Dominoes

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Abstract

THE EDGE of the old clock blurred; its glass face shone in the dim twilight of the room. He tried to focus his eyes and ignore the noises in his head. There was a second rap at the door. He reached up to turn on the lamp by his chair, feeling slightly ashamed to have drowsed off again. With both hands on the chair arms, he leaned back for momentum, pushed hard against the floor with his feet, wrenching his body forward to stand up...
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by
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English 4

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"Goddamn legs ain’t good for nothing." Cursing under his breath, he stumped to the door.

"Hi Grandpa! How are you doing?" He felt arms around his neck and a small dry kiss on his cheek.

"Well," he had to clear his throat, "you home from college, eh missy?"

"Yeah. We have a break now between semesters. You’re looking good Grandpa, how are you feeling?"

"I’m doing okay. These old legs ain’t much good, but otherwise I’m okay." It was then that he noticed the young man standing behind her.

"That’s good, Grandpa. I want you to meet someone. This is Jim Harlan, and Grandpa, I don’t think Mom’s told you because we wanted to break the news to you ourselves— we’re engaged, Grandpa. We’re going to be married."

He blinked. This was his youngest granddaughter; she’d always remained the chubby little six year old in his mind. Getting married? How could someone who just graduated from kindergarten get married?

Bewildered, he looked at the future husband and remembered his manners.
“Glad to know you, son.”

Then turning back to his granddaughter: “I didn’t expect you taking this step so soon, girlie.”

“I didn’t either, Grandpa, but I guess life doesn’t always move along as you expect it to.” She smiled and looked at Jim.

“How old are you, anyway?”

“I’m twenty now, Grandpa.”

“Well, Nellie and I were younger than that when we tied the knot.” But he was still having trouble convincing himself. He studied the young man. Too thin for his height—made his cheeks look hollow. Sharp, bright eyes that didn’t miss much. Then there was the beard. The old man didn’t much care for beards. His father had had one but that had been a different time, for a different reason. He’d seen these rebelling youths on the T.V. screen and he didn’t like it. Anyway, he’d always pictured a clean-cut, robust youngster for Sarah, preferably countrybred, with the good, wholesome values of rural people.

“I’m very glad to meet you, Mr. Wheeler.” The beard moved in accompaniment with his lips. “Sarah’s told me a lot about you, especially about your domino games.”

“Yes.” The old man drew out the word as if many thoughts were contained between the beginning and the end of it. “I reckon we can play some while you’re here—if you like.”

“That would be fine—I’ve been looking forward to it.”

That was a point in the beard’s favor, the old man had to admit. It wasn’t that he really judged a person by how he played dominoes, but it sure helped figure how a person thought. For instance, Sarah’s mother was a good woman but her mind just wasn’t one for strategy or figuring. He really admired that in a person. It was a point of pride with him that he could beat most anybody in dominoes. He might be nearly eighty-six and only got through the eighth grade but his mind was as sharp as the next person’s and he dared
anybody to prove it wasn’t. Yes, he’d enjoy playing this new opponent.

‘‘Let me get you some soda pop or something.’’

‘‘Oh, don’t bother, Grandpa—we didn’t eat supper very long ago. As the matter of fact, I promised Mom I’d run some errands for her this evening. How about if I leave you two for a while? Hmmmm?’’ She had that wide-eyed innocent look that proved to them both that this spur-of-the-moment idea was very much premeditated.

‘‘Sure, I’d like that.’’ The young man was ready to play along.

Wheeler just chuckled and motioned his granddaughter out the door. Her grin was the last part of her to leave the room. The screen door banged behind her, leaving silence.

Jim stared at wallpaper nosegays as though a botanical treatise depended upon their identification.

Wheeler felt discomfort and slowly moved to the kitchen, puttering around with nothing. He heard the young man stir, sensed his presence behind him in the kitchen doorway.

‘‘How long have you lived here, Mr. Wheeler?’’

‘‘Close to ten years now. When Nellie died, my son wanted me to live closer to them, so I moved here.’’

‘‘It’s a nice little place.’’

‘‘S okay for an old man.’’ Although he always called himself an old man, he never really thought of himself as aged. That had always been reserved for others—those meek gray creatures who resigned themselves to senility and the wheelchair. He’d have a good hard fight with Time before he’d submit to that.

‘‘You like that game of dominoes now?’’

‘‘Sure, why not?’’

The old cardboard box containing the dominoes was on the bottom shelf in the front room. As the old man bent over stiffly, he saw Jim move as if to offer assistance. Ignoring
the younger man's hesitant motion in his direction, he retrieved the box and set it on the nearby cardtable.

"Set yourself down there, son." Wheeler indicated one of the straightback chairs. He awkwardly lowered his own bulk into the other. There was old familiarity in the smooth feel of the dominoes as he spilled them out onto the table.

"Take six and pile the rest into the corner," he instructed.

"I haven't played since I was a kid, Mr. Wheeler, so my memory may need to be refreshed a little." Although his voice contained the proper humility, Wheeler thought the look in his eyes was far from humble.

"Well, these here are twelve-spot dominoes—you probably played with six-spots when you was a young'un."

"No, I believe we always played with twelve; they were so much more challenging."

"Doesn't sound like you need much teaching then, young man." Something in that cocksure attitude irritated the old man.

"Oh, but I'm sure a little help wouldn't be amiss," Jim was quick to reply. 

"Let's have a go at it then. I'll help you if you get stuck. Got a double twelve? Eleven? A high double at all?"

"Yea—I've got a double eight here."

"Well then, put it out—I ain't got a one."

"There it is. Let's see now, you keep building on the ends, right?"

"That's right, and we write you down a score of the end numbers come to a multiple of five." The old man opened a dog-eared notebook filled with an infinity of tally marks.

"Ummm... I remember now."

As the game advanced, the old man watched the angular, stark design of the black and white rectangles become more complex, inching around the table, reminding him of a German swastika in the process of mutating. It was a familiar and yet ever new progression.
They said little to each other; their minds were busy with the task of adding and subtracting the small, white dots, considering and rejecting possibilities, always trying for some multiple of five. The old man ran out of dominoes first.

"How many spots you got left?"
Jim added them up. "Twenty-six."
"I get twenty-five, then. See, whoever goes out first gets to add on the other fellow's spots."
"Yeah, I remember. Say how many points does it take to win?"
"Five hundred. But it goes fast—you'll see."
It did go quickly. They played with intense concentration, the two lines of tally marks in the old notebook advancing as the game advanced. Wheeler couldn't quite put his finger on it, but there was a quality about this game and the young opponent that made him uncomfortable, put him on the defensive. He wasn't used to that.

Four times they turned over the dominoes, four times piled them in the middle, drew their pieces for the new set, and shove the rest to the corners. Finally Wheeler scored enough points to put him over the five hundred mark.
"Whew—that was a close game, son. I don't doubt but what you'd beat me if we played again."
"I'm not so sure about that. You're a shrewd player, Mr. Wheeler, just like Sarah warned me."

Somehow, this compliment didn't bring the usual satisfaction to the old man. "Well, we got time—you want to go for the best two out of three?"

Jim glanced at the old clock on the shelf. "Sure—okay, Mr. Wheeler."
So the dominoes were piled in the middle again; they began anew. The atmosphere tightened in the intensity of their playing. Wheeler felt it, but if the younger man did he gave no sign.

"Got a nickel's worth, eh?" Wheeler interjected such comments more for his own comfort than for Jim's. It made him feel like this was a game just like any other. Almost.
This time Jim reached five hundred first. Wheeler was not in the least surprised. A third game with this young man had seemed inevitable.

Jim laughed. "Beginner's luck," he said deprecatorily. The laugh hung about the old man's ears, lingering into the third game.

He didn't even try to intersperse this game with his usual comments. His body and mind were tense with the competition. Why did this game matter so much? He couldn't answer that—it did, that's all—it was important. He watched as the young man opposite him coolly evaluated the black and white pattern on the table and added another piece to it.

"That makes thirty-five."

"Right." The old man scratched one too many marks on Jim's column and had to erase. Something inside him crackled, stretched and taut. He wanted the game to be over and yet he was afraid of the ending. Jim ceased to be Jim at all; he was playing against a youthful phantom and he had to win.

"That's an eight, Mr. Wheeler, not a six."

Wheeler squinted at it through his bifocals. The white dots, blurred, scrambled, finally settling down to their normal symmetry. "So it is—them pieces look a lot alike."

He felt shaken and knew he was over-reacting. His granddaughter had returned and was watching the game. One part of him acknowledged her, but the majority of him was caught up in the black and white struggle laid out on the table before him. Each piece enlarged the design, each pencil mark brought the game closer to an end.

"That's it Mr. Wheeler. That's forty-five points you have there—you've won."

The old man looked up in surprise.

Sarah laughed. "Goodness, I've never seen two such intent men. And over a game of dominoes, no less. Honestly, Grandpa, if I didn't know you better, I would have thought your life depended on the outcome, the way you were playing. Well, anyway, you must have enjoyed it, you
were both so engrossed.'" She glanced at her watch. "Uh-

oh, we're late. I told Mom we'd be home by nine—the
Richardsons are coming to visit. We've got to be off but
we'll drop by again tomorrow or the next day—maybe you
two can play some more then. You should be proud,
Grandpa, you beat a computer science major. I swear,
sometimes his mind works like one, too." Her laugh was
high, light.

Jim smiled. "You're a tough one to beat, all right, old
m... Mr. Wheeler."

They shook hands. "We'll be seeing you. Keep those
dominoes warm." Another smile. Then they were gone.

He settled into his chair across from the old clock. Its
hollow pulse matched the dull throb in his legs. He turned
off the lamp; waited for the comfort of familiar shadows.

Tender Disguise
by
Betty Lartius
Distributed Studies 3

Tender, sweet lump of flesh,
Building block of civilizations
swaddled in innocence,
Delicate disguise for vicious souls
—tyrants, madmen, killers.
Could his mother,
forewarned,
have strangled the dimpled,
infant Hitler in his cradle?