

THE QUESTION IS MURDER by Mark Willen EXCERPT

Dear Mr. Ethics

Sam reads the email a second time, then a third, not sure whether to dismiss it as a prank or call the police. He prints it out and then reads it again, looking for some clue to the sender's frame of mind.

It's probably a stunt. Sam gets more than his share of cranks and weirdos. There's something about writing a newspaper column and calling yourself "Mr. Ethics" that attracts them. Some people just take offense at the notion of a guy sitting behind a computer trying to tell them there's a right way to behave.

He takes a deep breath and reads the email again, a blue felt-tipped pen in his hand. He studies the words, the grammar, even the sentence structure, looking for oddities or inconsistencies. Nothing jumps out.

He doesn't need this. Not now.

But then maybe he does. Maybe it's *just* what he needs. Something to take his mind off of Lisa, not unlike the migraine that makes you forget the sprained ankle, at least for a while.

He looks up from the sheet of paper in his hand and glances at the poster that hangs in front of him. It's filled with quotations on writing, and although it's the kind of thing a college kid would hang in a dorm room, he's always liked having it near. And he didn't have much else to stick on the wall two years ago when he was awarded his own office, a privilege he didn't especially want and still hasn't adjusted to. He loves the column, both for its intellectual challenge and for the feeling that he may be helping people, albeit in small ways, to make the world a better place.

He turns back to the email. He needs another opinion and knows it should come from his boss, but he doesn't want to lose control. Brenda would be cautious and call in the executive editor or a lawyer, maybe both, and that would mean days of delay. He's not going to use the email in his column, so whatever he does shouldn't come back to hurt the newspaper. He wants to help if he can, and he doesn't want anyone to get in his way. He's too old for bureaucratic games.

But he does want another opinion.

He gets up, grabs the printout, and walks down the hall to the newsroom. It's eerily quiet, nothing like the newsrooms he grew up in. Gone is the chaos of constant motion and loud conversations carried on from opposite ends of the room. Gone too are the ugly metal desks shoved together so close you can smell the whisky on your neighbor's breath, hear him belch or argue with an official or a source on the phone. Some had hated it, but Sam thrived on the synergy it produced, the bonds it created, the shared excitement of doing something he believed—still believes—is important.

Now, in its place he sees what the younger reporters view as high-tech paradise, with desks crowded with laptops and other electronic devices. The reporters and editors are stuck in a maze of mini-cubicles with three-foot high, sound-absorbing barriers to create a sense of privacy. They need to stand up to see another person.

He's acutely aware of how much journalism has changed in the thirty years he's been practicing it. Not that it was ever pure and not that all its practitioners had less than selfish motives. But many did. Now it's nothing more than a business, a fight for internet clicks or a spot appearance on TV, just when facts and truth matter the most because they're in such short supply. It's one of the reasons he was ready to give up reporting and editing to take on the ethics column, but that's not to say he doesn't miss the thrill of unraveling an important story.

He walks the maze, heading to Molly's corner. "Hey," he says as he comes up behind her.

Her right hand rises in a silencing gesture, and he realizes she's on the phone. One of those ear things hidden by her hair. How was he supposed to know?

While he waits, he glances up at the silent TV monitors on the wall and tries to guess why the weatherman is moving his arms around in a circle. After a minute or so, Molly ends the call and turns to him.

"What?" she asks, not unfriendly but not friendly either. *Busy* is the vibe he gets.

Sam was once Molly's editor and mentor as she learned her way around Congress, which was Sam's beat for twelve years. She still comes to him for advice, though not often, and he will seek her out when his ethics column needs the perspective of someone younger, or a woman.

He hands her the printout without speaking and watches her read it, biting down on her lower lip, a habit he's grown used to. He averts his eyes when she looks up and catches him staring at her. He glances around her cubicle while she finishes, then turns back to her, focusing now on her hands, which grip the printout on either side, as if she's worried he'll have second thoughts and try to take it back. He's never noticed how graceful her hands look, with long supple fingers, as though she was born to play the piano. Or type. The thought makes him smile.

Molly hands back the email and frowns. “So what’s the question?” she asks.

“Do you think it’s for real?”

She purses her lips and turns her head slightly. Her blue eyes, accented with eye shadow she doesn’t need, seem to settle on a photograph of her and Kyle, her fiancé. They are wearing hiking gear and standing atop a boulder, Molly’s bleached-blond hair blowing lightly in the wind. Their wedding is set for Memorial Day weekend, less than three months away.

“Look, Sam,” she says finally, picking up her water bottle and taking a swallow, making him wait for what’s coming. “Every woman has some rat-bastard in her past she’d love to blow to kingdom come, but they never actually do it.”

“Some do.”

“Not many. And probably only on the spur of the moment. More passion than planning, and never with advance notice.”

“This is different. He didn’t dump her. He’s stalking her and she’s scared. She doesn’t see any other way out.”

Molly tilts her head slightly and he’s not sure what that means. She reaches for the moisturizer she keeps on her desk. He watches her squirt some in her palm and then rub it carefully on the backs of her hands. He feels himself getting annoyed. Since Lisa asked him to move out, he has less patience for everything and everyone. He reminds himself of that and takes a deep breath.

“I can’t ignore it,” he says.

“But what can you do? It’s vague and anonymous. You can’t use it in the column. Are you thinking of turning it over to the police?”

“No. I have to answer her. Reach out in some way.”

“Tell me why. You always told me not to get involved in the stories I cover.”

“I can’t just let it go.”

“What if you find out she’s serious? Or suicidal?” she asks. “Then you’ll have no choice but to go to the authorities.”

The question annoys him. “Of course. But I don’t have enough to work with now.”

“I don’t disagree, and if it’s not a hoax, I feel sorry for her. But all you can do is tell her to go to the police.”

“She says she can’t,” he says. “I want to find out why. This is a cry for help.”

Molly shrugs, making it clear she doesn't agree. "If I came to you with this, you'd say reporters shouldn't get involved. I'd get your lecture on how our job is to shine a light on problems while staying above the fray, not try to make everything okay."

He doesn't know what to say. He can't argue with the journalistic principle she's quoting, but it doesn't apply here because he's not a reporter planning to write a story about the email. "I have to follow it up," he tells her. "I just do."

"Why'd you ask my advice if you already had your mind made up?"

He walks away without answering. On the one hand, he sees her point, but he's disappointed she isn't more concerned, more helpful. It surprises him that Molly isn't able to put herself in other people's shoes more often. Seeing the other side of an issue—any issue—is an important skill for a reporter. Call it empathy.

But maybe he's just annoyed because she doesn't agree with him.

Back in his office, he forwards the email to the IT department. He deletes the content, but they can analyze the IP address or whatever they look at to try to determine where it came from. He doesn't have much hope, but it's worth a try. Then he turns back to the email and rereads it.

Dear Mr. Ethics:

Is murder ever ethical? I hope so because I don't have a choice. An ex-lover is destroying me. I broke up with him and now he's ruining my life. He got into my laptop, stole all my data and used it to stalk, embarrass, and almost bankrupt me. Now he's moved on to even worse stuff. He's killing my hope for any kind of normal life, so killing him is a form of self-defense. Justifiable homicide, right?

I can't go to the police for reasons I can't explain here. And I can't give you any more details because I can't risk you figuring out my name.

So can I murder him? And no, I'm not kidding.

Sincerely,
Truly Desperate

Sam jots down several notes. The tone strikes him as strangely calm and rational. She's making a logical argument, not what you'd expect from someone stressed and frantic. Or crazy. Is it a hoax? Maybe a college kid bored with her ethics class and looking for term paper ideas. Or an author concocting a crazy plot for a thriller. Or maybe someone pissed off at Mr. Ethics and hoping to draw him into a discussion that will embarrass him if made public.

But maybe not.

It doesn't matter. He has to answer her. Keep her talking, try to get more clues so he can stop her on the off chance she really is planning a murder.

He turns to his keyboard and after several false starts comes up with his reply.

Dear Truly Desperate,

I'm going to assume this is a not a prank because I have no way of knowing, and I want to give you the benefit of the doubt.

From the little you've told me, I can assure you that what you propose is not ethical. Justifiable homicide applies only when your life is in imminent danger, and you haven't convinced me that this is the case. I don't think you've convinced yourself or you wouldn't be asking me.

You need to go to the police. If you can't do it yourself, is there someone who can do it for you? If necessary, I might be willing to do that, depending on the details. And with the newspaper behind me, the police will feel obliged to take it seriously.

If you don't want my help, I suggest you talk to a mental health professional or a social worker or someone experienced in cases involving domestic partner abuse (which this obviously is).

If you'd like to talk about this more (and I will treat any conversations we have confidentially), you may call me at any time (cellphone number below).

Above all, don't do anything rash.

Regards,
Sam Turner (a.k.a. Mr. Ethics)

He sits back and reads the note again. He considers his offer to go to the police on her behalf, mindful of Molly's warning not to get involved. He wants to help her, but that's going too far. He eliminates that sentence.

He also cuts the promise of confidentiality. If she asks for it, he'll agree, but there's no need to offer it upfront. And it might tie his hands unnecessarily.

He reads his response one last time and hits the send button.

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