
NUDE BRUCE
REVIEW

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Throwing in the Dish Towel

By Beverly Jean Harris

"Don't get too close—that ball might hit you in the face," George said to my mom.

George was relentless. The joking began the instant we stepped in the house. I was sure Mom would lose her patience.

My mother was standing, gnarled hands gripping her walker, directly in front of the television in the den. Her slight frame belied her feistiness and fierce will, which had blossomed with her new-found freedom after my dad died fifteen years earlier. She missed Dad, but she tried to fill the emptiness with new interests that had dwindled with the years into more passive pastimes, like the tennis match on TV.

"Oh, go on," Mom said to my husband with a dismissive wave of one hand.

George and I had taken advantage of my afternoon off for my dental checkup and had just returned from shopping. As we walked past Mom on our way to the kitchen, she kept her eyes on the TV screen.

At 97 years old, Mom was still interested in life, but life mostly filtered through to her via television. Though she'd been avoiding the news—whereas I had become morbidly obsessed with it—ever since the election of a certain "soulless" (as Mom said) reality-TV star, Mom found plenty on cable and PBS to occupy her. Lying on the den sofa, or standing in front of the TV, she watched *Masterpiece* ("That Ross Poldark never smiles," Mom

would say) and *Nature* ("Those meerkats are the cutest things ever, but I wouldn't want a family of them in my backyard!"). She dredged up ancient episodes of *The Tonight Show* and *Andy Griffith* and *The Waltons* ("I've seen this one a million times," she'd complain, and then keep watching).

During the day, though, it was mostly figure skating or baseball or tennis that engaged her. As an English teacher in the Virginia hills in the early 1940s (where she had cooed with delight at the mice the boys slipped into her desk drawer for a prank), she had been required to coach boys' basketball—though at first she knew nothing about it—and discovered her love of sports. In her nineties, she developed an interest in horse races. Hours before a televised Triple Crown, she'd repeatedly go over her list of the entries and get herself so excited she'd be worn out by post time. One day, George and I walked into the den to find Mom asleep on the sofa—and the Preakness half over. I woke her up. "Oh, phooey!" she said, blinking herself further awake and focusing on the homestretch. After that, George would sometimes ask her, "Is there a race on TV today?" Then he would teasingly act out what might happen if Mom were to find a race to watch: "*And they're off!*" he'd call out, and the next second he'd drop his head and pretend to snore.

As I said, George was relentless. I worried that George's jesting exhausted and exasperated Mom, though she usually seemed to pay him little attention. Mom would often preface an observation with "Let me say this," and with barely a pause George would cry, "Say it!" Every Monday, Mom reminded herself, aloud, to take her methotrexate, and George would respond, "There's a

method to your trexate." "Oh, go on," Mom would always reply. I sometimes thought I saw a smile on her face before she quickly suppressed it, but she never failed to wave him away, as she might a fly.

George seemed resigned to her brush-offs. "I know, I know," he'd lament with a half-serious hangdog shrug. "I'm the skunk at the picnic." George had once told me that whenever he acted silly as a child (whether he neighed like a pony when warned to "quit horsing around" or talked all day in a raspy croak like Froggy, the nettlesome bow-tied and vested amphibian from *Andy's Gang*), his father would tell him "You're not normal," so eventually he stopped joking with his family.

The tennis game had been going on quite a while, since before we'd left for the store. Tennis mystified me. Mom had tried a few times in the past to teach me the strange "love" scoring, but I never grasped it.

The good thing about tennis was that even if the TV sound was cranked up to an astronomically high volume, it was still a quiet game, so the TV wasn't annoyingly loud in the kitchen as George and I put away the groceries—organic brown rice, kale, quinoa. I pulled a box of Ring Dings from the bottom of the mesh bag and held it up for George to see. "Really?" I said. He had obviously slipped the box of little crème-filled devil's food cakes into the shopping cart without my noticing.

The landline, which Mom insisted we keep, rang at a volume that could have woken the dead, since Mom also insisted that we set the ringer at its loudest. I dropped the Ring Dings box on the counter and walked across the kitchen to answer the call.

"Saved by the ring . . . ding," George mumbled.

It was the rheumatologist's office calling.

"Dr. Allegra needs to change Mom's appointment from Monday to Wednesday, but I can take her," I said to George, holding my hand over the phone's mouthpiece. Since I worked in New York most days and George worked playing music most nights, he usually drove Mom to her appointments, but I knew he was scheduled to be in the recording studio that coming Wednesday afternoon. I didn't want him to change his plans, especially if his plans involved music.

He took a carton of milk from the refrigerator and pulled a saucepan from the cabinet. "That would be great."

I told the receptionist that Wednesday would be fine.

As I was hanging up the landline, my mother made her way into the kitchen, her walker squeaking. "There was the sweetest lady on *Johnny Carson* last night," she said. "She saved potato chips. One looked like a camel. Another looked like a pear. And one looked *exactly* like Bob Hope!" She glanced at George. "George, if you boil water in that saucepan, don't put the flame too high, like you usually do. It singes the sides of the pan."

"Okay, I won't." He took the canister of cocoa powder from the cupboard.

"And, George, don't keep that light on over the stove—we don't have any replacements for that bulb."

"I can buy some replacements," he said, washing the saucepan.

"And George, you left the butter out of the refrigerator again last night. If you keep doing that, it's going to go rancid."

"Okay, I'll try to stop doing that. Do you want some cocoa?" He was speaking to Mom, not me. I love cocoa, but he didn't want to tempt me since I was trying to avoid sugar. "Chocolate is *your* favorite vegetable, too, isn't it?" he asked Mom.

Mom ignored George, as she often did, and looked at me, her eyes bright. Wisps of white hair haloed her head like a dandelion gone to seed. "I'll tell you why your sister couldn't stand pieces of cream in her milk when she was a child—it was because she was raised to not digest milk."

George's half-smile and furrowed brow told me he was as baffled by this weird non sequitur as I was. "I don't get it," he said. "Did you tell her 'Here, drink this milk, but don't digest it'?"

"Oh, go on," my mother said, a barely perceptible glint in her eye, which faded the instant she turned and saw George drying the saucepan with the daisy-design dish towel that her friend Louise Morrisey had given her for her 97th birthday.

Mom wanted things done a certain way. There were rules. She had a place for everything. And particular things were not to be touched or moved. The digital barometer sat on the upholstered stool in the den, within view of the sofa where Mom spent most of her days and nights. The broken cover for the light above the stove waited perpetually on the kitchen counter in case we remembered to ask our neighbor to repair it. And the daisy-design dish towel that Louise Morrisey had given Mom for her 97th birthday belonged on top of the tin bread box—and was, according to my mother, too pretty to be used.

"No, no, no!" Mom cried. "Don't use that towel! George, why can't you remember these things?"

George sighed and tossed the towel onto the dish rack by the sink. He set the saucepan on the counter. "I guess you don't want cocoa," he said, his voice flat. He left the kitchen, and as he climbed the stairs his tread was less than buoyant.

Mom picked up her binoculars from their designated spot on the kitchen table next to the jar of rubber bands, and she and her walker rolled back into the den.

It always amazed me how, later in life, my mom seemed blissfully unaware of any distress she created in the wake of her squeaking walker. Maybe, as with the news, she turned off whatever she didn't want to see or hear.

The day before, Mom had yelled at George when he scraped the remnants from his dinner plate into the "trash" (the tall plastic-lined bin by the paper shredder) rather than the "garbage" (the tin bowl next to the sink). The day before that, she had chastised him for using the new yellow sponge instead of the old green one to wash the cat's bowl. And the day before that, she had reproached him for not putting the scissors back into the red mug on the telephone table.

In these past years in my old family home whenever my heart felt stretched between George and Mom, I would usually retreat into practicality. I began to follow Mom into the den to tell her about the call from the rheumatologist's office—but George's injured feelings tugged me in the other direction, and I went upstairs instead.

"Sorry she yelled at you again," I said.

He was lying on the bed, the cat already on his chest, as he surfed through stations on the muted TV. His guitar lay beside him. Probably he'd been intending to play it, but the cat had claimed him first.

"According to your mom, I can't do anything right," he said, staring past the cat at the TV, a lock of his thick salt-and-pepper hair falling over one eye. He settled on a program about planets and stars. On the screen I saw a depiction of a frozen alien moonscape with a dark sky above. I wondered if the barrenness and lack of atmosphere consoled him.

"Please don't feel bad," I said. "It's so hard to remember exactly how Mom wants things done. And it seems like there are new rules every day. The only reason I know any of her rules is because I grew up here. You're at a disadvantage."

"Ha! I guess I've always been at a disadvantage. I did everything wrong according to my parents too."

George's father commuted each morning to a job he hated, and each evening he took out his frustrations on his family. Berated and belittled, George learned to walk away and pick up his Fender. Music saved him, he would say. At twenty-one, he walked away for good and began living on his own.

So different from my own family. We were always polite and genial with each other until the very rare occasions when somebody got angry, usually my dad, usually when something Mom said offended him. I always feared the rare blowups and became hyperaware of the slight shifts in tensions that portended them. Strange, though—Mom had changed. Nowadays she wouldn't

hesitate to express her irritation at anyone or anything, which was proving difficult for me to get used to.

George met my mom and the rest of my family when we started dating in our forties. George really got to know my mom, when, several years after my dad died, it became too difficult for Mom to live on her own, and George and I moved into my old family home to help care for her.

I realized George was probably as miserable here with Mom and me as he'd been with his parents.

Like George's father, I commuted every day to a job that left much to be desired, leaving home early and getting home late. Much of the burden of caring for Mom fell on George.

And what toll had this taken on us? We'd been married only a year when we moved in with Mom. Mom was the center of our marriage. Not always a frosted crème-filled center, either.

And where was *my* center? Had I lost myself? Music had once saved George, but what would save me? And why did I feel like I needed saving? As soon as these questions arose, they submerged again, since I had no idea how to answer them and no time to figure it out.

George scratched the cat's head. When he spoke again, his voice was softer. "Not that I'm comparing my life now to my life at home as a kid," he said. "The truth is I didn't really even have a family until I met you."

Relief rushed through me. He was okay here with us after all. He loved us. Maybe even as much as he loved his music.

"But," he continued, "I learned a long time ago that I just couldn't win with my parents. And now and then I

have to remind myself that I can't win with your mom either."

My heart went out to him. He was trying his best to please my mom. There had to be a way for them to get along better.

"Maybe if you didn't joke so much," I said, "then Mom wouldn't get annoyed . . ." As soon as the words left my mouth, I regretted them—I didn't want to sound like George's father, telling him he wasn't normal.

George shook his head, staring at the icy blue surface of Europa on the TV screen. "You've got it backwards. *You* need to lighten up."

Lighten up? That was the last thing I needed to do! "I can't lighten up. I need to keep on top of Mom's Medicare Advantage claims and her mail-order prescriptions and her non-inflammatory diet, plus I need to keep the house in order, the way Mom wants it—"

"And you're doing a great job. But *you* can't win with your mom either. We're never going to measure up to your mom's standards."

I began to panic. "But we have to try!" The alternative was unthinkable: we would drown in a deluge of my mother's never-ending nitpicking.

Unless maybe we were already inundated. Maybe I was struggling to swim, trying to get the strokes right, but flailing and failing, soon to be swamped and sucked underwater. They say when you're in a rip current you need to stop fighting, let go, and float—but that seemed counterintuitive.

"You worry too much," George said, which he'd been saying to me quite often lately. "Your mom just needs to throw her weight around a bit. Sometimes I let

it bother me, but I shouldn't. She doesn't mean any harm. We'll all be fine." He was touching the cat's ears, first one and then the other, causing her to flick each ear in quick succession as she purred. The cat adored him. "Life usually stumbles into some kind of balance. Don't forget to tell your mom you'll be taking her to Dr. Allegra."

"I'll tell her now." I felt myself slipping back into my pragmatic mindset as I went downstairs. I caught my reflection in the mirror on the landing and, with a slight shock, realized that the face in the glass wasn't my mother's—it was *mine*. My hazel eyes. My creased forehead. My ridiculous intensity. When had I become my mother? Pretty soon I'd be watching *Andy Griffith* and writing lists of Kentucky Derby entries and measuring the singe marks on the saucepan.

My vigilance had merged me with my mom. I had never stopped being hyperaware of the shifting tensions around me. I had never learned, as George had, to just walk away—even for a moment—to give myself some distance.

Back on her sofa, Mom was peering at the TV through the binoculars. "I can see the ball better this way," she said.

"Mom, Dr. Allegra switched your appointment to Wednesday, so I'm going to take you. George is busy that day."

She lowered the binoculars. "No, no, no! You need to reschedule it. George needs to take me."

My chest tightened. "Mom, I can take the day off." What was I—an old *Waltons* rerun? "Can't *I* take you?"

"No! Only George knows where to park—near the entrance but not *too* near the entrance. He brings my

pillow inside. He carries my green notebook and writes down everything the doctor says."

The tightness in my chest dissipated. She was 97, I told myself. She needed things to be a certain way—because at 97, after having let go of driving and teaching and maybe even hope for the world, you sometimes grabbed onto those few small things you could still control. Routine and consistency meant peace of mind.

Mom fixed her hazel eyes on me, still making her case. "After the doctor, we always take a ride to Long Branch to look at the ocean, or we visit Laird's Stationery, or we drive past the cherry trees on Ridge Road." She paused. "Plus George and I have our little jokes," she said, almost defensively.

An outing with George was a joy, an adventure. It was life itself, unfiltered.

And—who knew?—Mom liked George's jokes.

I smiled. "Okay, Mom. I'll reschedule it for a day when George can go with you."

She nodded once and, looking satisfied, lifted her binoculars to continue watching the tennis game.

I remembered that love means no score.

In the kitchen, I laid the daisy-design towel across the dish rack to dry. I understood why the dish towel was special to Mom. It had been mailed to her by an old, dear friend she might never see again. It had been given to her to celebrate a birthday that might be her last.

And I understood why, to George, it was just a dish towel.

I made cocoa. I carried a mug of it into the den to Mom. And then I made two more mugs of cocoa—one for George and—why not?—one for me. An image of the

frozen blue moonscape flashed across my mind: there was something more I needed. Something elemental, something music-like and immaterial, something singular to me. In time, maybe I'd know. But for now, a little sweetness was a start. Mom's rules weren't the only ones that needed to bend. I tucked the box of Ring Dings under my arm (I could avoid sugar tomorrow), took hold of the mugs, and once again climbed the stairs.

Contributors

(in order of appearance)

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John Delaney's publications include Waypoints (2017), a collection of place poems, Twenty Questions (2019), a chapbook, Delicate Arch (2022), poems and photographs of national parks and monuments, Galápagos (2023), a collaborative chapbook of my son Andrew's photographs and my poems, Nile (2024), poems and photographs about Egypt, and Filing Order: Sonnets (2025). He lives in Port Townsend, WA.

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Kim Hunter is a midwestern writer with writing that appeared in Lavender Review, HLFG, Blue Heron Review, Crab Fat Magazine, and others. She served as editor of The Prompt. Her writing is committed to highlighting small town queer life and the people living seen and unseen in rural America.

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Andrea Janov is a mess of contradictions, fan of parallel structure, and nostalgic pack rat who writes poetry about punk rock kids. She believes in the beauty of the ordinary and the power of the vernacular. Her work strives to reveal the art in what we see, say, do, ignore, and forget every day. She has been published in several kick ass journals and has two collections out in the world, Mix Tapes and Photo Albums (EMP Books 2022)

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