

The Housesitter

The glove lay crumpled in a gesture of sad farewell on the terminal's floor. Its mate was probably on its way someplace warm, a white sandy beach maybe. Tommy pictured smiling waiters bringing tropical drinks, and topless young honeys whose assets could be appreciated at leisure from behind mirrored sunglasses. He thought he knew how the forgotten glove felt. He could use a drink himself. Forget about the sandy beach – he'd settle for a stoop and a cold brewski in a brown paper bag. He ran his hand over his mouth. Maybe he had time for a quick one at the airport bar. On second thought, better not – Bill's flight was due in from Miami any minute, and it was probably better not to break the news to him with bourbon-breath. Bill had a thing about being responsible, and it was a big deal that he'd trusted Tommy to house-sit while he'd been on vacation. He needed to ease into this, prove that it wasn't his fault, and get Bill to see that it wasn't really that bad, considering.

Tommy had actually Googled “how to deliver bad news,” and he remembered the major points: timing, blah blah blah, put it in perspective, blah blah, soften the blow, blahdi blah blah blah, stay calm and let them react, yada yada yada. Sounded simple. He was up for it, and hopefully he could finesse this thing. As he nervously jingled the coins in his pocket, a trio of young men shifted by in low gear, their pants halfway down to their knees. To Tommy, they looked as out of place as a pack of hyenas at a dog show. Who did they think they were fooling? Those losers were going exactly nowhere, not like Tommy, who was definitely going to probably finally make it to Paris this year.

He allowed himself to luxuriate in his feeling of superiority and started to feel a little more confident. Yeah, it was all going to be fine – nothing to worry about. Maybe he'd even invite Bill on the trip to Paris. He remembered some French from ages ago in high school, but knowing that people in Paris were famous for being snotty about their language, Tommy had come up with a stellar plan: while there, he would speak English with a French accent and if anyone tried to speak to him in French, he would say, “Non, non, non! Do not speak to me een French! I weel go een one week to New York and il faut que je practeese my Angleesh! Eef you speak to me een French, I weel pretende not to undairstand you!!!” In this way, he was pretty sure he could pass for a local. Stupid French people!

Tommy was counting on Bill being relaxed and happy after his trip, and when Bill appeared, smiling and tanned, it seemed that the gods were on Tommy's side. “Tommy! I can't believe you came all the way out here to pick me up, bro! How's everything?” “You look fantastic, man! How was the trip? Hey, how could I leave you hanging here at the airport, with all that luggage and trying to get a cab – least I could do. Forget about it!” So far, so good. Tommy took one of Bill's bags and they started to walk to the parking lot together. The same three young men Tommy had seen earlier ambled by, this time protectively huddled around a fourth man who wore a large quantity of what might or might not be real gold. Big whoop, Tommy thought. Bill grabbed Tommy's arm and whispered, “That's DJ Mugga Thugga! He was on the same flight as me, but in first class. He gave me his autograph!” “Jesus, Bill, I didn't know you were a hiphop fan,” Tommy said, a little annoyed at the tone of awe in Bill's voice. Those punks were FAMOUS?! The whole world was going down the toilet.

Tommy stopped next to a bench and put the bag down. He had to get the ball rolling somehow, and he remembered you should have the person who was getting the bad news sit down before you let

loose on them. “Uh, Bill, these bags are kinda heavy. What do you say we sit down a second?” “Yeah, sure, Tommy – you alright? You look like you’re constipated or something!” They both laughed. “Yeah, yeah, no, I’m fine – but listen – I gotta tell you something.” Bill looked at his friend with concern. “What is it, Tommy?” “You know that engraved silver lighter you got from Wasteco after you’d been there 25 years?” “Yeah, what about it?” “I don’t know how to tell you this, but...” Tommy paused. Bill just looked at him, waiting. “I, uh, I lost it.” Tommy confessed. “Ah, man – is that all? You had me going there for a minute, Tommy! I never cared about that stupid lighter. It always struck me like they were trying to say, ‘You’ve been at the company way too long – here’s a lighter, now go home and smoke your brains out and die so we don’t have to pay you your pension.’ So, good riddance! Lighten up, Tommy, my man! Stop looking like a pigeon just crapped in your beer.”

Tommy smiled and jumped to his feet, saying, “That’s JUST like I was saying to the guy at the dry cleaners when I dropped your clothes off. I said, ‘Bill’s got his head screwed on right – always looking at the big picture, never sweating the small stuff.’ I said, ‘I know he’s gonna take all this fine.’” “You took my clothes to the cleaners, Tommy? You didn’t have to do that. Wait – WHY did you do that? Take all what just fine?” Tommy ignored the tone of concern beginning to creep into Bill’s voice, still floating on his initial success in breaking the bad news. “Let’s get to the car; I’ll explain while we walk – it’s nothing, really.” They started off for the parking lot. “I meant to tell you that I borrowed some of your clothes after I ran out of clean ones of my own – I didn’t think you’d mind, and I didn’t want to bother you on vacation to ask you.” “Naw, naw, of course not Tommy – we’re practically brothers, what’s mine is yours. You know that. But you could have just thrown them in the washer.” “Well, I did do that but some of the stains and stink didn’t come out.” “What stains? What stink? What are you talking about?” Bill looked confused.

“Okay, see, here’s what happened” said Tommy, warming up to his subject. “Sparky got out of the house...” “Wait – Sparky got out? How’d he get out? Jesus, Tommy, don’t tell me something happened to Sparky – I love that dog! Sparky’s practically the only thing Angela left me.” “Relax, Bill – Sparky’s fine. The way he got out, well, actually, I let him out.” “Shit, Tommy, I asked you not to let him out of the house without a leash.” Bill didn’t sound quite as forgiving now. “I know, I know. But I didn’t have any clean clothes and Sparky was whining at the back door like he really had to go RIGHT NOW and I didn’t want him to have an accident so I let him out figuring he’d be fine if I kept an eye on him from inside. And he was, until the skunk sprayed him.”

“Oh, no!” said Bill, half laughing, half choking. “A skunk! That’s almost funny!” “Yeah, well, I’m glad you think so but you weren’t the one who had to smell it. When it happened, I yanked on some of your clothes and went out and hosed old Sparky down right there in the driveway, and then I remembered that tomato juice is supposed to get the smell out so I brought him inside and looked for some. You only had Bloody Mary mix but I thought that would be close enough. I took Sparky and the Bloody Mary mix into the bathroom and lit one of those scented candles, you know, that your ex left, with your lighter. Threw the window open, too. I don’t know what’s worse, man, the smell of skunk, or the smell of skunk mixed with that potpourri shit. Anyway, I guess I got some of the Bloody Mary mix into Sparky’s eyes or something and he freaked out and bolted. All I could think of was the white carpet in the living room and how you told me you just had it cleaned and to be careful...” “Oh, god, don’t tell me you messed up the carpet. Angela’s supposed to pick that up next week with the rest of the stuff her lawyer says she owns and...” “Nah, the carpet’s great – don’t

worry! Luckily Sparky ran into the kitchen, and I cornered him there. The tile cleaned up beautiful, but your clothes were a mess, what with the Bloody Mary mix and skunk skank all over them. But the guy at the dry cleaner says they should come out OK; they'll be ready tomorrow, and Sparky's back to his old self now." Bill sighed, apparently relieved. "Oh, well, then – all's well that ends well, I guess."

They had arrived at the car, and Bill stopped and cocked his head. "A rental car? I thought you would have just driven here in my car." "Well, actually, I'm having your car detailed." "Detailed? Really? Aw, Tommy – you really didn't have to do that!" "Well, yeah, I did – I mean, I wanted to, Bill. Actually, it had a little bit of a smoke issue." "A smoke issue? What kind of smoke issue?" Here Tommy paused and tried to remember the guidelines for how to give someone bad news. Soften the blow. Context. Get the guy sitting down. "Let's get out of here and I'll explain on the way home." They got in the car and Tommy eased it onto the BQE heading to Bill's house in Queens. "So, I didn't hear about any fire while I was away." Bill looked quizzically at Tommy. "Well, no, it was a, it was kind of a little fire and the car is, it's actually 100% fine; it just had a little bit of smoke damage on account of I happened to have parked it close to the blaze. I mean, not on purpose, it was parked before the fire started and I didn't find out about the fire until after." Tommy was getting a little nervous. "It could have been worse," he added quickly. "The guy at the detail shop says they do shit like this all the time; you'll never know it was near a fire." "Where was the fire?" asked Bill. "Funny you should ask," Tommy replied. "We'll actually be going right past it."

Tommy quizzed Bill about his trip and made small talk until they pulled into Bill's driveway. The rear half of the house was draped in a giant orange tarp and the smell of charred wood permeated the air. Tommy heard Bill gasp. Well, at least he was sitting down. "What the fuck?! What the fuck, Tommy?!" Be calm. Let the person react, Tommy reminded himself. Put it in perspective. "See, Bill, that's what I was trying to tell you..." Tommy calmly began, but by then Bill had sprung out of the car, a moan rising from deep within his gut. Tommy got out of the car and stood next to Bill. "What the fuck happened here, Tommy?!" Bill's hands cradled his head and he swayed from side to side. "Well, remember how I told you that I lit the candle with your lighter and opened the bathroom window?" Tommy wasn't sure that Bill was even listening. "After I finally got Sparky cleaned up, I figured we'd walk to the corner bar and sit there while he dried off and so we went and had a couple of drinks, or I did – I would never let Sparky drink – and we didn't come out until we heard the fire truck sirens. I looked up the street, and flames were coming out of your bathroom. I think the candle set the curtains on fire. Stupid candle! The rest of the house is kind of OK, but the bathroom's pretty much a wash, hey, no pun intended. Listen, I'm really sorry, Bill, but it was just an accident. Could have happened to anybody. Don't be upset. You have insurance, right? And wasn't your ex dogging you for the house anyway? Let her have it, now, right? And speaking of dogs, Sparky's fine. The carpet got kinda wet but it'll dry out, and your clothes will be ready tomorrow and the car will be better than new..." Bill exploded. "You idiot! You unbelievable cretin! I should never have trusted you! I can't believe you did this!!!" He turned away from Tommy, his hands clenched, incoherent animal sounds burbling from his throat. Suddenly Bill wheeled around and screamed, "You bastard! You little shit! YOU OWE ME A LIGHTER!!!"

"Bill – hey, Bill, c'mon, calm down! It's me, Tommy. I'm good for it – you know me!" Tommy cocked his head and held his arms out wide as though demonstrating to an admiring crowd the generous measure of his good intentions. "You'll have a brand spankin' new lighter within a week,

end of the month, tops. Best money can buy. I'll even have it engraved with "Good Times", just like the old one. And the next time I house-sit for you, I guarantee you I'll be much more careful with it. You got my promise on that, buddy."

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