



The Masculine Virtues

Frank Diamond¹

"Joe Claimer. Tell us your story."

Claimer shifts in his folding chair, the squeak echoing through the recreation center's gym.

McKinley's probably reading his body language, because that's what shrinks do, you know. Hell, that's what everybody does: cops, clergy, pimps, and poodles. Claimer pretends to get less fetal, uncrosses his arms.

I'm ready!

Ready, but not willing. Claimer indicates the rest of the support group, some members of which — in prior sessions — have offered bits about wrongdoings here, and pieces about transgressions there, but nothing you could describe as a complete story.

"Again, Doc?"

"Please," says McKinley.

That's Christa McKinley, MD, PhD, standing in the middle of the circle. Over 40, Claimer figures, but she could pass for 30. Disciplined. Ex-military with boyishly cut blond hair. Married to a somewhat famous neuro-physicist, and they have two beautiful little children — boys. They give to charities, they help others. Like right now. She can't be getting much for conducting these sessions. Possibly even donating her time. A real pillar.

She's dressed, as usual, in a business suit: Black jacket and pants, and a light gray blouse that doesn't quite camouflage some nicely turned curves. Wedding band and watch, but no earrings. Also, what Claimer guesses Mom would describe as sensible shoes.

"Well, Doc," Claimer says patiently, "it's like you've been teaching. You need to recognize the problem in order to deal. Period."

Nice try.

"But tell us your *story* again, Joe," McKinley insists. "Not just the lesson."

So, Claimer tells it, or the version that McKinley wants to hear, the version that gives him some shot of getting his life back. It started when he broke up with Janet. No, wait, that's not it. She broke it off. That's the official ruling. OK. And Claimer didn't like that, no sir, didn't like that one bit.

Then they meet at a frat party a few weeks later and he thinks that they still have feelings and they hook up, and....

"I was stalking," Claimer confesses, hands raised in surrender. "Simple as that. Creepy as that. I refused to admit it at first and I am certainly sorry. I've learned."

"You've evolved, Joe."

"Yes, Doctor, I have evolved."

Just give me my life back. Please.

Janet filed a complaint, the dean's people investigated and next thing you know Claimer's expelled. No hearing, no finding out his side. Claimer didn't get a chance to see any evidence, or

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listen to testimony. Did someone other than Janet claim this happened? Who knows? Did she confide in a friend? Maybe, maybe not.

Note, though, that she accuses him of *stalking*, not of rape or assault. Why? Because, Claimer figures, Janet's case for anything more serious than stalking falls apart if it goes to court.

But that's not likely to ever happen because Claimer can't afford an attorney and any ambulance chaser that might take it pro bono would make things worse. Claimer just wants it all to go away. The university administrators know that. So, when he did threaten to sue, they told him that they might — might, that is — consider readmitting him under certain conditions, the kind found in a restraining order. At the very least, he takes a certain anti-harassment course (this one, on the other end of the city from the university, meets the requirements) and the expulsion disappears from his record so that it seems as if Claimer just needed a break from school.

Meanwhile, what about Claimer's baseball scholarship? A lot depends on how this here with McKinley turns out. It started bumpy because Claimer did in fact give his version — aka reality — some weeks ago during the first session. He just had to defend himself.

"Janet came on to me!" Claimer said, palms outstretched, pleading his case. "I kissed her back! I responded! Hey, I'm a guy! Not an android! I thought it was makeup sex! Or at least one for the road! It was consensual! I did not stalk her!" Exclamation point, exclamation point, exclamation point, exclamation point....

McKinley had said, "We'll return to this," and flashed a smile in which her eyes did not participate. American sniper. "For now, Joe Claimer, calm. Deep breaths."

That's when Claimer realized that he'll have to admit to this lie, because he's screwed if McKinley doesn't affirm that he's been rehabilitated. In subsequent meetings he retreated, letting her lead him to "the truth."

This sucks.

Claimer takes up drinking as a hobby in the weeks after he'd first moved back onto Mom's couch, and usually she'd be zonked in bed by the time he crawled home. She'd been on a long decline since Ghost Dad deserted them on Claimer's fourth birthday. But one night she waited for him.

"I need sleep," Claimer says. "Go to your room."

"Well, I was wrong," she says, not quite able to keep from listing.

"You're slurring."

"I was wrong! Wrooon-ga!"

"Now you're shouting. And wrong about what?"

"College taught you, Claimer."

Mom calls him Claimer because "Joe" had been Ghost Dad's name.

"Taught me what?"

"Life ain't fair, sonny boy. Life ain't fair to people like us."

A week later, he moves to a cousin's couch.

Claimer wonders what he'll remember about Janet — other than this expulsion bullshit — when he looks back in coming years. Memory boils things down: They met in line at Hoagie Haven, attraction extending the encounter into an afternoon of walking along the river. A tap-you-on-the-shoulder wind sounded the Autumn leaves as if they were tiny cymbals. Janet's blue-black hair framed a face slightly off-kilter because of a broken nose that had never healed properly. (She played soccer, but that's not how the nose got broke. Claimer never did find out how.) And then,



of course (probably foremost; who is Claimer kidding?), her body. The unapologetically animal robustness of it.

Boing!

He might recall the passion of those first weeks, then the malaise of letdown as Claimer realized that Janet just wasn't the one. What got in the way? Nothing and everything; they didn't fit, was all. When he called it quits, she said that she understood. Well, well, he thought, this might be one of those amiable partings that he'd heard about. She did text him a few times late at night. Just to check in. "Hey! Glad we can still talk!" That sort of thing. It should have clued him.

The next girl he'd dated, dumped him. When he and Janet bumped into each other at that frat party, he needed affirmation. He needed her to need him again. And maybe he made some promises. And maybe she believed him.

My weakness did me in.

At the university, Claimer had been studying construction engineering, and the fine art of fooling big dope batters with his change-up — his out pitch. But now he's studying that you shouldn't make unwanted overtures to a woman, or that "no" means "no," or that a supervisor doesn't try to mentor the shit out of some pretty young underling. (That just about covers every romantic comedy Claimer's ever been forced to sit through, by the way.)

Still, he admits, women do have a legitimate gripe. Some of these guys in this group straight up did what they're accused of, Claimer has no doubt. They belong here. The dude with all that ink and piercings, for instance? The Pirate? Yeah, the Pirate slipped something into his victim's drink, that's for sure.

Then there's High Roller, the businessman who tools around in a red Corvette and mentions that he'll be eating at the country club this weekend? Flashes creds, drops names? Yeah, High Roller definitely choked and slapped his girlfriend in the elevator at that casino. That girl drops the charges, wants High Roller back. (Talking about priorities, here.) The judge says not so fast because there's video.

But, give him this, High Roller figured out the game right off. Become the prize the do-gooders want most of all — the newly woke man. Win by losing. Surrender. High Roller's taking an anger management course and seeing two shrinks. Handed paperwork to McKinley to prove it. In front of the group, no less.

These ruminations ebb under the flow of Claimer's presentation; both his conscious and subconscious on cruise control.

That presentation — what McKinley wanted him to tell yet again — ends when Claimer says: "And that is my story."

And that is Janet's story.

His gaze sweeps the faces in the circle.

See? Nothing to hide.

McKinley keeps nodding, though, as if he's still talking. What should Claimer do? Bobble-head back? Take a bow? High-five the other miscreants? Ask to go to the bathroom? What?

"Ramon," McKinley commands to somebody her back's turned toward. "You're up."

And the guy sitting directly across from Claimer, the guy who always looks as if he's asleep, might really have been for once, because he jerks as if someone elbowed him. The others snicker.

Ramon stutters: "Yeah, well, um...."

McKinley pivots, facing him.

"So that our group can hear you, Ramon," she says. "Share."

"I didn't do shit, that's my damn share," Ramon grumbles. "I tell ya'll but ain't nobody listen. I tell everybody, but not one says, 'Yeah, Ramon. I feel you. Bitch framed you.'"

"'Bitch', you say?"

"Well..."

Poor Ramon still doesn't get it. Claimer wonders about Ramon's situation. For a few of the repeat offenders it's either this or prison. Now who's not going to take that deal?

"OK. Let's look at this again, Ramon," McKinley begins in kindergarten-speak.

On break outside Claimer huddles with Boomer and Paco, two other college kids in trouble. Though Boomer and Paco's stories differ from Claimer's, they too boil down to girls making accusations. Claimer doesn't know if they did it either, but they sure as hell didn't get a chance to make their case at school.

They loiter on the sidewalk a good distance from the rec center entrance because they smoke. Traffic on the highway behind them struggles to find a rhythm. They're an odd triumvirate. Boomer's a barrel at 5' 5" with a wrestling scholarship on the line. He's studying accounting, sports a mountain-man beard. Paco's a little over six feet, same as Claimer, but not as lanky. He's copying Claimer's "look," as if Claimer chooses to wear too-loose jeans, a jacket with worn elbows and stretched shoulders that won't zip, and unmatched sneakers that resist lacing. Paco's an artist of some sort, always massaging his goatee. (Claimer manages to shave every day, no matter the living conditions. That's one way he stiff-arms despair.)

"Ramon still doesn't get it," Boomer says.

"I keep telling him," says Paco, "but, no, he's got to fight. Truth-to-power. Good luck with that shit."

"He'll come around," says Claimer.

"What's the over/under?" asks Paco.

Most of the other members of the therapy group sit, stand and even lie over on the rec center steps. Smartphones drawn, of course. High Roller's usually calling or texting someone before he's even out the door because there are important things that he — and only he — must attend to.

"Asshole," Boomer says.

"Hey, 30 seconds after the last session are we ever going to think about any of these people again?" asks Claimer.

The heavy February air muffles the question. A couple of squirrels busying around a tree to the side of the softball field settle for a moment, standing on hindlegs with cuffed paws and looking over at the college boys. Claimer flicks his cigarette their way and the squirrels start squirreling again.

Boomer says: "Thought we were buds, Joe Claimer."

Claimer's eyes bulge in mock horror: "Is this some sort of bonding thing?"

"Chump," says Boomer, flicking his cigarette as well. It lands farther out.

Claimer right away knew that he and Boomer are on the same wavelength. Paco, not so much. Guys who brag about their Tinder shenanigans annoy Claimer, and it seems to annoy Boomer as well.

Boomer just got a new apartment about 10 blocks from the university, and Claimer and Boomer have discussed Claimer moving in. Claimer would love to have a bed again, not to mention



his own room. The dorm had been his most stable residence ever. But there are known unknowns like, for instance, how much rent? Also, would he and Boomer get along? So, they prod and poke; a roomie audition.

Paco says, "This is the last time with the Kents, dudes. Buy your own."

"Really," Boomer says.

"Yes, really," Paco says, putting the response in air-quotes. "You guys don't even inhale. My dinero up in smoke."

Paco now inhales deeply and blows perfect rings at the rec center entrance where some of the others start filing back inside.

"How much time?" Paco asks.

"Four more minutes," Claimer says.

"Doc should come out and ring a bell or something," Boomer says. "Recess is over!"

Paco says, "I'd like to ring Doc's bell. A skinny woman with big tits. Yum!"

Claimer glares at Paco as if he's a batter he's about to brush back.

"Really?" Claimer says. "You're going there?"

"I wouldn't say it out loud," Paco says.

"Just did," says Boomer.

"You learn anything?" Claimer says. "If it gets back to her...."

"How's what I say going to get back to Doc?" Paco asks.

Boomer says, "If people kept their damn mouths shut in the first place ain't none of us would be here."

"You guys would rat me out?" says Paco.

"Man, what's to prevent Claimer here from sucking up to Doc by throwing you under?" Boomer asks.

Paco looks at Claimer.

"I wouldn't, no. But you don't know that for sure. And where does it leave you if I do?"

Paco laughs; a whinny.

"So paranoid," Paco says. "Chill."

"Yeah, OK. Chill this: Trust no one," Claimer insists.

"Now that there's just a beautiful way to go through life," says Paco.

Says Boomer: "Let's see where being honest and open gets you."

Paco spreads his arms to the sky. "We are not that important," he says. "Do you really believe that someone's interested in what we think?"

"That's why we're here, right?" says Claimer. "To learn to think the right way?"

"Dude, we're not here because of what we think," reminds Boomer.

"Sure, yeah, it's what they accuse us of doing," says Claimer. "But it's what they *think* about how we *think* that makes them say 'Guilty!' without even getting our side of it."

"Well, I *think* that I actually follow," says Paco. "But, Claimer: Literally tracking us?"

"They want to know if we're for real being reeducated."

"Who?"

"They," says Claimer, gesturing toward the traffic.

Paco squints on his last drag and then flicks his cigarette. He says: "So you think *they* are bugging us or something?"

"Possibly."

"My man, where *they* going to put a bug?" Paco asks. "In them trees? On them fences? In that grass there? *They* going to know where we'll be standing beforehand?"

Claimer begins to protest but Paco cuts him off. "Get over yourself, Joe."

Claimer looks at the ground, scuffs the concrete, stuffs his hands in his pockets.

"OK, then," says Paco, sounding perplexed with what seems to be his sudden victory. "Settled."

Indeed settled, because "Get over yourself, Joe," is something Coach in high school used to say when Claimer protested getting yanked from a game because they were killing the other team and Coach wanted to give the scrubs some playing time.

As they walk back toward the rec center, Claimer only half listens to Boomer and Paco's banter. He is a little paranoid, sure. Paco nailed it. But after the Janet bullshit, who wouldn't be?

But I guess Paco's right. Bugs? Not likely.

About an hour and a half later, Doctor McKinley confirms this diagnosis: "Bugs are so 20th century, Joe. You don't need bugs for surveillance these days."

They sit at the table at the far end of the gym, where everybody signed in that first session. It's probably where the timekeepers and scorekeepers sit during basketball games. McKinley stopped Claimer as she dismissed the group for the day.

"I have that clarification you requested," she said.

Claimer had asked her to certify that he'd been to every session. He'd gotten a letter from some stupid university bureaucrat asking why he hasn't attended.

They don't get anything right.

He says to McKinley, "How can something like this even happen?"

Her head's hidden behind her opened briefcase; she's rummaging and doesn't respond. Finally, she flashes a folded-up business letter and says, "Here we go." She snaps the briefcase shut, places the paper on the table. They face each other.

Claimer reaches for the letter, but McKinley shakes her head.

"Listen."

McKinley thumbs her smartphone. Then comes the recording.

I'd like to ring Doc's bell. A skinny woman with big tits. Yum!

Really? You're going there?

I wouldn't say it out loud.

For a moment, Claimer doesn't recognize the conversation, or even his voice. When he does, his arms fall to his sides.

McKinley turns it off.



"Just a sample," she says. "We got the entire discussion, of course. And other discussions, as well."

"We?"

"Not important."

Claimer feels his eyes water as if allergies set in.

He says: "I ... I just don't know what to say."

McKinley's focus sharpens.

She says, "Some in your spot will cry that it is illegal in this state to record a target without his knowledge."

Target.

"Is it? It is."

"Yes, but then there are all those consent forms you signed that first day that you didn't really bother reading, Joe."

"But I told Paco — and it is Paco, by the way — don't go there. You can hear me."

"I can hear you, Joe. But you're obligated to report such an exchange immediately. Another form you signed."

"Where did you plant the bug? I guess you won't say."

"It's like this, Joe..."

That's when McKinley explains to him how today's technology makes bugs obsolete, her hand flat on the letter as she speaks.

"What did you write?" Claimer asks.

"I wrote what I felt obligated to write."

"Shit. Screw this."

He starts to stand but McKinley stops him like a traffic cop.

"Have you not learned anything, Joe Claimer?"

"Yeah, I learned what my wreck of a mother always says: Life ain't fair."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning this bullshit, Doctor McKinley. Meaning having to take this rehabilitation when the only thing I did was break up with a girl."

McKinley begins to respond but this time it's Claimer who cuts her off. "And that's all I did. Enough pretending. Janet's nuts and pissed off. Yet, here am I, while she's back at school. And she still got a future. Ah, what's the use?"

"Wait," McKinley says, sliding the letter toward him.

Claimer looks at it.

"Go on. Read."

Claimer picks it up from a corner as if it's litter, shakes it open. He skims, seeing that it's confirmation that he's attended every session and appears well on his way to being rehabilitated. Claimer begins reading it again, this time holding it firmly with both hands to see if he missed something.

"You're confused," McKinley says.

"What is this?"

McKinley cups her head in her joined fingers as she tilts back.

"I have two sons, Joe: Tyler and Paul."

"You gonna break out the home movies?"

"Don't be flip. Flip is easy. Flip is schoolboyish, and you're better than that, Joe Claimer. You're a man, not a man-boy. And over in Iraq I watched men die. Real men. They came from all parts of the country, from all backgrounds. But they sacrificed. They sacrificed because of the classic masculine virtues."

"Masculine virtues."

"They manned up. Real men deny themselves. Real men don't cave into their weaknesses. Real men are courageous and real men avoid the easy path. And, yes, before you protest, real men can be flip, too. They know how to have fun."

"Real men."

"Yes, real men, Joe."

Claimer nods the obvious at her.

McKinley says: "Yes, and we women in the military sacrifice just as much as the men do. But that's because we believe in the masculine virtues, too. It's the masculine virtues that win wars. That keep us safe."

Claimer can't resist: "But violence is never the answer, Doctor McKinley."

"Flip, again, but I actually welcome it this time. It's a segue. Because well you know, Joe, that violence sometimes is, in fact, *the* answer. It's often the only possible answer. Violence stopped Hitler. You, Joe Claimer, in the subway see a man beating a woman."

"I pull him off. Call the cops."

"Yes, you pull him off. And yes, you call the cops. But you, Joe Claimer, would also make him dearly pay."

"Maybe. But what does this have to do with my situation?"

What does this have to do with anything?

McKinley stands and begins pacing the length of the table. She's lecturing.

Is she crazy, too?

He's transfixed, though. McKinley moves in and out of light streaming from a window at the other end of the gym. When Claimer shifts, she remembers he's there, and breaks out of reverie.

"Don't even try recording this."

"OK. Fine."

Then, she's back to her monologue.

What does she see, Claimer wonders, while she's gazing at the walls and talks, and talks, and talks? A crowd, he decides. She's making a speech to some imaginary audience because, he realizes, this woman wants to change society. She wants revolution. Her sensible strides percuss her words along, and taut muscles shift economically under her outfit — her uniform. When, at one point she pauses and puts her hands on her hips, Claimer sees the pistol strapped to her side.

Claimer takes mental roll call that includes Ramon, the Pirate, High Roller, and the mumblers, grumblers, stumblers, and soon-to-be convicts.



Shit. Maybe I should get a gun, too.

As McKinley continues, Claimer wishes he could take notes, wishes he possessed the memory that would let him recall every word. He will always remember parts of it.

"A nation that wants to offer equal opportunity to little girls and little boys should not deny the essential nature of little boys," McKinley says. "That's not equal opportunity. Little boys like my Tyler and Paul are more energetic and aggressive than little girls. That's DNA and those qualities need to be channeled, not suppressed. You can bet that my boys will get dirt bikes when they are ready, Joe."

"When's that?"

"Next year for Tyler. He turns six."

Back to the lecture. Claimer's in class again except this time he's learning. (Sort of at gunpoint, true, but still....) For instance, he didn't know that the NCAA's transgender policy makes it so that the person who holds the record in the U.S. for the women's 400-meter hurdles was born male. He didn't know that transgendered women smashed world records in weight lifting, tennis, and several other sports. Of course, he couldn't avoid knowing that Facebook recognizes 58 gender options.

"It's unfair, and it's illogical," McKinley says. "Illogical because biology trumps labels, Joe. You can label them whatever you want, but there are only two genders at birth. And where has this myth of gender fluidity gotten us? Girls in swim class at this very rec center protested that a grown man — now identifying as a woman despite possessing all the male physical accoutrements — uses their locker room. A complaint's filed. Do they arrest him for exposing himself to underage girls? No, the city apologizes for inflicting psychological harm on him. The swim class gets cancelled. Who's going to subject their daughter to that? Unfortunately, more and more will, Joe, because those who we used to refer to as normal people will have fewer options. Meanwhile, that person with a penis continues to use the woman's locker room."

McKinley swings her attention back to Claimer.

"What do you think, Joe?"

"That I shouldn't be here?"

McKinley smiles.

"We still have a chance," she says.

"Chance?"

"To save civilization, to preserve Western culture," McKinley says. "Civilizations that are dying, cultures that no longer believe in themselves always become transfixed by gender fluidity. It's a death rattle. And those societies get swept aside by the barbarians at the gate, the people who still believe in heroic masculinity."

McKinley sits again, faces Joe. He doesn't blink.

"I want my Tyler and Paul to grow in a society that makes real men, Joe. I want my sons to be brave, and honorable, and strong."

She pauses, taps on her briefcase.

What now?

"You're going to move in with Boomer," McKinley says. "I think he can be recruited. Paco, maybe. Keep in touch with him. Then you'll return to university. Your costs will be covered."

"Recruited to do what?"

McKinley smiles.

"Listen...."

And Claimer does indeed listen. Closely. He's compelled to. Because McKinley tells him about this secret organization, the Brotherhood, that will take back the culture, capture the future. Claimer doesn't ask what if he doesn't cooperate. It's understood: His life will be hell.

McKinley's got the tape, and she'll deny that they ever spoke. She even hints at one point that she could make it so that he goes to prison. No way he'll test her. What's worse Claimer knows — he just knows — that she would kill him to save the Brotherhood.

He's involved whether he wants it or not. He has been chosen.

So, as she speaks, Claimer begins to sweat. He's afraid. His breath quickens, hands quiver. Claimer's never fainted, and now wonders if this might be what the leadup feels like. He remembers riding a rollercoaster just a few years ago, the wildest one on the East Coast, and the fear-rush that accompanied him. His stomach seems to fall away.

I don't want any of this.

No, Claimer wants to run.

Is that a masculine virtue?

But then it happens.

The light through the far window dims; a cloud makes its presence known. And Claimer sees it. Him. Sees him. He stands in the corner behind McKinley; a faded snapshot of a man waving, a blanked-out face that could be smiling. At least Claimer thinks he sees him. The man's there and then — like that! — not there.

And that shadow's wave might have in fact been a blessing because suddenly a strange grace engulfs the day, settles upon everything. Excitement pushes Claimer's fear aside, making room for something totally unexpected: joy. A joy he'd never before felt. It might be the joy Claimer's heard that overcomes mystics when they experience God. He's intoxicated. He wonders if he can fly. He is flying. They all are. He feels the earth's rotation. This Christa McKinley; she's the one who did this. Her words brand him.

"I'm in," he whispers.

"Yes, you are."

Claimer asks: "And when I get back to school?"

"You'll get instructions."

"Instructions to do what?"

"You'll get instructions."

"From you?"

"From somebody. Goodbye, Joe Claimer."

"See you next week, Doctor McKinley?"

"Doctor Andrea Patterson is leading this course the rest of the way."

Claimer doesn't ask: "Is she one of us?" If "they" want him to know, "they" will tell him.

"You're a warrior, now," says McKinley. "Part of the fifth column."

Some hours later, Claimer stops by Mom's. It's early evening, and she's at the point where today's buzz greets last night's hangover.

"You again."

"Just getting some shit. Not staying long."



"I am your mother, you know. You could spend *some* time with me."

"Doing what?"

"Television?"

He doesn't hate her. He doesn't even feel sorry for her anymore. Or himself, for that matter. In fact, much of what troubled him up until that very morning troubles him no longer.

Claimer says: "Me and somebody from the group are moving in together."

"That won't last."

"Why's that?"

"Cause life ain't fair, Claimer."

"You keep saying."

"And ain't nothing ever gonna to change that."

"Maybe."