

Destruction

Fred used to come up to the house every six months or so to tune my piano. I hardly play it anymore, and I knew it didn't need his attention that often, but he insisted on it and charged me very little. Besides, he was a comfortable guest, more like a friend and happily unlike a few of my relatives I'm obliged to endure on occasion.

Fred didn't make much money at his trade, but I know he loved making a piano sing as much as a plastic surgeon enjoyed making a woman beautiful. He was in the prime of life, a big guy in his forties, and when he arrived and set up his little tuning forks and tiny rubber mutes and tuning hammer it always appeared odd to me that a giant of a man enjoyed using such tiny tools. I'd expect a fellow his size to come through the front door with a fence post over his shoulder and a sledge hammer swinging on his hip.

Although Fred often stayed for 2 or 3 hours, he would only tweak a string or two. Then he'd take the piano for a ride through a little Chopin and afterward slide into some old stuff by Gil Evans. After that, we'd just sit and talk and drink coffee. On this last morning when I saw him, I offered my condolences regarding the death of his father I had read about in the newspaper.

I often tried my stories out on him, and he often told me some of his. Neither of us ever asked the other if the tale just heard was literally true. His last story certainly was. I could hear it in his voice. He had started to play a few notes of Gershwin after the tuning and given up because of an injured thumb. I knew he would tell me about it, and I wondered if the adhesive patch and gauze on his forehead were part of the story.

"When I got out of bed this morning," he began, "I had a firm resolve to get the damned motor home out of the driveway. I called a friend who lives up on the state highway and he said I could put it on his lawn and it would sell in a week.

"I could hear Pop griping, 'What took you so long? I've been dead 3 months! Why pay the insurance on it? I sure can't drive it now.' His logic was always sound. Mine always questionable. Fathers are always in charge,

right? No matter what. Even when they're wrong. Even when they're dead."

Fred's last remark raised the level of seriousness a bit more than I usually expected from him.

"Even when he did something stupid, like sell his car and buy a motor home from his dead brother's daughter, telling me, 'Of course it doesn't get good gas mileage, but I don't go anywhere but camping anyway.' He sold his Buick so could he could pay the money to his niece, who I'm sure used it to put more coke up her nose. And Pop had never gone camping in my memory, although it was something he might have planned to do. After he bought 'The Monster' as I called it, he took it out once, dragging me along on the worst weekend of my life. I couldn't get away from him in a thirteen foot camper. Not like at home where I hid out in the basement while the old man watched old TV shows like *Gunsmoke* and *Dragnet*.

"Dad was a sad case, waiting out his days until the Grim Reaper appeared on the scene. 'Hopefully with quick slice to the neck,' he often said. Mom was dead, his brothers were dead, his friends were dead. Dad was dead, really, or at least walking with the dead.

"The motor home was out of commission most of the time. He couldn't get it to start. So he often borrowed my car to go to the liquor store and to the Office for the Aging where he flirted with the lady workers.

"So this morning I was thinking, if I could somehow get those rusted license plates off the damned bumpers, I'd bring them in to the snarly folks at the Motor Vehicle bureau. Then you have to take the slip of paper to those thieving bastards at the insurance company to try to retrieve some of the payment he made only a few months ago. There should be almost half of the annual premium coming back. That's if Pop didn't pull one of his asinine tricks and sign the check, "The Lone Ranger" and then throw out the overdue notices.

"Wouldn't use a microwave either. I bought one anyway, and some days when I came home I noticed he had used it to cook his vegetables. He just wanted to be difficult.

"The problem with getting the license plates off was I couldn't find the correct tools to remove them. Pop would use my tools and never put them back. I can't imagine anyone but myself putting up with him.

"You know, I never took a chance and asked a girl to come home and live with me, to marry me. I'd date one here and there for a while, but then I realized it was useless. I couldn't afford to live elsewhere on my

earnings, and a woman would never live with me for very long with my father in the house.”

“Pop didn’t just get strange in his old age, I think he was always strange. He didn’t want an answering machine in the house, said it was too impersonal. But since no one ever called him, not even his brother, I don’t know why he cared about being personable. When I insisted I needed the machine for my business, because I couldn’t be home all the time. he grudgingly said OK.

Fred was quiet for a moment. He moved his mutes and hammer around aimlessly on the little table he’d set up next to the piano.

“Did you get the plates off the camper?” I finally said to break the silence, a bad habit of mine.

“Do you know what it’s like to be chained to a house, a life and father who hates you?” said Fred.

“Fred, he was an old man”

“Not when I was a kid and he took my bike to the dump because I forgot to put it away in the garage one night. Not when he called up the girl I asked to my senior prom ... my only date in high school ... and called her a whore so she’d break the date because he said we didn’t have \$40 for me to take her.”

This time I remained silent.

“Yeah,” said Fred, “I got the plates off” ... and here he switched to a deep voice of lecturing authority ... ‘with the right tool for the right job.’ But not with the wrenches. I looked all over the workshop for them. Then I noticed the crow bar next to the driveway door. I took the damned thing, went outside and jammed it in behind the plates and ripped them right off the bumper.”

“I guess that works,” I said.

“Then I took that effing crowbar and I broke every goddamned window in the camper!”

“Really?”

“Yes, Really! And I pried the doors off and I punctured the tires, and then I went inside the camper and broke everything I could with that crowbar.

“When I swung down on the steering wheel, the crowbar bounced back at me and almost tore a hole in my forehead. You know head wounds ... blood all over the place.

“But I kept going and I broke the toilet and the little kitchen table and then I was ripping the curtains off with

my bare hands, because the blood had made the crowbar so slippery that when I swung it at the stove it went flying into the TV set and glass exploded all over the place.

“Geez, Fred,” I said

“I killed him, Dave,” he said. “That’s when I realized what I was doing. I killed my father. The blood was everywhere.”

“Fred,” I said, “you may have felt like it, but - ”

“No,” he interrupted, “I have to tell someone the truth. I almost did kill the bastard a month before he had the heart attack and died. He was abusive to a customer who called a little late one night, and we got into a big argument. He said some things he shouldn’t have said to me. I ran out of the house and into the garage. And I stared at that crowbar, and I can stand here and tell you I was this close to taking it back in the house and murdering the man, my father.

Fred began to gather up his tools and fold up the little table. I didn’t know what to say, so I didn’t say anything.

“Fred,” I said after a while, “sometimes we never know what we’re capable of, but we never know for sure that we would actually commit such an act.”

He was quiet, just shook his head as if in agreement while he buttoned up the little kit of tools. Then he said, “How can a man make his son so angry that he wants to kill him?”

I had no answer for that.

Fred doesn’t tune pianos anymore. He gave up the business, sold the house and moved to Florida, where he works for a small insurance agency. The piano can use the rest, I chuckle to myself, but I miss him sometimes when the granddaughters show up and start banging on the keys, and I know Fred would cringe at the abuse.

I got a card from him last June, a Father’s Day card. He wrote on it, “I saw this card and wanted to buy it. A man should have someone to send a Father’s Day card to. I knew you would understand.”

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