

Doris Fly

ART IS MY FATHER-IN-LAW, ONCE REMOVED. (I've had another one come and go. Been around, you see.) My ex and I didn't trouble Art with word of our divorce. He'll go to his grave in blessed ignorance. I think. I'm still not sure that's the right way to approach it, but it's what we've settled on. It will probably save him some unnecessary, late-in-life pain and anguish. At least that's the theory. I know it will save me some tough explaining.

Art is a model resident at the Whispering Pines Villa. (Everyone calls it the "Home".) He is quiet and respectful. Undemanding. Polite. His insidious dementia has unlocked no monsters. Indeed, there are no monsters inside him *to* unlock. If anything, as his mind has begun slipping its lines, he has become even gentler and kinder.

I try to get out to visit Art a few times a year, sometimes with the grandson in tow. My ex goes out to the Home a little more often than I do, and she's been a bit better about bringing Julian along. The thing is, I only get him on alternating weekends. There's stuff to do. You know how it works. One can only expect so much from a deadbeat dad, after all.

Doris Fly's room is a couple of doors down the hall from Art's at Whispering Pines. She's in her nineties but she doesn't miss a thing. I don't know but I think she has figured out what my ex and I don't want Art to know. Doris Fly always leaves me believing that she can see right through me.

"Why don't you and your wife ever come visit him together?"

"You know. Work schedules. Busy lives. It's hard to coordinate."

"Yes, I know. I know. Ninety-six years on, I know a whole lot more

than you and most people think.”

Trouble in the Sunroom

DORIS FLY CAN BE AS MEAN AS CAT-DIRT (to use an old expression of my mother’s).

Nurse Giesbrecht and Doris share a love for the American televangelists. Sharp at nine on weekday mornings—after breakfast when all the residents are wheeled into the sunroom so the staff can clean up and have their coffee—the nurse will reach up and set the channel on the big flat-screen high on the wall to tune in the Reverend Benny Hinn or Dr. Robert Schuller. “Just for an hour,” she’ll say. “Give Doris her due for an hour. Then the rest of the day is yours.” But, inevitably, before the hour is up, Burt Pawlowski will have gotten hold of the remote and switched the channel to ESPN to see the sports. Or Mr. Sahota will have grabbed it and switched to the multicultural channel.

“Gobbledygook!” Doris will shriek then, as loudly as she can. It’s the same when Mrs. Zhang gets the remote and resets the channel to the Fairchild Network so she can watch *Hong Kong Satellite News* or, on Fridays, *Mandarin Profile*. “Gobbledygook! Gobbledygook! Nurse Giesbrecht! Get yerself to the sunroom, please. There’s an insurrection happening in here.”

After a while, strange things begin happening to the remote. First it shows up in the cutlery tray for the Home’s big industrial dishwasher. The kitchen staff find it there, drooping like a Dali clock after the ultra-high temperatures of the wash and dry cycles have had their way with it. A week later its replacement departs the building hidden in somebody’s adult diaper. Then the replacement for *that* remote somehow ends up behind the wheel of Mr. Sahota’s wheelchair when he rolls back from the crafts table one day to find himself a better pair of blunt scissors.

“Now see what you’ve done. You’ve crunched it,” Doris says to him.

“I’ve been set up,” Mr. Sahota answers.

“Nonsense,” Doris says back to him. “Just clumsy and careless, as usual. And now you’ve broken it. Serves you right, all of yiz.”

They aren't buying it. None of them.

"Doris Fly!" says Burt, accusingly.

"Fly!" manages Mrs. Zhang.

"Swat the fly!" cries Mrs. Wiebe who lately, and rather obviously, has developed quite a fondness for Mr. Sahota.

"*Brutta vespa!*" Mrs. Zeppole calls out in a muffled voice from inside the sunroom's unisex bathroom.

"Don't yiz point yer filthy fingers at me, ya great lot of beached whales. My conscience is clear," Doris answers, looking each of them straight in the eye over the top of her reading glasses before returning, unconcerned, to her knitting. Just then, and to everyone's amazement, the Reverend Benny Hinn's voice booms out of the flat-screen, as if on cue: "*Ay-men!*" Doris looks up at them from her knitting and nods. Believing firmly in small miracles, she knows that she has just witnessed two in succession: the destruction of the remote and the Reverend Benny Hinn's blessing of the act. A perfect and very public vindication. Small miracles. She has often commented that many of them happen every day and that we'd all know that if only we'd keep an eye out.

On and on it goes.

"This is getting ridiculous," Nurse Giesbrecht announces, eventually, to the whole group at breakfast. She's sounding cross. "Six remotes in as many weeks. We might have to get rid of the TV altogether if this keeps up."

Doris Fly can barely contain a dismissive chuckle. Without the big flat-screen playing in the sunroom, the care aides might have to start doing an honest day's work (instead of talking gobbledygook all day about their relatives in the Philippines). She recognizes Nurse Giesbrecht's comment for what it is: a hollow threat.

The Build-up to Christmas

IT'S 4:30 P.M. ON SATURDAY, DECEMBER 12TH—the date and time foretold on the posters that have been up all around the Home since the last jack-o'-lantern was dispatched to the compostables bin at the beginning of November. Excitement is in the air.

“Guarda! Guarda! Che gioia!” Mrs. Zeppole calls out mockingly—as she does every year—when relatives first begin showing up at the front door of the Home for the Whispering Pines Christmas party. They stamp their feet, remove their gloves, scarves and hats and rub their hands together for warmth. *“Guarda! Guarda! Arrivono i Natalini/Pasqualini! Che gioia!”* No one within 20 kilometres speaks a word of Italian but all naïvely assume that Mrs. Zeppole must again be offering up a cheery Christmas greeting from the Old Country.

At this year’s event—like the others before it—the residents’ big beige chairs and wheelchairs have been arranged in a circle around the Home’s perky little tree. The flat-screen TV is tuned to a radio station playing Christmas carols. Nurse Giesbrecht is dressed as a rather over-upholstered Santa and she stands in the middle with Julian and several other children who have been conscripted as elves to hand out anonymous gifts. Doris Fly, as usual, wonders what any of this has to do with the Lord. It is a question that has troubled Art, too, but his manners always prevent him from joining her in asking it publicly.

The party is as festive a gathering as these things can ever be when held under bright, fluorescent lights in a big room that always smells of urine and Pine-Sol. Sons, daughters, nieces and nephews crouch next to the residents like over-earnest Keg waiters: helping them unwrap their gifts, cooing and enthusing, pausing frequently to check smartphones and watches. Meanwhile, fuelled by too much holiday baking and too little supervision, their kids run amok, tut-tutted only occasionally by the staff when they roar through the kitchen. It’s all kind of surreal: the adults’ guilty faces betray the fact that most of them visit their slowly expiring moms and dads and aunts and uncles only on seasonal holidays. It’s more than surreal, in fact. It’s abjectly sad.

This year, after things have subsided somewhat and other relatives and I are gathering up mountains of gift-wrap for recycling, I notice that Doris Fly has Julian cornered. He tells me later that she first wanted to know why she got two electric nose-hair trimmers from Santa and none of the others received even one—not even Mr. Sahota who, she said, could use one for each of his nostrils and a couple more for his ears. “Is this some kind of sick joke?” Julian hadn’t a clue

what to say to her, of course. I think, no, I *know* that the poor kid finds Doris Fly frightening. I don't blame him. I hurry over to prevent a cross-examination and when I reach them I can hear that the questioning has turned more sinister.

"Tell me the names of *everyone* who lives in your house."

She asks him the question in a deceptively singsongy voice, but I know this is nothing less than evidence-gathering, pure and simple, meant to prove or disprove a theory—a theory that I'm deathly afraid she's already shared with Art, damn her. Julian begins to answer.

"Well, at Daddy's there's Daddy, then our cats Marx and Lenin..."

"Julian, come with me. Your face and hands are all sticky from the Christmas baking." Before he can answer further, I march him away to the *en suite* sink and toilet in Art's room to clean him up.

Time to Go

"FETCH YOUR COAT OFF GRANDPA'S BED, there's a good boy," I tell him. "It's almost time to head home, son."

Julian gives Art a big hug as we prepare to leave. He really does love his Grandpa. I think to myself that I must do a better job of getting out to the Home with him more often next year.

Meanwhile, Doris Fly is hovering outside the door. "Not so fast, mister."

"Julian, give Mrs. Fly a hug too," I tell him.

"*And* a kiss on the cheek," she adds.

He looks up at me with a "Do I have to?" expression on his face.

"Julian. Give Mrs. Fly a kiss on the cheek."

"I've got a gift for him," she says, once that important formality has been taken care of. "Yiz'll have to come with me to get it."

We follow the whine of her motorized wheelchair into her chaotic room. Once there, she finds the wrapped gift on a low shelf and hands it to him.

"That's very kind. What do you say, Julian?"

"Thank you, Mrs. Fly."

"Yiz'r not to open it till Christmas morning, understand?"

"We understand, Doris," I tell her. "Thank you, again."

“Yiz have yerselves a blessèd Christmas, now. And make some room for the Lord in it, for God’s sake.”

And so, after putting Julian’s gift package in the car, we at last pull out of the Whispering Pines parking lot and drive home through blowing snow. I slip a Christmas CD in the player, Julian and I sing along and Doris Fly flies out of our thoughts, at least for a week or so. Until Christmas Day.

Christmas Day

HAVING SOMEHOW BEEN PUSHED to the back of the tree, Doris Fly’s gift is almost missed. But then, Julian has a sharp eye for gift wrap.

“One more, Dad!”

When he finally tears off the paper and gets the box open, he is both delighted and puzzled. Inside the box? A brightly painted, hand-made wooden truck. Oh. And a remote.

“Is the truck electric, Dad?”

“No, son.”

“I didn’t think so. So...Dad?”

“Yes, Julian?”

“It can’t make the truck go, then?”

“No, I’m afraid not.”

“Then I don’t get it.”

“I’m not sure I do either, son.”

Postscript

AND, WHO KNOWS? Maybe one day the up/down button—the one for changing channels—will make the wooden truck fly. It would be a small miracle. They *do* happen. So Julian and I will just have to wait and see. We’ll just have to “keep an eye out.”