

Maybe That, Too

By

Patricia Schultheis

Early March in Baltimore, and at the museum, rain batters the sculpture garden. Two women sit by a window in the museum's café, where the centerpiece is a sugar bowl of crayons. On a paper tablecloth the woman with a silvery poof of hair has drawn the garden's soaring orange stable. Throughout lunch, she had sketched and talked, sometimes stopping mid-sentence to gaze out the window.

Then, after a minute or so, her companion Liz would gently rustle the mink-lined raincoat draped over her chair, and Dawn would begin her story again: how she and Tal had planned a trip to Ireland for their fortieth anniversary; how his diagnosis had been unexpected, and how his doctors first had been hopeful, and now were not. She has capped her stable with a chartreuse gargoyle and topped the gnarled tree behind it with a red-eyed crow. Her bracelet's gold bangle of the Empire State Building dangles when she pats her poof of hair and puts her crayon back, tapping it a little to signal she's done.

Liz looks at what she's drawn and raises an approving eyebrow. "You know, Dawn, that orange thing out there looks better with your creature on top. Maybe you should talk to the director about adding something like that." She then slings her raincoat over her arm. "I'd like to pop into the shop. And, if it's okay, maybe make a quick stop for a onceover... I have a client coming in from Houston. Do you have time?... I know how it goes."

Dawn gathers her slouchy handbag. Of course, Liz knows how it goes. Thirty years earlier Liz's own husband had brain cancer—the desperate hopes, the humbling courage, Liz knows all that. Others had offered to help, but only Liz really knows.

They go to the museum shop, where the merchandise reflects the current Degas exhibit. Liz ignores all the ballerinas pirouetting over scarves and placemats and beelines instead to a pile of African-print pillows. But Dawn stops to finger the toe-shoe shaped handle of an umbrella.

"Watch how, even when they're still, those dancers command their space, Dawn. That's the mark of a real lady." Her aunt Bridgett's whispered admonition comes back to her. The two of them in the balcony at a New York City Ballet for a Saturday matinee. Dawn, eight, her father long gone, she and her mother living in a Hicksville, Long Island, walkup, but every week, she took ballet lessons that spinster Bridgett paid for. But not for her leotards and shoes—"I can only do so much."

Seven years of lessons. Seven seasons of dancing the Nutcracker. But never as Clara. Ballet, however, had given her good posture, and that, with a degree from Manhattanville College plus a pretty face, had made William Jennings Talcott with his Yale B.A. and old-money Maryland pedigree seem like recompense for all those mean Hicksville years.

She leaves the umbrella and wanders out to the lobby. Through the café's entry she watches a waiter crumple up her drawing. Years ago Tal's grandfather had been on the museum board and had insisted she and Tal go to some charity event. Her tree with the red-eyed crow had been the one she'd seen Tal leaning against, his back to her, his tuxedo open, one ankle cocked behind the other. One hand pressed against the tree, the other holding the woman whose cerise skirt billowed around and between his legs. Just as well her tree's in the trash now. Decades of weather and growth—not one single molecule of young William Jennings Talcott's palm

remains on that tree's bark now. Her daughter had urged her to go to the exhibit when Dawn told her that their neighbor from St. Bart's Way had invited her. She volunteered to come up from DC so she could stay with her father for the afternoon, telling Dawn she'd read somewhere that it's essential for caregivers "to take care of themselves."

Dawn takes out her phone and calls Amy now. "We're fine, Mom, don't worry. This Masters is great. They're at the thirteenth hole, and it's a three-way tie."

"Did your father eat anything?"

"A bowl of applesauce and some yogurt."

"That's all?"

"He didn't want anything more."

And then Amy's yelling, "In the hole... in the hole!" and Dawn hears Tal yelling. And then she hears Amy again: "No, no, Dad. That wasn't the bet, and you know it. The bet was if Justin birdied, not bogeyed... pony up."

When Amy quiets down, Dawn asks her to put her father on. Tal sounds almost energized. "I can't remember a Masters as tight as this. If only the weather holds. A storm's threatening."

She tells him that Liz wants to make a stop. "Something about one of her clients. But if you need me home, I'll...."

"No. No, we're, fine. How was the exhibit?"

"Lots of pastels and tutus, you know Degas."

"Just a pas de deux away from pathos?"

"Well, judging from the tchotchkes in the shop, a very profitable pas de deux." He chuckles—amazing he still has the strength. Then Amy is shouting again, so Dawn says good-bye. And from the lobby, she watches the waiter wheel away the trash with her crumpled drawing. Liz's business is personalizing condos that universities and law firms maintain for out-of-town guests, and she bustles out of the shop with a bagful of pillows. "Everything okay?"

"Fine. He seems to be actually enjoying himself."

"The stop I want to make won't take long. It's just that this guy coming in from Houston is a big deal astrophysicist. Hopkins maintains a unit in the Braddock."

“The Braddock?”

“Yeah, why?”

” “Nothing... just coincidence. Before the Braddock went condo, Tal’s grandfather had an apartment there.” Thirty-five years of living in Baltimore has taught her the city’s code of civility: never divulge ugliness. No need to tell Liz about the first time she met Tal’s grandfather, the old man’s hand on her shoulder, steering her toward the telescope on his sunporch, showing her the constellation Draco, the dragon, and saying he hoped she’d feel free to come use his telescope whenever she wanted. And then excusing himself, leaving her alone with the dragon, maybe thinking Draco would keep her so enthralled that she wouldn’t hear him inside. “She’s pretty in an Etruscan sort of way, Tal. At least her absent father’s Guinea blood isn’t that dark Sicilian pool. The mother, you say, is Irish. Better be careful or you’ll get a dozen Joycean street urchins. And for what, Tal? A fluttering flame you’d have to pump damn hard to light?”

At the Braddock, in a fifth-floor unit smelling of quicklime and fresh paint, Liz fluffs the pillows. She sets one in the corner of the sectional couch, then tosses the other onto a leather armchair. She cocks her head at a querying angle toward Dawn. “I remember back when we lived on St. Bart’s Way, and you painted your dining room gray. I thought that was so daring. You were light years ahead of the pack. So give me your opinion. What do you think about Mr. Astrophysicist’s pillows?”

Dawn removes the one from the couch and sets it nearer a lamp where the pillow’s ochre picks up the brown in the shade. Next, she takes the one on the armchair and sets it on an ottoman. “Mr. Astrophysicist can cushion either his back or his feet... not both.”

“You sure have a flair, Dawn.”

“Actually, flair is how I met Tal. The summer I graduated from Manhattanville, I was working for an interior design firm in New York... I knew how to dress, make a nice impression. They had an investment bank for a client... I had no idea what an investment bank was. But Tal’s grandfather had gotten him into some sort of training program. So, there I was, and there he was, both of us lonely kids in the big city. Would you believe I’d never even been south of New Jersey until Tal took me to Baltimore to meet his parents?”

“Must have been quite a shock... the Talcott set and all.”

“Let’s just say it was an interesting adjustment.”

“I’ve got to check the wine.” Liz bustles toward the kitchen. The refurbished unit with its crown moldings and hardwood floors has retained its pre-war atmosphere, but the kitchen’s cabinetry and appliances are sleek and contemporary. Liz stoops to the wine cooler tucked under the white island. “Let’s see... the sauvignon blanc from Argentina that Mr. Astrophysics Guy requested, a nice pinot grigio, a Napa cabernet, another sauvignon blanc. Oh, what the hell.”

She pulls out a bottle of red and takes two glasses from the hanging rack. “Have time?”

Dawn texts Amy, gets a quick reply, and answers Sure. She clinks her glass against her old neighbor's. "How on earth did you ever manage. Liz? I mean you had three small kids when Tommy got sick."

Liz looks out at the gray sky. "Well, I'll tell you... white shorts, knock out drops, and Charlie Pierce that's how."

"Charlie Pierce who lived in the old stucco place next to yours?"

"Right. That spring, when the doctors said they couldn't do anything more for Tommy, the grass didn't get the message. It just kept growing and growing. So I gave Tommy knock-out drops, put on a pair of white shorts and got out the mower. And damn, if before I hadn't cut one row, ole Charlie Pierce didn't come hippity-hop through the hedge. Took care of the lawn and a whole lot more."

"I belong to a support group... you hear all sorts of things."

I'll bet." "Some of the members, it's terrible how they beat themselves up.

"Survivors guilt. I guess it's only natural."

To Dawn, the wine feels like a warm rush of good. "One woman, her husband already has had the last rites. Twice. Her sister wants her to book a cruise for November... her husband will probably be gone by then... but she won't do it. She said something that stunned me. She said there's a line between self-preservation and betrayal. And she doesn't want to cross it."

"Nobody does, but who gets to draw the damn line, that's what I want to know."

"I guess everybody draws their own."

"My point, exactly. All I know is that I never felt guilty about Charlie Pierce. The kids and I couldn't have made it without him. He was my rock, kept me sane. And kids need a sane mother." Liz rinses the glasses, gives a final appraising look around the apartment. "Listen, there's a unit for sale and a neurobiologist in Boston likes this building so much, he wants to buy in. Today's the open house. Think you have time for a peek?"

"Sure, why not?" The unit is empty except for the realtor with an avid smile. He hands them folders containing the specs, and Liz begins talking fees and taxes. Dawn wanders through the echoing rooms. The unit presents the same perspective as the third-floor Hicksville apartment where she grew up: the same ratio of sky to street, the same slant of light. She feels as if the stretch of years between being twenty-two and light-footed with anticipation as she rushed down 34th Street to meet a gangly boy outside the Empire State Building had led to this moment when she stands alone in an empty back bedroom in an old Baltimore building. Across the courtyard, she sees the apartment of Tal's grandfather—"And for what, Tal? A fluttering flame you have to pump damn hard to light?" She takes out a pen and on the back of a sheet of the unit's specs, sketches the wardrobe she inherited from Bridgett. Her heavy gold charm rags across the page as she sets the wardrobe between the bedroom's two windows. Next, she sketches the bed and bureau from the St. Bart's guest room. She goes into the master bedroom and draws the banjo

clock hanging near the St. Bart's fireplace. She can imagine the sunroom chaise longue against the opposite wall. A rainy Sunday... reading, napping... yes, she can imagine that. And each imagining feels like a sin. A wish to a future lived without the husband whose decades-long work has made her Braddock dreams possible. The husband whose sorrows she never bothered coaxing to light, preferring, instead, to let them fester in the dark, so she wouldn't have to deal with them. His teen-aged older brother, drowned in the Chesapeake, his mother's alcoholism, his father's—she'd never really took to heart what impact any of that had on a gangly kid growing up under the rigid strictures of the Baltimore code. Never allowed her husband's stories about loss and grief to penetrate into herself, preferring to interpret Talcott stoicism as imperviousness. And to think that money had insulated him from pain. She had to think that, because the foundational belief of her marriage was that William Jennings Talcott was rock-solid, invulnerable... my God!

“Ready to go?” Liz stands in the doorway, her raincoat buttoned up. Evening has fallen by the time she drops Dawn off at St. Bart's Way. When she gets home, no one's in the living room, and on the TV two sportscasters are speculating about how long the rain will delay the tournament. She finds Tal and Amy eating pizza in the kitchen, Amy complaining that the delay might mean the Masters won't resume until the next day when she'll be at work.

Dawn sets the Braddock folder by her cookbooks on the country hutch and joins them. Tal tells Amy that she can catch the final round on the golf channel. And Amy answers that watching the tournament after it's already finished is like reading the last chapter of a mystery first. Normal, Dawn thinks, if it weren't for the hollow in Tal's jaw where he hadn't bothered putting in his bridge, the three of them could be mistaken for a normal family on a Sunday evening, a normal family with all the time in the world.

And then Tal gets up to check if the delay's over. And his pants droop and his shirt hangs, semaphores of the unescapable truth: Life is jumping ship. Dawn watches Amy's eyes follow him, then ricochet back to her own, begging her mother to take some of her pain. But Dawn can't—her own pain is filled to over brimming. Amy sighs and starts clearing away the pizza. She knocks the Braddock folder off the hutch, and its inserts spill over the floor. She starts picking them up, then stops, studies them. And stays down by the floor, looking at them very hard. When she stands up, her eyes hold fury. “What are these, Mom?”

“Nothing... just sketches.” Dawn tries explaining how Liz had to stop at the Braddock for a client and that “some neurobiologist in Boston” was interested in buying a condo there—but Amy won't be detoured. She keeps looking at the drawings. Dawn watches her daughter deliberately study one sketch, then another, until she finally blurts, “I was just killing time, Amy. Liz and the realtor were going 7 on and on about taxes and all.”

“But these are plans, Mom. Plans! That's the clock from the living room. And Aunt Bridgett's wardrobe! You drew Aunt Bridgett's frickin' wardrobe!”

“They're just doodles, Amy.” “They're not! You were planning where your furniture would go, for God's sake. For after Dad goes, you're already arranging frickin' furniture.”

Dawn knows Amy's fury is fed by her fear of losing her father, but her own terror has rendered her catatonic, sapped her of the volition to comfort her daughter, to kneel beside her, put her arms around her, and hold her head to her own shoulder, so they might share the blessed release of tears. Still on the floor, still holding the drawings, Amy stares past Dawn. And Dawn turns; Tal is standing in the doorway. If he were a rain-soaked beggar, he couldn't have looked more bereft—he had to have heard.

His voice croaks. "They cancelled for today. Play starts at one tomorrow." Then he shuffles away, back to the parlor and the TV, leaving Dawn and her daughter alone. Amy gets off the floor, slaps the drawings on the counter. "I have to get back to Washington.

" Dawn tells her to be careful driving home. "... This rain." But her motherly admonition achieves nothing. Amy won't even look at her. Dawn hears her go down the hall, stop to say something to her father—Dawn can't make out what— then slam the front door. And her daughter's gone. Dawn shoves the realtor's folder into the pizza box. She tries crushing the box, but it's too stiff for the stainless container at the end of the counter, so she wrests the white plastic bag out of the container, then stuffs the pizza box inside. Then she knots the bag and puts on Tal's old windbreaker hanging by the door, feeling comforted by the shape of his bones impressed into the sleeves, his scent rising from the lining. And assaulted, too, because soon that's all she'll have of him. She bundles the bag out the door and into the green plastic can at the edge of the patio. Through the misty rain, she rolls the garbage down the driveway and parks it at the curb to be hauled away in the morning. She goes up their fieldstone walk to their front door and in the security panel sees her reflection. Her poof of hair has loosened. Soon it will fall to her shoulders just as it had the night William Jennings Talcott unpinned it and let it run like silk through his fingers. "Dawn," he had said, "you'll always be my sunrise. Every hour, every minute, a sunrise." From some recess of her memory comes the admonition she must have heard in a Marymount theology class: "The only trustworthy guide through life's trials is grace." But she knows that grace is a gift given outright. A bolt to the soul on the road to Damascus. And she hasn't received it. Instead, in Tal's jacket she looks like a bedraggled, exhausted child. And feels as she had when she was eight and received toe shoes in October, and heard her mother, "Consider those shoes your Christmas present. Don't whine if there's nothing else."

Tal's slumped in his chair, watching a nature show, lions loping across the savannah. He mutes the sound and summons a weak smile. She sees that he's weighed everything, has decided to exercise the only power he has left: the power to absolve. "Was it nice?" he asks, "... the condo?"

"It was okay... needed some work."

"How many bedrooms?" "Two." "Fireplace?"

"No. Want some wine?"

"Sure, why not?"

In the kitchen, she hangs up his jacket, pours two glasses, and goes back to the living room. And when she hands Tal his, her gold Empire State Building charm chimes against his glass. He smiles. "Maybe tomorrow, after the doctor's, we can stop by and see it."

Dawn drinks her wine. “Maybe tomorrow, after the doctor’s, we can get Chinese carryout and watch the end of the Masters.”

“Maybe that, too. Or, I can record it. I don’t mind reading the last page of a mystery first.” He takes her hand, fingers her charm, the one he’d given her the morning Amy was born. An Empire State Building charm because Amy, at least the potential of Amy, had been born two years earlier somewhere between the iconic building’s lobby and its observation deck. On the evening when a gangly boy from Baltimore had taken a pretty girl from Hicksville into his arms and asked her to marry him, the two of them ascending past all the floors and all the energy, effort, toil, drudgery, ambitions and aspirations expended by people working on those floors, while the two of them, sealed in a soaring box, rose to the observation deck, where a silvery springtime mist enveloped them and blinded them to the sunset horizon beyond.

Patricia Schultheis’ fiction and creative nonfiction have appeared in three dozen literary journals, and been anthologized alongside Alice McDermott and Annie Proulx. She is the author of Baltimore’s Lexington Market, a pictorial local history (Arcadia Publishing); St. Bart’s Way, an award-winning short story collection (Washington Writers’ Publishing House); and a memoir, A Balanced Life (All Things That Matter Press). She’s the recipient of numerous fellowships and awards, including from The League of American Pen Women.