

into the Army at age sixteen, did a four-year stint as a cryptography hardware expert, and then found civilian employment as a field technician for a national retail electronics chain. And while he is never going to become wealthy troubleshooting customer computers and home entertainment systems, he enjoys the work and it keeps him up to date on the latest electronic trends. The job pays enough to support a modest apartment and the schedule is steady enough to afford him a good deal of spare time—time to pursue a pastime that he had stumbled upon shortly after getting out of the Army and settling in the small St. Louis suburb of Pleasanton.

He remembers that day, three years earlier, as clearly as he does the current one. He had been perusing an online news site that reported on events local to the central Missouri area, and he had come across a story about a parent who had been taken to court for beating his young son to the point of unconsciousness and subsequent hospitalization. The parent was exonerated for lack of concrete proof that the boy's injuries had not, in fact, been accidental as the man claimed. He had reflected, in that terrible moment, on his own childhood, one that, while filled with incessant beatings, had never degenerated to the point of actual hospitalization, and he wondered if he might not be in a position to possibly do something about situations like this one.

As luck would have it, he had made a friend shortly after moving to the St. Louis area, a woman with whom he had had a brief but unsuccessful romantic affiliation, followed by a surprisingly felicitous parting, so much so that the two still shared the occasional dinner or lunch and compared notes on their respective jobs. Hers was as a social worker, in which capacity she dealt regularly with reports of domestic abuse in the St. Louis area, both spousal and adolescent. It was in this latter capacity that Phineas had sought her assistance. Upon describing his vision for the role he might play, she had at first been uncertain. But, once Phin had thought it through in greater detail, he had explained the idea to her in such compelling terms that she was forced to agree that the notion had merit, just so long as he swore never to invoke her name should he be found out. Which is how it came to pass that Phineas gained access to a steady source of detailed information concerning homes in the area in which child abuse of one form or another was suspected but not yet proven to be taking place, at least not so certainly proven as to cause the separation of child from parent, preferably because of the latter being remanded to prison.

It had been an easy thing to create the necessary persona to become a convincing cable television repairman—a few tools, a doctored employee badge, and a plausible narrative about improving the service at certain selected homes identified in advance by his friend. You rang the doorbell, told your concocted story, installed a tiny video camera and microphone, and you left, the final ironic touch being that the abuser's own Wi-Fi and Internet service provided the medium through which images of any subsequent abuse were streamed to high-capacity servers that Phineas had set up in his apartment. And because the tiny camera that Phin had obtained included a motion sensor, there was no need to edit out the lengthy periods of inevitable inactivity from a suspect's home, though finding the specific bit of incriminating footage—if it was there at all—nonetheless required a good deal of watching and waiting. But eventually, inexorably, there it was, the precipitating offense, the harsh word, the too-slow response, and the injury.

Sometimes it was a simple beating, of more or less the sort Phineas had grown up receiving, doing little more than adding one more scarcely measurable increment to the psychological trauma the child would bear for the remainder of his or her days. Other times—and Phineas had, over a span of three years, developed a frighteningly acute sense of when it would come and which parent would deliver it—there would be the too violently yanked arm or the blow to the face, as painful to watch as it was to receive. These were the parents whose principal crime was an inability to control their own anger and who needed a convenient punching bag on which to take out their frustrations.

And then sometimes, mercifully rarer, were the parents who gave their cruelty a good bit of advance thought. These were the true practitioners, the ones who knew just how to deliver a blow so that it left no marks. They were the vilest of all, which is not to say that the parents who were simply unable to contain their pent-up anger were in any way defensible. But the ones who acted with premeditated malice, the ones whose child consciously avoided interacting with them at all unless utterly unavoidable, these were the ones Phineas did whatever he could to see punished.

In the early days, he had been uncertain as to what he should do with the handful of video clips he had begun to obtain—an uncertainty that lasted only until a night several weeks into the program when he had seen Benjamin Faulkner interviewed about the status of a local abuse case, and had learned that the attorney's quest was very much like his own. It had required merely fifteen minutes online to locate the attorney's e-mail address, and another five to send him the first clip and a request to meet.

Phin's overtures, and Benjamin's reactions thereto, had put the latter into an interesting position vis-à-vis his ethical responsibilities as a member of the Missouri bar. Much research had then ensued, particularly concerning the American Bar Association's views on the ethicality, or lack thereof, associated with using as prosecutorial evidence recordings that had not been consented to by all parties concerned—consent that would likely not naturally be forthcoming. Most extant opinion on the matter dealt with cases in which the attorney had been directly involved in the recording activities, and the ABA had changed its view on these cases more than once in recent decades, though current views varied from one state to the next. But Faulkner and his paralegal had uncovered no opinions or precedents at all for cases in which a prosecuting attorney had been presented with such recordings from a third party, said third party offering no details on just how the recordings had been obtained. The matter had been raised by presiding judges in no less than half a dozen of the subsequent cases in which Faulkner had used Talbot's recordings, and in no case had the evidence been thrown out as a result. That said, Faulkner nonetheless felt that he was cavorting on thin jurisprudential ice, and he had taken extraordinary care in adhering to every legal process nuance in pursuing such cases.

"Tell me you have good news, Ben." Phin answers his cell phone on the first ring.

"Depends on who we're talking about," Faulkner's enigmatic reply.

"Obtuseness doesn't become you, Benjamin."

"You know what I mean, Phin," Faulkner responds. "We've played this record many times. You take the parents down. The kid goes into the foster system. Is he better off?"