

Less Worth than the Worthless

In the aftermath of the interview, Ashton found himself 40 stories above the world, looking down at the cars along the dark city road, gleaming like fireflies and buzzing with the roars of honks. The night air was cold and bitter and felt as though it had sealed his hand to his freezing beer glass as he dangled it above the railing. Behind him and inside the apartment was a huge party with hundreds of executives and models, carefree and oozing with manufactured happiness. He didn't even know which coworker's apartment it was. Normally, Ashton would've donned the mask of joy, but tonight he felt truly alone. Ashton mourned the loss of an opportunity like many others would mourn the loss of a loved one. His mind often referring to his father's words that had grown like an infection in his mind. For him, he had shown himself he was the failure he was told he would be. He was conditioned to succeed, and this moment proved he couldn't do it on his own. As he took a swig of his glass, his nose pointed towards the infinite cosmos, each star competing for a spot in the gleam of his eye. He thought of himself the day before and collected his memories of the events.

The Day Before...

As the moonlight rushed away and the sun began to bombard the apartment with light, Ashton turned his head away from the window. It was early in the morning and Ashton was sprawled in the doorway after a long night of schmoozing and drinking. The stench of alcohol was still on his breath. Before his mind was even fully awake, his body forced him to stand and walk towards the bathroom. Like an automaton, his body had recognized it was time to work soon and he needed to be ready.

His apartment was empty, but it was 28 floors above the world, so in that way it gave him a sense of power. A jail cell looked like a palace compared to this void room. The only amenities present were seven different framed awards. There were degrees, diplomas, and even a certificate for helping during company fundraisers. The only pristine area, kept free from dirt and grime, was the closet. Ashton's suits sat ready like ironed soldiers with a mission to make him adored. The war those soldiers fought was a war to make others envy Ashton. Once his mind finally caught up with his body, he felt confident that he had won over a few members of the committee at the party last night. He then was filled with anticipation when he remembered that his task today was to score a promotion at work. Normally, Ashton relished the opportunity to put himself above the pack, but today he would be competing against the only person in the world he truly hated. His rival was Wallace Parker, a man who was considered a saint and a role model by those who knew him.

Ashton slammed the door to his apartment shut and waved at his neighbors as he walked by. He gave them all a cheesy, Hollywood smile. Ashton's teeth were as white as the marble pillars that he walked past on his way to work. As he brushed by all the others on his street, he was easily noticeable. He stood about a head taller than most people and walked like a king among peasants. The wind tried to penetrate Ashton's slicked-back, jet-black hair, but it couldn't pierce the bastion of gel that fortified the strands to his scalp. He knew today was one of the most important days of his life, and he felt confident.

As he walked down the busy road, a homeless man held out a weathered cap for him. Ashton gave a great grin to the man and gently placed fifty dollars into the cap. The man was elated and looked at Ashton with reverence, like he was a great prophet. Others saw this act and believed the same. Nobody had seen the four other homeless men that Ashton ignored because

they begged on empty roads. Ashton was a saint when he had an audience. He believed there was no point in preaching without churchgoers, and no point in cooking without guests.

Almost to work, Ashton noticed that his boss's favorite coffee stand was about to close. The aroma of the coffee was no comfort to him. He'd hated it every day he was forced to carry it to his father's associates and every day since. He quickened his pace and stepped in line. The only other patron was an elderly woman with wrinkles so far up her face it was like her eyes were sewn shut. Ashton tapped his foot out of impatience. He correctly assumed the shop was only going to serve one more customer. He thought about stepping away and continuing to work, but then he remembered how much better of a chance he would have at the promotion if he walked in and gave his boss her favorite coffee. He gently tapped the old woman on the shoulder.

"Ma'am," he gently inquired with the respect of a choir boy. "Why don't you go sit down on that bench over there and I will bring your coffee to you?"

The woman's face lit up with joy as she began to wobble over to her seat. The coffee vendor smiled at Ashton's kind act and offered to give the woman the coffee for free. Ashton waited for the coffee and even gave the worker a nice tip. He walked around the corner to the bench where the old woman sat alone. The worker could not see the bench but assumed the old woman was quietly sipping on her nice coffee. Ashton approached the bench and continued walking. The old woman sat and waited for a coffee that would never come. Ashton figured the senile woman had probably already forgotten about it by now, so there was no harm. He didn't have ill-intentions, but he was raised to take what he wanted, so this was just nature's course. He finally approached his work and gazed up at the place that gave him so much purpose. The

building itself pierced the skies and towered regally above the horizon. Ashton cared little for the actual work that occurred inside the building, as admiration was his payment.

“Good morning, Emily!” Ashton exclaimed as he strutted down the hallway like a lion on the hunt. “I heard about your son’s big play! I bet he was a little movie star in the making, huh?” Ashton hardly even remembered what he said as the words came from his mouth. He spewed small talk from his mouth like an overflowing sewer of words. Deep down, he held information about others like playing cards in the big game of corporate success. Remembering someone’s name just helped him win. He didn’t care when he wasn’t playing. He marched towards the elevator, ready to skyrocket his success with his big interview. As the door opened, he saw Wallace standing in the coffin shaped room. Ashton smiled and stepped into the elevator. Both men had monstrous grins, like two veterans reuniting after war. They cleared their throats. Both men were masters at the façade of acting interested. Any conversation between the two read like a car salesman and his echo.

“Ashton! Glad to see you could make it buddy!” Wallace boomed. “You’re looking sharp today”.

“I could say the same to you, Wally.” Ashton smiled while fuming inside. The elevator closed and the two men began their ride to the top.

As Ashton entered the lion’s den of the elevator with Wallace, there was an unspoken agreement between them. They both knew that they would fight like battle bound gladiators in their interview. The two men stared down at their own feet with great, creeping smiles on their faces. The elevator doors opened like a shining stage curtain and both men were ready to perform. Like two noble thespians they prepared to pretend, exaggerate and schmooze their way

towards their goal. Ashton had unbridled anger for the man next to him, and he knew Wallace felt the same.

Ashton organized his notes and sat in wait. The next 15 minutes crawled like a dying lizard through the sand. The sniffles and coughs of each patron in the room insulted Ashton's ears. Most other people in the room were checking their phones. Ashton believed them to be mindless and disrespectful, especially the man sitting next to him, attached to his device like an artificial lung. Wallace, from the other side of Ashton, leaned closer to his rival, clearly ready to get inside his head.

"Ya know, Ashton. I was just wondering something," Wallace pried. "Didn't you used to work for Bickman Offices up in Brooklyn?"

"Yes, I did, Wallace," Ashton whispered. He was already irritated because he knew what Wallace's game was. The man next to Ashton looked up from his phone to eavesdrop.

"So that is your father's company then, isn't it? I was reading up on them and I saw something about you leaving there and thought 'Well that can't be *our* Ashton can it', but man, that's something isn't it." Wallace jeered.

Ashton began to fume inside. Wallace did this research only to frustrate him. Anyone who investigated the situation could see that Ashton left his father's company 8 years ago in a public and angry way.

"You got me, Wallace. Yes, my father is very successful, but I just wanted to have my own successes, you know?" Ashton chuckled. Wallace leaned over further to Ashton, making sure his next words would invade his ears.

"That is funny. I heard you just couldn't handle it. He didn't think you were man enough for it."

Ashton craned his neck around to look Wallace in the eyes. The sheer malicious intent alone was enough to make Wallace regret his words. Ashton gritted his teeth and then opened his mouth, freezing slightly after due to the sound of footsteps.

The boss set one heel into the room and Ashton was as attentive as a guard dog. His mouth watered at the idea that he could rise above the drones sitting next to him in this room. Ashton clutched to the coffee like it was an offering to an otherworldly deity. As his boss grew closer, he realized she had something clutched in her hand. It was the same coffee. Ashton's eye twitched. The silence around him started to sound like static and little noises stung at his ears. This was pure irritation. Carefully he set the coffee down on the floor and smiled a hopeful yet false smile. He was so excited to finally prove to this company he was worthy of admiration. He fanaticized about the hours of standing ovation and adoration he would soon receive.

The meeting wouldn't even last 10 minutes.

His boss examined the room around her and cleared her throat.

"Alright, I'll just make this quick. As far as the promotion goes, it isn't much of a step above anything anyone here is already doing. If you'll all look around the room, you'll see a new face in here. Martin has just defected from Killman & Sons and we are happy he's decided to make the switch to join our team instead. As a show of our appreciation for him leaving our competitors, he will be receiving the position." She orated.

She brushed off the promotion like it was nothing. It was an act to appease the new employee. The man who obtained the promotion was the man sitting next to Ashton. Ashton didn't even move after the meeting. It was as if everything he had been working towards had just been ripped by him. Wallace stood up, a disappointed look on his face. This was the first time he looked at Ashton and understood that they both felt the same. Their rivalry had been robbed from

them. To them, it was like a mother telling their kids to come home in the middle of a game. Ashton began twiddling his thumbs in his seat, unsure of what to do next. He had done everything he was supposed to, and still he couldn't show everyone how important he was.

Upon standing to his feet, his mind began to grow dull and numb. He stopped thinking about everything. For once in his life, he thought about buying a nice chair to rest in for his apartment. He knew it wouldn't bring him and fame or attention, but part of him just wanted a nice place to rest his feet. He thought about that chair and about how maybe he would be happy just sitting there. He wondered if Wallace had a nice chair too. This intrusive thought stayed fixed in his mind.

Back to That Night...

He looked back down after the swig of his drink, remembering again the party going on behind him. Finally, he freed himself from his chamber of isolation and stumbled back into the apartment. All the others stared as he wobbled towards the front door and out into the incandescent hallway. Out about twelve feet from the door was another partygoer sprawled out with his apartment key sitting in his hand, as if he was reaching to go somewhere. Ashton chuckled to himself, taking a little pride in the fact that he wasn't as much of a degenerate as the drunk on the ground. He stepped right over the unconscious man and continued his way down the hall. He paused. For an unknown reason, Ashton was compelled to look down at the man who lie on the floor. As his eyes turned to the man's face, he realized it was the young kid that had swiped the promotion from both him and Wallace. He was filled with resentment for a moment but then stopped and realized the kid was in a bad state, lying on the floor like a wounded creature. It filled Ashton with disgust that the man who was supposed to be the proud

recipient of the promotion laid like a dog in the middle of the hall. Ashton knew he would be even more embarrassed if the man he lost to was found sleeping in a pile of his own vomit after the party. Ashton didn't think much before beginning to lift the man onto his shoulder and carrying him across the hall. The man was light and fragile, so Ashton had no trouble dragging him through the complex.

"Wake up," Ashton commanded. "Which room is yours?". The man's eyes flickered for a second and made the only sound his mouth was able to make.

"Four..tee...Twent.....two," the man slurred.

*As Ashton approached the room, he grabbed the key out of the man's hand and fiddled with the lock to get the key in. Eventually, he pushed the door open and stepped into the man's dark apartment. He reached over and flicked on the light. Ashton was stunned with what he saw. The man did not have expensive or lavish furniture like some party hosts and corporate bosses have. The man did not have a lonely and pointless apartment like Ashton, who saw no point in buying things people won't see. Instead, the man had a humble room with cozy couches and tons of family pictures hung up. The room was not filthy, but it wasn't spotless and waiting to be inspected like many apartments on this floor. There was a mess, but in a cozy way. In a way that feels inviting and natural. This was not the room of an overachiever or an obsessor, it was the room of a man. The family pictures caught Ashton's eye for a bit longer than it normally would have. A fleeting thought that entered his mind was envy. He envied that something as cliché as a cheesy family portrait probably fulfilled the man.

Ashton gently placed the man on his bed and haphazardly threw his blanket over the top of him. Ashton even regretfully felt the need to take the shoes off the man. Springing to life, the man sat up in his bed, startling Ashton. He held up \$300 in his drunken trance and waved it

towards Ashton. It seemed as though the man was trying to offer him payment for carrying him to his room, but the man was so drunk he probably did not even realize he was doing this.

Ashton reached for the money, but as his fingertips touched the bills, he gazed at the empty face on the man and then back around the room to the pictures of the man's family. Ashton realized that nobody would praise him for rejecting the payment. It would be pointless to not accept it because nobody would idolize him for making the "right" decision. He should take it, and yet, he paused with his fingers gripping the money. Ashton looked one more time at the man and in one slow movement, Ashton let go of the money.

Ashton flicked off the light of the room and closed the door behind him. As he walked down the hallway, he felt confused. There was nothing to gain by choosing to be kind in that moment, yet he did so anyways. His brilliant, mogul of a father never would've let go of that cash, yet he did. For some reason, he was okay with that fact. He felt slightly repulsed that he was generous to the man that stole away his own happiness, but for some reason, that feeling subsided quickly. The feeling that flowed in afterwards was unknown to Ashton. Deep down, Ashton recognized that maybe he had been pretending to feel this way his whole life, but it was only until now that he could truly experience it. This feeling was true. This feeling was real. This feeling was pride.

The Next Morning...

The snow beat on the window like an angry mob and the ice in the air stung like bees in the frosty sky. Ashton still wore his black suit through the winter's day and his outfit stood out against the white, snow-covered scene around him. Due to this blizzard, nobody was out on the street. Nobody watched Ashton.

Further down the road sat a freezing man. He sat clutching his giant coat that fought its best against the elements. Ashton looked at the man, who had a cup of change next to him. Normally, Ashton would've felt superior to this man, but after the events of the past few days he understood how the man could've felt. He threw some change into the man's cup. The man lifted his bearded, disheveled head and spoke.

"Thank you, sir. Merry Christmas" the man mumbled.

Ashton had completely forgotten about Christmas. He gazed upon the empty street. His body shuffled along the rest of the road. Ashton walked past a furniture store that was still open. As he gazed through the window, he saw a nice chair. It was a calm, blue velvet chair. Ashton, without thinking, walked in and purchased the chair. He drug that chair through the snow all the way back to his apartment. He struggled to carry it and had to stop frequently, but for some reason the difficulty made it feel more rewarding. For once there were no noisy cars on the road and the only sounds to be heard was the chair dragging through the snow. One man appeared almost out of the thin, freezing air and walked right past Ashton. It was Wallace. Ashton stopped for a moment and called out to him, speaking without any thought to what he was saying.

"Wallace", Ashton stated firmly. Wallace turned around. He had bruises across his face and smelled of garbage and cigarettes. Ashton prodded, "You don't look so good."

"I-I guess I'm not," Wallace said. "How're you out here after all that? I can't even live with myself. I thought you'd be angry too, but here you are acting all proud like normal."

"I am angry, Wallace." Ashton rebuked. "I never wanted anything more than that promotion. It proved to me I could be my own person and that I was worth something. The part that I was most angry about is that you lost, too. I wanted to be mad at you. I liked the idea of

being better than you.” Ashton began to choke up as he spoke, his breath like dragon’s smoke pushing through the bitter air towards Wallace.

Ashton whined, “You saw the man we lost to, though. Did he care about the promotion? How can something that meant the world to me be the smallest part of his life? Maybe there are things more important, Wallace.”

“Ha. I know you, Ashton. You’ll always care about being better. You know something?” Wallace pointed his finger towards Ashton, his feet stumbling around a bit in the snow. “I don’t need this. Go enjoy your sad life, and I’ll enjoy mine. I know I’m better than you. Stop acting all mighty all of a sudden. Just grow up.”

As Wallace finished speaking, he turned to walk away, but his foot got caught in the snow and his face planted into the ground. Ashton slowly trudged over, reaching out a hand to his once rival. Wallace swatted his hand away and quickly stood to his feet and marched out into the morning fog. Ashton felt pity for the man. He and Wallace were exactly alike, but this one day, Ashton was the only one willing to stick out his hand. Ashton did not feel superior for doing this, he did so because secretly, he wanted a hand too. Ashton lifted the wet chair and continued to drag it through the thick snow.

Ashton set that chair down in his apartment and finally had an actual piece of furniture to call his own. Although this was the most decorated his apartment had been, it somehow felt emptier than it ever had. It needed more. As he set his feet down in that chair, Ashton thought about all the times he’d walked over others for that promotion. He wondered how they viewed others. Thinking about how he’d stolen that woman’s coffee made his eyes well up. Pity had been caged inside his soul for so long, he was unsure of how to express it. He decided to make one call before he drifted off to sleep in his new chair. His thumb hovered over his father’s

contact, but he did not feel the urge to dial. For once, he decided he'd allow himself to fail. He was the ruler of his life, and only he could decide his worth. He swiped away from his father's name and began to dial. He was calling the man who had snagged his promotion. The drunk fool who had stolen his dream. The man picked up the phone with a mumble, hardly even a "hello". Ashton spoke softly into the phone. When he spoke, he spoke truthfully.

"Congrats," Ashton said. For the first time in his life, he spoke these next words with meaning. "I'm happy for you."