

## Let's Go by James P. Hanley

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In a period between classes, Edward looked up Carole's page on LinkedIn, and was surprised that there was an end date on her job—the one in which they worked together, he reporting to her. He wondered about her spirits and what she would do now. Over a year before, he'd left the same employer for a job at the community college, teaching undergraduates the practical elements of business. She had joked that he was abandoning her. In the months after he'd left, they'd felt freed from the restraints of a reporting relationship and had lunch periodically, she relaying stories of people they knew at work, he explaining the newness of instruction, seeking her thoughts on classroom simulations and assigned projects.

“I do miss you,” she'd said in their last conversation, and waiting before completing the sentence, added, “around here.”

He called her after reading the LinkedIn page, and overcoming her reluctance and proffered excuses, invited her for a drink. When she came into the small restaurant with a mahogany bar, he thought she looked weary; deep rings had formed under her normally clear, expressive eyes. Edward had always thought of her as attractive but an attractiveness that she made no effort to enhance or suppress. He'd once joked with her that if subtle was a make-up shade, she would buy boxes. A business suit with a starched blouse, he remembered, was her principal wardrobe and when

dress-down day at work became an edict, she seemed ill at ease in slacks and plain top. That day at the bar, she was wearing jeans and a sweatshirt. Detecting the reason for his stare, Carole said, “I do own such clothes.”

He was pleased by her humor. “You look nice.”

“It’s good to see you.”

“I was shocked to hear you’d lost your job.”

She answered in a way that was mildly mocking, he thought, “I didn’t misplace it, I was fired, discharged. Ever notice how many shooting synonyms there are?”

As the bartender placed their drinks in front of them, Edward asked, “What happened?”

“Business was bad, they needed to cut back, the usual.” She finished after a pause, “I really don’t know why me.”

“They did offer you a good package, right?”

“Yes, severance, benefits continuance for a time, and outplacement.”

“Is that helpful?”

“Outplacement? It’s fine. To be honest, I

have a problem with their counselors who make a living offering services to the distraught. The same reason we hate morticians and dentist.”

He smiled at her response, recalling the facetiousness she often employed, her defensive retorts and her adeptness at verbal parrying.

“What did your husband say?”

“His first words were ‘what did you do wrong?’ That’s a bad question of someone who’s been endlessly asking that question of herself.” She suddenly leaned forward and said, “How are you?”

He wanted to embrace her and her proximity would have made the gesture easy, but he sensed that there had always been lines with her, and crossing them, even though they had been reformed as a result of her termination, was precarious. Once you overstepped with her, he knew, there was no forgiving.

“The hardest part is the networking,” she said later, “contacting people, some you haven’t talked to for a long time, *conveying your availability*—the euphemistic expression of the outplacement counselor—and emailing your resume. It’s embarrassing, humiliating.”

“You’re so good at what you do. I’m sure you’ll find something quickly.”

“I naively thought that was enough; I’m not

sure now. Well, I can go to a shrink to confide in, and have an outplacement strategist to discuss job searches with, so let's keep it light."

There was more he wanted to question her about: how many others were terminated, how she was told, who told her, what followed, did she talk to her staff afterwards, did she have to leave right away, her reaction when notified, but he sensed that evening wasn't the time, maybe there would never be. Saddened by her plight and bothered by seeing a woman so self-assured forming doubts, he stayed with her for a long time but with widening gaps of silence.

The next day, Edward sent her an email saying he enjoyed getting together and asked her to send him a resume. When he received it, without an email note, he printed a copy and scanned it briefly before folding it and putting it in his pocket. At home, he poured a glass of wine, took the resume from his pocket and read it intently: MBA from the University of Pittsburgh, undergraduate from St. Mary's College, progressive titles and responsibilities across three companies, and a list of projects in her most recent job that he recognized, ones that he had been a part of. He chuckled at the words under interests: *Flautist in community orchestra*, a skill she'd never mentioned, but he could envision her intensive practicing, grimacing at bad notes, and perfecting chords until mastered. The next day, he emailed her, and told her how impressed he was with her background and added: "A flute!!!"

Carole wrote back quickly, “I’m hoping a frustrated musician will have sympathy.”

In a few days, he checked her profile on LinkedIn and her resume had been added and names of others: recruiters and professional she later described as *once-peers*. He decided to write a reference on her page:

*She is one of the finest professionals I’ve worked with. Knowledgeable, intuitive and analytical—a rare combination—she is focused and tireless in solving problems, adeptly documenting causes, solutions and outcomes in a compelling and persuasive manner. Highly respected by staff, senior management and peers, she has accomplished a great deal and yet never self-congratulates, acknowledging even the most minor staff contribution. Entrusted with projects and tasks of increasing complexity and value, she has always risen to the challenge, never faltering or disappointing, even when available resources are limited or unforeseen obstacles emerge.*

In the morning, he received a brief email:  
*Bless you.*

Edward felt an obligation to her, in part, based on past gratitude for her defense of him over innuendos and gossip as to why there were no pictures on his desk, no guest at the annual holiday party, no stares at attractive women. Only after he

resigned and some he worked with were emboldened to convey the common suspicions to him did he learn that Carole had angrily put down the whispers and speculations. His feelings for her, he reflected, were between the love for his partner and care for close friends. He knew he was one of the few that felt that way toward her, and she asked once in a conversation, “People at work didn’t like me, did they?”

He answered, “It wasn’t one of your goals. They respected you, if that matters. Besides, I wouldn’t say they didn’t like you, they were neutral, that’s better word.”

She laughed; “That’s why I like talking you. I learn so much about myself, or at least the way I’m perceived.” In that conversation, she also confided, “I have too much time to think, too much introspection, wishing I could change things, maybe the way I did things, wondering if I could have prevented this. I feel like a disgraced soldier in a movie, stripped of his epaulets and standing in bare uniform, common, plain.”

At another time, while momentarily distracted by students’ voices outside his closed door, Edward dialed her work number, not realizing the error until he heard the flat words without greeting of a generic voice mail instructing the caller to leave a message. He then contacted her at home and Carole’s husband answered. He thanked Edward for supporting her, adding that she was

encouraged by him. But Edward was not pleased with the compliment, doubting sincerity. Early evening, he was slouching on a cushioned chair, nearly asleep and the phone rang. He sat up when he heard her voice. “My husband said you called.”

“Yes, I wanted to see how things were going. He told me he appreciated my supporting you, that I’m a big help.”

Sensing the sarcasm, she answered, “He was honest about that. He is grateful.”

Instead of responding to her correction, Edward focused on the words: “about that?”

“He’s a good person,” Carole explained, “but there has always been a competitiveness in our marriage, a begrudging acceptance of equality—on his part—but we had equal authority in our different careers, practiced competence, made lots of money, but now—“ she didn’t complete the sentence.

“I don’t like him, I’m sorry. When I met him at the holiday events, he seemed condescending, likely because I reported to you.”

“At times I don’t like him, but most times I do. Guess we can say that about most people.”

“I’m not a threat to him, so I’m harmless.”

“You and I know we never could have the

kind of relationship that would create a threat, so why be bothered? Who cares what he thinks.”

He answered sharply, “Because I don’t like when people make assumptions about character or—“

“Or feelings,” she completed his sentence.

“That’s a good-enough word. How are you coping? What do you do each day?” Edward asked.

“I get up in the morning as usual, shower—although my husband balks at my continuing the routine rather than unnecessarily limiting, as he describes, his preparation time—and I have breakfast, but usually on the second cup of coffee remind myself I have no place to go. I email and occasionally mail resumes, then wait. If I’m in another room, I jump each time my computer sounds that an email has arrived, and I practically stalk the postal carrier.”

The following days of late fall were marked by cloudiness and constant threat of rain—which rarely came. Blown clean of colorless leaves, tree branches swayed more readily in light breezes. Edward considered November a sorrowful time of year, a brief period of autumnal melancholy before the holidays began and the commercial joyfulness colored stores. In their last conversation, in part to keep her talking, he asked about her house, encouraging description of the rooms until he could

fully envision her sitting at her desk overlooking the winding street and tended back yards, and afterwards wandering through quiet rooms. He wondered about her mood, did the sunless sky affect her, as it sometimes did him?

Suddenly there was stress in Edward's life: his relationship ended abruptly and depressed him. He didn't contact Carole for weeks. When he did call, he could sense her coolness and she required coaxing before she accepted his offer for lunch. Edward explained what had been going on with him, adding that the only benefit was that he now understood the impact of losing something that was central to his life, as she was experiencing.

"I'm sorry. You forget there are probably other tragedies worse than your own," she said. She gave him an update on her fruitless job search. "It's causing further strain at home; our income has been cut in half now that severance has run out, and he had to put me on his company medical plan, which is not cheap. He was also embarrassed to tell them why. We were the envied couple," she closed sardonically.

"He should be more supportive."

"He's angry with me, but knows I can't be blamed. That's the worst kind—anger without a place to blame."

They had the conversation at a restaurant

near her home. After lunch, Edward retrieved the check, and while he searched through his wallet for a credit card, he asked her, “Do you need money or—“

Carole grabbed the lunch bill from his hand and pulling twenties from her purse, slammed both on the table; in silence, her expressive eyes reflected her ire. Edward followed after her from the restaurant and down the street, calling after her, “I’m sorry, I don’t know what to do, how to help.”

She swirled and poking his chest, said, “That’s not it.”

She hurried away from him and he stood still, shouting in frustration, far louder than he intended, “Shit!”

Overhearing, she turned toward him and for a moment they stared at each other until she suddenly broke into deep laughter, so much so that she had to sit on the steps of a building. After the outburst subsided, she walked back toward him and threw her arms around him and he returned the embrace.

Stepping back, he said, “You never even hugged me the day I left work.”

She pressed his face between her hands, “I was frightened of crying.”

The next day in his office at the college after class, he turned his cell phone on and saw there was a message from Carole. When he called her back, she answered, the exuberance showing even in her greeting. “I have an interview; it’s a perfect fit.”

“When?” he asked.

“Early next week. It’s a short distance from home, great company. I’m excited. Please pray or offer sacrifices, whatever you believe in.”

He laughed. “You’ll do fine.”

During the interview time, Edward didn’t have a class and sat in the cafeteria, wondering about how it was going. He imagined Carole was answering questions adeptly, showing accomplishment and impressing the interviewers. When she called an hour later, he knew his speculation was wrong.

“What an asshole,” she began. “I only met with the Human Resources person and she asked from a list of questions, never going beyond the simple inquiry and at the end said they’d be in touch. When I asked if I was meeting anyone else, someone from the department, she seemed annoyed at my question. It didn’t go well.”

For a while after that, they spoke every week, rarely discussing her job search—at her request.

“My husband and I discuss it every day; it’s all we talk about or else about cutting back on expenses, delaying what we need. I feel like I’m reporting as a condition of our marriage.”

“Don’t let it get to you,” was all Edward could offer.

“I won’t but it’s killing *us*.”

He could sense her mood on each call until one time in late winter, she had a scheduled interview at a company in the next county. “It’s a drive but I can get up early. I’ve already driven the route, it’s not bad. The job is a perfect match to my background.”

“Call me after the interview,” he instructed.

Carole called him from her cell phone in the parking lot of the company, “I’m coming back for a round of departmental interviews early next week. I’m cautious from the last time, but I have a good feeling about this.”

When the day came, he emailed her, wishing her good luck and again asked that she contact him after the meetings. Weeks went by and she never heard back from the company. When they spoke, he avoided asking.

In early spring when he met her, he could

see the stiff—back confidence had weakened. She wore no make-up and her blouse was wrinkled as if she was indifferent to her appearance.

“Nothing’s happening, no email responses, no calls, nothing. We’re like houses; when you’re on the market too long, people wonder what’s wrong and stay away. Some still have doubts about the unemployed, feeling that better individuals remain employed even in difficult times.”

“Who’s been telling you that?”

“I’ve heard it.”

“From your outplacement counselor?”

“No, but he told me that you go through the five stages of grief when you lose your job just as people experience when someone close dies. Apparently, I’m in stage four, depression, but that means,” she said, her voice quivering slightly, “one to go.” After a moment in which neither spoke, she added, “I’m scared.”

In the calls afterwards, there were things he wanted to say to her—constructive things, he thought—but he knew that a byproduct of the unsuccessful job search was a growing fragileness in their relationship. Encouragement or counsel was taken as rebuke and she’d respond with petulant silence. Once she has blasted him, “Who appointed you as my cheerleader? You can only take on this

self-appointed role because you're working. You know, you are also a reminder. You once worked for me, and once a part of *that* life." She apologized the next day. He wanted to tell her that her retorts, once a disarming weapon, had made a turn toward bitterness.

But the strain carried further into their relationship and he felt her drifting away. He confronted her, and regretted it. "I'm trying to help," He said accusingly.

"You can't help, really; you can't understand. I'm tired of the flood of advice: get a hobby, do volunteer work. One person even suggested I get pregnant. You all draw on some parallel experience but it's not the same. You have a job. I can hear it in your words and the condolences, the underlying exhaling and thought: *thank god, it's not me.*"

"That's not true," Edward answered, unintended anger seeping into his words. "You can't let this tear you down."

"Save your lectures for class," she said before sobbing.

She calmed but when he hung up with her, he sensed the *goodbyes* were more than the end of an exchange.

After dark, prior to an evening class in the

fall semester, he drove by her house— knowing the address from her resume— and didn't see her car in the driveway. He took that route for several more weeks and after unanswered messages on her cell and email since the summer, he pulled up in front, and knocked on her door. Explaining who he was, Edward asked Carole's husband if he could talk to her. The husband responded brusquely that she was not at home, conveying finality to the conversation and slowly closing the door. Edward never saw or heard from Carole again, but watched LinkedIn for activity. Nothing; the postings were old, no additions. Months later while holiday shopping, Edward met a woman who also reported to Carole, and inquired about their former boss, faking remote interest. The woman said she hadn't heard much recently but there was a rumor that Carole and her husband had separated and she had taken a job in Colorado, "one far less challenging," the woman offered. After that, Edward still checked LinkedIn until one day her profile disappeared and she ceased to exist.

**Jim Hanley** is a Human Resources professional and adjunct professor. He has had stories published in several genres, which have appeared in publications such as: *MacGuffin*, *Concho River Review*, *Wisconsin Review*, *South Dakota Review* and others. Jim is currently working on a novel as well as short stories.