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Testimony

Anita Shreve

Mike

It was a small cassette, not much bigger than the palm of his hand, and when Mike thought about the terrible license and risk exhibited on the tape, as well as its resultant destructive power, it was as though the two- by- three plastic package had been radioactive. Which it may as well have been, since it had produced something very like radiation sickness throughout the school, reducing the value of an Avery education, destroying at least two marriages that he knew of, ruining the futures of three students, and, most horrifying of all, resulting in a death. After Kasia brought Mike the tape in a white letter envelope (as if he might be going to mail it to someone!), Mike walked home with it and watched it on his television – an enormously complicated and frustrating task since he first had to find his own movie camera that used similar tapes and figure out how to connect its various cables to the television so that the tape could play through the camera. Sometimes Mike wished he had just slipped the offensive tape into a pot of boiling water, or sent it out with the trash in a white plastic drawstring bag, or spooled it out with a pencil and wadded it into a big mess. Although he doubted he could have controlled the potential scandal, he might have been able to choreograph it differently, possibly limiting some of the damage...

He lay his head back against the sofa and closed his eyes. The house was empty and quiet. He could hear the wind skidding against the windows and, from the kitchen, the sound of ice cubes tumbling in the Viking, recently installed. Tasks now needed to be accomplished, students queried, the Disciplinary Committee convened, and all of this conducted beneath the radar of the press, which would, if they got wind of the story, revel in a private- school scandal. In this, Mike thought that private schools had been unfairly singled out. He doubted that such a tape would have been of any interest to the press had it surfaced at the local regional high school, for example. The tape might have circulated underground, students might have been expelled, and meetings might have been held, yet it was likely that the incident would have been greeted with indifference not only by the local newspaper, the Avery Crier (its editor, Walter Myers, could be talked down from just about any story that might cause embarrassment to local kids and parents), but also by the regional and national press.

Mike thought the national media would scoff at the idea that sex and alcohol, even sex and alcohol involving a fourteen-year-old girl in a public-high-school setting, was news of any sort; whereas if the same set of facts, but in a private-school setting, were to pass across the computer screen of a reporter at the Rutland Herald or the Boston Globe, it was entirely possible that the reporter would be dispatched to Avery to find out what was going on. In such a story, there was juice, there was heat, there was blood. There was also, if this tape had been copied in any way, footage. Was it because private schools were held to higher standards, according to which such an incident ought to be nearly unthinkable? Or was it because everyone loved to see the elite (even if that elite involved a local farmer's son on scholarship) brought down and ridiculed? A little of both, Mike guessed, with emphasis on the latter.

More troubling, however, was the thought of police involvement. Though Mike felt nothing but revulsion when he thought of the Silas and Rob he'd just seen on the tape (boys whom he had previously much respected and even, in Silas's case, been quite fond of), the idea of them being led away from the administration building in handcuffs was appalling. (Did police routinely handcuff boys suspected of sexual assault, which was what this particular crime, in the state of Vermont, was deemed?) Police in this case meant either Gary Quinney or Bernie Herrmann, neither of whom would find any satisfaction in the arrest; Gary was, after all, Silas's uncle. Would the boys then appear some months later in the dowager courthouse across the street from the gates of Avery, the building itself smug in its self-righteousness? Mike's job would be at risk, and any number of teachers who were supposed to be supervising either the dance or the dorm that evening might be fired, for one could not expect the trustees to view the incident and its attendant legal fuss lightly. Would the boys then go to jail, to the Vermont State Prison at Windsor, where almost certainly they would be raped in turn?

Mike reined in his thoughts. He was getting carried away. No, he had to get a grip and act quickly. Three boys were in trouble, and a girl ... well, presumably, if it did turn out to be a case of sexual assault, the trouble had already occurred to the girl, though the fallout for her might be endless.

Mike got up off the floor and sat on the sofa while he loosened his tie and unbuttoned the top button of his shirt, as if increasing blood flow to the brain might help solve his problem. And it was then that the word containment entered his mind. And with that word, moral, ethical, and political choices were made, though Mike would realize the implications of these only later, when it occurred to him that he might have chosen at that moment another word, such as revelation, say, or help.