

ANNETTE. We're very touched by your generosity. We appreciate the fact you're trying to calm the situation down rather than exacerbate it.

VERONICA. Frankly, it's the least we can do.

MICHAEL. Yes!

ANNETTE. Not at all. How many parents standing up for their children become infantile themselves? If Henry had broken two of Benjamin's teeth, I'm afraid Alan and I would have been a lot more thin-skinned about it. I'm not certain we'd have been so broad-minded.

MICHAEL. Of course you would!

ALAN. She's right. Not at all certain.

MICHAEL. Oh, yes. Because we all know it could easily have been the other way around. *(Pause.)*

Start

VERONICA. So what does Benjamin have to say about it? How does he view the situation?

ANNETTE. He's not saying much. I think he's still slightly in shock.

VERONICA. He understands that he's disfigured his playmate?

ALAN. No. No, he does not understand that he's disfigured his playmate.

ANNETTE. Why are you saying that? Benjamin understands very well!

ALAN. He understands he's behaved like a thug, he does not understand that he's disfigured his playmate.

VERONICA. You don't care for the word, but the word is unfortunately accurate.

ALAN. My son has not disfigured your son.

VERONICA. Your son has disfigured my son. Come back at five and have a look at his mouth and teeth.

MICHAEL. Temporarily disfigured.

ALAN. The swelling on his lip will go down, and as for his teeth, take him to the best dentist, I'm prepared to chip in ...

MICHAEL. That's what the insurance is for. What we'd like is for the boys to make up so that this sort of thing never happens again.

ANNETTE. Let's arrange a meeting.

MICHAEL. Yes. That's the answer.

VERONICA. Should we be there?

ALAN. They don't need to be coached. Just let them do it man to man.

ANNETTE. Man to man, Alan, don't be ridiculous. Having said

that, we don't necessarily have to be there. It'd probably be better if we weren't, wouldn't it?

VERONICA. The question isn't whether we should be there or not. The question is do they want to talk to one another, do they want to have a discussion?

MICHAEL. Henry wants to.

VERONICA. What about Benjamin?

ANNETTE. It's no use asking his opinion.

VERONICA. But it has to come from him.

ANNETTE. Benjamin has behaved like a hooligan, we're not interested in what mood he's in.

VERONICA. If Benjamin is forced to meet Henry in a punitive context, I can't see the results would be very positive.

ALAN. Madam, our son is a savage. To hope for any kind of spontaneous repentance would be fanciful. Right, I'm sorry, I have to get back to the office. You stay, Annette, you'll tell me what you've decided, I'm no use whichever way you cut it. Women always think you need a man, you need a father, as if they'd be any help at all. Men are a dead weight, they're clumsy and maladjusted, oh, you can see the F train, that's great!

ANNETTE. I'm so embarrassed, but I can't stay either ... My husband has never exactly been a stroller dad! ...

VERONICA. What a pity. It's lovely, taking the baby for a walk. And it lasts such a short time. You always enjoyed taking care of the children, didn't you, Michael, you loved pushing the stroller.

MICHAEL. Yes, I did.

VERONICA. So what have we decided?

ANNETTE. Could you come by the house with Henry about seven-thirty?

VERONICA. Seven-thirty? ... What do you think, Michael?

MICHAEL. Well ... Honestly ...

ANNETTE. Go on.

MICHAEL. I think Benjamin ought to come here.

VERONICA. Yes, I agree.

MICHAEL. I don't think it's right for the victim to go traipsing around.

VERONICA. That's right.

ALAN. Personally, I can't be anywhere at seven-thirty.

ANNETTE. Since you're no use, we won't be needing you.

VERONICA. All the same, it would be better if his father were

here. *(Alan's cell phone vibrates.)*

ALAN. All right, but then it can't be this evening ... Yeah? ... There's no mention of this in the executive report. And no risk has been formally established. There's no evidence ... *(He hangs up.)*

VERONICA. Tomorrow?

ALAN. I'm flying to The Hague tomorrow.

VERONICA. You're working in The Hague?

ALAN. I have a case at the International Criminal Court.

ANNETTE. The main thing is that the children speak to one another. I'll bring Benjamin here at seven-thirty and we can leave them to have their discussion. No? You don't look very convinced.

VERONICA. If Benjamin is not made aware of his responsibilities, they'll just look at each other like a pair of china dogs, it'll be a catastrophe.

ALAN. What do you mean? What do you mean, made aware of his responsibilities?

VERONICA. I'm sure your son is not a savage.

ANNETTE. Of course Benjamin isn't a savage.

ALAN. Yes he is.

ANNETTE. Alan, this is absurd, why say something like that?

ALAN. He's a savage.

MICHAEL. How does he explain his behavior?

ANNETTE. He doesn't want to discuss it.

VERONICA. But he ought to discuss it.

ALAN. He ought to do any number of things. He ought to come here, he ought to discuss it, he ought to be sorry for it, clearly you have parenting skills that put us to shame, we hope to improve, but in the meantime, please bear with us.

MICHAEL. All right! This is idiotic. Let's not end up like this!

VERONICA. I'm only thinking of him, I'm only thinking of Benjamin.

ALAN. I got the message.

ANNETTE. Let's just sit down for another couple of minutes.

MICHAEL. A little more coffee?

ALAN. A coffee, okay.

ANNETTE. Then I'll have one too. Thanks.

MICHAEL. That's all right, Ronnie, I'll do it. *(Pause. Annette delicately shuffles some of the numerous art books dispersed around the coffee table.)*

ANNETTE. I see you're a great art lover.

End Reading #1

Start Reading #2 →

with them? (*She sprays the tulips.*)

MICHAEL. I don't keep siding with them, what are you talking about?

VERONICA. You keep vacillating, trying to play both ends against the middle.

MICHAEL. No, I don't!

VERONICA. Yes, you do. Going on about your triumphs as a gang leader, telling them they're free to do whatever they like with their son when the child is a public menace; when a child's a public menace, it's everybody's concern, I can't believe she puked all over my books! (*She sprays the Kokoschka.*)

MICHAEL. (*Pointing.*) Put some on *The People of the Tundra* ...

VERONICA. If you think you're about to hurl, you go to the proper place.

MICHAEL. ... And the Foujita.

VERONICA. (*Spraying everything.*) This is disgusting.

MICHAEL. I was pushing it a little bit with the shithouse systems.

VERONICA. You were brilliant.

MICHAEL. Good answers, don't you think?

VERONICA. Brilliant. The stock manager thing was brilliant.

MICHAEL. What an asshole. And what did he call her?! ...

VERONICA. Woof-woof.

MICHAEL. That's right, Woof-woof!

VERONICA. Woof-woof! (*They both laugh. Alan returns, hair dryer in hand.*)

ALAN. That's right, I call her Woof-woof.

VERONICA. Oh ... I'm sorry, I didn't mean to be rude ... It's so easy to make fun of other people's nicknames! What about us, what do we call each other, Michael? Far worse, isn't it?

ALAN. Did you want the hair dryer?

VERONICA. Thank you.

MICHAEL. Thank you. (*He takes the hair dryer.*) We call each other Darjeeling, like the tea. That's more ridiculous, if you ask me! (*Michael switches on the machine and starts drying the books. Veronica flattens out the damp pages.*) Smooth them out, smooth them out.

VERONICA. (*As she smoothes out the pages, raising her voice above the noise.*) How's the poor thing feeling, better?

ALAN. Better.

VERONICA. I reacted very badly, I'm ashamed of myself.

ALAN. Not at all.

Start
Reading #3

VERONICA. I just steam-rolled her about my catalogue, I can't believe I did that.

MICHAEL. Turn the page. Stretch it out, stretch it out all the way.

ALAN. You're going to tear it.

VERONICA. You're right ... He's right, Michael. That's enough, Michael, it's dry. Objects can become ridiculously important, half the time you can't even remember why. (*Michael shuts the catalogue and they both cover it with a little cairn of heavy books. Michael finishes drying the Foujita, The People of the Tundra, etc. ...*)

MICHAEL. There we are! Good as new. Where does Woof-woof come from?

ALAN. How much is that doggie in the window.

MICHAEL. I know it! I know the one! (*He hums.*) Woof-woof! Ha, ha! ... Ours comes from our honeymoon in India. It's idiotic, really!

VERONICA. Shouldn't I go and see how she is?

MICHAEL. Off you go, Darjeeling.

VERONICA. Shall I? ... (*Annette returns.*) Ah, Annette! I was worried about you ... Are you feeling better?

ANNETTE. I think so.

ALAN. If you're not sure, stay away from the coffee table.

ANNETTE. I left the towel in the bathtub, I wasn't sure where to put it.

VERONICA. Perfect.

ANNETTE. You've cleaned it all up. I'm so sorry.

MICHAEL. Everything's great. Everything's in order.

VERONICA. Annette, forgive me, I've hardly paid any attention to you. I've been obsessed with my Kokoschka.

ANNETTE. Don't worry about it.

VERONICA. The way I reacted, very bad of me.

ANNETTE. Not at all ... (*After an embarrassed pause.*) Something occurred to me in the bathroom ...

VERONICA. Yes?

ANNETTE. Perhaps we skated too hastily over ... I mean, what I mean is ...

MICHAEL. Say it, Annette, say it.

ANNETTE. An insult is also a kind of assault.

MICHAEL. Of course it is.

VERONICA. Well, that depends, Michael.

MICHAEL. Yes, it depends.

ANNETTE. Benjamin's never shown any signs of violence. He

wouldn't have done that without a reason.

ALAN. He got called a snitch! *(His cell phone vibrates.)* ... I'm sorry! ... *(He moves to one side, making elaborately apologetic signs to Annette.)* Yes ... As long as there aren't any statements from victims. We don't want any victims. I don't want you being quoted alongside victims! ... A blanket denial and if necessary attack the newspaper ... They'll fax you the draft of the press release, Murray. *(He hangs up.)* If anyone calls me a snitch, I'm liable to get annoyed.

MICHAEL. Unless it's true.

ALAN. What did you say?

MICHAEL. I mean, suppose it's justified?

ANNETTE. My son is a snitch?

MICHAEL. 'Course not, I was joking.

ANNETTE. Yours is as well, if that's how it's going to be.

MICHAEL. What do you mean, ours is as well?

ANNETTE. Well, he did identify Benjamin.

MICHAEL. Because we insisted!

VERONICA. Michael, this is completely beside the point.

ANNETTE. What's the difference? Whether you insisted or not, he gave you the name.

ALAN. Annette.

ANNETTE. Annette what? *(To Michael.)* You think my son is a snitch?

MICHAEL. I don't think anything.

ANNETTE. Well, if you don't think anything, don't say anything. Stop making these insinuations.

VERONICA. Let's stay calm, Annette. Michael and I are making an effort to be reasonable and moderate ...

ANNETTE. Not that moderate.

VERONICA. Oh, really? What do you mean?

ANNETTE. Moderate on the surface.

ALAN. I really have to go, Woof-woof ...

ANNETTE. All right, go on, be a coward.

ALAN. Annette, right now I'm risking my most important client, so this responsible parent routine ...

VERONICA. My son has lost two teeth. Two incisors.

ALAN. Yes, yes, I think we all got that.

VERONICA. One of them for good.

ALAN. He'll have new ones, we'll give him new ones! Better ones! It's not as if he's burst an eardrum!

ANNETTE. We're making a mistake not to take into account the origin of the problem.

VERONICA. There's no origin. There's just an eleven-year-old child hitting someone. With a stick.

ALAN. Armed with a stick.

MICHAEL. We withdrew that word.

ALAN. You withdrew it because we objected to it.

MICHAEL. We withdrew it without any protest.

ALAN. A word deliberately designed to rule out error or clumsiness, to rule out childhood.

VERONICA. I'm not sure I'm able to take much more of this tone of voice.

ALAN. You and I have had trouble seeing eye-to-eye right from the start.

VERONICA. There's nothing more infuriating than to be attacked for something you yourself consider a mistake. The word armed was inappropriate, so we changed it. Although, if you stick to the strict definition of the word, its use is far from inaccurate.

ANNETTE. Benjamin was insulted and he reacted. If I'm attacked, I defend myself, especially if I find myself alone, confronted by a gang.

MICHAEL. Puking seems to have perked you up.

ANNETTE. Do you have any idea how crude that sounds?

MICHAEL. We all mean well. All four of us, I'm sure. Why let these minor irritants, these pointless aggravations push us over the edge? ...

VERONICA. Oh, Michael, that's enough! Let's stop beating around the bush. If all we are is moderate on the surface, let's forget it.

MICHAEL. No, no, I refuse to allow myself to slide down that slope.

ALAN. What slope?

MICHAEL. The shitty slope those two little bastards have perched us on! There, I've said it!

ALAN. I'm not sure Ronnie has quite the same outlook.

VERONICA. Veronica!

ALAN. Sorry.

VERONICA. So now Henry's a little bastard, is he? That is the last straw!

ALAN. Right, well, I really do have to go.

ANNETTE. Me too.

VERONICA. Go on, go, I give up. *(The telephone rings.)*

MICHAEL. Hello? ... Oh, Mom ... No, no, we're with some