

SPUD

“Dad, something’s wrong with the Grand-Spud. He won’t wake up.”

The boy poked a mass of blanket and pillow he knew to be his father and elicited only an ursine grunt. He poked again.

“It’s Thanksgiving. Let me sleep, Pal.” His father pulled the covers up over his ears.

“Dad,” Jimmy insisted, “the Grand-Spud’s on his throne and he’s very cold.” The boy was close to tears.

His mother sat bolt upright in bed, held out her arms, and Jimmy crawled across the paternal lump to snuggle against her. Impatient, she kicked her husband’s leg. “Luis, wake up. Go check on your father.”

“Okay, okay.” Luis surfaced reluctantly from the clutter of blankets and dreams, inhaling the first tribulation of the new day. He cleared his throat and his mind.

Laura loved the sight of her husband. She considered him to be so handsome he was almost a cliché with his square jaw and sharply etched features. She waited, stroking her son’s hair while Luis went into the bathroom. Minutes elapsed before he emerged, hair slicked back, smile gleaming and smelling of toothpaste. “Happy Thanksgiving.”

She smiled indulgently. “Happy Thanksgiving. Now go check on Spuddy. If he’s ruined the throne, I’ll kill him.”

“Be right back.” He ruffled his son’s hair.

Five years ago on Spud’s eighty-fifth birthday, Laura and Luis moved into the family home in the Throggs Neck section of the Bronx. At the time, Luis’s sister, Sheila, was in the

army in Iraq, so she couldn't take on the care-giver role, and their brother Roberto's wife wouldn't hear of moving Spud into their Connecticut Tudor with indoor swimming pool and outdoor duck pond. Their house hadn't made *Architectural Digest* ("too Ralph Lauren Home," the twerpy junior editor had pronounced), but they did get a photo spread in *Classic Living*. Spud and his throne, the infamous Barcalounger, clearly would not have fit in, to say nothing of Finn MacCool, Spud's inseparable Irish wolfhound, who was almost as old as Spud in dog years. A certain physical resemblance, a tattered grey endurance, had developed between man and dog over the years, except that Spud was short and burly while Finn MacCool was high and spectral.

One of the conditions of the move was that Laura got to update the ancestral duplex. She ripped out the orange shag carpeting, replaced the avocado appliances, laid ceramic tile and painted the walls a pale coffee. Integral to the make-over was Spud's massive brown Naugahyde Barcalounger. It came with levers, buttons and dials controlling the angle of recline, the height of the footrest, the severity of the massager (choice of pummel or roll), a pop-up cup holder, a fold-away tray table, and a telephone hidden in the arm rest. Spud wouldn't part with the chair but he compromised by letting Laura re-upholster it. When the Barcalounger came back from the shop done up in an expensive Chinese red brocade, Spud took to putting on a jacket and tie before climbing aboard for his nightly boiler-makers. And that's when everyone began to refer to the chair as Spud's throne.

Luis came back into the bedroom, ashen. "Spud's – gone."

"Are you sure?" A spectrum of emotions from fear to grief and relief washed over her.

Jimmy struggled to be free of his mother. "No, he's not gone. He's right on his throne. I saw him."

She clutched the boy tighter. “What Daddy means, Honey, is the Grand-Spud’s gone to Heaven with Jesus.”

“Then who’s the guy on his throne?”

“The Grand-Spud left his body there, but he’s gone to Heaven.”

“I suppose I should call the police.” Luis ran his hands through his hair. “And Sheila and Roberto.”

“What do we do about Thanksgiving?” Laura asked.

“I don’t know. I don’t know. Who do I call first?”

“You call the sibs. I’ll call the cops.”

“What do I tell them about Thanksgiving?”

She shrugged. “I’ll cook the turkey anyway. Probably they’ll all come over just to be together.” Sudden tears rolled down her cheeks. “Oh poor Spuddy.”

Luis picked up his son and the three of them quietly, reverently, as if on the Holy Communion line, filed into the livingroom.

Spud appeared to be asleep in his Barcalounger, eyes closed, head lolling to the side, feet upon the levered footrest, a small smile on blue closed lips as if he had, indeed, gone to Heaven. Finn MacCool, stretched out next to the chair, raised a weary head, looked at the trio with soulful eyes and moaned, dropping his massive head to his shaggy paws as if it weighed a thousand pounds.

Laura leaned toward her husband. “Spuddy looks so peaceful.”

“Probably went in his sleep. Never knew what hit him.”

“Poor Finn knows. Look at him.”

Jimmy wriggled down from his father's arms and curled up next to Finn MacCool, hugging the dog. "The Grand-Spud's gone to Heaven, Finn, but he'll be back. You'll see."

Laura knelt beside her son. "The Grand-Spud's not coming back, Jimmy. When you go to Heaven, you have to stay there."

"That's not fair. I want him here. I'm only five. I need my grampa. So does Finn MacCool." He jumped up, lifted the arm of the throne, reached in and pulled out the telephone. "Here, call Heaven. Tell Jesus I want to talk to the Grand-Spud."

Gently Laura replaced the phone. "Sweetie, we can't call him. They have no telephones in Heaven."

"But – but – " Utterly frustrated, the child burst into tears.

She held him close and rocked him as Luis knelt down and embraced them both, and Finn MacCool leaned his bony weight against the familial tableau and sighed deeply, sorrowfully.

Two patrol cars, sirens whining, blue lights blazing, arrived within minutes of the call. Finn MacCool rose to full attention beside the Barcalounger, growled menacingly from the stomach and bared his fangs at the police, the hair on his back stiff with aggression.

Officer Maldonado asked, "Is that thing a dog or what?"

"It's an Irish wolfhound," Luis said.

"Jeez, I've never seen a dog that big. You better confine him."

Luis patted Finn on the head. "Come on, Finn."

Finn MacCool continued to growl and inched protectively closer to Spud, assuming the aura of a demon dog emerging from myth and moor.

Laura tried to lure him into the bedroom with a slice of baloney, his favorite treat, but he just continued to growl and glare malevolently at the police.

Officer Gross, the other policeman, warned, “If you can’t control that beast, we’ll have to shoot it.”

Jimmy ran over to Finn, grabbed his collar and tugged. “It’s for your own good, Finn. Come on.” The dog looked at Spud, looked at Jimmy, and whimpered. Jimmy put his hands on his hips. “Because I said so, Finn.” The great dog groaned and let himself be led away by the little boy, head drooping, paws heavy, nails clicking on the tile floor.

The police took down the particulars of the deceased: Name: Seamus O’Flanagan. Birthplace: Ballynonty, Ireland. Age: ninety. Widowed. Retired. Survived by sons Luis and Roberto; daughter, Sheila and three grandchildren.

Officer Maldonado commented, “Ireland. And you and your brother got Hispanic names.”

“Our mother was from Cuba. God rest her soul.”

When the police determined there was no foul play, they moved toward the door.

Luis almost panicked. “What do we do with – with the body?”

Officer Gross asked, “You got yellow pages? Look up funeral homes. Pick one. They’ll send a hearse. Here. You’ll need this.” He handed Luis some paperwork and they left, saying, “Sorry for your loss.”

As soon as Finn MacCool was released from the bedroom, he resumed his sentry post beside Spud’s throne.

“Laura, will you make the calls?” Luis asked. “I feel like someone punched me.”

“I’ve got to stuff the turkey and get it in the oven.” She hugged him. “Have some coffee

first, Dear. I'll put it on. And fix Jimmy some cereal, will you?"

A man will make you his mother, if you let him, and Luis had a decided tendency to domestic dependency and hypochondria. Laura sometimes felt she should pin mittens to his sleeves before sending him out to the office every morning.

Laura had a master's in special education but had postponed her doctorate for a year to have Jimmy. Then Spud needed care. So here she was, five years later, stuffing a turkey and grieving over the old man who had anchored her life in limbo. She was not resentful. She believed in karma and had just spent half a decade making sacrificial deposits of goodness.

She heard Luis on the phone with his brother, "For crying out loud, Robert, (Roberto had dropped two o's in his Wall Street ascendancy and become Robert Flanagan) it's not like Spud chose to drop dead on Thanksgiving morning, okay? Yes, we're still having Thanksgiving. Laura's got the turkey going. I agree, Spud would want it this way. No, no, come whenever you want."

Please don't come too early, Laura silently begged.

The phone call to Sheila proved to be as much of a shock for Luis as it was for his sister. He got off the phone, leaned against the refrigerator and announced, "Sheila got married. And she's pregnant."

"What? When? My god."

"I don't know. His name's Lee."

"Why didn't she tell us?" Laura paused in crinkling the aluminum foil tent over the turkey pan.

"She was afraid to tell Spud. Look how he reacted when she became a vegetarian and

then an Episcopalian. ‘Church of England,’ he bellowed all over the place and called her a granola-eating Quisling.”

“I think he’d be relieved just to see her married and having a baby. We need this good news today.” She grabbed the turkey. “Open the oven door will you?”

“Sheila said Lee’s Chinese. Maybe that was the hesitation.”

“Leave it to Sheila. And I hope she’s bringing her gluten-free, mock turkey burgers because I’m not preparing a separate vegan menu. And no turkey foo yong, either.”

“You’re so good, Laura, putting up with my weird family.”

“Every family’s weird in its own way.”

Before Laura could forget her goodness, Luis begged a favor, “Will you call the funeral home?”

“Sure. If you peel the potatoes, peel and slice the apples, roll out the pie crust, set the table – with an extra place setting for the new Mandarin in-law – and parboil the pearl onions and peel them.”

Defeated, Luis walked out of the kitchen, got the yellow pages, returned to the kitchen and began calling, while Laura in her busyness dodged around him.

Exasperated, she said, “Can’t you do that in the other room?”

“I didn’t want to make the calls in front of Spud.”

She paused, put her arms around him, not noticing how close the point of the potato peeler was to the corner of his eye, and apologized, “I’m sorry.”

He laughed, shielding his eye. “Stupid, huh?”

“No. I understand.”

“I’ve called four undertakers already. Nobody’s answering.”

“The holiday.”

“What do we do with him?”

“Set a place? I don’t know. Call that Officer Maldonado. The nice one.”

A half hour later, Luis announced, “I finally found an open funeral parlor – Ricardo’s Mortuary, all the way over in Hunt’s Point.”

“My god, do we have to have the wake there? Everyone’s car will be stripped during the rosary. Maybe Ricardo’s can just refrigerate Spud till tomorrow. When are they coming?”

“They said they’d send a hearse as soon as possible.”

“Good.” Laura brushed a strand of hair out of her eyes with the back of her hand, still wielding the potato peeler.

“They said it might be a few hours. They’re busy.”

“No wonder. At Hunt’s Point they have to scrape the knife-fight losers off the sidewalks first.”

The morning hours dragged. The wonderful aromas of turkey, and apple and mince pies filled the house but failed to comfort. Laura took Jimmy to play at a friend’s then busied herself with preparations while Luis kept a vigil in the livingroom with Spud and Finn MacCool. “The dog’s a camel,” Luis said. “He hasn’t gone out all morning. He just lays there moaning.”

“Poor thing. I never thought I’d feel sorry for that animal.”

Just after one o’clock, a classic Bentley purred into the driveway. Luis pulled the curtain aside. “It’s Roberto with Justine and the terrible teens.”

“I hope they remembered the sweet potatoes.”

“I see boxes from Wolfgang’s Bistro.”

Luis opened the door and Robert blustered in. “Goddam traffic.”

Justine air-kissed everyone while the terrible teens slunk in moodily behind her. Instantly, they all became hushed at the sight of Spud in his Barcalounger. Luis relieved Robert of his bundles as Robert approached the throne and fell to one knee, making the sign of the cross. “He fed us. He gave us everything he had.”

Luis blushed with shame. Caught up in the details of an inconvenient death, he hadn’t thought to pray or pay any filial homage. His older brother always made him feel small, even when exhibiting a moment of humanity.

Nigel, his face ruddy from harsh acne soaps, and his older sister Sophia with a spray-on winter tan and three-hundred-dollar blonde hair extensions, hung back. “Cool,” Nigel said.

Sophia rolled her shadowed eyes and elbowed him.

Robert struggled to his feet. He was short and overweight, built as Spud was fond of saying, “like a brick outhouse.” To which, Laura always added, “An outhouse in an Armani suit.” Which was Luis’s cue to say, “Armani smarmy.”

Robert turned to his terrible teens. “Come, greet your grandfather.”

Justine hissed, “He’s dead, Darling.”

He glared at her. “It’s not contagious.” He held out his arm for the children, who crept forward, staring.

“Cool,” Nigel said again, sliding away from his sister’s elbow just in time. “I never saw anyone dead before.”

“Your hamster,” Sophia said, bored beyond belief and smelling faintly of incense and grapefruit body spritz.

“I mean a human being.”

Laura interceded, “Will you two go get Jimmy? He’s down the street playing at the Falco’s.”

“Can we bring Finn MacCool?” Nigel asked. “He looks sad.”

“Of course he’s sad,” Sophia said. “His master’s dead.”

Finn didn’t object when Laura put his leash on and he actually consented to walk out with the terrible teens, a victim of his biology. In minutes, Nigel was back at the door. “He pissed an ocean and now he won’t come with us.”

Justine corrected her son, “Don’t be vulgar. The dog urinated.”

“Mom, I know the word ‘urinate.’ Finn pissed.” He left with his sister, who was shifting from foot to foot in the doorway, while Finn MacCool with a weighty groan heaved himself back down beside the Barcalounger.

Justine then asked, “I hate to bring this up, but is Spud staying for dinner?” She, too, had an expensive complexion and hair extensions.

Luis said, “The funeral home is sending a hearse as soon as they can.”

Taking the coats, Laura said, “Sheila got married. He’s Chinese and she’s pregnant.”

“Well, well, well. That’s a shocker.” Justine was checking pot lids. “Umm. My favorite, creamed onions. I had my own ideas about Sheila.”

“What do you mean?” Luis asked. He struggled to like his brother’s wife.

She put a bejeweled, French-manicured finger delicately into the creamed onions and

sucked it. “Umm. Perhaps a little more nutmeg. I mean, I always thought Sheila might be a lesbian.” She put the lid back on the onion pot. “Not that there’s anything wrong with that. In fact, having a homosexual in the family would have been so interesting and a good lesson in tolerance for the children.” Her hand went to her black sapphire pendant and she shrugged. “But a genius Chinese in-law has almost as much cache. Does he speak English?”

Laura was annoyed. Who did Justine think she was anyway? Martha Stewart with the nutmeg? “No,” she snapped. “He speaks take-out. They’re not all geniuses, you know, or is it geni?”

Justine frowned in consternation. “Where’s your nutmeg?”

Laura plunged her hands into dishwater and began ostentatiously washing bowls. “No more nutmeg. The onions are exactly like Aunt Marcella’s. Perfect.”

The terrible teens crept in with Jimmy in tow.

Robert checked his Patek Philippe. “When’s the hearse coming?”

Luis shrugged. “I don’t know. As soon as they can.” They heard a car pull into the driveway. “Maybe this is them.”

Robert, looking out the window, announced, “It’s the bride and groom – uh-oh. Major uh-oh.”

Everyone rushed to witness the new calamity and saw a pregnant Sheila struggle out of the driver’s side of the car and a thin Chinese girl in bleak clothes step delicately, hesitantly from the passenger side.

Justine stamped a booted foot. “I was right. I knew it.”

“Aunt Sheila’s a lesbian,” Sophia said with awe. “I have a lesbian aunt.” She immediately

started texting someone.

“Put that thing away,” her father ordered.

She defiantly finished her text before pocketing her phone.

“Hi everyone. This is Li-Li.”

In an effusive burst of tolerance for Li-Li’s sexual orientation and exotic ethnicity, the family greeted the couple with warm, long hugs and clucks of endearment which neither detracted from their sincerity nor masked their awkwardness.

“Here, let me take those.” Laura reached for the aluminum pans of food each woman carried.

“Gun lo mein and stringbean casserole,” Sheila announced.

Justine effused, “All points of the compass are covered. This is just too grand, isn’t it, Roberto?” The dropped “o” was restored in a burst of ethnic comradery.

Sheila went straight to her father. “Oh, poor Spuddy.” She turned to Li-Li, tears in her eyes. “My father always understood me. He let me be a tomboy. He even encouraged me.” She addressed the room at large, “I remember when Mom bought me a Scarlet O’Hara prom dress and I refused to wear it. Spud told her, ‘Maria, it’s her prom. If she wants to wear pants, let her. This is America and it’s the twentieth century.’ So I got to wear an orange pants suit to the Saint Helena’s prom *a la* Hillary Clinton. My father is my hero.” She patted Spud’s hand and pulled back in horror at the coldness and rigor. “Has anyone called a priest?”

Again, Luis felt reprimanded. “I haven’t exactly had time.”

Laura stepped into the breach. “It’s not everyday one’s father dies in his chair while

everyone's expecting a turkey dinner. Besides, all the priests have probably washed up at some devoted parishioner's table and they're too old for pagers. We'll have a requiem mass and that will do the job."

Justine sniffed, "I could have gotten the turkey from Wolfgang's, too. All anyone had to do was ask."

When it was time to sit down to dinner, the hearse still hadn't arrived. Luis called again and was told there was a backlog and the hearse would be there as soon as humanly possible, unless, of course, he wanted to cancel the pick-up.

"No. He's still dead."

Robert shrugged. "The throne has wheels. Roll Spud over to his usual place at the head of the table and let's eat."

And that's what they did. Robert and Luis sat on either side of Spud with their families trailing down their respective sides of the table. Li Li sat quietly as far from the corpse as possible, disappearing behind Sheila's bulk.

As oldest son, Robert led the dinner prayer, thanking God for the bounty and for Spud's long life. "He was a good father. Amen."

Luis added, "Spuddy's got the Lord's ear. Any special requests?"

Robert laughed. "Hey, Spud, tell the Big Man I need a Christmas bonus. Pay off *The Silver Spoon*."

Sheila explained to Li-Li, "My brother's forty-foot yacht. We'll go sailing next summer. Have you ever been sailing? I mean aside from the freighter that brought you to New York."

Shrinking further, Li Li nodded a quick little no.

“Li-Li was smuggled into New York inside a container. She got here barely alive. We Americans have no idea what the rest of the world goes through. Their lives are so awful, they risk everything just to get here.”

The monosyllabic Nigel whispered, “Cool,” and glared at his sister who sat impotently on the other side of their mother.

“When’s the baby due?” Justine asked.

“Valentine’s Day, we hope.” Sheila smiled at Li-Li who was staring disconsolately at her plate of turkey and mashed potatoes.

“Artificial insemination, I assume.” Justine sipped her wine.

“Yes. We picked a Chinese donor so the baby would look like her parents. The donor has genius I.Q. and a Harvard degree in nuclear biology.”

Laura said, “A girl, how nice. Do you have a name yet?”

Sheila glanced lovingly at Li-Li, who actually smiled. “We’re naming her after Li’s mother, Mei Ling. Mei Ling O’Flanagan. We’re using my last name because as soon as the baby’s born and weaned, I’m going to go through a sex change. That way Mei Ling will have a mother and a father. We’re a very traditional couple.”

The terrible teens looked at each other across their mother’s bust and mouthed, “Cool,” while Sophia was frantically, surreptitiously texting.

Luis appeared helpless. “Spud would have a hard time with this.”

Sheila was immediately defensive. “Spud’s not having a hard time. He hasn’t even blinked. It’s you. You’re having a hard time.”

“It occurs to me I won’t have a sister anymore.”

“You never wanted a sister. You never let me play ball with your friends because I was a girl. Well, soon I’ll just be one of the guys.”

“Yeah, but can you pee like a guy?”

Justine intervened, casually asking Sheila, “Wouldn’t it have been easier to inseminate Li-Li as the mother, and then you could get started on the testosterone immediately?”

Li-Li and Sheila looked at each other as if they might cry. Li-Li nodded and hung her head. Softly, barely audible, Sheila said, “In China, Li-Li was raped and had a forced abortion in the sixth month. She’ll never have biological children.”

Laura immediately got up, went around the table and hugged both women. “I’m so sorry, Li-Li. And I’m so happy for the two of you that you’re having this child.” She was joined by Justine, and then the men, everyone either crying or roughly patting backs.

“Smile.” Sophia shot them with her phone.

Nigel elbowed her, “Shoot the Grand-Spud, too.”

She did.

As everyone filed back to their seats to resume the feast, Laura attempted to save the day from disintegrating into bathos. “Luis, tell us about the time Spuddy took you to Orchard Beach for your seventh birthday. I love that story.”

It was an obvious ploy, but Luis played along. He harumphed for an opener and said, “Spuddy went in the water. I didn’t know he couldn’t swim. He just laid down in the water and sank. When he came up for air, he said, ‘The Russians taught me to swim like that. They call it snorkeling. It’s how they plan to sneak up on us. Snorkelers from Maine to Key West.’ And I

believed him. I bragged about him and his Russian swimming technique.”

Jimmy said, “Pass the Grand-Spud some potatoes. He loves potatoes.”

Luis reached for the bowl. “That’s how Spud got his name. Potatoes were like candy to him.” He plopped a mound on the plate in front of his deceased father.

“Remember my First Holy Communion?” Sheila asked.

“Who could forget it. You cried like a banshee all day.” Luis made a volcano out of Spud’s spuds and dollopped in creamed corn, butter and gravy, just the way he liked it.

For the edification of those not present on that grim long-ago day, Sheila explained, “I woke up the morning of my First Holy Communion with the flu and a fever. Mom had my starched white dress and veil on a hanger over the closet door. Every time I looked at them I wailed. Then Spuddy came in, sat on my bed, and said, ‘You will make your First Holy Communion as soon as you’re better, and when you do, I will buy you the biggest bouquet in the Bronx.’ And he did. A huge bunch of peonies, so big I couldn’t carry it home.”

Robert said, “What I remember best about Spud was how he went to work. I mean he was just a telephone repairman, but off he went in a suit and tie every day.” He helped himself to more stuffing. “As a kid, I thought he must have a very important job. Years later Mom told me he carried his lunch and overalls in his briefcase. You gotta love the guy for that.”

Luis said, “We do.” He was about to offer a toast to Spud when the doorbell rang.

They all looked at each other, then apologetically at Spud, knowing it was the hearse from the funeral home.

“Jimmy, grab Finn MacCool and put him in your room. Close the door and stay with him, okay?”

The dog let himself be dragged away.

Robert suggested that his children go with Jimmy and Finn, but they froze in place, not wanting to miss a minute of the drama.

The two men who wheeled in the gurney acted as if it was routine to find the corpse at the dinner table with a pile of potatoes in front of him.

Sheila began rooting around in the pantry and emerged with a spice jar. As the men laid Spud on the gurney, she sprinkled him with sage, emptying the entire jar.

“He’s not a turkey,” Luis said.

“It’s an American Indian thing,” Sheila said. “Saging. It’s a blessing. Usually the sage is smoky, like incense.” She shrugged. “On such short notice, a sprinkling will have to do.”

“How about a little nutmeg?” Justine asked.

Laura rushed from the room, joining Jimmy and Finn MacCool.

“I was just trying to lighten the moment.”

When the men wheeled the gurney toward the door, an unearthly howl rose from the bedroom, as if the hounds of Hell were about to be unleashed upon the world. What’s that?” one of the attendant’s asked. The other crossed himself.

“It’s just the family pet,” Robert said.

As the gurney was wheeled out of the house, the eerie wolfish cries reached crescendo. The family stood in the doorway until Spud was inside the hearse and the door snapped closed. They watched while Finn MacCool bayed and the hearse crept down the driveway and away.

As soon as Finn was released from the bedroom, he raced for the Barcalounger, leaped over the arm and settled in Spud’s throne at the head of the table, moaning and grunting.

Justine apologized to Laura, “The onions were perfect. Just like Aunt Marcella’s.”

“You never tasted Aunt Marcella’s creamed onions. She was dead before you married into the family.”

“You and Luis were married after us so you never tasted them either.” They both laughed and hugged.

“Family legend,” Laura said. “Apple pie, anyone?”

They all sat down again with Finn MacCool in the red Barcalounger lapping up Spud’s potatoes and gravy.

Sheila stood up and proposed a toast. “Here’s to the Grand-Spud. He was truly grand. And he was that rare commodity – a good man.”

“Hey, hey,” Robert and Luis protested in unison. “How about us?”

Li-Li rose hesitantly beside Sheila and said in halting English, “Thank you very much for welcoming me to my first American Thanksgiving.”

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