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CALL AND RESPONSE

It was after he told me he never wanted to see me again that my father tried to kill himself. When Lupe found him lying on the floor in a pool of blood, some instinct or vision having called her to go upstairs and check on Thanksgiving afternoon, she called me. I was on my way home.

I thought it was my mother's sleeping pills; she died two years ago but the bathroom cabinet was still jammed with her prescriptions.

"He cut himself," Lupe told me in the hushed voice of incipient tragedy. "You come right back. I've called the ambulance."

I didn't want to. The good life I'd made with Soph was waiting for me. I knew what would happen the minute I went back: a massive load of guilt would drop on me, his only child. I didn't tell Lupe but Dad had called me when I was driving and seeing who it was, I hadn't answered.

"He threw your whole Thanksgiving dinner in the garbage," Lupe told me while I was making up my mind. "All that good turkey."

"Organic, too," I said. She didn't laugh. She'd cooked the meal I'd planned to share with Dad. He didn't have anyone else. Even his dog had died. But after he flew into another of his rages, I left.

I pulled off the highway. "He told me he never wants to see me again," I told Lupe.

"He's sick, Marty, maybe dying. I hear the siren. You go straight to the hospital. I'll stay here and clean up."

I took the next exit and started back. Either way, I realized, if I went back or I didn't, that shit load was going to drop on me.

I thought of what he'd blown up about.

The sponge.

I'd been cleaning up the dishes after breakfast, using a sponge he kept in a little plastic basket attached to the inside of the kitchen sink. When I finished, I'd left the sponge in the sink.

"Put the sponge back in the god-damned basket!" he'd roared at me, so suddenly I jumped. He was still sitting at the kitchen table and when I looked at him, I saw his face had gone scarlet and I wondered if he was having another stroke.

"Certainly, Father," I said in my best good-daughter voice, and I put the sponge back in the little basket.

"It gets funky when you leave it in the sink!"

"I'm sure it does."

But that didn't end his tirade.

He gestured at the packing boxes lined up against the walls. "It's all a mess!" he shouted. "All mixed up--pots and pans thrown in with my files! I can't find anything--and that quarter million dollar Hudson Valley landscape your mother gave me for my seventieth is gone! Stolen out of the moving van!" He'd left Manhattan permanently after Labor Day, everything in the apartment on the upper West Side packed and trucked out to New Mexico.

"Well, it's insured," I said soothingly. Dad spent his professional life in the insurance business, becoming quite wealthy-- I'm not sure exactly how-- so he knew he'd get close to the value of that painting.

"Go to hell, Marty! I never want to see you again!"

So it wasn't just the sponge, but the sponge did start it.

I didn't remember till I got to the hospital that it was still pandemic time, and when some official-type person told me I couldn't go in, I tried to argue.

"My father may be dying," I pleaded, hating the whine in my voice.

"Plenty of people dying in there today, Lady. Nobody but patients goes in," he said.

I might have tried to pull rank, say I'd come a long distance to see my dying father, but the expression in his dark eyes over his mask told me it was no use.

"And please pull your mask up," he said. I had dropped it under my nose so I could breathe.

I pulled up my mask and drove back to Dad's house to await developments. He'd had his castle--as he called it--built on top of a hill in a gated community a few miles north of Santa Fe. During the two years it was going up, he'd become close to the contractor, a charming crazy Hispanic called Juan Delgado. Dad bullied him and loved him like the son he'd never had.

Now they all want to tell my story but none of them can. I won't allow it. Nobody has access to my files or my memory. I'll lock everything up in my vault. My boy can sort the files

out first; he won't bother to read them, just not interested which is fine by me, but he'll be able to tell from the labels which ones are sensitive or just put the whole dam mess in my vault. It's big enough. And I'm the only one has the access code.

They're all interested now because they think they can make a story out of me.

Well, they can't. There is no god-damned story.

They tried it five years ago when I was up before the New York DA because my company shares were going through the roof and I'd just sold a bunch. Didn't want to believe me because they didn't understand the system. Marty was the worst, trying to soothe me into some sort of confession. My lawyer--smart, a Jew--finally was able to explain the system to her: all our major stock holders were tied into it. When our shares rose to a certain point, a percentage was sold. We didn't control it. All perfectly legal.

But I did know. Hadn't acted on it, of course, but no way I could avoid knowing. I built that company from the ground up.

Still, it was a good time to get out--retire. I'd just turned seventy-five and Nola has been after me for months. I knew what she wanted: full time in the house I'd just finished building in Santa Fe, beautiful, on top of a hill in the best gated community, with a cruise every winter to get away from the cold.

All right, she deserved it. Thirty-seven years with me--she was my second--and no straying as far as I know or want to know and our daughter Martha, our only child, married and gone. Married to another woman, no less. I knew that story as soon as she changed Martha to Marty.

And then she went and died on me. Not Marty or her butch "husband". Nola.

All that investment of time, energy, money--yes, money, Nola wasn't a cheap wife--and love down the drain and I was left to empty our apartment and get ready to move. Manhattan didn't offer me anything once I'd retired. I met a pretty woman in the park when I was walking my Cap but she let me know in short order she wasn't interested. All those benefits I used to go to with Nola dried up as soon as the pandemic hit so I had the contents of the apartment trucked out to New Mexico except they made a mess of it, boxes labelled wrong, my files thrown in with the pots and pans but what can you expect from a bunch of ignorant Mexicans? And stole the Hudson Valley landscape Nola gave me for my seventieth, a quarter of a million.

That's what I faced when I moved out and then Cap died.

I had Marty and her "husband" living five miles away but that was not the company I wanted and I told her so and that meant a couple of blow-ups and then she agreed to come by herself for Thanksgiving.

I'd waited long enough and the phone hadn't rung. I asked Lupe if she'd heard anything but she said no. She was in the kitchen punching dough for bread and seemed to want to be left alone, so I walked outside and went down the gravel drive. It was a full moon and when I turned around to walk back up, I saw Dad's castle in all its glory. God, it was beautiful. I had to admit it. I had to stop and stare. All those hand carved portals were casting their scalloped shadows on an inch of new snow and the octagonal window over the front door gleamed, staring at me. The balcony that ran along the front of the second floor still had its flower pots, dressed for the winter with dwarf evergreens and twinkly lights. I thought if Dad saw it like

that, lit up by the full moon, he might maybe--maybe!--see its beauty and decide it was enough, his creation, every detail a work of his vision and Juan Delgado and his crew devotedly following his orders.

I called Soph when I was back inside and told her what I'd thought and she told me not to be a fool. "Your Dad's always had the best," she said. "It doesn't mean anything." I hung up before she could go into her sermon about a "spiritual wasteland."

After I chased Marty off, I went into my library, the best room in the house, all mahogany paneling, and started to take my collection out of its boxes. I have it all: the collected letters of Abraham Lincoln, first edition of course, and all the generals' Civil War memoirs. Lee's is signed, very rare, took more than a year to track down. I put the collection together over the last decade and designed my library specifically for it and Juan and his team followed my plans to a t.

I'd just gotten to Jeb Stuart's memoir when an old photo fell out. Marty--Martha--about five on her first day of school, and I'm walking her there, holding her hand, and she has her little pink bonnet on and every block somebody is nodding and smiling, admiring my beautiful little girl and me walking her to school and holding her hand.

"Well, it's the only time you did that," Nola said. She always had to have the last word.

That did it. I couldn't go on. I took the box cutter and slashed my left wrist and there was a lot of blood all over Jeb Stuart and Stonewall too and then I passed out. The last thing I

remembered was telling Juan Delgado about Lee's speech at Gettysburg one day last spring when he was putting up the library shelves.

Finally someone called from the hospital and said it would be "touch and go" with Dad for the next twenty-four hours because of the amount of blood he'd lost. That meant he'd given them my number as next of kin and for the first time I started crying and that shit load of guilt fell on me and crushed me to the ground. I tried to love him, Soph can attest to that, she kept warning me about "boundaries" but every time he yelled at me my heart closed up like a clam and then opened right back up again. With Mom and his dog both dead, he didn't have anyone else to yell at but when I explained that to Soph she said with a rage-aholic there's always an excuse.

"Don't call my Dad that," I told her and I felt the prickle of rage that would have caused an explosion if I wasn't such a good girl.

Soph called back while I was sitting in that awful library crying and asked if I wanted her to come but I told her no. Dad dying or not dying was something I had to deal with myself, finally. Soph said she understood but I heard the hurt in her voice.

I needed something to do so I started to shelve all those Civil War books. I guess I hated that library because it was designed for someone who was going to sit in the big leather lounge and read evening after evening alone and Dad was never going to do that.

Lupe had cleaned up the blood earlier and now she stuck her head in the door to see if I wanted anything. "There's chicken soup in the frig. I can heat it up if you want some."

"Maybe later." I told her what the hospital had said and she nodded like it was just what she expected and said she was going to bed. I knew her husband Mattias who's Dad's yard man was waiting for her in their basement bedroom and I told her to go and felt relieved. She was such a knotted up little stick of a thing and yet nothing was beyond her, even a big mess of blood.

Later she told me she'd heard Dad shouting at me that afternoon and had wanted to go upstairs but Mattias had caught hold of her arm and told her not to go. "Let them work it out," or something like that, in Spanish, of course. I did know the only reason Lupe and Mattias put up with Dad (other than money) was because they had what Soph called "boundaries" and I tried to understand why I found that so annoying.

I went back to shelving all those books and it didn't surprise me that aside from Lincoln's letters it was all Confederate generals.

That reminded me of a few days ago when Dad asked me if I hated men and I tried to explain that of course I didn't and got nowhere.

When I went home that night Soph made me a cup of peppermint tea and told me not to go back but of course I did. He's my dad and I love him.

I told them to call Juan Delgado as soon as I woke up (they'd already called my daughter) but they couldn't reach him. He never answers his phone or listens to messages; I told him many times how hard that made it when he was building my house and I was still in New York and could never reach him. That used to make me mad, a little, but then I thought

how great it would be not to answer my phone or pick up messages. I thought once I got to New Mexico I'd copy Juan Delgado. A new life out there in the high desert.

It turned out it didn't matter whether I answered or not because no one called me that first month in Santa Fe except fundraisers. Those vultures know when a rich man moves to town; they can smell money. I hung up on them. I left all that behind in New York.

I was in the hospital two days for no reason. They had me on an IV because some nurse said I was dehydrated and they changed my bandages and woke me up at night to check my "vitals" but other than that, they left me pretty much alone. Wanted to unleash their shrink on me but I said do way. I threw out the hospital food and ordered from Dinner Just The Two of Us (Nola and I used to go there when she wanted to eat out) and looked at whatever I could find on TV and was bored out of my skull. I tried to reach my boy Juan but as usual his message box was full and maybe just as well I didn't speak to him because I'd tried to reach him just before I did it and left a message I now regretted. He'd be sure to make too much of it and avoid me although he knows as well as I do nobody's life depends on anybody else.

The second day I told them I was going home and they said they couldn't release me until I had a "suitable living arrangement", living alone at 72 being not in their view suitable, and Marty came by to tell me she'd reserved a "suite" in that old-age roost on the river and I told her I'd never live there and she left crying. Both of us knew there was no way we could ever live together.

Good. I didn't want her to come back on me with her "solutions".

That evening I called Juan to get him to spring me but Marty had already gotten to him with her version.

"I called you Thanksgiving morning," I told him. "You didn't answer. I needed you to come see me." That wasn't the message I'd planned to leave but no way I was going to repeat those words.

He didn't say anything for a minute and then he said, "I never thought you lacked for courage."

I shut my cell phone off and rang my buzzer eight or ten times and when someone finally came, I tried to bribe him to go out and buy me a bottle of whiskey.

By the third day Dad was raring to go home but the hospital wouldn't release him to go back to living alone in the adobe castle.

I called Juan Delgado five times before he finally answered from some construction site and I practically begged him to go and see Dad. He reminded me that with the pandemic raging nobody but next of kin was allowed to visit, and I knew he was relieved. "Give him my best," he said which was not what Dad wanted.

"Help me to work something out for him," I said, and he agreed to come "after work." That's an ordinary expression but I never hear it here. Soph volunteers at the rape crisis center two afternoons a week but other than that we're like all the other transplants, we're mostly at home or playing tennis or hiking or shopping. Even before the pandemic, no one we knew went to a job--they all live off some form of inherited money--although our neighbors next door claim to be painters and there's another man a block away who's said to be a professional Spanish guitarist but how could we know now with everything shut down. This town is a

retirement haven for well-heeled older people and the laborers who build the big houses (they have to be adobe) and clean and cook and garden and shovel snow and generally fetch and carry are all Spanish speakers and live in big low-cost developments south of town.

So I waited at five o'clock for Juan. Soph was cooking dinner. She didn't want to be involved. I put my mask on and waited on the patio, under the portale.

He came roaring up the drive in the big red truck Dad bought for him when he was building the castle.

"Lupe and Matthias are more than enough," Dad told me on the fourth day when the hospital said they couldn't hold him any longer against his will.

"Not in an emergency," I said. I was standing by the window and he was sitting on the edge of the bed as though he'd never again in his life lie down. "You need companionship and Mattias barely even speaks English."

"Then hire Juan Delgade," he told me. "He speaks good English and he makes me laugh." That didn't come as a total surprise. Last spring when the adobe castle was finished except for a few odds and ends I'd gone out to see it and found Dad and Juan sitting in that library and Dad was reading aloud from one of his Confederate books and they both had shot glasses of whiskey and they looked cozy.

"All right, I'll ask him," I said, "but it may take me a few days to reach him. Any idea what he would want to be paid?"

"A lot, make it work with some of my securities," Dad said. "He can move into my guesthouse and if he has to have his horses he can fence that field and put them in there."

The guesthouse was a whole other house with two bedrooms and two baths built up the hill.

"Tell him I won't charge him rent," Dad told me. "He can go on working where-ever he's working and I'll only need him for an hour at the end of the day when the sun's going down. A pretty good deal," he added.

That hour at the end of the day with the harsh sun bleaching out is always the loneliest. I remember from before Soph.

I got hold of Juan on the fifth call and when I told him what Dad was proposing, he laughed. "You're the one to move in with him," he said. "You're his daughter."

"But he's fond of you," I said.

The silence that followed that was not comfortable or comforting.

"The guest house is really nice--you know because you built it--and Dad won't charge rent. I hear it's tough for general contractors, with the pandemic. You could rent your house and save some." He lives somewhere on the south end of town; I've never seen his place but he's good builder and it's probably all right.

"I'll think about it,"

I told him I needed to know the next day.

I guess I've learned something about myself. I always thought I'd be fine alone--living with Nola was no treat after the first year or so when she quit trying--but I guess I have to admit I'm not. Juan and I have always gotten along except when he overcharged me for my patio, and he knows not to try that kind of thing again. A drink at sun down, maybe a little read, something to look forward to, and then go about your business.

Around four o'clock my first day back at my house, Juan called me. That had never happened, and I'm not even his employer anymore.

"I'll move into your guesthouse," he told. me, "for a month or so but we better have some rules. I may bring an overnight guest from time to time."

"That's acceptable," I said, though it tweaked me.

"Your daughter's the one that ought to move in," he said.

"She doesn't like me

"I don't know anything about that, but the only picture you have in your library is her when she was little."

"It's possible she loves me but she doesn't like me," I said. I didn't need to bring in the husband.

So after some more haggling, I offered Juan a good stipend, in cash. It wasn't as much as he wanted but it was enough to firm up his decision. The first evening I heard his red truck (that I bought him) roaring up the drive, I knew I was going to have what I wanted, finally, and I wondered why it had taken me almost 73 years to get there.

As they say, there are ways and ways. It usually isn't about bed, at least after a few months. I've noticed the relationships that last don't seem to have a label attached to them. Soph and I are legally married but we don't really fit the term. We both just want peace and quiet and maybe a warm body in the bed at night, especially during these cold winters.

If anyone ever put a label on what Dad and Juan have--they've been together now, off and on, for almost five years--it would wreck the whole thing. Dad wouldn't stand for it and neither would Juan. I guess we'll have another blow up when Dad says he wants to adopt him, but we'll work it out somehow, and even then Juan won't be his son. Or his companion or his employee or his lover. It's something that has no name and that's why it works, and I'm grateful. Every time I drive up there and see Juan's horses, the Palomino and the roan, grazing in that field, I think, this is the West, this is what we came for. Things without names.
