

Roy's Phone Call

by [Tom Ray](#) (January 2025)



The Land of Cockaigne (Pieter Bruegel the Elder, 1567)

Harriet knew her son's decision to join the Marines was an act of defiance. She continually pushed Mark to find a job, or start back to school, or undertake something more than video games and partying. That's why he announced his intention of enlisting in what he called "the Corps."

"You have more potential than that! Even if you don't want to get a degree, you can find a job to put you on the path to a good career."

"The Corps is a good career. I don't want to sit at a desk or punch a time clock." He stood over her as she sat in her easy chair, his lower lip stuck out like that of a spoiled child.

"They're fighting in wars! You'll get killed in the Marines!" She forced herself to avoid mentioning his excess weight and physical ineptitude.

"I'm not stupid! They teach you how to fight so you don't get killed. You ought to be proud of me for wanting to go fight. You think I'm stupid." He stomped out of the house.

All of this took place in the living room, where she'd been relaxing in front of the TV on a Sunday night. He had announced his intention of enlisting on the way out to meet up with friends.

She expected to continue the conversation, in a more civil tone, when he came back that night, or the next day. But he didn't return that night, as she stayed up late waiting for him, nor the next day, nor the next. And he didn't answer her numerous phone calls.

A few months before the argument about the Marines, Harriet had been in a Starbucks for a macchiato after getting her hair cut next door. The barista who took her order said, "You're Mark's mother, right?"

Harriet cringed at the thought that this young woman—skinny, pale, tattooed arms and neck, piercings on face, green spiked hair, yellow crooked teeth—knew her son. She recognized her as a potential source of information, however, and smiled. "Yes, I have a son named Mark. And you are—?"

"Amber."

"Oh, yes, Amber," Harriet tried to sound as if Mark had mentioned an Amber. The barista grinned.

Business was light in the mid-afternoon, so Amber had time to come to Harriet's table and chat.

"Johnny Q showed us your website, and Mark said, 'Yep, that's my mom.'"

"Harriet's Interiors?"

"Yeah. Do you have any other websites?"

"No, that's it." She wanted to ask who Johnny Q was, but that was secondary at this point. "How are you doing these days?"

"Same as always. Pumping caffeine by day and partying by night." She stretched her arms over her head, looking content. At that point another customer came in and Amber had to break off.

After that visit Harriet made it a point to visit that Starbucks a couple of times a week. Amber seemed to enjoy telling stories about Mark's activities— "Then he stole three cans of spray paint from Walmart and went to the church parking lot and painted 'Fuck you' all over the church bus"—and Harriet pretended to be amused.

Three days after the argument with Mark, Harriet went to see Amber. The barista laughed. "Isn't it wild? I can't believe he's going through with it. He said his application is in process. What does that mean?"

"I don't know. He didn't come in the other night. Is he staying with you?" Harriet tried to sound nonchalant.

"Are you kidding me?" Amber scoffed. "I have four roommates, and one of us is sleeping on the couch. No room for a big boy like Mark." Then she became serious. "He's staying with a friend, but he made me swear not to tell anybody where he is. I wish I could tell you, but I promised not to. He's OK, though, he's in a comfortable place, and is getting enough to eat and all that."

Harriet was sure he was getting plenty to eat. He had "borrowed" money from her before their argument Sunday night,

enough to keep him in pizza and beer “and all that” for at least a week.

“Oh, of course, I wouldn’t ask you to break your word.” She fantasized grabbing Amber by the neck and choking Mark’s location out of her, but she had to keep on good terms with the barista.

As usual, the after-work crowd started drifting in and Amber had to go back behind the counter. Harriet sipped her macchiato for a while before leaving, to avoid making it too obvious she only came to spy on Mark.

In desperation Harriet went to a mid-rise office building downtown. Exiting the elevator at the seventh floor, she walked past doors identifying divisions of Roy’s company. Suite 701 at the end of the corridor bore the words “Chief Executive Officer, Whitmer Financial.” She entered to find a large reception area with sofas, easy chairs, a kitchenette, and a door marked “Roy Whitmer.”

“May I help you?” The receptionist stationed in front of Roy’s door wore a gray suit jacket over a white blouse. Her close-cropped brown hair and minimal makeup, along with her pant suit, gave her a professional, asexual look.

“No, thanks, I can find my way.” Harriet had envisioned the office layout and had mentally practiced how she would charge past the receptionist and walk straight into Roy’s private office.

“You can’t go in there.” The receptionist rose from her desk and moved toward Harriet.

By the time Harriet reached Roy’s door the receptionist was on her. She grabbed Harriet’s right wrist as it reached for the door handle. Harriet used her right arm to push the

receptionist back, and her left hand to open the door. The woman held on as Harriet pulled her into Roy's office.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Whitmer, she just barged in."

He could have said, "That's all right, you can go back to your desk," or something like that. Instead, he looked at the receptionist with narrowed eyes and pursed lips. "Call Security, Monique," and the receptionist left. His stare shifted to Harriet. "What are you doing here?"

He had changed a little since she met him twenty-five years before, now with hair graying but not receding, his face slightly heavier and lightly wrinkled. As a young man he always overdressed, wearing a blazer and flannel slacks when the other guys wore polos and jeans. Now he wore a blue pinstripe suit with a starched white shirt.

"I need you to call your son."

"Never mind, Monique," he called through the open door to the receptionist placing the call. "I don't understand, Harriet. Why is he my son now? And close that door, would you please?"

"You want a son, don't you?" She closed the door. "Well, he's joining the Marines. He'll never survive an enlistment with them."

"Actually, I'm not that big on having a son. If I were into my legacy and all that stuff, I have two daughters to carry on the family name. And he doesn't even carry my name, does he? And why would your son listen to me? Don't you have a boyfriend who can talk to him?"

"He resents Brad and won't listen to him. And he knows you're his father." She sat down in a chair facing Roy across his desk.

"How'd he find out?"

"I told him last summer when you gave him that internship. Mark didn't want to do it, and I told him he should get to know his father."

"I hope he didn't tell anybody working here. Anyway, he sure didn't act like he knew I was his father. A total waste, from what his supervisor told me. That was the only time you asked me to do anything, and I regret I did it."

"Mark felt like you didn't respect him. He said you never talked to him, didn't acknowledge who he was."

"I have a couple of thousand employees, including several hundred in this building. I don't sit down and talk with every one of them. My oldest daughter interned here one summer, and I treated her the same way I treated your son. Which is to say, I treated them both like any other employee, like any other summer intern."

"I know we've had our problems, Roy, but I thought you would care more for your own flesh and blood."

"We haven't had any problems. I offered to marry you when you told me you were pregnant. When you turned that down I offered to pay for an abortion. You acted like you did me a favor when you let me pay your medical bills for delivering the baby. You made it clear you were insulted when I voluntarily suggested paying child support. You wanted to live your life and the boy's life without any interference. I was cool with that. There haven't been any problems. I'd almost forgotten I had a kid with you until you called me about that internship."

"You're right. It's my fault. I tried to be a good mother, I always had men in my life to be role models for him, I made sure he studied and was involved in sports. But kids are different these days, they bury themselves in video games and live in fantasies. I couldn't break through that bubble he hides in."

"My daughter interned here when she was nineteen. How old is Mark, twenty-four, twenty-five? The year after she interned she got her degree and is making a good living now in Silicon Valley. My younger daughter graduates this spring and already has a job lined up in New York. I don't see why Mark hasn't been able to find himself, as they say."

"I don't either. It's almost a good thing that he wants to join the Marines. Except he's so careless, still a kid. If he winds up in Iraq or Syria or any of those places, I'm sure he'll manage to step on a mine, or literally shoot himself in the foot or something like that."

"What would I say to him if I did call him? Why would he listen to me?"

"If you just showed some interest in him, that would make him think differently, maybe make him want to find a life in the real world." The argument that sounded so brilliant when she rehearsed it in her mind at home now came out weak, silly.

Roy's face took on that blank expression she hated when they dated. She was about to walk out of the office when Roy said, "Has he been sworn in yet, and given a report date?"

"No. He still has time to change his mind." She assumed that to be the case, anyway.

"All right. Give me his number."

"I'll text it to you. Give me your number."

He pulled a notepad from his desk. "Write it down here."

She took the pen from his desk set and wrote Mark's number on the pad. Roy's refusal to share his own personal phone number infuriated her, but since he agreed to help she didn't complain.

"I'm writing my number down here, too," she said, "so you can

call and tell me how it went."

He took the pad back without committing to call her.

They first met at a party, both of them a couple of years out of college. She found his single-minded pursuit of business success bracing after associating only with liberal arts majors as an undergraduate. His intelligence and sexual proficiency also attracted her. At first his sense of humor amused her, until she noticed it was always cruel and mocking, never self-effacing. Then there was his aloofness, which had become maddening. Tired of trying to guess his thoughts and feelings, she broke off with him.

She had no desire to get married and took her birth control pills religiously. Still, she found herself pregnant, undoubtedly by Roy. A mutual friend told him she was pregnant, which prompted his call and offer of marriage. Even with a good job and support from her parents, she had to accept Roy's help with medical bills. After that, though, she managed without him.

Now she wondered whether Mark would have turned out better with one father from infancy through adulthood, a dry, businessman type who made hard decisions with heartless objectivity. Marriage to such a cold slab would have been unbearable for her, though. She preferred guys with an artistic bent who favored rock concerts and spur-of-the-moment trips to Bali. Brad, her current partner, had no problem depending on her, letting her support his mythical music career.

She had expected more resistance from Roy against calling Mark. Having gotten his agreement, she thought it better to leave without pressing him on how soon he would call. She knew

that Roy must have a busy schedule, and that Mark might delay returning home even if Roy convinced him. Still, she hoped she might hear from her son that night after her visit to Roy. With no word from Mark that night, the next day at work found her tired from lack of sleep.

After that, another sleepless night. She fought the temptation to call Roy. Even if the secretary did put her through, Roy would consider her call nagging. If he hadn't called Mark yet, her inquiry might make him decide to back out.

She tried to carry on at work as if nothing was amiss. Nevertheless, by the third day one of her employees approached her privately. "Is everything all right, Harriet?"

"Everything's fine, Heather. Thanks for asking. I may have a touch of flu. Tested negative for covid, though. Just a little tired."

Then he returned. As soon as Mark walked into the kitchen, where she was loading the dishwasher, she hugged him. Towering above her, he let his arms hang loose at his side rather than return the hug. How could she have carried this behemoth around in her body, and how had he grown from a cute little boy into this sullen blob?

"I'm not going into the Corps."

"What changed your mind?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Sure, honey, you don't have to if you don't want to. I'm just happy you changed your mind."

She called Roy's office the next day, expecting to be put off. Monique surprised her by putting her through to Roy without delay.

"I just wanted to thank you for talking to Mark."

"You're welcome. I assure you I gave it my best shot."

"Your best shot was more than good enough. I can't tell you what a relief it was when he came home last night."

"Really? Well, good. I thought I hadn't had any effect. I assumed you were calling to tell me he's on his way to basic training."

"You must have gotten through to him. Thanks again."

Roy's answer puzzled her. During their brief time dating he never hesitated to claim credit for his real or imagined accomplishments. He must have developed modesty in his maturity.

She came home from work that evening to find an empty frozen pizza box on the kitchen counter and pizza crumbs on the kitchen table. She followed the sound of a guitar to the spare room Brad used to practice his music.

"Hi, babe. Just noodling a little to get ready for my gig in Nashville tomorrow."

"You had pizza for lunch?"

"No, I warmed up the casserole from last night. Mark had pizza before he left. By the way, I need to ask you for another fifty for my Nashville trip."

"Why?"

"Mark hit me up for it. He said he needed money tonight."

"You didn't have to give him that. I wouldn't have. Now he gets it from you, and you expect me to loan you more?" She maintained the fiction that her cash advances to Brad were loans.

"Sorry, babe. He acted so desperate, and I figured you'd want me to support him. You can let me have the fifty, can't you? I'll have expenses in Nashville, and I'm not sure if I can get that session gig for sure. I mean, I'm pretty sure. But if this one doesn't pan out I'll hang around and get something else. I'll pay you back when I get paid."

"All right. But don't be giving my son any more money without discussing it with me."

She had to get Mark back into the job market. The money he bummed off her wasn't the issue. He had to engage in something more than video games, beer, and pot. Maybe now he would consider going to work for Roy again; instead of intern, an entry-level job where he could work his way up. Once he accepted that idea she would call Roy.

Brad left for Nashville the next day. Harriet came home early that day hoping to see Mark before he went out for the night. She found him sitting on a stool at the kitchen counter, eating another thawed out pizza.

"Hi, honey. Going out?"

"Yeah." He spoke through a mouth full of pizza.

"Been looking for a job?"

"Don't worry about it."

"I'm not worried, but I might be able to help you."

"I'm not asking for help."

She controlled her urge to remind him he asked Brad for money the day before. "Do you need some new clothes? No matter where you go for an interview, you need to wear something besides cutoffs and a t-shirt."

"Don't worry about it." He crammed more pizza into his mouth, hurrying to finish eating and get out of the house.

"You need a plan. Looking for a job is a job."

"I said don't worry about it." He climbed off the stool and headed out the door.

The next day Harriet dropped by the Starbucks for another mid-afternoon chat. Amber said, "Have you seen Mark lately?" She played at sweeping and cleaning tables while they talked.

The question irritated Harriet, reminding her that Amber knew about the estrangement with her son. "Of course, yesterday. I haven't seen him today. He was still in bed when I left this morning."

"I bet. He was still going strong when I left Johnny Q's last night. He's sticking with his plan, though. Makes up for the pot by drinking more beer."

"What do you mean?"

"He's missing the pot, so he's drinking more beer to make up for it."

"Oh. I didn't know that."

"Yeah. How else can he go without weed for thirty days?"

"Oh, yeah. I wonder how he arrived at thirty days."

"That's what the website says. Actually, it's more than thirty days, because it takes a little longer for a heavy smoker, and more body fat makes it take longer. And our boy is definitely a heavy smoker with lots of body fat, isn't he? I think he's shooting for forty-five days. After that, piss in a bottle and he's on his way to Camp Lejeune, or wherever. Flunking the drug test really bummed him out, but he's made up his mind to

beat it the next time.”

Harriet drank quietly, thinking about what the barista said.

Amber went on. “Do you remember that asshole Roy Whitmer that Mark interned for last year? He had the balls to call Mark. Probably wanted to offer him another job. Mark had already flunked the drug test, but he wasn’t going to go back to work for that motherfucker. Before Whitmer even had a chance to make the offer, Mark told him to take his job and shove it.” The barista laughed.

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