

From Dead Bankers:

“I hope this teaches you and the rest of your scummy breed a lesson. You’re thieves. You may have these offices, these trinkets. But you are what you are. Your suits and fancy degrees can’t conceal it. You’re leeches. You create nothing but wealth for yourself and misery for others. And you call it capitalism. It’s not capitalism. Capitalism implies everyone gets rich. What you do is larceny.”

“Everything is hitting the fan right now, Ben. Reeves was a classic symptom. Harvard MBA, with all that implies. A herd follower. Smart enough to join the right herd, for a while, but too dumb to realize it was running him off a cliff.”

“This is not a rogue trader. This is not some pre-pubescent hedge fund. The whole Western world has been living beyond its means these past few years. And a few people have been living far beyond their means. This is well beyond a financial problem, Kevin. The whole system is knotted up. It’s a hairball which has been getting larger and tighter and more unfair and more impossible to untangle every day. And what is happening now is that a few people have had enough. And instead of pulling at their little piece of thread, hoping to pull it out, they have given up and they are hacking at it with axes and chainsaws and whatever comes to hand.”

He strode through the lobby, where two Arabs in full djellabas and head-dress were listening to a fast-talking Englishman, ex-Army Coles guessed. The nature of the deal was inscribed in the faces and bodies of its participants. The Arabs plump and sleek. The Englishman thin, angular and hungry. One side needed it. The other could do well enough without it. There were fewer rules in London, which was perhaps why he liked it so much. The world gathered here in a way it didn’t in New York. London was accommodating and messy, whereas New York, at least in business terms, was rigid, nervous and hidebound. Manhattan was filled with lawyerly types, constantly folding and unfolding their tortoise-shell glasses, alternately pernickety and profane who ran the city’s affairs in their own image. London was about two Arabs and a Grenadier Guard agreeing to dig holes in the desert and see what came spouting out.

“Is this recession going to be U-shaped? Or L-Shaped, Mr Secretary?”

How the hell did he know? How did anyone know? You placed your bets, limited your risk and hoped for the best. Economists may as well be shamans as far as he was concerned, leaping around waving smoke from the burning jujube tree. And when everything really went down, the government

waded in with its credit lines and printing presses to back-stop against disaster. Everything else, he had come to realize, was detail.

Prominent investors who accepted awards for their charitable work waged less visible wars to minimize their taxes, through legislation, avoidance or simple evasion. Last year he had attended a ludicrous ceremony at Harvard Business School honoring five famous alumni, three of whom he knew to be out and out crooks. He had sat in the back of the school's auditorium watching the Dean, a simpering finance professor with half-moon spectacles, reading out their preposterous testimonials: "For fanning the flames of finance and finessing the filigree of funding, we salute this master of management, this profit engineer par excellence." You'd think the man had organized the moon landing, instead of raping a few companies for his own enrichment and insider trading on a colossal scale. But what did academics know? They were too busy kissing up for donations so they could continue their life of pompous indolence.

It was a dull, down day in the markets. Everyone was taking a breather it seemed from the vertiginous slide of the past few weeks. He could imagine the brokers in London and New York slumped at their desks, fretting over paying for the next year's school fees and ski holidays. It was funny how quickly the Big Swinging Dicks of the trading floor became the playthings of the market, kicked around and abused by forces they thought they controlled. For all their boasts, few of them really understood what they did. They watched pairs of numbers and responded to the gap between them. It was Pavlovian. And for that they made millions. Ask them what the numbers signified or the mathematics behind them, and they would bluster. It was why ripping them off was so easy.

It was the way of the rich to develop justifications for whatever they did. When the law disagreed with them, they hired lobbyists and bought politicians to change it. When the markets turned and their malfeasance was exposed, they tossed the ticking bomb into the arms of government and ran away. They hogged their profits for themselves and forced everyone to share in their losses, like it or not. Gregory had been able to stomach the hypocrisy he saw at Harvard. The dismal executives boasting of their records, weeks before being fired for back-dating their options or bankrupting their firms. Crooks like Steven Weissberg bragging about the hard work and smarts which had brought him to the top, failing to mention the seedy side deals and tax evasions which gave him his edge. The corrupt professors with their board seats and consultancies, preaching ethics and social responsibility as if they knew the first thing about it.

“Shut up, Alexander. I want it all back. And I will get it all back. I’m not interested in what you have to say about risk and return. We all know how little that means. If it were a fair calculation, this club would not exist and nor would all of its inbred members. You think these people took more risk to make their money than someone trying to sell cigarettes on the streets of Moscow? Or a girl selling her body in a Prague strip club? And what do they get? Cancer. AIDS. Harassed by the police. Molested by drunk Englishmen. No Alexander, you tell me to follow the rules and we both know the rules mean nothing. The only thing that matters is power. How you can make the rules to your own advantage. It’s no different where I come from or where you come from. You just pretend it is. Humans are the same everywhere. They use money to hide the truth. And the richer they are, the more they have to hide.”

“As if anything would change, she thought. The very people who made their fortunes buying with leverage had long since turned to buying distressed debt. And now the government was going to help them. It was going to provide the speculators with loans to buy the very toxic assets they had created and sold in the first place. For much less than they had sold them for. And it was going to guarantee those loans in case of default. Why did anyone ever swallow this stuff? The rules of the world’s super-rich were simple: heads we win, tails you lose. Politicians were too weak and craven to change it. No, a politician vowing to change the behavior of the financial elite was like a witch doctor vowing to change bad weather. They could walk in circles and shake their calabash rattles, but it was all just show. Human nature would have its way.”

From Ghosts:

“It’s the beautiful thing about human folly. It’s always worse than you imagine. Always. You think people are dumb, and then they turn out to be total morons. Good news for us.”

“All you needed to know about modern finance, you could find on an Attic vase: priapic men, stupefied by lust, goaded by malevolent gods towards their ruin.”

“On the rare occasions he looked at his monthly outgoings, he realized how money had come to mean nothing to him. Hundreds of thousands of dollars were flushed out of his accounts for goods and services which barely registered: tubs of expensively prepared food in the refrigerator; freshly laundered sheets every day; new shirts which appeared monthly in his closet; the highly polished

marble floor in the entryway. Even the air ran through an expensive German purification system, one of only three in the United States. The other two were in the terminal illness ward of a hospital in Minneapolis. But when you had billions, nothing like this mattered. From that height, everything seemed cheap.”

“Her colleagues hung their virility on the shield of journalistic integrity, the public’s need to know, but it was quickly laid low by the realities of American capitalism. In this world, it paid to be a woman, an Italian woman with knee high, brown suede boots, a tight white shirt, a dab of orange blossom behind her ears, who rolled the r’s in credit derivative.”

“She’s laughing because you dare to call the group of sharks, pimps and charlatans who make up our financial world a community.”

“I give money to charity, Frank.”

“Course you do. To the private school your children attend, the empowerment zone favored by the politician who regulates you and to the museum board sat on by your otherwise very bored wife. And you claim tax breaks on all of it.”

“You think it takes talent to do what 95% of those money managers do? No. It takes a willingness to deceive people into letting you manage their money. You have to be ready to go to some underpaid bureaucrat at a pension fund and tell them that all those teachers and bus drivers and nurses whose pensions they manage would be better off paying 2% of their assets every year and 20% of their returns so that some Manhattan scumball can drive out to the Hamptons each weekend and buy the same art every other scumball buys, marry into the same weird-looking tribe of skinny-legged, large-headed women and send their kids to the same loser schools so the pattern can just repeat itself till end up as inbred as the good old boys of West Virginia.”