

About 3700 words

An Evening at Home

“You are like the pillow of my life,” he said.

“A pillow? Soft and lumpy?”

It wasn't a good metaphor. He realized it right away, before the words were out but after he could stop them. There was no turning back now though; he'd have to make it work. Perhaps, he thought, he shouldn't have poured the first drink down so quickly. He tried to remember what his evenings were like before he started drinking, waiting each afternoon for five o'clock, salivating at 4:55 PM. There was a time when there weren't enough hours in the day, when each moment was filled with purpose. He knew that was true, that his life had once been like that; he just couldn't remember what it felt like.

“You are my comfort at the end of the day. Your soul is where I rest my weary head.”

“That's not very romantic, George. A pillow....”

“You are my goddess. I am immersed in your beauty.”

“O.K. I'll give you credit for the effort, but you're a little off your game. I suppose you had a difficult day.”

He didn't know what to do with this comment. Susan knew that he hadn't had a difficult day for years, unless you call

taking out the garbage, washing the car, trimming the lawn and anything else he could think of to fill the clock, difficult. Unless reading the same news stories on a dozen different websites, playing hours of Sudoku and solitaire is considered difficult.

“Yes, I was a little out of sorts today,” he agreed.

“Sometimes I miss the kids. Today I was cleaning out my office and I came across some old photos. Remember when this house was filled with noise?” he said.

“And trouble,” she said. “it’s a wonder it all worked out.”

“What do you mean?” he said, the beginnings of a frown forming in the corners of his mouth. “Our children were a delight.”

“For you, maybe. It was easy for you all right. Just show up at five o’clock with dinner on the table, everything in its place. It didn’t just happen by itself, you know,” she said.

“What are you saying, Susan? That you weren’t happy?” He wished he hadn’t compared her to a pillow. He’d tried to please her, to say something to bring out her girlish smile, to warm the evening.

“Happy? Everyone wants to be happy. We’ve all got to be happy all the time. If you’re not happy take a pill!”

“Did something happen today, Susan?”

“What are you saying? Why did something have to happen?”

“You don’t seem yourself is all. You seem..... unhappy.”

“There you go again with the happiness stuff. Nothing happened. What do you want for dinner?”

“Can I fix you an Old Fashioned, Susan? It might do you good.”

“We drink too much, George. When did that happen? We never used to drink.”

He placed two glasses on the counter and dropped a sugar cube into each one over which he splashed some bitters and seltzer. He used the pestle his son Frank had given him for his sixtieth birthday, something he had found in an antique shop in New England, an eighteenth century pharmacist’s pestle carved from rosewood, to grind the mixture into a syrup. The gift had signaled that his evening cocktail habit had been elevated to a daily ritual recognized by his family. It had been, for him, an uncomfortable moment. Next he added the jiggers of straight Rye whiskey, two cubes of ice and a cut of lemon rind. If there was one thing he knew how to do well, it was to make an Old Fashioned.

“Here my darling, see if that doesn’t put the rose back in your vision.”

“I might as well. What is going to become of us, George?”

He could sense her warming to him. In a few minutes he’d be in his place on the sofa watching the evening news and Susan would be busy in the kitchen. He was happy for the structure of the dinner hour. Each evening it released him from the burden of the pointless hours of his days. He could

settle into a pattern, the grinding of the sugar and bitters, the evening news, Susan clanking plates and pans in the kitchen before they sat at the table and discussed nothing much at all.

“I just don’t see the point of it,” she said with some anguish.

“I know,” George said. “All those years struggling to get here.” He chuckled softly. “And where are we? When we are young we work so hard trying to reach that carrot on the stick, the reward always just beyond our reach. At every step of the way I figured I came up short of the mark, never quite good enough. But now, looking back, I see that it was just a series of moments. Holding your hand, teaching the kids to ride a bike, the sound of voices in the house. The rest of it doesn’t much matter anymore, although at the time it consumed me.”

“Jennifer texted me today. Rick’s company is transferring him to Chicago. They’ve put their house on the market.”

“Chicago? God! Can you imagine? How is she taking it?”

“She sounded kind of excited actually.”

“Carrot-on-a-stick syndrome I’d say. That Rick’s a go-getter.”

“He’s been very successful, George. There’s nothing wrong with a little ambition.” The corners of Susan’s eyes tightened as she said it.

“So, you wish you were moving to Chicago?” George challenged her.

“Sounds more exciting than Jerome.”

He had never had a fancy career, one where he wore a coat and tie to work and rode the elevator to a corner office. But he had done all right, in fact he had been the top salesman for eighteen of the twenty-seven years he worked for the Gem State Farm & Implement Company. As a young man, armed with his father's rolodex from his days as president of the Farmer's Cooperative, he had been thought of as a prodigy. "That boy could sell you the shirt off your back," the farmers would say admiringly over coffee at the Stockyards Café. "He's going places, that one." So when Teemu and Jaani Nieminen, the richest dairy farmers in the state, asked him to be the manager of their new venture, Nieminen Brothers Farm & Tractor, he'd viewed it as a natural step in his climb to the top.

Taking the job required some adjustments. For one thing the store was in Jerome, so they had to sell their house in west Boise. Susan and the kids said goodbye to the friends they had accumulated over a lifetime. And Susan had to give up her job teaching first grade at Valley View Elementary School. But, he explained to her, this was more than just a job, it was the first step toward real wealth and security. The Nieminens had offered him ownership, one per cent for every year the store made a profit up to a ten per cent share, and so he had managed to elicit a fervor in her for his vision of their future. Jerome was just a pit stop on their road to success.

They were both beyond themselves with excitement the day of the grand opening. It seemed like every farmer in the Magic

Valley turned out for pickled herring, frankfurters and a test drive. “The sker’s ter limit,” Teemu Neiminen, filled with vodka and good cheer at the grand opening, had told him. “Naw yew yest gew aught tar und sell, lak yew dew saw gudt.” What Teemu and Jaani and George hadn’t figured was that no one in Idaho had ever heard of the Valmet Tractor Company, and, although Teemu and Jaani were generally well liked, there wasn’t a farmer in the Magic Valley who was inclined to buy a tractor or combine made in Finland.

“They’s nice enough folks, the Finns, but they’s a bunch a drunks, if’n you ask me. Put vodka on their corn flakes I’ll bet. Wouldn’t trust nothin’ they built. I’ll be stickin’ with old John Deere, thank you.”

Within a year the store was closed. Teemu and Jaani got a big tax write-off and George got his old job back at Gem State Farm & Implement.

“That was a long time ago, Susan,” George sighed. “Can’t we let it rest?”

“It’s just that sometimes I feel, I don’t know..... disappointed I guess. It’s like my life is over and all I can see is what I missed out on. I mean, you go along thinking that some day this or some day that and all of a sudden all of your somedays have been used up.”

“What are you saying Susan? You’re disappointed in your life? Because I wasn’t good enough?”

“Why does everything have to be about you, George? I’m just saying that it would be nice to have an adventure once in awhile. I mean, for God’s sake, George! Jerome? That’s it?”

The mantle clock George had given Susan for their thirtieth anniversary, a genuine Versailles china reproduction that had set him back four bills, chimed the half hour signaling George that it was O.K. to mix another drink.

“I don’t know about you, but I could use another drink,” he said, rising from the chair. He stood over her looking down across her forehead, her eyes and mouth obscured by the half glasses resting on her pug nose. He saw that her eyebrows were coarse and sculpted, almost masculine with age, and wondered how it was that he had never noticed them before.

“Well, you want another drink, Susan?”

She looked up at him, the white of her eye flashing between the coarse eyebrow and the tortoise shell frame. It was a look that had become a part of her repertoire since the retreat from Jerome. The move back, the entire year, had been hardest on her, working as a substitute for a year and a half before finding another position. Somehow in the transition she had lost the rhythm of her life, never quite put the pieces back together. George had buried himself in work, volunteering for every evening and weekend shift he could. He had managed rather quickly to refill their life with things, but, try as he might, he was never able to fill in the space of them, the comfort they had shared.

“It’s like you said, Susan. All of our somedays have been used up and this is what we have. So let’s make the most of it, O.K.?”

“Make the most of what, George? Trips to the grocery store? To the doctor? Watching TV and waiting for the clock to chime so we can have another drink? Waiting for ten o’clock to come so we can go to bed. Tell me, just what am I supposed to make the most of?”

George went into the kitchen and fixed another drink, but this time he made no pretense of bitters and seltzer; he covered the ice cubes with straight rye whiskey. His mind once again found its way back to that day in Jerome when Teemu had put his arm around him. He remembered how hopeful.... no, certain, he had been. It was difficult for him to connect his present self with the remembrance. Like looking at an old photo, there was the understanding that the person he was remembering was himself, but a stranger, too. He downed the drink in one long swallow and poured another, wondering now, all these years later, just what had happened to George Winstead.

Annoyed at the sound of the doorbell, he turned, stumbling slightly, then caught himself and leaned into the counter for a moment, gaining control over the whiskey.

“Who the hell could that be?” he called into the front room.

“I forgot to tell you. A young man is coming by about long term care insurance.”

“What insurance?,” he grumbled, pleased that his words weren’t slurred.

“For our old age.....”

George was about to raise some loud objection but, opening his mouth, he couldn’t think what to say. He and Susan had never talked about growing old, being old. They had always gone from one day to the next, living around the edges of each other. The future had failed them, so there didn’t seem to be much point in talking about it.

“I’ll take care of thisit’s just preliminary after all. Why don’t you just stay out here while I get rid of him.”

He could hear them in the living room. It surprised him how much the young man sounded like Rick. He had the same inflection of confidence and enthusiasm in his voice. He could almost see him through the wall, smiling at Susan, comfortable in her presence; someone who would be comfortable in any situation because the world was a wonderful place, after all. There wasn’t a trace of doubt in his voice, not a hint of recognition that it could all go wrong at any minute.

George made himself another drink. As an act of self-discipline, he ground the sugar into the bitters and seltzer, poured the two jiggers of rye over two ice cubes and carved a sliver of lemon. He was still in control of himself.

Needing to keep his mind off of Susan’s surly eye, he opened the refrigerator hoping for something to snack on.

Susan would be busy for awhile (salesmen aren't easy to get rid of) and he was getting hungry. Why not cook dinner, he thought. It would be a nice surprise for Susan. He might regain some comfort yet. He found hamburger and lettuce. Simple enough, he thought; nothing he couldn't handle. Fry up some patties and make a salad, throw a couple of spuds in the microwave and dinner would be ready by the time the insurance guy was out the door. He could set the kitchen table, they probably had papers and policies spread out in the dining room, maybe light some candles and open a bottle of wine. That'd soften her up.

It took some concentration to make the patties. He had to squint to keep his vision from blurring and his fingers felt kind of numb, but he managed to get them into the pan. He was careful chopping the lettuce and vegetables; a finger in the salad wouldn't do much to enhance the evening, he chuckled to himself. He poked the potatoes with a fork and put them in the microwave, then set the table and sat down.

She had looked so pretty in her shirt and scarf, even packed a picnic basket. Laughing he had told her that it was only a two hour drive to Jerome.

"I thought it would be nice to stop along the river, where the pioneers used to cross. There are some trees there and a park where the kids can play. It'll be fun, George."

And he'd laughed some more, thinking how lucky he was. After the worst of the desert, when the barren flats gave way to the breaks of the Snake River, where intermittent streams nourished green valleys, they pulled off the interstate and turned toward the grass and willows by the river. Susan put out a lunch of sandwiches and chips and they split a

Heinekens, “because we’re celebrating,” she’d said. When they had eaten and the kids ran off to the playground, Susan spread a blanket under a willow and he had laid down on his back with her in his arms. Looking up through the leaves at the flickering afternoon light, they had shared their dreams for the future. For a moment then, more than thirty years earlier on a lazy afternoon along the banks of the river, he had felt the fullness of himself. Then they had packed up the blanket and the basket and the kids and resumed their journey. A quiet anticipation had grown with every mile as their dreams of comfort lolled in the shade of the willows.

“George, Doug says the rate goes up on your birthday. We haven’t got much time.” Susan and the young man came through the kitchen door. “Just what are you doing in here, George?”

“Thought I’d surprise you with dinner, dear.”

“Surprise me with a mess, you mean. Look, Doug says we have to act fast if we don’t want the rates to go up.”

He even looked like Rick, smiling there in the doorway, shoulders back, a pressed button-down and pleated slacks with the belt loose around a taught midsection. “Have the sale in the bag, do you?” George thought to himself.

“Now look, Doug, you’re not talking to some innocent housewife here. That’s the oldest trick in the book.” George heard the words come out hard and deliberate. Susan frowned at him, but the young man, undeterred, stepped forward with his hand out.

“I’m Doug Jones. Your wife was saying that you have a birthday coming up. Your actuarials change on your birthday, so naturally your premium would go up.”

George considered the logic of Doug’s statement as he looked down at Doug’s extended hand. Then he felt the words spit out of his mouth.

“Just who do you think you’re talking to? I’m a pro, Dougie Boy. I was salesman of the year before you were a twinkle in your father’s eye. What you’re doing right now is lying, plain and simple.”

“Now wait a minute, don’t shoot the messenger. I don’t set the rates, that’s done at corporate. I don’t know what you did, but I”

“What I did! What I did! That’s all I ever hear anymore, what I did. I’ll be damned if I’m going to take it from you, too!”

George took a step forward. His chin was jugged close to Doug’s face and that was when he saw it in Doug’s eyes, the recognition that things had jumped the tracks and he had no idea how or why.

“I tell you what, Dougie, why don’t you take your policy and shove it up your ass.”

“George, what’s gotten into you. For God’s sake, George. I’m sorry, Doug. My husband isn’t feeling well, he isn’t himself this evening. Perhaps we could do this some other time.”

He was aware of her, faint on the periphery of his consciousness. She was like a mirage now, a shadow in the

looking glass. He could barely hear her. Her faint voice was far in the distance, but he knew that he had wanted to be what she had wanted him to be.

Doug was in full retreat and, like a dog in a fight, George took after him. He shoved Doug on the shoulder. "Go on, get the fuck out of my house!" he shouted, slobber dripping from the corner of his mouth.

He was a half a pace into the front room when the smoke alarm went off. Its piercing screech provoked Susan into further panic. Grabbing George's arm from behind she jumped in front of him, attempting to thwart his aggression, but he pushed right through her. She fell into Doug, who was hurrying toward the door. His legs cut from under him, he fell awkwardly to the floor, hitting his head on the coffee table on the way down. After convulsing a few times he lay motionless on their Karastan rug, tucked neatly between the sofa and loveseat.

George sat dazed at the dining room table. Susan, who herself had fallen, got up and stared first at Doug, then at George. Her eyes glassed over, she paused to get her bearings. There was a sudden hush in the room, like closing the door on the last guest after a raucous party. Even the wailing of the smoke alarm didn't disrupt the calm that she felt. She wanted to speak, but the only words that came were, "I think you burned your dinner, George." And she went to the kitchen to turn off the stove and open a window.

“Go ahead, honey, Just step up there and press the button. I’m right here, O.K.?”

Her eyes were wide, looking at him to make sure that he was there, that it was O.K. to ring the bell.

“When they answer, just say ‘would you like to buy some Girl Scout cookies?’ That’s all you have to do.”

An elderly woman opened the door. Seeing the girl she leaned down, resting both hands on her knees.

“My, aren’t you a pretty little girl. I’m so happy you came to my house tonight because we just finished dinner but I don’t have anything for desert.” She smiled at the girl, then at the father.

The girl shifted from one foot to another, then looked up at her father.

“Would you like to buy some ...,” the father whispered.

“Would you like to buy some Girl Scout cookies,” the girl mumbled, still looking at her father.

“Why, I’d love to. I’m so happy you asked,” the kindly woman responded.

They made the sale, and turning, walked down the steps and onto the sidewalk toward the next house.

“Daddy, I did it!” she exclaimed as she squeezed his hand. “I really did it!”

And for a moment the burden of his failures was lifted.

“Yes you did, honey,” he said. “I’m so proud of you.”

“George..... George! Why don’t you come into the kitchen?”

Susan leaned over him.

“What about him? Is he dead?”

“He’s gone, George. Didn’t you see him get up? I swear, George Winstead, sometimes I don’t know about you.”

George looked up at her blankly.

“It’s like it never happened. Did you ever think about that, George? That nothing ever really happens, that it’s all just a dream. What have you been doing out here, anyway?”

Sometimes when you stare into space like that, I wonder where you are. Where is George, I ask myself.”

“I can’t even remember the color of her eyes.”

“Whose eyes, George? Who have you been thinking about?”

“I can’t remember what it was like being with her, not really, and now she is moving to Chicago...”

She put her hand on his shoulder, rested it gently there.

“Hazel,” She said. “Her eyes are hazel.”