

PALO ALTO ODYSSEY

JJ regrets funding Carl's startup

CHRISTI asked her husband JJ, the tech billionaire, to help out struggling entrepreneur Carl.

“Carl is like my father,” she said.

Carl had stepped in to help raise Christi after her own father, Tom, crashed and burned in a drug deal gone bad. Or something like that. The story was still unclear about the details of Tom's death on a pot farm up in Humboldt County.



JJ

But it was with reluctance that JJ agreed to help Carl with the development of his start-up idea for a nanny robot. Non-family members, JJ knew, were easier to work with than family members, because

boundaries were easier to define and enforce.

The problem with Carl, in JJ's view, was that he was a control freak, and he couldn't let go of his start-up baby.

That was a difficulty, JJ well knew, of many creators of start-ups; and

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the ultimate demise of many small tech companies — even ones that had workable ideas. Company founders were often creative people, but they didn't have the best skills for jumping their original great idea up to the next level.

JJ had the hard talk with Carl.

“You have to move laterally into an advisory position,” JJ said. “You can't be the CEO. You don't have the chops. You get too hung up on the small stuff.”

To JJ's surprise, Carl agreed, and with some relief JJ thought that they were through the difficult part. When he saw Carl a few days later, however, nothing had changed. Carl was back exercising control over every little piece of the operation, as though their conversation had never taken place.

JJ thought, “I could just back out



CARL

of this whole enterprise, and give up trying to help.”

He also realized that Carl was naïve enough, that JJ could probably steal the business from him. A little paperwork sleight-of-hand, and it would all be done. Carl wouldn't know what hit him, until it was too late.

But that would surely put an increased stress on JJ's already stressed marriage with Christi; and he didn't want to do that.

More humanely, JJ also thought, “I could give him some stock so he's not too hurt by being ousted; and if the thing takes off, he'll do well.”

But neither of those choices seemed to be ones that would enrich his family relationship with his ersatz father-in-law.

JJ wanted to sit down with Carl and tell him the truth — that their professional relationship wasn't going to work. But he worried this would further triangulate his already stressful relationship with his wife.

What to do?

“Marriage,” JJ reflected. “I didn't think it would be this complicated.”

More tomorrow.