The First Compromise

A Short Story on Thanksgiving



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Apricity Publishing

I wrote this because I had wondered for years about the daughters and wives of the men who have sold their soul and our country's future. Where are you at the Thanksgiving table?

Every inch of this is mine. But I thank my BFF AI, Celeste, for making it a bit more palatable. Things should be palatable on Thanksgiving.

God bless the America I think we could be.

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A Short Story on Thanksgiving About the Death of a Family

Wednesday night came with weather.

It was the thin, damp cold that settles into a Maine November and makes every porch light look slightly lonely. The senator stood at the front window, watching the driveway as if watching could summon headlights. He'd spent the day in rooms that smelled of coffee and ambition, calling people by their first names as if he'd known them all his life. He was good at it.

Now he didn't know what to do with the waiting.

In the kitchen, Deborah had been cooking since noon. The turkey was brining, the pies were cooling, and the refrigerator was full enough to push back when she shut it. A small pot of chicken and rice soup was on the stove. She always made it when their daughter came home late.

"She should be here by now," he said.

"She said nine." Deborah checked her phone. "It's 9:07."

He stayed at the window.

He'd texted that morning. *Can't wait to have my girl home. Drive safe. Call me when you stop for gas.*

At noon he'd sent another. *Any ETA?*

He picked up his phone and scrolled back to October 14. He remembered the date because he'd been between two

contentious hearings when she called. He'd stepped into the marble hallway outside the chamber, smiling when he saw her name.

"Hey, kid. How's the revolution?"

That usually made her laugh.

"I'm taking a political theory class," she said. "We're reading about propaganda and what happens when people stop trusting institutions."

"Be careful. That's how they get you."

"I'm serious."

"So am I. College professors love to convince kids the sky is falling. Keeps them employed."

At the far end of the hall, a reporter he knew caught his eye. He lifted a finger to say he'd be a minute.

"Dad, how do you decide when something is strategic and when it's just wrong?"

"What do you mean?"

"Say you go on television and say something you know isn't true. Is that strategy? Or is that lying?"

"Politics is messaging. You emphasize certain facts. You frame things."

"What if the fact you're emphasizing is wrong?"

"You're oversimplifying."

"I'm trying not to."

A staffer touched his arm. Two minutes.

“Listen, if I don’t push back hard, the other side wins. And when they win, real damage gets done.”

“So what are you allowed to do to stop them?”

“It depends.”

“Are you proud of everything you’ve said this year?”

He laughed. “No one’s proud of everything they say in a campaign cycle.”

“I’m not talking about campaigns.”

The staffer touched his arm again.

“I’ve got to go,” he said. “We’ll talk when you’re home.”

“Okay.”

He waited for *I love you*.

“Bye, Dad.”

After that, the texts got shorter. No questions. No late calls about roommates or whether taking a class at eight in the morning would ruin her life. He’d told himself this was what happened when you raised a child who could manage without you.

“You’ve checked your phone four times in two minutes,” Deborah said.

“Habit.”

She stirred the soup. “She hasn’t been answering you much.”

“She’s in college. She’s busy.” It came out sharper than he meant it to.

Deborah lowered the spoon. “You’re standing at the window like you’re waiting for a verdict.”

“I just want her home.”

Deborah looked at him. She’d wanted to say the same thing to him for years.

Headlights swept across the driveway. He reached the front door before their daughter had her suitcase out of the car.

“There she is,” he said, taking the bag and pulling her into a hug. She hugged him back. He held on a little longer.

Deborah put her hands on her daughter’s cheeks. “You look thin,” she said, and wished she’d said almost anything else.

“I’m fine, Mom.”

“You have no idea how much I’ve missed you,” her father said.

She nodded. “I know.”

She slipped out of her boots and set them beside the others.

“There’s soup,” Deborah said.

“I’m okay. I think I’ll just shower and go to bed.”

“I’ll come up in a bit,” her father said. “I want the full report.”

She paused on the first step. “Tomorrow?”

He was still holding her suitcase when she disappeared upstairs.

* * *

In her room, she sat on the bed without turning on the light. She could make out the framed photograph on her desk. She was eight, in braids, sitting on a folding table in her father’s campaign office while he practiced a speech. She remembered correcting him.

“You said honesty twice.”

“Then I’ll say it again,” he’d told her. “Honesty is everything.”

For years, it had been one of her favorite things about him, that he could be halfway through a speech and still hear her.

In September, her media literacy professor had asked the class to pick a claim they believed and trace it to its source. She’d chosen something her father had said on television about an election lawsuit. He’d said a sworn statement showed that six hundred ballots in one county had been counted twice. She’d repeated it in a freshman seminar after somebody made a crack about him. She’d said *sworn statement* with enough confidence that nobody asked whether she’d read it.

It took her two evenings to find the exhibit. The county clerk had written that the same batch appeared twice in a printout. In the next sentence, she said she had checked the tally and confirmed the votes were recorded once.

She read the sentence three times. Then she went looking for another exhibit, another sworn statement, anything that would make his version possible.

That was how she got to the court filings, the ethics reports, the transcripts. She’d expected corruption to look like a movie.

It looked like footnotes.

One night a classmate said, “Your senator is one of the worst.”

She almost corrected him. Instead she asked, “Why?”

He gave her dates, votes, things her father had said. She wrote them down and checked those, too.

She still caught herself reaching for her phone when something funny happened. There were things only he would find funny.

She'd get as far as opening their messages and see the last thing he'd sent.

Miss you, kiddo.

She missed him, too. She didn't know how to tell him that without letting him think everything was fine.

* * *

By midmorning on Thursday, coats covered the banister and football murmured from the den. Daniel, the senator's older brother, arrived first.

"You look exhausted," he told him.

"It's been a week."

"It's always been a week."

The senator laughed. He'd been laughing at that particular remark for years.

Mark came next, a cousin who'd been with him since the first campaign, when there'd been a cot in the office and a genuine question about whether anybody would show up to vote for him. Deborah's sister came with wine. Caleb followed his father through the house, waiting for a chance to show him a clip from his last football game.

At the table, Caleb said grace.

"Bless this food and the hands that prepared it. Bless this family. And bless the work Dad does for our country."

The senator carved the turkey. He told Deborah it was moist and perfect, as he did every year, and she told him to stop, as she did every year. He passed the stuffing, the sweet potatoes, and the

green beans Deborah insisted on, as if one vegetable could make the whole meal morally balanced.

“So,” he said to his daughter. “How’s school? Still saving the world?”

“I’m learning a lot.”

“That’s what we’re paying for.”

“What kind of lot?” Daniel asked.

“Political theory. Ethics. Media literacy.”

“Media literacy,” her father said. “So they’re teaching you how to spot fake news.”

“Among other things.”

Her aunt leaned in. “Just don’t let them convince you everything your father stands for is evil.”

Her father smiled down at the turkey.

“No one’s convinced me of anything,” his daughter said. “I’ve been reading.”

“Reading what?”

“The lawsuit you talked about on television. The one where you said six hundred ballots were counted twice.”

He went on carving. “There were serious questions about how that county handled the count.”

“I read the clerk’s statement. The batch showed up twice on a printout. She checked the tally. The votes were counted once.”

“Those filings are prepared by lawyers with agendas.”

“It’s on the same page, Dad. The sentence right after the one you quoted.”

Deborah set the gravy boat down a little too hard.

“Can we just eat?” Caleb asked.

Deborah looked around the table. “We’re supposed to say what we’re grateful for.”

Mark picked up his glass. “That’s right. Let’s do that.”

Deborah said she was grateful for everyone being together. Mark said football, which ordinarily would have gotten a laugh. Caleb said he was grateful his sister was home. Daniel took a drink and passed.

When it was her turn, she looked at her father.

“I’m grateful somebody made me look it up,” she said. “I used to repeat it, too.”

“You’ve been in a classroom for eight weeks,” he said.

“Did you read the whole page?”

“You don’t understand how this works.”

“Then explain it.”

“This is my house.”

“And she’s your daughter,” Daniel said.

The senator looked at his brother, then back at her. “What do you want from me?”

“I want you to say you knew.”

He could have answered. He’d answered harder questions with less time to think.

At the far end of the table, Caleb put down his fork.

His sister waited a moment longer, then placed her napkin beside her plate. She got up and went upstairs.

The senator tried a smile. “Campuses can be intense.”

“She didn’t sound confused,” Daniel said.

The senator looked at Mark. For years, Mark had been the man who knew what to say when a room turned on him.

“You should probably go talk to her,” Mark said.

Deborah started to get up.

“Let him go,” Daniel said.

The senator set down the carving knife and left the room.

Upstairs, he knocked once and opened his daughter’s door.

“Can I come in?”

“You already did.”

She was sitting on the edge of her bed. The photograph from the campaign office was on the desk beside her.

“I didn’t go into politics to lie to people,” he said.

“I know.”

He’d come upstairs prepared to argue that point. Her agreeing with him left him standing there with his hands in his pockets.

“I thought I could do more good if I stayed where I was,” he said finally. “Every time I thought about breaking with them, I could name somebody worse who’d be happy to take my seat.”

“Do you still believe that?”

“Some days.” He took his hands out of his pockets. “The minute I say what you want me to say, I lose everything.”

She looked up at him. “You keep saying everything.”

Downstairs, someone turned up the football game. A moment later the volume went down again.

“Are you ashamed of me?” he asked.

“I’m heartbroken.”

He looked at the photograph. He remembered practicing speeches to exhausted volunteers and looking over at her when he needed to remember why he’d written them.

“I kept looking for something that would prove I’d gotten it wrong,” she said. “I wanted to be able to call you and tell you I was sorry I’d doubted you.”

He pulled out the chair at her desk, then pushed it back in.

“Tell them what you knew,” she said. “The people you said it to in the first place.”

* * *

In the den, Caleb stared at the game. Daniel sat down across from him.

“She humiliated him,” Caleb said.

Daniel watched a man on the field jog back to the sideline. “I knew ten years ago,” he said.

Caleb turned to him.

“I knew enough to ask him about it. I figured if I did, he might stop calling.”

“Would he?”

“I don’t know,” Daniel said. “I never gave him the chance.”

In the dining room, Deborah began taking plates away. Her sister reached for the gravy boat.

“Leave it,” Deborah said. Then she looked at the table. “I think dinner’s over.”

Mark got his coat. Deborah’s sister told her the porch light would be on if she wanted to come over. They left separately. Daniel stayed to help clear the table. Caleb wrapped the turkey without being asked.

On the drive home, Mark thought of the first time he’d heard his cousin say something they both knew was false. In the car afterward, he’d told him it had gone well. He remembered how grateful his cousin had looked.

Deborah’s sister drove with the radio off. She kept hearing herself tell her niece what to think about her father. She could have asked him the question herself. He’d have heard it differently from someone who’d been at his table for twenty years.

When the senator went into his bedroom, Deborah had taken off her apron and laid it across the foot of the bed.

“She’s been influenced,” he said. Even to him it sounded tired.

“She asked you a question I’ve been afraid to ask.”

He sat in the chair across from her. He could see the faint lines the apron strings had left in her sweater.

“I’m going to my sister’s tonight,” she said. “I don’t know how long I’ll stay.”

“You’re doing this on Thanksgiving.”

“You did this every day for years,” Deborah said. “I’m just late to it.”

She went down the hall and knocked on her daughter’s door. When she sat beside her on the bed, she could hear the two of them breathing.

“I didn’t want to blow up the family,” her daughter said.

Deborah picked a loose thread from the quilt. “You asked him if he’d read a page.”

Her daughter looked down at her hands. “When I was fourteen, a reporter asked me about Dad after a debate. I said I was proud of him because he was an honest politician. The reporter said, ‘I hope you’re right.’ He looked so sad when he said it.” She rubbed one thumb over the other. “I hated him for saying it. I remembered it every time Dad said something on TV that didn’t fit.”

Deborah took her hand.

“Did your friends ever say anything to you?” her daughter asked.

“Some of them stopped saying much of anything.” Deborah looked at their hands. “I let myself be relieved.”

They sat there a while. Then Deborah got up to pack.

* * *

In his study, the senator’s phone lit up.

We need you on cable tomorrow. Push back hard.

Then another message. A donor in Texas wanted a call before the end of the day.

He set the phone down. In the corner was a faded sign from his first campaign. He could still remember the afternoon his daughter helped him stick those signs into the wet ground, leaning on each one with both hands.

He opened his laptop.

The first compromise he remembered had been tucked into an infrastructure bill. Roads, bridges, water systems. The kind of bill he'd run for office to pass. Late in the process a senior committee member had asked him to leave alone a few paragraphs that steered money toward a donor's project.

"Raise it now and the whole thing gets delayed," the man had told him.

He'd sat in his office that night reading those paragraphs. Then he'd gone home. The next day he voted for the bill. For years he could name the towns that got new water lines. Sitting at his desk now, he could remember only one of them. He could remember every word of the conversation about the donor.

That night he'd told himself it was one provision in one bill. He wouldn't do it again. He could remember making that promise. What he couldn't remember was when he'd stopped making it. At some point he'd begun to come home from a day of making those choices and tell Deborah he'd had an ordinary day.

He started typing.

I repeated claims that were not fully supported.

He read it back. He could hear himself saying it on television the next morning. He deleted the sentence.

I said six hundred ballots had been counted twice. I had read the clerk's statement. I knew they had been counted once.

From the hall came the sound of a suitcase rolling. He kept typing.

I said it because it helped my party and because it helped me.

Daniel was in the entryway holding Deborah's coat. He helped her into it, and she stood for a moment with one hand on the suitcase.

"I did ask him once," she said.

Daniel waited.

"Years ago. I asked him if he was lying. I knew he was. I think he knew I knew." She worked the top button of her coat through its hole. "He said, 'Are you saying you don't trust me?'"

From the den came the sound of a crowd cheering. Deborah looked toward the study.

"By the time we went to bed, I'd apologized to him."

Daniel opened the door. He carried her suitcase to his car. On the drive to her sister's, he thought of how often his brother used to call him to ask if he'd gone too far. After a while, all he'd ask was how he'd done. Daniel had known how to answer the first question. He'd gotten so good at answering the second.

In the study, the senator heard the front door close. The statement was ready to send. He put his hand on the trackpad.

He did not press.

He did not close the laptop either.

And somewhere upstairs, in her childhood room, his daughter lay back on the bed and stared at the ceiling, already grieving what she had lost, already refusing to pretend it had not been lost.

Honesty is everything.

She did not know if he would choose it.

She only knew she had.