

They say it is the first step that costs the effort. I do not find it so. I am sure I could write unlimited 'first chapters'. I have indeed written many.
J.R.R. Tolkien

“Not all those who wander are lost.”
— J.R.R. Tolkien, The Fellowship of the Ring

Chapter 1: Harvey the Entrepreneur

“Team, everyone needs to step up right now,” Harvey snapped. He would not be misunderstood or have his words discounted. Not today.

“Everyone, including me, needs to be at the top of our game for the foreseeable future. Understand?” He looked around the table, making brief eye contact with each person. It made things very uncomfortable, to be sure. This was not like the old Harvey everybody loved.

His leadership team surrounded him at the large conference table. This meeting was not the regularly scheduled Tuesday morning forum. This was 4:40 on a Monday afternoon. The urgent text to the core managers read, “Conference room, 15 minutes. No excuses.”

Harvey dramatically entered the room. He was wearing his typical white button-down shirt with sleeves rolled up, ruffled slacks, and reading glasses tied around his neck. Unceremoniously, he tossed a thick pile of disheveled papers in front of his chair at the business end of the large table. No one spoke. This was Harvey’s company, clearly Harvey’s meeting.

After an uncharacteristically long time, he finally began to speak. Harvey’s brow furrowed, his voice urgent, his words unrehearsed, and his body language clear. Harvey was worried. He rubbed his thick hands through his sparse white hair, ungracefully shoved his third pair of Wal-Mart reading glasses this week onto his face, and looked down at a red-marked, drenched

spreadsheet splayed before him. He was hunched forward. Harvey looked tired. Harvey was very tired.

“People, you probably know...” He paused, shaking his head slowly, and let his reading glasses fall to his chest. “Of course, you do.” He paused again, looking down dejectedly. “This recession is killing us. I am not blaming anyone. Maybe I am. I probably should have seen this coming. But I didn’t. This is on me.”

“We just need to work harder and smarter,” he said, not looking at anyone in particular. “And someone needs to pull a rabbit out of their...uh—hat—or anywhere else, soon.”

Sadie, short for Sandra, was very concerned for Harvey and had been for some time. She had been by his side from the beginning—back when they worked out of his small garage. He would bring in sales, and she would do the rest: everything from purchasing to manufacturing, bookkeeping, and coffee, yes, even rodent control.

Back then, it was exciting. Harvey was a savant, an entrepreneurial genius. Everything he touched seemed to turn to gold. Investors lined up to get a piece of Harvey’s knack for the bottom line. His current company had found a sizable niche in the industry, and early on, they had difficulty keeping up with orders.

The company quickly grew from Harvey’s garage to a small rental unit, and now it has a large warehouse with sixty employees. Sadie oversaw all manufacturing, from ordering to shipping, and did it well. However, she was not a miracle worker and had no power over an entire economy turning south.

Sadie looked at Harvey with motherly endearment. She knew he couldn’t keep this up much longer. What little hair he had left was white and unkempt. His eyes were uncharacteristically puffy. Years ago, they had both talked about retiring in their early 70s. Harvey was 83 last June, and Sadie was, well, let’s just say, not middle-aged anymore, either. There appeared to be no apparent exit strategy. Most of Harvey’s best friends had retired, died, or checked into homes. Would her friend and mentor be far behind?

She wondered if he was still taking Percocet for his back. She knew of others like him who had lived with high stress and got hooked on pain meds. Harvey swore he had stopped but didn’t want to discuss it further. She wasn’t so sure. He was guarding his back.

He hadn’t golfed for weeks. Not only was golf a vital outlet for his stress, but he also loved his foursome buddies almost as much as he liked creating businesses. They understood him, he thought. But everything was falling apart.

Ron, his best friend, had been a manager at Goldman Sachs until a few months ago. His wife found him slumped over in his favorite chair in his thirty thousand-dollar, recently remodeled man cave. It was a severe stroke, not unexpected. His blood pressure was way above what the doctor wanted. He drank himself to sleep almost every night—15-year-aged GlenDronach Single Malt—and smoked one of his favorite cigars, the Davidoff white label Double, a classic corona from the Dominican Republic. It was wrapped in an oily Ecuadorian Habano wrapper. Ron enjoyed the dark chocolate and coffee notes, but he actually liked the fat, stubby Corona feel—it

made him feel “gangsta,” he said with a grin. The cigar shop owner ordered them specifically for Ron. A whole box costs just under \$1000.

“How can someone like Ron be replaced?” Harvey went into a dark funk for weeks. “Is this all there is?”

That reminded Harvey of another tragedy. Another golfing buddy, Robert, a very successful young banker, had gone cave diving with a group off the coast of Florida. He was younger, in his 60s, and in pretty good shape, all things considered. Something went wrong. A rescue team was sent in after the group failed to appear at the designated rendezvous spot before their air was calculated to run out. When they found their bodies, none of them had made it. On his diver’s portable blackboard, Robert wrote, “Is this all there is?” No one knew if he was referring to oxygen remaining in their tanks or life in general.

It had been a difficult twelve months.

Anyway, there was no time for golf now. Harvey’s company was tanking.

The \$8 million high revenue mark they hit in 2017 has been shattered. They were looking at \$3 million at the end of this year, closer to \$2 million. Pink slips had gone out last month to a dozen employees, a couple of whom had been with the company for over a decade. These people were like family.

But what else could be done? The recent months have been hard on everyone, including Sadie. The late nights and pressure were also taking a toll on her home life. Her husband, a philosophy and religion professor at a local university, told her he had enough of the stress that she would bring home. She knew he was right. But...

“Sadie,” Harvey said in a quiet, desperate tone, “can anything more be done to reduce costs? We need to make more adjustments to...”

“You mean fire more people, don’t you, Harvey?” She shot back, her curtness surprising even herself. “Why not say what you mean?”

Sadie realized she was being louder than her usual soft-spoken tone—and angrier. Harvey’s eyes jerked up toward her. Her words had wounded him. She had to admit that she felt both sad and righteous at the same time.

There was more awkward silence at the table. Harvey subconsciously glanced at the framed Rotary Four-Way Test hanging on the back wall across from him. He knew them by heart, and they had guided him through many rough waters. “The Four-Way Test of the things we think, say, or do. First, Is it the TRUTH? Second, Is it FAIR to all concerned? Third, Will it build GOODWILL and BETTER FRIENDSHIPS? Fourth, Will it be BENEFICIAL to all concerned?” Today, he felt they only mocked him. Such was the state of his mind.

“Yes, I suppose you are right—as always,” Harvey said, this time even more dejectedly. “That is exactly what I mean.”

Harvey didn't challenge her, not this time. His voice was now quiet, reserved, and without any emotion. "I don't know what choice we have."

Sadie looked straight at him, frustrated and tired. She threw her hands in the air and exclaimed, "What's going on, Harvey? Are we going to make it? What do I tell the staff?"

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This was not Harvey's first rodeo. He started and sold three other businesses before this one. He knew tough economies before; there were downturns in 1991 and 2001. Harvey confidently—almost magically—rode through those recessions and won. He was like a champion bull rider—no fear, no hesitation—nothing stopped him until now.

In 2003, he sold the rest of his companies and invested all his savings, energies, and reputation into this venture. This economic downturn was taking it all.

Harvey was approaching the panic stage, though he didn't allow himself to admit it even privately.

He shook his head and looked down at the table. "Only God knows," Harvey said in answer to her question. He didn't mean it in any religious way. He was just being frank. "I don't."

Unfortunately, Dwayne raised his hand to speak. Sadie tried to stop him, but it was too late. This would not go well.

Dwayne, the young, bearded, skinny jeans-wearing Millennial generation caricature who had just last spring earned his MBA with a minor in psychology from the local university, unfortunately for all, took this opportunity to speak up.

By appearance, Dwayne was a strange combination of Buddy Holly and Justin Bieber. As an intern, he was minimally two and a half decades younger than the next oldest manager on the team. Dwayne was very bright and liked to remind people often—140 IQ, graduating near the top of his class. He explained to more than one person that he would have been at the very top of his class except for coming down with the flu during exam week. What he had in IQ, he lacked in EQ.

Unfortunately, he took this opportunity to share his 140 IQ with the rest of the table, a virtual brain dump. It couldn't be described any other way than a lecture—hard for the others to tell if he was well-meaning or demeaning, indeed not a poster child for humility.

"Look, I'm sorry," unknowingly channeling his inner Bieber. ("You gotta go and get angry at all my honesty, sorry")—and clearly, not sorry at all.

"I'm the new guy here, but I have been talking to many people, including a bunch of our customers, who are scared about the company's direction. They told me..." pausing for effect and tenting his fingers to appear more guru-esque. "They *all* told me they were planning on going to our competitors...totally. You know. They asked me why we don't have more social media presence and some tech support younger than fifty. No judgment. We just aren't listening

to the customers. Like, I am sorry if this offends anyone, you know, but it is the truth. Better said now than after the ship sinks.”

Among Dwayne’s many gifts was the ability to use the truth to distribute blame to as many people in authority as possible—never himself. That would require being in a role with any authority. With such an imposing brain, one would think he would have a better grasp on timing and context. Not so. This ill-timed and insensitive browbeating was beyond inappropriate. It felt like a rusty jailhouse shiv to Harvey.

Harvey slammed his hands on the table and yelled, “Enough!” His face reddened, and his jaws clenched, “Anyone else who wants to take a shot at running this company like our newest genius here? Hmmm? Aaron? Meg? Sebastian? Anyone?”

He paused and looked into each person’s eyes for effect. “I didn’t think so. Dwayne, let me see if I heard you. You have been talking to *all* our customers about the failings of *my* company? In fact, you have found that ‘lots of them’ agree with you. Am I listening well enough?” Harvey emphasized ‘listening’ as he stared into Dwayne’s shocked face.

The last phrase was dripping with sarcasm. From the looks of it, Dwayne still couldn’t see just how undermining his words were, particularly if he had been having such conversations with the company’s customers behind the company’s back.

“Well,” added Harvey, clapping his hands again with bitter sarcasm. “The pupil has eclipsed the master. It looks like we have no more to teach you, Big D. You have mastered my business in a record-breaking six short months. If I had all the answers like you, I wouldn’t hang around a sinking ship like this either. I would go out and start my own flawless company. Congratulations! Your internship is officially over. Go pack up your things. You are done here. And...oh, yeah...sorry!”

If the room wasn’t tense before, it was now. This was not Harvey—not the Harvey they knew. Harvey had always been kind and soft-spoken, like a father to them. He was their leader, an entrepreneur, and a bit invincible—always with a card or two up his sleeve.

Sadie remembered, but this wasn’t the time to remind him; it was Harvey who brought Dwayne on staff, a new management intern position, preaching to the team that we need to lift the next generation—get them on board. Frankly, he had been the only one patient with Dwayne’s millennialism. But no more.

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Harvey worked until 9:45 that night, like most evenings. He put on his old jacket, wearily got in his 2014 Ford F150, and drove to his comfortable executive home nestled on the 8th hole of the Tiger Wood’s designed golf course in an upscale gated community, about thirty-five minutes from the plant. He used to play golf two or three times a week, but then Ron and Jim died, and his back started acting up again. Sad.

His wife was away—again—visiting her older sister who had just gone into hospice with third-stage breast cancer. He probably should have gone with her, but he had responsibilities. This was

not a good time for him to take off. She wanted to go alone anyway.

They belonged to an old, established church in the community. He would describe himself as a 'good Christian.' But he had grown less and less in sync with his church and organized religion. Maybe the right word is just 'bored.' First and foremost, he was a businessman. Religion had its place, but the world ran on profits. He recently had that conversation with Peter, one of his few remaining golf buddies, a fellow Rotarian, and a man on the church's board of directors this term.

Over a beer, Peter asked Harvey about God, church, and other things. Harvey took a deep draught of the pale ale made by a local craft brewery and complained, "I like to separate God from my bottom line. You know what I mean. Where was God when I needed him in 2001 or '08?"

Peter and Harvey had gone through catechism together decades ago. Harvey didn't remember much about the topics anymore. He was a member of the church and was in good standing. That was sufficient. It's not like he is going to teach Sunday school anytime soon.

"Look, I've been a good man," Harvey said slightly too defensively. "I gave to a lot of charities. I was one of the founders and board members of the local food bank. If anyone could make it to heaven with his head held high, it would be me. Right? What else does God require of me? Maybe He won't say, 'Well done, good and faithful servant!' I mean...I am not a missionary or a minister. But I have given a lot. Just ask Pastor Rick. He'll tell you. I have been faithful to my wife. None of my kids did drugs or anything else kids do today. I am a good man."

If the truth were known, Harvey *was* a good man—no arguments there. Yet, truth be told, he had grown increasingly distant from the church and maybe from God. The worship service didn't draw his interest as much as it did when he was younger. It all seemed less relevant to his life somehow.

Deep down, he didn't expect much from church, worship, prayer, or, for that matter, God anymore. He was a businessman. His reputation and security were dependent on his talents and efforts. Right?

"God? He has His priorities in the world. I leave Him alone, and He leaves me alone. I am not perfect. I have made mistakes, but the good I have done far outweighs all the bad—you can be sure."

Eleanor, Harvey's wife, is concerned for him, but they don't have the kind of relationship where she can speak about spiritual matters. Pastor Rick regularly asks Eleanor how Harvey is doing and says he is praying for him, but he doesn't mention any specific prayer requests. What can he say that might make a difference?

Pastor Rick, though, has noticed a disturbing trend. Harvey is one of many professionals, men and women, who were once dynamic church leaders but participate less and less as they age. The things of the church don't seem to interest them as they once did. Religion and faith are less relevant than making decisions critical to the lives of so many at their companies.

Harvey sees his role as a faithful tither to the church which is set up for monthly direct deposit. He wants to do the right thing—even be generous. Of course, the board is appreciative, and says so to Harvey and Eleanor.

Having said that, any objective observer would note that the relationship is on the decline. Harvey is one of many aging Boomers who are less involved in their church, having little excitement and few expectations of any real change.

Harvey heated the leftover casserole Eleanor left in the refrigerator for him and sat down to eat in front of his favorite news show on his sizeable 65-inch TV. He pours himself a glass of Wild Turkey 101. It wasn't GlenDronach single malt, but it worked for Harvey.

He holds the glass up to the light. He always thought the light shining through the caramel liquid and ice was beautiful—even addictive. Then, there is the musical tinkling of ice in the tumbler. He could understand how some become alcoholics. Harvey remembers his dad's favorite being Wild Turkey 101 too. Every night, his dad would drink a glass of Wild Turkey straight up. Harvey knew when Dad sat down with his full tumbler, he was to be left alone. It's funny what you remember.

Harvey was never really close with his dad. He was only a young boy when his dad, Sam, died in a tragic car accident. His mother never said too much about it, but Harvey suspected alcohol was involved.

Harvey suspected the bigger problem was that his dad's once thriving business was about to go bankrupt—a combination of bad business decisions, a bad economy, and many other reasons. It happens.

Even though Harvey was young at the time, he remembers his dad drinking more and more. He wouldn't let anyone help him. Sam was a very proud man. That's how men were back then. Show no weakness. They didn't have any way to deal with the shame.

The drinking became so bad that his mother would pack up the two boys to spend a few days at her sister's across town. She called it a vacation, but the boys knew it had something to do with Dad and his drinking. Then they received word his dad had died in an accident. He drove right into a bridge barrier—instant death. Car totaled. The police said fog was involved. Maybe. Nobody talks about it, but Harvey's brother Sam Jr. believed it was suicide—"death by shame," he calls it. This was Dad retaking charge of his life—or his death. He didn't need help.

Mom got a fat check from the insurance company days before the business went Chapter 11. In the end, Dad was a provider, at least income-wise—not so much for relationships. Harvey wondered how his life would have been different if his dad had lived longer—probably not much different.

Sam wasn't very vocal about his feelings or praise for the boys. Harvey can't remember his dad ever hugging him. He was sure his dad never said, "Harvey, do you know how much I love you?" That's OK. Men must be strong, and needing others is a weakness.

A couple of marriage counselors back, Harvey was told he was still looking for his dad's

approval. That's why he is so determined to make businesses work, spends so much time there, stresses over the bottom line, and spends little time at home. The counselor suggested Harvey felt he needed to be more successful than his father to prove he was a worthy son. Then his dad wouldn't leave him. Then, his dad would tell him how proud of him he was. Then, his dad would hug him and tell him he loved him.

"Oh yeah," one shrink asked snarkily, "What was your dad's alcohol of choice?"

"That's ridiculous," Harvey told him with surprising defensiveness. "Pure crap. I didn't really have a father. If I did, I certainly have no feelings toward him now. He didn't care enough for us to stick around. That's on him, not me! I am an orphan. What I have done, I have done on my own. I don't need him to tell me he was proud."

Harvey sat motionless on the couch as his mind drew precariously close to the same dark rabbit hole. Harvey looked down at his drink, lifted it to his lips, and chugged it. He hadn't thought of his brother, Sam Jr., for a long time.

"How long ago was it?" He tried to remember. "At least a decade ago now. No, it was more than that."

Sam Jr. had fallen from a ladder and hurt his back pretty severely. After a week of rehab, he came home and, a couple of days later, went back to work, but he was never the same. Cynthia, his wife, said he would never talk about his pain, but it was clearly there. "Sharing feelings," said Sam Jr., "is a weakness and not my thing." Sam Jr. was just like the old man.

Weeks passed, and Sam became more distant and isolated. Harvey came running when he got the call from Cynthia. "Harvey, your brother is in the hospital. He's not going to make it much longer." Harvey couldn't believe what he saw when he went into the hospital room. Sam's lips were blue, his skin clammy, and he couldn't stop shaking. They now know he had become addicted to painkillers and had overdosed on a nasty combination of oxycontin and alcohol. There was little the doctor could do. Sam Jr. died alone, surrounded by his family.

Harvey poured himself another glass of bourbon.

"Well, the good thing is Sam Jr.'s pain is over—no more shame. He doesn't have to cover up anymore. He doesn't have to deal with the failures in his life. He's free." What shocked Harvey was the voice in his head wasn't his. It was his dad's.

What a thought. This evening, it became as clear as could be to Harvey. "That's the big deal, right?" He hadn't felt free for a long time. Certainly not now. It's done for his dad and brother. But he's more than likely suffering failure once again—being exposed as a lousy provider—possibly ending his life exposed as a bad husband and businessman—just like dad—just like Sam Jr.

"What is it with my family?" he said aloud to no one in particular.

It's true. Harvey's first marriage ended in a very public explosion, expensive lawyers, and his children taken by her. But he did what men do and muscled through it all. Time heals all wounds,

right? He had hoped to stay in touch with his two boys, but it just didn't work out, and now, well...."

His current marriage was better—at least at the start. But he and Eleanor kind of let things go a bit—maybe a lot? Counseling was her idea, and it seemed to only make matters worse. She says Harvey is distant and closed off. "She just doesn't understand," he thinks to himself. Or did he say it aloud? He can't be sure. More darkness.

This is his third business venture. The previous two had success at first, but both ran out of runway. Both were also very public failures, with Harvey firing many friends who had trusted him. It was the hardest thing he had ever done, and he still couldn't look some of them or their spouses in the eyes. He knows they felt betrayed, but what could Harvey do? It was just business. He tried to rehire some when he got his next venture going, but it wasn't the same.

"I don't think I can do it again. God no!" He says as he takes another slug. He was young then and had a lot more energy than now. Maybe he was a better businessman. Maybe he just cared more then. Now, he is tired, and his back hurts.

He takes painkillers for his back, too, just like Sam Jr., but he tells himself that he is careful not to lose control. Lesson learned from Sam Jr.. The oxycontin helps, but he still doesn't sleep well, which makes matters worse. He tosses and turns most of the night.

Like most evenings lately, Harvey is downing a very heady cocktail made up of Turkey 101. His chronic pain is minimally managed by oxy; he has fears of being a failure again, and of course, he is alone. Maybe it's the booze speaking, but right now, on this couch, he wonders if he can survive this one or if he wants to. It is his choice, after all. He is his father's son. He is Sam Jr.'s brother.

As if awakened from a dream state, Harvey jerks his head and mumbles as he falls into a shallow sleep, "Harvey, Harvey, Harvey, this isn't you. You are not your father or your brother. You are better than that."

Tonight, it seems Harvey will dodge another bullet—maybe. An objective observer would note that these downward emotional slopes happen more often. But for Harvey, there are no objective observers. He will not let his wife get too close. He is very adept at denial. I think it is accurate to say he is a train wreck about to happen. Will it be days, weeks, or months? Can't say for sure. But something must happen soon. Harvey, the good man, the gifted entrepreneur, self-sufficient, and distant husband, the Christian, is depressed. More to the point, he is alone.

Tonight, Harvey would be on the couch until he decided it was time to go to bed or until the oxy kicked in.