

Dignity

by

Michael Cowgill

Living alone in the house is still new for Albert. Thirty-seven years is a long time to be married, and now he has little to show for it. His wife Fran left two months ago, and most nights he wanders the house, touching things, remembering. On his way upstairs, he walks past the answering machine. The message indicator shows a red four, and he knows his daughter Maggie left them all, knows them by heart. She asks calmly at first for him to answer, but then her voice changes, rises a pitch, pleads for him to pick up, asks where he could be. He reaches to push play but changes his mind, not wanting to put himself through it tonight.

Instead, he walks upstairs to his music room. He opens his bassoon case, puts the instrument together, thinking he'll play. He even places sheet music on the stand he built with his son-in-law, but he doesn't play. He feels the glassy wood, fingers the keys. He wants to breathe life into it, but how can you breathe life into something when you don't have any life left in you?

The day is the only time Albert can sleep, nodding off while reading or watching television, but even then the sleep feels uneasy, feverish. He usually wakes up more exhausted than before he slept, covered in a film of sweat. Today he forces himself to

garden, something they used to do together. There's not much to do – some watering. He picks a few figs and some pea pods. When he's ready for a break, he takes the pickings in, pours himself some iced tea, washes the peas in a strainer, puts them in a bowl, and returns to the back yard.

He sets the glass on a small table, sits down in a lawn chair, the bowl of peas in his lap. Some he eats in two bites, but he snaps others in half and prods the peas out one by one, eating the pods afterwards. Fran never liked it when he did this. His neighbor Stefanie – she's only twenty-five, short, blond – walks around the corner of the house. He starts to get up, but she waves it off.

"Don't be so old fashioned, Albert."

"I'm old," he says.

"Pshaw," she says, mocking him. She unfolds another chair and sits down beside him.

"Not working today?" he asks.

"It's a holiday."

"Really?"

"Arbor Day," she says. "My boss is very environmental."

Arthur nods without really listening.

"You feeling OK?" she asks.

"Trouble sleeping," he says.

"I guess that's normal."

"For what?"

He snaps a pod, hands her half. She nibbles at it, bouncing a little in the chair.

"How's David?" he asks.

David is her boyfriend.

"David," she says, "is no more."

Albert sits up. "He's dead?"

"No, silly," she says. "Kicked out. Splitsville."

She looks around as if worried David might be listening, lowers her voice to a stage whisper.

"He put one of my tennis socks in the garbage disposal last night," she says.

"Can you believe that? I found him holding the pink ball from it and laughing.

Couldn't stop."

"In the garbage disposal?"

"Can you believe that? And he stops laughing finally and he's all 'I just wanted to see what would happen.' Fuck him."

"Stefanie."

"Sorry," she says. "Youthful exuberance."

She reaches over and grabs a pea pod from the bowl.

So strange, this girl. Only ten years younger than his daughter Maggie but so different, distant from her and him.

"Why are you wasting your time over here?" he asks.

"I was hoping to get a cigar."

Distant indeed.

"He put your sock in the garbage disposal?"

"Yes."

"And laughed?"

"Laughed and laughed."

"I never liked him much," Albert says.

"I hated him," she says and laughs. He doesn't see the humor. "You really didn't like him?"

"No," he says, "but then I never cared for my son-in-law much, and it turns out he's a decent guy."

"David isn't."

"He seems too – too energetic."

"He's a spaz."

"Spastic?"

"Hyper."

"Oh."

"So, how are you?" she asks again.

"Fine," he says. "I – I should get back to work."

"You want some help?"

"No." Of course he does. "I'll be fine."

"Well, I'll be home all day," she says. "If you need anything, just give a shout."

"I'll do that, Stefanie."

She seems to float away on an energy he's never known or understood.

Albert looks at the bassoon again. Maybe in the day he'll be able to play. He sets the sheet music, Beethoven's 5th, the second movement, on the music stand. They made the stand the first days after Fran left, and he almost stops, thinking of this. After a moment of tightness in his throat, a swell of sadness that fills his sinuses, he takes the remote control from the top of the stereo. He sits down, positions the bassoon, pushes play on the remote, and the CD begins, regal, but quiet at first. Albert follows the music, plays his part, keeps the tempo.

He knows a few musicians who could play these parts from memory without a metronome, backing music, or sheet music. He knows composers who hear music from some secret place inside themselves and can put it on paper without ever touching a piano. Beethoven was deaf after all. Albert is not one of these people. Nothing rises inside him when he plays. It is all practice, math.

He is a precise player, kept in community and university orchestras for his sense of time, his impeccable accuracy, but not for creating an emotional moment in a performance. He's never played a solo – never wanted to. Now, though, everything feels off balance. He can hear that he's behind the beat but can't catch up. He stops. Starts the CD again, and for the first few minutes he's fine, coming in at exactly the right moments. During a long passage in which he doesn't play, Albert glances up, sees a picture of himself, Fran, and Maggie from thirty years ago. They are all so happy, at the beach. He misses his cue, hears it, but misses it. He looks back at the music but can't find his place, flipping the pages, almost dropping the bassoon. He stops the CD again, decides the music isn't going anywhere.

The phone rings. He checks his watch. It's 5:30, when Maggie usually calls. He walks to the top of the stairs. He can see the answering machine on a table by the front door. It clicks on. His voice shakes on the tape, a message saying *You've reached Albert Masters, I can't come to the phone right now . . .* It beeps, and Maggie's voice comes out of it.

"Daddy?" She says, a grown woman calling him Daddy. "Daddy, are you there?"

She pauses, inhales loudly, the way she does when she's about to cry. Albert runs down the stairs, but her "I love you" is over, the phone hung up before he can pick

up the receiver. He sits in the chair by the phone, knowing he should call back, but he doesn't.

Albert wants to take a trip. To the Rockies maybe, someplace different from the flat suburban world he's used to. Maggie lives in this same world six hundred miles away. There's no escape in visiting her, and her eyes would only remind him of Fran's. Maggie has his demeanor thankfully and something all her own, a way to get past the little things and focus all her energy on the big. The little things are the only things keeping Albert alive right now.

The television shows Seattle. That's far away, but it's for the young, and Stefanie told him it's not all it's cracked up to be, especially if you're miserable. Maybe a cruise. One of those singles cruises for senior citizens. He just needs someplace else to be. If he were younger, his night vision better, he might take a long drive, find a hotel somewhere in the hills. He should call Maggie, but he goes outside instead. Rock music bounces over from Stefanie's house, but all the lights are off. Albert lights a cigar, not one of his Cubans, his one indulgence courtesy an old colleague at the university, but one rolled by a Cuban immigrant. A window slides open next door. Stefanie sticks her head out.

"Is that a cigar I smell, " she says, "or is there a dead cat under your house?"

Albert strolls over to the window. He takes another cigar out of his sweater pocket and hands it to her.

"Thanks, Pops," she says. "Come on in."

Albert wanders over to the front door, lets himself in. Immediately he feels uncomfortable being in someone else's home, readjusting his feet to different carpet, his nose to the smells of candles and perfume, the oddly antique furniture, wondering where to sit. The music stops, and Stefanie arrives, tying her hair back. She sits on the couch, pulling her legs under her. Albert sits in a maroon armchair.

"You're a doll, Al," Stefanie says. "Not every guy gives up a nice, hand-rolled cigar for a lady."

She lights hers on a candle on the end table.

"Politeness used to count for something," Albert mumbles.

"Still does," she says. "Have you heard from Maggie?"

"No, not in a week or two," he says. "I should call her, I suppose."

"Why don't you?"

He takes a long puff on his cigar, rolls the smoke around, thinks some brandy would be nice, lets it out.

"How was the rest of your holiday?"

A thin smile slips across her face and fades. She's too smart to fall for his easy trick, he thinks, but she's letting it pass.

"David came by," she says. "For his things. He wanted me to help. I told him, pardon my French, to fuck off. So he started crying, and what am I supposed to do, Albert? There's a man crying in my living room, a pitiful man. I mean, what would you do?"

He wonders if this is how Fran talks about him. He didn't cry in front of her.

"I thought about fucking him," she says.

That word again. She seems to delight in it like a child who's just learned a new word and can't stop repeating it.

"Did you?" he asks, embarrassed, not wanting to know the answer.

"No," she says. "I let him cry and sent him home."

"David is a very emotional young man."

"I can't deal with emotional young men."

"They are difficult," he says with a smile.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"You smiled. What?"

Albert puffs his cigar and looks at the ceiling, the same pattern in the plaster as in his house.

"When I was courting Fran," he says, leaning forward, "she chose me over another man, Billy Mumphrey. She said he was too emotional for her. She didn't feel secure with him. I, on the other hand, was..."

"What happened to Billy?"

"Who knows?" he says. "He might have died in Vietnam."

"Hmm."

"Not really that funny, is it?"

"No."

They break into laughter.

When they've settled, Albert gets up.

"Leaving?"

"I should."

"You sure?"

"I better."

She leads him to the door, touches his shoulder as he leaves. He turns to wave, and her eyes have widened, her mouth in a half smile as if a great sadness has overcome her. He starts to say something but strolls off into the dusk instead.

Albert decides to go to the mall, thinking being around people might make him happy. He usually avoids this place and its stale air, palm trees, escalators, and glass.

The old people in town come here to exercise, rarely buying anything. He does not want to be a part of that.

He spends some time in the tobacco store, but his supply of cigars is better than anything they have. The record store has little to offer in the way of classical music. So he buys a hot pretzel and a cup of coffee and watches the people go by. Most of them are in groups – couples young and old, families, flocks of giggling, chattering twelve-year-olds. He wonders if there are any other people alone here just as a young man with wild brown hair walks past, his hands shoved in his pockets. Albert sees something in the young man – his eyes cast at the floor, the way he moves around people – that looks like what he feels.

He gets up and wanders around some more. He thinks he sees David working in the knife store but doesn't go in to verify his suspicion. He wonders where Stefanie is right now, if she's hurting. She's not the type to admit if she is, but her face, her eyes reveal everything going on inside her. He thinks he might buy her some flowers but decides it would probably seem strange. On his way out through one of the department stores, he sees the young man again. Their eyes meet, and they nod to each other before they pass.

It's close to two, and he hasn't slept. The cigar smell clings to him, even after a shower, with a hint of Stefanie's perfume. And she's on his mind – that look of sadness

as he left. And more. He imagines telling her everything he has ever felt, every memory, what having your heart broken really feels like. He gets out of bed and looks out the window at her house. The lights are off, and the streetlight goes out as if to tell him to look away. He thinks about how her bottom lip curves out in a little U when she talks and believes it is an inviting gesture. Not for romance, but for comfort.

He takes off his pajamas and dresses again in his tan pants, white shirt, gray button-up sweater. He pads down the stairs, passes the answering machine – now up to six messages – and through the kitchen to the sliding glass door. He crosses the backyard and cuts between their houses to the street, then on to her front door. He rings the doorbell, and after a minute hears a muffled voice ask who it is.

"Albert."

"Albert?" She opens the door, wearing a ratty T-shirt that says The Fatted Pigs on it and a pair of shorts.

"Hey," she says, drawing out the syllable.

"I couldn't sleep."

"Uh."

"I needed to talk to someone," he says quickly. "I – didn't wake you, did I?"

"No, no," she says with a yawn. "What about?"

"I don't know."

She hesitates, pulls her hair back with one hand. "Come on."

"Are you sure?"

"Sure," she says. "Are you sure?"

"I don't know," he says, studying her bare feet. "I – I – I – I just came here for some reason."

"Come in."

He follows her in.

"Have a seat," she says, "I'll make some coffee."

She walks into the kitchen. He sits down in the same chair as before.

"What's on your mind?" she calls.

"I . . . nothing."

"Must be something."

"I – "

"I can't hear you."

He walks into the kitchen. Stefanie is pouring the water in the coffee maker. He walks around the all white kitchen, pulling open drawers and cabinets. He finds a can opener and begins playing with it, spinning the crank.

"Maybe you don't need any coffee," she says.

"I'm fine," he says.

"You sure?"

"Yes, really."

The water bubbles in the coffeemaker.

"I bought some new socks tonight," she says.

"Really."

"No fuzzy balls this time. Save myself some trouble."

"Sure."

Coffee begins to stream into the pot.

"David called, but I wouldn't answer."

"You shouldn't."

"He needs a purpose."

"Yes, he does," Albert says. "Didn't he want to be an actor?"

"Yeah."

"He told me once he was scared," Albert says. "He wanted to know how I'd survived as a musician."

"I think he's going to sell insurance."

"You know his problem?" he says. "He can't commit himself to anything."

"I think you're right."

The coffee finishes, and she pours two cups. Albert takes his black. They return to the living room.

"So, you're OK," she asks.

"Yes."

"Just up at two in the morning."

"Yes."

"OK."

They lapse into silence, the only sounds their sipping, the ticking of a clock, Albert's foot tapping. He glances at her, looks away. This kind of silence can lead to violent, unfiltered confession. He needs to fill the space with some small talk before she tells him something he doesn't want to know. She inhales, and he thinks it's coming, but the words spring from him instead.

"Her voice reminds me of too much," he says.

"Whose?"

"Maggie's. Maggie's voice reminds me of a family – of Fran. She – " his hand is shaking, "she still calls me 'Daddy' for God's sake."

The cup falls out of his hand and spills on the carpet. Stefanie jumps up.

"I'll get it," she says.

She disappears around the corner, returns with a towel. Albert stands up and moves to the bookshelves, pacing around as if he could find some comfort or solution in the room's antique furniture and modern books.

"I'm so sorry," he says.

She's still on her knees scrubbing. "It's fine."

"It's so wrong."

"It's just coffee."

"I don't want to talk to my daughter because my wife stopped loving me. It hurts to talk to my only child. How can Fran take that from me? How can she take my life?"

Stefanie carries the cup and towel into the kitchen. Albert can hear the water running. He follows.

"It's just not fair," he says, unable to stop the flow of words. "It's not what's meant to happen. Do you understand?"

She shuts off the water.

"She's my daughter, and I can't talk to her, and that house is so empty, and I think – I think about what I want to say to Fran, what I could have said, and this ache..."

Stefanie returns to the living room, Albert close behind.

"It won't go away," he says. "I sleep, and wake up and realize it's still here and it will be tomorrow and the next day and the day after that, and what can I do? Here – here I am – "

He leans his back against the bookcase.

"Here I am. A man. A human being. I don't deserve this. We don't deserve loneliness, do we? God. God didn't put us here to spend our nights wide awake in empty houses, afraid to sleep, afraid to be awake, to talk to our children, did He?"

He feels dizzy, slumps to the floor and notices Stefanie for the first time, frozen in her chair.

"Did He?"

The silence returns, but Albert can hear music in his head, music he's never heard, low, smooth. Stefanie rises, he thinks in time to the song in his head, moves, glides across the room, sits beside him. She leans her head on his shoulder, pulls her body close to his, slips her hands around his, closes her eyes.

"No," she says in the empty spaces between phrases, "He didn't."