

## Coming of Age

Dark of the night, up to pee. Prostate. At my age, least of my worries. Another one, sleeping on my son's couch, narrow as a coffin, disorienting. Didn't flush, their life style. Conserve water, good for them. Light on in the kitchen. Not so good. Waste not want not, family ethic. Tiptoed. Silly. Snoring from the bedroom enough to wake the dead. But not Joyce. Never. Odd moments, grabbed me, like stumbling into nettles. I trembled. Cold. Economy, another family value. Should'a grabbed my robe. Reached for the switch, saw Stanley at the table, a pile of papers.

“You working hard.” I kept my voice down.

He shrugged. “Need something?” His red pen scritch.

Need. As if. And if I did, would I beg from him. Joyce had scolded against my turning into a needy bastard. I shrugged, contagious like yawning. “Prostate. You get yours checked.”

Stanley looked up. Glasses magnified his molasses brown eyes. Joyce's eyes. Joyce's face. Black, wiry, hairs on his knuckles my major trace. He rolled his eyes. Same fuck off look I'd gotten a life time ago, when before his first date I'd said, condemns. Joyce

had been openly hostile to that first one. She'd won.

Stanley nodded, "Plumbing's good."

I nodded. Not the time for a p.s.a. numbers chat. For sure that would be meddling. I pointed at the papers. "Are they any good? Does it get any easier?"

"Some of them and no it doesn't get easier." He put the pen down, cracked his hairy knuckles. "Harder if you really want to know. Always need to find new ways to say this drivel earns a B. Can you imagine. There are no C grades. None. Give a C same as an F and you might as well resign." He lifted the next paper off the stack.

"But you still enjoy it?"

"Yeh. It still juices me. I've resorted to number grades. Gives me a tiny bit more latitude. Even if at the end of the day the great computer in the sky's going to convert them back to a letter. If anyone gets an eighty their hairs on fire and they're going to try to light mine. It's tricky. You gotta calibrate all of your grades within a twenty point range, nineteen to be precise 'cause I refuse to give hundreds. Some, very few, still respect the idea that there's no perfect paper." Head down, he made a red mark, "Wouldn't do it any other way even though kids with a ninety-nine come in to argue for that extra point."

“Become a principal.”

He snorted.

“Never explored anything else?” Joyce had had her heart set on our first born becoming a lawyer.

He snapped his pen down. “God, let her rest in peace. I was never going to be a lawyer, never. Even if grandpa was the best in St. Louis.” He turned to face me. “I don't need that.”

I folded my arms. “That's not on me. I never”

“Are you cold?”

I shrugged. The kitchen felt like my breath could be visible.

He reached, handed me a jacket, “Slip this on.”

I hung it over my shoulders. The sleeves came down below my finger tips. It smelled good, felt warm. The counter tops were the ones I'd helped install. Everything in its place. Even when she'd had her doubts, Joyce had admired that about Sheila. The walls above the counters needed a touch up. Just one way to measure age.

“I'm going to make tea want some. Herbal no caffeine.”

Caffeine or not it'd surely make me pee again. “I'll just keep you company.”

“Suit yourself. Are you ready to get back to bed.”

Lumpy, sloping, plastic covered couch not a bed. I shook my head. Stanley filled the kettle. The pipes rattled, stopped.

“Does it work better?”

“What?”

“The faucet. I changed the washer. It should shut off more securely.”

Stanley shrugged.

“Sheila asked if I would look at it. Said it sometimes drips.”

He set out two cups. “In case you change your mind.”

“How long have you been here?”

He chuckled. “You ask each time.”

“So. The answer must be different each time.”

“Good.” He laughed. “You keep all your marbles and I'll count 'em for you. Anita was born here.”

“How's she doing?”

“She'll be the one to fulfill Mom's ambition.”

I shook my head. No, no, Not ambition. How to possibly express it. Years ago I'd tried explaining the difference between a dream and an ambition. Joyce never had had the chance to go to law school, not even finish college. Whatever Stanley felt we'd never put any pressure on him. Not like the Kornfelds driving their son into medicine and addiction. I'd seen Kornfield at the funeral, looked like shit could hardly say anything civil.

I stared out the picture window. It had been my idea, my

project, paid for it, framed it out. Stanley had helped set it in. Car lights bounced back off the white fence. Six months after they'd put the window in Stanley had called to say his neighbors had erected an eight foot privacy fence on the property line. Joyce had taken it harder than I had.

“Anita's at Washington U law school. Tough place to get into.”

Had I known that? Momentary discomfort was drowned out by peels of laughter playing peekaboo, her fair hair fanned out on my chest, her first bicycle, a present from us. She'd stood multiple times for awards at graduation. Joyce had whispered she's got your brains. We'd taken out a second mortgage for college tuition.

I blurted, “Scholarship?”

“None for law school.” Stanley shot me a look. “Stop worrying. She'll pay you back. Isn't that half the point of going into law.”

“No. No. If she's happy.” I could hear Joyce's voice. I feared mine didn't sound genuine.

Stanley poured two cups of tea. “In case you need one.” Twin trails of steam rose. Sheila's snores rose and fell like ocean waves. The clock ticked. Car lights slid across the ceiling.

Stanley's voice jerked me back. “How'd I get my name?” He put his tea cup down.

Had they never discussed it. Impossible. He had to know the story. “You don't remember.”

“You tell a lot of stories. All my life, I was teased. I used to tell people it was after Stan the man Musial. I hated the name.”

It's good your mother isn't here to hear that. Had I said that aloud. I winced. Stanley's face hadn't changed. “You never knew your uncle? Your mom's younger brother. You couldn't have. You've seen pictures. Your mom treasured him.”

Stanley took another sip. “Try it. It's hot. Warm you up a bit.”

I pushed the cup away. “He was killed in Nam. Your mom got the news coming back from one of the demonstrations. She dropped out of school or got kicked out, you can take your choice. There was a ruckus in the deans office. Your mom was part of that.”

The chanting, the marching, the singing, locking arms, mounted police, clubs, the roar of motorcycles, helicopters, the smell of teargas. I ran my hands through my hair. That romance could blossom from such ugly chaos.

“You know that's how we met.”

Back straight, black hair to her waist, I'd hurried ahead to catch a good view of her. She was carrying two poles. I reached for one, took two steps to the side, the banner with skull and cross bones on a red map of America unfurled. I lost her after the teargas. Found her

again in the holding pen. Hair matted with blood, bruise on her cheek. Next day I searched her out. She'd braided her hair, covered up the bruising. We split a sandwich. She ate like she hadn't eaten in a week. I talked like I'd never spoken to another soul.

Stanley stood put his cup in the microwave. The overhead light flickered, dimmed. Another thing I should look at.

He took a sip standing, "I think that's what's screwed up your whole generation. You all need a check up. Abandoning individual thinking. Thinking for and by yourself. Relying on mob consciousness, mob rule." He sat back down. "It's why my students can't put together two consecutive sentences."

Inside his jacket, I folded my arms. I tried to catch his eye. "Did you read that somewhere. Weird way to play the generational blame game. If you believe that, all you're doing is the same passing along the blame like it's a virus."

"It is."

"What is"

"The incompetence. That's the virus. Mob mentality, collective think has produced that. More than in their essays, it's in their attitude. It's like an entitlement. Not the old fashioned kind of class clash but the new fangled one of look everyone feels like I do. We deserve better. We all agree. Call it the entitlement of

solidarity.”

Not for the first time, I didn't understand my own son. I felt ancient. It made no sense. His students were two generations removed. I needed Joyce's voice. I stood. “Maybe you better get back to your essays.” I saw my whited out reflection in the picture window. I remembered the couch was behind me.

Stanley picked up his pen. “You need anything?”

I picked up the cups. “Should I save my tea?”

He cocked his head to the side. “Does it feel like that here?”

I reached for his cup. “I'll wash them out.”

“How long are you going to need to stay?” The red pen scritchd again.

I wondered what Joyce's response might be.