

DANIEL GRIFFIN

Saturday Night

MAX WAS MAKING LUNCH when his father called. The boys were hollering in the living room and so Max didn't hear the phone at first. He caught it just as the answering machine picked up. "Boy," his father said, "has it ever been a long day."

Max stopped the recording, stretched the phone cord as far as the stove and flipped the grilled cheese sandwiches.

"Been up since quarter to five. I can hardly sleep anymore. You know what's on TV at quarter to five?"

"You drink too much coffee, Dad."

"Coffee's good for you now. Red wine too. Reduces the risk of heart disease. If I live long enough, cigarettes will even be healthy. I can start smoking again."

In the living room, one of the boys landed with a thud. Max turned. Marshall was on his back on the floor. Oscar stood above him on the coffee table. Max gestured at them and covered the receiver. "That's enough, boys. Off." Oscar jumped off the table and sat on Marshall.

"I'm taking care of the kids today, Dad. Diane's painting and I'm in the middle of making lunch."

"Boy, things have changed since my day. I was just saying to Ethel across the way that I didn't take care of you kids one day a month let alone one day a week."

Max watched Oscar lift Marshall onto the sofa. "Off of there please."

"You remember that time I took you kids to the beach? You wandered off and when I went looking for you, your brother disappeared too. I lost you both. Had to get the lifeguard to help find you."

"Hold on, the grilled cheese is going to burn."

"You remember that?"

"Guess so."

"Any chance I could talk to Diane? I'm trying to make walnut soup like she did. Walnuts fight free radicals, you know. Good for your brain. Like salmon and blueberries, all that stuff."

"We're having salmon tonight," Max said. "Doing sushi. You ever eaten Diane's sushi?"

"Don't think so."

"You want healthy, think how long Japanese people live. That's what you should be eating."

Max could hear the sofa's springs creak as the boys bounced. He walked as close to the living room as the phone cord would allow. "Cut that out. Both of you. Now."

"When are you making it?" his father said.

"Don't know. Seven or so. Put the kids to bed first then we can eat in peace."

It took a moment before Max realized this sounded like an invitation.

"Suppose I could take a taxi," his father said. "Save you the trouble of driving in to pick me up."

Max's grip on the phone tightened, but he didn't speak. A cushion sailed into the kitchen. "For crying out loud," Max said.

"You'd better go. I'll skip the walnut soup and see you at seven."

Max returned the phone to its cradle. "Shit." He leaned forward until his forehead touched the wall then he rubbed his eyes a moment, left hand still resting on the receiver. "Lunchtime, kids."

Oscar and Marshall came running in. Oscar wrapped his arms around Max's legs. "Want to wrestle?"

"No. And next time, wrestle somewhere besides the new sofa. Plus don't throw cushions. Look at this place. Jesus it's a mess."

"Oscar did it."

"Did not."

"Did too."

"Just please sit down." Max poured two glasses of milk, served the grilled cheese sandwiches.

"Yuck," Oscar said. "It's burnt."

"Yucky, yucky, not in my tummy."

Max took the sandwiches to the sink, scraped the burnt side with a knife then returned them along with a bottle of ketchup. He watched each take a bite before walking down the hall to the studio.

All the lights were on, and it was hot in there. Diane wore just a T-shirt and underwear. She held a pair of paintbrushes in one hand, stood above her canvas. "Diane, you're not going to believe what I just did."

Diane shifted the painting with her foot.

"I was distracted," Max said. "The boys were bouncing on the sofa. Plus I'd been trying to make them lunch. They were practically strangling each other. I swear I don't know how you do it all week." He paused. "With all this stuff going on, I accidentally invited my father to dinner."

Diane held one hand in front of her face to blank out parts of the canvas. "All right," she said.

"I know it was supposed to be our night. Hope you don't mind."

Diane didn't answer. Max realized she was back in her own world and he slipped out of the studio. It turned out that she'd been in her own world most of the time Max was talking. That evening when they were trying to get the kids ready for bed and the door bell rang, Diane said, "Who could that be?"

Arthur let himself in, called out, and the boys raced downstairs shouting for Grandpa and asking if he wanted to wrestle. Max followed.

"Oscar, your grandfather doesn't want to wrestle."

Max took his dad's coat, looked up as Diane stepped onto the landing. "Oh. Arthur. Hello. Something wrong?"

"No, aside from the taxi fare. Twenty dollars. Guess when you want an acre of land, you have to expect a bit of a drive."

"It's half an acre," Max said.

"Makes you a prisoner in your own house not to have a driver's licence."

Oscar pulled on Arthur's pant leg. "Playroom, playroom."

Max gave Oscar's arm a swat. "Shush."

"Five minutes, lovies," Diane said. "And then it's definitely bedtime. No ifs ands or buts, okay?"

"No butts." Oscar reached over, spanked Marshall.

"No butts," Marshall said. Coming from Marshall, it sounded more like, "No buth."

Oscar spanked his brother again and they chased each other shouting, "No butts."

When the boys finally left the room, Diane said, "Why don't you just go relax, Arthur. We were about to make a pair of gin and tonics."

Arthur opened the French doors, stepped into the living room. Diane headed into the kitchen and Max followed. "So what exactly is going on here?" she said.

"I told you. This afternoon, remember? I accidentally invited him over. It was a misunderstanding. The boys were jumping on the sofa and everything." Max swallowed, shrugged. "It was chaos."

"They shouldn't be jumping on the sofa. You should have taken them to the park. They need to get outside. That's why they're so manic tonight. Cooped up all day."

"You're right, Diane, I know. Okay?"

"I wanted to have a nice night together."

"It's certainly aphids out front," Arthur called from the other end of the house. "You can't survive without pesticides these days. I don't care if you have a hobby farm, a thousand acres or a flower garden. Bugs have gotten too hardy."

"If you can't see well enough to drive, Dad, how can you see what's wrong with our trees?"

"I can see well enough to drive." Arthur stepped through the archway and into the dining room.

"There are thousands of organic trees doing just fine. Plus it's crows not insects."

"Growing something organic is not the same thing as just letting whatever happen to it."

Max closed his eyes a moment. Diane was still standing beside him. He took a deep breath, stood like that long enough to wonder if he could fall asleep on his feet. In the playroom, Oscar yelled, "I'll eat your Hippo because your Hippo's poo-poo."

"No more potty talk," Marshall said. There was another moment of silence.

"Bedtime, lovies." Diane walked down the hall and into the playroom.

"Dad, half of those trees are completely fine, and we're getting nets for the other half."



Max brought a large bowl of rice, several sheets of roasted seaweed, strips of fish and avocado into the dining room. He pulled out a chair opposite his father's, spooned rice onto a sheet, placed a piece of tuna and slices of avocado down the centre. "Can't use too much rice. That's one secret." He rolled it then dipped his finger in water and wetted the lip of the seaweed. He closed the roll, picked up a knife and chopped the sushi into six pieces.

"Used to be all that came from Japan was plastic," Arthur said. "That's China now. China or Korea."

"You can put whatever you want in. Salmon if you want to combat free radicals."

"Ever notice that no one eats Korean food?"

"We used to live next to a Korean restaurant when we were in the city. The place was always busy."

"Busy with Korean people or other types of people?"

"I don't know, Dad. All kinds."

"Mostly Koreans, I bet."

Max started a salmon roll next. His father rattled the ice cubes in his glass.

"It all goes back to Elvis," Arthur said. "He was responsible for getting Japan started. Elvis made everyone want a transistor radio and so that's what the Japanese did. Tossed them out like beans."

"Diane's the real sushi expert. You should get a lesson from her."

"If it weren't for Elvis they'd still be running around the rice paddies in skirts or whatever."

Max took his hands from the roll. It slowly unfurled. "Why do you have to speak like that?"

"Like what?"

"The way you've been talking about people from Japan and Korea. It sounds racist."

"Diane's not Japanese or Korean."

"Dad, that's not the point."

"All right. I'll just stay quiet then."

"And you don't need to be like that either."

Max finished his roll then put a sheet of roasted seaweed in front of his father. "You going to make one or not?"

"Better not. Tendonitis is giving me trouble."

Max ran his fingers the length of his bamboo mat. "I'll roll one on your behalf. You want salmon?"

"Whatever's good."

"Salmon and avocado?"

When he was finished, Max noticed Diane leaning against the door frame on the other side of the room. "You look tired," Max said.

Diane nodded and stepped in. She set her hands on Max's shoulders and gave a deep squeeze. "Fell asleep a moment."

"You know he died on the john?" Arthur said.

"Who?"

"Elvis Presley." Arthur folded his hands on the table, leaned closer.

"Diane, you like Presley?"

Diane shrugged. She gave Max's shoulders a pat and pulled a chair closer to his.

“Couple of years after I started with CN, I bought a transistor radio to listen to music coming up from Buffalo. It was a GE if I remember correctly. Not everybody bought Sony. So maybe all that stuff I was just saying is bunk. Mind you, that was '54 or '55. Before Elvis really got started.”

Max passed Arthur's sushi mat to Diane. “I'm going to start the miso soup.”

In the kitchen, Max boiled a small pot of water, added miso, spring onions, cubes of tofu. He pulled the bottle of saki from the pot where it was warming, poured himself a cup.

“My grandfather was a fruit farmer.” Arthur's voice carried clear into the kitchen. “You knew that, didn't you Diane? Quite the fellow. When a customer at the market asked what kind of apples he sold, Grandfather would ask what kind they wanted. ‘Jonagold,’ the customer would say. ‘Well then,’ he'd say, ‘These are Jonagold.’”

“That's funny,” Diane said.

“I wonder what they did back then about aphids and what not.”

“It's not aphids,” Max said from the kitchen. “It's crows. They come and pick the fruit, that's all.”

“Oh, you're good at rolling those, Diane. Look at you go.”

“Let's not talk about the fruit trees anymore,” Max called.

Max took the soup off the heat just before it boiled. He brought out dishes for the Kikoman sauce, put the bottle of saki and ceramic cups in the middle of the table. Diane had rolled enough sushi for all of them. She'd grouped the rolls neatly on a cutting board. Max returned with three sets of chopsticks and three spoons.

“Do you want to say grace, Arthur?”

“Actually, I already ate.” Arthur squared his shoulders. “I get a headache if I eat after six, you know that.”

And so Arthur talked while they ate. Among other things, he explained why Canadians stopped playing lacrosse after World War One. “It's not because they learned baseball from the Americans either.” He pushed his chair out a little. “Lester in the apartment below made a study. All the best players were killed in the war so the lacrosse leagues folded. Any old idiot can pick up baseball so baseball took off.”

Max set two pieces of tuna nigiri on his plate, two on Diane's.

“Did I tell you Ernie Turnstone died last week? In the apartment next to me. Funeral was yesterday.”

“That's awful,” Diane said.

“Younger than me too. Seventy-one.”

“Jeez.”

“And Ethel next door is moving in with her daughter and family. She always said how much they wanted her to go live with them. I said to Ethel you’d better go while they still want you. Next thing I know, she’s got her place up for sale. These days it’s Revolving Door Apartments not Eastern Shore Apartments.”

“Who’s the fourth person on your floor?”

“Shorty and his wife, Irene. But they keep themselves to themselves.”

“Maybe you’ll hit it off with whoever moves into those two other units.”

“Maybe.”

“Last piece of sushi,” Max said. “Want to try it?”

Arthur shook his head.

When they’d finished, Diane tidied up and Max drove his father home.



By the time Max got back, all the lights in the house were off and the kitchen was clean. He walked up to the boys’ room. The night light was bright enough that he could make out their faces. Their chests rose and fell. They breathed in unison, a duet, the only movement in the room. Through the window, Max noticed a branch moving in the wind. All that effort to grow fruit and the best they could hope for was a few pies and preserves.

Max headed back downstairs thinking he’d make himself a drink. On the way into the dining room, he paused at Diane’s studio door, switched on the lights. It was suddenly bright as midday in there—a thousand watts at the flick of a switch. The painting was still on the floor. Diane liked to work that way. She liked to get at her canvases from all angles. She never seemed to decide which way was up until the very end.

Max took in the painting from all sides. It looked a lot like most of her recent work—plenty of yellow and ochre in non-geometric shapes. Warm, earthy colours melted into one another; two thick seams of paint cut borders across the canvas. It was strange to think that this painting had so completely distracted her. It only held Max for a moment.

Max skipped the nightcap. He headed upstairs, undressing as he went. As he slid into bed, Diane stirred. “You awake?” he said. She nodded, brushed a hair from her forehead.

“Sorry about tonight.”

“Aren’t you supposed to run it by me first? Outside of his Wednesday visits, I mean.”

"Some day soon he's going to want to move in with us."

Diane rubbed her eyes. She sat up a little. "Has he actually said anything? Has he really asked?"

Max shook his head. In the darkness, he could make out their furnishings, the dresser in the far corner, the open door of the closet, the rocking chair from Diane's mother. Under the window sat the trunk her grandmother had brought all the way from Hong Kong.

"Years from now," Max said. "Once we're old and all, if one of the boys was to take us in, which would it be?"

"Marshall. Oscar will be too busy running a multinational bank or something." Diane pulled up the sheet, rolled onto her side to face Max. "I've been suspecting something like this. You ever feel like you're losing control of your life?"

"Control of my life? Diane, I can't even keep the crows off our trees." Max waited, but Diane didn't laugh. He slid closer, kissed her.

"You're trying to change the subject," she said.

"No, I'm not. I just." He kissed her again.

"I'm exhausted," Diane said. "Aren't you tired?"

"It's Saturday night."

"I know, but." She lay back and looked up at the ceiling.

Max listened to the rain, watched it streak the window. He knew what Diane would say if he really asked. It wouldn't be a yes-or-no conversation. It would be negotiation. She'd want more time to paint, more help with the kids and housework, some guarantee of time to themselves. Max could almost hear her listing these things. Her voice would lower, words coming slow but steady, like drops from a broken faucet. Max would also speak carefully. He would find a way to bring up the fact they'd had kids earlier than he'd wanted. He would mention the money his father had given them to help buy this land.

There would be tension in the house, the blanket discomfort of an argument teased out over days or even weeks, but in truth, the decision was made long ago. Max wasn't sure when, but it was some time before the possibility had so much as entered his mind. Max had never been able to keep the crows out of the trees and he never would. He wasn't even sure he should try.