

EDWARD FALCO

THE PROFESSOR'S SON

THAT WINTER I WAS FIFTEEN, and how my father was related to me was still a mystery. He was a mathematics professor. I, his only son, could barely multiply. He wore khaki slacks and solid-colored shirts to university meetings, while I wore denims and holey Ts to the “alternative” high school, which was where they sent all the trouble-makers at that time, in a whole separate building from the regular high school. He drove a forest green Ford Taurus. I had a chopped Harley in the garage, which I worked on constantly and hoped to have on the road within the year. He was mellow, calm-talking, even-tempered, no matter what the situation. I wore a thin leather jacket, had a natural snarl, and a temper that regularly got me into trouble and was the principal reason I wound up in the alternative school with all the hoods and druggies. To his credit, he never tried to force me to be like him. He seemed, genuinely, to accept me as I was, which I found alternately maddening and life-sustaining. In general, and to the surprise of everyone who knew us, we got along well. The only serious problem between us was my mother, and it was only for that winter, when she was living two blocks away with Vance Howell, a guy my father actually worked with at the college.

She had moved out the previous fall, just up and disappeared one morning and then waited twenty-four hours before sending word of her whereabouts. I was hardly heart-broken over her departure. If we had ever gotten along, I had no memory of it. She drank too much, she was always on somebody's back about something, and she had a bad

habit of hitting people, especially me. She was a small, thin woman. By the time I was thirteen and 5' 10", 150 pounds, I was a good six inches taller than her and 40 pounds heavier--and I still flinched whenever she made a sudden movement in my direction. I had seen her hit my father on numerous occasions, though he was so much bigger than her that he could just turn his head, absorb the blows, and wait for her fury to pass. I never considered her leaving a terrible loss, but I did consider it an insult. It made me crazy that my father was so damn calm and understanding about it all.

ONE NIGHT THAT WINTER, I was awakened by the wind and came down into the living room to find him sitting by the window with all the lights off. He was in his stuffed chair, looking out at the backyard, at moonlight on a crust of icy snow. The weather was nasty. Wind blew a wild range of music, from low, agonized moans to high-pitched, hysterical howls, back and forth, up and down. In the dark, it was eerie. The house was messy and full of clutter, just as my mother always predicted it would be should she ever stop picking up after us. There were coats and scarves piled up on the couch, discarded newspapers and magazines everywhere, and shoes and boots and socks all over the place. I had recently had a cold, and my discarded, crumpled tissues were everywhere, little white pockmarks spread all over the house. I looked into the kitchen, where the digital clocks on the stove, microwave, refrigerator, and clock-radio said it was 12:00 a.m., 12:17 a.m., 12:03 a.m., and 5:30 p.m., respectively. I couldn't tell whether or not he knew I was there, standing at the foot of the stairway, looking at him across the dark house. Then he turned around. He didn't say anything. He just took hold of the back of his neck and started kneading the flesh as if he were searching for something under the skin.

I pulled an ottoman up to the window and sat alongside him. "Look, Dad," I said. "Why don't we do something about it?"

He sat back in his chair, gripped the armrests, and turned his gaze on me in full Abe-Lincoln pose. He's a tall man with a unruly beard, though, unlike the president of myth, he's burly and thick-chested. He said, "About what, Matt?"

I didn't bother to answer. We both knew what I was talking about.

"There isn't anything to do about it," he said, after several long moments of silence. "It's just the way it is." He turned back to the window.

"We could do something to him." I folded my legs under me and wrapped my arms around my chest, as if the chill from outside were making its way into the warmth of our house. "Not Mom," I said. "We don't have to do anything to Mom. Just him."

"Matthew —"

"Why not?" I jumped in as soon as he used my full name, which meant a patient explanation was coming. "I mean why the hell not, Dad? I'm not saying kill him or anything. Just, like, beat the hell out of him. Put him in the hospital. Show Mom what's up, that's all."

He looked up to the moon at that point, as if there were another adult up there who shared his consternation at my suggestion. Then he turned his most pissed-off glare on me. "I don't know where to begin responding to that."

I snarled, "I didn't think you would."

"What does that mean?"

"I mean why the hell not, Dad? I'm not saying kill him or anything. Just, like, beat the hell out of him. Put him in the hospital. Show Mom what's up, that's all."

"It means, what the hell *do* you know, Dad?" I kicked over the ottoman. "She walked out on you for this prick! Don't you have any pride?"

"Oh, Matthew," he said, immediately. "Please." His response was so rapid and dismissive, it blunted my outburst completely — which made me even more furious.

"Okay," I said. "Fine." I tried a small laugh, as if I weren't really bothered at all. "You don't have to do anything," I said. "I'll do it."

He leaned over and righted the ottoman. "And what is it that you think you're going to do, Matt?"

"I don't know," I said. In truth, I had been thinking about things I might do to Mr. Vance for months and had a whole slew of options from which to choose, most of them having something to do with his precious car. He drove a Porsche Boxster convertible so bright red it looked wet in any weather. He had the thing polished to a sheen that could

blind in bright sunlight. Every time I saw him and Mom driving some place in that thing I wanted to take a sledgehammer to it. "How about I pour a pound of sugar down the gas tank of that car of his?" I said.

He laughed at that and blushed, as if he were embarrassed at his reaction. "The car is a little flashy, isn't it?" he said. "He told me he's adding a garage to his house in the spring. Just for the car."

"He told you." I put my hands on my hips.

"Yes. He told me. We talk, Matt. We're civilized human beings." He got up then and went into the kitchen, where he turned on the light and began rummaging through the cluttered cupboards. "Actually," he said, and then hesitated. "Actually," he repeated. "He says that he and your mom are thinking seriously about marriage."

"Oh, they are?" I walked out of the kitchen, into the living room, and then back into the kitchen again. I could hear a whine in my ears, as if my blood were moving so fast it was starting to whistle. "And you have no problem with that?"

"Matthew . . ." In the cupboard alongside the refrigerator, he located a jar of honey, which apparently had been the object of his search all along. It was glued to bottom of the shelf by drippage and he tugged at it distractedly until it finally came away, pulling the whole sheet of shelving paper along with it, upsetting boxes, jars, and bottles in the process. The shelving paper was actually plastic of some kind and wouldn't tear loose. I noticed a scissors lying on the stove and handed it to him. "What am I supposed to do?" he said, while cutting a circle around the bottom of the jar. "Chain her down?" He pressed hard on the top of the honey jar, straining until it finally came loose. He held the jar in one hand and the top in the other. "This is a lesson you might as well learn, Matt. Some things, there's nothing you can do about it, no matter how much. It's just the way it is. Better to accept it, deal with it, live with it, than to run around blowing yourself up over it."

"Blowing yourself up over it?"

"You know what I mean." He set the jar down on the counter and went about heating up a small pan of milk. "You want some?" he asked. "Milk and honey. It's good to help you sleep."

"I'm not going to blow myself up." I crossed my arms over my chest. "I'm going to blow him up," I said. "I'm going to blow up his fucking car."

“Matthew,” he said. But I had already marched out of the kitchen, and was halfway up the stairs.

In my bedroom, I changed quickly into full winter gear, including thermal undies, as if I knew exactly where I was going and what I was going to do — which I don’t think I did. When I was dressed and ready, I turned out the lights and went downstairs to the hall closet for my winter coat and gloves. My father was on the couch, across from the closet, sipping his milk and honey. He said, “Where are you going?”

I ignored him. When I was all buttoned and zipped up, I started for the door.

“You forgot your hat,” he said.

I touched my head. “Thank you.” I found my wool hat in the top of the closet, pulled it down over my ears, and left the house, closing the front door tightly behind me.

OUTSIDE, THE WIND WAS BLOWING HARD. The street and the narrow sidewalks that ran around the development were clear of ice, but everywhere else the glazed surface of the snow glowed a luminous white under the pale circle of a full moon. I trudged around to the back of the house, ice cracking and breaking under my feet, until I reached our shed, which was a fairly elaborate structure compared to the everyday, suburban storage shed. Ours was as much a work room as it was a storage area. It was heated and insulated, half as tall as the house, with a large loft space, reachable by ladder, and an elaborate work table and sufficient tools hanging from peg boards and stored in metal cabinets and on wood shelving to build just about anything. There was also a television hooked up to a cable jack, and a screaming yellow telephone that lit up like a firefly with each ring. The phone had its own separate line, with its own phone number, which always impressed me as a kid. Before my mother left, my father spent a good deal of time in the shed, including numerous nights on the cot in the loft.

By the time I closed the door behind me and turned on the lights, I had settled on a plan. I was going to blow up Vance’s Porsche. I couldn’t be sure that it would literally blow up, but I thought the chances of that were pretty good if I dumped five or so gallons of gasoline onto the luxurious leather and carpet of the interior and then tossed in a match. I was pondering the problem of how to toss in the match without killing myself in the process, when the phone rang. It startled me. My heart leapt so hard at that first ring, it was like I felt the whole organ

move, and I was afraid I might have ripped or shifted something that wasn't supposed to rip or shift. I picked up after the third ring. "Sheffield residence."

"Very funny," my father said. "What the hell are you doing, Matt?"

"Looking for the five-gallon gas container we have out here somewhere. You know where it's at?"

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"Behind the lawn mowers," he said.

"What do you plan on doing with it?"

"Just what I said."

"Which was what again?"

"Blow up Vance's precious Porsche."

"Matthew," he said. "You're not going to do that."

I said, "Yes I am," and hung up.

In the back of the shed, behind the two identical red lawn mowers, one that worked and one we kept for parts, I found the five-gallon container. It was almost full, as I knew it would be because it was my job at the end of summer to empty the oil in the lawn mower, clean and store the spark plugs, and dispose of the left-over gasoline — and I knew I hadn't done any of that. On the work table, I found an over-sized screwdriver that would work perfectly for slashing the convertible top. I put it in my coat pocket and surveyed the shed again. I still had the problem of igniting the gas. I noticed a brand-new, shiny ax handle leaning against the wall next to the shed door, and the notion of using it as the stem for a torch which I could light and toss into the car from a distance popped into my head with the recognizable click of inevitable rightness. I had just finished wrapping the rags around the top of the handle when the phone rang again.

"Matt," my father said. "What the hell are you doing out there?" He sounded tired.

"Getting stuff together," I said. "I'm just about ready."

"To do what?"

"I told you what I'm doing."

"Matthew," he said. "Do you have any idea the number of years you're taking off my life?"

"Hey," I said. "You might be willing to let him get away with this shit, but I'm not. This is just the start. Who knows what I'm going to do next?"

"Certainly not me," he said.

"Damn right."

"Look. Matthew." He paused and made a pained noise, half-sigh, half-moan. "Look," he repeated. "Come back in the house. You're not blowing up anybody's car."

"Really? Why not?"

"Because," he said. "Civilized human beings don't go around setting fire to their neighbor's Porsches."

"Civilized human beings don't go around stealing their neighbor's wives."

"Yes they do," he said.

"Then they also blow up Porsches." I hung up on him again.

A moment later I was outside, making my way across the lawn toward Vance Howell's red Boxster. As I stepped into the street, I noticed, out of the corner of my eye, a movement in our lighted living room window; and I knew if I turned around I'd see my father standing there, probably with his hands on his hips, watching me walk away with a gas can in one hand and an ax handle in the other. His face would have that sad, stricken look. He'd be wondering what the hell I planned on doing with his new ax handle. I considered stopping while he could still see me and lighting the torch. I liked the idea of the reaction it might produce in him. I imagined him stepping away from the window and rubbing the back of his neck violently, as if the things I did aggravated some nerve center back there, I also thought it would be really cool to light up the torch. I was looking forward to it. I decided to wait though, for obvious reasons. It wasn't all that late at night, and just one neighbor watching Letterman to the end who noticed a kid

walking through his or her yard carrying a lighted torch could blow the whole plan.

I wondered, as I trudged over the crusty snow, what my father's life would have been like without me or my mother in the picture. I suspected that numbers and equations and woodworking projects were all he ever really needed to be happy. As a little kid, I used to watch him at work in his study, bent over his papers for hours on end. I'd look in on him in the morning, before going outside to play, and he'd be there at his books, oblivious to anything and everything around him. Because noises distracted him, he put in ear plugs and wore shooter's headphones/earmuff things to keep out the sounds of the everyday world. Because he chilled easily while working motionless for long periods, he wrapped himself in a thin tartan blanket, summer and winter. I grew up thinking it was normal to have a father who spent his days wrapped in a tartan, wearing earplugs and headphones, bent over scraps of paper utterly motionless, just staring at numbers and symbols indecipherable to me or most anyone else for that matter. If it weren't for my mother and me, I really don't think he would have thought about anything else at all.

My father was in the back of my mind as I cut across those neatly maintained suburban yards. I was probably worried about him. Neither one of us had had a decent meal since my mother left. We'd been eating stuff out of boxes and cans for months, stuff that came in shrink-wrapped plastic, designed to be thrown into a microwave. I didn't mind for myself, but, as I said, I just found it all insulting and somehow dangerous for my father. A man like him shouldn't be left to his own devices. I felt like my mother shouldn't be allowed to get away with it. There was something outrageous about her leaving, and now actually thinking about marrying that asshole Vance Howell. What did it say about me and my father that she would leave us for a guy with a shiny red car? Nothing good, that was for sure. If she had to drink to deal with us, fine, let her drink; but to just walk out—that was too much. Someone had to do something about it.

WHEN THE HOWELL RESIDENCE came into sight, my heartbeat started picking up noticeably. The place was one of those fake two-story Colonials, with fake white columns and a sloping lawn that slid down to the street and a wooded area that curved around the side and back of the house. The blacktop semi-circle drive was cleared entirely of snow, and the Boxster was parked by the front door. It looked as though it had been perfectly centered so that Howell could step out of his house and into his car with a minimum number of steps. It occurred to me that there might

be, given the car's location, some danger of human injury when the thing blew — not to mention the possibility of catching house on fire. It was not my intention to cause anyone any actual physical harm. I was intent only on doing serious property damage. Lights were on inside the house in upstairs and downstairs rooms, which surprised me since at home Mom was always asleep before ten o'clock, sometimes by nine. I decided that it was probably Howell awake inside the house, doing whatever the hell he did late at night, and that that was good. It meant he would notice the flames and call the fire department before the whole neighborhood went up in smoke. Hopefully he would have enough brains to get him and Mom out of the way before the thing blew up. Myself, I planned on watching it all from behind his neighbor's house, across the street.

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I checked the windows one more time to make sure no one was watching, glanced up and down the street, rested the ax handle on my shoulder like a rifle, took a deep breath and marched up the driveway. When I reached the car, Vance Howell opened the door and stepped out to greet me.

"For God's sake," he said. "You were actually going to go through with it, weren't you?" He was dressed in a long, navy-blue overcoat, one of those dumb-ass Russian hats that look like little boats or something, with boots and gloves. Between the bottom of the coat and the boots, though, I could see his flannel pajamas, and I figured out immediately that my father must have called and gotten him out of bed.

"Go through with what?" I said. I put down the gas container, gripped the ax handle in both hands like a baseball bat, and shifted it to my right shoulder in a position that I hoped looked threatening. Howell was younger than my father, closer to my mother's age, who was something like eight or nine years younger than my father. That still made Howell an old guy, though, probably in his forties, but he didn't look that old. He looked like he was in good shape, even with the coat and that stupid Russian hat.

"Your father said he thought you wouldn't actually do anything, but I don't think so," he said. "You know that? I think you were actually going to set fire to my car."

“What makes you think that?” I said. I looked down at the gas container and up at the torch. “Are you psychic?”

I hadn't quite gotten the word *psychic* out when he grabbed me by the coat collar and pulled me up against his chest. His nose was only a few inches from mine, and my arms were pinned between us. The ax handle stuck up out of our pressed-together bodies like some kind of flag pole. “You were,” he said. “Weren't you? You were going to set fire to my car.”

“Me? Set fire to your car? No,” I said. “I just came over to see if I could borrow my mother back for a little while. Our place is a total wreck and I was hoping—”

“Shut up,” he said, and pulled me up against him tighter, almost lifting me off the ground. “I'm not like your father. You mess with anything of mine and I'll rip your heart out, you little prick.” He picked me up and threw me down on the ground, hard. I landed flat on my back and I think I bounced and turned over because I remember seeing the sky go all red-maroon for a second before I found myself lying on my stomach, my face on the blacktop, with blood coming out of my mouth, a front tooth wobbling under my tongue. The ax handle was still in my hand and I remember just sort of waiting there a moment, waiting to see what he'd do or say next. I half-expected him to kick me, like in the movies, a kick to the ribs followed by some smart-ass comment. I didn't know what I was going to do if that happened, but I do know that I was gripping that ax handle hard.

He didn't kick me though and he didn't say another word. When I looked up, in fact, he was gone. I pulled myself to my knees, wiped the blood from my face, and surveyed the house. I would have heard the door had he gone back inside, but I looked there anyway. The front door and the storm door in front of it were both sealed closed, just as they had been when I first arrived. I stood up and checked all the windows. It occurred to me that my mother might have appeared on the scene, and that was what kept him off me; but the windows were all curtained, with half-circles of ice like crooked smiles on the lower panes. I was beginning to think the guy might have had a heart attack and just keeled over somewhere out of sight, but when I walked out onto the grass, away from the porch light, I saw him floating backwards at the bottom of the lawn. It looked like he had two heads: one turned up toward the sky, the other whispering into the first one's ear. And he was floating, not walking. His legs were actually off the ground.

When I took a few more steps in his direction, I saw that the second

head belonged to my father, who was holding Howell's neck between both his arms, in a hold that looked like something you see the cops do on the news when they're restraining some maniac. He held him off the ground in his arms as he moved backward toward the woods. "Dad!" I yelled, and ran to him, where it was apparent that he was strangling Howell. My father's face was so deep red it seemed almost

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black. Howell's face was rapidly turning blue. "Dad," I said, standing right in front of him. "Dad," I repeated. He didn't seem to hear me. He just kept taking backward steps, whispering indecipherable stuff into Howell's ear. "Dad?" I jumped up and hit him on the shoulder, but even that failed to pull him out of whatever trance he had fallen into out there. At that point, Howell's eyes were bulging and his head was wobbling as if he were about to lose consciousness. We were well off the lawn and making our way into a maze of shrubs and bushes and trees. "Jesus Christ, Dad!" I screamed, loud as could. "All he did was knock me down!" He still looked as though he didn't even know I was there, and it suddenly became clear to me that if he

didn't let Howell loose mighty soon he was going to kill him. I realized that at about the same time I realized I was still dragging my torch along with me. I put the two realizations together and smacked him across the head with the ax handle. Hard. The part with the rags wrapped around it, but still, hard. Like swinging a baseball bat.

That seemed to get his attention. He dropped Howell, who fell on his face into the ice-crusting ground choking and grunting. At about the same moment, my mother's voice came from the house, calling for him. "Vance!" she called. "Vance? Are you out there?"

My father looked at me and then back toward the house, the redness draining from his face. He said, "I think we'd better get out of here." He rubbed the spot on his head where I'd hit him.

My mother couldn't see us where we were standing in the woods, but we could see her perfectly. She was on the porch, directly under the light, in slippers and a robe that she was holding pulled tight around her. She looked different. Better. Her face seemed less gaunt and

pinched, as if she were recovering from a long illness and just regaining the fullness of her features. It pissed me off. "Yeah," I said softly. "Good idea."

MY FATHER TOOK MY ARM and led me out to the road, on a long route back to our house that had the advantage of keeping us out of sight. When I looked behind me one last time, I saw Howell pulling himself to his feet, bent over and breathing hard, both hands pressed against his chest, as if he were busy giving himself CPR. Under the porch light, Mom stared at the gasoline can as if it were a puzzle piece and she was trying to figure out where it went.

When we were walking a while, with Howell and my mother a good way behind us, my father said, "Everyone in the Department knows he's an asshole."

I said, "I thought you were going to kill him."

He shook his head. He said, "I can't believe I behaved like that." He sounded genuinely sorry and surprised. "Thank you, Matt," he said. "Thank you very much."

"For what?" I said. "Hitting you with an ax? Any time."

"For stopping me," he said, ignoring my attempt at lightening things up a bit. "It was as if—it was like I fell right back into the way I was as a kid. Like I dropped right back into it."

I said, "You used to strangle people as a kid?"

He made a little gesture with his head and shoulders that suggested that, in fact, there were some such occasions in his youth.

"You're kidding?" I said. "You got into fights when you were a kid? You?"

"It never seemed like the kind of thing I should tell you about," he said. "I didn't want to encourage you."

"That's—" I said. "This is—" I was amazed. At first it was just shock and surprise that my father could have ever been anything other than the calm, even-tempered man I'd always known; but then I started thinking about the implications that held for me, and that just shut me up completely. If my father was like me as a kid, would I be like him as an adult? The very possibility silenced me completely, and I walked

along beside him through the icy cold in a reverie of contemplation. When we'd been walking awhile and I realized we were finally nearing our house, I stopped, found the matches in my coat pocket, and lit the torch. It rushed into flame with an audible pop.

My father looked at the flaming ax handle a moment and then at me and said, "Why did you do that?"

"I don't know." I shrugged. I held the torch up. "It's cool."

"You understand," he said, "you're going to have to pay for that ax handle. It was brand new."

"Okay," I said. "How much was it?"

"Not much." He sounded disappointed. "Listen, Matt," he said, and started walking again. "What happened back there, with Howell. You know, there are going to be repercussions."

"Like what?"

"I don't know," he said. "We'll find out soon enough."

"Whatever," I said. "We'll deal with it."

He smiled at that and moved a little closer to me. I held the torch out high in front of us, as if our suburban neighborhood were a cave or a wilderness that I was exploring, and I went back to thinking about me and my father, and also about what the repercussions of almost strangling one of your colleagues to death might be. I was glad we were near the house at that point, because it was really vicious cold. Above our heads, black smudges of clouds rolled and tumbled. I put my other hand in my pocket and leaned in close to him, letting his body block the wind while I wondered over it all.