

THE FIRM

Directed by Sydney Pollack
Produced by Scott Rudin, John Davis, and Sydney Pollack
Distributed by Paramount Pictures
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What can we say about the American Dream? Is it a fantasy? Is it a way to assuage guilt, to camouflage the naked avarice that renders families outwardly prosperous and inwardly unhappy? Or have we become so sluggardly as a people that our delusions more likely entail not the hope that hard work will be rewarded exponentially, but that indolence breeds security, that the government owes us a living for minding our p's and q's? Have we exchanged our birthright of freedom for a mess of porridge in the guise of welfare bennies and stimulus checks? Whatever the Dream is, has its day passed? Did we set our expectations too high? Were we not once encouraged to dare greatly, for if none dare, none may prosper—neither employer nor employee?

Whatever the answers are, it is painfully obvious that life is not fair. However, in defining the boundaries of, and probing the causes of, success, there is more going on here than mere luck. All of us need to determine for ourselves what we're willing to fight for. But to refuse to try, to settle for mediocrity, is an abrogation of the God-given potential in all of us.

If someone asks, "What happened to your dreams?" there are at least four possible responses: *My dream came true, I found a new dream, I gave up, and I'm still looking.*

The Firm is about the contrasting dreams of two immensely talented, headstrong Americans, up-and-comer Mitch McDeere, and over-the-hill Avery Tolar. The contrast is set up with economical perfection by ace director Sydney Pollack in an expository scene so unobtrusive as to seem but a mere throwaway. Mitch, in his first day on the job for Bandini, Lambert and Locke, is invited to lunch by his "designated mentor," tax-evasion wiz Avery Tolar. To the question of what made him want to be a lawyer, Mitch reluctantly answers: He worked for a recent immigrant's grocery. Not understanding the tax code, he couldn't make up his back taxes and lost his store. Avery muses that Mitch is something of an idealist. Answer: absolutely not—when his boss lost his store Mitch lost his job. The government can do anything to anybody. Mitch wants to be in control.

Avery, the question thrown back at him, and with similar hesitation, gives his own response. It is markedly different. He used to be a caddy. Observing the carefree lawyers and their beautiful wives, he hungered in three ways—he had a lust for sex, the yearning for enough money to do whatever he wanted, and a decided weakness for indolence; he wanted a job that would allow him (eventually) to eschew hard work and simply coast. This interpretation admittedly extrapolates quite a bit from paltry dialogue. But consider how Avery orders alcohol at the very same lunch after telling Mitch the firm frowns on such behavior. Also, Avery is always hankering to go scuba diving and loves to sample the Hyatt buffet and bed random floosies.

And then there's Abby.

She is beautiful, but, more important, she is forbidden fruit, the innocent wife of the firm's star recruit. To still get his kicks, after all his stupid fantasies for a vapid life have been fulfilled, he must work that much harder. So he patiently begins to woo her. Stunned to find that she has followed him to the Caymans, he speaks frankly: "I have a very bad reputation."

"What do you do?" she queries.

"I run around."

But Avery's tragedy, his lost potential, is revealed in his subsequent bedroom confrontation with Abby: "You're not being *truthful!*" He's been hitting on her for months. He knows that plenty of women have succumbed to his schtick. But he knows someone as excellent as her could never really want him.

And yet, there is a sense that he actually respects her, that she is the kind of wife he wishes he had married (or she reminds him of the wife he *did* marry), and that he is fooling himself, thinking not so much that he is going to seduce her, as he is going to win her respect! Probably he doesn't know what his real motivations are at this point of his life, when he's feeling worn out and redundant. In Abby's first meeting with Avery, she takes a poke at him, rightfully offended that he's making a pass at her (and at a funeral, no less).

"You must be overwhelmed with grief," she sympathizes sarcastically.

"People grieve in different ways, Ms. McDeere," Avery coolly replies.

It's a great scene because it sets expectations high for their continuing interactions during the film. And, looking back, his rejoinder is appropos: he's not thinking of the death of Kosensky and Hodges; he's thinking of the life the firm took from him.

In the end, even as he realizes (he is a very smart man, after all) that she's using him, he refuses—twice—to take advantage of her. Rejecting her, and—by extension—helping her get away with the files, is his last desperate play for redemption. ("Whatever they do to me, they did a long time ago.")

The files provide the great struggle of the film. They also provide the best joke of the film: Referring to the querrulous federal agents, one of the partners asks Mitch McDeere, "Exactly what *did* they want?"

"The secret files," he replies matter-of-factly.

Avery chuckles (the great condescending Hackman laugh). "Who had those secret files last? You have 'em, Royce?"

"I gave 'em to you!"

Mitch becomes aware of the files on his first (and only, it turns out) trip to the Caymans. We know they're important because the key Mitch uses to open the door that houses them was almost excluded from the key chain that Avery handed over to Mitch (Avery couldn't figure out which keys were what, so he just gave them all to his new "protege"). Second, Alice Krauss's name is on one of the boxes, and she's one of the lawyers that, we already suspect, has been murdered. This treasure trove is all the files involving the law firm and the Chicago mob. Indeed, near the film's end, Mitch emphasizes, when he's setting matters straight with his clients at the Peabody Hotel, that he has complete knowledge of *all* their holdings. We know that all the Cayman files were copied, and these were the only files that Mitch ended up keeping, so we can conclude something else: Bandini, Lambert and Locke is very sophisticated in its money laundering. If they ever get raided by the feds, a search of their Memphis offices

will reveal nothing tying them to the Mob. Who would ever know, would ever *think* of searching some obscure condo in the Cayman Islands? It may be rented, for all we know, and nothing ties the firm to that piece of real estate. The island retreat is, in effect, an off-the-books law annex!

It's not even the firm's ties to the Mob that encapsulate its wickedness. More than spying on and blackmailing its employees, more than systematically cheating its clients, it is the killing of the four lawyers that really disturbs. And most disturbing is a very subtle development that comes near the bustling climax of the film. Mild-mannered attorney Lamar has been established as a somewhat tragic figure, distraught by the murder of his best pal Marty Kosinsky (the great lawn-sprinkler scene). Maybe he is a genuine friend to Mitch, maybe he's just supposed to keep an eye on him. But Marty's death *was* decidedly traumatic. The firm may be corrupt, and he may profit from that corruption, but he would never join in the rough stuff, right?

His wife, Abby's friend, Kay, spots Mitch hiding out on Mud Island, and thinks he's just killing time pretending he's a tourist. She casually relates her observations to her husband on a pay phone. Next thing we know, gruff security chief William Devasher announces "one of our guys" found McDeere on Mud Island.

Actually, Lamar told his superiors. He knew they were looking for Mitch, he knew that he would be killed, and—still—he passes the word. That betrayal is the best example in a film full of them; it epitomizes the soul-numbing corruption hidden amidst the winning smiles, brass fixtures, and mahogany trim.

Does the firm make men corrupt, or do corrupt men make the firm corrupt? Abby worried that the firm was destroying Mitch, as it already ruined Avery.

Avery's first word of advice to Mitch is simple—everything is about billing. Bill everything you can think of, and bill creatively. Of course, this is the *raison de etre* of the firm, this is how they keep the machine running. And billing, appropriately enough, is how Mitch smashes the machine and escapes. Abby worries that the firm is turning Mitch, as it turned Avery. He brought his own weaknesses to the firm, and it fit him like a glove (for a time), but, for the sake of argument, let's assume Abby is right. Let's assume that Avery was a fundamentally decent man, but the firm exploited his weaknesses, and put him out of reach of any possible redemption. This raises the issue of Mitch's character.

He is no saint, we must conclude.

In the very efficient opening montage, we see Mitch as a hard-working student. He is in the top five of his class, despite a steady job waiting tables at a busy restaurant. He takes time for sports (his being in good shape is a major plot point later in the film, and necessary for his survival, it turns out). He has great confidence in himself, is fiercely competitive, prone to anger, and never wastes words.

Only later do we find out that he has some skeletons in the closet, nothing heinous, but it's the source of his great drive and determination. He grew up poor, his mother is little better than trailer trash, and his brother is serving time for manslaughter.

The morning of the trip to the Caymans, after he's worked all night and she's waited up for him, Abby blasts him. In response to his protestations that he is just trying to make sure he

accomplishes everything she ever expected of him so she will not regret her decision in marrying 'down,' she corrects him: She never demanded that he work killer hours, and he is, for all his high-mindedness, a liar who can't deal with his family, letting his family's failure define him.

And, no, she will not have sex with him.

Abby knew from the very beginning that something was wrong with this setup. Back in Boston, Mitch layed out a celebratory dinner spread and gushed about the incredible offer Bandini, Lambert and Locke was offering him. Her first question, "Why?," was the right one. She repeated her concerns after they enjoyed Southern Hospitality at the Memphis barbecue. Again, he dismisses her concerns, gushing, "these are nice people."

Mitch has no excuse. Not only could Abby have told him (if he had listened), he had the admission of Royce McKnight, managing partner, who bribed the Harvard Law placement-office clerk so he could find out how high were the offers Mitch was receiving from the nation's mega-firms. Additionally, at the barbecue, senior partner Oliver Lambert tells Mitch that associates keep each others' secrets. (As he imparts this soothing sales-talk, the giant Peabody Hotel sign looms behind them—the same hotel where Mitch will confront the Chicago mobsters about *their* secrets.) In an ironic exchange, Mitch comments, "I like that."

"What do you like about it?" Lambert asks.

"...All of it—it's a family."

Left unsaid is the real reason Mitch is impressed. He has his own secrets to keep. But what secrets is the firm protecting? If people want to keep something hidden, it is likely embarrassing, or illegal. Thinking only of his burning desire to feel better about himself, Mitch, again, fails to see what is right in front of him. This out-of-the way firm with 41 lawyers should not be so prosperous. Nor should it be able to offer him \$96,000 a year with country-club membership, the low-interest mortgage, and the Mercedes. The firm plays by its own rules, but it refuses to tell Mitch what it expects of him until it's already too late.

Why does Mitch succumb to the plant? He's sleep-deprived, she's devastatingly beautiful, needy without being whiny, and appears to have the same hankering as Mitch—she wants to be safe (just as Mitch always wanted to be safe from the government [a conviction, it turns out, he was right to foster]), and she wants to be rich (because of Mitch's tumultuous childhood, his great weak spot).

She speaks intelligently to him about his needs, whereas Abby, one could argue, pushed his buttons and blew him off rather than encouraging him, recognizing that he was exhausted. He needed to be listened to before he would accept her advice.

The firm was listening, and tailored this set-up perfectly.

Interestingly, amidst this very serious scene (the most beautifully scored of the film, incidentally), Mitch suggests that she "report that guy." Misinterpreting her silence, he sympathizes, saying that it must have been her boyfriend. "That was for money," she replies, with just the right mix of shame and defiant self-respect. We're thinking prostitution, of course.

The joke is, this is the one true thing she says during the whole manufactured seduction.

Abby finishes saying, at the end of the film, what she wanted to say earlier, before the Caymans trip, when she began telling him that he didn't even know what it was about him that "moved" her. She says he has kept his promise. What has he done, exactly?

He has protected her, he has followed his oath to uphold the law, exposed corruption, and paid back the brother who looked out for him, a brother he dismissed as being—literally—non-existent. It's a speech that seems, at first, a little grandiose: "I've loved you all my life...even before we met." But when a thorough survey of Mitch's choices is undertaken, we quickly see that he is, indeed, a most remarkable man, brave and cool under pressure. And her experiences with Avery give her opinion credibility. He kept his promise. He overcame temptation. Avery just wasn't strong enough.

When Tammy finishes processing all the Cayman Islands files, she reports that there are no figures. Mitch instructs her to look very closely for any kind of code. Finally she finds it: 'Cordelia.'

Mitch, in a final bluff, talks his way past Avery's secretary and into his office. Plugging in the code word, Mitch finds, and prints, the figures off of Avery's computer.

Why is this significant? Sure, it's the last link in the chain that Mitch needs to take down the firm. But of all the keywords Avery could have selected, he chose the name of his estranged wife. This, indeed, is the trade-off: Avery gave up a simple, honest life with one lovely woman that he now misses acutely, a woman who no longer wants anything to do with him. Sure, she may say she "understands" Avery, she may even feel sympathy for him (like Abby does), but she's not putting up with it any more.

Avery is old, and he is alone. His own sinfulness wore him out—new conquests don't satisfy, and it's just a matter of time before he is an object of ridicule to the young women he pursues so desperately. 'Cordelia' accesses the riches of the firm's most notorious misdeeds. It is the key that unlocks the treasure. And that is the final irony: Cordelia is what he lost.

Mitch, on the other hand, learns his lesson before it is too late. He realized his dream, and discovered it was a nightmare. And now, in the best American tradition, having discovered what really counts in life, he's starting over—with Abby and a humble single-practice in Boston. He's found a new dream. He's realized the value of living up to his *own* expectations. And he doesn't have to prove anything to anybody ever again.