

EQUIVALENT VALUE

by George Malko

I watched the Deputy Sheriff, tall and gaunt, drag himself the final few steps up to the sixth floor, chest heaving. "I'm here— You've got—" he was saying, then gave up with a shake of his head and shuffled silently into the loft, shoulders bowed like folded vulture's wings. He uttered a hoarse wheeze and collapsed into the nearest chair. "Your stairs is murder..." Pouches hung beneath his eyes and as he mopped his forehead with a dirty handkerchief I could see that his hand was shaking badly.

"Drink?" I offered with a casual gesture of hospitality. "I've got some cold beer." I'd been preparing myself for this moment for days. Ben Orrens, my lawyer, had warned me not to make trouble. Why he even had to warn me, I couldn't fathom. Anything even remotely close to trouble was far-distant from my mind. What was required was tact and delicacy, and I was ready. When the bell first rang from down in the street, I pushed the release button and then stepped in front of the big mirror Ellen had originally insisted we hang in our apartment's front hall. I studied myself— deep-set eyes which an idiot reviewer had once called "proudful and dark"—studied that good and decent face looking back at me. I'd shaved and suddenly that seemed to have been a big mistake; my smooth freshly-shaved cheeks and broad normally unlined forehead should, under no circumstances, suggest someone too youthful, callow, irresponsible; worse yet, someone worried, with something to hide. I made my shoulders relax, then rolled up the sleeves of my faded long-sleeved denim shirt twice, to the elbow. It was much better. It made me look workmanlike, and reasonable. I stared into my own eyes again for a moment, and just for a second caught a glint of the old confidence. It was going to be all right, I assured myself.

I held up my hands, the palms calloused and rough-skinned, the backs scarred. Honest hands, I was telling myself, but I knew from bitter experience that the sight of them would not necessarily lead someone any closer to the delicate clockwork of my soul. I stubbornly wanted nothing less: to be revealed to the world as I truly felt, a thoughtful, honorable man, cruelly wronged.

My offer made the Deputy shake his long head and he tried to draw himself up into a more business-like pose. "Not on duty."

"Some wine?" I suggested and indicated the open bottle sitting within reach.

The Deputy hacked twice, like explosions, and then seemed to calm down. The red went out of his face and he pulled himself closer to the nearby kitchen table. "I'm on business, performing public duty. No drinking."

"Right," I said, took the bottle, and filled up my own glass. "You don't mind if I do, do you?" congenially adding, "So—" to indicate I was ready to start any time.

The Deputy reached into an inside jacket pocket and took out what looked to be a very long list. He glanced at it and then took his first real look at the loft, registering its vastness. He looked back at his list and again turned to scan the premises. "Where is everything?"

"Let me see what you're talking about," I said and reached over.

The Deputy withdrew the list protectively and shook his head. "Uh-uh, chief. Nobody sees this."

"How am I supposed to know what you came for?" I don't know why, but I was feeling bold, maybe because all along I'd been expecting somebody big and solid, a state trooper type who smells of broad leather belts and holsters, and instead this—this sad *heap* comes shambling in looking like a man flirting with an imminent coronary.

"I'll tell you what I came for, chief."

I sat back and sipped the wine. "Tell me, Chief." No question about it, I was definitely feeling bolder.

"Deputy Sheriff Axenlo."

"Tony Candell."

"I know," Axenlo said.

"Turkish?"

"Sorry?"

"Your name, is it Turkish?"

"Could be," Axenlo said, nodding. He glanced at his list. "Okay: we got what we call Equivalent Value. I'm telling you now so we don't have any surprises later and you get hot and bothered or some such bullshit because we're claiming items you say are yours and not from the inventory of things here on the list. Here."

"Let me ask you something." I knew I was sounding almost too amiable, but I didn't care. "Can you prove what you want to take isn't mine?"

Axenlo produced another legal-looking piece of folded paper and flicked it with the thick nail of his index finger. "Signed by the Judge." As if knowing that was all he needed to shut me up, he put away this document and laboriously got to his feet. "So, let's have us a look-see."

I stayed sitting by the table. "Help yourself. I don't even know what she's saying is hers."

"Who's that?" Axenlo asked from where he stood in the middle of the big open space, swiveling first one way and then the other, as if unsure of his bearings.

"My wife."

"Oh, yeah? Where's she at?" Axenlo took several heavy-footed steps towards the kitchen area. "This where you cook?"

"Don't you know why you're here?" I cried, jumping to my feet. "For Christ's sake, Sheriff, my *wife* is the one who insists this junk is hers!" Actually my wife and

Dunlop, her prick lawyer. But I kept my mouth shut because the man before me was on a single-minded mission and clearly was not interested in clarifications.

"Where's the fridge?" Axenlo was crouched behind the counter, next to the stove. He closed a cabinet and rose before me, his eyes on his list. "I'm looking for two hundred big ones. That could be the stove here and the TV—" he glanced up, "—what we call Equivalent Value."

"The television set's on the list all by itself," I said. I knew what was on the goddamned list by heart.

"How'd you know that?" Deputy Sheriff Axenlo demanded and pressed it to his chest to shield it from me.

"Sheriff—" I began.

"Axenlo. Deputy Sheriff Hoxsa Axenlo."

"Albanian."

"Right. Don't ever mistake us for Turks."

"Come back here and sit down."

"Where's the fridge?"

I exploded. "In the bathroom!"

"Okay," Axenlo said and went off to search for the bathroom. "Yell out when I'm close." He slowed and turned. "I got all day, chief. We get together on this, it's going to save us both a lot of aggravation." He swayed for a moment and had to catch himself. Something sparked in his eyes, a glint of embarrassment along with a sudden expression of discomfort. It suddenly hit me. The man had already been drinking that morning.

"Let me help," I immediately volunteered, grabbed the wine bottle, and followed. "Look at it," I said from the doorway to the bathroom. The two of us stared at the refrigerator, which was next to the small tub. I let a few seconds go by, as if

something profound might sink into Axenlo's keen mind. "Is that worth two hundred dollars?"

The good Deputy said nothing and looked back at his list.

"Sheriff, what in the hell do you want with all this stuff, this useless junk?"

The word 'useless' made Axenlo whip his head around to peer more carefully at the refrigerator. "It's broken?" he asked suspiciously.

"No, for Christ's sake! But who the hell can use it but me?"

"The Judge."

"Sheriff, the Judge doesn't give a shit about any of it! And I do.

Sheriff...Axenlo—right?—Sheriff Axenlo—"

"Deputy Sheriff," he corrected me.

"Right—" I was already saying, not wanting to lose any of my precarious momentum. "Look at it the way I see it, all right? The Judge is doing his job, and you are doing yours."

"You better believe it, chief."

"I am with you on this, Axenlo," I assured him. "Honest to God, this is no bullshit now. My wife, she has a *fully furnished* apartment, all right? Fully Furnished. Now come with me and I want to show you something." I reached for the man's arm very carefully. When I found no resistance, I caught it more firmly and led the way back out into the loft. We stopped, stood for a moment, and then I did a slow turn, gesturing broadly with my free hand. We could have been in the middle of some Florentine piazza. "Home Sweet Home, my friend," I said. "This is it. This is where it happens."

Axenlo looked at me. "Where what happens?"

Close up, I could smell the fumes of something sweet coming off him.

"Nothing," I said in solemn surrender and let my head and shoulders droop. "Oh, I'm

working—working hard—but..." I gave an all-encompassing gesture meant to signify futility.

Axenlo gave the loft another look.

I let him finish, and then changed my tack. "What you want is useful only to me. Does that make sense?" I waited until Axenlo sort of nodded. "Its value, whatever you call it, is something which is gone if you take these things away from me. Without me, there is no use. There is no utility. And, there is no value."

"Equivalent Value," Axenlo reminded me.

"I'm with you," I assured him. It was a relief not to be arguing right and wrong with the man. I had tried that once, first with my lawyer, and then with the Judge. Ben had been almost worse than the Judge.

"I've got one thing going for me," I'd said in the cab taking us to Center Street for the hearing on Ellen's Summons & Complaint.

"What's that?" Ben had asked.

"I know I'm right," I said. "I mean, I've had that from the very beginning. But today—now—it makes a particular difference knowing how right I am."

Ben responded with a small laugh, which caught me by surprise. "The courage of your convictions. Tony, listen to me, would you please. As your lawyer, I can shut my eyes to the fact that this could go on forever. But as your friend, I want you to get out of it. Find the redeeming factor, Tony. Be able to tell yourself *why* you married her. Retrieve that and it'll make you stronger than her. It'll make the Judge see you."

"See me? What the hell does he have to see for? I took what was mine! Only what was mine!"

"Yes, Tony. You're right. Only what was yours."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Do you really think Ellen initiated this action to get back those things because she wants to destroy you?"

"Why is she doing it, then?" I cried. "Does she need the stuff to decorate some hovel? Maybe that's it, Ben. Or maybe she thinks I've turned into a hopeless materialist and it's time to strip my life of clutter—you know, chairs, a table, a bed. No, you're right, you're right, she definitely does not want to destroy me, this woman is actually an angel of mercy, a muse, and what she's doing in her own loving way is reducing me to life's essentials." I had sighed, loudly and angrily. "God *damn*, I am glad we had this little talk."

Ben put his hand on my arm. "There is no way on earth Ellen would do something like this unless she thought she was dead right, or had the feeling, a very solid feeling, that she was right. You want to believe she's out to destroy you, that she hates you. All right, let's say she does. But why, Tony?" he had asked gently. "Tell me that."

We rode the rest of the way in silence.

On the courthouse steps heading for the revolving doors, feeling vulnerable and genuinely frightened, I grabbed Ben's arm to stop him. "You asked me to try and explain, if I could figure it out, put my finger on it, the redeeming factor in my marriage."

"It was rather a figure of speech," Ben said and glanced at his watch. "The word 'redeeming' has some unfortunate connotations."

"Whatever," I said with an impatient wave of my hand. "The point is I don't know if I can do it. Christ knows I want to try, but it's beyond me. Look, this may sound backward to you, but what happened was sort of as if she found out I never wanted to marry her."

"Found out?" Ben said, momentarily taken aback. "Found out how? What did you say to her?"

"I said nothing," I said defensively. "I have never said a thing! I am trying to explain something my way and you're not letting me say what I want to say."

"Say what you want to say," Ben had said.

"What's important to me in this world," I began, speaking slowly not because this lent any impressive weight to my words but because it wasn't working itself out in my mind as clearly as I'd hoped. "What counts for something, most of it is abstract. For Ellen it's very different. She believes that what's important is security, continuity, no surprises, a regular paycheck. She doesn't like speculating about ideas—if we're talking now about something that's like number one with her, that is it. She prefers simple talk. But Ben, I speculate, all the time."

"You're different from each other," Ben replied. "But what you said before is more important. You never wanted to marry her, you said. She worked that out. You didn't have to say anything. Dead silence might have suggested it to her. However you want to look at it, she reaches this rather devastating conclusion on her own. And on her own she decides to do something about it. You certainly weren't going to."

"What?" I said, taken aback. "Me divorce her?"

"It happens," Ben said.

"Why would I ever want to do that?"

"Because you never wanted to marry her in the first place. You just said so."

"No, you've got it all wrong," I said, what I was struggling to make clear confusing me more than ever.

"Either you wanted to marry her, or you didn't."

"It is not that simple! Ben, all I can tell you right now is that I had to marry her."

"Had to?" Ben gave me a sudden look of fresh interest. "What does that mean? Was she pregnant?" I shook my head. "Was her father holding a gun to your head because first he said yes after you asked if you could marry his little girl and then you started to change your mind?"

"He never knew about that," I blurted without thinking.

"About what?" Ben demanded. "He never knew what?"

"I did change my mind," I admitted. I realized Ben was staring at me. "Well, Jesus Christ, Ben, doesn't everybody?"

"Are you suggesting valid doubts or a complete change of heart?"

"I am talking about freedom of choice."

"No," Ben interjected. "You married Ellen for the very good reason that you thought you owed it to her." I suddenly felt as if something had been hauled out of me through his mouth. I sagged so completely that Ben reached over and gave me a comforting pat. "Don't think about it anymore."

"She loved me so much," I said, feeling truly wretched. "I thought she was going to kill herself."

Ben just stared, and then his expression softened even more. "We have to go in."

"Listen to me, please," I said, grabbing him. "The fact, the truth is that I felt a great deal for her. I'm not saying I never loved her. Ben, I did love her. I swear." I desperately tore my brain to find that one redeeming factor. "I was in love," I insisted lamely.

"We all are," Ben replied with cold reason.

"She loved me," I countered. "She may still."

"She may," Ben agreed.

"That's it!" I cried out, startling Ben.

"That's what?"

"The redeeming factor! If she still loves me, isn't that redeeming? It certainly seems redeeming to me."

"It's redeeming for her," Ben said. "Not for you."

"I thought you wanted me to find something—*anything*—that was redeeming?" I stared at Ben, imploring him to concede the barest vestige of a redemptive truth.

Ben returned my stare for a moment, then added a small shake of his head and with regret said, "You found the wrong thing."

The Judge's expression had only added to my growing sense of preordained doom. Nothing in his face had comforted me, even though it seemed familiar, full of rough lines and an expression of wear, as if tried by time and concerns of the human heart. But it hadn't looked as if it were on my side. "Did you take the things in question?"

"Only what was mine," I answered. The simplicity of his opening question made me feel a little more confident.

The Judge, for some reason, gave a small shake of his head and adjusted his eyeglasses. He raised a page from among the papers before him and made a notation. "You took them: yes or no?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"After she moved out. I went to the apartment, to pick up Tim, my son, and the place was empty—didn't she have to inform me, Your Honor? My son is involved—"

"Objection," Dunlop said wearily. Hearing the word took me totally by surprise and with a sinking sensation in the pit of my stomach I realized I was in a real court. I began to breathe more quickly and felt Ben's hand on my arm.

"Mr. Dunlop," the Judge began, paused, and then seemed to abandon further explanation and instead gave his head another slow shake.

I couldn't believe it; the man was either bored, or in some sort of pain. "Your Honor?" The small eyes, set beneath the thinning brows of an old man, found me. "I took them in July. It was the night of the blackout."

A puzzled expression appeared on the Judge's face. "Was there a blackout in July?" He turned to his Clerk. "We were on the Vineyard, I didn't see anything in the papers about any blackout."

"In Brooklyn," I explained.

The Judge looked back at me and nodded. So did his Clerk.

"I wasn't taking advantage of it," I added, and was rewarded, finally, with a faint smile.

"Whom do these things belong to?" the Judge inquired.

"Me."

"Ob—"

"You're sure," the Judge asked me directly, ignoring Dunlop.

"I am not a thief, Your Honor," I replied, feeling some rapport had finally been established. But my words only produced another nod.

Dunlop then rose to disagree. He disagreed vehemently, pacing, waving his arms, the energy of his disagreement coming off him like sweat as he insisted everything belonged to Ellen. I swore I had purchased every one of the things when I was living in the apartment. Only after I discovered that she had moved out, leaving our things behind, had I made up my mind that these were things I needed, for my loft. So I took them. "She abandoned them," I said.

"They were left for the use of the new tenant," Dunlop countered and looked up at the Judge. "Mrs. Candell is sub-letting her apartment."

"Our apartment," I said quickly.

Dunlop gestured to let me know he conceded the point. Seconds later he pulled out receipts for every single thing I had taken. Every one of them was in Ellen's name. Even my two suits belonged to her.

Outside the court I hurried after Ben, who trotted down the steps two at a time, arm up, flagging a taxi. "It was always easier to have her send the check," I explained as I came up behind him.

"It doesn't matter," Ben said.

"How the hell did I know she was going to sublet the place? God damn it, Ben, stop and listen to me!" Ben slowed and gave me a glance. "I am paying the maintenance on the apartment, paying for my loft, paying for Tim, paying her expenses to live, and she's sub-letting the place for at least twenty-six hundred and now she wants my suits! Ben??"

"Why didn't you at least talk to me before you took all those things?"

"I don't call you to ask if I can go to the bathroom, I don't call when I want to go to bed, or if I want to stay up late. Those fucking things are mine!"

"Dunlop proved otherwise."

"I'm paying him, too, aren't I?" Ben nodded. "But I can't fire him, can I?" A passing taxi slowed at the sight of Ben's still-raised arm. I grabbed it and hauled it back down. "What do I do?"

"Return all of it."

"No." Ben tried to pull free but I wouldn't let go of him. "I said I'm not going to return one goddamned item on that list. Ben, if you want a goddamned cab I'll go out and steal one for you! Now say something. Tell me what you *think*. Tell me what to do because I'm not giving back a thing."

"Do what you please," Ben said and for the first time in the years I'd known him lost his temper. He was getting set to rip free but instead turned and glared. "If what you really want out of this whole thing is to go to jail to show everybody how *right* you are, if that's what you—"

"I don't want to go to jail!" I interrupted hotly. "I want what is mine. I don't want a blessed thing that belongs to somebody else. I want what is mine!"

"What's yours isn't yours," Ben said.

The two of us stared at each. "And there's nothing you can do about it."

"—And there's nothing you can do about it," Ben confirmed, letting me see he was not angry with me anymore.

In the loft, I understood Ben's frustration. Poor guy, his hands were tied. But mine weren't. Not yet. And until they were, there was plenty I could do. I'm certainly not trying to break any laws, I thought to myself as I tried to lead Axenlo back to the table, even as the man's eyes continued to rove the room, looking for *things*. "May I offer you some *schnapps*?"

The Deputy Sheriff turned. "*Schnapps*?"

"From Yugoslavia," I said. "It's plum brandy."

"I know what *schnapps* is."

"Come and sit down. I know you're on duty. Axenlo, for Christ's sake, you're here to clean me out of house and home. I'm going to be washed up, finished. Sit down and have a drink, one simple, civilized drink. Put one away with the condemned man. Axenlo, Deputy Sheriff Axenlo, please."

Axenlo's expression softened. "Sure... hell, *schnapps* is fine." He returned to the table and sat down.

I went to the cupboard and took out the tubby little bottle and two little glasses and poured them each a brimful. "What's 'cheers' in Albanian?"

"Beats me," Axenlo said.

"Well, 'love an' luck,' then."

Axenlo knocked his back in one gulp and gave a small cough because it went down fast and burning. "Good," he said and held out his glass.

I refilled it back up to its brim, watched him empty it again, and began to refine the desperate, possibly stupid plan that was taking shape in my mind. "Axenlo," I began, "let me ask you a very technical question. You don't have to answer if you think it's too complicated for me to understand, or if you can't, if it's official business, if you know what I mean..."

Axenlo gave a wave. "Go ahead, chief. Ask me. I'll tell you if I can."

I gave him a smile and efficiently had his glass full again. "Princes invented

this," I observed. "So, my question is: who decides on Equivalent Value?"

Axenlo's head was back from drinking. He swallowed hard and his head came forward to stare at me. After a moment he put his glass down. "That's it? That's the question?"

"That's it."

Axenlo laughed suddenly, a narrow kind of a bellow, full of delight, and mockery. "I do. Jesus, chief, I set it all by myself."

I nodded, to let Axenlo see I was very impressed. In my heart I heaved a sigh of relief and told myself, Okay, now we go for the big one. "So you set it."

"Right."

"That means you know what things are worth."

"Goddamned right, chief, it means—"

I silenced him with a small gesture. "I mean, you really know what something is worth to a person, to the way they live. You can look around here, you can see what I've got, and you can tell what it's worth to me. Am I right?"

"Fucking-A... "

"Swell."

"The fridge there—" Axenlo waved loosely. "Worth about, according to list, two hunnert, an' if I take it, there's yer two hunnert. But / know it's worth maybe—this is maybe now—maybe it's *really* worth seventy-five."

Oh, Jesus, wait, I was thinking quickly, this isn't what I meant. But I calmly said, "I see what you mean," and refilled Axenlo's glass. "Now let me tell you something: practically everything in this place is like that, see?" Axenlo shook his head. "My things," I pressed further, "my everyday personal possessions, are worthless to anyone but me!"

Now, finally, Axenlo nodded.

I rose and started across the room. "A few years ago," I began conversationally, "I did a large piece of what I suppose you could call sculpture." I turned and looked back at Axenlo, sitting by the table, the small *schnapps* glass half-hidden in his fist, his rheumy eyes following me. "You knew I was a sculptor, didn't you?" It took Axenlo a moment to give a quick nod. "This large piece I did," I resumed, "it was a conceptual thing, and a foundation bought it. When they wanted to insure it they asked my gallery to put a price on it." I paused to let that much sink in. "They wanted to know what it was worth, Axenlo... not what they paid me for it, but what it was worth." I gestured for emphasis, turned, and started for the far corner of the loft.

"So?" the Deputy Sheriff called out after me. "What'd they say it was worth?"

I stopped and turned. "Two hundred thousand dollars." Axenlo's huge jaw dropped. I started back to the table. "Two hundred thousand dollars," I repeated.

"Fuck-no..." Axenlo murmured with disbelief.

"Fuck-yes. My gallery said that's what it was worth and it is their business to know. The foundation said thank you very much, their insurance agency said thank you very much, and you ask anybody what CURTAIN CALL is worth and they will tell you two hundred thousand dollars."

"What's CURTAIN CALL?"

"That's the name of the sculpture."

"I don't get it."

"You don't have to," I said. "But this next part is important, okay? I did some drawings when I was working on it, and they came out in a book." I neared Axenlo, gauging the distance for the proper effect. "The drawings went for five thousand."

"Five thousand? For drawings?"

"Yep," I said with a hard nod.

"You din' get that either?"

"Oh, no, I got that all right." I slipped back into the chair opposite him. "My gallery said that's what they were worth, and that is what I got."

"You should do more drawings," Axenlo suggested. "That's a real piece of change, five thousand."

"I'm trying, my friend. I am trying." I waited until our eyes met. "It takes a lot of time." I paused. When I spoke again, it was more softly, and very deliberately. "If you clean me out, that will be it. I swear, that will be it for me. But, if you have to come up with Equivalent Value, Axenlo, you can bring the Judge whatever you say is Equivalent Value, and you and the Judge and the Court are going to be happy. Do you know why they're going to be happy?" Axenlo's head was starting a slow swing to the left but I was plunging straight on. "Because *you* say it's what you went out to get!"

Axenlo sat back, let me see he was giving serious consideration to what had just been said, and then nodded heavily. "Fuckin-A, chief."

I rose slowly from the table. "So, Deputy Sheriff Axenlo, I have to leave now. You stay here. Finish up the *schnapps* as you check the stuff here. Use your list—I *mean* it. Use the goddamned list! And you see what's really worth anything. Maybe that set of new drawings over there—" I waved in the general direction of my drawing table without looking away from Axenlo's flushed face. "My gallery tells me these are worth five hundred a piece—right, *five* hundred!—and you decide." I reached out and took the man's long-fingered hand in mine. "Sheriff, you are going to be making some big decisions. I'm going to abide by them. I think you know me, I certainly feel as if I know you. Whatever you decide, it will be all right with me. Equivalent Value, that is a concept I can understand, because I know you're the man who is going to think of who is involved." Holding his hand more tightly, I leaned right down to Axenlo's ear. "Without me, the stuff in this place is useless. Axenlo, my friend, listen to me: it's not just worthless, it is useless. But I need it." My voice dropped even lower and my last

words were practically whispered. "I need it very badly... Axenlo..." I straightened, let go of his hand, touched him on the shoulder as if for luck, and walked out of the door.

Three hours later when I walked back in, the place was completely empty. I realized I wasn't surprised. Even as I made my way through it, tallied the sorry material remains of my life, I knew that nothing had been overlooked. The liquor was gone, of course, and both cases of wine—"More country red, Tony? Spare me." Sure, Ellen, spare you then, but now your wheezing goon appropriates it, crumpled documents waved in my face as he slyly inventories my wealth, my surviving possessions, even as his mind works on how he and his invisible confederates will invade my home, my sanctuary. Ashtrays: gone. Glasses? Out, with the cups and saucers. The stove, pots and pans: gone. The kitchen table and its three chairs? Out. My drawings—I rushed over to the drawing table and found them where I'd left them conspicuously in sight. Untouched. But not both suits and the tux! And all of the clean shirts, both sweaters, the sneakers—insane. Ellen had gone over the edge, done herself in. Totally. Half a beer in the Kelvinator, that's gone—the whole goddamned throbbing machine, beer and all. She'll see me starve, I suddenly realized, and make it part of her final charge against me. "Dropped dead," is how she'd testify. "Claimed he hadn't eaten in twenty-seven days. Kept mumbling something about drinking sea water only in small sips. Wanted to stand up and wave his shirt for the planes to spot. Madness, isn't it? The man malingered. Convict him." Ellen would let her eyes drop shyly, as if finally unafraid to discard her last remaining mantle of reluctance, and in a voice so soft and plaintive no one in the Courtroom would ever forget it, add, "Please. For my little boy's sake." That is what Ellen, my wife, would do.

I, meanwhile, stood in the middle of the vast emptiness like someone abandoned in the wilderness. My arms spread wide, as if to somehow will myself to accept the sacrifice I was being forced to shoulder. But the gesture was a question,

even as I said aloud, "Why would she do this to me?" The fear that gripped me as I stood there was that I would never know the answer. And still, in desperation, I had to add, "She loved me. She *really* loved me."