

# Typo Sample Chapter

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## Prologue: Driving

August 1999

My father, steady at fifty-five miles per hour behind the wheel of the Buick station wagon, always flashed his headlights to let the truckers know it was safe to pass at night, and they would blink their taillights in acknowledgement—a secret handshake between the professional big-riggers and my father.

Driving in the black gloom of an oncoming storm, I clicked the lights on my Honda CRV as a Wal-Mart rig roared past me down the big hill that curves down and out of the Central Valley. The eighteen-wheeler switched on and off the running lights that encircled his cab and flat bed. I smiled a little, wishing someone had come with me if for no other reason than to show them that my dad was right.

I would turn thirty-two years old in three months, but I had long ago absorbed his either careful or neurotic tendencies—depending on one's perspective on following the rules. As the rain started to fall, I ticked off the same roadside markers he pointed out on every family trip: a small white shield every tenth of a mile followed by a tall green one every mile. I was driving the New York State Thruway the hour and a half due north to our family house in the fifties-era suburbs of the city of Kingston. The foothills of the headlands, as my sister called them, were sandwiched between the Hudson River and the wall of the Catskill Mountains—which aren't really mountains, Dad had often told me, but a tree-covered plateau eroded by rivers seeking the sea.

The late summer storm passed quickly, and when I passed the Plattekill rest area, mile marker sixty-five, the sun had returned, igniting the wet road into mist. I divided my speed, a very un-dad-like eighty, by the number of miles until marker ninety-two-home. I repeated the calculation with every signpost, plenty of time to wonder why the government spent so much money to neatly mow the median and what I would find at the house I had been born in and not (aside from family vacations) spent a single night away from until I went to college. Although that wasn't entirely true, I remembered as I turned off the highway and merged onto Kingston's lone traffic circle. I had once convinced them to let me go to the state chess tournament in Syracuse my last year of high school. But, according to my father, I had come back so unruly he would never permit it again.

The house, a cross between a ranch and saltbox draped in white aluminum siding on a quiet dead-end street, looked as unassuming as always. But the lawn on our quarter-acre plot was a disaster. After a decade of neglect, dandelions had beaten back everything except the "duck grass" that stayed brown most of the year and my father had never been able to defeat. I sat in the car for a moment. The bottom panel of the screen door was as busted as the day I had kicked it in, clear evidence that everything would be as I left it on my last visit—nearly three months ago. Upstairs my bedroom would be dark with maybe a water glass that had evaporated down to a thin coat of dust. The closet would be stuffed with my unfinished elementary school art projects, old copies of Byte magazine, and that dubious peach-colored award for last place in the national college computer-programming contest in Atlanta, 1988.

My father didn't come to greet me, but I imagined him in the driveway, the hood of one Buick or another up as he re-spaced the spark plugs or de-gummed the carburetor's butterfly valve, extending the life of the car another hundred thousand miles. He was an engineer by training and desire, and I remembered him surrounded by parts: the lawnmower

blade he re-sharpened every season, the innards of the kitchen clock that kept breaking, or spiced ham for the sandwiches we assembled as a family on Saturdays.

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We sat in the spotless living room: me in the blue chair that I sat in for his lectures, and my father, with his thin legs bent Indian-style beneath him on the green shag carpet. His shoes were off, exposing deformed toes that had become crumpled in shoes handed down through four elder brothers.

I saw his bald spot that he combed his grey hair over, the thick white moustache he'd always had, the beard that was starting to grow unchecked after nine years of retirement, the thick PhotoGrey glasses as wide as a windshield, and the nose like mine, a honker. Everything was right except the small glass of Old Smuggler whiskey resting next to his ashtray.

There had always been the one, regular, drink after work, and I would never have guessed that such a minor pleasure, a tiny blue dot of ink bled onto the breast pocket of the crisp, white-shirt portrait of a man defined by obligation, responsibility, and a dedication to his family, would overtake him so completely-his concern for me replaced by worries he would run out of whiskey.

I looked at the couch no one had sat on since my mother died two years earlier. My father's health aide had folded her old blanket on one of the grey cushions. Dad's acceleration beyond the one-a-day drink had begun with mom's Alzheimer's. As her sole caretaker during those years, he had ramped up slowly but steadily, until, by 1999, he was downing a pint of whiskey a day. My business partner Dan, of the same generation as my father, said that the drinking was simply his cure for the sadness that had become his disease. "He still loves you," he had said.

Dan, at my request, had travel to the house a year before. He took a rare day away from work and his family to come three hours by train and another two by car to spend an afternoon with my father-arguing sincerely with him on the front stoop to stop drinking. To become the old Dad-the one who taught me to hang my shirts buttons facing left. The afternoon had stretched into a twenty-four hour ordeal that in the end hadn't changed anything-except for me to put that hole in the screen door and push my father a little further into seclusion. The next morning, driving back to New York to get Dan to the train, he rested a hand silently on my shoulder, and I knew Dan cared about me as much as anyone now. That's why I had come back-to get the money my father had offered to me in earlier, sober days: two hundred thousand in IBM stock that he had acquired-sometimes a fraction of a share at a time-over all those years. But looking at him on the floor, surrounded by a plastic bag full of cigarette butts, junk mail, and bits of broken nails he plucked from his toes, I felt less certain.

"How is old Dan?" my father asked.

I looked at the picture of myself on the mantle-a computer printout made of dot-matrix letters arranged to show my Dorothy Hamill bowl cut and my own PhotoGrey glasses.

"Still calling himself a benevolent capitalist?" he continued.

He had kept that photo on his mid-level engineer's metal desk at IBM. In his world, there was no greater good than the old IBM, and it was the same for me. Next to the family bible on the shelf below my portrait was the familiar black and gold binding of Think, the biography of Thomas Watson and the thin blue spine of the IBM Ethics Manual.

My father was a firm adherent of the meritocracy those books espoused. For him, advancement in the world was assured via IBM's twin paths to promotion: one for managers who liked to "play politics" and one for engineers who were promoted solely on their intelligence and objective accomplishments. When I was seven, playing a game of "war" with maple branches as rifles, I had proudly told a defeated enemy, "You aren't out. IBM puts you on probation for six months so you can improve your performance. Respect for the individual." I believed it then. I still believed it.

"He says you still love me," I said, unexpectedly, and maybe a little too angry, but his face showed no shock.

My father had retired in disgust when Big Blue had their first-ever layoff. He had been promised a promotion to senior engineer, but his boss of two decades reneged on the deal knowing my father would resign. It gave the boss a needed "chit" in the drive to let go of twenty percent of the employees. After that, Dad had started going to Atlantic City. He'd started fighting more with mom, and, one terrible night, he'd packed a bag and spent the night at a Super 8 motel, frustrated that his life's work of responsibility had netted him only resentment, and I began to sense that I didn't know what the man I wanted, more than anything, to be, had wanted his life to become. His anger from that night never went away when he chose to take care of mom's declining health, but he didn't spoke directly about it. Instead he scolded us loudly using his I'm-counting-to-three voice that "visiting home isn't about coming here to have fun and go out with your friends. You're need to look after your mother." And after she died, the anger still emerged when he saw ads for Microsoft-Bill Gates had betrayed IBM-or was reminded about the doctor who had first diagnosed mom with Alzheimer's-"he scarred her and she never recovered from that-but for most of the time it lied dormant, deep within, covered by a thick carpet of scotch.

"Of course I do," he said. "You're my son." He leaned to blow smoke into the chimney the way mom had made him-to keep the smell out of the house-and continued, "Now tell me about Clarinda."

"Typesetting," I said, and he watched me intently, the glass by his side untouched, "the process of putting bits of lead together to make pages, is long dead, but the opportunity-" I felt the words coming like they did when I was trying to impress my father about having gotten on the dean's list, a torrent of self-created conviction. "-the opportunity to make pages for publishers using computers continues to grow. And editorial services: copyediting, indexing, design-"

He was getting distracted, looking beyond me, and I, nervous, switched direction, "You're getting in on the ground floor of the roll up of the American typesetting industry. First we buy Clarinda, the premier typesetter in Clarinda, Iowa. They've been in business for almost fifty years and Dan negotiated with the bank that owns them to sell to us for almost nothing. Can you believe it?"

He smiled and puffed again. "My son, Mr. Businessman."

"All we need is two hundred thousand dollars," I said, the words coming out of my mouth, while my mind tried to absolve me of doubt. All his savings. All his "bad weather" savings for "just in case." If I lost it, who would take care of him?

He laughed and patted his pockets, "Not here, but you're welcome to whatever I've got. You know that."

"Are you sure?" I asked.

He grinned and took a sip of whiskey.

"You'll pay it back," he said, his yellow teeth showing, "I know you."

"Of course I will," I said. I had to.

"So, if you're going into the kitchen, how about you get me another ice cube. And while you're in there," he said and smiled, like a child expecting another grilled cheese sandwich, "why don't you top off my glass."

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