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High Crimes and Misdemeanors

BY WILLIAM KARDISH

Since his father had no license and his mother couldn't drive, Dorlan Jr. hadn't told them what time his bus would arrive from boot camp. He walked home, carrying his duffle bag as if it were a suitcase, his body thrown on an angle like the Leaning Tower of Pisa, and thinking as he stepped over each crack in the sidewalk how all this was his father's fault. It was his father's fault that he had to walk, and his father's fault that he had gone to boot camp in the first place.

Two months ago, Dorlan Jr. and Senior walked past these very trees and houses of Geary, two thick figures with the same mangy, auburn hair moving through the still morning, two rusted bolts. Senior's hand was wrapped in sweat around Dorlan's neck, who was just a bit taller. "You know you don't have to leave, son," he said.

But both Senior and the Judge were anxious for Dorlan to leave. Senior, who hadn't hit Dorlan since the cigarette days of eighth grade, slapped Dorlan's face when told about the pot and the police. Dorlan had been too surprised to strike back; he considered the pot bust a minor incident, while Senior said it was "obscene." But it was okay for Senior to drink himself stale.

When Dorlan finally reached his faded brown-shingled house, he tried not to think of Senior as drunk right then. Inside, he closed his nose against the stench of smoky, fermented breath which had saturated the walls and carpets over the course of Senior's life, and walked to the

kitchen, where the air hinted bits of powdered cleanser and boiled cabbage.

His mother's back was to him as she mended a pair of pants by the bay windows where even the sunlight on her face couldn't totally wash away the yellowish tone in her skin. When Dorlan walked over and came around to face her, his mother lifted herself slightly to meet his hug with her own body. She then pretended to straighten her dress, and only looked at him in brief peeks from the tops of her eyes.

"Mamma, you look better than I dreamt about in those barracks."

"Stop, you." The corners of her mouth suppressed an embarrassed grin.

Dorlan pulled a chair over and sat down next to her, and they both watched the back garden from the window. "Where's Senior?" he asked.

She went back to her sewing. "Oh, he had a few errands to run. He should be back home soon. Said he couldn't wait to see you." She smiled faintly.

"Why do you cover for him, Mamma?"

She didn't answer.

"He's never going to change."

His mother shifted in her seat. "Dorlan, please."

Dorlan shut up for a minute. "I brought you a present," he said, handing her a large envelope.

She opened it, and pulled out a picture of her son in his dress uniform. "It's very handsome," she said, studying the photo. Indeed, the service had produced a remarkable physical

transformation of Dorlan. He now stood every bit of his five feet eleven inches, and the lazy ruffles of flesh from around his shoulders to under his buttocks now functioned with the unities of angles and shadowed curves.

"Hmm," his mother said thoughtfully, picking up her sewing again, "Maybe you should keep it to look at sometimes. You're going to change more, you know?"

Dorlan left her thought where it was and waited to catch her eye. "I want to make you happy, Mamma," he said.

She reached her hand to his. "I am happy, Dorlan. I'm very happy that you're home." She kissed him.

For his mother's sake, Dorlan didn't create a stir when Senior finally returned home around supper time. Through clenched teeth, he bore his father's excessive formality, a ridiculous posturing that Senior believed concealed his inebriation. "Tell me, my son, is it true that the military has not changed much *ipso de facto* since the term of my service?"

Dorlan's voice was gravel: "I wouldn't know anything about your service," and the conversation ended.

Senior went out again at night, and Dorlan stayed home with his mother. They talked, and he watered the tomato and melon garden, and played the piano for her before they went to bed.

The next day, Dorlan drove her to the store to make groceries. As they were coming home, a man staggering in the middle of the street had both lanes of traffic blocked. Of course it was Dorlan's father. Some kids were on the sidewalk taunting him, "You're going to get hit, you old drunk." "Look, he can't even walk."

Senior waved his arms grandly and tried to reason with the youngsters, "Children, I am your elder, and as such I should be accorded all the respect due someone of my advanced years and position in this community."

"If you don't watch it, your position is going to be flat on the asphalt," one of the sharper kids retorted, and the other kids laughed.

Dorlan was furious. He slammed the car door

and walked towards the scene. His father stumbled back a bit upon seeing him. Dorlan said loudly, "You're drunk, you old louse, you. Drunk again."

"What? What? Who the?" Senior tried to form a sentence.

"Just get out of the damn road," Dorlan said.

"I have every right to stand where I please. And you, what kind of military bearing is this? They used to teach young men respect."

"Out of the road, damn it!"

Senior raised his fists. "I must warn you, one more word, son, and I shall be forced to take appropriate action."

"Move!"

Before Dorlan's father had fully wound up his arm, Dorlan landed a heavy punch on his chin. His mother screamed and the children stepped back on the sidewalk. Senior lay in the middle of the road, blood seeping from his mouth and from where his head hit the tar.

Dorlan took his mother's hand, "Let's go."

But she wouldn't move. She pulled her hand out of Dorlan's and screamed again. The children returned, and a crowd began to gather.

Dorlan said gently, "Come on, Mamma. It's okay, it's okay." He put his arm around her.

She looked at her husband and then at her son. "That's my husband," she said, pointing at the bundle of dirty clothes in the road. "That's my husband!"

She turned to the crowd. "That's my husband! That's my husband!" she yelled.

The gathered faces eyed Dorlan suspiciously. He backed away a few steps, confused and in shock, while his mother kept screaming, pointing alternately at his father and at him, her words an undecipherable lament.

He turned and ran, and a few of the more upstanding men in the crowd gave mock chase. Dorlan sped down the block, his green uniform perfectly keeping the shape of his sculpted body, even as he turned the corner. He was gone. ■