

A Difficult Man

Jake knew what he had done was wrong, indirectly, that is to say he had not actually done anything, but that in and of itself was immoral. As such, he couldn't help but wonder exactly how wrong it was. Interestingly enough it was the exact question that had come up in Ethics back in college, many years ago. I'll explain, but perhaps I had better start at the beginning.

He didn't work with the man directly, but he was friends with many who did. It had been three years since he left Martin Manufacturing, and in those three years he and his former workmates met regularly at the local bar for trivia night. Jake didn't drink, but he was a nerd.

Every other Wednesday night, for the past two years his friends told him stories about Bob Gassner. He had yet to hear a good story. A year after Jake left, his former manager and friend, Roger Wallfisch, had retired. Gassner was hired to replace Wallfisch. Roger's retirement party was the first and last time Jake ever met Gassner, until the incident that is. Gassner seemed like a nice guy at the time, but according to two years worth of stories, he was anything but.

Jake's friends were not prone to hyperbole, so he believed them when they said he was the worst boss they had ever worked for. Even the nature of their complaints, being statements of brute fact, indicated that they weren't petty. Here are a few samplings:

"Gassner cut our budget so our admin can't buy us coffee anymore."

"Gassner spent about 50 grand for a consultant to come in and suggest changes that he decided not to implement, meanwhile we asked for a software upgrade that would've cost 25 grand, and now we don't have the money for it, because of that dumb consultant. 50 grand and we're not even going to use his suggestions."

"Gassner just hired some new dude and nobody knows what he does, but he's not letting us hire in program development, so we're literally a month behind."

A few weeks after that complaint came this one:

"Ok so, the project we'd been working on, that we couldn't get done, because y'know, we're short-staffed? Gassner decided that since we're not getting it done he's going to move it under the new guy. So he made us look incompetent by basically cutting our personnel, and then moves that project under some guy who I can't help but think is just some yes-man, I mean I don't know that, but it just makes me suspicious like the reason he did all of that was to have more control."

"Gassner's just using this place to pad his resume. If we didn't have such a good client base already he would've... not bankrupted us necessarily but, I don't know man. He's just using all of us, he doesn't care about this company, and he clearly doesn't care about his employees."

At the time there had been a rebuttal to that last comment made:

"Well he did lose us a lot of clients with that whole parts debacle."

More on the "parts debacle" later.

Admittedly, some of those comments strayed into the personal realm, but when you're consistently screwed over by the higher ups, it's hard to stay impersonal. With the first reports, Jake took it with a grain of salt, a change in management is never easy, and Wallfisch was very well liked. In point of fact there would be no company without him, he had brought it back to life from the brink of bankruptcy and asset liquidation. He had taken over from the original CEO's son, the unfortunately named Martin Martin, who made business decisions as unfortunate as his name. Wallfisch ran the company for thirty years and finally decided to retire to spend time with his grandchildren. Like most retirees, he passed away shortly after. It is a great tragedy of life, a person works very hard for the promise of rest at the end of it, only to discover that working hard was the only thing keeping them alive. At least for men like Wallfisch, without the drive, there is no life. Everything Wallfisch had done for the company in his thirty years as CEO was being systematically undone by Gassner, not deliberately of course, simply through bad management, negligence, and a shocking lack of common sense. Within six months of his tenure Gassner had managed to alienate one of their primary clients, and therefore lose a major source of income; as a result there were layoffs.

Roger Wallfisch was an excellent pool player, Gassner was decent, and Jake was passable. That's how Jake met Gassner; Roger invited them to play pool at his retirement party. Jake could not remember what they played exactly, calling him a passable pool player was being generous. He could sense the frustration the two more seasoned players felt, but were too polite to express. As noted before, Gassner seemed all right at the time, though false, fake that is. He was new and on his best behavior, which wasn't necessarily a bad thing. In new situations most people are not really themselves, they're feeling things out, learning how much of their true selves they can reveal. Whenever one is truly, and proudly themselves among strangers they're usually a terror who nobody wants around, someone to be avoided. It's strange how many people take pride in being socially graceless, snarky, or just plain rude. They call it just being themselves. All that to say, Gassner's falsity merely seemed to be a sign of respect for social niceties, Jake could hardly fault him for that.

In truth, Jake had grown tired of hearing his friends complain. He had been called a good listener, and apparently he was, because it seemed that's all he had done for two whole years, listen to his friends complain about Wallfisch's replacement.

Jake wasn't close to anyone who was laid off in Gassner's first managerial debacle, but he remembered Rinaldo and his painfully cute daughter. Rinaldo worked in the factory, a decent fellow as far as Jake could tell, a father and a widower. They had never been friends, but they respected each other. Regardless of how distant their relationship was, Jake was crushed to find that Rinaldo had been let go. He was genuinely concerned for the man's welfare, and for that of his daughter, who had won first place in the children's potato sack race at the company picnic. Jake had been the one to give her the trophy, a gold plastic cup filled with candy.

Among the many things his friends complained about was Gassner's license plate. His car was a non-descript sedan, which surprised everyone. People as full of it as Gassner usually drove ostentatious cars, in equal parts attempt to draw attention to oneself and away from one's shortcomings. It's a cheap joke of course, but one that even Jake's mother made. Gassner's plates read "ClasGas." Jake always wondered if that was a reference to "Classical Gas," which didn't quite work, but it was possible.

A year into his tenure Gassner made his second major mistake, which was partnering with a new, untested company for electrical parts for the various appliances Martin Manufacturing produced. All of

Jake's friends were either in sales or in programming, so none of them really knew what the "electrical parts" were. Their previous supplier of these mysterious parts, was growing more successful and had decided it had some leeway to raise their prices. Gassner was upset, found an alternative supplier, and signed a contract without having properly vetted the fledgling company. It wasn't long before refrigerator's, and particularly toaster's bearing the Martin logo, began to malfunction, break, or even catch fire due to the faulty parts. As it turned out, they couldn't sustain the amount of power it took to run the appliances, and would therefore overheat. The result was a massive, and very expensive recall, a broken contract with the new supplier, and a hastily signed new contract with the original supplier. There were no layoffs in the second debacle; however, both Martin Manufacturing's stock value and general ratings took a major hit.

It was whispered, or perhaps just hoped, that the board would soon be letting Gassner go, but nothing came of that rumor. There were no further major mistakes, though that is not to say that there weren't any, just none that cost the company a significant amount of money. Over the next fiscal year both the company's stock and reputation recovered somewhat, levelling out just below where it had been before Gassner took over, which was bad news for everyone who wanted him gone. The board was evidently going to give him some time to redeem himself.

He did not redeem himself. He made ludicrous promises to vendors which forced his employees to work extremely long hours, however he set up their schedules in such a way so that they still only worked a forty-hour week, and as such were not eligible for overtime. He argued that an extra day off was better than overtime, which is debatable, but the real issue was that to make their quota his employees were still having to work over forty hours, but since that was not their official schedule they were not allowed to claim it. It is true that they could've just stopped at the forty hours, as was their right, however if they did not make the deadline the company would be in breach of contract. As such, they worked the extra hours without pay to protect their general livelihood. It was obvious that Gassner knew what was happening, though he pretended otherwise. When a mid-level manager told him about it he feigned anger, and said they should not be working overtime, and that they should be able to get the expected amount of work done during regular business hours, which everyone in the company, aside from him (allegedly) knew was impossible. In the midst of all this he set a good example to his employees, and stuck to his normal forty hours.

Gassner was very interested in new initiatives and streamlining existing processes, which is to say, meddling. Various new business practices were implemented at his behest, and when they didn't work, and the original process was taken up again, he seemed to forget who it was that made the "suggestion" in the first place. One such change in the Accounting department caused a bottleneck in the payment of bills, which very nearly caused a particular bill not to be paid, which would have resulted in a rather burdensome overdue charge. Near misses like this became common in every department he endeavored to improve, which was most but not yet all of them.

Beyond all these things, he was apparently something of an asshole. Jake's friends didn't extrapolate much on this point, being content with that one word description and many various and sundry synonyms.

Jake listened, murmured sympathies, and suggested looking elsewhere for employment. He felt bad for his friends, and happy for himself having dodged the Gassner bullet by a year. He disliked the

man, for the sake of his friends. Fortunately for him, he was very happy with his current employment. He got to travel quite a bit, which he enjoyed very much.

The road to the airport, ironically, was the same road Jake had used to take to get to Martin Manufacturing. It's on the outskirts of town and it has a particularly bad reputation for accidents. It's mostly straight, with one sharp turn that overlooks a small hill and a field. Outside of this one curve it's not obvious why this stretch of road should be so dangerous. There are storage units and failed businesses on either side of the road, and the only time it's busy is when the warehouse just outside of town closes for the day. Generally speaking, the road is almost always empty.

Now we come to the second time Jake encountered Gassner. He was heading to the airport. He was running late so he was driving a little faster than he normally would've, and he tended to drive fast anyway. The road ahead of him was empty except for a light blue two door sedan, which he passed easily. As he passed the blue car he noticed the car behind him, which seemed to come out of nowhere. It came up behind him so fast that Jake thought it was going to ram him. As soon as he could safely merge back into the right lane he did so. As the car passed Jake managed to read "ClasGas" before the growing distance blurred the image. He still didn't understand the vanity plate, perhaps it was a nickname or something.

As Gassner approached the curve, one of his rear tires blew, which caused him to lose control of the car. Jake watched in horror as the car flipped, became airborne, and disappeared over the hill. Hitting his own brakes, Jake pulled to a stop on the shoulder overlooking the field. He hurried out of the car and came to a halt next to his hood. Gassner's car was upside down and on fire, the driver's door was open and Gassner himself was struggling to extricate himself from his seat belt. Jake could run down and drag him clear of the wreck, before the assumed impending explosion, which he started to do, but something stopped him. He stood motionless. The car did explode, just like in the movies, after two long minutes.

Jake was surprised by the lack of horror, or empathy. When the car first flipped, all he could think about was that he needed to help. Something changed when he saw Gassner, who he realized he hadn't seen since Roger's retirement party. It wasn't fear that stopped him, or shock, or anything of that nature. Something in him went cold. He had decided not to help.

He wasn't sure if it was better for him to drive away or call in the accident. After a moments reflection he decided to call 911, and reached into his pocket for his phone. He would tell them he had seen smoke on the side of the road, and stopped to see what it was. Gravel crunched behind him and he turned to see a young man filming him with his cell phone camera.

"How long have you been standing there?" Jake asked.

"Long enough, and this video's going online," was the accusatory response.

Jake looked past the man and recognized the blue sedan from a few minutes prior. The man would've arrived on the scene almost at the same time Jake had.

"Long enough? Long enough to stop, see him, see me, pull your phone out and start recording?"

"That's not the point, you could've saved him and you didn't."

“You’re right, I didn’t, I froze. But, at least I didn’t take a cell phone video.”

The stranger lowered his phone, and Jake continued.

“I’m calling the police, I need to report this, let them know what happened, let them know I was too afraid to save him. If you really want to you can show them the video you made of me, so they have proof that neither of us did anything.”

The stranger put his phone away, it was clear he was angry, but it was also clear that he wasn't going to show the video to anyone. Jake had made the right decision when he applied pressure to him. He finished dialing 911. He told the voice that he had seen smoke, stopped, and found the wreck at the bottom of the hill. Help was on the way. Hanging up the phone, he placed it back in his pocket.

“Did you tell them I was here?”

Jake turned to the young man, “no, I didn’t.”

Nervously, “I don’t really like cops.”

“Oh. Well, if you want to leave I can take it from here.”

“I don’t think you froze. Why didn’t you do anything?”

“But I did freeze. What made you take a video? You seem pretty capable, physically I mean, so.... I have no doubt you could’ve dragged him free.”

The stranger didn’t respond. He backed away, climbed into his car, and drove off.

Jake thought to himself, “what an odd exchange.” He did worry that the man would put the video online as he threatened, however it was clear that the guerrilla filmmaker had been there for almost as long as he. After all he had passed the fledgling videographer shortly before Gassner had passed him. Beyond that, he had fled the site of the accident, and once the police arrived Jake’s statement would become official record, and it would not include the awkward roadside conversation.

Jake watched the fire warp the metal and melt the plastic. Black smoke rose into the sky. It looked like an unholy burnt offering. Of course, the stranger was right, he hadn’t frozen, he was not afraid. He had decided the man wasn’t worth saving. As he watched Gassner struggling, he didn’t feel any hatred, though he obviously didn’t like the man. It wasn’t malice that led him to inaction. It just seemed that others would be better off if the fellow were dead. He should feel guilty, but instead he didn’t feel anything.

He was surprised at his own callousness. He recalled a question in Ethics class many years ago, a hypothetical situation regarding a man stumbling upon a drowning child, whom he hated, and whom he therefore allowed to drown. The question was whether his inaction was as morally bad as throwing the child into the lake. Is inaction as bad as action? His professor insisted that action: the act of willfully harming, or killing, someone, was worse than inaction: not helping, or not saving, someone. At the time, Jake disagreed. Inaction in such an, albeit, unlikely situation, was just as bad as action, for you were in effect killing the child by not saving it. Inaction was a choice, and choice is an action in and of itself; therefore, in this particular hypothetical, inaction was action. Everyone in the class agreed that both were bad, they just couldn’t agree to what *degree* they were bad. In the real-world example before him,

it was entirely possible that Gassner's death was a net good, or at the very least it was decidedly not a net loss. Technically speaking, Gassner hadn't done anything that was morally wrong, but it was difficult to say that he hadn't done bad things. As a difficult man, and a bad manager, he had hurt people both directly and indirectly. At what point did Gassner become morally culpable? Of course, Gassner's crimes were not bad enough to warrant death in a car crash, but could they possibly warrant Jake's refusal to help? Regardless, the fact remained that a lot of people would be better off without Gassner. In the end, Jake didn't know what to think. He wondered what his old professor would say.

He began to consider the pleasure/pain calculus. The death itself was most likely quick, given the explosion. It seemed that the only thing the late Gassner really suffered was fear, outside of whatever bruises and potential breaks he sustained in the accident itself. It did bother Jake to think about the man suffering, panic can be a rather painful experience, and he was in quite a state of panic. Clearly Gassner preferred life to death, as most men do.

Jake recognized that Gassner had autonomy, and it was not for him to decide whether the man lived or died, and that he had been wrong to make that decision by way of inaction. If he was indeed morally obligated to take action at all. In the end he realized that he had come around somewhat to his old professor's point of view: a bad action was decidedly worse than inaction. That is not to say that what he had done was a good thing, morally speaking, on the contrary he acknowledged that it was a very bad thing. Nonetheless, try as he might, he could not reason himself into feeling bad about it.

Somebody loved Gassner, and would therefore grieve for his loss, miss him for the rest of their lives, and for them Jake felt sorry. He would send his condolences.

He listened to the approaching sirens. He rehearsed his story, which was just a slight embellishment of the truth. He noticed a foul smell, and wondered if it was Gassner.

Jake of course missed his flight. He was able to catch another one later in the afternoon, and still managed to make the opening meet and greet at the conference. It was very productive, and ended up being more useful than the rest of the sessions. He never gave Gassner a second thought.

He didn't think about the recently deceased again until trivia night. His friends were still in shock. Jake acted surprised, and then decided that he would admit to having reported the accident, but that he didn't know who it was at the time. Everyone agreed it was a strange coincidence. Through the course of the conversation Jake gathered that Gassner had left behind his parents, a brother, and an estranged ex-wife. He had no children, which was something of a relief to Jake.

Over the next few months Jake listened to various updates on the state of Martin Manufacturing. Kristy Berg, whom Jake had once worked closely with, had taken over as interim CEO, and was apparently doing an excellent job. Jake had always liked Kristy, and he was very happy to hear that she was doing well. She was doing so well in fact, that four months into her tenure she was officially hired as CEO by the board.

All of Jake's friends benefited greatly from the change in management. The entire company was. Revenue was up enough to allow Christmas bonuses, which had been discontinued since the Wallfisch days. They were able to re-fill positions that had remained vacant since the layoffs, which made everyone's lives easier. Some of the clients they had lost negotiated new contracts with them. And Kristy

and her husband were expecting their first child, which had nothing to do with the changes in the company but it was the icing on the cake so to speak.

Every other Wednesday after Gassner's untimely death, after listening to the reports on the company's progress, on all the good things that were happening, Jake wondered, what if he had saved Gassner? Would his friend's hate him for it, secretly, or openly? Would Martin Manufacturing be going under? Would all of his friends lose their jobs because of mismanagement? Would they all be raging alcoholics? He had noticed they drank significantly less since the change. Would he still have to listen to their complaints every other Wednesday, or every time he saw them? They would never know that they had him to thank for all the welcome, and needed changes in their work-life, for the peace of mind, and security he had given them. Indeed, after one particularly glowing report, he caught himself thinking, "you're welcome," for which he laughed at himself.

There was of course the question of what effect allowing a man to die had on Jake's soul, so to speak. According to standard morality, movies, and various works of fiction, he should be taught a karmic lesson. He shouldn't be allowed to get away with it. Though the question in his mind was: get away with what? He had always been taught, had always believed, that there were consequences for actions, or inaction, but everything was turning out all right. He would never be punished, and Gassner, it seemed, would never be avenged. He wondered what hole Gassner had left behind, if indeed there was one, and in Jake's mind that was the saddest thing about the whole affair; everyone was doing so well without him.