

MIKE STEEVES

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For Nikki



‘Everyone readily assumes that he
himself couldn’t do anything evil,
because after all he’s a good person!’
—Robert Musil



‘The honourable life is like timing.
One might not have a talent for it.’
—Karen Solie




PART ONE

I used to think that if I ever had to face a moral crisis or was confronted by a matter of life or death—the sort of grand ethical dilemma you might read about or see on TV—not only would I know what the right thing to do was, but I would actually do the right thing. I dreamed up melodramatic scenarios where I said all the right words and had all the right opinions. Whenever I heard about a disgraced public figure, I told myself that given the same wealth, power, and fame, I would've handled a similar crisis with grace and dignity. Whenever I watched a war movie, I identified with the hero who somehow managed to preserve their common decency throughout the most degrading circumstances the civilized mind has come up with yet, and not with the sad, desperate, and craven characters who served as scapegoats, the ones who invariably wound up doing something depraved and horrific. I watched the heroes sacrifice their lives for the lives of others and I told myself that's what I would do. That's who I would be.

I wasn't naïve. I knew that if I were ever to experience what it is like to be a celebrity or politician who has been publicly

shamed and humiliated, or if I had to live through something on the same scale as World War II and the Holocaust, it was highly unlikely I would do anything heroic, or that I would conduct myself in the dignified and graceful fashion, which has been so rarely on display throughout history that it exists more as a myth or a fantasy than a feature of humanity. Still, I was convinced that at the end of the day, when push came to shove, in the final analysis, when all the chips were in, I was at heart, at base, at my core, a fundamentally decent person, even if the real reason I lived a morally blameless life was simply because I hadn't been given the opportunity to do any real, lasting harm. I saw myself as the sort of person who would pull over at the scene of an accident and offer to help, even though I never had. I fantasized about volunteering at a homeless shelter, and while I never acted on these good intentions, I told myself it was only a matter of time. 'I'm too busy,' I would say. 'You have to look after yourself before you can look after other people.' Without ever having done anything that could be described as courageous or heroic, I somehow convinced myself that given the right circumstances, the appropriate context, I would live up to the ideals that still persist in our culture, even though they have been shown to have played a large role in many of history's bloodiest wars and atrocities, and I was convinced that in any moral crisis, or life-or-death situation, I would never behave in a cowardly and morally bankrupt way, like the characters in movies and on TV shows who stand by and watch, or run away, or stay silent and do nothing while the hero is sentenced to death, or has their home taken from them, or their children are abducted.



But now I know that if I am ever faced with a test of my courage, or character, or moral instincts, that I will probably fail the test in the same thoroughly predictable ways as everyone before me has failed.

Last year, after spending nine months on a work assignment in a foreign city, I was called back to the home office. My job involved a lot of travel. My company sent me all over the world, and I became accustomed to the perks of living in a foreign city on an expense account. Because I was willing to go anywhere at a moment's notice and for long stretches of time, I was able to distinguish myself in what might've been an otherwise unremarkable career, and I was rewarded with colonial-level luxury whenever I was on assignment. Traveling for work was a way for me to get ahead without having to do much else aside from travelling. Despite the ubiquity of international business and the frantic way people are ceaselessly shuttling back and forth across the globe, my clients were always grateful when I travelled to meet with them, even though all I did was buy a ticket and sit on a plane for a few hours. My friends and family were impressed too, imagining that all the meetings they had to do for their work, the excruciating small talk, and the mindless drudgery, would somehow be redeemed if they took place in a foreign city. 'You're doing great work over there,' Roger, my boss, said to me after one of my first foreign assignments, when I was really only doing a passable job at best, and, as he knew, the work I was doing wasn't anything special, and certainly not challenging. An open secret of my profession is that even though we all make a show of the crazy hours we keep, and

