

# A Sad Case

by Edward Belfar

The year had begun auspiciously for Martin Schwartz. His practice was thriving like never before. Suddenly, everybody wanted to get divorced. Media attention began to come his way.

In the second week of January, *Shoreline Magazine* featured him on its cover under the headline “Top Long Island Lawyers.” The photograph, a torso shot taken with the camera, angled slightly upward, captured him girded for battle, his arms folded across his chest, his mouth a taut line, his eyes coldly appraising an unseen opponent. The accompanying profile lauded him as “the man you want on your side” if your plans for the coming year included a divorce and custody litigation. Initially, he thought he came off well. Rereading the article, however, he began to have some doubts, which crystalized when his wife, Julia, flipping through the pages at the breakfast table one Sunday morning, read some of his more provocative quotes back to him: “‘Marty Schwartz will go to war for you.’ Really? You sound like a bully.”

“Well, it’s a good thing you didn’t read it before you married me. Now, you’re stuck.”

“That’s not as funny as you think.”

Pushing the magazine aside, she gathered up the plates and the cups and deposited them in the sink.

In an interview with a reporter from *Newsday*, Martin—no longer Marty—tried to show himself in a more gentle light.

“When clients come to me, the first thing I ask them is whether they’re sure they want to get divorced. Are they sure the relationship can’t be fixed? This may sound strange coming from a divorce lawyer, but I believe in marriage. I believe that it’s love, and our obligations to those we

love and who love us, that keep us centered and give us a reason to live. It may cost me some business that way, but I sleep well at night.”

“Did I sound too sappy?” he asked Julia.

“The sentiments are fine. You can sound very caring when you want to. Now try to live up to your words for a change.”

After two interviews on local radio stations, Martin, upon a friend’s recommendation, hired an agent. Though Martin had never appeared on television before, the agent soon landed him a coveted guest spot on a national cable newscast. The attorney greeted the news with some trepidation. A stocky man with a large, square head, a slightly receding hairline, hooded eyes, incipient jowls, and a thick, mostly white goatee, he worried that his appearance might prove a liability on television. Opposing litigants, and the occasional disgruntled client, had told him over the years that he reminded them of a used-car salesman, the kind of home remodeling contractor who would take their money and never finish the job, or, worst of all, their exes.

“No worries,” the agent assured him. “The studio people are pros. They’ll have you looking like George Clooney. I mean like George Clooney ten years ago. Besides, this is too good a chance to pass up.”

The agent proved correct. A sprinkling of hair fibers removed a decade’s worth of gray, while leaving just enough to provide the proper measure of gravitas. Makeup and lighting smoothed his blemishes away.

Billed as an expert on family law, he led off the noon hour with his take on the sensational divorce and custody case of a pop singer who went by the mononym of Tiffany: “If she were my client, I would sit her down and tell her that if she wants those kids back, she needs to check herself into a rehab center and stay there this time until she finishes her treatment. She needs to show the court that she’s making a real effort to clean up her act and that she’ll put those kids first from now on. That’s easier said than done, I know, especially since the whole thing has become such a media circus. It’s a tremendously sad case—a tragedy to see someone so gifted fall so far. It’s even more tragic for the kids, caught in between the way they are. The kids are always the ones who suffer the most in these situations.”

Congratulatory calls and texts kept his phone buzzing the rest of the afternoon. They came from friends, relatives, acquaintances, and colleagues, from people he saw almost every day and some he had not communicated with in years. He looked great, everyone told him, and his talk was superb—a perfect blend of authoritativeness and compassion.

As he had not heard from Julia by late afternoon, however, he texted her: “See the broadcast?” She wrote back, ominously, “In NJ. Dad had a fall.”

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Some colleagues had offered to take Martin out for a celebratory happy hour, and he had reluctantly begged off, citing the need to visit his daughter in the hospital. Standing in the hallway outside the hospital dayroom, watching Heather braid the hair of a fellow patient, he regretted his decision. He could have used a drink or two.

Tawny-haired and green-eyed, Heather, at thirteen, was the youngest patient on the ward. A slender wisp of a girl, she hid what little roundness she possessed in an oversized sweatshirt and baggy jeans. Her companion—pallid, skeletal, and flat-chested as a boy—may have been close to Heather in age or quite a bit older. All the eating-disordered patients looked like teenagers, though some were in their late twenties.

She was standing while she braided because standing, she believed, burned calories. The harried staff acted as if they believed it as well. They would scold her and order her to sit. She would obey, only to spring back to her feet again as soon as she thought herself unobserved. The day before, she had pushed the nurse on duty too far and gotten herself locked in a seclusion room for two hours. Though he sometimes wondered whether the staff were too hard on her, Martin, trusting that they knew best, had always taken their side. For that, she could not forgive him.

Slowly, he crossed the dayroom, a large, rectangular area with pale blue walls festooned with papier-mâché snowflakes. Heather’s group had mainly gathered in the far corner opposite the entrance. Denied the use of their cell phones in the day room, they chatted, played board games, or, like Heather and her friend, braided one another’s hair. They seemed an

incongruously cheery lot to find on a psych ward. A more heterogeneous but much less animated assemblage of patients afflicted with affective disorders, the majority middle-aged or older, occupied the seats along the near wall and a sofa in the rear. These patients were allowed the use of their phones, and several were texting or scrolling through their messages. Others dozed or gazed blankly at the walls or at the television.

“Heather?” Martin called softly as he sat down in an armchair beside Heather’s friend.

An unseen but palpable curtain fell between father and daughter. The light Heather’s eyes dimmed; the smile tightened until it became a grimace; the fingers that had been working with such adroitness suddenly grew clumsy.

“Heather, you know you’re supposed to be sitting down.”

She kept her eyes on the braid. Frowning, she shook her head, undid the braid, and started her work anew.

“Heather, do we have to go through this every time?”

Her silence provided the answer.

“Heather! Heather, you look at me when I’m talking to you.”

He felt the eyes of everyone else in the room upon him, but hers remained resolutely focused on her task. Lacking the stomach for a fight, he slipped out of the room.

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Back at home, Martin poured himself a glass of Zinfandel and turned on the news. There was another story about Tiffany, followed by an interview with a presidential advisor who sought to allay the worries of investors over some recent volatility in the market.

“Contrary to all these hysterical media reports you’ve been hearing, this so-called pandemic is not going to shut down the economy. I can assure you today that we have it contained. It absolutely will not become widespread here. This is the United States, not China.”

The official’s confidence, however, seemed forced, and he answered the interviewer’s questions evasively. Martin, heretofore inclined to view the news reports as sensationalistic, found the segment unsettling.

He turned off the television, and after fortifying himself with a second glass of Zinfandel, he called Julia. The news from New Jersey was as bad as he had feared. His father-in-law had fallen in the bathroom during the night and hit his head.

“So she does nothing, absolutely nothing, for nine hours, and then she calls me at work, just before my presentation. ‘Why didn’t you call me right away,’ I ask. ‘It’s nothing,’ she tells me. ‘I didn’t want to bother you. It’s just a little scratch.’ ‘You’re calling me at work about a little scratch?’ I drop everything, drive out to Metuchen, and I find him lying there on the living room sofa with this big bandage across his forehead. It’s soaked with blood. There’s blood dripping down his cheek, blood on his pajamas, blood everywhere. He’s been lying there bleeding for all those hours, and he looks like he doesn’t know where he is. I ask her, ‘Why didn’t you call me? Why didn’t you call 911?’ You know what she tells me? ‘I didn’t want to upset you.’ I suppose I should be grateful she didn’t let him bleed out right there on the sofa. I can’t fucking do this anymore. I just can’t.”

“I know. I know. It’s hard. How is he now?”

“He’s at Robert Wood Johnson. They’ll be keeping him overnight at least. I just brought Mom home, and now I’m going back there.”

“Do you really have to? If he’s stable, I mean. He’s probably sleeping. Why don’t you get some rest while you can?”

“Mom’s resting. I can’t rest. Somebody has to be there when he wakes up in his hospital room the middle of the night and starts screaming because he doesn’t know where in the world he is or how he got there. Who else is going to do it, if not me?”

The anger in her voice and the implied criticism militated against his pursuing the issue any further.

“Well, he’s getting good care there, and he’s a tough old bird. I’m sure he’ll be fine.”

“He’s not going to be fine, damn it! He’s not fine, I’m not fine, Heather’s not fine, nobody’s fine. Except you, with your magazine covers and your TV spots. For you, everything’s fine.”

“Look, we’ll talk when you get home. We’ll figure something out.”

“Figure what out? How I can be in two places at once? How I can stop him from falling when I’m eighty miles away?”

Having no better answer, he at last fell back upon the truth: “I don’t know.”

A lengthy silence followed.

“Are you still there?”

“Did you see Heather today?”

She was sobbing.

“Of course. I just got back from the hospital. She seemed a little better today.”

“Better? Really? How?”

“Just...ah...Her manner. It’s hard to put my finger on it.”

“For a lawyer, you’ve never been a good liar. I have to go now.”

“I love you,” he said, but she had already hung up.

Martin reached again for the Zinfandel.

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As lugubrious as he found the prospect of dining out alone, staying put held even less appeal. The four-bedroom colonial, purchased when he and Julia anticipated having more children, had always felt far too large for a family of three. For one, it was as cavernous and desolate as an empty airplane hangar. Martin decided to get dinner in town.

Despite the cold and the lowering sky, he opted to walk the half-mile to Main Street.

After sitting all day, he needed some air and exercise, and the search for a parking space on Main, or within easy walking distance, had become increasingly irksome, even on weeknights. In just a few years, his sleepy little village had metamorphosed into a town trendy enough to have attracted the notice of *Shoreline Magazine* and *Newsday*. Along Main Street, two luncheonettes, a beer distributorship, and an auto mechanic’s shop, all longtime fixtures in the town, had vanished within a span of a half-year. In their place, there had sprung up a cluster of new restaurants, two wine shops, a French bakery, a cheese store, and even an outlet that dealt solely in olive oil. Once, Martin’s Mercedes S-Class had stood out on

Main Street; now, he would regularly see Ferraris and Lamborghinis parked there.

Exiting his cul-de-sac, Martin felt the full force of the wind. He had brought with him neither hat nor gloves, and by the time he reached Main Street, which was oddly devoid of traffic and had parking spaces in abundance, his fingers, ears, and toes were stinging. Some windblown snow had begun to settle on the grassy surfaces. He remembered having heard something on the radio while driving home from the hospital about a storm on the way, but he had not listened closely.

The upscale part of town lay several blocks ahead, east of the railroad tracks. On the west side, there remained a small stretch that the new breed of entrepreneurs had not yet claimed. There the dining options consisted of a franchise sub shop, a Chinese takeout place, and a purveyor of pizza desiccated by lying all day under heat lamps. Dinner could wait, Martin decided. He needed to get out of the cold, and he could use another drink or two.

A block or so west of the tracks stood a bar called the Stationhouse Tavern. In the nineteen years he had lived in the town, Marty had walked past it innumerable times but never once thought to venture inside. As a refuge from the wind, though, it would do as well as any other place.

The interior was dim and drafty, its paneled walls bearing few adornments, save for a couple of pictures of the railroad station of early twentieth-century vintage. On a shelf on the wall behind the bar, stood a television tuned to a hockey game, the sound muted.

Besides Martin, there were but three patrons at the bar. One of them wore a baseball cap bearing the logo of the local volunteer fire company. With his sagging posture, rheumy eyes, and cheeks lined with white stubble, he looked as though he had just risen from a sickbed. He listened stoically, sometimes nodding, while a younger man with a wispy moustache and a Make America Great Again Cap, fulminated against communists and pedophiles.

The woman to the younger man's left would have fit in on Heather's ward, except that, rather than trying to conceal her body beneath baggy clothes, she wore a clingy black V-necked sweater and tight-fitting jeans. Her hair was wavy and black, with smoky wisps of gray, and her

eyelashes long and spiky. Her lavender nail polish matched the hue of her eye shadow. She looked bored.

Passing up several unoccupied chairs, Martin settled himself at the opposite end of the bar. On the wall to his left, there hung an antique, or more likely faux-antique, tin sign advertising a brand of whiskey with a nautical name. The sign featured a profile of a young woman, nude but for pirate boots and a tri-corner hat. Seated on a whiskey barrel on a beach, she was looking out over the ocean through a long, brass telescope. Gazing at the sign, Martin tried to remember when he and Julia had last had sex. Some time back in the fall, he guessed. And the time before that? Summer? One for each season of the year. As desire had faded away, so, too, had laughter and small intimacies. Often, they passed each other in the house like ghosts. Why had everything gone so wrong?

The bartender, a lean, dour, balding man, was desultorily wiping down some glasses. If he had noticed Martin enter, he gave no sign.

“Excuse me.”

“Just a second.”

Putting aside his rag, the bartender shuffled down to Martin’s end of the bar.

“What’ll it be?”

“A Scotch, please. You have Glenlivet?”

The bartender frowned.

“You can get that up the street, pal. This is a shot-and-a-beer kind of place.”

“Right. Well, the thing about going up the street is that it gets too crowded. Everybody goes there. Johnny Walker will do.”

Muttering something under his breath, the bartender departed. When he returned, he set Martin’s glass down hard, splashing some of the scotch on the bar.

At the other end, the older man put on his grim-laden jacket and left. The young man slid his chair closer to that of the woman. He said something to her, and she shook her head. He leaned in more closely still and placed his hand over hers. She snatched her hand away and picked up her glass and her keys from the bar. A moment later, she had settled into

the chair beside Martin's. A heavy, clove-like scent wafted in the air around her.

"The MAGA ass clown giving you a hard time?"

"The creeper! He has two kids at home. He says he's a pipefitter, but he's in here day and night. I think his girlfriend supports the three of them."

The man glared at them, and Martin, who had stared down many a hostile witness, glared back.

"I'd love to sink my teeth into him in a courtroom. He's the kind of deadbeat who probably wouldn't even bother to show up, though. When his girlfriend finally comes to her senses and kicks him out, she'll never see a dime of child support."

Martin and his younger antagonist continued to lock eyes, until the latter looked away. Finishing his beer, the young man rose to leave. On his way out, he gave the door a violent shove.

"You're a lawyer?"

"Yep. And I play one on TV, too. If you were watching at noon today, you would have seen me. They had me on to talk about that awful mess with Tiffany."

The woman yawned. Martin felt even more deflated than he had after his visit with Heather.

"I don't watch TV, I don't care about Tiffany one way or the other, and above all, I hate lawyers."

"You and everybody else. Until you need one to get you out of trouble."

"I worked for a lawyer once. He paid me nothing. I asked him for a raise because I couldn't afford my rent. He told me I should find a cheaper apartment. He said, 'What are you, five-one, five-two? How much do you weigh? Maybe 110 when you're dripping wet? How much space do you really need?' I spit in his face. He threatened to have me arrested, but I guess he decided it wasn't worth his time if he couldn't bill for it.

"Now I teach math to eighth graders. Ungrateful little shits."

Martin signaled the bartender, who looked the other way.

"What is it with this guy? Is it my face he doesn't like?"

“Probably. It’s unfamiliar. And your suit, too. You are a little overdressed for this dump.”

“How does he stay in business?”

“I don’t know, but he does. Maybe not for much longer, though. It used to be like a party in here every night. The people who come now...”

She waved her hand dismissively. When she beckoned the bartender, holding two fingers aloft, he came promptly, bearing a pair of shot glasses. No sooner did he set them down than they were empty again.

“Two more,” said Martin.

“I guess my money is good here after all, as long as I’m spending enough of it,” he whispered as the bartender shuffled away. “I have a daughter who’s in eighth grade. I’d be thrilled if she weighed 110. She won’t eat unless someone forces her. It’s like she’s trying to make herself disappear. We had to put her in the hospital. Second time in six months. She was always such a happy, sweet-natured kid. Now, she won’t even look at me. Literally won’t look at me. How the hell does that happen?”

He looked again at the woman on the barrel. Her outlines had begun to blur.

“You need another drink. Or two.”

Swaying in her chair, his drinking companion leaned against him. Martin felt the gentle pressure of her hand upon his knee.

The bartender brought two more rounds, then returned once more bearing a bottle in a brown paper bag.

“I’m taking this one home. You want to help me finish it?”

Once, such a proposition, accompanied by the creep of a woman’s hand up his inner thigh, would have made him hard in an instant. Now he felt but a faint stirring, a vestigial reflex. “Thanks, but I really should go. I’ve had way too much to drink already.”

She withdrew her hand.

“What’s the matter? The wedding ring weighing you down?”

“Among other things.”

“Well, at least walk me outside, in case the MAGA creeper is lurking around.”

“I think I scared him off. It doesn’t take much with someone like him. But all right.”

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Neither the MAGA creeper nor anyone else was about on the street. The snow, falling thickly now, wind-tossed, forming eddies in the air, had already blanketed the sidewalk.

“Wait,” the woman said, standing in front of the Stationhouse door.

She rifled through her handbag, finally plucking out a pack of cigarettes. Cupping her hand to shield the flame, she lit one. She and Martin started toward her car, but they had only gone a few steps before the cigarette went out. She lit it again, with the same result. Tossing it aside, she poked around for another, but the pack slipped from her hands. She dropped to her knees, groping in the snow. By the time she found the cigarettes, the pack was thoroughly soaked. She crumbled it up and flung it away. As she tried to rise, she slipped and fell onto her side and cried out in pain. Martin pulled her to her feet and then held her arm to keep her upright. The trek to the car—in actual distance, less than a block—felt interminable.

The Volkswagen had a cavernous dent in the passenger’s side door and lacked a front grille. Assorted smaller dents, nicks, scratches, scuff marks, and rust spots marred the dark-blue body, along with a streak of white paint—the residue, perhaps, of a parking lot encounter with another car. The car was parked crookedly, its rear wheels almost flush against the curb, its front end protruding into the road. The woman slipped again as she stepped off the curb, but Martin caught her. Reaching the car, she suddenly pivoted about, her back flush against the front passenger door and window, her face inches from his, her eyes expectant. Still unaroused, he kissed her anyway, but he had hesitated a moment too long. Her mouth remained half-closed, and her tongue lay inert. She tasted of whiskey and cigarettes, of 2 a.m. at the Stationhouse, of bedsheets soiled by strangers, of hopes raised and dashed by duplicitous married men. He shrank back.

“What?”

“It wouldn’t do either of us any good.”

“Now you decide that? You’re a shit.”

“A lot of people have told me that.”

