

## The Senator's Dilemma

It was hard to miss where the explosion had happened, with the yellow police tape around the rubble that used to be the train station. There was still glass there, shining in the sun. The concrete and tile was all in a jumble, demolished with dust all around. There was video online showing the way the fire had sprouted up like a great flower blooming at high speed. Then the screams started, and things began to fall down. There had been 10 people killed, and 40 more injured, still in the hospital with burn scars or broken bones from falling concrete arches and metal pipes. There was word that some people might have lung problems now.

Every time Senate Majority Leader Terry Powell opened up a social media app, there was more talk. People talking about how the explosion came from the gas leak, which was caused by utilities company Trinity Delta. Powell had his aide, Martha, comb through the Twitter mentions for his own name every few days. It had started as a way to keep abreast of the arguments, but now it was just amusing. He liked to look at them during meetings when someone boring talked. It gave him a thrill, the pure fire of their anger. As if he could've personally done anything. He texted the best ones to Pauline. In years past she would've laughed with him, but more often these days she did not respond. She'd say later she'd just been busy, but he heard the implications.

Martha had asked him if he wanted to go and visit the victims, maybe just for a photo shoot. He said he'd think about it. But there had just been no real reason to go. No need to see what he could already picture so vividly in his mind. He could picture the agony perfectly, the flames, the smoldering human flesh, all of it adding up to a tableaux of death. In his mind it was a perfect ordered chaos, a frozen memorial. He didn't take joy in any of it, but at the same time, he thought of it as just another thing that happened. The order of things. Death came for everyone at some point.

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He pulled up to the two-story ivory-white behemoth he owned in the suburbs, with its pool and S-shaped driveway and the decorative fountain in the middle, and he saw Pauline was home. Her little Hyundai Sonata, glistening white and gold in the sun, sat in its place. He parked behind it.

As he opened the door to the house, he came unto her typical fragrance of cooking, wafting through the open living room and even into the foyer. It smelled spicy and yet a bit sweet. He could hear her humming. The whole house had a sacral air to it. Quiet and stuffy like a church. It would've been easy to get back in the car and just drive. But he didn't.

Kicking off his shoes at the front like she wanted, he walked to the kitchen in just his black dress socks with the soles of his feet cooling on the tile, and she was there, her lithe form and flowing dark chocolate-colored hair surrounded by cooking smoke.

She smiled at him, but it was guarded. "Hey."

He leaned in and pecked her on the cheek and she neither pulled away nor reciprocated, and something deep in his gut stung. "How was the island?"

"Mom's enjoying the views. And the quiet – it's good for her."

"The Parkinson's isn't bad?"

"She's making do."

Terry sat down at the stool by the kitchen island, propping one dress-shoe-clad foot on the rung of the stool, feeling the support of the wood. "I'll come with you next time."

She'd turned back to the steaming pot of vegetables and meat before her, which had a mysterious concoction of smells, rising up like a plume, all spice and richness. "Only if you want to."

"I do. It's just the work."

She nodded but didn't turn to face him. "So you're doing the budget, right?"

Powell recalled the therapist's advice, to be forthcoming. It was good to talk honestly, because otherwise you got to a terrible point where more time was spent apart, where the silence had taken over like mold and roaches. "Sure are. As usual, everyone has to have their things in there, like toddlers."

She seemed to mull his words, like there was a tangible taste. "Why not just put some of those things in? You know, if it helps people?"

He said, "You know I hate all that headline-grabbing crap. It's just pandering."

"Maybe some pandering's good every once in a while."

Powell forced himself not to roll his eyes. That had been another thing the therapist said. To remember how they'd challenged each other once upon a time, how she had once inspired him greater by questioning him. He tried to recall those days in university when they'd sat on the lawn, books open on the grass, debating the national security strategies or the ways to deal with poverty. A love language if there had ever been one. Powell could see the conflict in Pauline, her East Coast beach-town liberal upbringing and the plight of those with nothing and the knowledge of the wrongs of the world, but also she liked her fancy wines, the big spacious house, dinners out on the town. It gave her a real edge, a burning conflict, which Powell found exciting. He didn't want someone who just agreed with him. That was the way to boredom. Some empty-headed Barbie, just nodding and smiling – he'd have either cheated or left her long ago if she was *that*.

Powell gritted his teeth, which was something else the therapist said he ought to stop. She'd given him the name of an orthodontist who could help, but Powell looked at his teeth in the mirror and had decided it wasn't a big deal. Doctors often didn't know what they were talking about. Like almost everyone else, they were just out for more money and would say anything if they thought it'd get you to open your wallet.

To Pauline, he said, "Well, we can't just give everybody everything. There'd be nothing left. The system would unravel."

She stretched her shoulders and shifted her weight. "I'm just saying – you always talk about wanting to be remembered. I don't know if this is the way."

She had him there. He would often say things like that when in the deep of the bourbon, on those nights when they used to just talk until they would fall asleep, sitting by their fireplace or out on the patio overlooking the koi pond and the moon and the smattering of stars. That had been happening less and less these days. He kept meaning to try and fix things. She let herself lapse into a quiet state and just kept stirring. The wooden spoon hit the pot and made a tinny klink like an arena bell for a boxing match. It was a rhythmic sound and filled the space of their silence.

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The lights of the Casa Infinitas were a brownish-gold hue giving everything the air of the bourgeois. The place was a construct of utter smoothness; every surface shining. The bar and tables were an obsidian shade, high and reflective, and the music playing in the background was a light piano ditty. The employees looked like mannequins, not a hair out of place. There were rumors that the bosses would fire employees on the spot if they showed up unshaven or without makeup, or even if they coughed or sneezed too much in the presence of patrons.

Powell sat at the bar, nursing an Old Fashioned. Lillian McDuff found him easily, sidling up on the stool next to his. She got a tall glass of white wine and sipped, her thick, dark hair spilling over her shoulders. McDuff, a first-term senator from some inner-city hellhole, was popular these days on social media. Had a certain feel for snarky quips and quotable barbs. He'd have felt some kind of attraction to her, he supposed, if he'd been divorced from this hellish chasm of politics. He knew she hated him – like real hate, burning in her, not performative like some of the old guard did for the cameras. Maybe that was the whole point.

"So, about this bill," she said. "I figure we can talk for real now."

He sipped his drink and relished the strongness of it, the bitterness against his throat. "I suppose we can."

She was an angular creature, all hard purpose and agenda. She was infused with a righteousness reserved for the heroes from Homeric poems. It was how she appeared on TV, and Powell wondered if the character had become more than a mask. "We want a new program for the victims to sign up with to get them whatever they need. And we'd like Trinity to help out and do what they can. We need stronger regulations and safety checks from now on."

Powell shook his glass at the bartender, the ice making tinny noises in the air. "Ah, but wouldn't it be best to approach it without hurling accusations?"

"Accusations? I mean, the gas leak was..."

"It was the fault of the inspector who didn't look close enough at the pipes. Guy was a drunk. He should've stayed home if he felt like boozing on the job."

"You don't think Trinity needs to answer for the way they cut corners? There are testimonials coming out, detailing---"

"Cutting corners. Please... you're just trying to posture. I know your game."

"I can fight you on this shit, Terry," she said, eyeing him with brows arched, sipping her wine. "I can bring in the charts."

"And I can also haul out that email conversation I was forwarded. Between you and a certain Rodney Mitchum, reporter for the Daily?"

That caught her off guard. He smiled at her and felt the surge of adrenaline, the thrill of this. A vaguely sexual thing, making him more conscious of his own flesh and blood. The game of politicking was all like a match of boxing or chess, looking to see what your opponent would do, predicting, parrying, countering. In truth, this aspect of it, digging into people, knowing things, was the best part of being in charge.

"Jesus, Terry. What the fuck?"

His smile came more genuine this time. "I hardly think it's befitting of your careful social media image. The things you said to him made *me* blush."

Her face was reddening. "I really thought you were better than this."

Powell smiled. "I just like to have some extra cards, is all."

She took her wine and got up from her seat. "This isn't over."

"Okay, then."

"I'll be back in touch."

But she was leaving, her movements frenetic, getting her purse and leaving a \$20 on the bartop. As she was walking back down the steps to the parking lot, he flagged down the bartender and got another Old Fashioned.

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He'd thought about just approving everything McDuff and her cohorts were asking. It would be easy and they could just move on. But there was something gnawing at him. He thought of how he had gotten where he was. At some point in school, he had begun paying attention to politics and the job had appealed to him. He saw where the halls of power were and so he got started campaigning, got on a few local boards in his mid-20s. It had taken a few years to really get the kind of clout to get voted into a DC seat, and when he did, his mother's family had some checks to buoy him along, get the right people on board with him.

So he'd gotten in. Then there had been lobbyists who had definite ideas about what should and should not be pushed. Then came the fat paychecks. The nice dinners at rooftop bars, the private screenings of art, all of it a big moving machine. He didn't want to get off the ride. It was easy to keep everything moving. On paper he was successful at his job, which was the bare minimum of what a man could accomplish in life.

There was a stripe of new guys in the Senate and the House now. Ideologues, zealots with new and strange ideas of heritage and who was an American and who wasn't. Some of them were strange and frightening to him. One of them was Caden Zacharies, who had bug eyes that Powell found disconcerting, and the way he constantly licked his lips made Powell's skin crawl. Zacharies would send long monologue-length emails about the birthright of his people and about the way society was crumbling. There were rumblings that he'd been in and out of some institutions, that he took staffers on binge-drinking nights at the seediest bars in town, said a lot of things about genetics and who was better than who. He allegedly had a bunker way out in Montana where they would take underage kids from bars and hunt them for sport in the woods. Nobody could prove that story, but it kept coming back up in the tabloids, in the depths of Reddit, on the whispers in the dark bars of DC. But he was who the voters had picked. Zacharies and his bug eyes. Powell had long adapted to that.

The lobbyists for Trinity wanted to go to a champagne bar. They'd already made the reservations the previous week. They'd been texting casually with Powell, including right up to the start of the session that day.

At the session, the vote came to the train bill proposal. Lillian McDuff, standing rimrod-straight and speaking in her boldest voice, said what the bill would do, who it would help. She talked of justice and said it was the right thing to do.

Powell, when it was his turn, said, "We'll be passing on the vote for this one. We're just not satisfied that this is a responsible use of funding."

There was some rustling and murmurs in the crowd of senators. There were reporters in the back snapping pictures. The flashes came like bursts of starlight through the endless darkness.

Outside, his shoes making hard, definitive claps on the polished tile, he was flanked by legions of the reporters with their shouted questions, the why's and the what now's, and it all became a hurricane of sound.

He wanted to tell them the truth, that he thought life was a predestined thing, that he couldn't change the outcome, that they'd all die anyway no matter what he did. That they were all specks in the grand scheme of the universe, microbes floating along in the cruel and cold galaxy uncaring. That God was a lie and that you could stare at the sky forever and all you'd accomplish was starvation and dehydration, because no one was coming. And then one day they'd all be in the dirt and the Earth would swallow them and make new flora, a post-human age, and all of their dreams would just be whispers in the aether. So what did it matter if he did anything at all? His job was a specific thing and he did only what it required, to keep everything moving. He got his paycheck for doing that, so it seemed to him everything was in its right place.

So instead he said, "We hope to put together an aid package that is satisfactory for everyone. As is, it's not important if it'd just be a waste of time, and it is if it's using this much money that we don't know where it's coming from. There's no information."

There was more clamor. One woman standing near the front of the crowd said, "My brother's one of the victims. They're saying he might lose his leg."

Powell faced her and nodded, trying to give her his full attention. "And I'm deeply sorry to hear that. And I hope we can find a way to lift everyone up with a sensible package. Which the one we had was not."

She just gaped at him. "And you're OK with people dying? Are you a fuckin' monster?"

He just smiled. "We'll be resuming negotiations sometime in the near future."

She was shouting other things at him. Other voices were joining the chorus. Wanton calls for violence. A man saying he'd come to Powell's home and disembowel him and his whole family. There was something like glee at this. He wanted the challenge. Finally, something exciting – the idea of an intruder in his home seemed like a titillating thing. He was surprised at the tingle in his groin at the

thought. How much sympathy would he be afforded? Would there be bloodshed? He wanted to turn around and tell the man *give it your best shot*.

He found his feet moving faster. His walk turning into almost a run. He stopped when he got to his car in the garage. Checking his phone, he saw on Twitter that Trinity Delta was saying they were deeply sorry about what happened, were starting a new grant fund for victims to apply to, pledging to do an in-house review of how this had all happened and who was really at fault. It would never happen again, they swore. It was a new day at the company.

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He ate pho that night with some junior Congressmen, all boy-faced, fresh in from the countryside of Idaho or the working-class Pennsylvania. They were all like kids in a candy store, wide-eyed. One of them told him it felt like they were high on the power, that they finally felt like they could make a difference. Another said he was sending pictures home to his mother. The pho was a steaming broth, and its scent wafted through Powell as if he were a building with all open doors and windows. They all took a selfie outside as the dusk was setting.

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The champagne bar was dimly lit, a secluded oak-walled chamber with a chandelier hanging from the top. The bar was so small only about three people could stand there at once, and the bartender, a heavy-lidded man wearing a tie and a charcoal-black coat, poured them round after round.

The Trinity lobbyists were like visitors from another world, every movement sure and confident in ways only afforded to those who were on the winning side. They drank heavily. Powell did, too, to keep up. Soon the room was spinning. One of them, with peppered gray and black hair, grinned at Powell with big white gleaming teeth. "Where's the best place to get a burger? I'm in town for a few days here."

Powell rattled off some places he and Pauline liked, or that he went to with his friends on the weekends. He listed the places with the best beer and cocktails and the other man grinned wider, said he would bring his whole family next time. They spoke about their cars, their wives, the vacations they took, the ones they were planning to take. The conversations were frenetic, chaotic, mingled. One guy talked about a trip to the Bahamas where they'd paid a local to bring them more bottles of rum every day and paid a different girl to give them both back rubs at the beach. Another guy talked about his new

car, a Tesla, which had features to test his blood for diseases as he drove and to sense his brain waves and speed up or slow down to correspond with his moods. It wasn't even on the market yet. It had already told him he was at a risk of high cholesterol.

Powell reflected as he listened to them that money was often unseen, moving through the circuitry of the world like blood through veins, and these men knew no limits on it, and it made them fascinating.

They parted ways and hung around the awning of that little place, on a crowded city block in the nighttime. One of the lobbyists was leaning in close, stinking of fried food and alcohol. He was leering at Powell and asking where he could find some companionship. Powell gave him a few addresses, told him the passwords for the best deals, the best girls. The man thanked him and said it was good to have connections, good to know who your friends were. Powell decided to walk home. He hadn't been exercising so much. He didn't feel like sitting on the subway and he could do with the fresh air. His gut was churning. The food hadn't agreed with him.

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All six stories of blocky white concrete of the hospital were bathed in the shadows and cast in a milky blue tint from the moonlight. He wasn't sure why he had come, except that he was wired and didn't feel like going home yet.

He said hello to the guard by the metal detector, a stocky olive-skinned man, who recognized him and just waved him through. There was a ward on the third floor that had been sectioned off for the gas explosion victims. He got in the elevator and closed his eyes, letting the cool air conditioning and the low, meditative hum of the elevator take him where he was going.

The rows of rooms greeted him, with polished oak doors and glass windows, curtains drawn. Most were closed-up like tombs, the people inside sleeping soundly. He walked for a while, his footsteps the only constant in the place, a rhythmic patter on the hard tiles. You could do anything to anyone hear. He realized he could be himself here, away from the cameras, the gaggles of other lawmakers and away from his wife's expectation of debate and clarity. He didn't want clarity.

He went into the first open door he found. Inside, there sat a skeletal-looking man who had a large gauze bandage covering half of his face. He was hooked up to tubes and faintly-beeping machines. His bloodshot gaze went past Powell, and instead was seeing some other part of creation, maybe the face of whatever creator he thought had done this to him.

"What're you doing here?" The guy's voice was raspy, and there was a curious lack of depth to the sound, like it was only coming from one side of a speaker.

Powell, caught aback, said, "Oh. Just... wandering."

"I've seen you on TV, haven't I?"

Powell cleared his throat. "I suppose you have, maybe. And I didn't come here randomly."

"Nah, man, I didn't suspect you did."

Powell walked into the room gingerly, as if expecting a bomb to go off. He stood at the foot of the man's bed, facing him. "Punch me."

"Huh?"

"You heard me. Really beat the shit out of me."

The guy in the bed smirked and let out a chuckle that was like a potato chip bag crumpling. "The fuck?"

Powell felt like he had downed five cups of coffee, all mad speed and energy now. "You can really fuck me up. Tit for tat. This is the last chance you'll get. I'd let you do more, but in your present state..."

The man in the bed just gaped at him.

"Just do it." Powell heard his voice getting thinner, more desperate, crackling like a fire. "If you do it, then there'll be, you know, a balance. There's no real morality to the world except what we do and how we react. No justice, no greater arc, nothing beyond. That's what I'm sure of. There's only people doing things and the retaliation. I deserve something at least."

The guy was just looking at him like he'd sprouted a third eye. "Hey, you're freakin' me the fuck out, dude."

Powell shook his head. "Suit yourself, I guess. That was your one chance."

He left the hospital. As he exited the doors, he felt the night air on him a cool, smooth caress, a freshness to it that hadn't been present in that sterile, sprayed-down monstrosity behind him. His legs felt like jelly. He staggered out of the emergency room parking way and to the other side of the street, where he found a big stone street pillar and leaned on it like it was a life raft. The alcohol was raging in him. He wished he hadn't had those last two fingers of champagne.

He vomited on the sidewalk, all the pho he'd had earlier with the junior Congresspeople in that dimly lit place with its glistening blue fish tank and blinding white tablecloths along with the alcohol he'd drank after that with the Amtrak men. All of it coming back up in a rush, a mess of light-tan bile, remnants of vegetables and noodles mixed in like a fourth-grader's diorama of the intestinal system, all

of it sparkling under that pale dim moon. After that he felt cleansed, pure, a new and empty vessel for the world to begin pouring things into anew.

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Pauline was waiting for him in bed. Her hair fanned back on the pillow. She raised her arms, beckoned him in like an air traffic controller. He slipped off his shoes and coat and laid with her, arms intertwined, feeling her softness. "How was your night?" she asked.

"Tense. Good food and drink. But it's all so damn tense."

She rubbed his upper back. "That's no good at all."

"How about you?"

"Good. It was good. Did some work with my nonprofit. Watched some TV. Ordered Chinese."

"Sounds like a delightful evening."

She was looking at him pointedly. "So, why so tense?"

He sighed and ran a hand through her hair. "I don't even know. I was just in a shit mood. Just one of those nights, I guess."

She listened and stroked his hair. "Well, you've always done whatever you had to. Even when I didn't agree, and then, well, it's worked out so far."

He angled his head up at her. There was no trace of sarcasm or humor in her. She wasn't much for either. Pauline was an earnest type, who saw the plight in things, while he had always looked at the world like a calculator, transactions and what could be gained from adding A to B. Their old days of debates, sitting on that endless lawn with the sun beaming down, were often centered around this difference between them.

He said, "That's perceptive of you."

"We've been disagreeing lately. I figure I didn't want to make it worse."

"Maybe a good idea. You were always sensible like that."

She shifted and they were facing each other, both lying on their sides.

"Too many people let their marriages go by the wayside. I don't want to be one of those couples." She was meeting him with a steady gaze. There seemed to be oceans in her eyes, tumultuous, all-powerful. "I believe we can rise above that and be better. Don't you?"

"I do." He couldn't look away from her. There was silence and the clock was ticking in the other room. Her hand found his upper arm and he felt her fingers there, caressing the fabric.