

GRAPPLING

LEADERS STRIVING
TO IMPROVE

ROBERT E. KAPLAN



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PREFACE

Have you done much grappling with yourself? I have done my fair share of it. As father to my three precious children, now adults, I struggled with impatience. I've had to guard against working too much, especially with kids at home. I'm intense and at risk of getting carried away on any playing field. I watch myself, guide myself, and I'm always striving to improve at whatever is important to me. I have also done my fair share of helping other people grapple with themselves. These have mainly been leaders but sometimes a family member or friend if they wanted my help.

My one-on-one work with leaders goes all the way back to the late 1980s, when my colleagues and I at the Center for Creative Leadership came up with a prototype of executive coaching well before there was such a thing. The service was a by-product of an R&D project on the development needs of senior managers. We used a novel methodology, what we called *biographical action-research*. We used *action-research* in the sense that you study a phenomenon by changing it or attempting to change it. *Biographical* was in the sense that we took into account the leader's early life and current life. Since then, whole-life consulting to senior managers is largely what I've

done—in large organizations and in start-ups (www.kaplandevries.com).

I have also done plenty of expounding on the topic: many articles, several books—a lot of exposition in the form of theory, research findings, advice, and case studies designed to make a conceptual point. Lately, I found myself yearning for another way to convey what I've learned, and I hit on the idea of writing novelistically. The narratives that follow are based on real people, and, as with historical fiction, many of the scenes are imagined. The narratives are instructive, but the instruction is implicit; it's not spelled out. The closing chapter, "Lessons for Leaders," however, makes explicit the themes that cut across the several narratives.

You will encounter a variety of leader types, even archetypes. You won't just witness these leaders in the office. You will get to follow them into their homes. You will see that, whatever the arena, their basic character is always in play, for good or ill. Their character is also revealed in the way they relate to the trained professional—the guide—attempting to help them grapple with themselves.

Each of these dramas is unique, but they have in common the universal struggle to do better and be better—to mature. Maturity is not just knowing your worst tendencies but getting a handle on them.

PROLOGUE

Sam, a turnaround artist, has the mentality to match, which is deeply ingrained, and plays out everywhere.

WRONGED

Sam Calastri sat high in his black leather desk chair behind his massive white oak desk, completely free of paper and polished to a gleam that almost hurt your eyes. A big man, looking fit and strong though no longer young. He came to work every day in a dark suit and white shirt, senior management's uniform, but his tie was always loosened.

Opposite him stood two straight-backed chairs for guests. In one perched Sally Cain, a self-described guide to leaders, who had flown in from Boston. To her own black corporate outfit Sally added a splash of color, a classy scarf loosely knotted and draped over her shoulders.

Sam had cancelled twice before. The first cancellation she accepted without question. The second one made her doubt his commitment. That, or he was just jerking her around.

The top HR executive, along with the CEO, had decided to get consulting help for an *enfant terrible* in senior ranks, not Sam. To avoid the appearance of singling out the problem executive, they decided that a senior person in good standing should “work on themselves” at the same time.

The CEO himself was the best choice, but he demurred. So the HR head approached Sam—the two of them went way back—and Sam agreed. It fit. Sam had always beaten his brains out to make the grade, and that always meant learning new things, acquiring skills. Hence Sally's presence in Sam's office, although she knew none of this backstory.

As Sally attempted pleasantries, Sam had his chair tilted back. He wasn't going to make it too easy for her, or it wouldn't be a true test. Coddling people, like his children—he had three—was antithetical to him, abhorrent. He had no truck with presents for children whose birthday it wasn't.

For Sally, it was like scouting around for a foothold on a sheer rock face. *Surely, there's a dimple, the slightest indent, something to support my weight.* Her breathing was shallow; her diaphragm hardly moved. She thought to ask, "How did you come by this big job?"

Now his chair came vaulting forward, his deep voice filling the room. She'd hit on the thing that animated his very being. "Long story short: I had my heart set on a company with a dominant market position—Stellar Corp, a medical device business, in particular. Coming from some no-name rinky-dink college, I had no business applying there. For some unknown reason, they hired me."

She wanted to say, *Good for you*, but doubted it would be welcomed. She wasn't a rookie. After getting a master's degree in counseling and going to work at a search firm with a newly added consulting arm, she'd put in the 10,000 hours that's said to be required to get good at something—not to say she'd completely mastered her discipline or herself. When she was just a baby, her paternal grandfather heard her piercing cry and predicted she'd be

an opera singer. Her maternal grandfather referred to her at age three as “a tornado.” Her father, stunned that at a young age she escalated when they admonished her, said she “raises Cain.”

“Foot in the door at Stellar, great,” Sam continued. “But then it was up or out. I had zip chance of making the first cut. At least that’s what the other guys in my entering class of twenty-five management trainees seemed to think. They never missed a chance to drop the name of the fancy school they’d gone to. They looked at me like I was some ugly duckling. Maybe it was my crewcut. No one else had one.”

She felt for him but kept her mouth shut. *Let the line run out*, she told herself. She’d gone deep-sea fishing a few times past Georges Bank.

“But, truth be told, they were much better prepared than me—bigger vocabularies, more articulate. I had so much ground to make up it wasn’t funny. Worked ninety hours a week. Kept it up ’til Christmas, and then I was sick as a dog—high fever, raging sore throat. Then back at it ’til the Fourth of July and sick again. I should never have taken time off.

“A year into it, my peers were getting promoted, and I wasn’t. Scared the daylights out of me. But my supervisor taught me the ropes. If it weren’t for him, I’d never have made the cut.” He got choked up for a moment.

Sam scooped back a little and opened the drawer. Out came a switchblade. With the tip of the blade, he scraped dirt from under his fingernails. *Like killing a flea with a cannon*, she thought. Growing up, she’d owned a jackknife, skinned branches, played mumblety-peg with the neighborhood boys. She wanted to tell him that, get her lips unstuck, but she refrained.

“It’s grease,” he explained. “I do all the work myself. It’s an old pickup truck, a Ford F-150. A wreck when I got it. Rebuilt it myself, body work and all. I promise you it’s the only truck in the parking garage.”

Common-man touch, she thought. “I’d love to see it.” Finally, she got a toehold in the conversation.

“You can do more than that; you can drive it. If you can handle a stick shift, that is. This one’s on the floor.”

“No problem. That’s how I learned to drive; that’s how my kids learned.” *Take that*, she thought. Emboldened, she tried a segue. “Do you work on yourself?”

“You bet. Every new job I get, I whip myself into shape. Have to.” At *whipped*, Sally raised her eyebrows. Evidently, he read that as wanting to know more and added, “I bone up on the new business, do a SWAT analysis on it.”

Hesitantly, she asked, “How about, you know, self-improvement?”

He blinked. “You mean style issues? But why would I mess with a winning formula?” She sensed he was toying with her. “Like I told you on the phone, I don’t introspect much. That’s why you’re here.”

“Yes, that is why I’m here,” she said, grateful to have her reason for existing confirmed yet fearful he was just putting her on. The photograph on the wall behind him caught her eye—a young man in a football uniform. “Is that you?” she asked, pointing. *Stupid question: Who else could it be?* But again, she had hit on something core to his being, and he didn’t bother to tease her.

“Yeah, I played for a very good Michigan State team that won the Big Ten title my senior year.” He smiled, revealing a crooked tooth next to his front tooth. *No money for orthodontia.*

“My college boyfriend played pro football.”

He perked up. “Which position?”

Ah, good. I've got him, she thought. “Defensive back. For the Bengals.”

Not to be outdone, he said, “I played middle linebacker. Pity the ball carrier I got my hands on.” His eyes flashed like he was getting ready for the ball to be snapped.

“Well,” she said, “I played varsity hockey in high school—defense.” She got to her feet. “I’m not that big—as you can see—but I spent plenty of time in the penalty box. Mighty Mouse, my teammates dubbed me.” She could be faulted for getting down to his level, or you could applaud her for helping herself with him by drawing on what she had in common.

“Scrappy, huh?”

“Yes, that was said.” *What—am I winning him over?* She sat back down and began to breathe a bit easier. But not content with the win, she kept pushing, uneasy as she did it. Her husband told her she didn’t know when to quit. “Your style of play as an athlete,” she said, “how does that compare with your leadership style?”

“You’re right, Sally, I wear the black hat.”

“The black hat—what does that look like?”

“It looks like my Darth Vader costume.” She couldn’t tell if he was being literal, but he was. Literally, every Halloween he wore it—never tired of shocking people new to the Halloween parties he and his wife threw, rollicking affairs. “Want to see the black hat in real time? Sit in on my ten a.m. meeting tomorrow. You’re invited.” She accepted, thinking it would help to see him in action.

The following day, after waking up, she stayed in bed, eyes closed. Her father came to mind. He smoked, and when she was seven, she told him, with the moral clarity of a child that age, “Dad,

smoking's not good for you. You've got to stop." He kissed her on the forehead and did stop. A few years later, his drinking caught her attention. That he drank—martinis, wine at dinner—wasn't new. It was that he probably drank to excess. Again, she appealed to him. Again, he thanked her, hugged her affectionately, but this time nothing changed. Frustrated, she kept after him, but that only served to displease him, and she didn't want that. Getting dressed, she mused, *Why did I think of Dad? Does Sam remind me of my father?*

The occasion for the ten o'clock meeting: Stellar had just issued a recall on a new type of replacement hip. When he got word of the recall, Sam was mortified; he was furious.

Someone had brought over a couple of extra guest chairs, and Sally took a seat in one of them. "Don't mind her," he began, shooting Sally a bad-boy grin, "she's a shrink." She welcomed being recognized but not in that way. Normally, she'd object to *shrink*, but she was mollified by his humor.

The GM, a fellow named Charlie, started passing around a slide deck, but Sam interrupted him. "What's the point?" he barked. "You sent this out as a pre-read. Everyone read it, right?" Whether they had or hadn't, people nodded sheepishly. "So what have you found? What do you recommend?" Charlie turned to one of the staffers, a young woman so nervous her hands shook. Sam heard her out and, softening his tone just a bit, said, "Thank you, Lisa," then turned to the R&D head. "This analysis is full of holes that even a nontechnical guy like me can see. It's not ready for show-time, and you know it. Get back to me tomorrow," he boomed. It was Thursday.

"But, Sam," the R&D lead protested weakly, "that's not enough time."

“Okay. Monday.” With a wave of his arm, he dismissed them.

Just then, Sam’s phone rang, and Sally, having had an eyeful of black hat, saw her chance. She waved good-bye and ran after the GM, Charlie. “Can I ask you something?” she said, out of breath. “Is he always this way?” He nodded and ushered her into his office.

“That’s him. He gets angry, but it blows over quickly. It’s his ‘this isn’t good enough’ approach. We’re used to it, most of us anyway. If you can’t take it, you leave. Plenty of people have left. By the way, I’m one of the chosen ones. Every time he’s given a new assignment, he’s taken me with him.”

“What’s the attraction?”

“Despite the hard exterior, he’s got a good heart, which he does his best to hide. It pains him to let people go, especially first-line employees. But he gets called in to fix businesses, and that means triage. It’s brutal, but it’s his job to be brutal.”

Sally and Sam met for dinner at Morton’s, his favorite steak place. “Listen,” he said, “I’m not the complete asshole you must think I am.” That devilish grin again. “Not that I give a damn.”

She turned mischievous herself and asked, “Do you have proof?”

He stared at her for a moment. “Okay. Our youngest, Brian, who’s fourteen—last night, he and I watched the first half of Thursday Night Football together. It was the Steelers, our home team, against the Patriots.”

Taking after his father, Brian played football. Sam’s wife, Margaret, had objected. “Football ought to be outlawed,” she had said.

“First let’s outlaw war,” Sam fired back.

During a commercial break, Brian had muted the TV and said, “Dad, call my cell phone.”

“What the heck for?” I asked. ‘I’m sitting right here.’

“Just do it, okay?”

“He handed me his phone, and it rang with an ominous, dun-duh-duh-dun. Beethoven’s Fifth, I think. His way of ribbing me about my—what’s the word?—persona. I leaned over and punched him on the shoulder, lightly of course.”

“That’s your idea of camaraderie?” She teased him, although she sensed faintly he was touched by the moment but wanted to hide it.

“Hey, the kid knows. Who says it has to be hugs and kisses?” It sounded like he was offended, but the glint in his eye said otherwise. Banter was his favorite indoor sport.

“Are you that way with your wife and daughters too?” Even though she was still unsure of her position with him, she too enjoyed the repartee.

“What do you take me for?” he said and slid his phone over to her. She caught it as it was about to fall off the table. “Here. Talk to my wife. Ask her.”

Shaking her head, she slid the phone right back, noting with pleasure it stopped just short of the edge. *What—are we playing hockey?* “In due time,” she said, worried he’d persist.

“Okay then, I’ll tell you what she’d say.”

Before he could put words in his wife’s mouth, Sally interjected. “Are you open to a counteroffer?”

He raised his chin, signaling her to go ahead.

“I have a better idea. Let her tell me directly.”

“Fine by me.” She was taken aback, not prepared for him to agree and so readily. *What’s going on? Am I turning the corner?* She smiled inside, and the glow showed.

“Just so you know,” Sam threw in, “Margaret’s a handful. She catches fire way too easily.”

Look who’s talking, Sally thought, but much more charitably than she’d have felt a minute earlier.

In short order, Sally arranged to meet with Margaret, in a conference room at her hotel. Margaret interrupted before Sally could get two words out of her mouth: “I get it. I’m a psychiatric social worker—at a prison, actually.” Murderers, rapists, the muscle-bound types—she could handle it, although, sometimes too quick with a comeback, she got herself in hot water. “What’s Sam like? To the kids, he’s Father with a capital F. He plays hardball with them.”

“What would Sam say?”

“‘When it’s needed.’ I don’t always see the need. Case in point.” She related a recent incident involving their fifteen-year-old daughter, Lisa, their middle child, a high school sophomore, a natural high achiever. In Margaret’s telling, Lisa had burst into the kitchen, knocking the swinging door into the wall. Margaret jabbed her index finger at the phone in her hand. Lisa paced the floor. The moment Margaret put the phone back on the hook, Lisa rushed up to her (Sam preferred wired lines, better sound quality). “Mom,” she shouted, “Dad is on my case about my fall-term grades!”

“What did he actually say?”

“That there was no excuse for a B. That I ought to try harder!”

Margaret tried to calm her down. “Can I get you something to drink?”

“Diet Coke.”

“It’s too late for caffeine.” Lisa settled for a caffeine-free Dr Pepper. They sat down at the kitchen table; Margaret squeezed her

daughter's hand. "Look. You may find this hard to believe, but your father is very proud of you."

"You'd never know it!" Lisa said and stomped out of the room.

Sally was about to ask how the two of them met, but Margaret beat her to it. They met in college, and at first, Margaret was in awe of him. He was a senior, she just a sophomore. He was the starting linebacker on State's winning football team. She couldn't hold a candle to that. But once they were married, right after graduation, and once she got an eyeful of his feet of clay, the awe wore off quite a bit, and gradually, she learned to stand up to him.

From the beginning, one of Sam's favorite ways to show he cared for Margaret was to surprise her. For their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, they'd treated themselves to a long weekend in New York City. He'd led her to believe they would stay at their usual perfectly fine hotel, the Kitano. But, after dinner, he suggested they pop over to the Four Seasons for a nightcap. Walking in, they both admired the temple-like lobby. Then Sam took her by the hand and headed over to the registration desk.

She grabbed his arm. "What's going on, Sam?!" He allowed himself to be stopped, turned slowly around, and flashed a big smile. Catching on, she rushed into his arms.

That concluded Margaret's account. She turned to Sally. "Give you an idea?"

The whole time Margaret was speaking, Sally had been scribbling away. "It does. Thanks," she said. "I'm guessing you told Sam about how upset Lisa was?"

"You guess right. I pointed out the error of his ways. He didn't want to hear it. I could help him grow, but he's not open to it. It's a shame."

Sally cleaned up her notes and showed the transcript to Margaret, who was amazed Sally had got it down word for word. She gave Sally permission to show it to Sam.

At her next opportunity Sally, feeling like she was firmly in charge of the situation, did just that.

Sam read the transcript and said, “Yeah, that squares with what she told me about it. My older daughter could take it, and she performed at the highest level. McKinsey made her an offer, and they only hire the best and the brightest; she preferred to go in-house. You’ve got to challenge your kids. Parents these days are way too protective. Margaret’s not the worst, I have to admit.”

“What about the last part—when she caught up with you?” Sally asked, thinking *Sam’s letting me do my job, and that’s all I want.*

He threw up his hands. “Typical Margaret. Here’s what actually happened. She walked into my home office one evening, and she was so upset I could hardly make out her words. I got her to calm down enough to tell me what happened. That part I bought.”

“Do you buy that she could help you grow?”

He snorted. “Yeah, she tries to play therapist with me. Spouse as therapist—not a good idea. Anyway, she’s clumsy. Gives me gratuitous advice; nobody wants that. And she tells me what I’m feeling. How would she know? I know she’s better than that at work.”

Margaret’s clumsiness excited a touch of *schadenfreude* in Sally. But mostly, she was excited about the headway she was making with him and more intent on helping him. In all the sparring, she hadn’t lost focus on that. In fact, she was getting clearer in her mind on how best to be useful.

“Sam, Margaret suggested I ask you about your father. Urged me to do that.”

He sighed. “Do you want that?”

“Yes, very much: The child is father to the man, you know. But I’m mainly interested in you, the effect on you.”

“He was hard on me and on my mother too—when he drank. A six-pack—Pabst Blue Ribbon, the local beer; we lived in Milwaukee. Slugged them down one after the other. Then, watch out. He could turn ugly in a heartbeat.”

“Can you be specific, if you don’t mind?” She trod lightly. No telling what was next. No telling how bad it was.

“He didn’t hit me, if that’s what you’re wondering. Once or twice, he rapped my knuckles when I was late for dinner, but that doesn’t count. There was one time when I disobeyed my mother when she told me to babysit for the younger kids. I shook my head no and darted off to play ball with friends anyway. ‘Disobey your mother again,’ he told me later, towering over me and hopping mad, ‘and I’ll kick your ass.’ But he never did. That reminds me: My brother calls me the ‘Cosmic Ass-Kicker.’” Sam smothered a smile.

“Your dad turned ugly but no problem?”

“I got used to it. What do you want me to say?” She looked doubtful. “Know the song, ‘A Boy Named Sue?’”

“No, but I get the idea.”

“Yeah, my father toughened me up. He’s a big reason I’ve done as well as I have.”

She emitted a little wordless *hmmph*.

He took offense. “What—you don’t believe me?!”

“It’s not that.” She paused for a moment. “Only upside?”

He thought about it. “You mean I’m putting lipstick on the pig?”

“Pretty much,” she said, brightening. *Getting somewhere!*

His daughter Kathleen, twenty-four, reached him that evening

and the same themes got struck. In her midtwenties, Kathleen had followed her father into the business world. “I’ve been promoted to team leader, and I don’t know a thing about managing people,” she told her father.

Neglecting to congratulate her, he said, “You’ll do just fine. You’re organized. You have a good touch with people. Get some experience under your belt, and then we’ll talk.”

“I want to model myself after you.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t do that. Do as I say maybe, not as I do.”

“Nothing wrong with the way you lead, Dad.”

“What do you know about the way I lead?” He brought the hard edge, but she had long ago adapted to it.

“I’ve heard the stories. You attack what’s wrong; it energizes you, right?”

“I can’t deny it. But you, you’re a much nicer person than I am.”

“At work, don’t be so sure. The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.”

Oh great, he said to himself, but he was pleased too.

The Alcohol Factor

Sally had a very particular reason for dropping by Sam’s office the next day. “There’s something I want you to know. My father drank too.” *How about that!* he said to himself. “But I don’t mean to equate our situations; my father’s personality didn’t change when he drank. Either way, he was a pretty darned good father.”

It was Sam’s turn to be doubtful. “Let’s say it was benign, his drinking. Even so, did it have an effect on you?”

She got her back up. “What am I supposed to compare it to, a hypothetical father I didn’t have?”

“Never mind.” He was tolerant. Having drinking fathers in common helped with that. But with a twinkle in his eye, he then said, “Types like you aren’t supposed to be defensive, are you?”

Seeing he was having fun at her expense didn’t keep her from being embarrassed. She blushed.

“That’s okay, Sally. Just proves you’re human.”

That helped, and she went on. “I’ve toyed with the idea of going to Al-Anon. Heard of it?” He had. Margaret had suggested it too. From his wife, it came across as gratuitous. But coming from Sally, who broached it more like a friend than a professional, he took the possibility more seriously.

Maybe I am downplaying it, he thought. This boy-named-Sue thing is getting old, wearing thin like a once-favorite white shirt with a fraying collar. A few days later, he suddenly thought, What the hell? I’ll do it. I might learn something. But to heck with this Al-Anon thing, probably a bunch of people milking the victim thing for all they are worth. No, I want the real thing.

He chose an AA chapter on the other side of town, where he probably wouldn’t run into anybody he knew. He didn’t mind the drive. He used a car service and sat in the back seat making calls.

The meeting was held in a basement room of a church. As he walked into the building and down the stairs, people nodded to him. He was struck right away by how the meeting started. They went around the room, all twenty-five or so of them, all men, and each person stated how long, in days, weeks, months, or years—or not at all—he’d been sober; every meeting started that way. When it was his turn that first night, everyone turning to look at him, he said, unapologetically, “My whole life.” Except for some wondering looks, no one responded.

It was a strange feeling. *Exposed: that's it. Here I'm not a big shot. I'm not Father. I'm just another Joe Blow with a sad story.* He straightened his shoulders, stiffened his spine. He could handle it.

There was time that evening for several people to talk with blistering honesty about how they had bottomed out and how they were recovering or trying to. It wasn't until the next meeting that someone addressed him, an older, long-sober guy, although still, as he said, "recovering."

"Why are you here?" He was point-blank direct but not hostile.

"My father guzzled six-packs. Maybe I can learn something."

"Have a ball."

In meeting after meeting, they put people "in the barrel," attacked their illusions, their defenses. Mercifully, they left Sam alone. When he wasn't traveling, he kept attending, drawn to it like a book he couldn't put down.

The other side of life, he remarked to himself. But instead of feeling superior, he felt a kinship with the other men, not as strange as it might seem. Life had been a struggle for him too.

Three months into it, he was approached during a break by the veteran who had questioned him in group, his voice made raspy by cigarette smoke. Sam admired the way he'd enter late during someone's turn and cut to the crux. "You've got a sponsor now—me," he said. Sam couldn't make out whether that was meant as a gift or a threat. His cotton button-down shirt was wrinkled, his old jeans were wrinkled, and so was the skin on his face. In Sam's world, he'd start calling this unprepossessing guy "Wrinkles" on the spot. Why? To cut the guy down to size.

"Don't waste your time on me."

"Oh, yeah. What keeps you coming back here?"

Who does this guy think he is? Sam thought. He had come to accept Sally as a peer, but this man acted like he was in charge, had authority over Sam. Suddenly, the specter of his father darkened his mind, making him feel out of sorts. That threw him for a moment, but he did his best not to let it show. He summoned his considerable personal powers. He wasn't about to be intimidated by some stranger, however credible. Sam looked him in the eye and said, "Like I told you the last time you asked, I'm here to learn."

"Oh, yeah, what are you learning? Name one thing."

It had been many years since anyone treated him this way, but Sam stayed composed as he gathered his thoughts. "Life is a big struggle; I knew that but had no idea how much company I had." He paused, waiting for a reaction. There was none. "Here's what's new: A lot of the struggle is internal. You're fighting yourself."

"Not bad. Not bad for a rookie." The rough edge came off his voice, and he held out his hand. "I'm Gus." Sam already knew his name but appreciated the gesture.

They met on the following Saturday in a diner. Gus chose a booth off in the corner. It was clear from the way the waitress greeted him that he was a regular. They both ordered black coffee, nothing to eat. "Your father an alcoholic?" Gus asked.

"He drank a lot, but he wasn't an alcoholic." Gus asked for details and pounced.

"C'mon, mate! How many drunks have I seen drag their sad asses in here and claim they're not alcoholics? Your dad's shit stinks! Stop pretending it doesn't!"

It was like some 350-pound offensive lineman had knocked Sam to the ground. He sat there for a while, not offended. Gus sat quietly, as he often did. "I don't want to typecast him," Sam finally said.

“You mean you don’t want to stigmatize him.” Still direct as a hammer, a bit of compassion for the nail had crept in.

A month later, they met again on a Saturday, same place. “Where do you work?” Gus asked.

“Stellar.”

“What do you do?” It felt like an interrogation. None of the rapport built up the last time carried over.

“I run a business.”

“One of those higher-ups, huh?” Gus sneered. “What did your dad do?”

“Plumber.”

“Blue-collar family, and look at you. Think you’re hot shit, I bet!”

“No. Not at all.” Sam bit off the words.

“More like the opposite?” Sam nodded, and Gus smiled knowingly. “You’re just as easy to typecast as your father. ‘The hero type,’ not defeated by the circumstances, rose above it, way above it in this case. But, true to form, you still think you’re a chump. Right?”

How can he be so sure? Sam thought, I’m not sure.

“Here you are, a big guy in the world, but you still feel small. Why? Why? Because your drunk father made you feel small, that’s why! Got it?”

To Sam, it sounded too pat, yet it seemed to fit.

Sally Plays Catch-Up

In the four months Sam had been going to AA, he had canceled two of his monthly meetings with Sally, and she was getting a little uneasy. He had said nothing about AA on the theory that he’d surprise her if he got something out of it. Now he was itching to tell

her. They were back in his office in their usual places on either side of the desk.

“My AA sponsor, Gus—,” he began.

“You’re going to AA!”

“Didn’t I tell you?” He couldn’t resist toying with her. “Anyway, he’s rough-cut and untrained, but he’s got wise eyes. You know, he may be as good at this stuff as you are.” Tweaking her again made him merry.

But it didn’t make her merry. Nor did she relish having another helper come on the scene. *I thought I was the one guiding him.* Distracted, she missed her cue to join him in their usual friendly combativeness as she sat there and sulked.

“What’s got into you?” he said, taken aback and actually hurt. His face clouded over.

Oh no, I’ve lost him, she thought and had to fight hard to keep her face from crumpling. Presently, she pulled herself together and said, “Tell me, Sam.”

“That guy was tough—I mean *tough*. Nothing I’ve seen since—” He stopped.

“Your father?” she said quietly.

“Speaking of him—” He took a deep breath. “He *was* an alcoholic; you were right. You didn’t actually say that, but that’s what you meant, right?” She nodded, and he went on. “No surprise, right? What you’d expect of AA, right? But *this* I didn’t expect. Gus said”—Sally cringed at the name—“like a phoenix, I’ve risen from the ashes. Redemption. It’s as if I’m saved.”

“Okaaaay,” she said, drawing out the word, struggling to follow.

He waited.

“All of a sudden, you talk to some guy—” She wouldn’t say his name; it stuck in her craw. “—and, suddenly, you’re saved?” Her voice dripped with incredulity, not to mention disrespect.

“Wait a minute, Scrapy. I told you, that word, *saved*, goes way back.” Nicknames like that were purely intuitive, but if pressed, he’d admit or discover they were terms of affection and terms of derision, the mix varying with the occasion.

“What do you mean? I don’t remember that.” Fear rippled through her. *What are you doing, Sally, getting into pitched battle with a client? Totally unprofessional.*

“That word, *saved*, it goes way back.” A prayer from attending Mass flitted through his mind: “Help me, God my Savior, for the glory of Your name, deliver me and forgive me for my sins.” A lapsed Catholic, he could still rattle off psalms, hymns, prayers, large chunks of the liturgy. “I told you my first supervisor saved me, literally. It was up or out, and without his help, I definitely would’ve been out in the cold. At the time, it was a fate worse than death.”

In a much smaller voice she said, “Oh, now I remember. Sorry, Sam.” She hung her head, abashed, embarrassed, mortified.

He waved away the apology. “This I didn’t tell you: In the early days, when I was working myself to death, my mother on one of our regular calls said, ‘Sam, it’s like you’re afraid you won’t shape up.’”

“Shaped up—is that the same thing as saved?” she said mildly.

“Let’s not split hairs. My mother was right. I was desperately trying to whip myself into shape.”

“Like you whip organizations into shape?” It was coming together in her mind too. Like the two of them were again in a groove.

“Good point,” he said, sounding upbeat. “Whip myself into shape by whipping organizations into shape.”

“Great, you see it, Sam. But do you feel it?”

“Feel it?” He looked at his midriff as if he were consulting his feelings. “No.”

“You know what they say: You can take the boy out of the jungle, but you can’t take the jungle out of the boy. You can’t stop feeling there’s something wrong with you.” He didn’t object. “Does it have anything to do with your father?”

“Could be. He was a great one for depreciating my worth. Sally, I’ve got a lot to think about; I’ll take it from here.”

She missed that completely, actually didn’t hear it at all. She was excited about something completely different: *Finally, the opening I’ve been waiting for.* She also felt a pressing need to redeem herself.

“You’re catching up with yourself, right? And when you do, it will be a great feeling. But in the meantime, what about everyone else? What can you do to help other people feel good about themselves?” She was operating on the theory that we treat other people the way we treat ourselves. If Sam learned to make other people feel better about themselves, he’d feel better about himself and vice versa.

“By doing what?”

“Telling them ‘Good job’ when they do a good job,” she said.

“Nope. A job done well is its own reward. But the point is I don’t trust praise. It makes people complacent,” he said.

Laughing, she said, “How would you know if you don’t dis-pense it?”

He gave a little sideways smile; he didn’t seem to mind being

laughed at. “Fine. I’ll think about that too. But did you hear what I said? I’ll go it alone now.”

It’s Over

Now she heard him. “What—you’re ending the engagement? But we’ve just gotten started.” She was devastated. It was like her very reason for being had been snatched away. He nodded and seemed to be waiting for her to leave. Head down, she stuffed her papers and pad into her briefcase.

As she walked toward the door, he called out to her, “Sally, you’ve been a good sport. Thanks.” High praise coming from him, but it didn’t make a dent.

On her way out, she was relieved that she didn’t run into anyone she knew. Outside, she leaned against the building, bricks poking into her, writhing with self-recrimination. She was sure her rank unprofessionalism had done it, had killed the assignment. Charlie, the GM, of all people, saw her and walked up.

“How’s it going?” he asked, looking at her curiously.

“I thought fine but apparently not: Sam just ended the engagement.”

“Permanently? I wouldn’t assume that. I don’t have to tell you his heart may be in the right place, but he’s rough around the edges.”

That night, Sam told his wife as they were passing each other on the stairs, “I’ve dropped her.”

She scrunched her face in disbelief. “What??”

Pleased to get a rise out of her, he said, “Sally, the coach.”

“I knew who you meant. But why would you do that?!”

“I’ve had enough for now.” He hadn’t said a word to Margaret about being redeemed. He was afraid of a letdown.

“It’s your funeral,” she said, turning away.

Sequel

A year went by without any contact except for an exchange of “Happy Holidays” cards. *At least I’m still on his list*, Sally thought, but it didn’t relieve her severe pangs of guilt for screwing things up. Unknown to her, though, her idea of making other people feel good—with words, that is, actual words—had made an impression.

Sam’s first stop was to his own daughter, Lisa, the one he gave a hard time to. He wrote her a little note (he had good penmanship) and placed it on her pillow after she’d left for school. When he got home from work that evening, she rushed up to him and threw her arms around his neck.

“Thank you, Daddy, thank you so much for your note.”

He was astonished. He never dreamed a little note like that could mean so much. He hadn’t heard her say *Daddy* for a very long time.

It took him a few weeks to decide on his next stop. Charlie, the GM who had followed Sam from assignment to assignment, had distinguished himself once again. Sam had asked Charlie to expedite the installation in Sam’s division of a cross-business ERP system, AI-enabled software for integrating business processes. Often, it’s a horror story. But Charlie had gotten it done on time and under budget. Enormously pleased, Sam thought he’d just

come out and say so to Charlie. Normally, he'd let good work be its own reward—that plus a bump in comp.

Charlie walked into Sam's office and was surprised to see Sam sitting in an upholstered chair at the other end of his office. Wondering if Sam's wall was starting to come down, Charlie seated himself on the adjacent gray couch. "What's up?"

Sam cleared his throat, cleared it again, as if he were trying to cough up the words. Sweat broke out on his forehead. *What the hell*, he said to himself. Finally, he spoke: "The year's winding down, and I thought we could look ahead, informally, you know."

Charlie was mystified. Sam and the team had, according to the corporate calendar, already laid out the long-range plan and were soon due to firm up next year's budget. Sam kept the conversation going, but it went nowhere. Charlie walked out scratching his head: What was that about?

Acting on Sally's advice hadn't prompted Sam to contact her. A job offer did. Sally walked into his office only to find the big chair behind his desk empty. *He must have stepped out*, she thought.

"Over here," he called out.

Seeing him on the chair, and not in his fortified position, made her eyes go wide. She seated herself on the gray couch and said, "What's up?" She knew he liked to get straight to the point, but more than that, she was uneasy: *Why has he changed his mind?*

"Good to see you," he said, not answering her question. She leaned her head back as if to say, *Really, you're glad to see me?* "Yeah, you're really the only thought partner—about myself—I have ever had."

What about Gus? she thought but couldn't help being gratified it was her, not him.

“You’ll come in handy now,” he finished.

“Since when are you doling out feel-good?” She wasn’t outright hostile, but now that she was back in his good graces, her stored-up resentment gushed out. *Watch it*, she instructed herself.

He pursed his lips but made no response to her snippy comment. Instead, he went ahead as planned. “I’ve been offered a CEO role, in another company.” A rival company had approached him; their CEO was stepping down in a year. Sam would start as president and COO and take over in a year. They knew he was a turnaround type but didn’t slot him. He could be counted on to get results; that’s what mattered to them. With integrity.

At that big news, her mood instantly shifted. “You have! Congratulations! Will you take it?”

“I’m sorely tempted.”

“What does Margaret say?”

“Haven’t told her. I never know what I’ll get, a voice of reason or full-blast upset. I’ll wait till I’m clear in my own mind.”

“What can I do for you?”

“Check my motivation.”

She was impressed and instantly got on the balls of her feet. “Okay, two questions. First, what attracts you to the job, the actual substance of it?”

“The chance, in that seat, to shape an entire company. Everything would be up for grabs: strategy, structure, the culture, staffing, innovation—everything. Very attractive.”

He glowed in a way she’d never seen before. “I see the appeal. Second question: What does the job *represent* that attracts you?”

“You mean status, ego?” She did. “Well, I’d be lying if I said

none of that. The role is the capstone of an executive's career. For me personally, it would be the ultimate vindication, no doubt about it. The money, as a measure of success—not so much. I have all I need.”

“You check out; the job checks out. What's keeping you from taking it?”

“Not sure I want to go to war again.”

That struck her. She'd never given much thought to what his big job took out of him.

“Better bring Margaret under the tent. Unless you want to commute.”

“You're right. I'll keep you posted.” He paused. “One other thing: I couldn't do it.”

She had no idea what he meant, but the slight upturn of his lips told her he was once again having a little fun with her. “Oh?” she said, playing along.

He skipped over the note to Lisa and told her about his failed attempt to praise Charlie. “It would have taken a Heimlich maneuver to spit the words out,” he said. “It was agonizing.”

“That hard, really?” She didn't know whether to take him seriously. That hard, he repeated. She was shocked. Last time, he had seen the light, and that convinced her that he could do it, that he would do it. But he proved unable, and that meant she had failed, that she was incompetent. On a good day, it wouldn't have hit her so hard, but she was coming down with a cold, and her defenses were down too.

But it wasn't just that. She had pinned her hopes on this backdoor move: If he gave other people recognition, then he'd better

recognize his own value; he'd place less emotional weight on what's wrong. And if the move came off, then she could declare her work with him a success.

"Knock, knock, anybody home?"

She shook her head twice attempting to clear it.

"What—are you giving up on me?" he said. It wasn't self-pity; it was friendly mockery.

She smiled ruefully. "Sorry, Sam, I'm off my game today."

"Don't worry about it." He went over to his desk and jotted something on a piece of paper, folded it neatly, and put it in a self-sealing envelope. Handing her the envelope, he said, "We'll stay in touch. In the meantime have a great life."

She stuffed it in her bag, didn't bother to thank him. Walking down the hall, she was still not herself, but she happened to see the sign for Charlie's office and stopped to say good-bye. He was there and jumped up to meet her. "You're a magician!"

"What?!" She was utterly bewildered.

"Yes, yes. I got this great note from Sam, thanking me for everything! In all these years, there's never been anything like it. I knew he thought highly of me, but this was different." She narrowed her eyes, trying to take it in. "Not just me, Sally. Other people around the office have been getting these kinds of notes. Truly, you've worked wonders. His wall's coming down."

In the car taking her to the airport, she leaned back and tried to catch her breath. It was as if she'd just staggered off a roller coaster. A few minutes later, she thought to open the envelope. *Now what could this be?*

"Dear Sally," it read, "there's a fallback; I'm surprised you didn't think of it. But I'm sure you will."

She looked up from the letter: *The devil, he's not telling me! But I outfoxed him: Someone else let me in on it.*

She read on: "Thanks for being such a good sport. And a big help; God knows I didn't make it easy. Working with you has meant more to me than you will ever know."

She glowed. *That Sam, he's something else.*