

A Fracas. At the Farkuses

by

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Come Back, Sit Down: Twelve and One Stories

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A Fracas. At the Farkuses

Normally, I wouldn't have been so elated to see the house's front door. But I was. I groped around the darkness, fitting key into lock. The door fell open. I stepped in, closing it behind me. A modicum of safety from insanity. My back was against the door, my eyes having just shut momentarily, before:

"Tom? Is that you?"

It was Doris. From upstairs.

"Yeah, it's me," I responded.

"What time is it?" She called down.

I had no idea. "4:30," I called up. That seemed fair enough.

"Goodness," was the muted response.

I mounted the carpeted stairs. Slowly. My legs ached, maybe from hunger, maybe from fatigue. I walked down the hallway towards our room, meanly-lit, probably from the bedside lamp. I couldn't remember. The door was three-quarters the way open. I pushed it further and stepped in.

Doris lay in bed, in the same position I had left her earlier that night. The intricate traction machine suspended her cocooned limbs like a futuristic puppeteer. All four limbs were cast in graffitied plaster. Doris had many friends. In kinder moments, I thought of her as my fair marionette.

"What happened to you?" She asked, surprisingly lucid, all things considered.

I thought better of just coming-out and saying it. There are always countless ways of saying the same thing. Short and to the point. Long and drawn out. Or something in between. And with Doris, there could be no certainty the question and answer session would ever come to an end. I craved sleep. It would have been something else entirely if Doris were nicely asleep.

"There's been a ... ah ... fracas ...," I relented.

An open door is an open door.

"At the Farkuses?" I could tell she wanted to sit-up, to lurch forward. Her voice with a distinct hunger at its core.

"Yes. Fracas. At the Farkuses." I thought how absurd, or even trivial, those few words all together sounded.

"Really?"

“Really.”

I may have rubbed an eye. I may have leaned my head back and sighed. Those things of habit seldom imprint themselves.

“Well?” Doris. Patience. Virtue. Words never uttered in the same sentence. Not by me, nor anyone I could imagine.

I studied my words, thought through my options. I would do this for myself, an act of preemptive selflessness to the self, resignation the better part of valor, coming out with it all to conserve on heartache.

Unto the breach.

“... And?”

“Well ... I show-up for our Scrabble night ... they of course sent their love. We said another prayer for you ...”

“Tom!”

“Fine. Fine. It was a nice prayer, though. Just wanted you to know. Anyway, we’re playing Scrabble. And it’s the usual. They don’t know what the heck their talking about when it comes to vocabulary. The dictionary is out, getting thumbed to pieces. And Mary had prepared her famous dip to go with the finger foods. Bob had some new wine he’d wanted us ...”

A grunt, as the machine’s tentacles jangled over the weight of her impatience. She was trying to adjust herself.

“So we’re eating, drinking, playing ...”

“Jesus-God, Tom!”

“... and Mary, out of absolutely nowhere, she wasn’t even tipsy, we’d had, I don’t know, a glass and a half each so far, stands and yells, like some crazed, homeless bag lady, ‘Bob *fucked* my cousin,’ pointing at Bob. ‘You cousin-fucker, you!’”

Doris sucked wind through her teeth, the bed moving as if sideways, as she tried with the conviction of an ancient god to move the immovable, herself, momentarily forgetting her condition. She arrested herself.

“Which one?”

“Which one what?”

“Which cousin?”

“I don’t know. How’m I supposed to know? Marissa. Melina. Something ...”

“Oh ... well, she’s not overly attractive ...”

“What the ...”

“Well, I’m just ...”

I turned to walk-out of the room. I wasn’t feeling up to the task of the storyteller, despite my fleeting conviction. Doris can do that to you. That and she doesn’t readily lend herself to the role of the story-listener. I was back in the hallway, thinking maybe a snack before bed, when:

“You’d better get back in here, Mister.”

Every neuron synapse in my brain was telling me to keep on walking, to go to the kitchen, to go to sleep, to tell her some other time, something. Except for one. That lone neuron holdout forced me to turn, to retrace the half-dozen or so steps already taken. I was back to where I had started, starring at my immovable feast.

“It’s Marina, by the way.”

I can’t remember if I massaged by temples at that very moment, but I am now, thinking about it.

“So ...” But I had forgotten where I’d left off.

“So Bob and Marina ...”

“Right, right ... so at this point Mary’s standing, and she’s doing this finger-wagging-jutting motion at Bob, pretty much screaming: ‘You’re a motherfucking cousin-fucker, you cocksucker!’ And Bob is sitting there, with his hand quite literally suspended in the tile bag, maybe even with food still wedged in his cheeks. I wouldn’t know. I just wanted to get the heck out of there.”

“I can imagine ...

I think I smiled at her sympathy ...

“Well, come on. Get on with it.”

... However fleeting that has always been.

“At this ... that point, Bob did what anyone would do, if you can remember. He denied it ...”

“Now ...”

“ ... saying, ‘you’re crazy, woman. For all I know, you’ve been fucking my cousin,’ at which point Mary says, indignantly I may add, ‘yeah, right, I’ve been fucking Bernie.’ At which Bob may have leapt out of his chair, his voice surely did, saying something like, ‘See! Ha! You just said you’ve been fucking Bernie. You’re the cousin-fucker, cousin-fucker.’ This was probably the wrong approach to take, believe me ...”

“Oh, I’m believing ...”

“... because at this point Mary is digging through the finger food platter, looking for one of those little sausages to throw at Bob. Which she did. And I’m just sitting there ...”

“Holy Goodness!”

“No shit!”

She looked at me, and I at her.

“Yes ... so, and this part is fuzzy, because I don’t remember looking away, as much as I wanted to look away, but Bob’s voice was what refocused my attentions on the matters at hand: ‘Now you put that fucking thing away before there’s real hell to pay.’ I looked from Bob to Mary, in that slow-motion way, you know when time seems to be standing still, as if ...”

“Tom, I’m about a moment away from calling Mary myself ...”

“... and Mary’s holding this gun. I don’t know anything about guns, but there is this black monster in her hands. And she’s not trembling in the slightest. Not a movement, like she’s done this a million times before. And Bob is quiet now, just sitting there, like me, maybe out of deference to the size of that thing, or maybe because I guess he realized that she now had some sort of upper hand. Me? I wasn’t even breathing. So Mary she draws this deep, fine breath, and she’s calm now, well, calmer, and she says something like: ‘Bob, what have I been to you all these years?’ It was rhetorical, that much was obvious, but Bob goes to answer something, and Mary thrusts that black conversation killer at him, and he shuts up right-quick-like. ‘What is it that you’re always telling me, Bob? What is that thing about the Lord and His Good ways, and us having to work our way back into His graces after such long time in our wilderness.’ And Bob says something not very bright like: ‘I meant that mostly in an illustrative way,’ but Mary was having none of that in her moment, saying, ‘Shut the fuck up, you cousin-fucker...’”

“Where’d she get that gun ... and those words ...”

“... so Bob shut the fuck up. Again. And Mary is deep, deep in her moment here, saying: ‘Who is it that gets treated this way, Bob? I don’t think you’d treat a dog you didn’t like so well this way. Would you?’ I thought maybe she’d have a tear in her eye, but then I thought maybe she’d thought about this so much all reactions had been drained away. And only actions remained. She wasn’t done: ‘You don’t treat your stupid friends this way, do you? Not even Tom over there.’ She waved the gun my way. I think I just smiled, maybe nodded. I can’t remember. ‘Did you think you’d be saved with good words and occasional good thoughts, Bob? I’m pretty sure that’s not the way it works. I’m pretty sure it starts with treating those people who

love with you with the respect and dignity they deserve. And fairly, too. But that ought to go without saying, shouldn't it, Bob? Don't you think the good Lord would expect if nothing at all, at least He could expect that from you. But you managed to reduce it down to memorizing words and refrains and telling everyone how holy you always feel. Maybe there's no goodness, and this is your way of showing me, right Tom?' She looked me again, but not with the gun this time, and this time I know I nodded."

Doris was blinking furiously now, manically, like she had something in her eyes.

"You okay?"

"Yes, I ..."

"I think she was trying to get to the heart of some matter, Mary was, to an answer of some sort. But I don't think she knew how to ask it. 'My cousin, Bob? More of a sister than my own sister. Of all the people you could've ... and probably did, you had to pick on her? What did I do to deserve this? Where does all this come from? Are things so bad? Are you so ...? Do you want me to start listing out all those things you want me to do upstairs, in here, on this table, in that chair Tom is sitting in ...' I think I moved uneasily in that chair. All I could think about was getting out of there. Anyway, Bob was shaking his head, probably not even listening to her. 'And I don't even want to do it most of the times. Sometimes, but not all the times ... What else is there? What other things are lurking around, just waiting for me to discover? I don't want to know. I don't want to know ...' She paused, I don't know, maybe to think things through. Then: 'I want them back to the way they were before. What happened to the before?'"

I stopped to make sure I'd gotten everything so far.

"And then silence. It was a nice silence. Just the three of us. I think I'll remember that silence for a while."

Doris's blinking had slowed. I watched her watching me.

"Then Bob says: 'There's a lot of overreaction now. We need to all calm down. I don't know, maybe you're in the midst of some sort of demon possession. We need to trust that the Lord will guide our ...' At that point, Mary's gun goes off, just a huge, deafening blast. You haven't heard something like that. I fell off the chair. I looked up, but Bob was still sitting in that chair of his, dazed, I'll give you that. Mary, she's still holding that gun, its barrel smoking like the nostril of a stuffed-up dragon, Bob looking at the hole in the wall behind him, probably a bit shell-shocked then, turning, saying: 'Ha! Missed. The Lord protects those He ...' And I'll be *god damned* if that gun didn't go off again, louder, more angry somehow, and Bob and that chair

went flying back, blood everywhere, oh, what a mess, what a mess, and I'm on the floor, crawling and crawling to the couch, because I couldn't stand, and I climbed onto that couch like a small child, and Mary was still standing there, and Bob was still looking a dead mess on the floor, and I'm thinking I need to get out of there."

I paused for a breath.

Doris's blinking episode had subsided. She stared at me with her mouth open, kind of how Bob's mouth was wide open, in shock, but Doris was still alive.

"Bob? Dead?"

"Bob is dead. Just dead."

Doris may have been cast white.

There was very little more for me to say.

"Do you want me to continue?"

Doris didn't respond.

"I'm on the couch, sitting now, and Mary is slowly regaining whatever it was that was just lost. Maybe thirty seconds had passed. Maybe a minute. I don't know. And she steps around the table, over Bob, and on-over towards the couch where I'm sitting. You know, that two-seater against the window ..."

Doris nodded.

"You'd better call the police now,' she says in a very calm way. I don't move an inch. Just sitting there. Trying to be as small as possible. 'Go on,' she says. Make that call. I'm done now.' But she's still holding that smoking thing, but in her left hand now. So that was a bit of a relief. I stand and walk to the telephone. And from behind me, Mary says: 'What do they say? Cap? Pop-a-cap? Tell them I also popped a cap into that husband-fucking bitch, too. Two, actually. I didn't miss the first time. Have them go there first, I'm not going anywhere. It's a twofer. That's right.' At this point, she's sitting on that two-seater, leafing through a magazine."

Doris stared through me with that universal look of speechless disbelief. I didn't care. I was done. I was beyond snack-tired at that point. I imagined a warm bed and sleep. It might have been around five by that point. I turned, again, to walk out of the room.

And from behind me: "What you do?"

I turned back. "What do you mean, 'what you do?'"

"What did you do then?"

"I dialed that phone. I called the police. What'd you think I was gonna do?"

“Okay.”

I turned and walked into the hallway, walking towards the guest bedroom. I could hear the clanging of metal from the traction machine. “Tom?” It was not quite a whisper.

I was losing patience. I tromped back to the room’s doorway.

“You’re not mad again, are you? We’re still okay, right?”

“Yeah, we’re still okay.”

“At least I had the courtesy to fuck someone from work. Someone you didn’t know.”

Doris’s strengths never lay in word selection. It’s what made her such a lousy Scrabble partner. I took a moment to find my calm place, just as I had promised myself. Then: “I wouldn’t call that a courtesy ... but yes, better than a cousin.”

“Okay, just checking. Good night.”

“Good night.”

And with that, sleep could finally be had.

And Doris could have her nightmares, and I my fantasies of what-ifs.

The End