

Fault Line

2250 words

“What the heck,” Edna said, sitting up.

“Was that the doorbell?” Nick said.

“It sure sounded like it . . . please be careful.”

Nick found his slippers and lumbered down the stairs. Through the side glass he could see a car at the bottom of the driveway which looked like Andy’s, so he opened the door.

Andy was wearing a baseball cap and an overcoat, and right away he smiled and held his hands up, like everything’s fine, this is no big deal and sorry to wake you up.

“I didn’t want you freaking out,” he said, “so I didn’t bring the squad car.”

“It’s okay,” Nick said, nervous. “What do you got?”

“So your daughter-in-law’s Katie, right? Griffin? . . . They brought her in.”

“Wait--Katie’s all right?”

“She’s fine. But she hit someone in the face, a woman. Allegedly. . . . With some kind of kitchen implement.”

“My God,” Nick said. “That’s . . . inconceivable. You sure? . . . What woman?”

“Reason I even picked up on it, I was doing paperwork, getting ready to take my lunch. Two in the morning, but you know what I mean. Anyhow I see Jonny waiting up front.”

“Oh no . . . Did he . . . take her home then?”

“She should be loose in a few hours,” Andy said. “Has she had any violent tendencies in the past, that you’re aware of?”

“Wait, you’re interrogating *me* now?”

“Nickie, not at all, just trying to help out. Get to the bottom of it.” Andy lived down the block. They played on the same old man’s softball team, and once a year the two families got together for a barbecue.

“Shame on you,” Nick said, and closed the door.

Edna was standing there in her robe. “No point trying to sleep anymore, do you think?” she said.

“I suppose not,” Nick said. “Shall we call Jonny?”

“Why not wait a while, have some coffee. I’m happy to do drip or the machine, Hon, whichever you prefer.”

“You never liked her, did you?” Nick said.

Edna sat down on a stair. “Why do you do this?” she said.

“I mean, I get it. The mother-in-law and the only-child business. . . . But you could have at least disguised it better.”

“Okay,” Edna said. “You are probably correct.” Her voice cracking slightly.

“We have any bacon?” Nick said.

When Nick walked in, Katie’s parents, Max and Noreen, were sitting in the living room with Jonny. They got up, and there were timid hugs all around.

“She’s upstairs,” Jonny said, before Nick could ask. “Mom come too?”

“In the car,” Nick said. “She didn’t feel like socializing this morning . . . Now you mind telling me what the fuck happened . . . sorry Noreen . . . or is this a bad dream?”

Max cleared his throat and spoke up. “Nick, this is awfully stressful for everyone, but we need to keep it civil.”

“Oh yeah?” Nick said. “Well how about you civilly tell me about it, or I may have to hit *you* in the head.”

Max said, “Sorry Jonny, we’re gonna take off. We’ll be in touch soon. Please tell Katie don’t worry.”

When they’d driven away, Jonny said, “Way to go Dad. I always knew I could count on you in a crisis.”

“That’s my fault, then,” Nick said. “But who’d she hit?”

“Oh, some gal . . . We were at a party, a bunch of English department folks . . . and apparently there was a point of contention . . . they were in the kitchen, and Katie, she whacks this person with a big serving spoon.”

“Jesus . . . Blood?”

“That was the problem, there was a lot. Her nose . . . What compounded it though, Katie hit her a couple more times, cut her up a bit.”

“Unbelievable . . . She okay now? The . . . victim?”

“I think so. Spent a few hours in the ER is my understanding, and then got released.”

“You knew her?”

“The woman? I’ve seen her here and there. She’s a first-year grad student.”

Nick looked outside. Edna was reading a paperback in the car.

Jonny said, “I know . . . It’s so entirely . . . out of character. You think you know someone, but . . .”

“What now?” Nick said.

“Well, when she’s ready, she’ll come down.”

“Wasn’t my question.”

“Oh . . . So there’s a court date, and a lawyer. The Griffins are taking care of it of course.”

“When?”

“A couple weeks . . . And a mental health evaluation was also mentioned.”

“She have any history, show any signs . . . forget that,” Nick said.

They stopped for lunch at Chick-fil-A in Walnut Creek.

Edna said, “Remember when we were here last? The young man at the counter told us the story, about the basketball players.”

“Yeah the Warriors,” Nick said. “Supposedly Curry and Thompson ran into each other here by accident. Both half-white guys incidentally.”

“What could that possibly have to do with anything?”

“I’m just saying . . . Thompson went for 60 Tuesday night, by the way. Against Indiana . . . On the other thing though . . . it add up? Or what.”

“Well . . . why don’t you ask Andy to look into it further?”

“That mope,” Nick said. “He enjoyed telling us.”

“He did,” Edna said.

Thursday morning Nick looked up from the newspaper and said, “We’ll get through this. Let’s invite everyone for dinner.”

“Kind of short notice,” Edna said.

Nick said, “Tell ‘em to come, don’t ask.”

Edna made her lasagna and Nick picked up a couple racks of ribs from Costco and fired up the outdoor grill. Max and Noreen showed up first, and Nick acted like nothing had happened the other day, which seemed the logical way to handle it. After the first round of martinis, Max told a Donald Trump joke, which Nick resented, but he let it go and pretended to laugh.

Katie looked pretty good, considering. She and Jonny arrived arm in arm and smiled a lot and you wouldn’t have known they were all in a situation, except that Katie had politely said hello to everyone and then that was about it.

That first weekend Jonny’d brought her up to the cabin in Tahoe, when they got a chance to know her,

Nick was hoping this was the one. Now he couldn't help wondering if Katie was slightly off her rocker, and he watched and listened to Max and Noreen in ways he hadn't before, to see if there was some kind of genetic clue.

There were after-dinner drinks and Nick made a fire and they sat around playing cards, no one too concerned about it being a weeknight. It was starting to drag on, but Nick figuring a little unification never hurt.

Close to midnight the doorbell rang. Nick excused himself and answered it, and it was Andy, walking the dog.

"Couldn't help notice the gang's all here," he said, with a big smile.

Nick thinking, in a perfect world I'd deck him for sure. "Yeah, well, we're a little busy," he said. "So unless you've got something, I'm gonna wrap up this little conversation."

Andy said quietly, "He was banging her, is what it appears now." Nodding. "Jonny."

Nick was trying to digest it.

"Word is she's dropping the charges," Andy said. "You might ask him if he spoke to her."

Nick watched Andy go, cutting across the lawn, then pausing while the dog inspected a bush. There was plate noise in the dining room, and Edna was serving a second round of pie and ice cream.

“Who on earth was *that*?” Max said.

“Just a neighbor out,” Nick said. “Saw we were up.”

“Gosh, your neighborhood is so different than ours then,” Noreen said. “No one would think of ringing the bell after nine, at the latest.”

“Well, two ways to look at that,” Max said. “Our deal, we’re more spread out, there’s privacy, but here you’ve got the interaction.”

“Depending,” Edna said.

Nick said to Katie, “Sweetie, mind if we take a walk?”

Katie hesitated. She had an apron on and had been helping Edna in the kitchen. “That’d be fine, I guess,” she said.

“Hold on Dad,” Jonny said, “what are you doing? She obviously *does* mind.”

“I’m talking just a little air, it’s nice right now,” Nick said, holding up his hands like Andy at 4 in the morning. “Nothing to do with the . . . other nonsense . . . So don’t have a conniption fit.”

“Kay?” Jonny said.

“It’s all good,” Katie said, and got her coat.

They walked the other direction from Andy’s house. After half a block Nick said, “The thing of it is, I’ve been trying hard to picture it, but I can’t see you swinging a spoon at someone.”

Katie said, “It’s certainly not something . . . I would have predicted.”

“So my son then, he caused it,” Nick said.

“I beg your pardon?”

“It’s okay . . . that’s a good quality you have . . . I never thought I’d be figuring out a way to injure my offspring, but that’s what I’m working on.”

“Jonny played no part in this. Something snapped . . . I’m a bit worried about myself actually.”

“I see. You were socializing with this person, talking restaurants and music and movies . . . and then you flew off the handle. So to speak.”

“Pretty much, yes.”

They got to the end of the cul-de-sac and turned around. Nick said, “Well, that moon tonight, the orange, it’s special, you know it?”

“It really is,” Katie said.

Nick had a service that cleaned the leaves out of his rain gutters. He used to do it all himself, but as his knees bothered him more it didn't seem worth it to do all that climbing. He still took care of the first floor, the low ones, but he left the high stuff for the pros.

Saturday, Jonny was up on the ladder instead of the service. It was a little early in the season, you might still have to re-do the job, but Jonny was happy to help out. Nick hadn't confronted him, but suspected Jonny was aware that he knew, and would do anything to make amends. It was just the two of them, Edna was doing an all-day art workshop in Santa Cruz.

They took a lunch break and put the ladder on the side of the house, and Jonny got back up there. He was right above his old childhood room, gloves on, reaching to the right, sweeping out the leaves and dropping them down in fluttering bunches.

The other night after everyone left, Nick had watched a YouTube video on extension ladder safety. He'd always had the impression that when you lean too far, the risk is the ladder sliding sideways. It turns out that's wrong, that the ladder starts rotating. Whatever.

Nick waited until Jonny made his most off-balance reach, the furthest one for that little section before

they'd have to move the ladder. It was harder than he thought, but with both hands on the bottom left and some elbow grease Nick persuaded the thing to start rolling, and it looked a lot like the demonstration in the video, Nick yelling out, "Whoops!" and Jonny not making any noise but scrambling to grab the vinyl gutter and pulling it down with him the two stories.

The side yard was dirt, and Jonny seemed dazed but okay. Nick had hoped he'd break something, not his neck or anything, but at least inflict some damage he'd have to deal with for a while.

"Jeez man, what happened up there?" Nick said.

Jonny staggered inside and laid on the couch and Nick got him some water. A few minutes later there was an ambulance, which was kind of surprising, but Nick supposed someone had seen it and overreacted, and what could you do.

They took Jonny in for observation. Around dinner time Andy showed up again, this time with the squad car. There was another uniform guy with him.

Andy said, "We'd like you to come down, answer a few questions there Bud."

"You would?" Nick said.

"The boy says you did it on purpose."

“That’s crazy, Petersen . . . You know me a whole lot better than that.”

“Oh, and something else,” Andy said.

Nick silent now.

“We got a cute little new assistant DA’s been working your other case? . . . Caught up with her yesterday. Like I say, very easy on the eyes.”

“C’mon,” Nick said.

“What it turns out, it wasn’t him doing the banging after all.”

“Unh?”

“No. It was her, messing with some dude. Pretty sure your boy was aware of it . . . I guess you’d call it a catfight, the other girlfriend . . . Factor in a little alcohol, and there you have it.”

“You’re putting me on,” Nick said.

“This little ADA, she’s good. Dug around at the college and such. That’s where they work, right? Jonny and Katie? . . . So’s the other guy.”

Nick took a minute. “Fuck . . . me,” he said.

