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DEMERITS



a short story  
by

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"I'll take that call now, Frances."

"Line six, Mr. Vaughn."

"His name again?"

"It's a Mr. Harrison Crowell long distance from Western Chemicals. He's been trying to reach you for a week, Sir."

"Fine, that's good. Thank you, Frances." Jonathon Vaughn leaned back in his leather upholstered swivel armchair. His finger depressed the button on line six as his eyes moved to the great expanse of window wall that overlooked, from the twentieth floor, the panorama of the city. "How do you do, Mr. Crowell. Jonathon Vaughn here."

"Mr. Vaughn. We've not met personally, but we have been in correspondence, as you know; and I did hear you speak in person when I attended the East Coast conference last Fall. Your talk was published in our journal, as you also know; and, to come right to the point, Mr. Vaughn, my organization would like to have you speak at our next convention. It's going to be held at --"

"What is your organization prepared to pay, Mr. Crowell?"

"Oh! Well, we're prepared to pay you as much as \$1,500.00, Mr. Vaughn."

"I never speak for under three thousand, Mr. Crowell."

"I understand. Please let me explain that our usual budget is a thousand dollars maximum, but we're offering you fifteen hundred because our board really, really wants you."

"As I said, Mr. Crowell, I never speak for less than three."

"I understand that, Mr. Vaughn, but you must understand that our maximum budget is usually only one."

"But your board really, really wants me, you say?" said Jonathon Vaughn.

"Oh, yes. They really, really want you. Specifically you."

"Ah. Well, in that case I'll do it for four."

"But that's altogether out of the --"

"If they really, really want me as you say, Mr. Crowell, then four is my price."

There was a silence.

"Well," said Crowell, "what can I say? I'll have to take this back to the board with --"

"Tell me now, Mr. Crowell. Just what do you expect me

to do for you?"

"Oh, the usual. Just give a talk, then answer a few questions from the floor at the end."

"Well, I'll give a fine talk for four, but if you want me to answer questions at the end you'll have to make it five."

"But I told you our budget is --"

"Look here, Mr. Crowell, it's not for me. It's for my organization. Not my company, you understand. My organization. All my speaking fees and consultation fees I donate to my organization. Your company profits from the work of that organization. The whole country profits from the work of that organization. No, I'm sorry, Mr. Crowell, I can't do it for less than five for my organization."

"Five, you say?"

"Plus hotel accommodations, first class plane, a limousine to meet me, of course, and --"

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Jonathon Vaughn ran his fingers through his gray, thinning hair and again pushed the button on the inter-com.

"As soon as Mr. Pickrell arrives, Frances, let me know."

"He's here now, Mr. Vaughn."

"Oh, fine, show him right in. And, Frances, I don't want to be disturbed under any circumstances."

Jonathon Vaughn rose to greet his old friend at the door of his office. "George, come in, come in!"

"By god, this is some complex you've got here, John. You know I've passed this building a million times over the years and I've never been up here to actually --"

"It's your own fault, George. If I've told you once, I've told you a hundred times, come up any time. The door is always open to you."

"Christ, I've seen what your office looks like in the magazine layouts, and in some of those photos in your den, but it's nothing like the real thing from right here in the sanctum sanctorum. Just look at this view from up here, will you? It's like you're God and all those little people down there are just --"

"What're you drinking?" Jonathon Vaughn walked to the wall of floor-to-ceiling rosewood cabinetry, swung open two panels to reveal a well-stocked bar.

"This time of day? I don't know. What are you having?"

"Leave it to me." He plunked ice cubes into a tall gold-monogrammed glass. "It was good of you to come on short notice like this, George. I appreciate it."

"Are you kidding? Of course I'd come. Anytime." He took the glass from his host, tasted its contents. "Ahh,

that's good, that's very good."

"Sit down, George. Make yourself --"

"Haven't finished with this view yet. It is spectacular."

"I love it myself," said Jonathon Vaughn.

Looking over the city together, the two men tasted their drinks.

Finally, George Pickrell spoke first. "A long way from O.C.S., eh, John?"

"An astronomical distance." Jonathon Vaughn moved behind his desk, lowered his stocky but muscular, middle-aged frame into his oxblood colored leather armchair. He swiveled in it to view the back of George Pickrell's looming figure as the man stood at the window wall. His clothes were neatly pressed, but still they appeared fairly rumpled as they hung from George's lanky frame. His hair was essentially gray now, but it was thick, and more full than a truly well-groomed man, concerned with how he presented himself to the world, would allow it to grow.

"You've come a long way, John," George Pickrell went on with open admiration. "Two little twerps in Officer's Candidate School, I bet you never thought then you'd ever be standing in these shoes."

"Ha!" laughed Jonathon Vaughn.

"Tell me, do you want to excuse yourself? If you feel like urinating in your shoes now, I promise I won't tell anybody this time."

"No, this time I feel like urinating in your shoes," Jonathon Vaughn said.

"Ha!" laughed George Pickrell.

"Don't dare me, I warn you, George."

"No. People know better than to dare you to do anything, John."

The two men laughed as George Pickrell sat himself in the armchair across the desk. "These floors are carpeted, anyway. It wouldn't be the same."

"No. It wouldn't be the same," said Jonathon Vaughn.

"It was because the floor was so cold, you didn't want to take off your shoes to get to the latrine, wasn't it?"

"Partly. And partly laziness. And partly rebellion," said Jonathon Vaughn. "I understood how they wouldn't want guys scuffing up the floors. But those floors were damned cold to pad across in your stocking feet. You'd be surprised how many times, George, I got away with keeping my shoes on just to run in and tap a kidney."

"Even at the risk of getting demerits for it?"

Jonathon Vaughn smiled into his glass. "Especially at the risk of getting demerits for it. I always did like to

tempt fate. And to defy authority."

"Some authority. Picture it. Me, a squadron leader."

"Well, they picked the right one. You did your job," said Jonathon Vaughn.

"Yes. I was young and conscientious."

"And jealous of me even then. Loved being in the position of power and authority over me, didn't you, George?"

"No. As you said, John, just doing my job. Plus I didn't think it would do you any harm to find out once that a law not of your own making was in existence."

"Self-appointed crusaders, I've always loved. Maybe that's why I've never wanted to let go of your friendship over all these years, George. I just love to watch self-appointed crusaders do their stuff. Here, let me freshen your drink."

"No, I'm fine."

Jonathon Vaughn laughed. "It's the terminology that made it all worth while. Can't you see the headlines today? 'Jonathon Vaughn Gets Five Demerits for Urinating in his Shoes!' Try to explain to the civilians it only meant I didn't take them off first before I went in to use the head. But you want to know the irony, George? I've never told you this. This will be a first for you. The irony is, it was



the only de-merits I got, those five from you. And just the week before I got my only five merits, and that was even funnier a fluke. I got them for good military bearing. Want to know why my posture was so outstanding during that particular inspection? Because I had diarrhea and I couldn't wait to get to the latrine but I had to stand there like a ramrod, squeezing my buttocks together tight as I could. That'll give you good military bearing every time. Here, that little bit of scatological nostalgia does call for another round of drinks."

Through their laughter, Jonathon Vaughn refilled their glasses and continued, "So it was you, my old friend and buddy George Pickrell who gave me my only demerits."

"Had to," George Pickrell said, as Jonathon Vaughn handed him his second drink and rounded the massive carved desk.

"You saw yourself as a man who must play by the rules, eh?" Jonathon Vaughn seated himself again, opposite his friend.

"I'll drink to that assessment," George Pickrell said, raising his glass in toast before sipping it.

"And to think, I thought I could count on you," Jonathon Vaughn said, sipping his own drink.

"Yeah, well, it's an adding machine that counts."

"That just goes to show you how out-of-it you are, George. The update on that old saw would be a calculator. You should have said it's a calculator that counts. You should have done that mental gyration in your head and updated the word to make that line a viable quip. Guess you're just not -- will you permit me to say calculating enough?"

"Yes, well I guess you could say I've never been as quick as you, John."

"Oh, please, don't sell yourself short. You're quick enough. You don't think quick, maybe, but you're quick like a bunny in the clinches. And quick on your feet too, George."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Oh, it's a compliment. You're fleet of foot."

"Meaning?"

"No grass grows under your feet."

"Well, I get around."

"You get around a lot of places where angels fear to tread, my friend." Jonathon Vaughn said. "Maybe that's because the devil himself is your tour guide."

"Huh? Hey, you really are needling me, aren't you, I wasn't sure. Why don't you stop all this hyperbole, John, and tell me what --"

"I'll tell you alright, Dancer. I'll tell you and we'll see if you can side-step this one. I need your advice. This -- friend of mine, see. He doesn't have long for this world. You can imagine the shock. And he has to put his life in order. But he doesn't know --"

"Oh, Christ, John! I don't want to -- Christ! I don't believe it! Oh, I don't want to hear this. Why, you're the picture of health, John. Jesus, what is it, cancer? Is it cancer, John? Christ! I appreciate your telling me like this. I couldn't imagine why you called me to come up here like this -- I mean, out of the blue, after all this -- oh, Christ! Look, are they sure? I mean, sometimes a diagnosis is -- I mean lab reports sometimes are inaccurate. Christ, John! Look, what can I do for you? There must be something special you want me to --"

"There is. I want you to know I appreciate your coming on short notice like this, George. That's number one."

"Well, of course, John. Anytime. I mean -- oh, Christ!"

"And number two. I want you to marry my daughter." said Jonathon Vaughn.

"What? You what? Christ, John, what's my marrying Suzanne got to do with your finding out you're going to -- I mean, I can understand your worrying about Suzanne's future

now, but, well, you never have to worry about her welfare, for crissake. And since I'm not a wealthy man, John, as you well know, I just can't think why you'd consider me desireable for --"

"Oh, you're set okay."

"I don't have nearly what you have."

"Few do."

"That's true. That's true, John. So why do you --"

"Well, let's just say I want you to have what I have. And what I have, to all appearances, is this daughter, you see, who's just a little bit pregnant."

"Oh, Christ!"

"And she tells me you --"

"Look, I love her, John. It's not what you think."

"Oh. So that big -- hesitation step before. Just more fancy footwork?" said Jonathon Vaughn.

"No. It just didn't jibe, that's all. You tell me you got a death notice in one breath, then telling me you want me to marry Suzanne in the next breath. I mean, a visible means of support she doesn't need, and --"

"Are you an authority on what Suzanne needs?"

"Are you, John?"

"Oh, yes. Make no mistake on that, that's exactly what I am," said Jonathon Vaughn.

"But why do you think she needs me? I think she does. Hell, I know she does. And I need her too. But I couldn't be more floored that you've come to that conclusion. I'm your contemporary, for god's sake. We went through the war together. I'm old enough to be Suzanne's father."

"You always were good in math."

"You know what I mean."

"Yes, but you misunderstood something I meant before," said Jonathon Vaughn. "This friend of mine who doesn't have long on this planet. Well, it wasn't a boomerang image back to me, Pal. It was an oblique way of telling you I'm going to kill you."

"What! You're going to kill me? Might I ask when? Is this killing going to take place before or after I'm supposed to marry Suzanne?"

"Oh. Well, the logical response would be after, I think."

"I see. That is logical."

"Logical, but inaccurate," said Jonathon Vaughn. "I intend to kill you today. Before you waltz down the aisle with my -- our Suzanne."

"Uh huh. And assuming even you could perform that little quadrisection of metaphysical magic, may I ask what that would solve?"

"Certainly. For one thing, it would solve a little thing like a name for the baby. I play by the book sometimes too," said Jonathon Vaughn.

"A baby with a father who's been murdered. That's a nice grandfatherly --"

"Well, it's been a long time since I've been the sentimental type," said Jonathon Vaughn.

"Well, this is pretty grisly, John, even for you."

"Don't worry. The baby won't have known you; won't miss you."

"Not worried about the psychological after-effects that might arise? Or even the immediate trauma for Suzanne?"

"She'll survive. It's you who won't survive, George."

"Alright, enough of this now, John. What did you want, to shock me? Scare me? What? Let's just say you succeeded on all counts."

"I haven't succeeded yet, George, old buddy. I said I was going to kill you, and I am. And I always succeed in what I set out to do. You know that about me if you don't know anything else."

"Everybody knows that about you."

"Sure. Because whatever I am, I'm direct. Not some slimy bastard who --"

"Okay, okay. But again, please hear me, John, it's not

what you think."

"How do you know what I think?"

"Because I'd think it, if I was in your shoes."

"If you were in my shoes, tell me, would you be urinating in them by about now?" Jonathon Vaughn's intense gaze dropped to his desk drawer. He made a ceremony of opening it very slowly.

"Look, John, I -- now don't tell me you've got a gun in there. Hey, put that thing down, John. Christ, he's aiming it at me! Put it down, I said! Are you trying to tell me because of those stupid demerits you've carried a grudge all this time and blown it so out of proportion that at a time like this you've cooked up this --"

"Who cooked up what on who?"

"Look -- don't point that thing at me, I said! -- now look, John, I don't expect you to understand this, but I really love Suzanne. I've loved her from the minute she was born. I was there with you that night, remember?"

"I remember alright."

"Well, she's always been special to me. I've always loved her in a way I can't explain. More than you, John. It's a crazy thing. Over the years I think I loved her in some ways to make up for you, you cold bastard. Everybody knows you're a cold bastard. Except you. You don't think of

yourself as cold, you only think of yourself as clever and superior and powerful. But love is a special kind of power. It's a soft, quiet thing, John. A tender thing. A thing you couldn't understand in a million years. I'm not proud of myself that this -- tenderness I've always had with Suzanne turned to something else. We always had this incredible closeness, even before Claire died and the kid was left without a mother. I was there for her then, John. God knows where you were, but I was there for Suzanne. That was a hundred years ago, and I'm still there for her, sweet Suzanne, dear Suzanne. Only before we could both turn around, here she is a woman, and she needs me in a different way now, an entirely different way. God knows I fought it. For the longest time, I fought it. But suddenly there we were -- Christ! I can't explain it to myself, I sure as hell can't explain it to you. Just try to understand, will you, that it wasn't -- lascivious. Put that gun down, will you! It's not enough you're not pointing it at me, just put it down! You're not going to kill me here with it, for crissake, you're too calculating for that, I know. You plan things too carefully for that. Look, I was young and eager and righteous and maybe if I'd thought it through I wouldn't have given you those demerits that day, but you were pretty obnoxious, being so cock sure you could get away with



anything you wanted on your own terms. Hell, I just can't believe you've been harboring resentment over a thing like that all these years. Good god, we've laughed about it, joked about it, brought it up practically every-other-time we've seen each other --"

"Yes, well, it's always served as a sure-fire topic of conversation for us now for more than two decades," Jonathon Vaughn said. "Something to help us bridge the time we have to spend together."

"You think I never noticed? Hell, I bring it up myself just to fill the dead air before it gets noticeably empty between us. Everytime I think we've run it into the ground, there we are again, twirling it in our fingers like a stemmed goblet of fine wine, holding it up to the light, examining it from all sides."

"You always manufacture a way to bring it up, George," Jonathon Vaughn said. "I just sit there and allow it, and extend it with you. Not as much as today, but today is in a class by itself, I guess you could say. A good safe topic, miraculously always fresh and new, always good for a few laughs."

"Christ!" George Pickrell shook his head, "this barrier between us, I always put it up to your being so busy, such a successful executive type with your finger in too many

pies."

"Well, George, old boy, I'll never match you on that score."

"You mean to tell me, John, all this time you've been cold potatoes to me over those stupid demerits!"

"No, George. Not that. I didn't like it at the time, but it wasn't that I've been bitter about. So quick to jump to false conclusions. That makes three today alone. One, you thought I'd been given a death sentence, when it's you. Two, you think I want to kill you with this gun. Don't be a fool. That'd be so messy. It'd mess up my office and mess up my life, and I'm not about to let you mess up my life any more than you already have. Besides, while we're on the topic of my shooting you, it would be over too quick that way, so have no fear of a quick, clean bullet as the source of your demise. Three, you think I want you to marry Suzanne to give the baby a legitimate name? No, no, no. First of all, I don't know if the baby's going to be a baby. If we're lucky, it'll self-destruct, abort. If not, who knows what kind of defective thing it might be. You see, George, Suzanne's not my daughter. She's yours. My death notice came years ago when I was told I was impotent. I had very much wanted a family, but I had had this -- well, I'll spare you the details. At any rate, the doctor told me that as a

result I could still be a good husband, if you know what I mean, and I'm sure you do; but I could never hope to be a father. I went into a tailspin over it, couldn't face Claire with the news, I was so ashamed, embarrassed, mortified, crushed, you get the picture, I'm sure. Instead of -- sharing my pain with her, as they say these days in psycho-babble, I withdrew into a world of my own. Treated Claire like dung, in the process. When I finally saw the error of my ways she'd already taken up with you, and when I finally came to her, ready to tell her why I'd been such a heel, she upstaged me by telling me first she knew I was under a lot of tension from trying to build the firm, but everything was going to be wonderful from then on because she was pregnant. Well, it didn't take me long to figure out how you had been the one, George, holding her hand --"

"Christ, John, I --"

"And so, to make a long story short, Suzanne's your kid, George. You made her. With my wife, you made her. I just made her legitimate, that's all. And now I want you to make an honest woman of her. Marry her, George. And if for some reason you can't bring yourself to do that now, you'll have to deal with thinking up what you'll tell her about why you're dumping her. And maybe you'd better think up something to tell her about the bizarre outcome she might be

wise to prepare herself to expect from her approaching blessed event too. Now of course I may be unduly pessimistic about that. Incest doesn't always produce defective offspring. I understand Cleopatra was the product of seven brother-sister marriages and unions, and all of those progenies were geniuses. Good, strong, dominant DNA along the Nile. Maybe my concern along those lines has been premature. No need alarming our sweet Suzanne, dear Suzanne unnecessarily, is there now? But there is this, George. If you do go ahead and marry her, and if you find for some reason you can't bring yourself to touch her anymore -- after today, I mean -- well, you'll get used to it, George. And if things get sour between you and she can't figure why, and you can't bring yourself to spell out the real reason; well, you'll get used to that too. People adjust to just about anything. Tell me, are you dead yet, George?"

Jonathon Vaughn spun the barrel on his gun, replaced the safety catch, and placed it back in the drawer which he closed and locked. He dropped the key into his breast pocket as he said, "Get out of here now, George. I've seen enough of your face to last me ten lifetimes. Maybe you'd like to leave by the window. Or maybe the view doesn't have the same appeal to you anymore, all those private lives in the naked city."

*B. E. G. A.*