

The Homecoming

By T. E. Stazyk

Ah, the Midwest again, thought Larry Montgomery as he pulled out of the rental car lot at the airport. He was used to larger airports where you had to take a van from the terminal to the rental car agency. Here, he only had to walk to the end of the baggage claim, go outside and pick up his car.

Not only was this a return to the Midwest for Larry, it was also a return to his western Michigan home town. He had lived in the same neighborhood all his life up until high school. He left and got a business degree and an MBA from the University of Michigan and after graduation, got a management position with Global Synergies in New York. While he was in college, his parents had moved to Florida and there had never been a reason for him to come back.

Larry was now a Senior Vice President with Global Synergies, an international conglomerate. They owned Bapco Industries, which was a major employer in his home town. It seemed like everyone in town either worked for the government, the hospital or Bapco Industries. His father had spent his entire working life in the purchasing department, and if Larry hadn't done so well in high school and gotten a scholarship, he would probably have ended up working there, too, where the men in the office wore short sleeved shirts and ties.

But it was a good thing for him that he didn't work there because he was in town to assist management with closing down the business. Global Synergies felt that Bapco was not providing a satisfactory return to the shareholders – it was not providing global synergy-- and had decided that the best approach would be to simply liquidate the operation and sell off the assets. It was very bad news for the town.

Usually he would have sent one of his subordinates on an assignment like this, but he felt some degree of allegiance to the company and the town and wanted to be involved. His job was to meet with company management to

The Homecoming

discuss various outplacement programs for employees as well as severance packages.

It was just before lunchtime and his first meeting at the company was scheduled for mid-afternoon so he decided to take a drive through town and his old neighborhood. It was a beautiful spring day, but downtown managed to look even grimmer than he remembered it. The major change was that the two banks now had the names of big national banks and the old Holmes Brothers department store was closed and boarded up. The Christmas decorations were still up in the town square.

In his old neighbourhood, he slowly took in the differences. Things seemed smaller and there was a pervasive sense of dilapidation. Less green. More cars.

His old house looked the same. The garage had been rebuilt, which was no surprise; and at some point, someone had demolished the shed behind the garage and put in an above ground pool that looked as if it were about to collapse. His father had used the shed for storage, and for several pre-adolescent summers Larry used it as his hideout. He would spend the hot, dusty afternoons reading about Sherlock Holmes, John Carter, the Lensman and the Hardy Boys and thinking that life outside of western Michigan was definitely more interesting.

He drove past his old schools. Nothing had changed. Larry had hoped that seeing the schools would bring back happy memories, but the general feeling of decline he was seeing had put him in a negative frame of mind. All he could recall were experiences that had marred his childhood. He was feeling as unwelcome as ever.

He slowed down in front of the high school and looked it over. There was the old gymnasium where gym teacher Mr. Bonfiglio had made his life a living hell. Across the street, the Kwicky Kar Wash was still there. He smiled, wondering if Paul Neal, his nemesis, was working there. Mr. Lynch, his favorite

The Homecoming

teacher used to tell them that if they didn't study hard and act like human beings they would end up working at the Kwickie Kar Wash and used to single Paul Neal out as a likely candidate for that career, while holding out Larry as a person destined for greater things. Larry appreciated the positive attention, but regretted it because it served only to further stimulate Paul Neal to devise new ways to torment him. In the predatory world of adolescence, Neal was at the top of the food chain and to him, the thin, bespectacled, studious and unpopular Larry existed only to receive his abuse.

Mr. Lynch's threats, however, fell on deaf ears because Paul was the captain of the football team and based on the talent he had displayed to date, everyone assumed that a football scholarship and a bright career were inevitable for him. As a result, Paul exuded an almost tangible aura of superiority and he was regularly surrounded by a group of admiring boys and girls who were the captive audience for his wit and humor, and also to witness his regular humiliations of Larry.

With that recollection, Larry's eyes involuntarily flashed to the huge flagpole in front of the school. It was to the base of that very flagpole that Paul Neal and three of his thug acolytes had dragged a struggling Larry one cold winter afternoon. Larry was never sure what point exactly they had hoped to make, but as they held him down, they informed him that they were going to "de-pants" him and "run them pants up the flagpole."

Larry had kicked and screamed in horror, realizing that he could never possibly recover any shred of self-esteem if he were left in his underwear with his pants waving from the pinnacle of the flagpole in lieu of Old Glory, just as school was letting out. Ironically, it was Bonfiglio himself who came to Larry's rescue. Having noted the suspicious behavior at the flagpole, he stormed out of the school and started blowing his whistle like a football referee. Neal and his associates were hustled off to some unknown punishment while Larry, tearfully composing himself, was told, "Montgomery, get your fat butt home."

The Homecoming

God, I'm glad I'm out of here Larry thought as, glancing at the clock, he decided to head over to Bapco for his meetings.

Over the next two days, Larry met with management and worked through important issues regarding the closing down of the business. Most of the discussions centred on the compensation plans for the employees and management had asked Larry to meet with the head of the local union to talk about severance arrangement. Larry was set up in an empty office in the executive suite and looked up when he heard a surprisingly tentative knock at the door. He got up and walked to the door, extending his hand to the tall, burly, bearded man at the door. The man, who looked much older than Larry had expected, was dressed in a flannel shirt, jeans and work boots. Larry, preoccupied with the meeting agenda, shook the man's hand casually and said, "Hi, I'm Larry Montgomery."

The man's eyes narrowed and then he broke into a smile. "Paul Neal, Local 47 President."

Larry froze, his hand in Paul's. He fought the impulse to pull it away. *Maybe he doesn't remember me, the bastard.*

Paul squeezed Larry's hand, studying Larry closely and saying nothing.

"Please. Have a seat," said Larry, recovering and indicating the chairs placed in front of the desk.

Paul sank heavily into one of the chairs and Larry took the other, speaking rapidly. "I'm with corporate headquarters in New York . . ."

"Oh? You sound local to me."

"Yeah. Well not any more. First, let me apologise for this unfortunate turn of events."

Paul lifted his hands, "Business is business."

Larry smiled, "That's probably the best way to look at it. Now. The objective for today is to let you know what the issues are and what the company is thinking."

The Homecoming

“Right,” said Paul.

“Before we start, I must tell you. This is not like a normal union contract negotiation. The company is closing down. Period. That is not negotiable. Of course, we regret the loss of jobs and the loss of the company to the community, but as you say, ‘business is business.’”

“OK. I understand. I just need to know what to tell the members. They want to know what to expect.”

“Of course. Be assured that the company wants to be fair.” Larry handed Paul a folder. “It’s all laid out in there for you to review and discuss with your people. Basically, management is willing to provide six weeks severance to each employee, regardless of length of service.”

“Six weeks?”

“Yes. It’s competitive.”

“With what?”

“Industry practice. We have to consider the expectations and needs of the shareholders.” With that, Larry stood up, signalling the end of the meeting.

Paul, not knowing where to start with a rebuttal, also got up. “Uh, could I ask you just one thing?”

“Sure.”

“I’ve got to present this to the union membership and they’re going to have some questions. One thing I know they are going to ask is how the package for the union compares to the others.”

“Others?”

“Yeah. The non-union salary employees in the office. And management. You know, the execs.”

“I’m not sure I can tell you that.”

“You mean it hasn’t been determined yet? Or you just won’t tell me?”

Of course Larry knew the full details of the severance arrangements. Not only that, he had even suggested that perhaps management was being a little too

The Homecoming

aggressive in giving themselves such advantageous terms at the expense of the union employees. He was under strict instructions to keep the lucrative management bonuses quiet, and the last person he wanted to tell was the union representative. "I'm sorry, but I can't tell you."

"I'm sorry, but I don't believe you. I don't believe that you came all the way from New York just to tell me I'm getting kicked out the door with six weeks pay after working here for twenty years." Paul pointed his finger at Larry and added, "You know. And I'm going to do whatever it takes to find out. We have lawyers too."

"Why are you being so unreasonable?" Larry asked. "You should be focusing on communicating the settlement to your members and not worrying about what other people are getting or not getting."

Paul stepped toward Larry but quickly got control of himself. He obviously was going to say something but thought better of it. He turned and left the office. "We'll talk."

That evening Larry and several of the local Bapco executives went to a nice restaurant in Grand Rapids for dinner and entertainment. Everyone was delighted with the way things were turning out, but Larry was bothered by how unfair the dissolution settlement was turning out. Now that he was here, back home, the local people were more than just payroll data. He felt sorry for them. Management was getting everything and the union people were getting virtually nothing. Many Bapco executives had been offered positions elsewhere in the global conglomerate and some were even getting stock options from the parent company. The top two Bapco executives were receiving multi-million dollar payouts. The union employees were going to get six week's wages. Larry thought that it was ironic and unfair. The employees were the people who had worked hard to produce and ship the company's products. The executives, on the other hand, were the ones whose lack of vision and failed strategies had resulted in the loss of market share that had led to the closing of the business.

The Homecoming

Management had cited out of control costs as one of the reasons for continuing losses, but maintenance on manufacturing facilities had been cut back to virtually zero and the union had agreed to wage increases below inflation for the past five years. During that time, management compensation and bonuses had doubled.

When he got back to his hotel, Larry called his wife in New York. "I took a ride through my old neighbourhood. Saw my old house and school and everything."

"How was it?"

"I don't know. It was nice but I feel like that is just such a distant part of my life. I mean, I couldn't imagine still living there. But you won't believe this."

"What's that?"

"So I'm out at Bapco. You know. The company we're closing down? I met with management and the lawyers. We went through our whole plan and everything's all set. They wanted me to talk to the head of the union. Just a formality, really, but they want those guys to think they are part of the process. It was wild. They sent him to the office I'm working in. I look up and there's this lumberjack standing there. You know, fat, beard, flannel shirt, boots the whole bit. A real lowlife."

"How do you know that?"

"Oh, I do in this case. Just wait. All will become clear. So he introduces himself and you'll never guess who it is?"

"How should I know?"

"A guy I went to high school with. You believe it?"

"Really? Did you know him?"

"Not well," Larry said. "He was the one Mr. Lynch always said would end up washing cars. He wasn't too far off, I guess. He was a big rugby hero in those days. Now the only thing that's big is his beer belly."

"That's sad."

The Homecoming

“What’s sad? He had his day in the sun. It just turned out that he peaked early. He acted like Mr. Big while he could, and now he’s just another fat redneck.”

“Well, he is head of the union.”

“Oh. Excuse me. I’m sooo impressed.”

“What’s going to happen to him?”

“I don’t know. Get another job, I guess. I don’t know what he does right now. Must not require too much physical effort. Or mental effort.”

“What is it about this poor guy? It’s like you’re gloating over the fact that things have turned out well for you. You should feel sorry for him. Did you recognize each other?”

“I recognized him right away, but he had no idea. I didn’t want to remind him who I was. I figured it would just make him feel bad. Why rub his nose in his failure?”

“Who says he’s a failure? Maybe he’s perfectly happy. For all you know, he could be more content than you.”

“I sincerely doubt that.”

“I think you should talk to him.”

“I doubt it.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. He used to think he was so great and made my life miserable. I can’t help enjoying the moment.”

“I’ve told you before. The world is never going to become a better place until people stop living in the past and worrying about who has hurt them. Bury the hatchet and get on with life.”

“You always say that. But I’m serious. I still have issues to deal with. I’ve never told you all the things he pulled.”

“Yeah, but what difference does it make now?”

The Homecoming

“I have a long memory. Anyway, that’s the news. I’m here for another day and then I head to Chicago. I’ll call you from there.”

“OK. Love you.”

That day Larry had another series of meetings with management and the attorneys. Although all of the management people he met with seemed to think that they were fully entitled to their settlement benefits, Larry realised that even they recognised the imbalance between what they and the union people were getting. The company’s lawyers continually reminded them about the need for confidentiality. “You know,” the company secretary had told them at a meeting, “the union has been agitating to find out about management’s severance package. It’s the usual complaints about fairness.” He tapped the table with a fingertip to accentuate his point, “They must not learn about the management package. It would be a disaster. If they brought a suit, with the right judge we could be in big trouble. I mean, you could kiss your severance goodbye. It could come to that. At a minimum, payments could be held up for years while the litigation plays out. So if the issue comes up, and it will, I will handle any response. Is that understood?”

Walking to his car at the end of the day, Larry saw Paul Neal in the parking lot. He hesitated briefly but continued towards his car. Paul called out, “Hey. Mr. Montgomery.”

Larry smiled and waved, then, as Neal approached he said, “You know I’m not sure that it is appropriate for us to meet without legal counsel present.”

Paul waved a hand, “Forget it, this isn’t business. I wanted to say that I think we’ve met before.”

Larry hoped that he could avoid a further discussion and coolly said, “Really?”

“You don’t remember? Lakeview High School? About twenty years ago?”

The Homecoming

Larry desperately wanted to leave but also realised that his wife would never forgive him if he told her he'd avoided a chat with Neal, so he said, "Uh, there was a Paul Neal I remember. Is that you?"

"Sure was. We've both changed quite a bit." Paul and Larry laughed and both relaxed. "So you managed to get out of here. Looks like you've done well."

"I've been lucky."

Paul was about to say something when Jim Meigs, the company secretary came out of the office and saw the two of them talking. He hurried over, concerned about Larry's safety as well as what they could be talking about. "Is everything all right?" he asked. Turning to Paul, he said, "What do you want?"

Paul shrugged.

"It's OK," said Larry. "We just ran into each other as I was leaving. No problem."

Meigs visibly relaxed, but quickly said, "Larry, there are a few issues we need to discuss. Can I have a minute before you leave?"

Paul looked disappointed. He glanced uncertainly at Larry and Meigs and before turning to walk away said, "Well. See you I guess."

Meigs asked Larry if he had dinner plans, but Larry wanted to be alone. He didn't feel like spending another evening listening to the Bapco executives congratulate themselves on how well they were doing for themselves.

Larry found an Italian restaurant in town. It was half full and after studying the menu, he ordered a glass of wine and looked around. He found himself looking twice at a number of people. Several of them looked vaguely familiar and he wondered if they were people he may have known in the past. At one table he saw an older man and woman and the more he looked, the more he was certain. He got up and walked over and as he approached they looked up expectantly.

"Hello," he said. "Sorry to interrupt you."

"Yes?" said the man.

The Homecoming

“Excuse me, but aren’t you Mr. Lynch? You taught English at Lakeview High School?”

“Yes. I am,” he said, smiling at Larry. “But I can’t place you.”

“I’m Larry Montgomery. I was in your class.”

Mr. Lynch looked closely at Larry and stood up, taking Larry’s extended hand, “Oh yes. I remember! I would never have recognized you. What have you been doing with yourself? No. Wait. Please join us. We haven’t ordered yet, have you?”

“No. I’d love to join you.”

Larry got his wine glass and joined the Lynches. Mr. Lynch introduced his wife and told Larry. “Call me Alan. This is Carol.”

The Lynches were anxious to hear about what he had done since he had graduated and also told Larry about the changes in the school and the town from their perspective. Larry explained the purpose of his visit and the Bapco closing. Alan and Carol shook their heads and Alan said, “How sad. That company has been a cornerstone of the economy of this town. It doesn’t make any sense.”

“Isn’t there anything you can do to help?” asked Carol.

For once, Larry didn’t feel like making himself sound important. “No. I’m just the messenger.”

After dinner, the Lynches invited Larry to their home where they spent another two hours in a wide ranging conversation. At one point, Alan said, “You know I’m glad to see you haven’t lost your interest in literature. I didn’t think they focused on the arts in business school.”

“They don’t,” said Larry. “But I have to thank you. You got me interested in reading and literature and whenever I could take an elective, I always took English classes. I still do some reading on my own and would love to do formal study some day.”

Alan smiled. “That makes me so happy to hear. What do I have to show for after forty years of teaching?” He paused. “Nothing but the difference I’ve

The Homecoming

been able to make in people's lives. And I never really know if I've done that. But to me, that should be everyone's goal in life. To make a difference. Too many people live their self-indulgent lives worrying only about themselves. When they die, what real difference did they make? Did they make the world a better place?"

"But not everyone can save the world," said Larry.

"I'm not talking about saving the world. I'm talking about helping someone. Righting a wrong. Treating people with dignity. Sorry, I don't mean to preach."

Carol smiled, "That's the teacher in him. Always lecturing."

Alan and Carol dropped Larry back at his hotel and asked him to keep in touch. He promised he'd look them up the next time he was in town.

Larry didn't need to be at the airport until ten the next morning, so he decided to give himself the unusual luxury of sleeping in. But he couldn't sleep and was up at seven. He drove over to the Bapco plant and went up to the security guard at the loading dock and asked if he could see Paul Neal. The guard pointed toward the factory and said "Just go in that door. Ask someone and they'll find him if you don't see him."

Larry found Paul in the union office. When he knocked at the door, Paul looked up warily and greeted him gruffly. "You still here?" he asked.

Larry hesitated, forgetting what he'd planned to say. "Before I left I just wanted to say goodbye. And good luck. For old times." Larry extended his hand.

"Thanks for that." Paul softened. "Say, you got time for a cup of coffee? That is, if we're allowed to talk," he added sarcastically.

"Sure."

"This way. Show you how the other half lives."

The Homecoming

In one corner of the plant was a small canteen containing vending machines and tables. Paul led Larry in and said, "What's your pleasure. I'm buying."

"Just black coffee."

Paul bought two coffees and they went to one of the tables. "You think we'll see any more of you?" he asked.

"I doubt it. Nothing more for me to do. It's been interesting to be back, though."

"Well, to be honest, and ignoring everything else, I'm glad you made it out of here. I always knew you were going places, Montgomery. You had brains. You're smart. All I had was football. And after my knees gave out . . ." Paul shrugged.

"I'm really sorry," said Larry. "What happened?"

"Freshman year at college. Zigged when I should have zagged and that was it."

"So sorry."

Paul shrugged again, "Like I say, though, it's good to see someone getting out of this town and succeeding. Have you had a look around? It's really gone down the toilet." Paul started telling him about some of the things that had happened and some of the people they had known together.

As they talked, Larry found himself confused by Paul. He couldn't put his finger on the emotions he was feeling. He certainly wasn't intimidated by him and didn't pity him. Nor did he find him contemptible. In some strange way, he felt a bond of sorts that he had never felt with anyone before. It was as if he and Paul had some common thread that no one else could share or understand. Some of what they shared still caused Larry acute embarrassment. But was his embarrassment any worse than the humiliation Paul must be feeling, having Larry see him at his most weak and vulnerable?

The Homecoming

It was no longer enough for him to tell himself that he was smarter than Neal or had worked harder and therefore was entitled to the good things that he had that Neal would probably never have. If Paul hasn't been injured, he might be a big star. And when Larry imagined that, he knew he would have resented Paul more than ever. He would have thought it unfair. Larry shook his head, thinking about the word 'unfair.' That pretty much summed up what was happening to the workers at Bapco Industries.

Paul broke off his reminiscence and changed the topic. "Yeah. You know, ever since I saw you again, I've wanted to apologise to you for some of the things I did."

Larry had been dreading a discussion of their past. He certainly did not want to relive it. But at that moment, things were different. Paul had changed and so had he. No one was superior or inferior any more. He and Paul were two adults; peers because of their shared pasts. He waved his hand, "That was a long time ago. It's just the way kids act."

"Yeah, but I feel bad. I'm not just saying that because you've become so successful and I'm still sitting here soon to be unemployed. I think I was afraid of you and that's why I bothered you. It was the only way I knew. I spent some time thinking about this after I saw you at the first meeting. I didn't know if you didn't remember me or if you just didn't want to talk to me. I thought about it and realized that I didn't want to go through life with you thinking I was still just a mean bastard. I've changed a lot over the years."

Larry smiled, "Well, that is one of the terms I'm sure I used at some point. I was afraid of *you*."

Paul laughed, "All those things we thought were such huge problems back then. Compared to what we have to deal with now, it's no wonder people are always living in the past. Anyway, I'm sorry. I've learned."

"Thanks. It's OK. Do you ever go back to the school. Like to football games or anything?"

The Homecoming

“I don’t go to games. I don’t want people looking at me thinking that I’m regretting my life or anything. Or that I’m stuck in the past trying to relive my success. Which doesn’t mean a thing today. But I was over there the other day. The school. For an errand. I went down to the gym and they still have some of my awards there. I’m surprised some kid on steroids hasn’t broken my records yet.”

Larry smiled at Paul. “I’m glad that hasn’t happened.”

Paul beamed when Larry said that and then smiled coyly, “Well, it’s got to happen one of these days.”

The conversation continued until Larry looked at his watch and said, “I guess I better hit the road.” He opened his briefcase and pulled out a card and handed it to Paul. “Here. Keep in touch. Let me know what happens.” Before closing the briefcase, Larry moved some papers and revealed a black binder. The cover read “*Bapco Industries--Executive Settlement Program. Highly Confidential.*” Larry saw Paul looking at it as he closed the case.

“Thanks again,” said Paul. “I’m glad you stopped by.”

“Yeah, me too. Say, before I go, is there a copy machine I could use? There are some papers I need to copy.”

“Yeah. Just back there in the union office.”

“Could you show me?”

Larry took out the black binder from his briefcase and copied its contents while Paul got another cup of coffee. Paul came back as Larry was finishing up. He put the black binder back into his briefcase but left the copies in the machine. “Thanks. All set,” said Larry.

“Glad you stopped by,” said Paul, slightly confused. “You have everything you need?”

“Yes. I haven’t forgotten anything. Bye and good luck.”

The Homecoming

A week later, Larry was back in New York and his normal routine when he got a call one afternoon from Jim Meigs. "We're dead."

"What?" said Larry.

"Somehow the union got a hold of the exec package at Bapco. I mean they actually have a copy. They've gone to the press and they're eating our lunch. You wouldn't believe what's going on out there."

"What's the problem? Sounds like an embarrassment, nothing worse."

"Are you kidding? They are talking lawsuits. Equalization. Pension plan restoration. Cash payouts. Annuities. You name it. The best-case scenario is that the management compensation package will get drastically reduced and the reductions given to the union. But most likely, the whole divestiture will be cancelled. They figure it will be cheaper to try to save the business. The board is going to rethink the whole closure."

"No way. All that work for nothing?"

"Well, it's better than the alternative. I just wish I knew how they got their hands on that report."

"I shredded mine when I got back to New York, like the lawyers said."

"I'm not worried about yours. Anyway, I wanted you to know. We may need to do some crisis management."

The next day, Larry's assistant buzzed him. "There's someone on the line for you. He won't tell me his name. What should I do?"

"I'll take it. . . Hello, Larry here."

"You don't know me, but I wanted to say thanks." Larry recognized Paul Neal's voice.

Smiling, Larry said, "Whoever you are, I'm glad I could help."

"Just wanted you to know. You made a big difference in a lot of people's lives."