

Strategy

By Avery Erskine

PEN SCRATCHING AGAINST PAPER.

SIPPING COFFEE.

PEN SCRATCHING AGAINST PAPER, PAPER
FLIPPING.

SPOON AGAINST BOWL; JEANETTE'S
(early 20s) CRUNCHING.

PEN SCRATCHING AGAINST PAPER.

MARK'S (50) FOOTSTEPS.

JEANETTE
(mouth half-full with cereal)

Good morning.

MARK

Good morning.

Anything in the paper?

JEANETTE
(mouth now empty)

Just one op-ed. But I don't recognize the author, so you're
fine.

MARK

Anything on Twitter?

Jeanette BREATHES THROUGH TEETH.

Ah, got it.

JEANETTE
Yeah don't, like, check your feed anytime soon.

MARK

Sounds good.

JEANETTE
Is Mom gonna make it today?

MARK

No, her plane was delayed. She'll get in late tonight.

JEANETTE

Sorry.

MARK

It's okay. You'll be there.

PEN SCRATCHING AGAINST PAPER.

You're already doing work? You need to give yourself a break.

JEANETTE

It's actually not my work.

PAPER SHUFFLING.

It's yours.

MARK

Ah, you're back in editor mode I see.

JEANETTE

That's what happens when your father writes an apology speech full of egregious grammatical errors.

MARK

I don't know if I'd use the word "egregious."

JEANETTE

Because you wouldn't know how.

MARK

Are you suggesting I don't know what the word "egregious" means?

JEANETTE

Perhaps.

MARK

You know I have a PhD.

JEANETTE

No, I didn't know that. You never bring it up.

Mark LAUGHS.

MARK

Are you going to be ready soon? We have to leave in twenty.

Small GASP from Jeanette.

Jen?

Jeanette CLEARS HER THROAT.

PEN SCRATCHING AGAINST PAPER.

JEANETTE

We're fine on time. I don't need twenty minutes to change.

PEN CLICKS, Jeanette SHUFFLES AND TAPS PAPER to organize.

Jeanette's FOOTSTEPS.

CERAMIC HITTING METAL, FAUCET
RUNNING.

MARK

Are you okay?

FAUCET STOPS.

JEANETTE

I'm fine.

MARK

Are you sure?

JEANETTE

It's just been a rough week. For both of us.

MARK

I shouldn't have called him crazy.

JEANETTE

You didn't know any better.

Jeanette's FOOTSTEPS off.

SHUFFLING PAPERS.

Jeanette's FOOTSTEPS, PAPER HANDED
OFF.

MARK

Thanks.

SHUFFLING PAPERS.

So you liked the opening?

JEANETTE

(offstage)

Yeah, it's good. Very diplomatic.

MARK

(surprised)

Well thank you.

PAPER FLIPS.

What's awkward about this sentence on page 4? I like the way
it sounds.

Jeanette's FOOTSTEPS on.

JEANETTE

I don't have your whole speech memorized, you know.

Zip?

DRESS ZIPS.

MARK

Right here.

PAPERS HANDED OFF.

JEANETTE

Yeah, it's not clear what you're modifying there.

PAPERS HANDED OFF.

MARK

It's perfectly clear.

JEANETTE

It sounds like the illnesses are what aid the lives and the economy.

MARK

(stubbornly)

No. "I have always supported programs that aim to reduce the effects of these illnesses, which aid--"

Oh, you're right. Never mind.

JEANETTE

Mhmm.

MARK

You know I have professionals to help me with these things, right?

Mark CHUCKLES.

Jeanette's FOOTSTEPS off. (Jeanette does not laugh.)

MARK

(muttering to himself while reading)

"My passion for this extends beyond governmental matters. My family and I have always sought to prioritize mental health, checking in with one another frequently and providing support to each other in multiple ways, including..."

Jeanette?

JEANETTE

(offstage)

Yeah?

MARK

I don't understand the edits on page 7.

JEANETTE

(offstage)

Give me a second.

Jeanette's FOOTSTEPS on.

PAPER HANDED OFF.

MARK

You cut the whole paragraph.

JEANETTE

Yeah, um. It didn't flow with the rest of it. Everything was more general before and this distracts from what you're trying to say.

MARK

Really?

PAPER HANDED OFF.

Jeanette's FOOTSTEPS.

REFRIGERATOR OPENS, CLOSES.

No, I think we should include it. It's important.

CABINET OPENS, GLASS ON GRANITE.

JEANETTE

It's just a completely different tone from the rest of the speech. You need to stay consistent.

WATER POURED INTO GLASS.

MARK

It is consistent. It's the same topic.

JEANETTE

No, it's a distraction from the apology.

MARK

It enforces the apology. It shows that I have a personal stake in the issue.

JEANETTE

Are you sure voters want a governor who has a personal stake? It might scare them off.

REFRIGERATOR DOOR OPENS, CLOSES

MARK

It hasn't scared them off in the past.

JEANETTE

It just doesn't make sense for it to be there. There's no transitional sentence that leads into it. There's no clear transition out of it. It's just there.

MARK

Then we'll add transitional sentences.

JEANETTE

It's honestly easier just to delete the whole thing.

Jeanette DRINKS WATER.

MARK

I don't have time to replace it with something else. And I wouldn't know what to replace it with. This is what convinces voters that I actually care about this.

JEANETTE

Or it could show voters that you don't understand the basics of essay writing.

MARK

It's not an essay.

JEANETTE

What is it if it's not an essay, then?

MARK

A speech.

JEANETTE

Yeah, a spoken essay.

MARK

They're not the same thing.

JEANETTE

I know multiple scholars that would disagree with that.

MARK

And are these scholars potential voters?

JEANETTE

Why does that matter? They would still recognize certain aspects of the story if they heard it.

MARK

Does that bother you?

Jeanette takes a SHAKY BREATH.

GLASS ON GRANITE.

JEANETTE

It's clear what the story's about.

And I don't like it.

MARK
(gently)
I never mention your name.

JEANETTE
It's still obvious.

MARK
No one would know. We made it intentionally vague.

JEANETTE
Let me see it again.

PAPER HANDED OFF.
No, it's clear you're talking about one of your children.

Mark's FOOTSTEPS, DRAWER OPENING.

MARK
Have you seen the car keys?

SHUFFLING OF DRAWER'S CONTENTS.

JEANETTE
And then you say "she," so it's obvious you're talking about your daughter--

MARK
Hey, Jen, did you put the keys somewhere?

DRAWER CLOSES.

JEANETTE
And it takes a two-second Google search to figure out that I'm your only daughter.

Mark's FOOTSTEPS.

MARK
Can we drop this for a second and look for the keys? None of this matters if we can't get to the venue.

Jeanette SIGHS.

JEANETTE
The BMW or the Mercedes?

MARK
The BMW. The Mercedes is in the shop.

Jeanette's FOOTSTEPS join Mark's.
I could have sworn I left them by the door.

JEANETTE
Maybe they're in your suit jacket?

Mark's FOOTSTEPS off.

MARK

And check your purse!

PURSE UNZIPS.

JEANETTE

They're not in here.

PURSE ZIPS.

Mark's FOOTSTEPS on.

MARK

They're not here either. Maybe I should call Charles.

JEANETTE

Ah, Charles, our hero.

MARK

Do you have any other ideas?

JEANETTE

No, no, go ahead, call Charles.

MARK

I know that we're going through something right now, but I'm going to need you to treat Charles with a little more respect.

JEANETTE

He has to earn my respect.

MARK

He's earned mine.

JEANETTE

Yeah, 'cause he's *your* campaign manager. Nowhere in his contract does it say I have to respect him.

MARK

Jen, I know you're angry, but--

JEANETTE

(under her breath, overlapping)

Yeah, no shit I'm angry.

MARK

But this isn't his fault.

JEANETTE

I think page 7 is his fault. No thanks to you.

MARK

(forcibly calm)

Jeanette, look at it through my point of view. This anecdote is the perfect thing for people to see that my mistake was only that -- a mistake. It shows that I'm a family man, that I care about the people in my life.

JEANETTE

So I'm just a campaign strategy to you.

MARK

I don't have time for this right now.

You didn't find the keys?

JEANETTE

No.

CELL PHONE DIALING.

You can't just avoid me by calling Charles.

MARK

(to Jeanette)

We have to get there somehow.

(to Charles)

Hey, I can't find my car keys.

INDISTINCT MALE VOICE ON PHONE.

Do you think you'd get here in time?

INDISTINCT MALE VOICE ON PHONE.

Yeah, we'll be ready. Thanks.

INDISTINCT MALE VOICE ON PHONE.

(to Jeanette)

What shoes are you wearing with that?

JEANETTE

My black heels.

MARK

(to Charles)

Black heels.

INDISTINCT MALE VOICE ON PHONE.

(to Jeanette)

Do you have flats?

JEANETTE

The heels looks nicer.

MARK

(to Charles)

She wants to wear the heels.

INDISTINCT MALE VOICE ON PHONE.

Well does it really change the image that much if she's in heels?

INDISTINCT MALE VOICE ON PHONE.
Alright.

INDISTINCT MALE VOICE ON PHONE.
See you soon. Bye.

HANG-UP TONES.

JEANETTE
He doesn't like the heels?

MARK
Something about the image.

JEANETTE
Seems to be a big concern of his.

MARK
It's his job.

JEANETTE
Hm.

MARK
Go ahead and get your shoes on. He'll be here in a few minutes.

JEANETTE
Do I have to put my shoes on if I'm not going?

MARK
Are you still hung up on this? It's one paragraph.

JEANETTE
Well, it's a paragraph that's stopping me from going. You don't have my consent.

MARK
This isn't the time for vocab from your gender studies classes.

JEANETTE
Since when was "consent" exclusively gender studies?

MARK
You know what I mean.

JEANETTE
I don't give you *permission*. Is that better?

MARK
It's not yours to give.

JEANETTE
Why?

MARK
Because.

JEANETTE
Because you said so?

MARK
(trying to maintain patience)
Hey. I need a change of attitude from you.

JEANETTE
Excuse me?

MARK
Put your shoes on and take a few seconds to cool off. Take some deep breaths.

Jeanette's FOOTSTEPS.
The flats, not the heels.

Jeanette HUFFS; her FOOTSTEPS off.

Jeanette's FOOTSTEPS on.

CHAIR PULLED OUT, SAT IN.

SHUFFLE of shoes being put on.

Jeanette STANDS.

MARK
You look beautiful.

JEANETTE
Well I feel like shit.

MARK
Jeanette, I love you. This is the way that we will make things better for you. For us. For everyone else out there who's struggling.

JEANETTE
Don't tell me this is for me.

MARK
This story could make a big difference for all of us. You could lead awareness campaigns.

JEANETTE
I agreed to support you, Dad, not become a politician.

MARK

Well then don't be one.

JEANETTE

You're turning me into one! Leading campaigns?

MARK

Fine. No campaigns.

What if I made it so they don't know it's you. I'll change the pronouns, not say it's my family.

JEANETTE

They'd still know it's me.

MARK

I won't let that happen.

Jeanette EXHALES dramatically.

MARK

Well?

JEANETTE

Oh, I'm practicing those deep breaths you were talking about. Or did you not want me to cool off?

MARK

Listen, think of all the mental health improvements we can make if I'm elected. Better healthcare plans. Training educators to look for signs. Changing the stigma.

JEANETTE

(laughing cynically)

Oh my god.

MARK

(defensively)

What?

JEANETTE

"Changing the stigma"?

MARK

Yes! Think of the progress we could make!

JEANETTE

We? This isn't about "we." This is about you exploiting my story.

MARK

I don't understand how in the world this qualifies as exploitation. I'm using an anecdote to show that I'm pro-mental wellness.

JEANETTE

I just think it's funny that you're suddenly very "pro-mental wellness" and you think the only way to show that is by oversharing something incredibly personal.

MARK

You're being irrational.

JEANETTE

No, I'm being realistic.

MARK

And tell me how exactly slandering your father's campaign is "realistic"?

JEANETTE

Well mental health wasn't exactly "extremely important" to you until you decided to call Governor Johnson "crazy," was it?

Pause.

MARK

That's not fair.

JEANETTE

Oh?

MARK

I didn't know about him, or, or about his condition. He's not open about it.

JEANETTE

Oh, so he's just supposed to open with "Hi, I'm Governor Johnson and I'm bipolar!"?

MARK

Jesus Christ, Jen, can you give me a break? I'm trying to fix this! How many times do I have to apologize?

This will help you. This will help so many people like you.

JEANETTE

Like me?

MARK

You know what I mean.

JEANETTE

No, no, tell me. What exactly are people like me? Describe them to me.

No response.

Hm?

MARK

I want to help people achieve mental wellness.

JEANETTE

You know you can help people without tokenizing me.

MARK

Ah, her gender studies vocab makes another appearance.

JEANETTE

What does this have to do with gender studies?

MARK

"Tokenizing"?

JEANETTE

Yeah ... you're tokenizing me.

MARK

Come on, Jeanette, you are an upper-class white girl. I have made sure to give you the most comfortable life a child could ask for. Do not try to act like you're being "tokenized" right now. That word is not for you.

JEANETTE

Oh, so I don't get to decide when I'm being oppressed?

MARK

Do you even know what you're talking about or are you just throwing buzz words at me?

JEANETTE

You think I'm bullshitting my education?

MARK

I think you're bullshitting the severity of the situation.

JEANETTE

You're using my story for political gain. A story about me and my life.

MARK

I was there. It's my story, too, whether you like it or not.

Pause.

MARK

If Charles doesn't show up in the next minute, we're going to be late.

JEANETTE

It's your speech, you decide when it starts.

MARK

You know that's not how it works.

JEANETTE

I think that's exactly how it works. You're in charge of your own damn campaign, aren't you?

MARK

I can't be late to this one. This could make or break me.

JEANETTE

What good could this speech actually do for you? Change maybe two minds?

MARK

If I make it on time it could change a ton of minds! My entire campaign hinges on this!

JEANETTE

It's just like any other speech you've ever given.

MARK

You know this one is different.

JEANETTE

(giving up on patience)

They're all the same. Every speech. Every public appearance. You show up, you say a few words, you shake some hands, and I just smile and wave and pretend like you're the best person in the whole fucking world even though we both know you're not and we're all - even you - we're all just reduced to some two dimensional ideal of a person, just some fake cardboard cut-out of a human being.

MARK

(more offended than he's letting on)

You're being ridiculous.

JEANETTE

Am I?

MARK

You're making no sense.

JEANETTE

Are you saying I'm crazy?

Pause.

MARK

That's not what I said.

JEANETTE

But you've been thinking it this whole time, haven't you?

PHONE RINGS.

MARK

Hey.

INDISTINCT MALE VOICE ON PHONE.

Alright. We'll be out soon. Thanks.

HANG-UP TONES.

We'll talk about this in the car.

JEANETTE

I need to touch up my makeup.

MARK

You didn't do that before?

JEANETTE

Well we kinda got lost in conversation, didn't we?

MARK

I'm sure Charles has a makeup artist on call if you really need it.

JEANETTE

So I can't be trusted with my own makeup skills either?

MARK

Grab your makeup. We can figure it out there.

JEANETTE

The house has better lighting.

MARK

I'm sure there's great lighting at the venue, too.

JEANETTE

I like it at home better.

MARK

That's not an option right now.

JEANETTE

I'm making it an option. I'm staying here. Where no one is calling me crazy.

MARK

I made a mistake, and I regret what I said. I've told you that multiple times.

JEANETTE

But somehow you're still failing to prove to me that you mean it.

MARK

What else do you want me to do?

JEANETTE

Cut the story.

MARK

That's not feasible! It's about more than just you! Stop overreacting and let me tell my story.

JEANETTE

I'm barely comfortable talking about it with you let alone sharing it with thousands - possibly millions - of people.

MARK

But you have talked about this. On the car ride home, we talked about this.

JEANETTE

Barely.

MARK

I told you I would help you.

JEANETTE

I know.

MARK

We made plans. To heal you, we made plans.

JEANETTE

Yeah, therapy. That's all we decided. We decided it wasn't your fault and that I would go to therapy. And I did.

MARK

I said I was there for you.

JEANETTE

Have you been though? Maybe if you were actually "there for me" we'd already be on our way to the venue.

MARK

If I hadn't been there for you, we wouldn't be having this conversation right now, would we?

Jeanette's SHAKY BREATH.

JEANETTE

Being the first person to walk into my room that day does not count as being "there for me." You have to actually care.

MARK

Jeanette, when I found you, I thought my entire world had ended. Seeing you lying there ... in the room I painted for you, next to books I had read to you, under the roof I worked so hard to provide for you. You were just lying

there... surrounded by all I had done for you. It broke me to see you like that, so much promise almost gone, lying in the middle of my- our home. I felt like I had failed you. I was supposed to protect you, and I failed you. I didn't know where I went wrong--

JEANETTE

It wasn't your fault--

MARK

That was the scariest moment of my entire life. It's a parent's - a person's - worst nightmare.

JEANETTE

I know, but--

MARK

But it had a good ending for us. I can't even imagine how I would be functioning right now if things hadn't ended the way they had. I wouldn't wish those feelings on my worst enemy.

JEANETTE

Dad, imagine how I felt. I was alone. I was scared.

MARK

I know, I know, I--

JEANETTE

No, you don't know! You don't know at all! That moment was the darkest moment of my entire life. You don't know fear until you're two inches away from the end of it all. When I woke up in the hospital, for a split second, I thought it was heaven. Heaven, Dad. As if I deserved to go there.

MARK

Of course you deserve--

JEANETTE

God, would you just stop talking and listen for a second?

Mark stops interjecting.

I know that your campaign is stressing you out, so I guess I just forgave you up until now, but you just keep choosing the stats and the voters and the images over me time and time again and I'm sick of it.

You have never once supported any of the choices I made on my own. Not my writing, not my major, shit, not even the shoes I want to wear. How do you think it feels growing up knowing you'll never be enough, you'll never be right?

MARK

(overlapping)

Growing up?

JEANETTE

(overlapping)

And no matter how much you work, it just isn't enough and when everything gets to be too much-

MARK

Stop, stop, growing up? How long have you felt this way?

JEANETTE

Dad, my whole life has been about how I make you look. And now I can't even have the darkest moment of my life to myself.

MARK

Your whole life? Why didn't you say something? I could have-

JEANETTE

You had campaigns to win. Worlds to change. And you get used to none of your choices ever really being yours.

Pause.

MARK

I didn't know, I-

JEANETTE

Well, you know now.

MARK

I'm sorry.

JEANETTE

I'm sorry doesn't really cut it right now.

MARK

Okay. Okay. I understand. It's your choice then.

JEANETTE

What?

MARK

It's up to you. I'll cut the story if you want me to.

JEANETTE

Really?

MARK

It's your choice.

JEANETTE

Oh.

Pause.

JEANETTE

Okay.

MARK

Okay?

JEANETTE

Okay, you can keep it in.

MARK

Really? I want you to be sure.

JEANETTE

I don't want you to throw away this campaign for me. You deserve to be governor, Dad. You've worked your whole life for this.

MARK

Thank you.

Pause.

MARK

Are you still okay to come with me?

JEANETTE

Mmhm.

MARK

If you still need to touch up your makeup, now's your chance.

Jeanette's FOOTSTEPS off.

Jeanette's FOOTSTEPS on, UNZIPPING
POUCH.

Jeanette CHUCKLES softly.

MARK

What?

CAR KEYS JINGLING.

MARK

You're kidding.

JEANETTE

I guess you can tell Charles you don't need a ride anymore.

MARK

No, we can still go with him. I don't want his drive to have been for nothing.

JEANETTE

(reluctantly)

Actually, are you okay if I don't drive with you?

MARK

What?

JEANETTE

I'll take the BMW. I just need a moment to, um ... collect myself.

MARK

Of course. Yeah.

I'll see you there?

JEANETTE

See you there.

Pause.

MARK

I love you.

JEANETTE

I love you, too.

FABRIC AND PAPERS SHUFFLING.

DOOR OPENS. DOOR CLOSES.

Pause.

FABRIC AND PAPERS SHUFFLING.

DOOR OPENS.

Jeanette's SHAKY BREATH.