

BEEKMAN'S BIG DEAL

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Prologue

Beekman O'Day, who was five years old, looked across the table at his father like he hadn't heard a word.

"Drink your milk," Leo said for the third time.

"When will my voice change?" Beekman responded. He was always asking his father that question. His voice had always been raspy, like his throat was lined with medium-grain sandpaper. When he became especially excited, his voice cracked and he croaked like a frog. They were having breakfast at a coffee shop on Madison Avenue.

"Your voice will change one of these days," Leo said as he took a felt-tip pen from his pocket and drew a line on Beekman's glass of milk. "One of these days your voice will be smooth as silk."

"It will never change," Beekman said.

"You'll sound different when you're older," Leo assured his son. "And milk will help. Just drink it down to the line."

"I don't like milk," Beekman said.

"You don't have to like it," Leo said. "All you have to do is drink it."

"Why?"

"Because it's good for you, that's why," Leo said. "It's necessary for your continued health and well-being. Your continued health and well-being is my job."

"But it tastes funny," Beekman said.

"It tastes like milk," Leo said. "Just down to the line."

"Then can I have a roll with butter and grape jelly?" Beekman asked.

"We'll see," Leo said.

Beekman and Leo had been having breakfast at this coffee shop every Monday through Friday since they'd moved into the apartment on Seventy-fourth Street. On every one of those mornings Leo had drawn lines on Beekman's glass of milk and had induced and cajoled him to drink the contents. Once a week, on Friday, if his son had consumed enough milk, he let him have his reward of a roll with butter and grape jelly.

The rest of the time he made him eat cereal, which Beekman wasn't crazy about either.

"Will I ever get any bigger?" Beekman asked. It was another favorite question.

"Drinking milk will make you bigger," Leo said. "It builds strong bones."

That was another thing Beekman O'Day knew about himself. He was small. Very small. Short and thin and wiry. The smallest kid by far at Mrs. Binkman's kindergarten. He lifted his glass and made a face and drank the milk down to the line, then made another face.

"It didn't make me any bigger," Beekman said.

"Give it time," Leo said, drawing another line an inch below the first one.

"Tell me about when I was born."

"You were born," Leo said. "It's something that happens every day. Millions of people are born." Despite his smile, Leo's well-chiseled face appeared troubled.

"Was I good-looking when I was born?"

"The best-looking baby the world has ever seen," Leo said. "Now drink your milk and eat your cereal."

"But I want to know about when I was born."

"There's nothing to know," Leo said. "We don't have time for all this conversation. We're running late."

Beekman could tell that his father was getting upset. He could hear it in his voice and see it in his expression. Leo always got upset when Beekman asked him too many questions about being born. "But I want to know," Beekman persisted. "Did I cry a lot?"

"All babies cry a lot," Leo said. "Finish your breakfast."

Beekman lifted his glass and made a face and drank his milk down to the next line, then made another face.

Ten minutes later they were standing on the sidewalk in front of Mrs. Binkman's kindergarten. Beekman's hands were planted firmly on his hips. His chin was thrust out defiantly. "I'm not going," he said.

"You have to go," Leo said. "You have school and I have work. That's the deal."

"I don't like that deal," Beekman said.

"It's the deal we have," Leo said. "You know you like it once you're there."

"I don't like it," Beekman said. He dropped to his knees and banged his forehead against the pavement. "I'm not going!" he yelled.

Leo snatched Beekman up off the ground, checked his head for damage—none was done—wiped away the smudge of sidewalk grit, and carried him inside.

"I don't like school," Beekman protested, wriggling in his father's arms. "I hate it."

Up and at 'Em

The telephone rang. Beekman hated the telephone. It interrupted things. Like sleep. It rang again. He could hear his father singing opera in the shower. Leo always sang opera in the shower, even though he didn't know the words to a single one. It rang again. Answering the telephone meant getting out of bed. Beekman hated getting out of bed before he was ready. It rang again. Reluctantly, he hauled his bony little twelve-year-old body from beneath the sheets and padded across the wilted green carpet to the desk and picked up the receiver.

"Good morning, Rudy," Beekman said in his raspy voice.

"Good morning to you, Beekman," Rudy said. "Up and at 'em."

"I am up and at 'em, Rudy," Beekman said. "I couldn't be talking to you if I wasn't up and at 'em."

"That's the spirit," Rudy said. Rudy worked the night desk at the Chester Hotel. His last duty before going home was to make sure that Beekman was out of bed. Leo had arranged it. In case he overslept himself. Beekman and Leo lived in suite 1501, which was two rooms plus kitchenette, complete with peeling paint and fading wallpaper. Leo slept in the bedroom. Beekman slept in the sitting room, which was sometimes Leo's office. He slept on a Murphy bed, which was hidden behind a

door and pulled down from the wall. Sometimes Beekman wondered what it would be like to be folded up into the wall with it.

"I'm awake, Rudy," Beekman said. "I promise I won't go back to bed. You can go home now."

"Then home I'll go," Rudy said. "It's going to be seventy-eight degrees today and not a drop of rain in the sky. Good luck with the interview."

"Thank you, Rudy," Beekman said. He hung up. He liked Rudy, whom he hardly ever saw because their schedules were so different. Rudy was eighty years old. Beekman yawned and stretched and made his way to the window and looked down at Ninth Avenue. He liked how small everything was down there; people the size of pinky fingers, buses that looked like toys. He heard his father singing "Seventy-six Trombones," which meant it was his turn.

"Hi ya, Pop," Beekman said as he entered the steam-filled bathroom with its cracked tile floor and old-fashioned toilet, whose water tank was braced precariously above it close to the ceiling. He thought the tank's long pull chain should have a whistle attached to it. Some big old whomper of a whistle that sounded like a train coming to a crossing, or maybe a ship's foghorn. Every toilet in the city should have one. Millions of horns and whistles going off all day. They'd hear it on the planet Pluto.

"Hello, my one and only son," Leo said, wiping at the mirror so he could see his face to shave. Leo had a ready smile and straight white teeth and a full head of coal-black hair. "Good night's sleep?"

"Good until Rudy called," Beekman said.

"How is Rudy this morning?"

"On his way home."

"To the enchanted land of Brooklyn."

Beekman stepped out of his underwear and turned on the shower. Leo ran the razor down his right cheek. "Big day today," he said.

"What's big about it?" Beekman said, stepping under the water.

"Your interview is what's big about it," Leo said. "On top of which, there is no such thing as a small day. They're all big."

Beekman didn't think that an interview with yet another new school qualified as a big day. Especially when the fall term had already started. Four days ago. But he kept this to himself. He'd been to too many schools to make an issue of it.

"Think big, live big," Leo said.

"Think small, live small," Beekman said.

"Now you're talking," Leo said. He started singing "Over the Rainbow."

Beekman washed his hair, which was brown and grew in several directions at once and fell forward over his forehead, no matter how much effort he put into training it. He soaped his body. There wasn't an ounce of fat on him. His rib cage looked like a section of bumpy road. He thought that a truly big day would be one in which absolutely nothing happened.

While Leo ironed their shirts, Beekman made his bed and pushed it up into its alcove and closed the door. He slid the coffee table back into position. It was where they ate breakfast.

"Groats grip the road," Leo said, spooning out two bowls of it from the pot on the three-burner stove. He'd done somebody a favor and ended up with a hundred-pound bag

of the stuff by way of thanks. There were a lot of groats left.

"Groats are for horses," Beekman said. He hated groats.

"Groats are oats," Leo said. "Like oatmeal and so on. Groats are good for you."

Beekman whinnied. He sounded like a horse with a frog in its throat.

Leo laughed. It was hard to stay mad at Leo. He had a way of looking at you that made it difficult to remember why you were angry. He had a way of making you want to make him happy.

"Think how fast you'll be able to run if you eat groats," Leo said. He poured milk on his and passed the container to Beekman. He sprinkled brown sugar on top.

"Maybe if I eat enough groats," Beekman said, "I'll turn into a horse." He poured the absolute minimum amount of milk required over his groats, then added two heaping tablespoons of brown sugar. He wished he had some chocolate syrup and ice cream to top it off.

Beekman poured them each a glass of orange juice. Leo poured himself a cup of coffee. Beekman measured out half a glass of milk, then added two tablespoons of coffee. They pulled chairs to the table. Leo passed Beekman the Daily News and opened The New York Times.

"How'd you find this school?" Beekman asked after scanning the front page of the paper for the various scandals and sensational crimes that had occurred in the past twenty-four hours.

"The result of my never-ending search for a better life," Leo said. "Chance Academy is a fully accredited institution with an outstanding academic program. You're being interviewed

this morning by none other than Headmaster McCann himself."

"What if I don't get in?" Beekman asked. "School has already started. Maybe they don't have room."

"They have room for one smart boy," Leo said.

"That leaves me out," Beekman said.

"You'll get in," Leo said. "You always do."

"I don't get to stay very long."

"You can't complain about your education," Leo said, putting down the newspaper. "You're the smartest kid I know. You're smarter than ninety-nine percent of the people I do business with. You're way ahead of the game."

Beekman thought about all the schools he'd been to since Mrs. Binkman's kindergarten. He'd been to St. David's, Trinity, McBurney, Ethical Culture, St. Ignatius, Horace Mann, Brandeis Prep, and Winkler's School for the Performing Arts. He could no longer remember the exact order in which he'd attended them. He swallowed a spoonful of groats and, despite the brown sugar and milk, felt like he was grazing in a field.

"Why is it called Chance Academy?" Beekman asked when he managed to swallow.

"It's named for its founder, Ulysses S. Chance," Leo said. "Mr. Chance hit it big and wanted to give something back, so he started this school."

"For who?"

"For boys who are smarter than they think they are."

"No girls?"

"No girls."

"Why'd they agree to interview me when school's already

started?"

"I convinced Headmaster McCann that you were a bright prospect. Not to be overlooked. Worth the trouble. I described you and he agreed."

"I got all C's last year," Beekman said. "Technically I didn't even finish. I had to leave ten days early."

"I told you I was sorry about that. You can go ten days extra this year if it makes you happy."

"Why are you so sure they'll take me?"

"Name one school that hasn't taken you," Leo said. "Nobody can resist an O'Day. Stop worrying so much and eat your groats."

"Somebody owed you something, didn't they?"

"Somebody who knows somebody who is an illustrious graduate of Chance Academy put in a word. All I got you was the interview. The rest is up to you. Will Beekman O'Day take advantage of the situation? Will Beekman O'Day become an illustrious graduate of Chance Academy himself? Stay tuned."

An unlikely prospect, Beekman thought, given that the probability of his completing even one full year at Chance Academy was practically nil. And that wasn't just because he was something less than an ideal student and often in trouble because his behavior left something to be desired. Many times it was because Leo ran out of money and couldn't pay the bill.

"Why don't you just send me to public school?" Beekman asked his father as they stood side by side in front of the full-length mirror in the hall. Leo was wearing his light gray suit, one of a half dozen he'd had tailored when they were flush. He wore a white shirt and a black knit necktie and dark brown English suede shoes. Beekman was decked out in dark gray

flannel pants, white shirt, one of Leo's old black knit ties, blue blazer, and black lace-up shoes. This was pretty much Leo's understanding of the Chance Academy uniform.

"I went to public school," Leo said. "My son will do better."

It was what his father always said. Beekman had often pointed out that public school was free, but Leo didn't care. His mind was closed on the subject. His son was going to private school no matter what. Beekman wondered what public school would be like. At the very least the possibility of staying put would be greatly increased.

Leo tucked his silk handkerchief down into the breast pocket of his jacket, then put his hand on Beekman's shoulder. "If there's a better-looking father-and-son combo in America," he said, "I don't know where they're hiding."

Beekman studied his image in the mirror. He was short and reedy thin and his ears stuck out a little too far and he carried a serious expression, as though he had something important permanently on his mind. But even with all that, he had to admit that he didn't look half bad. His nose and eyes and mouth were all in the right place and about the right size for the rest of him. He shifted his gaze upward to take in his father's reflection and saw that Leo was smiling at him. He smiled back.

They sang a chorus of "Tea for Two" and did a little dance to go with it, then headed out. Mr. Bush, who was the assistant manager of the Chester Hotel, was waiting for them in the lobby.

"Good morning, Mr. O'Day," Mr. Bush said to Leo. "I wonder if I might have a word with you." He didn't even look at Beekman.

"Of course, Mr. Bush," Leo said. "Would three o'clock this afternoon be convenient?" Leo liked to set the time and place of meetings.

"I was hoping we could do it now," Mr. Bush said.

Beekman thought that Mr. Bush always looked like he'd just got done sucking on a lemon.

"Nothing would give me greater pleasure," Leo said, "but I have an important meeting for which I am already late. Three o'clock would be excellent, but I can also do it at five. Why don't we do it at five? For a drink. That way the problems of the day will be behind us and we can relax. Meet me at the Plaza at five. The bar at the Oak Room." Leo moved to the large glass doors that led to the street. Beekman stayed one step ahead of him.

"Three o'clock will be fine," Mr. Bush said, smiling like he had gas. "My office."

"In the lobby," Leo said, as Wilbur, resplendent in his faded brown uniform with its tarnished gold piping, pulled one of the doors open.

"Good morning," Wilbur said in a voice that sounded like it came out of his nose.

"Good morning, Wilbur," Leo and Beekman said in unison.

"Do you need a taxi this morning?" Wilbur asked.

"No, thank you," Leo said. "I'm walking."

"No, thank you, Wilbur," Beekman said.

They stopped at the corner to survey the day. The sun was brilliant against a deep blue September sky. They inhaled the morning air.

"Why does Mr. Bush want to see you?" Beekman asked.

"Mr. Bush moves in mysterious ways," Leo said.

"Is he going to throw us out?"

Leo grinned. "We don't get thrown out," he said. "We leave."

"Are we behind with the rent?"

"Hey, who handles the finances in this outfit?" Leo said. "I'll do my job, you do yours. Besides, I'm working on a big one. A life-changer."

Deals were Leo's business. He was always making one or setting one up or just missing out on one. But it was the life-changer he was after. The one that would set them up forever.

"What kind of deal?" Beekman asked. He was anxious for his father to succeed.

"Basically it involves an amusement park in California and a fleet of old ships in Turkey and some people in Singapore who want to buy them. I'm one meeting and five phone calls away from putting it together."

"Knock 'em dead, Pop," Beekman said.

"You too, son of mine," Leo said. "Show them at that school what an O'Day is made of."

Beekman watched his father walk off as though he didn't have a care in the world. Leo moved gracefully. He was relaxed. At peace with his surroundings. He exuded confidence. Nothing flustered Leo. Beekman wanted to be that way. He pulled his Mets cap down over his eyes and headed uptown. He walked as leisurely as his father, doing his best to emulate him. So what if he was late for his interview?

The Interview

Beekman made his unhurried way up Columbus Avenue to Eighty-eighth Street, then headed toward Amsterdam Avenue until he reached his destination. The four-story stone mansion that had once been the home of Ulysses S. Chance stood wedged between two modern apartment buildings like the overstuffed contents of a huge white-bread sandwich. Now it was Chance Academy, founded and endowed in 1901 by this minor robber baron whose fortune was made manufacturing railroad track. It was all rooftop turrets and gargoyles and dormers and high arched windows and spiked iron fences and carved double doors of dark brown wood. Beekman suspected that he might find Gomez and Morticia and Lurch and the rest of the Addams family waiting for him inside.

It was just Lurch. In the person of Headmaster Mc Cann. Who was the largest person Beekman had ever seen. It hurt his neck to look up at the six-foot-seven-inch-tall frowning

man whose facial features and girth were directly proportional to his height.

"You're enormous," Beekman said.

"And you're late, Mr. O'Day," Headmaster McCann said, tucking his watch back into his vest pocket. His voice was as large as the rest of him.

"But—" Beekman started to say.

"There are no buts at Chance Academy," Headmaster McCann said, cutting him off.

"There was a lot of traffic," Beekman said, undeterred. "There were a lot of people on the street."

"Take the subway," Headmaster McCann said.

"Oh, I couldn't take the subway," Beekman responded. "It's underground. I don't like traveling underground."

"Tardiness is not on the program at Chance Academy, Mr. O'Day. You can walk. You can run. You can fly. How you transport yourself is of no concern to me. When you get here is. I'm Headmaster McCann. I like to greet prospective students personally." Headmaster McCann strode off across the polished marble floor of the buildings grand entrance.

"I needed time to think about what I was going to say this morning," Beekman said, trying to keep up. "I'm a little nervous about the interview." He followed the headmaster through the outer office, past the school secretary.

"Miss Haymaker, this is Mr. O'Day," Headmaster McCann announced as he sped by. "He may or may not be our new student."

"It's good to meet you," Beekman said to Miss Haymaker, extending his hand and pumping hers briskly.

"You're late," Miss Haymaker said.

"Sometimes things happen," Beekman said.

"And sometimes they don't," Miss Haymaker said.

"Come along," Headmaster McCann said.

Beekman entered the inner office, the inner sanctum, the mighty McCann's lair. It was book-lined and thickly carpeted and the walls were painted a dark forest green. A large globe stood on its stand in one corner. A portrait of the portly Ulysses S. Chance filled the space above the fireplace.

"You sit there and I'll sit here and we'll size each other up," the mighty McCann said.

Beekman settled in at one end of the long couch and the mighty McCann lowered himself slowly onto the other and they eyed each other.

"You have a good-looking school here," Beekman said finally, thinking to break the ice on a positive note.

"You've been to a lot of schools," the mighty McCann said.

"There are reasons for that," Beekman said in a practiced way. He prepared himself to recite them.

"No need to explain," the mighty McCann said. "Your father covered all that when we spoke. Charming man, your father. Solid. Old school. Who was the second president of the United States?"

"John Adams," Beekman said. It wasn't that he hadn't paid attention in all the schools he'd attended. He'd learned a little something.

"We don't have computers at Chance. We don't offer electives. We don't play sports with other schools. There are no gut courses. We have a prescribed program that teaches our students to read, to think, to solve problems, and to express themselves. All our students take the same course of

study. If you manage to graduate from Chance, you'll possess the tools to educate yourself for the rest of your life. Where is Lake Titicaca?"

"South America."

"Where in South America?"

"Peru. Ecuador. Chile. Somewhere in there." He remembered studying the lake. Who could forget its name once heard? "The best Panama hats are made in Ecuador." Maybe he'd get some extra credit for throwing that in.

"Why should we be interested in Lake Titicaca?"

"It's the highest lake in the world."

"What's the square root of one hundred forty-four?"

"I don't know."

"Take a guess."

"I couldn't."

"What is a square root?"

"I don't remember."

"Look at it another way" the mighty McCann said. "What number times itself equals one hundred forty-four?"

"That's a tough one," Beekman said. He stunk at math. He hated math.

"What's twelve times twelve?"

Beekman calculated quickly: Ten times twelve was one hundred twenty. Easy. Then two times twelve was twenty-four, which, added to one hundred twenty, came to one hundred forty-four. "It's one hundred forty-four," he said. "So the square root of one hundred forty-four is twelve."

"The chapel, my office, Miss Haymaker, and the library are on the main floor," the mighty McCann said. "Chapel begins precisely at nine. We sing a song to kindle the spirit, read

something to stimulate the mind, and make announcements. That takes fifteen minutes. Five minutes later the first class of the day begins. We are precise at Chance, Mr. O'Day. Things are as they were meant to be. Who was Stephen Crane?"

"A writer."

"Who wrote what?"

"The Red Badge of Courage."

"Which you've read."

"It takes place during the Civil War. It's about a boy's first experience in battle."

"The upper school," the mighty McCann said, "grades ten, eleven, and twelve, or forms four, five, and six as we refer to them here, meets on the third floor. The gym and lunchroom are on the fourth floor. There's a playing field in back. Intramural sports are mandatory. What's your personal philosophy of life?"

"To stay in one place as long as I can," Beekman said.

"The lower school, grades seven, eight, and nine, or forms one, two, and three, meets on the second floor.

There are twenty young men in each form. I know everything that goes on here. The classical education offered by Chance remains unchanged since the death of our founder. The terms of his endowment assure its future. Neatness in appearance and school work matters. Spell college."

"C-o-l-l-e-g-e."

"Come with me." The mighty McCann charged out of his office. Once again Beekman had to pass the formidable Miss Haymaker. "He didn't eat you," Miss Haymaker said. "That's a good sign."

In the library, the mighty McCann pulled textbooks from

shelves. "Latin," he said. "Mathematics. Science. History. Government studies. Do you prefer Spanish or French?"

"Spanish," Beekman said. "Does this mean I'm accepted?" He thought it would be nice to hear the words. Some small bit of ceremony. A moment's recognition.

"We're out of philosophy books right now," the mighty McCann said. "I'll order one. It includes the study of comparative religions. A boy withdrew two days ago for health reasons. Your father's timing was fortuitous." He stacked the books in Beekman's arms. "In addition to all this, you'll take physical education.

A strong mind requires a strong body to transport it." He tucked a piece of paper under Beekman's chin. "Your class schedule. It changes every day."

Weighed down like a pack mule, Beekman ran to keep up as the mighty McCann took his giant steps across the marble floor to the grand sweeping marble staircase. Up they went, directly to a closed classroom door on the second floor. The mighty McCann flung it open.

"Mr. Gno," the mighty McCann bellowed at the startled teacher, "this is Mr. Beekman O'Day." He put a hand on Beekman's back and pushed him into the room.

"Don't let me down," the mighty McCann said to Beekman.