

Revision: A Scene

Version 1

I'd spent the last few days largely in avoiding my father. It was a pattern we'd developed over the years for our mutual comfort. The flaw in Judith's system had always been that, disappear as I might for eight to ten months of the year in the direction of various institutions of learning, I inevitably reappeared at Christmas, Easter, and summer vacations. But it was a large house for two people, and what with my growing old enough to have outside interests, and my father's health and inclinations taking him deeper and deeper into seclusion, we could with a little forethought and ingenuity go whole stretches without catching sight of each other.

About halfway through each vacation, however, some vestigial paternal sentiment would awaken, and he would appear at my door to invite me to supper. On these occasions we would sit in the muffled dignity of an old Boston restaurant, while my father interrogated me with the restrained patronage of a headmaster bringing out a timid pupil at the school dinner. Eventually we would fall into an awkward silence, seeking help in turn from the dusty drapes, the log burning in the fireplace, the topographical charts of Suffolk County. At these times, as I watched him helplessly play with his fork, reach for his wineglass, put it down without sipping, gaze dimly about him, I would begin to feel an odd painful emotion for the old man, so daunted by the presence of his son, and I wanted nothing more than to get him back to the safe confines of his study where he could be alone.

Version 2

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direction of various institutions of learning, I inevitably reappeared at Christmas, Easter, and summer vacations. But it was a large house for two people, and what with my growing old enough to have outside interests and my father's health and inclinations taking him deeper and deeper into seclusion, we could with a little forethought and ingenuity go long stretches without catching sight of each other.

A couple of days after Christmas, though, I was surprised by a knock on my door.

"Shall we go to dinner tonight?" said my father when I opened the door.

I suppose I looked startled, but of course I said yes, and an hour or so later we were sitting in the muffled dignity of an old Boston restaurant. My father ordered a bottle of wine. When the waiter had taken our orders and the overlarge menus, we looked at each other for a moment in horrible suspense that we'd have nothing to say to each other.

"How is school?" my father wanted to know.

And I told him. And we went on like that through dinner, my father interrogating me with the restrained patronage of a headmaster bringing out a timid pupil at the school dinner, and I trying to spin out my threadbare responses as long as I could. Dessert had not yet arrived, though, before silence fell, and panic seized me. Years later I can think of things I want to ask him, things I wish I knew. But then my mind was blank, and I scoured it in vain for something to say. He played with his fork, reached for his wineglass, put it down without sipping, gazed dimly about him. Dessert was placed before us and, "Ah," he said, as if this was what we'd been waiting for all evening. I asked the waiter for coffee, relieved to hear my own voice. My father made a commonplace remark about youth and its tolerance for caffeine, and I made an inarticulate response. And after that, silence.

In the taxi home it occurred to me that we could talk about Judith or Alan, and this kept us going till we arrived at our door. We stood in the hallway a moment, and I wondered if I should suggest port or something. But the moment passed and my father started up the stairs.

“Thanks for dinner,” I said.

“You’re quite welcome,” he said without turning, and I felt I’d disappointed him.

Version 3

I got home late that night. I’d managed to snag a school friend for dinner and a movie, and it was close to midnight when I got home, feeling hungry. I was standing in the light of the open refrigerator when I heard the scuff of a slipper behind me. My father had come into the kitchen, looking as if he’d come on purpose to find me.

I was clutching a Tupperware container of pasta and felt a guilty impulse to hide it, though there was no reason to.

“Midnight snack?” he said.

“Do you want something?”

He shook his head.

Now I was self-conscious and, not wanting to linger in the kitchen, I started eating the pasta cold.

“You should heat it.”

“I’m fine.”

“You should sit.”

I sat. He remained standing and I wondered why he’d come. He looked, as always, vaguely embarrassed by my presence. Finally he said, “I opened a bottle of Saint Emilion tonight. Would you like some?”

“Sure.” His eyebrows lifted slightly. “Yes, please,” I emended.

He set the bottle and two glasses on the table and sat down. As he poured the wine, he asked, “What did you do today?”

“Just wandered around. Downtown. Bought some books.” This seemed pretty threadbare so I added, “I ran into Lint. Remember Lint? My old roommate?”

It seemed unlikely that he would, but he nodded. “Oh, yes. Lint. He was...” He searched for a word. “Droll.”

Like many of my father’s pronouncements this seemed a

little sibylline, a trap laid for the unwary interpreter.

“And how is Lint?” he asked.

“He’s fine. The same. He’s selling coffee.”

“Ah, then he’s found an occupation.” And if this was meant to be a joke, he didn’t mark it with a smile.

We fell silent. Neither of us had turned on a light, and the light from the stove cast everything in a chilly chiaroscuro, turning the wine black, fading the plaid of my father’s bathrobe into shades of navy and grey, leaching the blue from his eyes. His gaze was focused on his wineglass and I watched his face, papery pale and tired. I thought I should say something. I should ask him about his day, but the mysteries of my father’s day were shrouded in awe. What did he do with himself when he was shut up in his study or his room? I remembered he’d gone out for a walk that morning, as he usually did, and that there was an antiquary shop he liked near Harvard Square. I thought I could ask him about that, though I wasn’t sure what to ask. Last summer we’d gone there together and he’d bought some kind of bird print by a nineteenth-century naturalist whose name I could almost remember, and I had just about determined to ask if he’d been able to find any more of the series when his chair scraped back and he stood. He hovered a moment, swirling his wineglass, then shuffled out.

“Goodnight,” he said, and I felt as if I’d failed a test.