

The Man Most Likely To Be A Fool

The inner office of Paxon, Reynolds, MacGruder, and Strunk was exactly what you'd expect from one of the established and respected legal firms in the city. Carmichael Paxon would have rolled over in his grave if the partners had gone "hi-tech" after his death. No, the shadow of that imposing man hung over the building in a much more tangible way than just the life size portrait that looked down upon the great cherry wood table in the paneled "Partners' Room".

There would be no attempt on the part of this practice to emulate the slick, glass and aluminum style of the TV generation. Paxon, Reynolds, MacGruder, and Strunk stood for a different time and a different perception of the profession. The building reeked of Ivy League and hell would freeze over before that was going to change.

Everyone who worked for that firm knew that the clientele of this practice was the old guard of Nashville, families whose roots went far beyond the new glitz of Opryland, U.S.A. and the current rage of the country music scene. The people who held Paxon, Reynolds, MacGruder, and Strunk on retainer were the people who built science halls at Vanderbilt and Peabody. They were the ones who dreamed of Nashville becoming "the Athens of the South" and built the replica Parthenon in Centennial Park a century ago. These people were

the vanguards of the "genteel of southern society". Barbara Mandrell may have been "country, when country wasn't cool", but the clientele of Paxon, Reynolds, MacGruder, and Strunk were the upper crust of a society much older than that.

The old money society of Nashville had certain expectations of Paxon, Reynolds, MacGruder, and Strunk. The passing generations of the old guard families knew that when they walked into that building on Jefferson, in the shadow of the capitol, that life moved at a slower, more gracious pace. Emiline, the receptionist, always had a fresh spray of flowers on her desk. Secretaries never addressed anyone by their first name. Young men who carried mail and documents throughout the building would never think of coming to work without a tie and jacket. No one ever told them to do that, it was just an unwritten rule that hung heavily throughout the hardwood hallways.

"Good morning, Mr. Feldon. May I take your coat, sir?"... "Lovely weather today, isn't it Mr. Feldon? Indeed it is!"... "A cup of coffee for you, sir? Cream and one lump, isn't it?"... "And how is Mrs. Feldon? Did she enjoy her trip to Scotland?"... "Mr. MacGruder will be right with you, sir."... "And Miss Caroline, is she enjoying Berry College? Yes, it is truly a lovely campus. I'm sure you're quite proud of her."...

This was the pulse and atmosphere of Paxon, Reynolds, MacGruder, and Strunk.

Craig Avery knew exactly what to expect that day when he walked through the great oak doors on Jefferson. He'd been there many times with his grandfather and his father both. He knew the smell of the corridors and the images in oil that lined the walls. Andrew Jackson, General Lee, Cornelius Vanderbilt, George Peabody, Matthathias Reynolds, Luther S. MacGruder, and,

of course, the imposing portrait of Carmichael Paxon in the "Partners' Room", he recognized them all.

Now, 22 years old, Craig Avery was taking over the family legacy. His father, Quinten, had been nearly 53 when Craig was born, and the old man had taught him well of the responsibility of being "an Avery of Nashville". The son of a wealthy plantation owner, Quinten Avery's father, Gamaliel, had read the tide of changing times and invested heavily in the first steel mills in Chattanooga and Birmingham. America went to war and the rest is history. At 22 Craig Avery was inheriting the family fortune.

It was only fitting that the last surviving founding partner, Henry LaMonde Strunk, would personally reveal the parameters of Quinten's will. Venerable, straight as an arrow, Henry Strunk was the last surviving vestige of the founding partners. The firm would never lose its equilibrium as long as he survived, it was guaranteed.

The old man strode down the hall toward the Victorian sofa where Craig was sitting. Craig immediately stood up as Henry Strunk came down the long corridor. Even at 74 years old Henry Strunk cut an imposing path. His white hair was immaculate and his steely gray eyes could see right through the most defensive of opponents. Nothing intimidated Henry Strunk and therefore he was absolutely fearless and confident.

"Good morning to you, young Mr. Craig. I wished you to know that my door is always open to the son of Quinten Avery," the gentleman said with his hand extended.

"Thank you, sir. I am honored," Craig responded, seeking to defer the proper amount of respect that was required of the moment.

"I trust that Miss Emiline has been taking good care of you here?"

Craig nodded easily. "Oh yes, she has been most kind," but he didn't expect anything different. Miss Emiline Carver had been the gracious guardian of the gate of those hallowed halls for many, many years.

"Well, fine, fine. Yes, that's just fine." Mr. Strunk gestured down the hall and said, "Come now, won't you please join me in the Partners' Room? I've taken the liberty to invite Mr. Reynolds, Jr., Mr. Rathburn, Mr. Williams, and Miss Wexman to join us if you don't mind." He pointed to the four dignified people who stood respectfully behind him.

Craig was not at all surprised. With an account like the Averys he would have been surprised if Strunk had not ordered every one of the junior partners to clear their calendar for this event. It's not every day that there is the changing of the guard within one of the old families of Nashville. Paxon, Reynolds, MacGruder, and Strunk would never have done any less. That was their way.

For the next two hours Henry Strunk allowed each of the various junior partners to present different portions of the picture that represented the vast wealth and influence that Craig was inheriting. Reynolds, Jr. spoke of the portfolio of investments in American heavy industry, Roland Williams revealed the various financial accounts held on three continents, Gloria Wexman presented the various tax advantages of adjusting a percentage of the Asian Market money back into potential real estate development in eastern Davidson County, and Roger Rathburn told of the progress that he had attained in growth stocks in Mexico, Latin America, and the potential of African investment.

After two hours Craig Avery's head was spinning. He felt that neither his privileged education at Shelby Academy nor the courses at Vanderbilt had prepared him for this responsibility. He had always known that his family had wealth but he never dreamed of the vastness of the empire that he was inheriting. He was even more amazed at the casual, businesslike demeanor of the various lawyers and advisors as they threw around figures and proposals that would make a sultan blush.

At 22, Craig Avery had it all.

When he stepped out into the Nashville sunshine Craig his head was spinning. He climbed into his Q 45 and headed out Briley Parkway to the family's estate. When he pulled up the circular, tiled driveway he jumped out, ran up past the dorian columns, and immediately went into his father's study. Craig took out a yellow legal pad, sat down in the rich leather desk chair, and began to furiously make notes for himself. Long into the night he scribbled away. Other young men might head into life squandering his privilege but not Craig Avery.

At about 4:00 in the morning, with the legal pad full of plans and designs and notes that were either underlined or scratched out Craig Avery leaned back, took his last sip of coffee, and headed upstairs to go to bed. He knew that the next morning he was going to begin to live the master plan of his life.

The first item of business on the following morning was to contact an old friend of the family, Robert Baker, a man who knew the real estate world of middle Tennessee as no other person. If there was anyone who would know of the place where Craig could first begin his dream it would be Robert Baker.

Craig was not disappointed. Within a matter of days Mr. Baker had retained an office complex for him overlooking the Cumberland River and the Nashville skyline. Penelope Trainor sent her crew over to create just the design and atmosphere that would be fitting for an enterprise that would represent the Avery estate in the business world of the burgeoning south. Every appointment and decoration within the complex was perfectly planned and soon the facility was ready for its open house.

Anyone who was anyone in business and commerce from Cincinnati to Mobile was invited to the grand opening. Throughout the evening he moved among the assembled crowd with a confidence and appropriate grace befitting the Avery legacy. The atmosphere was perfect and when the magical evening was over Craig Avery stood, quietly looking out of the darkened windows at the city lights as the caterers removed the remainders of the gala. Craig knew that "Phase 1" of his master plan had begun well and it was time to begin to implement the other facets of his strategies.

Craig soon hired a local management firm to oversee the day to day operations of the estate and funds. He sensed that he needed to become more individually adept at the world of high finance and so he went to Fort Worth, Texas, rented a marvelous condominium, and began his course of study at the renowned school of economics at Texas Christian University. Early in the semester he was influenced by Professor Galen Bransteter to take time off to write his own personal "life mission statement". That endeavor cost him two full semesters for by the time he'd finished the new school year had already begun.

For three years young Avery read every book on economic theory from Adam Smith on. He observed the lifestyles of society's modern power brokers and realized that the last thing he needed to do was to remain single. The single

lifestyle may be less confining but it certainly doesn't lend to an image of stability. The girl that he married would have to be absolutely proper and look wonderful on his arm and in his background. For two years Craig studied the society events to ascertain if there might be a Texas belle who would fit the bill. Eventually he set his sights on Jaqueline Brand, a graduate student in "Romance Languages" at S.M.U. in Dallas.

If you're Craig Avery, whatever you want is exactly what you get and the wedding was the social event of the season within the Dallas metroplex. Jerry Jones, the owner of the Dallas Cowboys, offered to host the reception at his estate and mansion but Craig knew that the atmosphere of oil money and football players was not the image that he wanted to portray when the editors of Fortune and People showed up. Luckily, he was able to act appropriately shy and unassuming when he requested the reporters and photographers to respect their privacy when they went to honeymoon on Barbados.

Craig returned from the honeymoon to again tackle the program at T.C.U. He also spent a period of time commuting back to Nashville to tour the office complex. The adulation that he received from every person in the building was almost more than he could handle. As he stood on the top floor and considered how he'd created a gem of a facility, ergonomically perfect in every way and, at the same time, aesthetically stunning, Craig Avery nodded to himself. Yes, he certainly was doing well, but he had other horizons to conquer.

Upon returning to Ft. Worth Craig announced to Jacqueline that they were moving to Pittsburgh. He knew that he needed to continue to establish his reputation and power base but it wouldn't really be done at Texas Christian. "Granted," he said, "T.C.U.'s not anything to sneeze at but if a person wants to study at the feet of the masters he has to make his mark at the Carnegie-

Mellon Institute." Jacqueline knew that there would be no discussion, she was moving to Pittsburgh.

Within a matter of days Craig flew to Pittsburgh and bought a manor on the edge of town overlooking the rolling hills and the river. When Jacqueline finally arrived she found her new "home" only had a few pieces of furniture, if you want to call them that. Craig had found a few folding chairs and a card table. He'd discovered a simple dresser in the garage and moved it into the master bedroom. She was grateful that he'd at least purchased a real bed and mattress.

"What is this?", she asked.

"I knew that we needed to furnish this place in the manner that will be expected of us. I haven't had time to work with the decorators yet so I knew we didn't want to waste a penny on anything that we might find, later on, to be a white elephant, do we?"

Jacqueline knew there was no arguing with Craig. This wasn't what she'd expected in life and she began to wonder why she'd given up "Romance Languages" for an empty mansion in a city a long, long way from home. Being the bright, intelligent woman that she was, Jacqueline soon began to feel the smothering reality of her role in Craig's life. She was, for him, an instrument to be used, an auxiliary portion within his repertoire that was chosen specifically for what he assumed she'd bring to the table. She was bright, articulate, attractive, and wonderfully photogenic. The image of Mrs. Craig Avery was exactly what he dreamed it should be.

But Jacqueline Brand was not raised to be an ornament. Her parents had instilled a certain value into her and she began to nudge Craig to let her out

of her cage. "The least I can do is look into various charities that we could assist," she insisted over supper one evening. "You, yourself, know that there's a lot of good public relations to be had in well chosen charity work..."

"Yes," Craig responded as he stared across the woodlands to the setting sun. "Yes, you're absolutely right. But mind you, let's be discreet in the causes that we choose to espouse. We can't just let the Avery name be tied to just every do-gooder dream that walks the street. And more than that," he turned and spoke with a degree of finality, "there are ways to support causes that don't require as much of our own risk as others. I will see that Levinson advises you on that...", and the tone of his voice guaranteed that there would be no further discussion or negotiation. Jacqueline again knew that even in this she was only going to be a manipulated pawn, controlled by the overriding vision of Craig Avery.

That arrangement, of course, wore thin fairly quickly with a lady who wished to blossom on her own account. Craig had his corporate concerns and his classwork to give him endless fulfillment. Jacqueline felt that she had nothing and it brought her to the breaking point just after the holidays.

"Craig, I'm leaving you, at least for a while," she said as she stood in the door of the master bedroom.

Craig was stunned. If Jacqueline were to leave him it would add a completely unwanted wrinkle into his well planned life. He had chosen her for a specific purpose and it would be exceedingly difficult to create a "plan B" if she left. His mind raced to consider his options. This wasn't at all what he'd planned and he really didn't have time to deal with this now. Understanding that he needed to recover the moment he finally spoke, "Is there someone else?"

"Oh, heavens no!", she said in surprise. Jacqueline was completely incredulous at the idea that he could be so out of touch with who she really was and the real problem that they needed to address. "Absolutely not. I have no desire for any other man in any way, it's just that the truth is, Craig, there is no 'us'. You have your dream and your agenda and your well-choreographed life and I find that I'm only an amenity that serves the purpose for the great love of your life... that's your dream, your vision of who you are wanting to be."

"Jacqueline, I was not dishonest with you. I shared my sense of purpose from the beginning of our relationship. I thought this dream was mutual."

"Well, Craig," she said firmly, "I won't accuse you of deception at all. I guess I have no one to blame but myself. I honestly thought we did share a vision, but it was one where I was also going to make an intellectual contribution to and not just be the trinket that hovers nearby you to help you look good."

"And if you leave, what will that do to me?", he asked, completely oblivious to what would have been obvious, even to the dog (if Craig would have allowed her to have one!).

"I don't know," she shook her head sadly. "I'm sure you'll find some way to adjust and get what you want anyway. I have no doubt about that at all." She leaned against the door, looked sadly at the chandelier in the hallway and concluded, "I confess. I'm changing the rules. I admit to foolishness for I really didn't know what the game was all about when I agreed to play."

"Where will you go?", he asked. "Back to Dallas?"

"Oh, no. I wouldn't do that to you," she reassured him. "It would be all too obvious to the folks there that things just didn't work." She turned to him fully, with one single tear tracing her cheek, "I've decided the best way to handle this is that I go to Bern. I can attend the institute there and immerse myself in my field. It will look as though I'm just taking an extended vacation to Switzerland and very few people will be the wiser."

With that it was settled. Jacqueline agreed to return to the states randomly to appear at functions and she promised that she would remain far from scandal. "I don't need that pain, Craig," she reassured him. "You don't have to worry about me. I will find sweet fulfillment in my study and in the quietness of the countryside."

In the morning she was gone. There was no kiss, not even a last embrace. Craig felt a twinge of sadness as he saw the taxi pull down the driveway but he knew that he had to work to build a destiny and that he would have to be strong enough to do it with an amendment in life that he'd not planned for. But he was Craig Avery and he was at his best when dealing with solving problems. One unexpected contingency in life was certainly not enough to derail him.

After Jacqueline left Craig threw himself into his dream all the more intensely. He was much too busy to think of her very often. Between meetings with design executives and consultants who could think-tank the Avery empire into the next century he had little time for the luxury of sentimentality. The more advisors he hired the more his plans grew and expanded. Should he look to expansion on the Pacific Rim? Some thought he should offer to purchase the Philadelphia Phillies or perhaps create a package deal for the Eagles, too, and then build a stadium complex to replace the old Vet. (Weren't all the major dollar barons and dot.com power children parading as sports franchise owners

anyway? Hobnobbing with athletes and icons of American entertainment is seen, by some, as a perk of the life of the ultra-successful.)

Should Avery Enterprises ride the new crest of economic development on the African continent? What about establishing a pool of public relations experts to assist in creating the image of one that the Wall Street Journal called, "America's New Golden Boy"?

For every scheme there were experts and consultants and teams of people to advise and make recommendation. Every dream carried an enormous price tag and not one of them showed a sure-fire result of profitability. Every speculation was going to cost a bundle without any guarantee of return, even if he didn't find himself finally investing in any of them. The consultant teams alone were eating up hundreds of thousands at every turn.

After a while Craig became a bit reclusive. He had contributed to political campaigns only to see his candidates come to nothing because of their own petty weaknesses and foibles. He'd dabbled into risk capital investment schemes that could have returned multiplied profits but somehow, for him, they never materialized. "America's New Golden Boy" was graying and no longer was the intriguing figure of GQ or Esquire.

Several years after he'd completed the groundwork at Carnegie-Mellon he sold the mansion in Pittsburgh to a scion of the old steel families. His advisors told him that the economic slump of the region looked to be long term and he'd better take what he could get for the estate so his loss was rather dramatic. He made his way back to Nashville and found that the real estate boom of the near south was going to cost him dearly if he dreamed of having a place like he'd grown accustomed to in Pennsylvania, but the image of the Avery name would not allow him to settle for less.

Randomly a flag of warning would be put before Craig. One of his father's old advisors would plead with him to look toward saving for the rainy day. Craig saw that as weakness. Others would and become more involved in charity and acts of benevolence but Craig would not hear of it. "Charities have their place but I am not the government. I don't have unlimited resources. You can only by so much good will with charity and good will is a finite commodity in the real world," he responded. Craig Avery's personal credo was that his greatest asset in life was Craig Avery.

It was a late summer day and the Cumberland flowed its muddy brown past his office window. Craig had just completed a conference call with several advisors in Korea. They were concerned that the political instability in the north was going to overflow into Seoul and that it was a "now or never" time for Asian involvement. "Only the strong are going to weather this one out, Mr. Avery," his consultants said. "The ones who survive this are going to come out the other side twenty times more prosperous but it's going to be a bumpy ride."

Without a moment's hesitation Craig blurted out, "Then do what you have to! Buy everything in sight, I don't care what it is. If we can ride this storm out we will be as rich as Midas!"

Suddenly there was a gentle knock on the office door. It was Lucinda Weaver, his longtime executive secretary. "Mr. Avery, Mr. Reynolds is here to see you."

"I don't remember asking him to come here, Mrs. Weaver!"

"No sir," she responded, "but he has assured me that it's really quite urgent that he speak with you. He knows that this is an inconvenience but he is quite adamant that it is absolutely imperative that he speak with you today." The secretary looked a bit nervous for she had been well trained. It was not at all her custom to interrupt Craig Avery's plans with any unplanned event. "What shall I say to him, sir?"

"Well , Mrs. Weaver, this isn't a mailroom boy or some city councilman you are talking about. Put my next appointment on hold and, by all means, show him in."

Mrs. Weaver opened the door and gestured for Mattathias Reynolds, Jr. to enter the spacious office. The elderly gentleman walked in and firmly headed toward the large mahogany desk where Craig was sorting through a file. "Mr. Avery, I must apologize for coming to you without appointment but we at the firm felt it absolutely imperative that I, the senior partner, personally come to you today."

"Mr. Reynolds," Craig stood to reach out his hand, "please, don't you mind that at all. Won't you please sit down?"

"No, Mr. Avery," the old man demurred, "actually, I'd rather stand if you don't mind."

"Well, sir, that's fine," Craig answered. "Whatever you are comfortable with. May I pour you a drink?"

"No sir, I thank you. I'd rather be about my business if you don't mind."

Craig laughed nervously, "My, this does sound serious! And pray tell me, to what do I owe the honor of a visit from the senior partner of Paxon, Reynolds, MacGruder, Strunk, and Rathburn?"

"Mr. Avery," the lawyer responded solemnly, "my firm has represented your family's interest for more than seven decades. I am so very sorry to be the one that must share with you today that it is all gone."

"Gone?", Craig Avery was thunderstruck. "What do you mean 'gone'?"

"Exactly what I said, sir." The surviving Reynolds spoke in very measured tones. "Your inheritance and financial empire is gone. For several years a number of us have warned you about your increasingly risky moves toward speculative opportunities. We have seen this day coming but you would not hear of it, instead you chose to believe the inflated promises of the brigades of advisors and consultants who were bleeding you dry. These parasites have eaten away at everything that you have and now, quite frankly, I'm afraid they've succeeded in destroying their own host."

Craig looked across the great desk at Mattathias Reynolds and laughed, "C'mon, this is a joke, right?"

The attorney did not waver for a moment. He looked intensely at the drowning man and replied, "I only wish I could say it was, sir. But I'm afraid that it is all absolutely the truth. Your fortune is gone. Avery Enterprises will have to be liquidated and I see no option for you, personally, other than to file for bankruptcy as soon as possible. Out of deference for the many years for which we have been under retainer with your family I have advised my staff that they are to do all that they can in assisting you with this process, at least

for the first few months. After that you may have to find a way to get legal advice in another manner."

The old gentleman turned and walked slowly to the door. When he opened it he looked back at the spacious office and the majestic view of Davidson County. "I am sorry, sir. I am pleased that neither nor your father nor mine lived to see this day."

He slowly closed the door behind himself and was gone. Craig Avery dropped his head and began to tremble. It was all a very bad dream and he was sure he would awaken from it but the dream would not end, no matter how often he shook his head and blinked his eyes. The silence of the office became deafening.

He put his hands to his face and shook his head. He felt great beads of sweat developing upon his brow. He ripped at his tie to loosen it. He felt he could hardly breathe.

Thousands of thoughts and emotions came swirling up inside of him as he began to rock sideways in his great leather chair. He bit his lip, looked at the picture on the wall where he stood with his father and President Carter on the White House steps. Craig Avery found his breath coming deeply, with quick, rapid, measured efforts. The man's fingers and toes began to tingle and he realized that he couldn't really focus his eyes. For a moment he tried to cry out to Mrs. Weaver in the outer office but before the words escaped his lips he slumped forward...

*"And he said, 'This will I do:
I will pull down my barns, and build greater;
and there will I bestow all my fruits and my goods.*

*And I will say to my soul, "Soul, thou has much goods laid up for many years;
take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry."*

*But God said unto him, 'Thou fool,
this night thy soul shall be required of thee;
then whose shall these things be, which thou has provided?'"*

-Luke 12:18-20