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"THE GOOD FIGHT"

"I need your help," said Siegel to the guy who answered the phone at the car rental place in Oregon, to whom he explained that his son's girlfriend had been badly mistreated.

"Not a whole lot we can do," was the reply. "What's done is done."

"Nope. What's done is going to be corrected. And the first step is to give me your name and corporate employee number."

"Why?"

"So I can report your unwillingness to help."

"Listen –"

"No, I'm not here to listen," said Siegel firmly. "The info, please. Then put me through to the manager."

"I understand you're a little unhappy," announced the manager once he came to the phone.

"Not just a little," Siegel stated emphatically. "My son's girlfriend was treated abominably in a bunch of ways, and I'm supposed to roll over and accept that what's done is done?"

"Hey, things happen."

"And when they do, somebody's got to make 'em right."

"Since I can't move back the clock, how about I refund some of the money?"

"Is that going to erase the shabby way she was treated?"

"Well –"

"Or that because she was given the wrong hitch, she needs a new front bumper?"

"She didn't have to accept what we gave her."

"Late on a Friday afternoon? When she was supposed to pick up my son at the Portland airport in an hour, then drive down to LA with him at dawn the next day?"

"What exactly do you want?"

"For you to make good."

"I'm afraid I can't do that."

"Then give me your name, please. And your corporate ID number," Siegel said forcefully.

Far from daunted by what he took to be a combination of unwillingness and inability to make amends, Siegel went on the internet and found the (800) number for the car rental company. Placing a call, he asked for Customer Service.

After sitting on hold for seven minutes, he gave a short-form version of what had transpired to the woman who finally responded.

When she, like her predecessors, claimed there was little she could do other than initiating an inquiry, Siegel once more requested a name and a corporate ID number. Then he demanded to be put through to a supervisor.

Nine minutes later, an officious sounding man spoke. "What seems to be the problem?" Siegel was asked in a manner designed to put him on the defensive.

"*Problems*, as in plural," Siegel responded. "An ever-mounting list, starting with the heartless and, if my understanding of consumers' rights is correct, illegal way my son's girlfriend was taken advantage of in Portland –"

"Well, sir –" the supervisor started to interrupt.

"– Compounded by the callous and disrespectful way I, too, have been treated."

"Okay, so I've glanced at the file. What exactly would you like?"

"Peace on earth, goodwill toward men, and an all-expenses paid trip to Paris," Siegel said. "But I'll settle for having my son's girlfriend's situation corrected to her – and my – satisfaction."

"Is that all?" the supervisor asked in a tone laden with irony.

"What I want above all is to know that you intend to make things right."

"Other than perhaps refunding a certain percentage of the charges, I don't know that there's much I can do."

"Then guess what. I'm going to have to take this to another level."

"You're welcome to try. But I can guarantee you won't get anywhere."

"Want to bet?" was Siegel's reply.

What the supervisor did not know was that thanks to him Siegel had an even greater incentive to fight the good fight.

Though not someone who searched for or solicited battles, there was a part of him that enjoyed going to war for what he believed in.

The roots were deep-seeded. Unlike friends whose childhood in blighted industrial New Jersey resulted in powerlessness in the face of authority, Siegel had never been willing to accept subservience in any form. Having escaped literally, by moving to California, and figuratively, by recognizing that he was resourceful enough to fight for his rights, he had become skilled in standing up against overwhelming odds.

His refusal to be victimized was reinforced by a belief that in taking a stand, he was

defending the disenfranchised – those too weak, frightened, or oppressed to take on a Goliath.

Then there was Siegel's innate competitiveness, which in his youth had carried him to success in baseball, basketball, and boxing far beyond his physical gifts.

Plus, in taking on the car rental agency, he had the added incentive of shining in the eyes of both his son and his son's girlfriend.

Recognizing that success requires a playbook, Siegel's quests made use of rules he had formulated through trial and error.

First: Express righteous indignation based on specifics, not abstractions.

Second: Make demands that are strong, but not overly excessive.

Third: Avoid yelling, plus profanity that can be termed abusive.

Fourth: Be resolute and firm.

His track record and guidelines – coupled with resourcefulness and daring – gave him a sense that no challenge was too great, no foe too daunting.

Having tried unsuccessfully to reach the rental agency's corporate offices through the company's (800) number, Siegel again turned to the internet. Thanks to postings on the New York Stock Exchange, plus Dun & Bradstreet, he had at his disposal not just the names of the corporation's CEO, CFO, and key VP's, including the guy in charge of P.R., but also pertinent information for the executive offices, which happened to be in Connecticut.

Setting himself up with a cup of green tea, plus a copy of the New York Times for what proved to be an inevitable wait, Siegel dialed a Connecticut number.

"Mr. Olson's office," said a woman after the switchboard at last connected him to the office of the CEO.

"Arthur Siegel calling for him."

"Will he know what it's about?"

"No, but here's how he can. I'd like you to Google me: S-i-e-g-e-l, first name Arthur."

"May I ask why?"

"Because I make documentaries, and I may have found the subject for my next one."

"I'm not sure I follow."

"Ever heard the word muckraker?"

"I-I believe so."

"Well, now you've met one. It just so happens that my son's girlfriend was badly mistreated by the folks in Portland, Oregon. And so was I in coming to her defense. Now is Casey free?"

"I'm afraid *Mr.* Olson is not," she replied with condescension.

"Then tell him *Mr.* Siegel expects a call sooner rather than later," Siegel responded in kind.

Declining the assistant's request for further explanation, Siegel instead gave his phone number. Then, noting the time, he hung up.

Forty-five minutes later, Siegel's caller ID displayed a Connecticut phone number.

"Mr. Siegel, this is Charles Goldsmith," said a voice at the other end when Siegel answered. "I've been informed that we have somewhat of a situation."

"Let me ask a question or two. Was Katrina a little rainstorm?"

"Not exactly."

"Or Chernobyl a minor incident?"

"I don't see your point."

"That this is hardly *somewhat of a situation*. We clear?"

"If we're to proceed –"

"Which is a big if –"

"I-I beg your pardon –"

"My understanding is that you're in P.R."

"I'm Senior Vice President in that field."

"With the power to make amends for wrongs that have been done?"

"Well, I –"

"Unless that's a yes, I take it as a no."

"Mr. Siegel, I can assure you –"

"That you'll provide a sympathetic ear? Or pass this on to the appropriate party?"

"In principle, yes."

"Then let's define Public Relations. I assume that in part that means dealing with people like me who were resourceful enough to circumvent what you folks call Customer Relations. Correct?"

"Yes."

"But if I'm not mistaken, it also means creating a corporate image in the eyes of the public. Right again?"

"To a large degree."

"Then I'm your worst nightmare. Familiar with my work?"

"I did a Google search."

"Then you know I'm fully capable of showing your firm as cold, heartless, bullies – predators who exploit and abuse sweet, wholesome young women."

"Is that a threat?"

"Let's define threat," said Siegel. "To me it's an invocation of menace that's designed to intimidate, but rarely acted upon. Whereas a promise, which is what I'm making, is a statement of purpose. A solemn vow. Want to guess what vow I'm making?"

"I get the feeling you're going to tell me."

"That in the absence of remedy, there'll be war. So I suggest you have someone reach out to me soon with remediation. But if you play tough by bringing in Legal, there's something to be aware of. Ready?"

"I suppose."

"Before it ever hits a court of law, I'll have a field day in the court of public opinion."

"I-I'd rather not go there."

"Because? That would constitute a Public Relations disaster," said Siegel wryly.

Less than an hour later, another call came in with a Connecticut area code on the Caller ID.

"Mr. Siegel?" asked the voice at the other end when Siegel answered. "My name is Sheila Sullivan, here to see if I can help make you happy."

"Then let's cut to the chase. How?"

"How, what?"

"Are you going to make me happy?"

"Well first, we need to do some fact-finding."

"We?"

"You and I together."

"Why would I do that when I know the facts?"

"Well –" said the woman.

"Further, as I understand it, you folks already have a file. Correct?"

"Yes, but –"

"Which means that any more yack-yack is simply temporizing."

"Mr. Siegel, I don't think you understand the way we work."

"Quite the contrary. I'm going to give you the benefit of the doubt and assume you're a nice person simply doing your job. But as I explained to Goldsmith, who may be your buddy, but certainly isn't mine, I want two things, and I want them immediately. Ready?"

"Okay."

"I want to be made happy, and I want it to be done by Casey Olson."

"Mr. Olson does not attend to matters such as this."

"So as not to sully his hands?"

"That's not exactly how I meant it."

"Nor did you say it's not true. How are you on betting, Ms. Sullivan? Like the ponies? Football pools? March Madness?"

"Why are you asking?"

"Because I'll bet you a month's salary that I get to good ol' Casey. And I'll bet you double or nothing I get what I want."

Siegel's certitude was based to a large degree on geography. Had the executive offices been located in a major metropolitan area – Manhattan, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago, or Boston – his quest would have had an added degree of difficulty. But Connecticut made the task far simpler. Step #1 was to determine which wealthy towns, particularly those with exclusive private golf clubs, were within commuting distance of the corporate offices. Then, since in those areas telephone numbers were less likely to be unlisted, it was simply a matter of using the

internet to go through public records such as deeds and campaign donations before turning to tools such as Switchboard.com.

Having found what proved to be far from a needle in a haystack, Siegel ran some other internet searches. Then after a light workout of chin-ups, push-ups, and crunches, he jogged over to the Santa Monica steps, where amidst the bodybuilders, fitness freaks, and women in Spandex, he added two more reps to his twice-weekly routine on the stairs.

At 5 PM his time – 8 PM in Connecticut – Siegel placed a long distance call. After two rings, he heard a woman with a patrician accent say, "Good evening."

"It's Art Siegel for Casey," he stated convivially.

"Will he know you?"

"He should."

"In regard to?"

"This and that."

"I shall see if he's available," the woman replied dubiously.

A minute passed before before Siegel heard a man with stentorian tones. "Olson, here. What exactly can I do for you?"

"How about making me happy?"

"I beg your pardon."

"Since there's obviously a mandate that underlings not bother you, it was either call you or take steps."

"Such as?"

"Ever read Variety? Or the Hollywood Reporter? Or The Wrap?"

"What would they have that might interest me?"

"A story about a documentary exploring certain of your company's practices."

"Such as?" Olson asked with what sounded like concern.

"The brutal and heartless treatment of a sweet young woman."

"Please –"

"Who happens to be a Native American."

"Come now –"

"And an orphan –"

"I hope you're not exaggerating –"

"And on top of that, a beautiful model. Which, when I add that she wound up in tears by the side of a highway at rush hour – with the wrong truck, the wrong hitch, and a front bumper that was damaged so badly it was barely hanging on – positions your company as a bunch of ogres. And you, I should add, as the big, bad wolf."

"I had nothing to do with it," Olson protested.

"But now you do."

A moment of silence ensued, then Olson spoke. "Is this a shakedown?"

"Far from it. But something tells me that once the word spreads, people will leap out of the woodwork with horror stories of their own."

"What did you say your name was?" asked Olson.

"Siegel. Art Siegel. Unlike you, I'm not a member of a country club that, as I understand it, didn't have a black member until 2003."

"Now wait a second –"

"And is still sorely lacking in Latino or, not so coincidentally, Native American members."

"If you're trying to strong-arm me –"

"Me? And as for those political contributions you've made to candidates opposing same-sex marriage –"

"I must protest!"

"That I've done my diligence? I suggest you act sensibly by getting the file from your Mr. Goldsmith or your Ms. Sullivan. Then call me tomorrow no later than 10 AM, California time."

"Or?"

"Let's just say I've been searching for a project this juicy for a long, long time."

At 9:45 the next morning, Siegel received a call from a very distressed Goldsmith.

"Did you know," the P.R. whiz asked, "that Mr. Olson is actually Colonel Olson, having served our country honorably in both Iraq and Afghanistan?"

"Which means I get court-martialed for insubordination? 'Fess up. Unless you're prepared to make me happy, why this call?"

"You've put me in a wretched situation."

"My heart bleeds."

"What you told Mr. Olson about the girl in question, how do I – we – know it's true?"

"You don't. For all you know, I could be a con man, a mental case, or totally full of shit. But there's also the chance that maybe, just maybe, I'm on the level. Prepared to take that risk? And by the way, checked Yelp lately?"

"Why?"

"Let's go through some adjectives and nouns. *Mean. Rotten. Arrogant. Nasty. Parasites. Vultures. Despicable. Cheating slime.* Guess which company they're describing. Can you picture those words on-screen in a documentary? And have you considered that some

of the complainers might be willing to go on-camera to tell their stories?"

"You're killing me."

"Then cry to the Colonel. It's now 9:51 my time. That gives him nine minutes."

With that, Siegel hung up.

At 10 AM Siegel's phone rang. Then a familiar female voice said, "Please hold for Mr. Olson."

"Okay, I'm prepared to reverse all charges," Olson announced a moment later.

"And?" asked Siegel.

"Meaning?"

"The front bumper."

"That shouldn't be –"

"Not the way I see it."

"And if I say yes?"

"Then we'll deal with the pain and suffering."

"I am not at all prepared to negotiate," Olson barked, making no attempt to hide his irritation.

"Nor am I," said Siegel firmly. "I get that you're accustomed to having your way, as well as hiding behind the chain of command. Know what I say to that? Tough shit. So let's talk analogies."

"What in hell does that mean?"

"In the military, there's the term collateral damage."

"Yes, but –"

"And in economics, people talk of cutting their losses. Reading me?"

"Not happily."

"Good, 'cause I'm neither Santa nor the Easter Bunny. So here's the scoop. I get made happy, or you find yourself in a totally different kind of war."

"Do you know who you're talking to?"

"Yeah, the arrogant prick whose company misused and abused my future daughter-in-law."

Two nights later, while seated at his favorite Cantonese restaurant, Siegel smiled when in stepped his son Jason, together with an attractive young woman who, aside from being Native American, was indeed a model.

"What's the event?" Jason asked once hugs were exchanged.

"Justice," Siegel announced, proudly displaying a sizable check from the car rental agency.

The victory didn't mean peace on earth, or goodwill toward men. Nor would it pay for a vacation in Paris. And it wasn't sufficient to make the world a significantly better place.

But to Siegel it meant that life was a little bit fairer.