

## STRAIGHT ARROW

**I**N THE END, it was a story about corruption, ambition and shame in a picturesque little New England town. It was also about the foolishness of missed opportunities. But of course this was no consolation to the survivors.

Ed Fitzgerald was, by all accounts, a straight arrow. He was a dedicated, loyal employee who always had the company's best interests at heart. He worked hard, stayed late, volunteered for the things no one else wanted to do. He never complained and made a point of being a team player, even when it seemed like he was the only one who cared about the team.

In other words, he was a model employee. His work was also first rate. Ed was too modest to say so himself, but he didn't have to. His boss, Virgil Gibson, was happy to say it. Customers said it too. He was a talented engineer and a good draftsman who never took shortcuts and was exacting with measurements, going over them again and again until everything was as clear to him as a mountain pond. Otherwise he could not sleep at night.

Ed felt personally responsible for his projects. He believed in Harbor Company's vision of excellence and wanted to embody it. No, he did not go a hundred miles an hour, but no one asked him to. Virgil wanted the job done right. He appreciated Ed's drive for perfection and willingness to work long hours. Besides, speed can be overrated. Ed's projects finished on time because he took the time to make sure they were done correctly in the first place.

Ed was a rising young star at Harbor—honest, competent, not a big talker but sincere. He had a reputation

for being willing to knock down a wall in order to make the customers happy, and Virgil liked that. He also knew how to finish a job, and Virgil liked that even better, since finishing paid the bills.

The future seemed bright. He was given more and more responsibility until he was practically running the shop. But that was before Sharon Cosgrove arrived on the scene. Then everything seemed to change. For the first time there were quibbles about his work. It was all nonsense, as far as he was concerned, but he did not know how to respond. Sharon turned his virtues into defects. He was too slow. Nobody did things like that anymore. The customers were frustrated, and they told her so.

Later it was discovered that she was planting these doubts in the customers' minds, with her smiling, pretty face. They liked Ed but they loved her. At least the men did, and most of the customers were men. She would take things they said and twist them just enough to make Ed look bad—and to tell the truth they were not always eager to resist. Even if they liked Ed, they liked her better. They wanted to be liked by her.

Ed was caught off-guard by this assault. There he was, going along happily in life, following his routine, and then all of a sudden things were not so routine anymore. For the first time he became aware of what it was like to be vulnerable. The very attributes that had always been his strengths were now considered to be suspect. He was honest and direct; Sharon called him indiscreet. He was methodical; she called it "plodding."

Ed's big mistake may have been his unwillingness to defend himself. He put his trust in his integrity, not in the tongue with its prevaricating powers. His response to Sharon's aggression was to withdraw. He believed in hard work and in being humble. He loved the parable about taking the lowest seat first; then the master of the feast would see his lack of selfish ambition and invite him up.

There was just one problem with this plan, however. The

master of the feast had moved on. Virgil was not exactly retired, but neither was he directly involved in the business anymore. He was rarely seen at the office. He was still the official face of the company he had started, but when it came to the day-to-day operations—well, those had been pretty much ceded to Herb.

If Virgil had been there, Ed could have taken the lowest seat first and been lifted up in spite of the worst that Sharon could do. Virgil knew how to appreciate him and the value he brought to the company. Ed did not have to impress him with anything other than his hard work and attitude. But Herb was not Virgil. He did not have Virgil's business acumen or sense of value. He appreciated Ed—but he appreciated Sharon more.

In fact to the naked eye it seemed like he was infatuated with her. They went out to lunch together and came back laughing. He took her on inspections on beautiful summer days when there was no good reason for both of them to go. They spent inordinate amounts of time in his office with the door closed and were often the last ones to leave at night.

Were they having an affair? There were various opinions about that around the office. Some thought it was obvious. Others found it hard to believe Sharon would squander her considerable charms on a balding, married middle-aged man who shaved his head in an attempt to look sexy. A few loyalists thought Herb was just being playful and was not interested in her in that way; after all, he had a wife and two kids.

Herb's fondness for Sharon, whatever it was, put Ed in a very difficult position. In company gestalt—but not on any paper—he was senior to her. When Virgil was there, it was clear that Ed was second only to Herb in the pecking order. But Virgil was not there very often, and Herb's view of the matter was somewhat more ambiguous. He showed deference to Ed, but his enthusiasm for Sharon was such that the lines became blurred.

Ed just wanted to do his job and go home, but Sharon would not let him. A partnership was at stake. This prize had been promised to Ed, albeit unofficially, but she felt she was more deserving. Ed's fast track was nothing more than sexism, from her point of view. He was unimaginative; she was quick on her feet. He was not smooth with the customers; she was a natural. He could only handle one thing at a time; she could multitask.

As it happened, not everyone in the office was as enthusiastic about Sharon's multitasking as she was, especially when they had to clean up her messes. But Herb seemed sold. She wanted to convince him she deserved the partnership more than Ed, and he was willing to listen. Her relentlessness made him uncomfortable at times, but he knew about the prejudice against assertive women. He did not mind if she called Virgil a sexist, but he did not want her thinking of *him* that way.

She was hot on the trendy idea that leadership was to be found in being comfortable with chaos. Herb dutifully read the articles she gave him from the *Harvard Business Review* and was impressed. The effective businessperson must be comfortable with change and rapidly evolving situations, etc. Ed was good with fundamentals; what he was not so good at, according to Sharon, was being "nimble," as the lexicon de jour would have it.

These changes had a devastating effect on Ed. He could see the arc of history moving against him but felt powerless to do anything about it. He could not go to Herb and complain about Sharon when Herb was apparently infatuated with her. Besides, he did not like to complain. He believed in bringing solutions to management, not problems for them to solve.

But it was more than that. He did not want to complain because he did not want to look weak. He had integrity. He was good at what he did. He knew he could not fight with words, but it seemed to him that the answer to Sharon's relentless assault was to focus on work and leave office

politics to others. Which is just what he did, all fall and all winter.

Then in the spring he was felled by a little tick. He was not the sort of person who missed work, but noble intentions did nothing to stop the relentless progression of Lyme disease. First he thought he had a cold and kept on working, but the pain and fever would not go away. One Saturday it was so bad that Nancy insisted on driving him to the emergency room. He wound up being admitted for IV antibiotics.

He was still sick when they sent him home, almost too weak to get out of bed. He *wanted* to get out of bed. He wanted it more than anything. They were at a critical stage with the big sewer extension project for the town, his town, and Ed wanted nothing more than to be on the front line and in the thick of things. But he couldn't. He was too sick to function. It was as simple as that.

Sharon graciously offered to step in—and that was how the legend of the “three-foot skew” was born. She did not find any plans on the server, but she did manage to locate some sketches on Ed's drawing table. When she had them digitalized, the staff found an error in the elevations. Or, as Sharon so colorfully put it, “If they had gone ahead and done the dig that way it would have been an absolute freaking disastah.”

This was disingenuous at best. They were *sketches*. Ed liked to do freehand drawings when he was thinking about a project. It helped him work through the details, or at least to obtain an awareness of what those details were likely to be. These sketches did not constitute a plan in his mind. On top of that he was sick when he made them and not operating at his usual high level.

But how to explain all this to Herb in the current environment? How could he address the “three-foot skew” without bringing it front and center and playing into her hands, since he was not the one with the silver tongue? How could he invoke his illness without making it seem like he

was trying to make excuses? He did not believe in excuses. He believed in being accountable.

A lie repeated often enough often becomes the truth. This was especially true when the target of the lie was someone like Ed, whose sense of honor prevented him from trying to defend himself. Sharon kept talking up the “three-foot skew” until Herb almost believed it. She said she had copies of the infamous sketches and could pull them out anytime she wanted.

It was this lie that finally ruined Harbor for Ed. Herb called him into his office the day he came back to work, still feverish.

“So listen, Sharon’s been talking to me about your plans.”

“What plans?”

“The sewer plans she found on your desk. Apparently there was a problem with them. Do you know anything about that?”

“Problem? I’m not aware of any problem.”

“She said there was a three-foot skew in the elevations or something. Not good.”

“I didn’t do any plans. Is she talking about my sketches? My hand-drawn sketches?”

“I don’t know what she’s talking about. You can ask her. But I’m sure you realize it’s way too late in the game for anything like that. This has to be right, or we’re going to be screwed.”

“I’m perfectly aware of that, Herb. I know better than anybody it has to be perfect. That’s why I’m here, even though I’m still sick.”

“You didn’t need to hurry back. I had Sharon do up the plans.”

“What? Are you kidding me? That was my project.”

“Ed—you weren’t here. What could I do? This has to get done. We don’t have time to lose a week or two weeks or however long you’ve been out.”

“Virgil assigned that project to me. He specifically told

me he wanted me working on it.”

“Virgil doesn’t know about the three-foot skew. And don’t worry—I’m not going to tell him. But I did what I had to do. We needed plans, and I told Sharon to help out on them.”

“So you’re saying you believe her?”

“Apparently she has evidence. I’m not taking sides here. I’m just saying we have to get things done. The plans are done. Now we need to take them and finish it. We need to be perfect from here on out. No offside penalties. No mistakes. This has to go right, and I need you to make that happen.”

Ed was completely devastated by this conversation. He hurried to his desk and pored over the sketches. It did not take long to see where the problem was. But they were just sketches! As soon as he put them on the computer he would have seen the inconsistency.

Herb did not seem to believe him. Now Ed was sick in his heart in addition to being sick in body. Herb was the master of the feast, and it seemed like he had no intention of raising him up. Later Ed saw him with Sharon, laughing and carefree, and felt sick all over again. She was the golden child now, in spite of her deficiencies.

Suddenly Ed found himself in a psychological storm. They were accusing him of bungling a major project. This was shattering to someone who based his entire identity on being competent. Herb’s attitude toward him had changed. It was obvious now. He did not see how he could do anything about it. There was no way to get around Sharon.

He could have gone directly to Virgil. He thought about it. But Virgil did not want to be burdened with company business. He had made that perfectly clear. Also Ed was not sure he *wanted* Virgil to know about the mess. He was embarrassed by the accusation and horrified at the thought of it reaching his ears. If it came down to Herb’s word against his, he was not at all sure he would prevail. And he did not know how Virgil felt about Sharon.

Virgil was like a father figure to him. He liked Ed personally and his work ethic. He saw him as a talented young engineer who got things done and never caused problems. Some people always caused problems. Others never seemed to get things done. Ed was not like that. If you gave him a project he finished it, no matter how extensive or complicated it was. You never had to hold his hand. He didn't want his hand held.

But Virgil was not there anymore, in body or in mind. He had been working twelve-hour days and weekends and meeting payrolls in fat times and lean and dealing with customer problems and personnel problems for over thirty years—and he was sick and tired of it; tired of the stress, the sleepless nights, the family parties disrupted, the high blood pressure.

He had begun to distance himself from the company. There was no formal announcement, no meeting where he said he would be spending less time at the office and more on his sailboat or with his grandchildren. Instead they found out by email that Herb was now the vice-president of Harbor Company, a title that had never existed before, and all communications were to go through him.

This was Virgil's way of attempting to retain control over the company while relieving himself of the burden of responsibility. He did not want to let go because his ego was involved and he did not completely trust Herb; but he was also tired of holding on. He had plenty of money in the bank. He began traveling with Jennie.

The more he indulged himself this way, the less he wanted to see or hear of the office. There were the usual negotiations with customers and problems to be overcome, and there were no doubt various complaints and sources of unhappiness among the staff, but his mind became blissfully disengaged. He lost the will and maybe the wherewithal to return to the fray and be responsible for everyone and everything.

But without Virgil, what could Ed do about the changes



at Harbor? There did not seem to be anything he could do. It wasn't just the assault on him; the whole place seemed to be falling apart. The laser-like focus on quality and service was fading, and this had ripple effects on every aspect of the business. Ed was dismayed. He started to see things he thought he would never see.

Sharon's disdainful attitude made him miserable. Maybe the watershed incident happened fairly early on in her tenure. He was at work late one night and came out of his office and heard her talking on the phone.

"He's such an idiot, it's unbelievable. The way he works, it's like something out of the dinosaur age. And of course Virgil loves him. He has no idea what he's really like or how everybody has to go around making up time for him. He's never here, so how would he know?"

Ed retreated back into his office and waited until the call was over. He saw her heading for the door and caught up with her.

"So who were you talking to back there? Herb?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"Sure you do. You were on the phone just now talking about me. You were calling me an idiot."

"I honestly have no idea what you're talking about. I was just on the phone, yes. I have a right to be on the phone."

"Do me a favor. If you're going to talk about me, please include me in the conversation. I'd like to have a chance to respond."

"If I talk about you, I'll be sure to let you know."

This was typical. He didn't always overhear her, but he found out about her calumnies through the grapevine. He kept thinking the misery would go away—things would get better if he treated her with patience and kindness—but she doubled down with every inch he gave. And now she was openly attacking him. She was accusing him of a serious lapse in the very thing in which he prided himself the most.

Herb spoke softly, but all Ed heard was his father yelling at him. He had not been raised to be cavalier about failure.

He could forgive others for failing but not himself. It almost didn't matter that the accusation was a lie, or at least trumped-up. Herb and Sharon were the management at Harbor now, and apparently in their view he was incompetent.

For some time he had been dreaming about doing something different—opening a farm store, in fact. He loved to garden and was pretty good at it; he loved country life. He would make a warm, welcoming place for people who loved the same things, with farm-fresh eggs and dairy and cheese and ice cream and organic produce and pies and holiday treats in the cold winter months.

He had six acres of arable land. He had a nice old barn with good timbers that could be converted. He would do all the work himself, just as he had practically rebuilt the old Cape since they reclaimed it from foreclosure. He was not afraid of hard work. That was one thing they couldn't take away from him. He and Nancy had scratched together almost fifty thousand dollars in savings. It seemed like enough to get started.

It was a beautiful dream. He would be independent. He would be the one making the decisions. He would succeed because the goal would be value and service to the customers and because farm stores were popular and there were none in the area. It was a little scary to think of leaving his profession—the work he had studied for and used to love—but he believed he could make the store a success. He did not think it was an impossible dream.