

## *Squeeze the Putty, Mrs. Martin*

MIKE ONOFREY

“Do you have a minute?” she said to Dwayne as he was coming out of his mother’s hospital room at four in the afternoon.

Dwayne nodded and she led him along the hall to where her office was. She left the door open and gestured for Dwayne to sit down on one of the two chairs in front of her desk while she circled and sat opposite him, a window in back of her, sunshine glancing in and illuminating the room, June, Southern California.

“I’m Ms. Hastings,” she said and smiled, teeth well cared for, hair a mix of gray and black brushed back into a short pageboy. Her uniform said she was a nurse and Dwayne guessed that she was a special nurse because she had her own office, which was at the corner of the hallway where a perpendicular corridor led to the elevators and beyond that to another wing of the hospital, a location strategic for catching people on their way out. The positioning of her office also allowed for passersby to see into her office because the door was often kept open. Since Dwayne had been visiting his mother every day for the past week in this wing, the rehabilitation wing, he had seen Ms. Hastings talking to middle-aged people, usually couples. The discussions looked serious.

“Mr. Parker, your mother is going to be discharged from the hospital in two or three days. It’s dangerous for her to be home alone. If I’m not mistaken, you are away from home during the day due to work.”

“Yes,” said Dwayne, and noted that Ms. Hastings had the names right, for Dwayne had had a step-father acquired when Dwayne was

sixteen and then lost because of death when Dwayne was twenty-three and overseas. Dwayne's mother's name was Martin, Mary Martin, whereas Dwayne had chosen to keep his father's name, Parker, his father having died when Dwayne was twelve.

"The responsible adult, or adults, away from home during working hours..." Ms. Hastings was saying, hands on top of her desk, a computer monitor nearby but off to the side so as not to interfere with eye contact between her and her guests. Dwayne felt small, almost childish, sitting in her presence. He guessed Ms. Hastings to be about his age, fifty-two, but somehow Ms. Hastings seemed more mature, more in command. Perhaps it was the position she occupied, a position that had taken a lot of education and experience to reach.

"Here is a list of care facilities," Ms. Hastings said, and handed Dwayne four sheets of paper stapled at the corner, each sheet with names and addresses and phone numbers, groupings according to price. Dwayne took the papers and started flipping through them. Ms. Hastings brought his attention to the top of page four.

"This is a homey facility administered by a nurse who works on the ward your mother was in before she came here," Ms. Hastings said.

Dwayne looked at the address and then at the price. He saw that his mother's Social Security check would just cover the monthly charge. Dwayne brought a leg up and put his ankle on the knee of his other leg, white pants speckled with paint, work boots in the same condition. Dwayne was rangy, arms and legs long. He adjusted his bifocals and raised his eyes.

"Has my mother been told about this? You know, the care-facility idea?"

"No."

Dwayne nodded.

"Then I guess I have to tell her," Dwayne said.

Now it was Ms. Hastings' turn to nod.

"She ain't going to like it," said Dwayne.

"It's for her own good," Ms. Hastings said. "The elderly fall. It's particularly dangerous when no one is at home."

Dwayne knew that this was the argument, and it was a case well made, for that was exactly what had happened, his mother falling in the bathroom and not being able to get up, or to open the door and crawl out of the bathroom, her body blocking the door. That was where Dwayne had found her when he came home from work two weeks ago, his mother moaning behind the bathroom door and Dwayne having to shove the door to move her back a bit so he could reach in and shove her further away from the door so he could get in there and get her out of the bathroom. Once she was out and sitting on the edge of her bed she wasn't able to tell him how long she had been stuck in the bathroom nor how she had fallen.

Dwayne took a pencil from his shirt pocket and marked the care facility that Ms. Hastings had suggested. Ms. Hastings looked at her watch. Dwayne stood up.

"Take a look at several facilities," Ms. Hastings said. "Your mother will be discharged the day after tomorrow, possibly the day after that."

Ms. Hastings stood and came around her desk and extended her hand. Dwayne was almost taken aback by this touch of courtesy, but then he wasn't because he understood that she was asking him to do what needed to be done and that he was agreeing to it. But at the

same time there was something else, and it had to do with shaking someone's hand, for in shaking a person's hand there was the notion of friendship, and perhaps something more, such as 'we're in this together.' But Dwayne knew that they weren't in this together.

\*\*\*

The phone rang. Dwayne stood up and went to the dining room and answered it. It was Linda Kim.

"Yes. Sure. Come on over," he said.

He hung up and went back to the living room and sat where he had been sitting – an armchair, a coffee table pulled up in front of the armchair, a Thomas Brothers Map Book spread open on the coffee table, the papers Ms. Hastings had given him next to the map book.

Dwayne heard Linda's car pulled up to the curb after a couple of minutes, her parents' mini market only four blocks away. Linda operated a cash register there. Dwayne followed her sounds – car door opening and closing, footsteps on the lawn, footsteps on the porch, screen door opening.

She came in and crossed in front of Dwayne and threw her bag on the couch and plopped down next to her bag, black hair in a ponytail, legs in a pair of Levi's, white blouse tucked into the jeans. Linda let out a breath, living room warm, sunset an hour away, heat only beginning to subside.

"They want me to put her in a care facility," Dwayne said. "You know, a home for old people."

"Whadya talkin' about?" said Linda, eyes hooded, lips thin, four silver studs lining her left ear.

Dwayne told her what had taken place in Ms. Hastings' office. Then Dwayne said, "So I went in there to tell her, you know, to tell

my mother, and I was standing there looking at her, and I told her, and she just looked at me like she didn't understand. So I told her again and still she just looked at me. So then I said, 'Getting out of the hospital, Ma, doesn't mean going home.' She started to get it then."

"There's that other lady in the room," continued Dwayne.

"I wanted to keep this private. It didn't seem that that lady was listening because when she is she usually chips in. I didn't want that. Fortunately, that didn't happen. The TV was on. They were getting ready to serve dinner. I could smell it. They bring it up in these aluminum bins."

Linda smiled. "I've never heard you talk so much, Dwayne."

He looked at her and said, "It got worse."

"What happened?"

"I told her I was going to check out some of these places."

Dwayne picked up the four pages of addresses and shook them and dropped them back on the coffee table.

"Of course she was getting it now," said Dwayne. "She looked worried. And so . . ." Dwayne trailed off, eyes going down to the coffee table. From outside there was the sound of a car going by on this dead-end street in the San Fernando Valley, neighborhood of car alarms and pit bulls.

"Yeah?" said Linda.

Dwayne raised his eyes.

"So I told her, 'It's only till you get better, Ma. It's only till you get better, then we'll bring you home.'"

Dwayne's gray eyes behind his glasses went right to left.

"So?" said Linda.

Dwayne grinned, but his was a crooked grin, the right side of his mouth rising, the left level.

“There ain’t no getting better, Linda.”

“There ain’t no getting better from old age and dementia,” said Dwayne, “not to mention asthma and blood problems. Her arms are a mess. She’s got these bruises that take forever to go away and by the time they do go away there’s others to take their place. She can’t walk without a walker now. They got her walking around the hall with an assistant, a physical therapist, so that’s something – the walking might get better. They got a brace for her back but she doesn’t like it.”

Dwayne shook his head, thin hair receding across his scalp. He was still in his work clothes, painters’ whites.

Linda stood up. “Do you want a beer?” She placed a hand on her hip.

Dwayne looked up at her and was stalled as if discovering her beauty for the first time. He chuckled and said, “Yeah. A beer.”

Linda marched off toward the kitchen, ponytail swinging, house vibrating from her footsteps, a stucco affair built in 1950, two bedrooms. Dwayne watched as Linda turned from the dining room into the kitchen, her image disappearing, her footsteps felt and heard and then stopping, refrigerator door opening.

Dwayne still couldn’t believe it – Linda Kim, Korean-American, twenty-three years old. They had met the previous fall in an art class at a nearby community college. She was good at drawing and water-color. She had done a number of nudes of Dwayne set in motel rooms. Those settings, though, had switched to the two-bedroom stucco house after Dwayne’s mother went into the hospital.

Linda came back from the kitchen and handed Dwayne a can of Bud Light. She popped the tab on her can and took a drink and set

the can down on the coffee table and pulled up her shirttails out of her pants. She picked up her can of beer and took another drink and then took a step and sat down on Dwayne's thigh while looping an arm around Dwayne's neck, her can of beer near his ear. Dwayne opened his can of beer. His free arm/hand went around Linda's waist.

"You smell like sweat," she said.

"Oh."

"It's not bad."

Dwayne nodded.

"Let's get some tacos from Rico's," Linda said.

"Okay," said Dwayne and smiled. Then, for whatever reason, Ms. Hastings came to mind. Dwayne saw her and heard her: "We can only hope that our children think of what's good for us when the time comes." Dwayne had almost corrected this but thought better of it. Dwayne had no children, no wife, no brothers or sisters and no relatives except those back East and lost track of.

"Those tacos are sooooo good," said Linda, words oozing out of her mouth like honey.

\*\*\*

There were four houses at the end of a dead-end street, houses across from each other, not in a row. The nurse wasn't there but her husband, Frank, was. He ran the operation – collected money, assigned rooms, purchased food and supplies, paid wages to the young women who were actually the ones who looked after the elderly on a daily basis. The young women were from Jamaica, the Philippines and Mexico. Frank showed Dwayne a room. It was clean – a bed, a chest of drawers, a closet, two windows.

Three days after his talk with Ms. Hastings, Dwayne brought his mother over to the care facility in the cab of his pickup, a small cylinder of oxygen on the floor, walker thrown in back on top of drop clothes and painting gear, a camper shell over it all.

When Dwayne and his mother arrived the nurse was there, Mrs. Taylor, a tall, thick-boned woman who was a match for her husband, for Frank was outspoken and jolly with a big belly and a British accent. Dwayne recognized Mrs. Taylor from the hospital.

Dwayne waited around for his mother to get settled. She was a thin, frail woman in her seventies, complexion wrinkled and delicate and looking as though it might tear. Dwayne watched as dinner was served. He thought his mother would like the ice cream, which was dessert. She had liked ice cream all her life, but she only took a few bites, which was all she had attempted of the chicken and potatoes and salad. She said she was full.

Dwayne helped her into the living room where she sat on a chair in front of a blaring TV, her walker next to the chair. Dwayne didn't bother with her hearing aid because none of the other residents seemed to have them, not with the volume of the TV cranked up the way it was. Dwayne's mother had never learned to put the hearing aid in her ear and adjust the volume by herself. The hearing aid was for Dwayne's benefit.

The other four residents of the house, all women, came in from the kitchen one at a time and sat down. No one spoke. There was a game show on TV.

"Well, I'm going to be taking off, Ma."

She turned and looked at him.



"If you need anything, just ask Millie, okay?"

She only looked at him.

"I'll be back tomorrow. I'll see you tomorrow. Okay?"

Still, she only looked at him.

\*\*\*

The next day when Dwayne visited he found his mother in her room lying on the bed, a plastic tub from a large cylinder of oxygen at her nose. She was looking up at the ceiling. It was four in the afternoon, sound from the TV audible even after Dwayne closed the door. His mother looked at him and said, "Oh, Dwayne."

"How are you doing, Ma?"

"I don't like it here."

"Is there something wrong? Are they treating you bad?"

"I just don't like it."

"What's wrong?"

"I don't like it."

Dwayne looked around. The small suitcase he had packed and brought over the day before was against the wall next to the chest of drawers.

\*\*\*

He stopped by every day after work and every day it was the same: "I don't like it here." On the fourth day, he asked, "Is there something you want, Ma?"

She turned and looked at him. The windows of the room were open, no breeze. It was hot.

"I just want you to put me in your truck and take me home. That's the only thing I want."

\*\*\*

Sunset threw pastel shades on the walls through the screen door.

Linda found him in the armchair in the living room.

“What’s the matter?”

“My mother.”

Linda waited.

“Today she said, ‘I just want you to put me in your truck and take me home.’”

Linda waited.

“I told her I couldn’t do that right now. I told her I wanted to take her home, but I couldn’t right now. I told her that her doctor and the people at the hospital said it was best if she was where she was. I told her that it was dangerous for her to be at home.”

Dwayne stopped talking. Linda started to pace, hands in her back pockets. She stopped and looked at him. She took her hands out of her pockets and came over and put a hand on his shoulder.

“I think I’ll go home,” she said.

“Okay.”

“I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“Okay.”

\*\*\*

Dwayne’s mother was back in the hospital. Dwayne had gotten the call that afternoon while getting into his truck, exterior of a house finished, check in hand, cell phone buzzing. There was a follow-up visit by people from the hospital and they had found his mother in bed wheezing, lungs full of fluid. She was rushed to the hospital.

By the time Dwayne left the hospital his mother was asleep in a private room, and as Dwayne drove home, the events of the day

began to root about in his mind like a thorn, for if Dwayne had brought his mother home instead of having taken her to the care facility, then the fault of tardy detection, or even of prevention, might very well have been his, for the follow-up visit would have surely yielded the same results given the heat and smog of the day – lungs full of fluid, mother rushed to the hospital. Dwayne had dodged a bullet of blame, all bases covered, Dwayne an innocent bystander. Yet wasn't this part of the deal, part of the decision making processes, perhaps the process itself? Do the right thing and you're not to blame. This, though, wasn't innocence. It was insurance.

\*\*\*

They had spoken on the phone while he was at the hospital. Linda said she'd have dinner waiting when he got home. And she did – tacos from Rico's, tall-neck bottles of Budweiser, a pint of Smirnoff. She was in an apron and that was real nice because that was all she was in. Dwayne always took a day off after finishing a job.

\*\*\*

He found his mother sitting in a chair chattering like a cricket, voice brittle, utterances incomprehensible, hospital gown askew on her shoulders. Her eyes were half shut, eyelids fluttering, hands limp on her lap with wads of gray putty on her palms. Standing beside her was a heavysset woman, a physical therapist, who had his mother's dentures in hand and was scrubbing them with a toothbrush.

“Squeeze the putty, Mrs. Martin! Squeeze the putty! If we don't get you up and out of bed, then you won't be getting out of bed!”

The physical therapist smiled at Dwayne, but what she was saying was serious and she meant it as serious as if she were arguing with Dwayne's mother.

The other bed in the room was vacant and for that Dwayne was thankful. His mother had been moved from the regular ward to the rehabilitation ward four days before and it was only the day before yesterday that his mother told him that she was feeling better. And indeed she looked better, color on her cheeks, a paperback Nero Wolfe book opened and on her lap, her torso propped up in bed.

Then, the day after her apparent recovery, she was chattering softly in a weird way with her eyelids jittering when Dwayne arrived, room quiet and peaceful as a male therapist administered oxygen by turning the flow up and timing it and then turning the flow down. Dwayne asked the man what was going on, and the man said, "She's half conscious. It's like she's dreaming. She's not suffering." The therapist's voice was gentle, his movements gentle, his presence gentle. "You can stay if you like," the therapist said, and indeed Dwayne felt like staying because the room was at peace and felt comfortable.

Dwayne came up to his mother and got down on his haunches in front of her and looked at her fluttering eyes and said, "Ma. How are you doing?"

No response. He repeated himself, but again there was nothing except fluttering eyelids and mumbling.

Dwayne stood up, the therapist watching him. She was a strong lady in her forties. She turned and dropped the dentures into a glass of water. Dwayne stepped back from his mother and stood.

"Squeeze the putty, Mrs. Martin!"

The wad of putty in Dwayne's mother's left hand rolled off her palm and fell to the floor. The therapist bent down and picked it up,

Dwayne's mother's body listing to the right. The therapist grabbed Dwayne's mother by the shoulders to bring her upright. The piece of putty in the right hand fell to the floor. The therapist put the one piece of putty in Dwayne's mother's hand and started squeezing his mother's hand around the putty. But the hand was flaccid.

"Squeeze the putty, Mrs. Martin!"

\*\*\*

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know."

"Are you going to travel?"

"I don't know. I haven't thought about it. This was an open-ended deal. I had no idea when it was going to end. I didn't think it was going to end like this – so sudden, so simple."

Linda stood, Dwayne sat, Yellow Pages opened and on the coffee table, telephone next to the Yellow Pages.

"They'll take care of everything," Dwayne said, and motioned with his hand over the Yellow Pages.

"I just called them. They'll pick the body up at the hospital, cremate it, put the remains in a container. I'll pick up the ashes in about a week. They'll call me. I'll put a check in the mail today, eight hundred dollars."

Linda stood looking at him – at his long face, at his long arms,ropy muscle and raised veins along those arms. It was what she had tried to capture on paper – the long, rangy look.

"Give me some time," said Dwayne, and then went on to tell Linda about the phone call that morning at a little before six and about his going to the hospital.

\*\*\*

The ward was surprisingly quiet, a Sunday. He walked into his mother's room. A nurse came in, a short, dark-haired woman. She told him that she'd leave him alone and she left the room. Dwayne went to his mother's bedside. His mother looked small and shrunken. She looked as if she had gone back to childhood.

Dwayne reached and placed the back of his hand on his mother's cheek and it was soft, so awfully soft as if everything had gone out of her. He listened, but all he could hear was his own breath. He took his hand away and glanced around the room and was once again thankful that no one occupied the other bed. He stood trying to fathom the situation, the circumstance, the meaning of it all, but all there was was light coming in through the window and air moving in and out of his body.

At the nurses' station he filled out forms. His ears began to ring. A copy of the death certificate several weeks later would tell him that his mother's death was due to respiratory heart failure. He walked by Ms. Hastings' office. The door was closed. He continued on to the elevators.

Downstairs with a large plastic bag containing his mother's possessions in his hand he looked out at a mostly empty parking lot, day warming, promise of smog and high temperatures tangible.

Dwayne had lied to Linda about not thinking about what he was going to do, for all he could think about on his way home from the hospital was getting out of Los Angeles, the same thought and the same feeling as when he graduated from high school. He couldn't tell Linda about that because she was mixed up with him and he was

mixed up with her and he needed time to think about things while he took care of getting his mother's house ready to sell and then selling it. He needed to think about direction, he needed to think about Linda, he needed to think about what was best. But he found himself thinking about his mother as he went through the chores of bureaucracy and death.

\*\*\*

"New Mexico," said Dwayne. "A modest trailer in a trailer court is what I have in mind."

Linda was standing, Dwayne sitting.

"What about Eastern Europe?" Linda said.

"Can't do it," replied Dwayne.

"Why not?"

"I'm too old. I can't do it anymore."

"You seem okay to me."

Dwayne grinned.

"What about us?" said Linda.

"The Southwest ain't bad," said Dwayne.

Linda cocked a hip and set a hand on it.

"Living out there and visiting out there isn't the same thing," she said.

"I know."

"A trailer court and a trailer in the sticks?" said Linda.

"Something like that."

"Where do I fit in? You know, I'm alive, I'm here, I'm part of this. You haven't asked me."

"I am asking you now," said Dwayne. "Do you want to go?"

She stood looking at him, room hot, air dry. She took her hand off her hip.

“What about the fantasy we have? What about the freedom?” she said. “I can do anything with you. I told you that. I told you I want to get out of here and you said you did too. You said you always wanted to get out of here and I understood that, and now this – a trailer in New Mexico.”

Late September, a Saturday, midday, Los Angeles was suffering a heat wave, Santa Ana conditions, dry wind from off the desert. Escrow on the house had begun the day before. Linda was waiting, but Dwayne only looked at her.

Linda spun and went to the kitchen. She returned with two cans of beer and handed one to Dwayne.

“Georgia O’Keefe was in New Mexico,” said Dwayne. “That’s where she did her best work.”

Linda opened her can of beer and took a slug.

“I can go out there,” said Dwayne. “You can join me after I have a look-see, after I get settled.”

Linda started to pace.

“Or,” said Dwayne, “we can go together and look for a place together.”

“I don’t know,” said Linda. “I have to think about this. I have to think about this.” She turned – anger, decision, possibility. She was stunning.

“Yes,” said Dwayne. “Think about it. No right, no wrong. Just decision. “

She looked at his drawn face.



“I want you to go with me,” said Dwayne. “That’s for sure. But this is more than me. This is you. It requires decision. No formula, no fallback, no hidden agenda – no reasons other than this.” He gestured with his hand, the room and its occupants vivid.

“No ‘the right thing to do.’ None of that,” said Dwayne, utterances tumbling from his throat as if over a rasp.

She looked at him, at his long face, at the pain etched into the folds of that face. She was stalled.

From outside a crow cawed. Linda brought her can of beer up and took a drink. She lowered the can.

“Let’s go in the other room,” she said. “I want to do a drawing. We’ll turn the fan on.” □