

SOFTENING THE BLOW

“Fuck me,” he says lightly, to no one in particular, except maybe himself, since Goody is the only one standing in front of his bureau, in his bedroom, undershirt and boxer briefs, in a house with roommates, or house-sharers, as he likes to refer to the two people he is now renting rooms to, after the divorce.

Goody is standing there, in front of his bureau, up in his bedroom, on the third floor, which he thinks of as his floor, since the rented bedrooms are on the second floor and there are no common areas up top, according to the lease he had put together. He is quite happy—proud, even—with the lease he had written up, modifying a boilerplate copied off the Internet.

I'm not a real lawyer, he tells himself as he studies his image reflecting back from the bureau's big mirror, but I play one on TV.

Goody has never actually played a lawyer on television, and he knows quite well that his would-be acting career is hardly impressive, mostly community theater, although some festivals, too, which is why he had bothered to get the equity card some years back, back when his wife—*former wife*—still took pride in having her good-looking husband an actor. *Formerly good-looking*, he tells himself, studying the receded hairline, remaining hair swept back but mostly thick only on the sides, much more gray than original dark.

He had once upon a time congratulated himself for not coloring his hair, accepting the shift towards salt and pepper, but the pepper is mostly gone now, and if he is honest with himself, he regrets not coloring his hair, but now, of course, it is too late. Too late because Goody can't stand the idea of having to confess to the obvious dying. He knows that he could use the excuse that he has to dye his hair for his

acting, but he also knows that people are likely aware that he hasn't acted in a couple of years, and even the last gig was small, brief, and had been the only work he had had for years.

Goody earns his living managing a restaurant downtown, although he still resents thinking of the modest town in the Catskills he had moved to, following his wife's wishes, away from the New Jersey suburban apartment that had been at least striking distance from the city and the likelihood of stage roles and working in commercials. His highest achievement, at least financially, had been his appearance in a commercial for a stool softener, although the residuals were laughingly tiny these days, and hadn't been all that impressive to begin with.

But he had nailed it, everyone had said so, including a couple of would-be agents, some theater colleagues, friends, although when he thinks back to that time he remembers much more clearly how his friends, neighbors, had given him plenty of shit, even while being generally impressed. *A shit*, he thinks to himself, with a bit of a snort that he then repeats for the mirror. "*Constipation?*" he recites, looking into the mirror as if it were the camera, "*It happens.*"

Ah, fucking brilliant, he thinks, with the sarcasm that colors most of his thoughts these days.

He's thinking about the commercial, and thus his pathetic acting efforts, because he's been sorting his prescription pills into his week organizer, bottles placed about the bureau's surface, and he's been trying to decide whether he should be adding a stool softener to either his morning or nighttime bins.

"Fuck me," he says, bewildered and bemused by his recent struggle with taking a shit, having had increasing bouts of constipation, sometimes to the point of wondering if he was going to rupture something or maybe faint with the straining, and so he had bought some pills, although generic, not the brand name he had once pitched. The constipation had been getting more frequent and it had finally

dawned on him that his taking Ibuprofen every day morning and night, because of some knee thing he remained reluctant to get checked out, was at least a contributing factor in his frequent difficulties.

He turns sideways to the mirror, checking on the profile of his abdomen, noting yet again that it continued to fail to miraculously diminish. His added weight, which had slowly and inexorably ticked upward as he got older, was probably a contributing factor to his knee pains, which meant, he had been realizing, that his getting heavy was part of his toilet trouble. Goody didn't particularly like to think of that, however, even though he is not entirely unaware of the static-like state his mind assumes when this thought comes close to the surface.

"Fuck me," he says again, looking at the pill organizer and the various prescription and over-the-counter pills and vitamins he is sorting out into the little plastic compartments. He can remember helping his father do this task, back when his father was alive, back when his father was old, older, back when he would visit him in that extended care facility that Goody had liked to call *The Elderly Gulag*.

Even years before his mother had died and his father had gotten to need some assistance, he remembers commenting to his friends how so much of his parents' actions and conversations were about doctor appointments, maladies, supplements, and the ever-repeating wondering if the morning's or dinner time pills had been already taken. There was universal agreement on this state of things.

These days, just a few years from when most friends would be retiring, he and his friends sounded a whole lot like their folks, with aches and pains, and surgeries and diagnoses, tests, prescriptions, the most common subjects of conversations.

He reaches for his statin bottle, noting that this one had yet another bottle cap design, requiring a moment of figuring out how this type comes loose. Goody is counting out the pills per compartment, a miser pushing coins with his thumb.

He'd be going into work on the early side, having a lot of catching up on ordering and scheduling and quite a few other to-do items he'd been putting off. He didn't particularly mind the work, even if his being a restaurant manager sometimes could still surprise him, as if his years of waiting tables and the occasional theater part hadn't been perfect preparation for the job. One of the things he liked about the work was that it put him with a lot of younger people, including handfuls of lovely young ladies who passed through the institution on a regular basis, off to college after a summer's gig, or off to a real job, as Goody thought of it. There were some cute servers, some smart ones, some stupid or immature ones, although Goody understood that they all were immature, not leastwise because he was now, with some, three-times their ages.

He is not rude with them, not fresh, not inappropriate, although there is sometimes a bit of flirting back and forth, at least with his favorites, mainly for some entertainment, and because Goody still mostly thinks of himself as a vital man, like a reflex. *Young flesh*, he thinks to himself, picturing young Sally's beautiful lower back curve into quite a wonderful ass, well-highlighted by those uniform slacks and the order pad portfolio that she tucks into the belt at her back.

Goody shakes his head, and looking up from the pill sorting, rolls his eyes for the mirror.

Goody snaps closed the lids in his organizer, two or three at a time, double-checking that each is snapped.

Goody is putting away the pill bottles, shifting them toward back of the bureau top to await next week's re-filling. Goody is starting to turn away from the bureau, to the clothes he's laid out on the bed, to start his dressing for work, and he realizes that he's forgotten to take this morning's pills.

"Fuck you," he says to himself, as he reaches for his water bottle.