

# 1

## The End

In most ways Trevor would be considered a good man, at least that's what he told himself. Hardworking and resourceful, he had positioned himself at the threshold of upper management for a well respected telecommunications firm. Not a bad accomplishment for someone still months away from his 45th birthday. He owned a nice house, in a nice neighborhood, in a very nice town in northwest New Jersey. It was one of those towns so well endowed their greatest concern seemed to be protecting athletic fields from too much activity during periods of bad weather. He drove a somewhat pricey SUV 27.3 miles to work each day and his wardrobe was only limited by his disdain for clothing stores. He hired a painting contractor from time to time, depending on which rooms needed primping, and a landscaping crew to cut the lawn, but he always raked his own leaves. Trevor had even managed to save enough money, aside from his retirement investments, to purchase a boat: a 33 foot Sea Ray that was barely a year old. He wanted desperately to get it back in the water now that Spring was warming. There was something about being on water that calmed Trevor's soul.

He thought himself a kind and charitable man, serving dinner to the homeless each Thanksgiving Eve, and refraining from the

abuse of both bottle and his wife. Most would have expected such abuse, especially after the things he witnessed as a child. The cold and calculated silence, the torrent of negative comments and gestures, the aggressive and threatening behavior, and the moments of drunken rage, were all part of the world in which Trevor was nurtured. He couldn't fully understand it then, but he accepted it, never aware that things could be different, that things could be better. His mother had tried with all her might to shield he and his siblings from the abuse, but she was a victim too, and often ran out of strength long before her husband. It was during those days that Trevor stepped up to care for his younger brother and sister, regardless of whatever pain he might be feeling, and learned a great deal about being strong. Through the years he developed an intolerance for the behavior of his father, and he never laid a violent hand upon his wife.

But much like the rest of humanity, Trevor was not quite perfect. It was also true he had made a couple of bad mistakes along the way, the not so good side of Trevor.

There was an almost two year affair with an attractive lawyer from Codby and Barnes before he turned 30. It ripped Cindy apart and drove her back home with her parents for a couple of months, but Trevor was still young and selfish in those days, and the other woman had practically thrown herself at him. He had grown up a lot since then and there was no way he would ever repeat that behavior. These days he barely looked at other women, and he had learned long ago how to keep his flirtatious words to himself.

There was also an arrest back in '02 when his blood alcohol level provided ample reason why he very abruptly parked his car into

the trunk of a tree. Somehow he was able to redeem himself, vowing never to drink beyond excess again. Although six months without a driver's license was inconvenient, it did provide great motivation to stay sober, and for more than a decade since he held his ground by keeping dry.

But Trevor's life was not all about redeeming failures. He was remotely aware of a darker slice of his being, filled with the same kind of pain and despair that hits most men in their forties. The realization that they will not shake the world. The sad inventory of broken relationships and missed opportunities. The cold and sobering truth that each of us really wants so much more than this world will ever offer. The sting can be unbearable, driving most to the drug of their choice as they desperately attempt to numb away the pain. Materialism. Adultery. Bitterness. Drugs. Alcohol. Trevor, at this point in life, believed himself too strong to stumble. He also thought, unlike most, he did a pretty good job of hiding his shortcomings.

There was, however, more at work in Trevor's life than he was aware of, and a surprise came one day that caused him to question the mastery he held over his domain. As he looked into his wife's eyes, she spoke words he had never heard her say before, words he never imagined she would say.

“I want to go to church tomorrow.”

A nagging sensation chewed at his stomach. Church, he thought, was for the weak and needy, a hiding place for those who struggle in life. He knew God was a lie, a convenient invention handed down from primitive man to explain away difficult

circumstances, while simultaneously offering false hope to the hopeless. He also knew the Bible was a fairy tale concocted by men with dubious motives, attempting to subjugate the masses. He wondered how any educated person could buy into outlandish accounts of a sea being split in two or a carpenter rising from the dead. After the words left her mouth, he pondered for a moment in the area of his brain where no one was allowed to enter.

“Are you serious?” he asked, carefully studying her face, half expecting a grin to form and break into a giggle.

“Yes I am. Beth is going to meet me there at 9:15 in case you want to join us.” There was no smile, not even a smirk. In fact, her face was childlike in its naiveté, almost waiting for him to concede and join them, like a chess master in forfeit. Trevor slowly, reluctantly, realized that his wife was serious.

His mind started churning. It was true they had been married in a church, but that was more about tradition and saving money than anything else. There was also the token visit every Christmas Eve when some random group of people would attempt to portray a new angle on a two thousand year old fable.

*No one really believed any of it, did they?*

Trevor considered church to be about trying to make people feel good or bad so they could make it through another week, the same way a recovering alcoholic tries to get through each day. It was a place filled with self-righteous fools, ceramic smiles, and a shameless thirst for more money. It was no place he wanted himself, or his wife, to be.

The phone rang and Trevor hurried to grab it. He was hoping

to buy some time to better analyze the present situation. He thought the incoming call might provide a good distraction.

“Hello,” he said, listening to only a few words before reaching out his arm and handing the receiver to his wife. It was his mother-in-law. Once Cindy had the phone in hand, Trevor hustled out of the room and down the steps, ignoring her signal to wait.

Making his way outside he followed the front walkway across the house and toward the garage where he found the perfect alibi for his exit; garbage. Trevor took hold of the large plastic bin and started wheeling it down the driveway, contemplating why Cindy might have reached such a dramatic change of heart. He wondered if some bizarre cult had found inroads with his wife, or what someone might have said to coerce her to behave so erratically. Through the years Trevor had become somewhat aware of various tactics used to sway the will and manipulate the mind. He was concerned.

He was deep in thought as he neared the end of the driveway and failed to notice Jeff Johnson in the street until it was too late. Trevor used to call him JJ, but that was years ago, before Jeff made a few observations and remarks about the way Trevor dealt with people. Trevor remained convinced that these went well beyond the point of being neighborly.

“Hello,” Jeff said, slowing his Golden Retriever slightly.

Trevor's face soured. “Hey,” he said, and then quickly turned away. Jeff moved on.

Trevor left the can by the curb and started walking back up the driveway. His eyes focused momentarily on his home as they so often did from this section of the drive. He enjoyed surveying his

property and reminding himself that he had been able to carve out a nice life for he and his wife. Nearing the garage he quickly shifted his thoughts back to the problem at hand.

He entered the house and found his wife in the kitchen gathering up supplies for dinner. The minutes outside had been enough for him to piece together a strategy. He knew enough about human psychology and would need to be careful with his next move, avoiding repellent words like “you can't” and “don't ever.” Trevor chose tact over confrontation.

“I thought we were going down to the boat tomorrow,” he said.

“I changed my mind,” she replied. “Besides, it's too early for that. We could still get snow. You should just leave the cover on for a few more weeks.”

Trevor knew too well that April snow was always a possibility in Jersey, but he also knew his will was stronger than his wife's. A bit more force, subtly applied, would surely achieve the desired result.

“I was thinking we could go to Howard's for dinner,” he said with a smile, and bumped up against her in a flirtatious manner.

“That sounds nice,” she said, taking a step to the side to grab a cutting board that was just out of reach.

*Success.*

“But I promised Beth we could grab some lunch afterwards. Sorry.” It was true Cindy had become a stronger woman over the years, much the way hands become calloused under the stress of physical labor, but he couldn't remember a time when she forfeited a date with him for anything.

*Perhaps it's best to just leave things like this. I can spend more time on the boat without her there, maybe get some fishing in. I'm sure she'll see through whatever phony is preaching in the morning, and that lesson will be long remembered. This should turn out to be another win-win situation.*

“Not a problem,” he said. “Have a good time, and please say hi to Beth for me.” His words were designed to be doubly confusing because not only did Cindy know her husband thought little of church, he also had zero tolerance for Beth.

The unspoken rule for driving in New Jersey is the posted limit, plus ten. Trevor felt no need to break with convention, so his car rolled down Route 287 at about 75 mph. He was feeling pretty good. The morning sun was beaming through the windshield and although the temperature outside was still in the forties, he was toasty warm in the car and it made him think of summer. His *Ocean Drive* CD was in play with *Sloop John B* pumping through the speakers. This was his favorite Beach Boys tune because it was more about sailing and less about surfing. A pair of jelly donuts sat in a bag next to his coffee, and the EZ-Pass gizmo stuck to his windshield guaranteed that he would barely need to slow down before arriving. He still had almost twelve hours before the Sunday evening blues set in, so the nagging realization it would soon be Monday seemed eons away. It was going to be a great trip.

Trevor knew there were only two things that could have made his day better: 30 more degrees on the thermometer and Cindy by his side. It was true he had not always been the best husband—he could admit that to himself—but in the safe place in his mind where he did

most of his thinking, there was no one closer to him, no greater ally, no better companion. If she had only received half the attention he lavished on her internally she would never doubt his love. Such was life with this thinker, so many thoughts and so few words. If only she knew.

He noticed his car closing rapidly on the car ahead of him. A quick glance in the mirror, a twist of the wheel, and he passed easily on the left. A few seconds later he drifted back into the middle lane where he felt at home again. As the pavement flew past, Trevor did what he did best—think. After the strange events of the previous day it was important to try and connect the reality he thought existed with the one playing out before his eyes. He needed to understand why Cindy had abandoned reason and common sense.

*What is wrong with her? Is this just a game, or is she serious? Is she just trying to get back at me for something? Perhaps it has to do with the in-laws.*

He had long been at war with his in-laws, but his was not a war fought with strong words and dirty looks, it was far more covert than that. Forgetting to relay a message from mom to daughter was always effective. Making plans to be out of town during a holiday celebration was another weapon in his arsenal. But his personal favorite, the one which drove them all insane, were the *innocent* observations about Cindy's brother and his endless struggle with heroin. These were the words that cut deepest because they highlighted the failure of an entire family, a failure that had taken decades to mature. Trevor knew these words brought pain and embarrassment to his wife, but he always felt a bit of collateral damage could be tolerated since they were so caustic to his mother-

in-law.

He crept up on another car and then turned off the cruise control. There was no rhythm to the traffic this morning, so he would be better off without it. He was still troubled by his wife's decision and wondered why she would go against the grain, his grain. He had been and done so much for her, the endless hours he worked to provide for her, the wise decisions that made life better both financially and socially, the constant sacrifice for no one else but her.

*Why wouldn't she trust the judgment of such a good man?*

Trevor was willing to concede that there were times in life when he lost focus, but he could also remember and take pride in many hard battles, fought and won, at a young age. Like so many others who have walked through the pain of a difficult childhood, Trevor had developed a strong personality, and he had grown quite fond of it. He felt it served him well, allowing him to stand against storms in life that would have crushed others. But he also sensed that with each passing year, the armor he adopted early in life was making it harder to stay afloat, like an unrelenting anchor pulling him slowly down below the surface of the water. Usually he pretended not to notice, but sometimes he was far too aware of his condition, arms and legs pumping furiously, trying not to sink. He had never gone under in his younger days. He was equally determined now.

Trevor looked down and noticed his speed had dropped off, lulled to a slower speed by the drivers around him and the thoughts in his mind. He pressed his foot to the accelerator and moved back into the passing lane. Then it hit him, the memory of his father. The ruthless villain in the story of Trevor's life. The selfish, maniacal

force that pushed harmony into disarray, paradise into hell. Even at a young age, Trevor had vowed in his heart to be a better man than his father, a much better man. He wondered what might have happened to the man he shared his childhood with, the man he barely knew. But then Trevor quickly hardened, hoping the old man got what he deserved.

He looked down at the gas gauge and chastised himself for not filling up the tank. He hated exiting the highway when he was in the zone, but with more than a quarter tank he decided to keep going, reasonably certain he had enough to make it one way.

His phone rang. He picked it up and saw that it was Bob calling. He debated internally for a second or two and then hit the answer button.

“Hey Bob, what's up?”

“Are you on the road?” Bob asked.

“Absolutely,” Trevor said.

“Nice,” Bob said. “And how did the review go?”

Trevor turned down the music and let out a groan. “It feels like last year again. Mostly good, but it's the negative stuff that kills me. It overshadows everything. Uncooperative and stubborn were the two words that stuck out the most. I really thought Steve was in my corner. I may have to rethink things a bit.”

“He can be two-faced,” Bob said. “Just be careful.”

“I will,” Trevor said. “It just shouldn't be this hard to get a promotion. I feel like I'm running out of allies.”

“I know what you mean,” Bob said. “I feel like I'm stuck. It's Groundhog Day.”

“Phil? Phil Connor? I sure as heck fire remember you,” Trevor said and both men let out a laugh.

“Well, just know that I've got your back,” Bob said. “But it probably won't do much to help right now.”

“I appreciate that,” Trevor said. “I've found myself getting pretty disgusted with the place. I feel stuck too, and I don't even like most of the people I work with these days. It's frustrating.”

“Just hang in. It'll get better, and you'll have your day in the sun. Until then, enjoy the boat.”

“I hope you're right,” Trevor said. “Either way, I will enjoy the boat.”

“Good. Talk to you later,” Bob said.

“Later,” Trevor said, and set the phone back down on the passenger seat. He thought for a moment about the people in his life, and how they seemed to fit neatly into two columns, those he loved and those he hated. He wondered if this was a by-product of what his parent's had inadvertently taught him, loving one and hating the other. Whatever its source, Trevor saw little need to shade his feelings from the rest of the world. He seemed unconcerned about how his personal life was affected, but his lack of political correctness was becoming more and more obvious at work and that was a problem. Adding to this dangerous mix was Trevor's decreased interest in his job. He wondered where it might lead. He had enjoyed riding the escalator to the upper tier of the company, but to move forward now he would need more than intelligence and hard work. Now it was about teamwork and cooperation, and he had fought too many hard battles to garner the necessary support to reach the next level. He

had become too critical of the individuals that surrounded him and the system under which they thrived, isolating himself from the avenues to power. He knew he was rapidly approaching his professional ceiling and this added fuel to an ever-growing fire.

And then his mind relaxed, accepting that the challenges and turmoil would keep coming, but that Cindy would always be there. Knowing that she understood the trials, and the man who faced them, brought tremendous reassurance.

*But why church? What is she thinking?*

Cindy sat quietly in a church pew, staring at a heavysset man with gentle mannerisms speaking words of conviction and certainty. His eyes bounced from one parishioner to the next, eventually meeting hers. She wondered if the urgency rising up inside of her was born from the strength of the preacher's voice or some intense longing deep within.

For years she had sought fulfillment in her marriage, but never quite found her treasure. She recently became convinced that in Trevor's mind most people were like bit actors in his story, instead of leading men and women in their own. He typically woke before sunrise, hurried through a never-changing 25 minute get ready routine, and then ate his breakfast on the drive to the office. Sometimes he said goodbye to his wife and sometimes he didn't. Some days she heard him mumble something and other days she just slept right through. She never bothered to call him at work anymore because after years of being rushed off the phone, there was no news so important or exciting that it could not wait until he returned

home. She filled her days with a part-time job, cleaning, cooking, shopping and decorating. It was a full schedule, a little of this and a little of that, but she always carved some time from each day to wonder if life was supposed to be better than this, if the world she lived in was just a terrible compromise or the best that people in upper-middle class America can hope for.

She had tried on many occasions to talk to Trevor about their relationship. Where it was. Where it had been. Where she wanted it to go. She longed for greater intimacy and a more profound connection. Years ago he listened patiently, but usually offered resistance when she implied they had missed the mark. But as more time passed, his patience waned. The here-we-go-again sighs became more and more pronounced until she barely dared to dream anymore, eventually running out of words to say. She had once thought about the unthinkable, but decided she would remain faithful to her husband, even if it brought about a slow and painful death.

Cindy was in a very hard place. A nauseating emptiness had taken hold of her several months earlier, and nothing she tried could shake it. She had stopped looking for sunsets at the end of each day. It might have driven her to calamity, but she devised a plan, a non-conventional approach for avoiding what she was certain would be a major downfall. Cindy chose four women in her life, based on no particular criteria other than geography, and much like science lab in high school she observed each acquaintance with the hope of discovering what makes for lasting happiness. Somewhere during her four week experiment, Beth was beginning to outshine the others. Call it inner strength, faith, confidence, or whatever the motivational

speaker du jour titles his most recent book, there was a distinct difference about her. She could find joy in the good times. She could be patient in the bad times. She could even muster fragments of hope during impossible times. Her tears were real, as were her laughs. She was comfortable enough with her faults and did not feel the need to hide or escape from them. She knew she was flawed, but she also knew there was a great deal more that helped define her, an intricate and rare blend of talent, intelligence, beauty and potential as unique as her fingerprints. Cindy was desperate to know what made her friend this way.

And now she sat beside Beth on a crisp Sunday morning. Slowly, remarkably, something was overtaking her. Like the feeling of coming home after a long and exhausting journey, Cindy felt a peace that could not be easily shaken. This was all so new to her, the sermon, the singing, the unfamiliar crowd, but somehow, more than ever before, she felt safe. She was immersed in joy.

The car rolled down the highway. Trevor had not seen his boat in more than six months and felt like a child on Christmas morning. He slowed just enough to safely follow the curve of the exit, and then quickly sped up as he approached the Parkway. Traffic cones were everywhere due to a new span being added to the Driscoll Bridge. Trevor took his eyes off the road to study the unfinished concrete and rebar to his right, and then it happened.

The bus driver had been this way more than a hundred times. He knew every turn along the Parkway from Essex County to Atlantic City, but the cones had been moved two days earlier altering

the traffic patterns approaching the bridge. It might have made more sense to drive cautiously, especially when fifty lives hang in the balance, but young men often consider themselves invincible. After plowing down more than a dozen cones and drifting dangerously close to a mini-van, the driver over corrected his vehicle and found himself darting into the lane on his right. The thud was barely noticeable to most on the bus, but it was enough to right the large vehicle. Unfortunately there are two sides to every collision.

Trevor's car was rocked by the bus and his head slammed hard against the window. The pain was instantaneous and the haze it cast over his consciousness lasted for seconds. The unexpected jolt set his car on a new course toward the unfinished addition of the bridge. Even this he might have recovered from, but the much larger bus transferred some of its momentum to the car as well. The images and sounds that registered with Trevor seemed anything but real. The surprisingly loud sound of wheels slapping over loose sheets of plywood. Cones flashing by at frightening speed. The ominous screech of rebar tearing at the body of his car, followed by the emptiness and dread of near silence.

As the car traveled the more than one hundred feet between the road surface and the Raritan River, there was enough time for Trevor to stop panicking and evaluate his situation. His stomach winced as the car rocked forward. If only the front of the car would hit water first, he might draw some benefit from the airbag. He wanted the impact sooner than later, and heard himself utter two words that felt strange moving across his lips.

“Please God.”

Convinced he could survive the collision, his mind raced to establish a plan of escape for the moment his car sunk into the frigid river. He tried to recall and assemble every safety tip he had learned over the course of a lifetime into a single coherent plan when—crash! The blow was softened by the airbag, but was bone crushing all the same. This was the second major impact he had felt in the span of seconds and all focus seemed to escape him once again. His world became a blur of white nylon, shattered glass, and frigid water. He knew he was alive, yet at that moment his mind seemed incapable of processing any additional information. Trevor was in a fight for his life, but his brain was faltering.

Water continued rushing into the vehicle and Trevor could feel the sting on his legs. He lost discernment between up and down, left and right. Everything was happening too fast and his thoughts could not keep up. He strained to free himself, but was unable to move from his seat. Cold water rushed over his stomach causing him to remember the seatbelt. He groped for the release but his hands were still disconnected from his thinking. Where was it?

Trevor's chest was now submerged. He had only a few seconds left. He would need one deep breath before the car went completely under if he were to have any chance. Maybe it was the chilly water, or perhaps the intense adrenaline rush, either way, his mind was clearing. His survival instincts were returning and he was ready to fight again. Three. Two. One. He drew in as much air as he could, but something felt terribly wrong. There was a strange pressure on his chest, as if someone placed a 200 pound weight there. His count had failed him and he took in far more water than

air. He panicked, flailing his arms in a haphazard manner. Meanwhile, his chest convulsed a number of times involuntarily, seeking the air it desperately needed. Then it stopped. Trevor no longer struggled. With the battle now lost his mind calmed to the inevitable. Time slowed to a crawl. He thought momentarily about his wife and then all faded to black.