

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 up front. And it might tie his hands unnecessarily.

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

A drizzle is falling in Washington when he leaves the office on 11th Street a little before five. He hasn't made much progress on this week's column, but he needs an early start to get to the University of Maryland in College Park, where he teaches a weekly seminar in journalism ethics.

On the ride along slow-moving Rhode Island Avenue, he keeps thinking about the email. He's hoping she'll call soon, but he knows there's a good chance he'll never hear from her again, never find out whether it was a hoax or whether she changed her mind or even whether she carried out her plan. There isn't much he can do but wait.

The ethics seminar is for graduate students in journalism, many of them in mid-career. He loves handing them a difficult problem and watching them wrestle with it, struggling to put ethics above the constant on-the-job demand to write attention-grabbing stories. The class is diverse in every way, split by gender, race, and background, a fact that makes for spirited discussions. His email doesn't pose a standard journalism issue, but tonight's topic is anonymous sources, and he wonders if he might find a way to work it in.

He arrives on campus in time to grab a sandwich that he eats quickly. When he reaches the seminar room, everyone is already seated. He unloads his briefcase, takes a breath, and begins.

"We've talked a lot about transparency in reporting and how important it is to limit your use of anonymous sources. You owe it to your readers to show what and whom your reporting is based on so they can judge its credibility. But sometimes granting anonymity is the only way to get information. When that's the case, it's crucial to set ground rules and stick to them. Let's run through some typical approaches. Who wants to start?"

He stands up and begins pacing while he waits for the answers.

“Question the source’s motives and how that affects his information. Don’t let him use you.” The answer, a near verbatim quote from the Society of Journalists’ Code of Ethics, comes from Danny Flores, one of Sam’s favorites. He is in his late twenties, an earnest student who works as an editor on a TV news website, waiting for a chance for a real reporting job. Danny and Sam are the only men in the room wearing ties. Everyone else is dressed in jeans or shorts, with T-shirts or simple blouses.

“Yes,” Sam says, “but I’d qualify that. Sources often have ulterior motives and that’s not necessarily a problem. Just be sure you’re aware of them and that the benefit to your readers justifies what you’re doing. What else?”

“No personal attacks,” another student says.

“Exactly,” says Sam. “Never let someone hide behind anonymity to attack another person.”

They continue through the list, Sam still moving around the room, waiting not so patiently for an opening. When he doesn’t get one, he plunges in. “What if you find out the source has broken the law or intends to break the law?”

“That’s not your problem,” Danny says. “We’re not cops. Besides, sometimes we need them to break laws. Like if they’re giving you confidential information.”

“Agreed. We’re not cops and sometimes it works to our advantage if they break a law to reveal information,” he says before stopping and running his eyes over the group. “But what if someone confesses to a crime? Say they offer you an exclusive interview to say how sorry or guilty they feel but won’t let their name be revealed?”

“I’d take it,” says Josh Glenn, an eager but not-too bright kid who works for an online political news aggregator and who once told Sam he didn’t believe ethics should be a required

course. That was right after Sam asked him not to wear his baseball cap in class.

“Why would you take it?” Sam asks.

“Great human interest story. And it would serve the public.”

“How would it serve the public?” he asks, genuinely curious.

Josh doesn’t answer right away, and Eliza Morado tries to come to his rescue. “If the person felt guilty and sorry, and the interview showed that, it might discourage someone else from committing a similar crime,” she says.

Eliza is a thirtyish woman who writes a sports blog and is already lobbying Sam for a job with his paper. She’s wearing too-tight jeans and a top with a plunging neckline.

“So you’d be doing it to discourage crime?” he asks, knowing he hasn’t hidden his skepticism. “Do you really believe it would have that effect?”

“It might. And anyway, it’d make a great story.”

He looks around the room to see if anyone else wants to comment. His eyes settle on Danny. They look at each other for a second before Danny speaks. “You don’t know that it would discourage crime. It could have the opposite effect. It might encourage some nut case who wants his fifteen minutes in the limelight.”

“You can’t control that,” Eliza says. “If you never printed anything that might provoke some nut job, you’d never print anything.”

Others jump in and the discussion goes on until Sam worries that time will run out.

“Let me put another twist on it,” he says, still moving about the room. “What if you became aware of a long-ago sexual assault case that was never reported to the police? Let’s say the alleged perpetrator is a teacher who’s still in the school system. The victim is now a married adult. You grant anonymity to the victim thinking she deserves it and you want to save other kids from a similar fate. Plus, you know it could turn into a major

news story if it checks out. During the interview, the victim tells you she doesn't want to report it to the police because it's her word against his and no one will believe her. Instead she's contemplating killing the teacher."

It sounds implausible even to Sam, so he modifies it. "No, scratch that last part. Let's say she tells you that her husband bought a gun and she's worried he's going to go after the teacher."

He lets that float for a minute, turning from one student to the next as they take it in.

"You have to give the teacher a chance to comment before writing the story," one student says.

"Sure," Sam says, "but what would you tell him? You can't name the woman."

"If she's telling the truth, he already knows her name."

"Maybe," Danny breaks in. "What if the teacher's assaulted several kids over many years? He won't know which one is talking."

It's a good point, but it is steering the conversation away from where Sam wants it to go.

"Let's come back to the woman's fear that her husband is going to kill the guy. Would you go to the police with that?"

There is a pause while they think about it. "It's too vague," another woman offers, "and the police wouldn't take it seriously." The woman is Ariana Soto, a bookish, normally quiet and tentative student who has yet to break into journalism. Sam has seen Ariana and Danny arrive at class together and believes they're an item. He likes them both and, on some level, hopes he's right about them being together.

"Maybe you could talk to the husband first to see if the threat is real," Josh says.

Sam shakes his head. "Not unless the victim agrees. And even if you talk to the husband, how can you tell if he's a serious threat? You're not a shrink or a social worker."

“It will make him think twice about killing the guy if he knows you suspect him,” Josh says. “He’ll know he’ll get caught.”

Sam leans his weight against a wall as he considers that. “Is that your role? Why not go to the police? Citizens are required by law to speak up if they know a crime is about to be committed. Or do you think the First Amendment exempts the press?”

“The First Amendment is why you have to write the story,” Eliza says. “It’s not that complicated. You go to the teacher and say a woman is accusing him of assault. You don’t need a name because he’s going to deny he ever assaulted anyone. You let him comment and then print what you have. You don’t use the woman’s name, you don’t mention the husband or talk to him, and you don’t go to the police. Once it’s public, the cops can sort it out.”

“But if the woman doesn’t want to go to the police, they’ll have nothing to go on unless you tell them who she is,” Danny says. “You’re back to square one. And it’s not right to print that kind of allegation from an unnamed source. It’s not fair to the teacher.”

“It’s not fair to the woman to do nothing,” Ariana says.

Eliza shakes her head and starts to respond, but Sam interrupts her. He is out of time.

“Let’s make this an additional assignment for next week. Take the situation as I’ve outlined it and tell me what you’d do and how you’d justify your actions. Keep it to a thousand words. Be sure to include the threat from the husband and how you’d handle that. Is it your responsibility to do something or not? And if you think you should write a story, what would it say?”

He is tempted to tell them to email their essays to him within seventy-two hours, but he doesn’t. Much as he’d welcome it, he can’t expect his students to solve his problem.

When Lisa asked him to move out, Sam found a short-term rental, a furnished one-bedroom, hoping the separation would end soon. The apartment is on Massachusetts Avenue in an older building with a sparse, high-ceiling lobby, a perpetually annoyed doorman, and a chugging elevator that rattles on its way to the twelfth floor. It's a big step down from the colonial in Bethesda, which was spacious enough to raise three children and a dog named Dodger. He doesn't miss the house or the space, and the children are grown, but he misses Lisa. And he misses Dodger.

It is after ten when he opens his door, and he is still nursing a glass of bourbon, stretched out on a couch at midnight when his cellphone sounds. The screen says, "caller unknown," but he guesses who it is.

"Hello?"

"Mr. Ethics, I presume?" The voice sounds distant or maybe muffled. He wonders if she is trying to disguise it.

He takes a breath. "You can call me Sam."

"You can still call me Truly Desperate."

Sam stands up and walks over to the window, peeking behind the shade as if he expects to see her. "I'm glad you called."

"Why? Why do you care?" He can't tell whether it's fear or hostility that gives her voice an edge.

"You asked for my help."

"No, I asked for your advice on an ethical question."

"Well, I gave you that in my email and you still called me." He finds himself getting annoyed and isn't sure why. He tries to shake it off. "I'm not your enemy," he says. "I want to help if I can. If you don't want that, why did you send the email?"

"Truth is, I don't know why."

"Yes, you do. You said it yourself. You're desperate and you need help."

She is silent so he keeps going. "If what you say is true, you need to go to the police."

“You don’t believe me,” she says in a voice smothered with disappointment.

“I didn’t say that, but you haven’t given me much to grab hold of. If you’ll trust me, maybe there’s something I can do.”

She doesn’t answer right away, which he takes as a good sign.

“I can’t deal with this much longer,” she says.

“Why don’t we meet somewhere? You can tell me the whole story, and then we’ll try to figure out what to do.”

“I can’t let you know who I am.”

“Why is that?”

“Because I really do have to kill him. It’s the only way to make him stop.”

“I don’t believe that, and you don’t either. You wouldn’t have written me if you didn’t want me to do something.”

“Don’t analyze me. I already have a shrink.”

“Have you talked to him about this?”

“Her. And that’s none of your business.”

He sighs. He can hear the stress in her voice and wants to ease it.

“Look,” he says as gently as he can. “I’d like to help, but I can’t if you won’t let me and won’t talk to me. Why don’t we meet? No strings. You don’t have to tell me your name.”

“And you won’t try to follow me and find out who I am?”

“Of course not. I won’t do anything you don’t want me to do.” She doesn’t answer so he pushes on. “Just pick a place.”

More silence.

“Are you near downtown Washington or can you get there?” he asks.

She hesitates and he takes that as encouragement. “Take the subway and get off at Metro Center. Exit on 13th and turn left. You’ll see a Peet’s Coffee shop. How about we meet there tomorrow? You can pick the time.”

Now he hears her sigh. “Ten-thirty,” she says. “How will I know you?”

“I’ll wear a blue shirt and a red tie.”

“Like that’ll be different from everybody else in D.C.? Tell me what you look like.”

“A fifty-five-year-old Prince Harry. But with a lot less hair. The usual paunch.”

“If I’m not there, you’ll know I changed my mind.”