

Michael Skirpan

A Matter of Interpretation

“I am bursting out of this dress.” I caught sight of myself in the rearview mirror as we turned into the cul-de-sac where Howard lived.

“Boo, you know I think you look good. You lookin’ to the wrong person if all you wanna to hear’s how bad everything is.” Brenton was being sweet and telling me fibs to keep me happy. He looked calm sliding on his grey, felt jacket.

“Hun, I hope you don’t hate me after today.” I don’t think Brenton knew how to hate, but I had to warn him. I had to make sure he knew I was to blame if anything went wrong. Where he came from people didn’t tend to lie to you in a pleasant vocabulary with a smile on their face. People had real concerns.

The windshield of my little red Pontiac could not even hold the image of the three-story house as we pulled up. Hard-pack snow covered the grass, but the driveway was immaculately clear. Parking on a slight slant in front of the two-car garage, there was nowhere to go but up. Two stone stairways ascended the front and side of the house. Three stories of off-gray paneling and rocks looked down at us as I squeezed out of the car. I straightened up, waiting for Brenton. A short glimpse of the rest of the neighborhood made me feel in need of a shower.

“Damn, you weren’t playin’ when you said your step-dad had money – this place is sharp.” We climbed the stairs to find my brother, Fred, emerging from the house with my mother’s black lab on a leash and a smirk on his face. I wanted him to see me as happy so I perked up a smile and gleefully said, “Fred! Merry Christmas, I’m excited to hear how college has been going.” We each took an uncertain, awkward step forward and hugged.

“Merry Christmas. I take it you’re Brenton?” he turned his slim neck and nodded his head toward Brenton. Fred was wearing a black sweat suit and looked casual as ever. After a year and a half of college, he hadn’t gained a pound; in fact, he looked better than when he left. I guess genetic chance preferred him to me. Fred

used his charm to introduce himself to Brenton, making an immediate good impression by bringing up the fact that he played keyboard and wanted to ‘jam’ sometime. Brenton played bass and had recently begun playing in a new jazz band, *The Bass Truth*. I wanted to tell my family this when I introduced him. I wanted them to be impressed, but I didn’t want to force Brenton into a conversation he hadn’t asked for.

“When you guys go in there, keep mom and Howard busy for a few minutes,” Fred quickly cut the conversation off, tugged the dog out the door and rustled his hand around in the pocket of his sweatpants. Past the open exterior door in through a glass interior door, I saw my mom rushing down the two-tier staircase. Entering the house, I was force-fed the taste of holiday-scented Yankee Candles that must have been burning all morning.

“Well hel-loo, honey! Merry Christmas. How are you?” She put out her arms wide so I could fit in for a hug. She felt warm and soft like a pastry fresh out of the oven. Over her shoulder, I peeked around the banister and down the hallway where Cassie – Howard’s daughter – passed through the dining room. She was athletically built with a large forehead, deep-set eyes, and a tendency to stare at the ground. Receiving highest honors as a junior at Palisade Preparatory School meant she was destined for a top-notch college. According to my mother, her mom is obsessive about grades and success, and treats her like a five-year-old. I could never decide if I envied or pitied her.

“Oooh, I missed you so much Haley. You don’t come home enough. Don’t tell me you were scared to introduce us to this handsome young fellow.” The two of them hugged and went through the motions of a proper introduction.

“I wasn’t scared. Honestly, I have been so busy with work that I barely remember to look at my phone,” I pointed out.

“Don’t even start me with work. It’s so sad. Some of these parents don’t show any regard for their newborns.” My mom began venting to us a traumatic story of a baby born suffering from heroine withdrawal that died in the NICU a few days ago. Her face was beginning to show the sadness she felt over the years. As

she took our coats and guided us toward the kitchen, my throat felt tight. I was worried she may blurt out something harsh about ‘addicts,’ or ‘projects,’ or ‘blacks.’

“I’m always so thankful we all have our health,” she said.

“I feel that too,” said Brenton.

Passing through the dining room, I noticed an older man half-asleep in a wheel chair with some cheese and crackers in front of him. Before I could think twice about whom he may be, Howard’s booming voice traversed through the entranceway between the kitchen and dining room.

“Have the special guests finally arrived?! Haley, you look great. I love the dress – red is definitely your color.”

“Merry Christmas How..,” I made the mistake of trying to fit in a few words while Howard was still in high gear.

“And this must be the mystery man. I hear you’re a car buff like me. We’re going to have to hit the garage once I’m done here in the kitchen. I got a few toys you might want to play with. We also just got an HD Projector and a massage chair in the den so get ready to relax and watch some movies later tonight. You guys are staying, right?”

“I don’t think we’ve made any specific plans.” Brenton spoke too soon.

“It’s going to depend, I might have to help out at work tomorrow.” I inserted an excuse in case we needed a quick out later. Howard showed off his “twenty-four pound Tom” turkey that was in the oven, the two kinds of mashed potatoes—cheese and garlic—and a few new appliances he picked up since last time I visited. He seemed to be catering the conversation toward Brenton, which made me nervous. Howard intimidated me. Not only does the man have an MD, but he is also the vice president of a software company. A red-blooded American—ruddy cheeks, broad shoulders, and the fill of a well-fed man—who is too smart to feel comfortable around, but too amiable to feel alienated. He married my mother about three years ago, but I’ve never been told why his first marriage ended. It’s hard to imagine - the guy always seems so damn happy.

“Dad, I think gram-pa needs some help out here. He knocked his food off his tray and I’m worried he’s going to fall out of his wheelchair trying to clean it up,” Cassie said, peeking her head into the kitchen.

“He must’ve gotten overly excited, seeing his only grand-daughter for the first time in months.”

“No Dad, he was fidgeting and knocked the plate off,” she walked off blithely.

“Oh, fidgeting with excitement I bet,” Howard smiled and shook his head as if there was a joke we were supposed to be laughing at, and followed his daughter out of the kitchen.

I was told about Howard’s father, Harvey, but had only seen pictures of him when he was about twenty years younger. He owned his own real-estate business that he sold soon after his wife died. When my mom met Howard, Harvey was coasting as a retiree in Marco Island, Florida. A year or two ago they moved him into a personal care home because he started forgetting how to get back to his condo. The decision came after he called Howard from a grocery store pay phone saying that he couldn’t find his wife, which was making him angry since the only reason they even went to the store was because she had forgotten to get his favorite tea, again.

“It’s so sad to see Howard’s father this way. He used to be such an independent man,” my mom whispered so as not to embarrass Howard or Harvey in the next room.

“It’s how it goes though,” Brenton added after a moment of silence.

Hors d’oeuvres were put out and I was being cautious not to eat too many. My mom had turned on the holiday music and was looking for her winter-themed pie dishes. She is a sucker for tradition. At this point in our lives my brother and I had functionary Christmas tasks to carry out each year: we had to buy each other one new ornament for the tree, my brother always ripped the first drumstick off the turkey, and I put together pies with my mom right before dinner. Even last year, when I was adamant about my diet, she played the guilt card: “Oh alright, I don’t

mind doing them alone.” The addition of that last word signaled her disappointment so I made her happy and baked pies.

“Where’s Fred? He’s been missing for awhile,” I asked while cutting another tiny slice of Camembert.

“He’s enjoying the new entertainment set up. He’s been watching that one TV show he’s obsessed with about the awkward people who work at a paper company,” Howard acted as if he didn’t know the show.

“*The Office*, c’mon Dad, I used to watch that show all the time,” Cassie said. She was completely stolid, as usual when addressing Howard, and had been silently sipping eggnog while watching me eat.

“Well it’s a tough job keeping up with you, Cass. Your old dad isn’t moving at quite the speed you are,” he winked at Brenton. Cassie’s upper lip curled slightly, her eyebrows rose, and her eyes fixated on the tablecloth – a method of casting judgment on her father. The four of us were sitting at the center of the of the ten-person table with a red platter filled with cheeses, nuts, crackers, hummus, and some pita chips centered directly under the chandelier. Cassie and Howard were continuing to go back and forth – Cassie prodding, Howard trying to be witty. Harvey was lumped in his wheelchair at the corner of the table near the doorway to the kitchen. His mouth appeared to be pronouncing something like a child sounding out a word while reading. My thoughts were occupied with strategizing a moment alone with Brenton. I wanted to check and see if he was enjoying himself. I placed my hand on his thigh and saw him turn a smile. The second his neck began to swivel toward me, Howard butted in, “Want to take a stroll with me down to the garage, Brenton? I got a seventy-six Mustang Cobra some of the guys from work help me rebuild. You might be interested in a peek under the hood.”

“For sure,” said Brenton.

“Alright, Cass, you’re in charge of watching your grandfather, he’s a handful (*Another wink, this time at me*). Us boys will be back before dinner is ready. Haley, if you want more of the cheese, there is a ton in the fridge.” And there it was, a note of honesty. I needed to get away from that table. I could feel everyone’s eyes moving between my mouth and my stomach.

“Where *is* all the cheese?!” Harvey inquired, lacking control of his volume.

“Dad, it’s all right over here. Cassie will bring some over,” Howard was already standing behind Brenton, waiting to take him.

“No, I know my cheese. It’s not there,” Harvey’s neck had a sagging bit of skin that folded in on itself as he turned to make eye contact with his son. He was dressed well-to-do—beige Casmir sweater and some khakis—but everything looked to be the wrong size. He must have been losing weight.

“Dad, all the cheese is right there on the tray. Don’t worry, you’ll get it the way you want,” Howard explained.

“Honey, your Dad means the Dubliner cheese that’s here in the fridge. Remember, it’s his favorite,” my mother’s voice echoed from the kitchen.

“Well then Dad, I guess you know your cheese better than I thought. Maybe next year we’ll provide you with the milk, rennet, and a mesophilic starter and you can convert the casein yourself,” Howard joked. Everyone was silent. Howard’s shtick fell flat. I felt bad. I realized that was truly the first thing that came to his mind meaning that he was trying harder to be casual than I imagined. I guess you can’t go to an Ivy League school and walk away Joe Shmoe.

Brenton was now standing. One of his eyebrows was crunching his eye into a squint and he was nodding at Howard with a grimace on his face. I wondered what kind of thoughts he was having. Second-guessing the alone time with Howard? Howard’s face was getting red as he looked at his father who was giving him a cock-eyed glare. I couldn’t tell if he was trying to communicate something or struggling to remember what had happened. Brenton broke the silence, “So we doin’ this?” Howard got right back into stride and started talking about his car as they walked off. I excused myself from sitting with Cassie and Harvey to go and find my brother.

Opposite the kitchen across the dining room was a study where Howard and my mom each had their own glossy desk and iMac caddy corner to one another. Above my mom’s was a photo of her and Howard framed under a wooden block that looked like it was from Hallmark. Etched in it was a delusional little saying, “*One day, right in the middle of life, love walked through the doors.*” I felt like I was in the

way of a shot for a Renée Zellweger movie. I reminded myself that this room was a place of serenity for my mother. To the right of Howard's desk was a door to the entertainment room. It was open and I could see the back of my brother's head sticking up above the horseshoe-shaped leather couch. As soon as my foot stepped down into the room my mom's dog, Duchess, popped her head over the couch.

"I know exactly what he's talking about. I sprout mung beans on a damp paper towel in my desk drawer. Very nutritious, but they smell like death." My brother was cracking up at Creed, the creepy-old-man character in *The Office*.

"Hiding away today, eh?" I asked, coming up from behind him. He paused the Netflix stream and turned around. He was still smiling and his eyes made it obvious he had been watching TV all afternoon.

"Have you watched this show before?" he asked in return.

"I've seen a few. It's pretty funny, but I never took the time to really get into it."

"Well you should, this show is genius." I was skeptical of this remark. Being somewhat of a theater and film buff, I couldn't see myself judging a network sitcom as *genius*.

"Really? What's it have going for it besides that whole British irony gimmick? It kind of seemed like part of the new wave of reality-TV-age sitcoms to me. Not really my thing."

"That's just it. Through all the Jim-and-Dwight gags and Michael's uncalled-for comments, it is critiquing our 'post-modern,'" he gestured finger-quotes and rolled his eyes, "life. I mean, think about it, why in the hell do we accept the camera being there?" He slapped his hand down on the dog that was lying on her side next to Fred.

"It tropes reality TV. People are used to it."

"True, but we've had *The Gong Show* and *The Dating Game* since the 60's or 70's. We know we like to laugh at each other, but why do we like watching everything at another step removed? We aren't mere voyeurs anymore. We accept that they know we're watching."

“But that’s part of a television trend. *Real World, Road Rules, Jersey Shore*, it’s all about people being idiots and we eat it up. Why not mock it?”

“Those shows give us a lens to see our own lives as one big dramatic irony. *The Office* points at the irony of watching life from that perspective. Instead of being vulnerable or insecure in a moment where we fuck up, we hold it in and turn it into an ‘f-my-life’ moment or something to laugh at instead of something to learn from. Once you watch *The Office* enough to see the characters develop, you realize they are developing *because we’re watching*, because of the added awareness. People do the same thing with Facebook. It’s not a moment until someone else knows about it. We are validated and void of judgment as long as someone comments or likes what we do.”

“I *think* I know what you’re saying, but I kind of lost you there Fred.”

“What did I say?”

“Ummm, all that stuff about irony and developing characters through the viewers or something. You’re talking to a dumb theater major here. I learned to act out those things, not think about them.”

“Yeah, I don’t know, I’m still kind of high and sort of rambling. But seriously, this show is great.”

“Wait, what? You are high? I didn’t even know you smoked weed?”

“I’ve been smoking since the summer before I left for college. I am surprised you didn’t assume I smoked when I went off to a far-left spot like Swarthmore.”

I felt flush. I wanted to hug him. For once, I wasn’t the only one who did something that this family would disapprove of. I now recognized his disheveled hair, unshaved neck-beard, and misty eyes.

“I used to smoke all the time when I was at Oberlin. I figured you were one of those binge drinkers trying to hook up with girls every weekend.”

“Well, I was kind of an automaton in high school, but, for whatever reason, smoking kind of woke me up.”

“You should come over to my apartment sometime and smoke with Brenton. I can’t smoke anymore because of the job, but he smokes all the time.” The dog popped off the couch and ran into the study.

“Alright, let’s relax on that, mom’s coming,” Fred warned. I was expecting her to come in and begin a lecture about all of the drugged out kids and messed up babies she sees at the hospital. That or worry we were depressed or had psychoses or something. People didn’t smoke weed, or didn’t admit to it, where we grew up.

“Aww, there are my sweethearts. Glad to see the two of you got a chance to spend some time together.”

“Yeah, we were just catching up a little,” said Fred.

“Did you tell her you declared a major at school?”

“No, we were talking about post-modernism and shit like that.”

“Do you have to use words like that?” She paused her eyes on Fred. “Anyway, I wouldn’t have understood a word of it. All of you are so smart. Well, I’m going to tear Haley here away because its time for her favorite part of the evening.” She tilted her head and gave me a fawning look. Suddenly, I remembered that Brenton was still down in the garage with Howard. I considered texting him to provide leeway for him to cut off The Howard Show, but I didn’t want to give off the impression I was obsessive.

The pies were in the oven and I was in the guest-bedroom waiting for Brenton to bring our travel bag in from the car. Uncertain of how the night would go, we brought a change of clothes and some toiletries. I should have known this was unnecessary seeing as the connected bathroom had enough of a surplus that four people could have been put up for a month. My mom had also put a bunch of my old clothes in the drawers and closet.

Lying back on the down comforter, I thought about Brenton, wondering how he could possibly still be putting up with me. I guess it was his patience. The day I met him he had brought his eight-year-old stepsister to the center because his dad forgot to send in her Medicaid renewal when he switched jobs. She got strep throat and ended up with an enormous hospital bill that no one was going to pay. It was clear he had just been arguing because he arrived at my desk fuming. Recognizing that he was doing a favor for this little girl and dealing with a frustrating family, I made him some coffee and got him a snack from our break room. Within that first

day I knew a lot about him: he had grown up in the projects in Queens and didn't join a gang, from seven to twelve his father was in prison with a distribution charge, his parents divorced when he was fourteen, his dad re-married an addict named Deborah when he was sixteen, and, so that his mom could quit her third job, he became financially independent at seventeen. It had taken me all of ten minutes working at the family services center in Brooklyn to conclude that everything I thought of as traumatic in my life was pathetic. That was my twelfth day of work, and I was lucky to learn that some people developed grace out of tragedy. What made me even luckier was that he asked me to show up at his jazz show that night.

"So we staying here tonight or you just changin'?" Brenton had come into the room without me noticing.

"Well, what do you think? I don't want you to feel uncomfortable."

"I'm not. Everybody's real cool, you gotta nice family. Howard talks out his ass sometimes, but we all do."

"You were in the garage with him for an awful long time."

"Yeah he showed me his muscle and we ended up taking his Acura out. The TL is a nice ride, he offered, and I was interested so I figured whatever."

"And he didn't annoy you?"

"Babe, I appreciate you worrying. You got a real good heart, but for real, you gotta let it go sometimes. I handle myself. Howard was bitchin' about some shit at work that seemed petty so I told him."

"Really? What'd he say?"

"Said people at work were freakin' about a law suit because the software misdiagnosed some rich dude. I said, 'what did you expect when you got computers giving out prescriptions?' I mean, what's it matter anyway, his company makes millions, don't it?"

"How'd he take it?"

"I think he assumed that I didn't understand, but it wasn't worth harpin' on it, you know?"

"You're amazing."

“I don’t know about all that. What I do know is I’m hungry as hell.” Brenton sat down on the bed near my knees. The white comforter compressed around him until his legs disappeared. I rubbed my shin on his back. I wanted to tell him I was proud of him, but I knew that made no sense – I wasn’t exactly sure why I felt that way. The Christmas dinner at his mom’s house two nights before was so simple: the three of us, a nice-sized ham, and one gift each. She got me a cute, and useful, hair band for when I wear my hair in a bun. Things weren’t the same at my house. There were expectations. And he was just being himself without a care in the world. It gave me something to strive for.

“Dinner’s ready,” rang up the stairs in my mom’s mawkish tone.

“Ohhhhhh, yee-ah,” Brenton smiled and gave me a soft, backhanded slap on my hip.

The table was replete with goodies: two baskets of dinner rolls, two small bowls of cranberries, two large bowls of mashed potatoes, a platter of steamed vegetables, a plate of candied yams with marshmallows, a gravy boat, a bowl of stuffing, and, in the middle of it all, a giant, carved turkey. When Brenton and I emerged from the hallway, everyone was there except Fred. Howard was at the head of the table with Harvey parked at his left and my mother on his right, her hand resting on his between their napkins. I sat down next to my mom and across from Cassie with Brenton to the right of me. I didn’t remember the serving dishes being so grandiose last year. Each one looked as though it had been recently polished. The placement of each item seemed to have a mathematical relationship to the others. I felt like I had to sit still so as not to disturb the order. No one said a word awaiting the arrival of my brother. My mom pursed her lips and looked at Howard.

“He probably thought there was no hurry,” said Howard, placating my mom’s anxious expression. She got up, walked across the room, leaned into the study, and shouted one more time, “C’mon Fred, everyone’s at the table.”

“Oh my bad,” Fred was still in the entertainment room contemplating his relationship to the TV. He hurried into the dining room, exiting the study with his

body postured for a jog. “Sorry I figured, ‘dinner’s ready’ meant like ten minutes until people would actually be ready.”

My mom was biting her lower lip slightly and Cassie looked like she wanted to chuckle. Now it was Fred’s turn, nothing was going to happen until he removed the first drumstick and started serving himself. At Brenton’s mom’s place we said grace since she was spiritual, but we stopped doing that in our house after our parents divorced. My father had some religious inclinations, but my mother thought the church was too judgmental.

“Alright big guy, that drumstick is calling your name out. Have at it,” Howard said, bowing his head and extending his arm.

“Ripping apart turkeys is fun and all, but I don’t always have to be the one to start Christmas dinner,” Fred said inconsiderately. Neither of us do a whole lot for my mom. I was a bit peeved he couldn’t make peace with his role this one day of the year. Hell, I licked a spatula for her only an hour or so before when we were mixing the pie fillings. The least he could do is pluck off the damn drumstick.

“Ain’t nobody forcing you. I’m good to go,” Brenton cut in and started spooning out a helping of garlic mashed potatoes. My stomach turned once and I was too scared to look at my mom. All I wanted was for everyone to like Brenton, and this stupid fucking tradition was going to ruin everything.

“What in the hell is everyone waiting for?” Harvey waved his arms at the table.

“Here Dad, tell me what you want and I’ll get it for you,” Howard offered.

“I don’t need nothing. Pass the things around, I’ll get some.” Harvey then reached into his mouth and picked something out of his molars. I was trying to make eye contact with my brother. A panicked glare should suggest that this needed to be the last stunt he was going to pull tonight. I finally glanced over at my mom who, surprisingly, seemed happy. She was already forking off a few slices of turkey from the platter. Besides Harvey wanting Howard out of his hair, everyone seemed happy.

“Well Freddy, why don’t you tell Howard and Haley about your new major. What’s it called? Interpretative something?” My mom pleasantly transitioned into some normal dinner conversation.

“Interpretation theory,” Fred corrected. “Yeah, it should be interesting. It’s sort of like cultural studies if any of you know about that area.”

“So basically we won’t be able to understand anything your saying in a few years?” kidded Howard.

“Like two days ago, I was looking at the majors on MIT’s website, and I didn’t see anything like that. What is it?” Cassie asked.

“It’s kind of a study of mind, kind of a study of human practice. We basically look at how history has shaped the way people interact with media and things like that. We want to explore the question, ‘why does a culture have certain common beliefs?’”

“I mean that sounds like it could be cool, but what kind of research or jobs can you do with that?” Cassie questioned further.

“It’s a bit different than science, Cass,” Howard answered. “We are more interested in how genes may dispose someone towards cancer, whereas he wants to know why we think genes are important, or something like that,”

“Sure, I’d be interested in that,” Fred said shrugging his shoulders.

“I’m just so proud he’s getting good grades,” my mom chimed in.

“Sounds cool to me. I think about that sort of stuff all the time like why people complain about not having free time, but take jobs that give them like two weeks of the year to themselves,” Brenton boldly entered into the conversation.

“Well, it’s not always like that, some of us have jobs that we feel matter,” Howard said looking to my mother. “Elaine, for instance, keeps newborns alive, which isn’t the type of job that makes you feel unnecessary.”

“I mean, I guess I don’t know about being an adult, but I am definitely not looking forward to the day where I don’t have summer vacation,” Cassie added.

“I miss work. I ran a company for awhile,” Harvey said. “Working after the war was different, everybody was happy to have jobs. I was *in* the service. And we had to take care...uh huh.”

“Take care of what Dad?” Howard asked.

“Uhhh, mmmhhmmm, mmmm,” Harvey was struggling and began bobbing in his seat and squeezing his fork. “Napkins.” Cassie giggled. It was sad and I wanted to laugh, but I knew it was inappropriate. He clearly had named the first thing in his sight, which was the napkin tucked into his sweater.

“You took care of napkins?” Cassie checked.

“Yup,” Howard said confidently. Everyone else was trying to look at their plate. Except Howard, he had a hanging smile on his face that slowly closed into a pinch. As strong willed as Howard was, there was nothing he could do about what was happening to his father.

“So when are you kids going over to your dad’s?” Mom asked, changing the subject. I looked at Fred since he was the one that was suppose to confirm whether he could do the upcoming Saturday.

“It looks like we’ll go over there on Saturday,” he answered.

“Brenton has a show on Saturday night so the plan was to do dinner and then all go listen to the new band,” I said. I was hopeful for Saturday. My dad can be a good time, especially with a few drinks in him. Fred and him always carried a tension when they were together, but music should be a good distraction to that. I looked down around at the table and noticed that I was the first one to finish my plate. I didn’t want others to notice that, but I also didn’t know how to get seconds without everyone seeing.

“You guys should come out some night. The new band is pretty hot, and we’re booked almost every Saturday through February.” I was astonished. He was asking for more. It was starting to seem like everything was going to work out.

“That sounds wonderful, Brenton. We’ll have to take a look at our calendar, but I’m sure we can make it to one,” my mom replied. The dog started barking from the foyer.

“Looks like Duchie needs to go out, I’ll take her,” my mom said. Fred looked like he was about to voluntarily get up until my mom said something. Duchess and Fred were always together when he was home. We got the dog right around the time of the divorce and Fred had taken an immediate liking to her.

"Is everybody excited for gifts?" Howard opened his eyes wide and passed his smile around the table.

"We doin' it big here, huh?" Brenton asked.

"Gotta *do it big*, it's Christmas time," Howard said.

"Yeah, I guess it ain't always like that for me, you know?" Brenton responded, candidly.

"Well that's why you got us," Howard gleefully continued.

All of a sudden the door slammed and my mom came back in with the dog. I thought Duchess must have really had to go because normally it takes more than a minute to take her out. My mom took heavy strides into the dining room with her eyes fixed on Fred.

"Fred, look me in the eyes," she commanded.

"What? Why?" Fred looked disturbed.

"Frederick Bernard Shaw, look me in the eyes," she insisted. "Jesus Christ Fred, are you stoned?" She held up the last third of a soggy joint. My heart started beating rapidly. I couldn't hold my silverware right. Was I supposed to pay attention or act like nothing was happening?

"That isn't mine," Fred claimed.

"Oh yeah, well explain to me why your best friend took me right to it and started sniffing it the moment we went outside." Her lips were quivering and her eyebrows furrowed.

"I'm not going to lie to you about this, it's stupid. Yeah, that's mine, I smoked like four hours ago or something," he confessed.

"Oh Freddy," she lamented.

"Kids in my school smoke weed, I saw Tommy Resatar smoking at the fields the other day," Cassie added an empty comment. I wish I knew how to explain that this was nothing. It was going to ruin everything for no good reason.

"Fred, you realize that this is serious?" Howard asked with a solemn tone.

"No it isn't, why the hell does this even matter? Two minutes ago you were complimenting me on my good grades," Fred said.

“Oh my gosh! Fred, what is happening here?!” My mom’s voice was squeaking as she began to get louder.

“Stop yellin’, I’m need to...” Harvey looked agitated by the escalated noise.

“Dad, we need to deal with this so give it a minute. Fred, you realize that this can have adverse affects on your short-term memory, has links to depression, and even psychoses. Especially for someone your age whose brain is still maturing.” It had to happen, they had to pull out the conservative medical perspective.

“How do I know it’s going to stop here? Are you experimenting with other things at school? What kind of people are you hanging out with?” My mom was wrestling with a list of unnecessary questions that were speeding through her head. They can never let people be who they are. Everything comes packaged with an expectation.

“Fred, we’re going to talk to Dr. Tamarack tomorrow,” my mom demanded. She was now pacing like a child having a tantrum.

“Enough, this is crazy, I hope you realize that I smoked weed for years, and none of you knew!” I had no idea what I was saying, but I know I shouted something. A loaded silence ensued.

“Would you hold on?” Harvey broke the silence, squeezing the tablecloth.

“You both think you live picture perfect lives, but, you know what, you’re both divorced and your kids are pretty fucking good despite that. You act like this is the end of the world, but you have no idea, this is nothing. I’m so tired of having to act around you guys. No wonder I went into theater. It’s all a big show!” My brother was staring at me waiting for me to acknowledge his disbelief, but no one else could bear to look my way.

“Hummphhh!” Harvey’s entire face was clamped now.

“Dad, are you alright?” Howard suddenly got worried. His face turned beet red and his hands looked unsteady.

“Well there it goes,” Harvey relaxed.

“You know, I wasn’t gonna say anything, but this needs to go down a notch. In my neighborhood, a little weed is nothin’. Absolutely nothin’. My mom felt blessed everyday because I wasn’t getting into sellin’ crack. You know how lucky

you are? Look at this house, look at these kids. It's all good, and you're all worked up about one little joint. Get some perspective. Most of my friends who stuck with only weed are fine. It's all the alcoholics and addicts that are locked up or doin' crazy shit," Brenton kept an eased demeanor, but had no idea how hard it was to erase fifty-some years of comfort.

I felt tears coming to my eyes. I looked at my mom. She already had them coming down her face. She hid her eyes and turned into the hallway and up the stairs. Howard was stunned. He sat there looking like he needed drained of something. Shifting in his chair, he placed his elbows on the table.

"You know, you're right, but you know what else, you're dead wrong if you think the people sitting around you haven't had real problems. I may have a nice house and car, but that doesn't mean I don't sympathize with people in privation. We all are born into things we didn't ask for, and it's a shame some are much worse off than others. That doesn't give you the right to judge this family for our worries and concerns." Howard talked smooth, but his face continued to be filled with blood.

"How were we supposed to know about your life anyway? We knew next to nothing about you before today," his voice cracked a bit and he overtly passed a glance at me.

"Fuckin' hell! Dad, did you take a shit?" Howard broke.

"Well, what do you want?" Harvey returned.

"For god sakes, let's get you changed," he stood up, and, with one, last twitchy glare at Brenton, he took the handles of his father's wheelchair and headed toward the nearest bathroom. I was still standing, on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Brenton was finishing what was on his plate, shaking his head. I probably should have just told him he could leave. I looked to Fred. He was covering his mouth. I'm pretty sure he was laughing. He never gave two shits about what happened to this family. I sat back down and took a deep breath.

"If we're all done with dinner, any of you want to watch an episode of *The Office*?"