

Facing Mrs. Abercrombie

(For A.W.)

Look at her.

Sitting there all high and mighty. Like she's the Queen of friggin' Sheba. Thinking she's got it all sorted out, everyone and everything slotted into their proper place.

"I'm sure you realize that the money we raise from the sale of chocolates is of great benefit to our school," Mrs. F. Abercrombie says. What does the F stand for, Deb wonders. Florence? Faye? But she also knows, it has been made perfectly clear to her, that it isn't her place to ask. Not befitting her lowly status.

She has already decided that she isn't going to make it any easier for Fatass Abercrombie. So she just sits there, not saying anything or seeming to react. But Mrs. Abercrombie isn't fazed by the tactic, she just plows right ahead.

"Lucille was sent home with one container of chocolates. There are twenty boxes inside at three dollars each--that comes to sixty dollars."

Lucille. That just kills her. She must be the only person in the world who calls Lucy that. Joe, the big Kenny Rogers fan. *You picked a fine time to leave me, Lucille.* Only you were the one who did the leaving, weren't you, Joe? Asshole.

"All of our students are instructed to sell as many boxes as they can and return the unsold portion." Deb knows all of this. They both know she knows it. Part of the torture. "The money is used to support and subsidize a wide variety of school activities and programs." Pausing but Deb keeps her lips tightly buttoned. "Everyone else brought back their money several weeks ago." Pause. "When we talked to Lucille she

was...vague. We were hoping--" who's *we*? "--that you might be able to shed some light on this. That's why the note was sent home. Just to try to set the record straight."

Mrs. Abercrombie's desk is very neat and efficient looking. Everything tucked into labeled files, no slips of paper showing or fluttering post-it notes required to pique a memory that forgot *nothing*. A mug of pens and pencils within easy reach. Her chair is high-backed, like a throne, to go along with her lofty position.

"You must understand, we're not seeking to assign blame." *Oh, really?* "We asked you to come in because, well, we're not really sure of the best way to proceed. I guess what we're seeking is clarification. An understanding. We're not trying to turn anyone into a villain."

Deb almost snorts at that but manages to catch herself in time. She tries to meet Mrs. Abercrombie's gaze but finds nothing to cling to, no empathy, some of that understanding she was just talking about, so her eyes go back to exploring the desktop between them. No cute keepsakes or family pictures, she notices. Mrs. F. Abercrombie likes to keep her business and home life strictly segregated. Where was *Mr.* Abercrombie? Did they have any kids? Deb has a hard time picturing it, imagining this woman purple-faced, features swollen and distorted from the effort of pushing a child out into the world. No, her job is undoubtedly her entire life. Deb envies her.

"It's not just a matter of the money," Mrs. Abercrombie lies. "Lucille...well, when our counsellor, Mrs. Price, talked to her, Lucille insisted that she didn't know what happened to it, the sixty dollars. She was absolutely adamant that she sold the chocolates, went around the neighbourhood, worked hard and collected the money and put it away in an envelope. But after that she refused to say anything more and Mrs. Price didn't want to risk upsetting her any further. Apparently she was quite...distraught."

Deb wishes she could smoke. No, what she *really* wishes is that she hadn't come in here in the first place. Ignored the summons the way she had brushed off the school

secretary when she called last week. *What am I doing here?* And it just kept getting worse and worse--

It had gone wrong right from the beginning, when she realized that this Abercrombie bitch wasn't going to give her a break, allow her an easy way out. Deb has become pretty good at judging people, figuring them out from the moment she first meets them. F. Abercrombie isn't the least embarrassed or self-conscious about what she is doing. She wants that money and *nothing* is going to dissuade her. She is one hard seed as dear, old daddy would've said.

"Mrs. Perrault?"

"I spent it." There. The truth. Let her put that in her pipe and smoke it. And don't be apologetic about it, either. There's still a way out of this and she's surprised it hasn't occurred to her before. "The child tax credit was late last month and we needed the money for groceries." Deb sits back, more satisfied and happy with herself than she's been in a long time. In charge again, holding all the cards and almost smirking about it. "That's the absolute, honest to God truth, Mrs. Abercrombie. It's not an easy thing to have to admit, as I'm sure you must realize. But there it is." She feels like a million dollars and this time she has no trouble looking the principal right square in the eyes, not bashful or downcast, a woman to be reckoned with again.

"I see," Mrs. Abercrombie replies, but oddly enough she doesn't seem taken aback by Deb's heartfelt confession. If anything, the temperature in the room drops another few degrees. "But I'm afraid that doesn't quite explain...I have to be honest with you, Mrs. Perrault--"

"*Ms.* actually," Deb interrupts her, somewhat nettled that her moment of triumph hasn't been acknowledged in some way. "My husband and I separated some time ago."

Mrs. Abercrombie purses her lips, an expression that appears more annoyed than sympathetic. *What is wrong with this woman?* "Thank you for correcting me." Almost as if in retaliation, she reaches into a nearby file folder and pulls out a pink Hilroy

notebook that looks vaguely familiar. "Lucille's home room teacher brought this to my attention. She has the class keep--I guess you could call it a journal, where they take a few minutes each day to write down their thoughts, what's on their minds or bothering them. It's very helpful and for some of our students quite therapeutic. I thought you might be interested in one particular entry."

Uh oh.

She finds the right page and pushes the notebook across to Deb, indicating with one polished, buffed fingernail a longish paragraph and Deb immediately recognizes her daughter's meandering scrawl:

"Im so mad at my Mom rite now. She went to the bar with her boyfreind and then the two of them went to caseno and spend all that choclit money on boos and slot masheens. How can a person ever do that? All she ever thinks about is herself and I am sick and tired of it. I wish I could run a way some weres like the girl in that book I am reading who gos to..."

There was more, plenty more, and it didn't get any better.

Shit.

"Our children aren't blind," Mrs. Abercrombie observes, retrieving the notebook once she sees that Deb isn't interested in reading any more of it. "They're not stupid either. They have a strong sense of what's right and wrong and they--"

Deb finds herself on her feet but has no idea how she came to be standing. She feels trapped in this little office smelling of paper and this woman's subtle, expensive perfume. She wants *out* but first she has to do something to restore her pride and recover vast tracts of lost ground. "You think it's so *easy*." Practically hissing it. "You read that and you think to yourself 'there's the answer, right there'. You bring me in and all along you intended to pull this shit on me. Wave it in my face: 'here's the evidence, you're

guilty as charged'." She's flushed and hot and red as a beet. What is she giving birth to this time? "A nine year old writes that and you believe it without even questioning. *Nine years old*. And it's supposed to be private, right? A journal is for private stuff and instead you bring it in here and use it against me. Where's your--your decency, for Christ's sake? What does she know? And as long as we're on the subject, what the Hell do *you* know?"

She should have made Pete come in with her. Big Pete. They wouldn't have screwed around with *him*. Not with his temper. And come to think of it, he's to blame in a way, he was the one who kept saying that they had to get out and do something. Spoil themselves. Get away from all the bullshit for awhile.

And, God, she has to admit, it had been fun, having a few drinks and dancing up a storm and then doing a bit of gambling, acting like a couple of high rollers. A person deserves that sometimes. To let their hair down and cut loose. This Abercrombie bitch wouldn't know anything about that. She's way too tight-assed for that kind of thing.

"Certainly if there are special circumstances we're willing to--"

"You'll get your money, I'll make sure of it." Deb heads for the door, hearing her get up behind her. "I can see how important that is to you people. Funny how I thought this was supposed to be a *school*." She's thinking about the bottles and recycling on the back porch, that would bring in twenty or thirty dollars. She had been saving it to get her hair done but that can wait. Everything can wait. That sixty bucks will be the only thing on her mind until she's finally able to pay it back. Every last goddamn cent.

The secretary jumps when she storms out of the office, working herself up more and more with each passing second. "I guess it's asking too much to expect any sympathy in this place," she snaps as she stalks out.

Then she's in the hallway, heading the wrong way at first so that she has to turn around and stomp back in the other direction, past Mrs. Abercrombie who doesn't appear ruffled, not a hair out of place. "Thank you for coming in today," she coos.

"Kiss my ass," Deb snarls, "and that goes for all of you. *Kiss my ass!*" Barging through the heavy iron doors and finally, thankfully, out of there, breathing real air again. Freedom, sweet freedom.

After about a block she starts to come down, feeling better, more like herself. And already beginning to think things through in her mind, everything seeming more clear now that all of the pressure is gone. At least she had said something, not just sat there and taken it.

Then she remembers that there's another school not that far from here, a Catholic school, true, but nowadays that isn't any big deal. She could pull Lucy out of that other shit-hole and transfer her to--what was it called? St. Mary's or whatever. And that way she didn't have to worry about paying back the money and could wave that fact right under their noses. Not a thing they could do about it either.

Lucy wouldn't be too happy about it but, then again, this is all Lucy's fault. Writing stuff like that so people could read it. She should know better. You don't pull that kind of crap on people who sacrifice and work hard and raise you against all the odds in the world. A person does their best to be a good parent and look where it gets you.

Lucy would have to learn. Life is hard sometimes. You make choices and then you have to live with the consequences. Deb knows all about that, has known it for as long as she can remember. It didn't have anything to do with fairness, it was just part of the price you paid for being alive.

And it adds up to a helluva lot more than sixty measly dollars, Lucy, my sweet, and if you'd like to sit down and write that in your little, pink notebook for the whole world to see, you go right ahead. Your dear, old mother won't mind one damn bit...

End