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Transcription

A pen scribbled away at a thick ream of note paper, diligently copying words broadcast over a tinny speaker. Edward Alterman worked with a methodical precision oft attributed to a printing press, with pen strokes that sounded more like a rhythmic exercise than actual work. As the radio echoed through the space, it harmonized with the militant pen scratching until it became an orchestra of efficient stenography.

“Fellow citizens we have a right, nay, a duty to work towards a civic solution that provides for all of us.” The voice of Lord Mason, Edward’s prestigious employer, still carried a significant amount of the Lord’s presence and regality despite the low speaker quality. “There is nothing more important than securing a comfortable life for a deserving citizenry.”

As the recording droned on, Edward’s pen stopped in its ink-laden tracks. *Now I didn’t have him say “deserving”, did I?* He thought, *That’s repugnant!* He shuffled his ream of notations together into a slightly neater stack before digging through the contents of his jacket pocket. Among a litany of other contents including a ten-cent coin, a small ball of lint about the size of a pencil eraser, a pencil eraser, and a pocketbook, he found what his fingers were questing for: a small key. Alterman tapped his finger down the face of his desk drawers before locating the bottommost drawer on his right-hand side. Promptly unlocking it, he scrolled through the mess of notepaper before plucking today’s speech from the ephemera surrounding it.

A knock resounded through the well decorated but drearily lit space, jarring Edward from his investigations. His fingers lunged forward, jabbing into the radio’s speaker as he fumbled for

the knob. “Y-yes?” He said, readjusting the radio to his geometric specifications, not too far to the edge of the desk, but clear of the main work area. Just enough to reach without having to reach so far as to be uncomfortable.

A woman’s voice called out. “Mister Alterman?” *The Secretary*, He thought. *Whatever this one’s name was, of course it’s her. She was the only other person here, after all.* “I wanted to check on you, see if you needed anything.” She opened the door with great care, the solid wood portal giving a resounding creak that echoed through the now silent space.

“Well,” He said, “I would like to, though I still have such a pile to go through. Even now I’m going to have to wait for another rebroadcast later this afternoon, due to the interruption.” He ran a hand through his hair, trying to improve his dishevelment with a veneer of decency.

“Oh, my apologies.” She said, her brow curling into a dissatisfied furrow. “How horrid of me to impose some care upon you, Mister Alterman.”

“Of course, I would love to go!” He said, rearranging his papers and locking the drawer of his desk once more. “On the other hand, I could use the extra time to speak to Mason about what I heard. I don’t think he’s been reading my speeches enough before reciting them.” Unfortunately, she had left before he opened his mouth. Flicking the radio back on for a moment, he let out a deep discontented sigh. He was already at least forty seconds behind now. Checking his watch, he considered how long it would be until the re-air. *Only about an hour, more than enough time to check with Mason*, he thought. Tucking his key back into his jacket pocket, he left his meager office for grander surroundings.

###

Mason’s office was splendid, an absolute feast of class, decorum, and civility. Baroque furnishings were tastefully placed around the hardwood floor, set into compartmentalized nooks

that spoke to a multifaceted work-life equilibrium. A bank of windows ran the length of the left-hand wall, peering out over a cozy street lined with quaint half-brick buildings. Opposite that sat a tasteful fireplace, though it never held a log. Gas fireplaces weren't the most popular, but Mason would be loath to lack the most modern convenience. Mason himself was placed behind a plain desk of great proportion, relatively tame compared to the rest of the decor in spite of its size. Much like his desk, he was a broad man with little outward flair. Alterman stood in the center of a well-cared rug, turning his desk key between his thumb and forefinger while keeping the fiddling confined to his pocket.

"Are you going to speak or continue holding your peace, my good man?" Mason said with a chuckle. As he regarded the fidgeting copywriter in front of him, he began popping each knuckle with his thumb.

"Apologies, sir," Alterman replied. "This may be silly, but I heard a discrepancy in the speech I wrote as it relates to the speech you performed." He attempted a weak smile and leaned forward.

"What would that be, you mean today's speech?" Mason said.

"Yes, that one. Lovely performance, sir." Alterman nodded toward his superior.

"My thanks to a great writer, I hear he's the best in the business." Mason flashed a toothy smile worthy of his public persona.

"Kind words aside, sir, the way you referred to people, the 'deserving citizenry', could you elaborate what you meant?" Alterman ran his thumb along the key's shallow bow. The slowly warming brass gave some semblance of comfort.

“Why?”

“Well, it’s this word. Who are you referring to as undeserving if there is such a thing as deserving?”

“Middle-folk, you know.” Mason made a non-committal gesture, sweeping his arm across the empty air above his desk.

“Sir you are aware I’m one of those, right?”

“Not in that way, Eddie. You’re one of mine, what are you worried about?”

“Well, my mother. My finances. My career now that I think about it.”

“I mean aside from that, Eddie. Look, just hear me out.” Mason leaned forward, bracing his forearms against his desktop. “I’m putting forward a proposal next week and I need you to draft it for me.”

“A proposal, sir?” Alterman moved his fingers to his pocketbook and snagged it out of his jacket, fishing around in his other pockets for a small pen. Finding only a nub of a broken charcoal pencil, he began making notes.

“I’m looking for something like a mandatory work program, you know?”

“Mandatory work, are you serious?”

“Oh, you know, like pushing those academics and laymen into legitimate work.” Mason cleared his throat as Alterman’s pen stopped. “Don’t look at me like that, just think about it.”

“Sir I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“I don’t care, Eddie. You’re here to make words work for me, not tell me if my ideas click.” Mason gave his desktop a hearty rap with his knuckles. “If this is really bothering you, take some time. I was planning to put it out in a week or two anyways!”

Alterman stepped back, slinking toward the door. “I appreciate your time sir, thank you for hearing me out.” He said, pocketing his notes.

“It’s not hard, Eddie. Take a break, enjoy your week, then do your job.” Mason leaned back, casting his gaze over the street beyond his windows.

Alterman stood mouthing possible responses, looking much like a fish waiting for food. After a long pause, he backed his way out of the office.

###

Edward’s briefcase sat half-open on a bench beside the riviera. The man himself sifted through old scraps he had gathered from various file drawers and cabinets. Some were weathered, some stained with ink, some nearly as fresh as the hour they were penned, and still others were little more than disparate scribbling that implied a thought rather than show the thought itself. A crisp breeze blew away the musty aroma of old paper before it could offend those of even the most delicate sensibilities. The world felt far from Edward. The notes, however, reminded him that just under an hour’s walk away there was a man that would not value his work, nor even his life had it not been in service.

It was here on the pages, in bits and pieces. There were fragments of disparagement in one, contempt in another. The subject was always the same, that those who would be classified as his peers were somehow lesser for their lack of formality or lack of a supposed work ethic. As the dates moved forward, the language became more brazen. Edward had been so focused on tone and cadence he hadn’t noticed. He was complicit, responsible even! Jamming the papers back into the interior folds of his briefcase, he set out down the bank of the riviera heading north towards town proper.

###

A cup of coffee was stirred with what could be described as rhythmic motions. Edward sat outside his preferred cafe on the riviera, tucking his briefcase underneath the table with a slow kick. Bracing his forearms against the tabletop he took a long, shallow drag off the top of the beverage, slowly examining the patrons and street-side passersby around him. Many were like him, uninteresting and ungodly plain. The owner, though, she stood out. Whether that was her confidence, way of dress, or simply the familiarity a regular has with the proprietor of their preferred locale is up for debate.

“At this rate you’ll drink it in half the time you’ve prepped the damn thing.” She said, rapping the top of the café table with her knuckles. Edward had been so lost in his people-watching that he hadn’t noticed any of them moving. So much of his time was spent assessing rooms like one does to a painting and the movement could be lost on him if he wasn’t careful.

“Oh, preparation is the cornerstone of anything successful.” Edward said, jolting slightly before taking a slow sip of his drink. “You’re more likely to enjoy something properly prepared.”

“That’s idiotic.” She said, “Just enjoy things.” She stood, hanging over Edward for a moment before wagging a finger at him. “You come here often, right? Blank stare, thinking?”

“As much as one can frequent an establishment without it becoming gauche, yes.”

“So, what’s the issue today?” Resting her hand on the simply backed chair opposite Edward, the owner of the quaint café took a relaxed stance. “You don’t usually look so rough.”

“I’m having a tough time with some workplace issues. My employer and I don’t see so eye to eye.” Edward set his cup down and tented his fingers gently. “Do you mind if I ask you something?”

“Sure, go ahead.” She pulled the chair back with a sharp jerk, dropping herself into the waiting seat. “Ramona.”

“No, Edward.” He cocked his head, brushing the saucer under his cup with his thumb. A small amount of sugar left clinging to the saucer’s edge from his preparatory measures tumbled between the gaps in the wrought iron tabletop, adorning the small bricks of the sidewalk with near-invisible specks of sweet crystals.

“Are you dense or just oblivious?” She leaned towards him.

“Oh, my apologies. I guess I would say more perturbed, but if oblivious is your choice of word, why not?” He leaned back in his chair, taking his cup back into his hands.

“Ask your question, please.” Ramona said, bearing down on Edward with an intense gaze.

“Alright, alright.” He gestured toward her. “What would you do if you had a disagreement with an employer?” She raised an eyebrow. “Okay, alright. What if, bear with me, an employee of yours took umbrage with you? Ideologically, I mean.”

“I’d tell them to pack papers.” She said with a snort.

“Excuse me?”

“Leave, you know. Sail from the shore, beat feet, hit the bricks.” She clicked her tongue, the noise almost lost in the sleepy bustle of midmorning passersby. “If someone doesn’t agree with how I run my shop, they can leave. The horse doesn’t run if the legs aren’t moving the same way.” She crossed her arms, tapping her heel on the leg of the heavy outdoor table.

“I see. What if the work was hard to get?” Edward laid one hand onto the tabletop, bracing himself as he bore into his brow with the other palm.

“I can’t solve your problem, mouse.” She stood and leaned over the table, patting his forearm. It was firm, resolute, and gentle enough to be reassuring. She returned to the front of the café, slipping between the door and its frame. The glass barrier shut her into an entire world of productivity all her own, much like his own office door did for him.

###

That night, Edward wrote a simple letter to his mother in the countryside.

Mother,

I might lose my job soon. I’ve done the best I could, but I came across something in my notes that I can’t stand by. Just letting you know.

Eddie

###

The air around Mason’s edifice was thick with hesitancy, tension, and self-importance. The building itself seemed to hold its breath during that foggy morning, or maybe it was just the stillness of century-old mortar. Edward didn’t remember the walls reaching this high, nor the sculpted detailing of the trim corners and pillars being so menacing. Standing before the rather plain oak door to Mason’s office, he turned his desk key over in his pocket a few times for good measure. The warmth of his hand reacted well to the old brass, creating a nook of solemn comfort amongst the looming damp. Gripping the object tightly he pushed his way through the door with the uncharacteristic grace of a bull in heat.

“Mason, I won’t work with this.” Edward said, squaring his shoulders and delivering his words with a curtness befitting an irritable salesman.

“Excuse me, Eddie? Are you missing something?” Mason replied. He was leaning onto the mantle of his fireplace, poking at the small fire as it refused to take fully to the carefully stacked wood.

“I apologize for any inconvenience or miscommunication caused by my lack of diligence as it pertains to the content of your words.” Edward gestured toward his superior. “If you want, I can give you some references to someone with comparable, if lesser, skills in my specialty.”

“Fuck no.” Mason waved the poker lackadaisically toward Alterman. “You’re my boy, best I could wrangle. You’re not going to leave me dry with some green penman.”

“That’s my decision. I can’t keep drafting this, you get more brazen with every speech.” Edward eyed the poker, casting his gaze to the sitting furniture. Some stray ash and embers had fallen onto the tasteful royal blue seating and the glossy low table between them.

“You’d think so, right?” Mason hung the poker onto the wrought iron rack and slowly threaded his way through the furniture. “Eddie, who’s going to take you on after that? Leaving me?”

“I hear Bennet is looking for someone, and I know he can afford it.” Edward stiffened, jutting his chin out in a last-ditch attempt at mustering some courage.

“That’s like betting on a losing horse. Besides, Bennet won’t pick you up if we catch up with each other.” Mason said, his lip curling like birch bark. “Any more names for me?”

Edward stood stock still for a moment as the room seemed to shift on a fulcrum. Had this been a ship, the furniture would have slid so violently that it would have burst right through the windows and into the perilous seas below. Those were the final thoughts of Edward Alterman the ideologue before he choked out a quick “Understood.”

###

Edward Alterman wrote with what one could describe as mechanical precision, short stroked that beat out a steady rhythm of diligence. A completed manuscript sat in his out-box, ready to be performed for an adoring, or at least complimentary, public. Setting his pen down, Alterman bore the heels of his hands into his eyes. He had been working at twice his normal pace to finish the treatise, and it was taking its toll. His face was stretched gaunt, his knuckles locked up around any pen he held, and he never felt like he could stand quite right.

It dawned on him that he had barely looked at anything else on his desk aside from his workspace for days on end, the process had been so draining.

Reaching a reedy hand across the meager expanse of his desktop, he plucked the incoming mail from his inbox for the first time that week. It was nothing special, at least most of it. It was a horde of secretarial notes and nonsense, interspersed with the occasional county notice. Buried in bureaucratic ephemera was a lavender colored envelope. The paper had a pulpy thickness to it, with a rich quality that only decent stationary carries. Edward glanced around for a letter opener before shrugging and digging his desk key out of his pocket.

Slitting the seal and opening the envelope revealed a simple letter, containing only eight words.

Eddie,

You're safe. Come home, we'll talk.

Mother

"Hey Eddie, is the new piece done?" Mason chirped, leaning into the office with a firm grip on the doorframe.

“No sir, but the treatise was finished last night.” Edward said, keeping his composure as much as he could while his cheekbones were flushed as they were.

“Well get back on it, and whistle for the secretary next time. I hate snagging papers.” Mason snatched the small stack from the outbox, leaving Edward Alterman alone to weep.