

Dan, Darin and Darlene

“Are you coming to bed soon?” Beth asked.

“Pretty soon,” said Darin. “I want to work on these plans for a bit. We’ve got a meeting with the Chesapeake Group in the morning and we think they’re about to give us the go-ahead.”

“I’m getting pretty tired of your working every minute. We never spend any time together. Whatever happened to quality time?”

“You’re the one who wanted a new house, remember. Now that we’ve got it, someone’s got to pay for it, and until I see evidence to the contrary, that someone is me.”

He poured a cup of coffee from the carafe and disappeared into the dark hallway leading to his office, mumbling under his breath, sloshing coffee as he walked.

Beth gave a shrug and started for the bedroom with her tea and *Bon Appetite* when she was startled by a knock at the door. She peered through the peephole to see a familiar face. With some trepidation, she opened the door.

“Mr. Marsh . . . uh, Dan . . . how are you? Come in. I’ll tell Darin you’re here.”

“Where’s that li’l rascal?” said the elder Marshall, scanning the apartment behind his daughter-in-law’s back.

“You know, it’s pretty late. We just got Austin in bed for the night.”

“I jus wanna see’im fer a minute, Beth.”

“Dad. How ya doin?” said Darin, materializing into the foyer from the darkened interior. “Would you like some coffee?”

Dan Marshall waved the offer away with a look that indicated disgust for the beverage.

Beth slid between the two generations of Marshalls, giving her husband the bug-eye as she mounted the stairs to take up a defensive position at the threshold of the latest generation.

“I wanna see li’l Astin.”

“Austin.”

“Right. Ausin.”

“Dad, he’s in bed. Does Mom know you’re here?”

“She . . .that . . .”

Dan Marshall’s eyes wandered over the walls of his son’s new home, noting how his daughter-in-law had laid claim to the spaces suitable for artwork. He thought of registering a complaint but stopped short of asking what had become of the three paintings — his paintings — that he had given them as wedding presents, birthday presents, and most significantly, his grandson’s Christening present. Beth had shown little in the way of gratitude.

“Thank you so much Dan, but I’m not sure where we would hang such a large painting.”

“Like every other Philistine,” Dan thought.

The high-ceilinged interior his son had designed, with its museum-like white walls that could easily accommodate Picasso’s *Guernica* with room to spare, soared above Dan’s head. What a perfect venue this clean archetype of modernity would be for his art. But in place of its simple contemporary composition, interlaced with embedded poetry and references to political and religious protestations, were bourgeois accoutrements of the middle class: smallish framed reproductions of Marc Chagall, Monet, and the ubiquitous *Sunday Afternoon in the Park*.

Dan put an arm around Darin, waving an unsteady finger at the fake Seurat.

“Ya know,” he said, “Thass not foolin anybody.”

Darin turned to look at his dad, then drew back when the older man’s potent exhalations wafted past his nose.

“They got the real one down at the Art Institute ya know.”

When Darin turned his head he saw that his father’s hand was bleeding.

“Dad, what’s wrong with your hand?”

Dan removed the arm from his son’s shoulder and scrutinized the appendage, seemingly without recognition, as if it had only generated itself there since his arrival.

“There’s not a drink in it,” he said. “Waddy got?”

“I’ll get you a Band-Aid,” Darin said.

“Nope. None of them fancy drinks for me thanks. A gin and tonic’ll do jus fine. In fac, les jus make it straight gin.”

Dan headed for the liquor cabinet as Darin loped up the steps to get his father a Band-Aid. But at the top of the stairs Beth intercepted him.

“What’s he doing here? I thought you were going to tell him not to come back.”

“I had a talk with him. It’s not that easy you know. He wants to see Austin. I think we should . . . “

“Oh no. He’s not coming up here!”

“Shh. He’ll hear you.”

From downstairs they heard the sounds of clinking ice cubes and the closing of the freezer door.

“I’m calling your mother to come and get him,” Beth whispered.

“No, no, no. Don’t do that,” he whispered back with some urgency, “I’ll get him calmed down and call him a cab.”

When Darin returned with the Band-Aid, he found his father on the couch, channel-surfing.

“Here ya go,” Darin said.

Dan turned with a bewildered look.

“What? Oh yeah.” Dan said.

The old man took the Band-Aid and opened it with some difficulty, applying it to the wound on his meaty right hand.

He frowned at the hand and took a sip of his gin.

“Little disagreement with one of the sculptors. Bastards.”

Thursday, Darin knew, was his dad’s regular night with the art crowd down at the *WaterWorks*. Dan and the sculptors almost always became physically adamant about their viewpoints, arguing for hours about the relative merits of three-dimensional versus two-dimensional work. Most of the painters and poets maintained a humble demeanor around the big, noisy, hard-drinking, hairy, leather-clad, knife-carrying, jackbooted sculptors. The women among them were especially frightening. But his dad had never been one to back down from these brutes . . . lone defender of the gentler arts.

Dan was, after all, thought Darin, every bit as loud, hairy, and obnoxious as the 3D crowd.

He remembered as a boy, being dragged to one gallery opening after another. The evenings usually started out pleasant enough, with lots of congratulations, hand shaking and general schmoozing of the blue-hairs with the cash. But wine flowed freely at these events — sometimes harder stuff — and the nights usually ended in some kind of altercation, especially if his dad’s arch-enemy O’Connor was present, as he almost always was. Whether it was Dan’s show of oversized abstracts or O’Connor’s exhibit of *his* slick and colorful fiberglass sculptures, they always included each other on the invitation list. It was as if the work could not stand on its own merits. One of them had to show the other, in public, what a success he was.

Down at the *WaterWorks*, the painters sided, albeit quietly, with his dad, and the sculptors aligned themselves with O’Connor. This was certainly not the first time his dad had shown up with some kind of aesthetically inspired injury.

“Was O’Connor there?” Darin said.

“Bastard!”

“Dad, you know I’ve got a meeting with clients at 9:00 and Beth has to be at school by 7:45. We really need to get to bed soon . . . so finish your drink and let me call you a cab.”

Darin could never let him know about the beautiful pink and green fiberglass spiral they kept hidden in a basement storage room. The wedding gift from Frank O’Connor had become a point of contention between Darin and Beth. She had the perfect spot for the piece and wouldn’t mind at all, the idea of showing her admiration for it in front of her father-in-law. Darin loved the piece too, but it would have to stay put until the old man was out of the picture for good.

Dan stood up, wobbling a bit.

“I don’t need no stinkin’ cab goddamit!” he yelled. “Where the hell’s my paintings? Look at this shit for God’s sake. You’re a fuckin’ architect’ an’ ya got these fuckin’ reproductions of the 19’th fuckin’ century all over the fu . . .”

Beth stormed down the steps.

“I’m not having this in my house! I want you out of here now!”

Darin stepped between the two combatants, trying to calm his father while holding back his wife's advance like a coach trying to break up a melee among rowdy players.

"Aw, Beth," Dan protested, suddenly pathetic, with a gesture that sent gin and ice flying across the couch.

"Get out!" she screamed, "now."

Austin came running out of his room clutching a blanket and rubbing his eyes.

"Go back to bed, Hon," Beth said.

"Grampa!"

The little boy ran down the steps into his grandfather's arms.

"How you doin you li'l scamp?"

"I got a new big-wheel, Grampa."

Suddenly the child pulled away from his grandfather's stubbly face.

"Grampa, you smell bad."

Darin lifted the boy away from his father's grasp and Beth snatched the child up, hustling back up the steps just as the front door opened and Darlene, Darin's mother, stepped in.

"Dan, let's go home now," she said in her most soothing voice.

"I ain't goin nowhere!"

"Come on now. Can't you see what you're doing here. You're drunk."

"I ain't drunk!"

"Come on now, Hon. Let's go home."

"No!"

"Why do you have to do this? Do you have to make some kind of scene everywhere you go? . . . What happened to your hand?"

"Aw, it's nothin'. That bastard, O'Connor."

"You know what, Dan?" Beth interjected, "Frank gave us . . ."

"Beth!" Darin snapped, giving her the slit-throat sign, except down near his waist. It was an abbreviated version of the well-known gesture, shielded from his parents' view by his body.

"You're ruining our lives," Beth yelled. "I'm sick of it."

The raised voices floating out into the night beyond the open front door had attracted the attention of a neighbor.

“You’re ruining my night too,” the man shouted across the darkened lawn.

Darlene stuck her head out the door.

“Why don’t you go back in the house and mind your own business?” she screamed before Darin could manage to close her words in behind his own front door.

“I come to see my grandson and I intend to see more of ‘im.”

With that he lunged toward the stairs and began a slow, heavy charge toward his daughter-in-law, who stood fortress-like, at the top of the steps. By now, Austin had reemerged from his bedroom and was peeking fearfully from behind his mother’s skirt.

At the moment Dan’s charge met the stone wall of Beth’s resistance there was a heavy grunt, followed by a topsy-turvy conjoined roll of the two adversaries as they tumbled down the steps. Upon reaching the landing, surprisingly unhurt, Dan looked up from his prone position, past the blue pant leg, past the black leather belt and holstered gun, into the scowl of a police officer.

The cop mumbled something into his shoulder and a second officer appeared.

“Everything OK here sir?” the first cop asked the younger Marshall.

Dan stood up painfully and brushed himself off.

“We’re fine, officer,” Dan explained, “just a li’l understanding.”

“Right,” said Beth, “he can’t even talk. He’s a drunken jerk, and I want him off my property,”

“Beth!” Darin tried to restrain his wife, who was attempting to charge with flailing fists toward Dan.

“Ma’am, please lower your voice and calm down,” said the second officer.

Austin was bellowing now as Darlene tried to silence him, cooing and crushing the child to her heavy-duty bosom.

“Everything will be fine, Officers,” Darin said. “It’s just a little problem. I think we’ve got it worked out.”

The two cops scanned the lavish contemporary interior. They exchanged a look.

“All right, but if there is anything else, please don’t hesitate to call this number.”

The first cop handed Darin a business card.

“You sure you’re all right, Ma’am?” he asked Beth, who was now sobbing quietly in her husband’s arms. She nodded in the affirmative, not lifting her gaze from the polished hardwood.

The two cops turned and walked back to their car. Darin watched them get in as the neighbors squeezed the light from their cracked doors back into their houses. He shut the door and for moments there was only awkward silence, punctuated by gasping inhalations from Beth and Austin.

“You look good, Darin,” said Darlene making effort to return normalcy to the scene. “You’ve put on a little weight. I hate to see you so skinny.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” asked Beth. “I know you think I’m a lousy cook. I just happen to want our family to be healthy. We eat healthy food instead of greasy, artery-clogging meat. We respect animals and try not to kill them just to satisfy our bloodlust.”

“Beth!”

“It’s OK, Hon,” Darlene said to her only child, “She’s always been a little bitch, right from the start. She thinks she’s better than us.”

Beth snatched Austin away from his grandmother and scampered up the steps with him.

“He’s been eating meat somewhere, Bitch,” Darlene yelled. “Maybe at his girlfriend’s house.”

Darlene smiled, patted Darin’s tummy and gave him a wink.

“Mom, Dad, this has been a very difficult evening. Could you please just go on home and I’ll call you in the morning after my meeting.”

“OK, but you know . . . you could do better than *that*.” She rolled her eyes toward the top of the steps. “You were always the best looking boy in your class, and you’re an *architect*.”

Darlene whispered the word as loudly as one can whisper and closed her eyes with reverence for the title her son had earned. Darin’s father stood swaying in the doorway.

“Thass right,” Dan concurred, “fucking architect.”

The older couple leaned into each other now, Darin's mother offering support to his wobbly dad. At last Darin managed to coax them out and send them toward their own home.

“Good night, Dear.”

“Night, Mom.”

He stood for a while luxuriating in the silence, and in his own numbness. Finally he managed to move toward the kitchen where he poured himself a large scotch. Just as he was pouring his second one he heard two light beeps of a car horn, followed by footsteps on the stairs. Beth appeared in the foyer with the sleeping Austin in one arm and a suitcase in the other. She didn't look at him. He didn't try to stop her.

He watched his wife step out the door with his sleeping son, and heard the cab drive away.

He finished the second drink before walking into the bedroom to look in the mirror. His mother was right. He had gotten fat. He pulled his shirt up to reveal the disgusting paunch. He turned to his side. He could hardly believe how *thick* he had become. It had crept up on him. It wasn't just the burgers he sneaked at lunch. He had stopped exercising. When was the last time he had gone for a run? Three months? He got down on the floor and did sixty sit-ups. He had to stop and rest at fifty. The final ten were very difficult.

He sat at the table a while longer. It was 12:15 by the time he decided to put on his running gear and go for a five-mile run down by the lake. He had to stop and walk a few times. When he returned, he half expected to find Beth and Austin back in the house — to find that the entire episode was a dream.

He poured himself another drink. Now that Beth wasn't here, he felt free to pursue his other vice. He fished back behind the cleaning supplies under the sink for the pack of cigarettes he had stashed. He lit up. Damn, that felt good. He smiled, remembering the words of his friend Casey: “There are only two things in this world that taste good: fat and cigarettes.”

He thought over his options. Maybe his mother was right. Maybe he did deserve something better. He *had* been the best looking boy in his class, and now he was after all, an *architect*.

His parents — he didn't know what to think about that relationship.

“The hell with all of ‘em,” he said aloud to himself.

He went down to the storage room and returned with the O'Connor piece. He cleared a space for the sculpture in the entrance foyer and stood back to admire it.