Nothing Else Matters

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WILLARD Knuth parked his Buick Riviera under the huge spreading elm at the far end of the semicircular driveway. He tucked a few papers into his brief case and climbed out of the car, smiling. He breathed deeply to absorb the rich smell of evergreens and proudly surveyed his demesne. The lawn of the large suburban home looked like the eighteenth green at Augusta National. It ought to, he thought, since he paid a handsome price to keep it that way. Willard followed the curving walk to the front porch, pausing there to appreciate the rich colors of Indian summer. The crisp autumn air reminded him that it was football weather, though nothing needed to remind Willard Knuth about that. He was as much a football fan today as he had been in 1940, when he played fullback for Notre Dame—and that was twenty-five years ago. He still drove from Cleveland to South Bend on weekends when “the fighting Irish” played their games. Willard turned in time to see the front door open and an attractive woman emerge into the sunlight. Her green stretch-pants and white cable-stitch tennis sweater revealed a girlish figure beneath, and soft
brown hair hung loosely at her shoulders. Her lips parted in a smile as she approached her husband.

"Welcome home, Caesar," she kidded.

Willard stared at Evelyn with pagan lust, his hungry gaze following the subtle curves of her body up to the radiant face. "Hello, beautiful," he panted, "what's a girl like you doing in a place like this?" He swept her into his arms in one quick motion and carried her into the house in a dramatic re-creation of their honeymoon arrival. Inside, he hustled his struggling captive across the spacious living room, down a short hall, and into the kitchen, where he pinned her against the refrigerator. "Let me take you away from all of this," he breathed into her ear.

"Not on your life, Willard Knuth," she said, squirming alternately against the heat of his body and the chill of the refrigerator. "I like it here. And, besides," she poked him in the ribs, "a tractor couldn't drag you away from this house and you know it."

Willard knew she was right, of course. As a matter-of-fact, it made him feel good to hear her say it. He had worked hard to get somewhere in life, and now that he was vice-president of Preston Steel he considered this house part of the reward for his efforts. It was a symbol which testified to the fact that Willard Knuth and "the American ideal" were one and the same. Yes, he was truly a "self-made man": hard working, prosperous, and proud of it. He released his grip on Evelyn and stepped back, grinning as she followed after him for warmth. "All right, then," he chuckled, "let's have a martini to celebrate our trip tomorrow. How does that sound?"

"Fine, Will," she nodded enthusiastically. "That's something to celebrate, isn't it!"

It certainly is, Willard thought, as he opened the liquor cabinet. He took out a bottle of Beefeater gin and one of Vermouth and set them on the counter. "Do you realize it's been over five months since we've seen Mike? It sure was strange not having him home during the summer. Probably won't even recognize him." He crossed the kitchen and took
a jar of olives from the refrigerator. "As long as he hasn't
grown a beard, I guess I won't demonstrate my hostility."
Willard had meant that as a joke, but he didn't think it
sounded very funny. He had always resented demonstra­
tions and student protests, and now the thought of his own
son becoming involved irritated him.

"Michael seems to be quite active in school this year,"
Evelyn said, observing the change in her husband's expres­
sion. "Maybe this summer was good for him."

"I just can't understand anyone wanting to spend a sum­
er in Selma, Alabama, that's all," Willard snapped de­
fensively. He could have had that construction job again
and made some real money." Willard mixed the drinks
thoughtfully and added an olive to each before turning to
his wife. "I don't mean to sound critical," he said, feeling
guilty. "Mike is a good boy, I just wish he would get his feet
on the ground." He handed Evelyn a martini and sat down
across from her at the kitchen table. He watched her gaze
pensively out the window. She sipped her drink and looked
pleadingly across the table.

"Maybe he just needs time, Will."

"Time? He's twenty-one years old. When I was his age,
I knew where I was going." Willard was irritated again.
His wife didn't understand the mechanics of getting ahead
in the world. It's not easy to make a success of yourself, he
thought. You have to start early and work hard at it. I did
it and there's no reason why my son can't! He shook his
head. "Mike is too idealistic, Evy. He has to be more prac­
tical if he's going to make it in life. You know what he
writes about in his letters—art, philosophy, even socialism.
Where is that going to get him?" Willard saw that Evelyn
had retreated behind her martini. He knew she wouldn't
argue with him, but he suddenly had the strange sensation
of being beaten over the head by silence. She had always
sympathized with Mike, even when he decided to go to the
University of Michigan. Willard thought Mike had made a
mistake in turning down the football scholarship to Notre
Dame. He had been an outstanding quarterback in high
school and a good college prospect—it was foolish not to make the most of it. Willard had never really understood Mike, but at least when Mike was in high school they had had some great times together. Since then they hadn't been able to communicate very well, and each year it seemed like Mike's ideas became less "realistic". He just wasn't growing up. "I still think that boy should have gone to Notre Dame, Evy. It would have done him a lot of good."

His wife frowned. "But he didn't want to play football in college. Michigan is such a good school and they offered him that academic scholarship. He has to live his own life, dear."

"Oh, for Christ's sake! Can't you see that sometimes people don't know what's best for them. He was just a kid then. Why do women always. . . ." Willard stopped. He saw the sadness in Evelyn's eyes. He didn't know why these things always ended up like this. "I'm sorry, honey. Let's just forget it. I hate to spoil a beautiful day like this with an argument, and, besides, it's a bad way to start out the weekend." He forced a smile and tried to make his voice sound cheerful. "I'm really looking forward to that game tomorrow. Michigan is bound to be up for this one since it's homecoming, but Notre Dame is pretty tough this year. What a rivalry. I guess Mike and I will be in different camps. Who's side are you on, Evelyn?"

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Mike had been up since six o'clock in the morning. He knew the weekend would be busy and he had a lot to do before his parents arrived. He had read a short play and a chapter of European history before cleaning up the little apartment. Michael Knuth was built like a football player and he moved gracefully, but his facial features were delicate. His hair was long—too long—and he kept forgetting to use a comb on it. He had believed in sleep at one time, but his eyes showed that he found other things more important now. Today there was more than just tiredness in his eyes. He felt tense, apprehensive. It had been five months since he had seen his mother and father and a lot had happened
during that time. He hadn’t ever been able to talk to his
father very well—except about football—and what he had to
tell them was very important. It was going to be difficult to
explain and he had never wanted so much for them to under­
stand anything in his whole life. He watched the clock
nervously as he dressed. He had arranged to meet his parents
at the fraternity for lunch and he was sure they would be
on time. Mike put on a sweater and left the apartment
thinking about what he would say. He was standing on the
front porch of the fraternity house when the familiar Buick
pulled into the parking lot. By the time he got to the car
his parents were standing arm-in-arm like college pinmates,
smiling and shuffling their feet anxiously. He grinned at
them.

“Hi, how was your trip?”

Evelyn struggled free from Willard’s grip and ran for­
ward. “Oh, Michael, how are you? Gee, it’s good to see you!”
She hugged him for a second and then planted a big kiss on
his cheek.

Mike blushed profusely and gave in to his impulse to re­
turn the kiss. “You look wonderful,” he said. “Have you got
a date tonight, beautiful?” He squeezed her arm. His body
felt warm and slightly weak, but his throat was dry. He
swallowed hard and turned toward his father. “Hi, Dad.”
The two of them engaged in a contest to see who could crush
whose hand first, finally giving up in a stalemate. “Well,
come on inside and I’ll show you around,” Mike urged. He
led them in and acted as their guide for a tour of the re­
modeled fraternity house. He could see that his father was
impressed as they went from room to room and floor to floor.
New paint job, new carpets and drapes, new desks. . . .

“Say, this is terrific,” Willard bubbled enthusiastically,
when they reached the third floor. “Don’t you think you’re
missing something by not living here this year, Mike?”

Mike shook his head. “No, it’s really nice to get off by
yourself. Besides, it’s much quieter in the apartment and
I can get a lot more done there. There are other advantages,
too.” Willard seemed disappointed with this explanation,
but he accepted it, tentatively at least, with a shrug of his shoulders. Mike watched him turn and start off down the hall, peering into each room momentarily before continuing his inspection. Mike and Evelyn followed him, forming a little procession which wound its way through the house. Willard examined each room, checking to see how much closet space was provided and what kind of study facilities were available. Mike could tell that his father liked the arrangements, and the tour seemed to be reinforcing his disapproval of Mike's decision to live in an apartment. Willard stopped in a spacious four-man room at the end of the third-floor hall. It had been cleaned in anticipation of homecoming open-house and its orderliness was impressive.

"This place is beautiful, Mike," Willard commented. "I don't see how you could possibly do better in an apartment."

"There are many restrictions around here. I don't have time for a lot of their nonsense. I guess you kind of outgrow a fraternity after a few years."

The ex-fullback frowned at his son. "I don't think you've outgrown anything. As a matter of fact. . . ."

Mike felt a wave of desperation smothering him. The room seemed to be caving in, trapping him hopelessly. He couldn't keep up this game of deception much longer. He had to get it over, now. The room was empty except for the three of them and the hall seemed deserted. Mike turned toward his father. "I have something to tell you," he mumbled.

"Say, this ought to be a real hard-nosed game today," Willard said, not paying attention to his son's remark. "You could be out there playing if you wanted to, you know. How about placing a little bet on the final score? Got any faith in your team?"

Mike shot a glance at his mother. She had heard him, and her face wore a look of worried anticipation. He'd have to go through with it now. His stomach tightened and churned wretchedly, and he could feel his hands trembling against his legs. He loved his parents and didn't want to hurt them. This was going to be horrible. He wanted to
run or scream, but he just stood there shaking and hating himself for it. Then he thought of someone else he loved—a wonderful girl who admired him, trusted him, counted on him. His shaking stopped. He took a deep breath. “Dad, I'm engaged!” He watched his father stare in disbelief. The words were coming fast now and every one of them brought relief. “She's a girl I met this summer while we were working in Selma. She's from San Francisco and we're going to get married next summer. She's a Negro, Dad. I love her and we're going to get married.” He hardly felt his father's hand—just a stinging sensation on his face. “Nothing else matters, Dad. I love her.”

Evelyn looked at herself in the mirror. The dress was all right, but she wished her eyes weren't so red. What would the people in the church think? She sat down on the bed and tried to pull herself together. She had relived that terrible moment in Ann Arbor so many times that it seemed like it happened years ago—and still it didn't make sense. She remembered watching two proud men—her men—rip and tear at each other until their souls were raw and bleeding. Two men she loved had destroyed each other before her eyes. She had been trying to pick up the pieces ever since, but it was hopeless. Evelyn wasn't sure which one was right. She had been too stunned to pass judgment at that moment and too confused since then. It didn't matter. The damage was done. Evelyn still loved her men, but something that she loved in each of them had been destroyed in the moment of hate and pride. A moment which continued endlessly. She stood up and brushed some lint off her dress. San Francisco was a beautiful city for a wedding, she thought sadly. . . . She wished her husband had come.