From a Hundred Feet Away

I looked around my windowless room into his eyes, “I’ll tell you the story, but I don’t care if you believe me. I’m well past that point. But take it from me, when it comes to women, be careful. There’s a saying, ‘You can’t judge a woman from a hundred feet away.”

“My name is Matt Hardy, and the first thing you should know because men tend to define themselves by their career is that up until three months ago, I was unemployed. Lucky for me, I’m married to Dr. Karen Harr, so being out of work wasn’t a financial issue. That’s not to say that since walking out of my last job, I hadn’t been pounding the pavement. It’s a male pride thing. Maybe that’s why I’d applied to the Tulsa PD and the Tulsa Fire Department. I needed a career with balls. To add a little more stress, Karen had announced that she was 3 months pregnant.”

“Around that time, I first met Lauren Rodier when I went for an interview at the SpiritBank. I know, not a ballsy job, but I had no idea what impact maternity was going to have to our lifestyle. Hard not to notice a girl like Lauren. She flashed me a friendly smile and introduced herself as the Special Assistant to the VP. With a wink, she got me settled in the boardroom with some company propaganda in case I wanted to crib for the interview. She promised that Harrison Byers would be along shortly. I put her age at mid to late twenties. Lauren was tall, and her curves were beautiful and functional, like a Lamborghini. She wore a cream-colored skirt and a white silk blouse accompanied by a string of pearls. She had flirtatious blue eyes that seemed to linger. I sat transfixed watching her walk out of the room, leaving me the scent of her Jasmine perfume.

The interview with Byers went well. The man looked like a young Alec Baldwin, tall, dark hair with a little too much Brylcreem. I learned after I was hired that despite my lack of experience, Byers felt he needed new blood into the organization. There had been a recent study of financials in Tulsa using a 5-star scale. For SpiritBank they had to create a 0-star option to reflect all the negative comments.

When Byers smiled and offered me the job, I was so surprised I resisted the temptation to look behind me in case he was addressing someone else. Later that night over a celebration of chocolate popsicles and dill pickles, Karen tried to convince me that it was my brilliant answers that had won him over.

I felt great going to work the following day wearing a suit and tie. Byers told me that I was to spend time in different job functions and then I was to prepare a confidential report on my findings. As he laid out the plan, I began to worry the other employees would see me for just what I was... a plant, a fink, a big-ass tattletale.

After a few weeks, I had completed 4 detailed reports including recommendations. It wasn’t hard, there didn’t seem to be any positive spirit at the SpiritBank. No one enjoyed their job, and they all had a slew of complaints about their supervisor and fellow workers. Customers were less important than doing their nails and paperwork was multiplying like rabbits. You know the drill.

Despite my reports, I couldn’t point to one recommendation that was implemented. Maybe he was saving them up. I got very little feedback from Byers except to say, “Atta boy, liked your conclusions.” I started incorporating mystery shops at our competitors to add a new dimension. I don’t think Byers noticed.

My initial thoughts about how I would be perceived by the employees was unfounded. If they knew, I was a plant they didn’t seem to care. The real test of acceptance is whether I would be accepted into the rumor mill. I learned who was in trouble for what, who management's darlings were, and even who was sleeping with who. The juiciest of juicies was that the Byers, a married man, was doing the horizontal tango with his Special Assistant, Lauren. I didn't believe it. Rumors can sometimes materialize simply out of jealousy and cattiness. I had talked to Lauren a few times in the lunch room and my radar told me that she was happily married. Just because she was a hottie doesn’t mean that, every red-blooded male would hit on her. Well, not this guy! Not this happily married man with a pregnant, leg cramping and constantly bitchy wife. Besides, Lauren was way out of my league. Not that I'm ugly. Karen and my Mother, who clearly had discussed this ahead of time, both told me that I was solidly in the dapper camp*.* Who calls someone dapper? Isn't that something you say to a man when they try on a new suit? You look Dapper, a real Dapper Dan. It was around that time that my life changed dramatically and, excuse the expression, went straight to hell.

Byers called me into his office, and to my surprise, Lauren was asked to join us. “I have a special project for you two. The head office is putting together a series of focus groups. You know, they get a bunch of stiffs in a room, ask them questions about financial shit, and you guys come up with a report. You get to travel around the state and meet the people in our branch offices.”

“Will we be expected to stay overnight in places?” Lauren crossed her legs seductively.

“Play it by ear,” said Byers, staring at her legs. “If the group goes late and you’re tired, I have no problem picking up the tab. This is an important project.”

The work turned out to be a lot of fun, and I really enjoyed getting to know Lauren. We got into the project, changed some of the questions and then when it was over we went to a bar and wrote the report over a few drinks. We were driving back from the office in Sepulva when I summoned the courage to ask her about the rumors about her and Byers.

"Of course not! I'm happily married," she said with a touch of indignation.

“Well, I guess people just wonder. You know because you’re.....so beautiful, and Harrison is pretty dapper.”

“Dapper?”

“Yeah dapper,” I replied.

“If you say so. But that doesn’t mean he’s attractive.”

*Exactly,* I thought. I asked Lauren about her husband, and she told me that he was on disability, having been diagnosed last year with Parkinson’s.

“I’m sorry to hear that, must be tough.” I thought I detected a tear as she turned away from me and looked out the window.

We drove in silence for a few miles before I finally said, “I really enjoy working with you, Lauren. I’m sad that tomorrow is our last focus group.”

“Me too Matt, there’s only one more group in Oklahoma City tomorrow. Harrison left a message for me to say he booked hotel rooms for us at The Ambassador, one of the oldest most prestigious hotels in town. What's more, he’s going to be there already, so he wants to take us out to dinner as a way of saying thank you.”

“That was very considerate of him,” I replied. For a moment a sad look flashed across Lauren’s face. When I asked if there was anything wrong, she just shook her head.

The next day the focus group went well. Lauren asked if I could drive her to the nearby SpiritBank branch so that she could get some cash. Luckily there was one a short drive away. I parked in a tow-away zone, expecting she would only be a moment.

“I know lots of people at the branch, but I’ll try to be quick.”

After about five minutes a short, balding man wearing a pinstripe suit came out of the bank and asked if I was Matt Hardy. We shook hands, and he introduced himself as the Branch Manager. We were chatting about whether the Thunder would make the playoffs when Lauren came out and hopped in the car. The manager said with a grin, “You two head straight back to the branch, you hear!”

We checked into our adjacent rooms on the 4th floor. This was not just 2016 room at Best Western. Our rooms were beautifully finished in dark oak and had a double bed, an armoire, and a mini fridge. True to his word, Byers met us in the lobby, and we cabbed to a nearby steakhouse. Lauren had dressed for the occasion wearing a very slimming black dress that showed off more than a little cleavage.

The restaurant, food, and wine were fantastic. Up to that point, the nicest restaurant I had been to, was the new Denny's in Tulsa. I felt valued as an employee and more than a little embarrassed by the attention. My view of Harrison Byers up to that point had been that he was consumed with business results, and looking good to the head office people. He’d shown little interest in getting to know his employees.

Byers carried the conversation and had an endless supply of anecdotes about his twenty years at the bank. We were done the meal and halfway through our third bottle of wine when Lauren announced she was getting a little tipsy and was going to call it a night.

"I was going to take you two on the town, you know... night cap?” Protested Byers. Despite his efforts, Lauren persisted and went up to her room. With just the two of us the energy went out of the conversation like the air out of a balloon. "She's quite the gal isn't she?” Byers asked, slurring his words a bit.

“"Sure is. That was a good hire."

“Pretty easy on the eyes too.”

“Very attractive,” I subconsciously played with my wedding ring.

“I bet you'd like to get a piece of that ass.”

I didn't like the direction of the conversation. It's one thing to have this conversation with a buddy on the squash court but not with a half drunk boss. I started thinking about making a polite exit. “Happily married,” I said, holding up my hand showing the gold band Karen had given me 4 years ago.

From there the conversation seemed to hit a brick wall. I resisted talking about the focus group. This wasn't the right time or place. I finally told him I was bushed from a long day and was going to head up to bed.

“Sure, sure, thanks for everything,” Byers said, as I drained my wine glass and said good night. I was wondering how much longer he would stay there as I took the elevator to the fourth floor and walked down the hall to my room. For an old hotel, the walls seemed paper thin, and I could hear people’s TV’s as I walked by different rooms.

In my room, I had just stripped down to my boxers when it occurred to me that I had not called Karen. I looked at the alarm clock and saw that at midnight it was too late to call. That's when I heard the knock on the door. To my surprise, it was Lauren, still wearing the little black cocktail dress and holding up a bunch of bottles from her mini fridge.

"I was going to have a night cap, but decided that drinking alone was a bad idea....so I want you to join me,” she said playfully.

“Sure...come on in,” I said.

“Nice boxers,” she complimented as she retrieved a couple of glasses from the bathroom.

As she poured drinks for us, she slipped off her shoes and lay on the bed. “So what are you hoping for?”

I looked at her stretched out seductively on the bed and gave her a questioning look.

"I mean a boy or girl?”

“Oh,” I had told her previously told her we were expecting. “We found out last week, it's a boy.”

“Good for you. Every man needs a son. What names has Karen picked out?”

“We’re still discussing. She likes Richard, her father’s name,” I said, taking a sip of bourbon.

“But you don’t?”

“It’s not that. I just think he’ll get teased enough as it is.”

“You lost me. Why would he get teased?”

“Lots of women these days are keeping their maiden names and the kid gets a hyphenated name, so our son is going to have to deal with Dick Hardy-Harr.” This brought on a burst of laughter which was so infectious I joined in.

She raised her glass in a toast, “Well here’s to little Dickie Hardy-Harr!” Of course, this brought out a new bout of laughter.

I lay down on the bed beside her, conscious that I was still wearing boxers and an undershirt, along with black executive socks. The way Lauren was lying was putting pressure on the little straps of her dress, threatening to cause an avalanche at any moment.

“You never told me what you did before coming to the SpiritBank?” Lauren asked. Her eyes caught me looking at her breasts. She didn't seem to mind.

“Shit.”

“What?”

“I worked with shit.”

“I know what you mean, paperwork, deadlines....,” she rolled her eyes.

“No, not the forms. Shit.”

“Oh, like the people were shit, like the ones at the office?”

I smiled and said no. “I worked at a medical lab analyzing stool samples. I literally worked with shit.” This brought on another bout of drunken laughter. “I quit one day because the supervisor said I wasn’t processing the shit fast enough. It was a big fucking assembly line and the shit just kept on flowing.”

Once again more giggles giving way to laughter. The laughter ended abruptly when we heard a knock out in the hallway. A confused look spread across her face, she held a finger to her lips. “I think someone just knocked on my door."

“Who?” I asked, which brought the finger to her lips and a whisper telling me to shush.

Lauren got up from the bed and went to the door. What was a gentle rap, became more forceful. She nodded her head and mouthed the words, “My door...Byers.”

“Should I go tell him to fuck off?” I whispered with a stupid grin.

“No. Just be quiet.”

Then they heard, “Lauren, wake up and let me in.” This was followed by an incessant pounding on the door, by what sounded to me like a frustrated lover.

“Lauren, oh Lauren...Let me in Poopsie,” Byers sang in a creepy voice.

I looked at her and mouthed, “Poopsy?” She hid her face from me.

We heard him rattling her doorknob. “Lauren, please...” Finally, we thought he had given up. We heard his footsteps. To our horror, however, they stopped at my door. The old hotel had keyholes, and I pictured a drunk Harrison Byers squatting down trying to look into the room. Lauren's face was panicked.

“What if he knocks on my door?” I mouthed.

She shook her head in response.

We breathed a sigh of relief when we heard footsteps in the hallway moving away. I got up and put my arms around her. "How long?"

She shook her head. “It only happened a couple of times. He has something over me,” she said, shame written on her face.

I let her tell me the story. “It was when my husband got sick. At the time I was a teller. It was only a thousand dollars. I got called into his office the next day. Byers said he knew what I had done, and after hearing about my husband he said he would keep everything secret as long as I promised to never do it again. He even gave me a promotion to be his assistant so life would be a little easier. He was okay for a few months, almost had me fooled. Maybe this guy was a saint. Ha! Then came the demands and the threats to turn me in to the cops.”

“Wow, I had no idea. That must have been terrible for you.” As I said that she started to cry. I held her, standing by the door for what seemed like 5 minutes. Finally, I broke the spell, "Do you think he’ll just go back to bed?"

"I don't know." I was still holding her when we heard the knock on my door.

“Shit, shit, shit!” I mouthed. I raised my hands as if to say what do we do now?

As the knock grew louder, Lauren ran to the other side of the bed and hid out of sight. When it was safe, I opened the door yawning, as if I had been asleep. Standing in front of me was a wild-eyed Harrison Byers.

"Where’s Lauren?"

I stood in front of him in my boxers and executive socks and shrugged my shoulders, “Next door?”

When he looked at me with his drunken eyes, I added, “Was that you yelling in the hallway?”

“I need to find Lauren. She's not answering her door, he said putting way too much emphasis on need.

I went out in the hallway with him and made a show of knocking on her door. "Lauren, Matt here, is everything ok?” I was feeling pretty stoked about this performance. Of course, she didn't answer, and I held out my hands in the air in a sign of hopelessness.

“Get out of the way,” he grumbled, shoving me and banging on the door. “Lauren for God's sake, open up.”

“What's going on Mr. Byers? Why do you want to speak to her?” He gave me a dismissive look, and if I hadn't jumped out of the way, he would have pushed me again. He opened the door to my room and went in. *“Shit, shit, shit!* I followed him in and watched as he tore the shower curtain away and then stomped into the bedroom, opening the armoire. I thought I was going to wet myself as he strode past the bed and looked out the window. I watched as he tried to open the window, cursing under his breath when it wouldn't budge. He looked around the room and took a deep breath, “Alright, I'm sorry Matthew, go back to bed.”

“What are you going to do?” I asked as we walked to the door.

He just shook his head and left. When the door closed behind him, I heard Lauren squeezing out from under the bed.

“What the fuck?” I said as she sat back on the bed.

“This is all my fault Matt, I should never have given in to him.”

“What are we going to do?” I asked, conscious I sounded like a wimp.

“I’m scared, Matt. He could try to break into my room.” After a moment she added, “Can I sleep here tonight?”

“Of course, but should I sneak into your room and get your pj's?”

“I sleep in the nude.”

It took me a moment to process. “Well, I can sleep on the floor beside the bed.”

“Don’t be a prude Matt. If you want, you can sleep over the covers on your side of the bed. We need a good night’s sleep. Tomorrow we have to get out of here before he finds me.”

We closed the curtains and turned off the lights. I lay on my side of the bed while she used the washroom. She came out and said good night. While the room was dark, my eyes were adjusting. I squinted and saw her reach behind her back and unhook her bra. I forced myself to think of nuns playing street hockey. That didn’t work. I couldn’t pull my eyes away as she lifted a leg to the bed and rolled down her nylons. I concentrated on a naked Margaret Thatcher on a cold day. That didn’t work. I watched as she turned her back to me and seductively wiggled out of her panties. I finally had to think back to that sure fire boner-killer, when my Grandmother caught me looking at porn on the internet.

I felt her slide under the covers, she moved against me. She was straddling the midway line. Violating the no-fly zone.

“Matt, do you snore?”

“I don't know. Karen says sometimes ...when I'm stressed...Like right now.”

“Okay. Matt?”

“Yes, Lauren?”

“Thank you for helping me through this. I wish there was something I could do to make it up to you....”

\*\*\*\*

I woke when sunlight found its way into the room. I looked over and saw that Lauren was already up and out of bed. I stumbled to the washroom, but she wasn’t there. Could she have snuck back to her room for a change of clothes? I didn't see the note on her pillow until I was dressed. "Dear Matt, got up early, it'll be easier if we're not found together. Thanks again for being my hero. P.S. you don't just snore, you honk in your sleep. Karen is a saint.”

I tried her room but got no response. We had come to Oklahoma City in my car, so how was she planning on getting home? Even better, what explanation would she give Byers on Monday? I packed my bag, determined to check out and get on the road before Harrison showed up again.

I almost made it. When I got off the elevator in the lobby, I was confronted by Byers and two uniformed policemen. Byers grabbed my arm, “This is Matt Hardy, the man I told you about. He was in on it.”

“In on what?” I asked, looking back and forth between Byers and the cops.

“Lauren Rodier is wanted on a fraud charge.” Said one of the cops.

“Listen, officers, I don't know what this man told you, but Lauren works for him and the thousand she took years ago was supposed to be forgiven. It wasn’t until she refused his sexual advances, that he threatened to call the cops. She’s petrified of him. You should have heard him in the hallway last night! He was carrying on like a dog in heat! He's the one you should be arresting.”

The two cops looked at each other than at Byers and nodded. The cop turned back to me, “Mr. Byers is not the complainant. We have a report from the Manager of the SpiritBank downtown to say that Mrs. Rodier negotiated a fraudulent bank draft to make an emergency cash transfer of $300,000 to the Tulsa branch. She had a letter with his forged signature. It’s Bank policy not to turn over that much cash to one person, so they confirmed that you were with her. I guess that kind of makes you the getaway driver.”

I was totally confused. I followed as they checked Lauren’s room again, looking under the bed this time. I remembered the bank manager coming out to meet me and telling us to go straight back to the branch. I also remembered Lauren coming out to the car carrying her rather large purse.

\*\*\*\*\*

“So there you have it, I’ve told the cops this story a dozen times, and they won’t believe me,” I said to Leroy Shuggs. He was my slightly effeminate, defensive lineman type cellmate. The cops told me that Lauren wasn’t even married, and up until a month ago lived with a roommate who now was claiming to not know where she’d gone.

“So if you think you know a woman, think again.”

Leroy thanked me for the story but said he didn’t care much for women. He said he had only one question, as he put his hand on my knee, “Tell me what happened in the bed last night?”

Joe Hamilton BIO

Josephp.Hamilton@Gmail.com



Joe Hamilton has written a number of short stories which have been published in various magazines in Canada and the United States. He is the author of two published detective novels, “*Murder in Biloxi”* and “*Rock You Like a Hurricane*.” A third in the Gabriel Ross series, “*The Mississippi Queen”* is due to be published in the fall of 2016. His work can be found at JoeHamilton.ca. He lives in Hamilton Ontario with his wife Anita and two of his three kids...and of course his three wiener dogs.