

The following is an excerpt from

## Handy Man

A Novel

By

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In this opening chapter an executive officer with the McKinsey Consulting firm is assaulted by a group of people whose identity is not yet known.

“God damnit! Who are you people? Who are you? Why don’t you show your faces so I can see who the hell you are?”

Donald Oxenberg sent a spray of saliva with his words, out of control with rage as several anonymous thugs lashed him naked to a tree, tying his arms and legs back around the trunk so that he was fully exposed and vulnerable. A bank of bright lights blinded him to the identities of four backlit inquisitors who sat on campstools before him.

“God damnit, who are you!” he demanded to know.

“The jungle,” came the mocking reply.

Donald stopped struggling against the ropes, freezing at the familiarity of the words. He squinted into the glare as one of the dark figures before him produced a document and began to read from it in a formal way, as if the act were part of a court procedure — as if a prosecutor was presenting evidence.

*“...Donald Oxenberg, the chief partner at McKinsey’s San Francisco office, told us that he is sick and tired of hearing complaints about the sleeker, slimmer corporate America. ‘We are becoming a nation of crybabies,’ Oxenberg says. He believes that Americans have somehow developed expectations of guaranteed security, which is out of line with the reality of life in today’s complex international market economy. ‘This is the jungle, folks, and that plays to our strength. It’s the very beauty of capitalism. It’s what has made America an economic powerhouse...*

Looking up from the text. “What is the jungle saying, Mr. Oxenberg?”

The question set the hostage to a frenzy of useless struggle, as he wrestled in a vain attempt to free himself from the ropes. “What do you people want from me? Is it money? Take my wallet — there must be a couple hundred dollars there! Take my checkbook! For God’s sake, you can take my car!”

“We just have some questions for you,” said a third figure.

“Who are you? Why are you doing this?” Donald cried out.

The one that held the document began to read once again.

*...Oxenberg defends the system by acknowledging that the consequences of failing to be useful and effective in this society are devastating, so we are driven to excel.’ And what of those hundreds of thousands of hardworking people who have lost their jobs due to corporate downsizing and layoffs? ‘To them I say reassess your skills, figure out what needs there are out there in the marketplace that are going unmet, get the appropriate training, and be willing to move to where the jobs are. In short,’ Oxenberg says, ‘quit your damned whining and get on with it. If you don’t, you won’t survive the night, because the jungle is alive — and it’s talking...”*

“This is kidnap and assault,” Oxenberg spat. “You will not get away with this! Who do you think you are fucking with?”

“That’s exactly what we are here tonight to find out,” said the third figure. He reached over from where he sat and probed at something on the ground near his feet. The hostage heard

the plastic, light-metal click of a tape recorder being shifted to Record. “For the record, Mr. Oxenberg, we would like to have you state your full name, home address, and occupation.”

“Go to hell,” Oxenberg said, spitting vitriol.

“Mr. Oxenberg...” It was a fourth voice. “Things will go a lot easier for you if you simply do as directed.”

“Why are you doing this? Just tell me that,” Oxenberg said.

“Because you are an important man, successful. What you say gets published in magazines. Your decisions, the way you think — it all impacts on peoples’ lives.”

Another voice drolled — “You hear the jungle talking.”

“Are you a racist, Mr. Oxenberg?” one of the forms asked.

“No! Of course not!” Oxenberg cried.

“You *are* a Republican.”

His skin was abraded, scraped to bloody red wounds on his upper arms and sides. With each anguished contortion the ropes grew meaner. “What do you want from me?” he asked, at the end of what he could bear.

“Just answer the questions and tell us what we want to know. Start with your name, your home address and your occupation.”

Oxenbergs stood motionless for a moment, and then spoke in a resigned, bitter monotone. “Donald Oxenberg, 4150 West Cedarwood, Piedmont, California. I am a Senior Partner at McKinsey Consulting in San Francisco.”

“What is your annual income?”

Oxenbergs hesitated, squinting angrily into the lights. “Why,” he asked.

“Our records show that you were paid almost two million dollars last year. Is that figure correct?”

Oxenbergs nodded his head. “Yes,” he muttered.

“Look this way, smile, and say ‘Last year I earned almost two million dollars.’”

Oxenbergs couldn’t believe what he thought he had heard. “What?” he asked, squinting, uncomprehending.

“Look this way, smile and say ‘Last year I earned almost two million dollars.’”

“Why?” Oxenberg asked, but immediately the other voice — the threatening one — said, “Just do as you are told, Mr. Oxenberg, and we’ll get this over with very quickly. Or, we can let this drag on as long as you want. It’s your choice.”

Oxenberg took a moment to digest his options. There was no way out. He was at their mercy and naked, and he had no idea what kind of human beings these were. Voice quivering with rage, he began to repeat the lines, but was interrupted as soon as he’d begun. “Smile!” demanded the enforcer. Oxenberg gulped back his hatred as best he could, but he couldn’t comply. “No!” he cried. “Fuck you! Fuck all of you!”

One of the dark figures arose from its seated position and moved quickly toward him, eclipsing the light as it approached until suddenly it appeared as a dark smothering specter, its face up against Oxenberg’s, its leather-gloved hand covering his mouth. “Look, Mr. Oxenberg...” Oxenberg recognized the voice and felt a rush of danger. “...this is not really about options. I lied. All of us do. You could say we lied just like you lie to us.” In terror, Oxenberg tried to see through the eyeholes of the mask, but the figure blocked all light and Oxenberg saw only two seemingly empty black sockets. Suddenly something metallic and reflective was thrust before him—a large hunting knife. “The situation is that you must do as we say, or you won’t survive,” the specter told him. “It’s a real modern dilemma, Mr. Oxenberg. It’s the reality of life — *tonight*.”

The figure released its hold and Oxenberg immediately shook his head in compliance. “Okay, okay. What is it again? What do you want me to say?”

“‘Last year I earned almost two million dollars,’ and say it with a smile,” instructed one of the seated figures.

Oxenberg looked at the four dark forms before him, and into the bank of lights, and did what he could to curl his top lip up over his teeth. He began to sweat and shake, to hyperventilate. “Last year I earned almost two million dollars,” he said, his voice cracking.

“Very good, Mr. Oxenberg,” said the voice, the one Oxenberg was starting to recognize as the chief inquisitor. “The rest of what you say shall be delivered with that same attitude. Now, what is the nature of your work?”

“I’m a consultant — a general business consultant,” Oxenberg said.

“And what do you do in that capacity?”

“I consult with major corporations.”

“Remember — keep smiling. You mostly reorganize large businesses, isn’t that right Mr. Oxenberg?”

“Yes.”

“You direct downsizing operations, isn’t that right?”

“Sometimes, not always,” Oxenberg said. “Sometimes I reorganize sales staffs and test systems.”

“Look this way, smile, and say — ‘I direct downsizing operations.’”

Oxenberg closed his eyes for a moment, knew he had no choice, and did as directed.

“You were in charge of the engagement team that handled Digital Equipment Technology, isn’t that right?”

“Yes, I worked with DEK.”

“You were the person who suggested the layoff of forty thousand DEK workers, isn’t that right?”

Oxenberg stood silent, squinting into the glare. “What is this about?” he pleaded. “Are you trying to make me responsible for the world we’re living in? Is that it? Do you think it’s my fault that world economies change? That we’re living in a global market? What do you want from me?”

“Look this way, smile, and say — ‘I am the person responsible for laying-off forty thousand workers at Digital Equipment Technology.’”

Again, Oxenberg did as instructed.

The chief inquisitor continued in an orderly way, as if he were working from a checklist. “What is your educational background?”

“I’m an MBA, a specialist in organizational development,” Oxenberg said, his anger boiling his words to odd yelps.

“And where did you earn your MBA?”

“Harvard,” Oxenberg snapped.

“Harvard is one of the most expensive and prestigious schools in the world. Are you from a privileged background?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“I think you do, Mr. Oxenberg. Why did you go to Harvard?”

“What difference does it make? Everybody in my family goes to Harvard!” Oxenberg said. “It’s a tradition!”

“Look this way, smile, and say — ‘Everybody in my family goes to Harvard.’”

Oxenbergr repeated the line, snarling his smile as best he could, getting the words out just to eliminate the taste from his mouth, but as soon as they were spoken he was given additional dialogue. “Smile and say, ‘Harvard is one of the most expensive and prestigious schools in the world. I am from a privileged background.’” Donald spoke his words in acrid tones that came across with uncommon evil, emoted as they were from his agonized, contorted face.

“Your family has amassed quite a fortune in banking, isn’t that right?”

“Yes.”

“In fact, you were born a multi-millionaire, isn’t that right?”

“Yes.”

“Say it,” the enforcer said.

Oxenbergr now understood what they expected. “I was born a millionaire,” he said.

“You didn’t rank very well in your MBA class, did you Mr. Oxenberg?”

“Not...not really.”

“Sixty-third, isn’t that right?”

“How do you people know this?” Oxenbergr pleaded. “What are you doing?”

“It’s just that, McKinsey isn’t a firm that usually recruits from the mid-ranks, not even from the mid-ranks of Harvard graduates? You, however, became an associate upon graduation. How did you do that?”

“The Boston office wanted an organizational development guy,” Oxenbergr growled. “There weren’t that many of them back then, and I spoke at a conference and became known to partners in the firm.”

“You were helped by introductions, isn’t that right?”

Oxenberg was beat red, the vessels in his forehead seemingly near to breaking, as his chest heaved against his panicked breathing.

“In fact, wasn’t it a Mister Peter Auschonhuss, President of the Chemical Bank of New York, who brought you to the attention of the firm?”

“Yes.”

“You were fast-tracked at McKinsey, isn’t that right? You made Associate within your first six months and Senior Associate by the time you were twenty-seven: not bad for having taken a year off to travel to Europe, the Soviet Union and the Far East.”

“What is wrong with you people! I told you, I’ll give you anything you want! If it’s money, just tell me how much. I’ll put it in a foreign bank if you want, I can do that. Transportation! I’ll get you set up with an airplane. Anything! Whatever you want! Just let me go. I’m a husband and a father. I’ve got small kids at home, for God’s sake!”

“Let’s do talk about your family, Mr. Oxenberg. You’ve been married twice, isn’t that right?”

Oxenberg slumped visibly, having spent most of his remaining energy on his pathetic tirade. He was living the one primal fear that had always plagued him. How would he withstand torture? Would he save his dignity, or be revealed? He was mortified by physical pain, paralyzed with fright at the thought of major injury, a compound fracture or dismemberment. Even more than that, he feared loss of pride.

“You first married your college sweetheart, isn’t that right?”

“Yes.”

“You stayed married for fifteen years, isn’t that right? What happened then, Mr. Oxenberg?”

“I don’t know what you mean?”

“Your first marriage ended in divorce around the time you made partner in the firm. What happened?”

“It just ended,” Oxenberg said in weary tones.

“You remarried soon after your divorce was granted. A much younger woman, isn’t that right? I believe you were forty at the time, and she was twenty-six?”

“Something like that...”

“Your second wife — Jacqueline, I believe is her name...”

“Yes.”

“...she is quite beautiful, isn’t she? Much more beautiful than your first wife, isn’t that so?”

“No,” Oxenberg said, trying without hope to avoid the trap that was being set. This was a humiliation session, a punishment for being rich. He could see it now.

“She comes from a better background — even better than your own — doesn’t she? Your first wife made a good mother for your children, but she was really rather plain and not really suitable to your new surroundings. She wasn’t what you would be needing in San Francisco. A young partner at McKinsey, with a salary of eight hundred thousand dollars a year — you’d be needing a trophy wife. It must have been hard on your kids. Weren’t they about twelve and fourteen at the time. Still, you had to consider your career, isn’t that right?”

“If that’s what you say,” Oxenberg surrendered.

“Repeat the following — and smile,” the chief inquisitor said. “I achieved success in this society due to the influence of my family, who made a fortune in international banking.” Oxenberg repeated his line. “I abandoned my family when they became a drag on my career,” came the next instruction. Furious and frustrated to the point of tears, Oxenberg did as he was told.

There was a long, uncomfortable pause, during which Oxenberg strained to see what was happening behind the wall of lights. The dark figures seemed to be conferencing, discussing what to do next. Then they returned to their places and sat facing him. The chief interrogator spoke. “The jury has considered the evidence presented and found you guilty — guilty of being a pig.”

Oxenberg’s face was suddenly shot with fear and he squinted to see the men before him. What now? Were they going to execute him?

“You have been found to be a privileged underachiever, an anti-creative number cruncher who has profited from crimes against the common man, and a despoiler of family values. You

have aspired to greed and gluttony and have contributed to the general decline of this nation. You have encouraged the rich to become richer by making the poor poorer. You have committed treason against the middle class and you have failed to look for the union label. You are a tax-sheltered robber baron who deplores this nation's government and hates all people of color, and all whites who make less than two hundred thousand dollars a year. In a world of dwindling resources, you are incautious and unfrugal. This court pronounces you, Donald Oxenberg, of Piedmont, California, a menace to society and a threat to future generations."

"What are you going to do?" Oxenberg pleaded. "Are you going to kill me?"

"We are not murderers, Mr. Oxenberg," the chief inquisitor said. "We are just people who want our children's world to be better than our own. The only way we can see to do that is to make sure our kids don't have your kids to deal with, like we've had you."

Oxenberg's eyes widened in panic. "Not my children! Don't hurt my children, please!" he cried, straining again at his ropes, further scraping his wounds until rivulets of blood snaked down his arms and legs.

From behind, two men whom he could not see grabbed his ankles and pulled him off the ground, twisting his legs back on either side of the trunk. He hung there like a buck deer waiting to be bled, legs splayed so that his soft belly and genitals were completely exposed. He started to scream, but before he could cry out for help a balled handkerchief was popped into his mouth and his lips were quickly sealed over with a strip of masking tape.

Two men approached him from the lights; both dressed in black, their faces covered with dark ski masks. Oxenberg tried to fight against his captors, to scream out against his pain, but it was useless. The two men moved quickly toward him, and then suddenly one of them reached down and grabbed his scrotum. A bolt of pain shot through his entire being, then he felt a deep sickness at his very root. His eyes rolled back in his head as the man handled him roughly, then he felt another hand indelicately pushing his penis upward and away from his swollen testicles, which wanted to retract up into his body but were prevented from doing so by the way his persecutors pinched his sack. Then he heard the sound of something, felt the cold metal of a mechanical device, and then a searing pain tightened every muscle in his body. Sweat racing down his face, his field of vision began to fill with white spots and he knew he was about to pass out when suddenly he was hit full in the face with a pail of water. Oxenberg snapped back to consciousness.

The two men who had assaulted him were moving away now, retreating back into the lights. He saw three of the four inquisitors seated there before him, and then suddenly he realized that the fourth figure — the chief inquisitor — was standing right next to him. The inquisitor grabbed one corner of the masking tape and ripped it off his face, leaving the handkerchief to plug up his mouth. Then he grabbed the hair at the back of Oxenberg's head and used it like a handle to pull his chin down onto his chest.

Oxenberg looked down at his testicles and saw what they had done to him. They had slipped a thick, sickly grayish-green colored rubber band over his scrotum, pinching his testicles off into a tightly packed and throbbing sack of flesh.

The chief inquisitor pulled the handkerchief out of Oxenberg's mouth. "What have you done?" Oxenberg said, barely able to speak through the pain.

"We have given you a chance to see the error of your ways," the inquisitor said. "That band around your nuts is an emasculator. If it stays on there long enough, your balls will fall right off onto the ground. They'll be dead long before that." Oxenberg looked at him with horror-filled eyes. "You see, Mr. Oxenberg, we've seen what kind of a stud you are. We think you'll do better as a gelding."

Oxenberg suddenly became aware of movement in the dark all around him, as the party began to break up. The two men who held his ankles let go of him, and he was able to stand, but it only increased his discomfort. Putting weight on his feet seemed to make the castration band feel tighter. The bank of lights went dark and in the distance Oxenberg could see the interior lights of motor vehicles as people hurried to get in and drive away from the scene.

"I'm going to loosen your ropes enough that you'll be able to get yourself loose." The chief spoke in low, instructional tones. "You'll find your Lexus at the bottom of the hill. I would suggest that you get yourself over to Alta Bates Hospital as soon as you can. They might be able to get that thing off of you and save your nuts. I wouldn't advise trying to cut it off yourself. And I wouldn't waste any time. Every minute counts."

The chief started to loosen up the ropes, but he stopped for a moment. "Just one other thing." He leaned his face in close to Donald's, so that their cheeks touched. "Before I let you go I want to hear you say it just one time."

"Say what?" Oxenberg said, grimacing.

“Say, ‘I’m a pig and I deserve to die.’”

“I’m a pig...and I deserve to die,” Oxenberg said, no longer able to offer resistance of any kind.

“That’s right,” the chief said. “You are a pig. You do deserve to die.”