

# BLUE MOON

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Mozart's glorious notes emerge dubiously from the old upright, their edges flattened for the journey across the recreation room to the couch where I'm sitting. I adore the boy who's playing the notes; I'm delighted to be there in the room; I even admire Mozart, after a fashion. But the arrhythmical clunking offends my eardrums and makes me wish Willy's practice hour would come to an end.

By the way, I remind myself, it's not only Willy – most amateurs trying to play classical music run up against similar obstacles. Let's face it, our ears are accustomed to the way the piece sounds when Horowitz plays it on his favorite concert grand in an impeccable acoustical setting. But instead, what we have to endure are indifferent performers on untuned uprights competing with noisy air conditioners and a low hum from the TV in the next room. As listeners we wince, while the performer's self-esteem sags another notch . . . .

The wobbly notes stop for a few moments, as Willy puzzles over some unfamiliar fingering. When he resumes playing, it's back at the start of the last section. I groan inwardly and take a sip of my vodka and tonic.

I play the piano – the old popular standards, show tunes, a little jazz. Whenever I play for new acquaintances, several people come up to me afterwards to bemoan their inability, after ten tedious years of childhood lessons, to sit down at the keys and play anything at all.

"It's the largest untapped national asset we possess," I'm fond of pontificating at such moments. "Here's a roomful of people, an aggregate of 242 years of studying classical piano, and not a single note to show for it! And even those who remember a favorite etude are terrified to perform it in front of others, because they know it won't sound like Horowitz. . . ."

The boy finally completes the piece, the final chord sounding like he's utilizing both elbows. Willy gets up from the bench and heads over to my couch. He's a sturdy, almost handsome, 13-year old, whose Diamondbacks sweatshirt and pained expression proclaim that he'd rather be out tossing a baseball than stuck in the rec room of his parents' ranch-style home in a Phoenix suburb.

"Ugh!" he exclaims with a snort. "Well, G/D, what did you think of that crap?"

Since Willy uttered his first words, "G/D" has been his name for me. The letters stand for "granddad," a form of address that his mother, Helga, tried to impose on him. (This is the same Helga who insisted on naming the boy Wilhelm, although I've never heard anyone but her – and even she, only to command obedience – call him anything but "Willy.") It was Willy's father, John – my stepson – who devised the shorthand phrase, which was easier for the toddler to say. I liked it immediately. Helga waged a brief battle over it when Willy's pronunciation later improved, but ultimately she acquiesced and the name stuck.

I toy with being candid, but instead opt for a supportive – if slightly evasive – response. "Willy, I enjoy very much sitting here in Phoenix on a two-week vacation, sipping a vodka and tonic, and listening to my handsome grandson tickle the ivories."

It's true – at least the part about how much I enjoy being there with Willy this afternoon. Before the piano practice began, we spent a splendid hour discussing Willy's schoolwork and friends and then poring over a scrapbook of family photographs that I brought along on the trip.

"Thanks, G/D, but you don't need to make me feel better. I *know* how lousy I play. I don't like the music, I hate practicing scales, my teacher is an asshole – and things aren't gonna get any better."

By now, Willy is perched on the armrest of the couch. I put my arm around his shoulder, drawing the boy down onto the cushion. Willy comes readily, his body curling alongside his grandfather – mirroring my favorite picture of the two of us that occupies a prime spot in the scrapbook.

Rather than risk striking a false note by disputing Willy's disclaimer of talent, I decide to take another tack.

"Have you ever heard the expression, '*deja vu*'?"

Willy shakes his head no.

"Well, it means the funny feeling you get when something you're experiencing now seems to have happened to you before. That's the feeling I get hearing you talk about how you dislike piano lessons."

"You mean that you've heard me complain about them before?"

"Sure, but that's not what I have in mind. I'm thinking, rather, of another young man who, almost 55 years ago, felt exactly the same way as you do now – and who expressed his feelings in almost the same words you just used."

"Who was that?"

"Me."

"*You!*" The expression on Willy's face is one of complete disbelief.

"That's right, yours truly, old G/D. I was just about the same age then as you are now."

"Oh, come on, G/D, you're just trying to make me feel better. Hey, you're a terrific piano player."

"Thanks for the compliment, Willy. But at your age, I was having just as much trouble as you, and I was equally unhappy with my prospects."

Willy turns his body on the couch to face me directly. He seems interested, but still skeptical.

"So, then, what happened to change things?"

"*Blue Moon*," I reply, inserting the hook.

"A blue moon?" Willy looks puzzled. "I don't get it."

I take another sip of my drink, then shift my torso toward the boy. "Well, here's the story. I had taken four years of classical lessons, just like you, and still couldn't play anything decent. My parents sometimes made me perform for relatives or their friends, but I would never play for my gang."

"Hey," Willy interrupts, "that's just the way I am. You mean you felt that way too?"

"Absolutely. And I hated practicing, didn't respect my teacher, and had no knack for the classical stuff I was trying to play."

"So where does the blue moon come in?"

"One night, there was a party for seventh grade kids in the living room of my friend Joel's house. For us, it was one of the first times that boys and girls partied together – and with romance on our minds! About an hour into the party, Joel walked over to his parents' piano and sat down at the keys. Before then, as far as I knew – and I was one of his best friends – Joel couldn't play a note. All of a sudden, I heard the familiar melody of the song *Blue Moon*, by Rodgers and Hart, which was popular then. The piano sounded squeaky, but the tune was unmistakable. I couldn't believe my ears.

"Most of the guys tried to pretend that nothing was happening, but the *girls*, well, they just about flipped. Within a minute, they had all gathered around Joel at the piano – in fact, two of them sat down on either side of him on the bench. They were singing the words and making a big fuss over him."

I stand up, walk over to Willy's piano, and seat myself on the bench. "I can visualize the scene, just as if it happened yesterday – it made such an impression on me." Now I begin to play the notes of *Blue Moon*. After a few bars, I sing the words.

"Blue moon,  
You saw me standing alone,  
Without a dream in my heart,  
Without a love of my own. . . ."

I finish the song, stand up and return to the couch. Willy claps his hands, and gives me a thumbs up sign.

I resume the narrative. "Later on that night, I got Joel alone and asked him how he'd done it. 'Oh,' he said, 'it was no big deal. I took two lessons from this good guy who taught me how to fake the tune using the melody line and the chords. Then I fooled around with it for a few nights, so I'd be able to play at the party.'"

"Faked it?" Willy looks puzzled. "What does that mean?"

I try to make my explanation simple. "Well, it's the same thing I do when I play. I just take the melody line of the song in the right hand, then put chords to it in the left hand, add rhythm, and presto – *Blue Moon*."

From Willy's look, it's not clear whether he understands, but he's really more interested in the story. "So, what happened after the party?"

"Well," I reply, easing into my favorite part of the tale, "I wanted those girls sitting around *me* at the piano! And, like most kids, I enjoyed popular music a lot more than classical. So I used my allowance that week to buy the sheet music for *Blue Moon*, took it to my next piano lesson, and asked the teacher to show me how to play it."

"Did he?"

I smile at the recollection. "He wasn't happy about it – his first response was, 'Better, young man, you stick to Beethoven' – but I guess he decided it was worth a shot to see if anything could improve his mediocre pupil. So he taught me to play *Blue Moon*. The only problem was –" I chuckle, recalling my youthful disappointment – "it sounded like the song had been written by Beethoven! That was *not* what I had in mind."

"So, after some heavy debates with my parents, I convinced them to let me take a few lessons from Joel's teacher. Then I bought a book that showed how to use chords, and also a fake book – they were illegal then, but Joel's teacher knew where to get one – that provided the melody lines and chords for a number of songs. And *then* –" I pause for emphasis, having now reached the point I'd been building up to.

"Then what?"

"Then, I was so happy that I started practicing a lot. Soon I got to the point where I could play a bunch of popular songs that the kids all knew, and I would sit down and play them at parties. . . ."

Willy winces, apparently dreading the thought of a public performance before his peers. "Weren't you frightened?"

"No, not after a while. It was much easier than classical music. You didn't have to play the exact notes at the exact time with the exact fingering, like you've been trying to do today. It was more free form – or, to use a big word, improvisational; and that suited my personality much better than the discipline of the classics. Best of all, there was no model that you had to sound like – no Horowitz by which everyone judged your performance and found you lacking. . . ."

Willy sits quietly on the couch next to me, pondering this revelation. I finger my glass patiently, awaiting the boy's reaction.

"Do you think that I could do that, too? Although it might not be *Blue Moon*, which sounds nice but I don't really know it – maybe something like *Truckin'* by the Grateful Dead, which my dad listens to on his CD player all the time."

I don't hesitate. "I'm sure you can do it, Willy. I'll get you started on this while I'm out here – teach you enough that you can take it from there after I leave."

"What about Mom, though? She's a tiger on this classical stuff. Whenever she's home, she just sits in this room and listens to me practice. . . ."

"My mother did that too, Willy. But deep down, she was a realist, and my enthusiasm for popular music, and the progress I began to make, convinced her to come around. I'll be happy to talk to your mom about this. . . ."

As if on cue, at that moment I can hear the sound of the front door opening, and Willy's mother announces her arrival home. Willy winks at me, slips quietly over to the piano, and begins playing the Mozart sonata once again.

Moments later, Helga enters the room. She's of average height, a dark blonde wearing rimless glasses. I sometimes visualize her as an older Sonja Henie without the smile. She's dressed today in a conservative dark brown suit.

Helga comes originally from Austria. She met my stepson John back in their mid-20's, while they were both skiing at St. Anton, and married him within a year. They took up residence in Phoenix, where John is employed as a mid-level research scientist. Helga's English is superb, with just the slightest trace of a German accent on certain words.

"Greetings, Helga," I call out from the couch.

"Hey, Mom," Willy exclaims, jumping up from the piano to give her a big hug and kiss.

"Hi, Willy. Hello, G/D." While returning Willy's hug, she twists around to face me. "Tell me the truth, G/D, has Willy been practicing his scales and his Mozart religiously?"

Before I can reply, Willy interrupts. "Hey, Mom, G/D has a great idea for a new way to make me like practicing the piano a lot more and play much better than I have been."

Helga's arms drop to her sides, and she backs a step away from him. When she replies, she speaks slowly, seeming to choose her words carefully. I notice a "v" sound replacing the "w" as she pronounces the boy's name.

"Now, Willy, I'm sure G/D has a number of interesting ideas on that score, but for right now, your best bet is to work on the music that's in front of you. Try to get it a little smoother before your next lesson with Mr. Simpson."

"But Mom, don't you even want to hear G/D's Blue Moon idea? It's guaranteed to improve my playing within days, and" – here he looks over his shoulder to me on the couch, licking his lips suggestively as he speaks – "it gets all the girls to gather round the piano, with one or two of them even sitting beside me on the bench."

I start to chuckle but, glancing at Helga, see no trace of a smile on her face. Her expression, rather, is one of grim determination. As she talks, her gaze shifts back and forth between the two of us.

"All in due time, Wilhelm, all in due time. But I'll tell you one thing right now. Even though I greatly admire your grandfather's playing, if his idea has anything to do with switching

from classical to popular music, or giving up the lessons with Mr. Simpson, or neglecting your scales and your Mozart exercises – then both of you can just forget it! You're going to receive a classical music education if I have to give up my job and sit here with you every afternoon to make sure you practice."

Helga's voice, which started out in matter-of-fact fashion, turns harsh as she utters her threat. With the final word, she turns abruptly and exits the room.

I'm stunned by the force of Helga's reaction. The subject has clearly touched a nerve in her that I haven't previously encountered.

The boy, although clearly disappointed, seems less shocked. "I guess I should have known Mom wouldn't go for it," Willy says. "Once she makes up her mind on something, she's almost impossible to budge."

I begin to formulate a less charitable response about his mother's attitude but think better of it and remain mute. Willy strikes up the Mozart once again. After a few painful bars, he turns and says to me, playfully, "But I sure will miss those two girls sitting on either side of the bench. . . ."

I smile. What a lovely grace note, I'm thinking – the boy's good instincts always fill me with warmth and love. I decide to reply in kind.

"You know, Willy, that part of it didn't prove to be all that great. Sure, the girls hung around the piano when I played in high school and college and afterwards, but so did my male friends – and they picked off all the good prospects, one by one. By the time I was ready to call it a night, the only females left at the piano were the fat ugly ones nobody else wanted – the ones with Voice-10, Looks-3. . . ."

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I sit alone in the living room later than day, flipping idly through the pages of *The Wall Street Journal*. Nothing much is going on back east – I'm not missing a thing.

The living room, like the rest of Helga and John's house, is conservatively furnished and quite symmetrical, as if the spacings between objects had been measured with precision. There's a monochromatic quality to the couches and chairs, with no visible splash of color.

I put down the paper, stand up, and head toward the kitchen to make myself a snack. At the far end of the living room, I pause by a big round table on which sits an oversized lamp and a number of family pictures in small brass frames. The frames, which I've noticed at various locations around the house, are apparently a favorite decorating motif of Helga's – in fact, I recall Willy once remarking on it.

There's a photo of my wife Ruth, with her arm around our daughter Meg. Ruth is wearing her trademark light blue dress. She looks so full of life – it's hard to believe two years have elapsed since she passed away. Once again I experience that same sense of loss whenever a memory of Ruth surfaces. It's as if I've completed a jigsaw puzzle except for a large piece in the center that must have dropped out of the box somewhere along the way.

My gaze shifts to pictures of Willy and his father, Willy and his mother, Helga and John together, and all three of them. There are several stiff, obviously posed portraits of Helga's parents – probably taken at John and Helga's wedding in Vienna. And a few shots of Helga's brother and sister, complete with their spouses and kids. . . .

With a start, I suddenly realize there's no picture of me on the table. I quickly scan each of the frames again, but my first impression was correct – I'm the only one in the immediate family who's missing.

This is ridiculous – I should send them a picture of myself. The one from last year at the beach, for instance, or the one of Willy and me in the scrapbook. . . but then I realize they have many pictures of me. John, in fact, took some excellent snapshots at Christmas last year. So, why isn't one displayed?

I pick up the frame containing the photo of my wife. As I look into Ruth's eyes, a conversation flashes into my mind – one that I'd all but forgotten about until this moment. It took place five or six years ago, on a plane returning from a visit to John and Helga's home. I was on a high, fresh from some wonderful moments with Willy, which I was recounting to Ruth.

"Better enjoy Willy while you can," she said.

Her caustic tone was uncharacteristic. "What does that mean?" I asked.

"It means that I think the gates are closing fast."

"The gates?"

"That's right," she said. "Don't you see what your daughter-in-law is doing?"

"Helga?"

"Of course, Helga," Ruth replied impatiently. "She's molding that boy in her image faster and with more fervor than I thought possible. And *her* image does *not* include the likes of you."

I shook my head slowly from side to side, my standard gesture in rejecting a concept I don't care for. "Oh, come on, Ruth. Sure, Helga has a strong personality, and she's obviously a major influence on Willy, but not to the exclusion of others. What about John?"

"John fulfills a father figure role that Helga considers important. But in case you hadn't noticed, our son is on a very tight tether. The problem with *you*, though, is that Helga can't tether dear old G/D – so ultimately, she'll have to exclude you."

Although I usually trusted Ruth's judgments about people, this seemed like just so much hyperbole at the time. I've always been skeptical of such paranoid-tinged observations – fancying myself as drawn to the better angels of our nature. At any rate, neither of us raised the topic again, and I didn't give Ruth's observation a second thought.

That is, until now. Suddenly, the omission of any image of me, in what is clearly Helga's selection of photos – the ones of Willy, for example, weren't those that a father would have chosen – has taken on a sinister cast. Maybe it's because her reaction to the piano issue earlier in the day

seemed so harsh and out of proportion. And then, I recall another incident that occurred yesterday – something I didn't attach much importance to at the time.

Willy and I were watching a baseball game on television in the den when Helga came over to sit with us on the couch. At the first commercial break, without saying anything, she picked up the remote device and clicked to a news broadcast on another channel. When it became obvious after a few minutes that she didn't intend the programming change to be temporary, Willy asked if we could go back to watching baseball.

"You're too young to be fitted for an undershirt and a can of beer," Helga replied.

"What does that mean, Mom?" asked Willy.

"Ask G/D," she said. "It's his generation."

Willy turned to face me, a puzzled expression on his face. "What does it mean, G/D?"

"It means," I replied, in my best diplomatic fashion, "that your mother is not a red-hot baseball fan. And since she's joined us on the couch, let's give our full attention to what's going on in the world."

Am I now getting paranoid? Is Helga, in Ruth's phrase, trying to exclude me? Well, if she is, I certainly won't let that happen. Willy means too much to me. And, by God, I have some important lessons to teach the youngster. I want a role in his life . . . .

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"Did you ever have any formal job as we know it today?"

"Well, I was a manufacturer. . . ."

"What kind of factory did you have?"

"I used to make the Star of David, the Jewish star. . . . As soon as religion came in, I was one of the first in that."

John and I both chortle at the familiar dialogue from *The 2000 Year Old Man* on the car's CD player. It's the next day. I'm accompanying my stepson on some errands, and Mel Brooks and Carl Reiner are building up a full head of steam.

"How did you make it?" Reiner inquires patiently. "Did you have tools?"

"We didn't have lathes," replies Brooks. "I employed six men, each with a point. They used to run together in the middle of the factory, and in the great speed they would fuse. . . ."

"Thus making a star," concludes Reiner. The studio audience roars.

"Yes," says Brooks, moving smoothly into his topper. "We would make two a day because of the many accidents. You have six men running at high speed with points. . . ."

I break up, laughing heartily. "Did you hear that, John – the 'many accidents' they had, fusing the points at high speed. What a concept!"

There's a broad smile on John's face as he brakes for a red light. John, in his early 40's, is stocky with blue-gray eyes and a receding hairline. "Dad," he says in his earnest manner, "I'm so glad you thought to bring along the Brooks album – it conjures up such memories."

"For me too. Remember when we memorized all the best bits, and then we'd recite them whenever we had to wait in a skilift line or got bored on car trips. Well, the second week I'm out here, I'm going to give Willy a crash course on the 2000-year-old man – I can't wait to see his reaction."

Carl Reiner's voice breaks through. "You never thought of going into anything else?" he asks.

"No," replies the 2000-year-old man. "I had an offer, though. A fellow came to me, Simon."

"John," I whisper, "Listen to Reiner deliver the straight line."

"What did Simon ask you to do?" queries Reiner.

Mel Brooks turns reflective. "He said he had a new thing, a new item, looks like a winner, going to be a big seller – it's called a cross."

"A cross," John repeats, imitating Brooks' pronunciation, "a real 'winner'."

Brooks continues his reverie. "I looked at it and I turned it over and looked at all sides of it and said, 'It's simple. It's too simple'." He pauses for a delicious beat. "I didn't know then it was *eloquent*."

"Bingo!" John exclaims. "What a line! But when I first heard the original tape, I didn't know what 'eloquent' meant. You laughed so hard, though, that I was embarrassed to ask. Finally one day I checked it with Mom, who set me straight."

"You were never much for dictionaries. . . ."

Brooks breaks in again, this time in a regretful tone. "I didn't know it would be such a hit."

"You turned him down," says Reiner sympathetically.

"I said I'm sorry but I'm too busy." Brooks' voice drops away, as if he's ending a thought. I've always loved this moment, when the audience wonders whether the joke is finally over. Does Brooks possibly have anything else in reserve? Of course he does. . . ."See, I could have fired four men – two men run together, *bang*, you've got a cross!"

John and I roar at that line for the hundredth time. Now I reach down and switch off the CD player. "That's enough for one day. We'll come back for more tomorrow and hear about Dolly Madison –"

"And a fellow named Phil. . . ."

"Yes, and how the 2000-year-old man kept a locker in Europe."

The light changes, and John steers the car briskly through the intersection.

"Dad, I'm so glad you've come out to stay with us for a whole two weeks. Those weekend visits in the past have always seemed so rushed. I've really been looking forward to this."

I'm pleased that John feels this way and can articulate his feelings. When I married Ruth – a year after her first husband, Harry, died suddenly of a massive stroke – John was only three years old. We hit it off right away, and most of the time I forget he's my stepson. Our relationship is just as strong as the one I enjoy with his sister, Meg who I did sire two years after Ruth and I wed. Unfortunately, I don't get to see Meg much nowadays – she lives and works in London, closing in on 40 and unmarried.

I have to admit, though, that John gave us some worrisome days until he finally settled down with a wife and then a child. For one thing, John had a terrible adolescent temper. Ruth always said he inherited that trait from his biological father, Harry, who was evidently prone to severe blow-ups – one of which may have triggered the fatal stroke.

I remember one day when John, in a fit of pique over being misquoted, got so mad at another boy that he beat him up badly. I was in the next room at the time and able to intervene before real damage was done. Then I had to apologize to the boy's parents and administer stern punishment to John. Some years later, there was that girlfriend, the one John discovered was cheating on him – he knocked her around quite a bit. . . . But now, from all appearances, John seems to have his temper well under control.

"I'm delighted too, John. Living thousands of miles away from you guys is no fun – especially with Willy growing up so fast. I'm scared I'll miss something."

"He's crazy about you. That's all he could talk about for the last few months – the things we'll do when G/D gets here."

"He's a fine boy. You've done a first-rate job bringing him up."

"Thanks, Dad, that means a lot to me. But even more of the credit should go to Helga. She's been a terrific mother – balancing those responsibilities with her job and all the charities and other activities she's engaged in."

I stretch my legs out as far as they can go, smoothing out the wrinkles in my trousers. "She's quite a whirlwind, isn't she?"

John's voice takes on that familiar earnest quality I know so well – a tone that says the jokes are over for the moment, and now I've got something serious to tell you. I always try to be sensitive to the signal and reply in kind.

"Dad, I'm sure it's no secret to you that the research work I'm involved in pays relatively little and demands an awful lot of my time. I find the work fascinating, and I hope something important will come out of it, but it's not a conventional career path. Helga's income as a tax

advisor lets us do a lot of things that wouldn't otherwise be possible. And her irregular hours allow her to spend a lot of time with Willy – time that I can't devote to him under the pressure of the research."

I nod my head affirmatively, but make no response. After a few seconds, John speaks again.

"You know, after all these years, I really don't know how you feel about Helga. You've never said much one way or the other. You two seem to get along all right. Am I missing something?"

It's one of those moments that, depending on my reply, could either be game-changing or simply pass without notice. John is presenting me with a prime opportunity to convey my true feelings toward Helga – feelings which I might not otherwise proffer on an unsolicited basis.

But what, I'm wondering, *are* my true feelings? How significant are my recent clashes with Helga? Is the absence of my photo on that living room table meaningful? Am I blowing Ruth's observations from back then out of proportion? How would Ruth advise me to reply to John?

I'm not sure of the answers to these questions, but I realize that the more important issue is whether I want to sully this splendid vacation by getting John perturbed – a reaction that any suggestion of a clash between his wife and stepfather is likely to cause.

"Helga has many admirable qualities," I reply, speaking slowly and choosing my words with care, "not the least of which are, one, her good judgment to marry you, and two, her apparent ability to make you happy."

My reply seems to satisfy John – who, like his stepfather, doesn't go out of his way to confront problems – and after a moment, he switches topics. "But, Dad, since we have some time to talk, tell me how *you're* doing? What does it feel like to be retired?"

Now I'm on more comfortable ground, although not without a pang of regret over having squandered my opportunity to be candid about Helga. "Well, to put it into perspective, I would say that from the time of the visit you and Helga made to New York three years ago to the present, my life has changed about as much as anyone's could have in such a short period – first, with your mother's passing away almost two years ago, and then with my having retired at the end of last year."

"Has it really been two years since Mom's death?" John asks.

"That's right." I look straight ahead, my eyes shifting from the traffic to a more distant perspective. "And, not to be maudlin, I still think about her every day. Even more often lately, now that I'm not working all the time."

As I speak, a vision flashes into my mind. I'm dancing with Ruth on the seaside patio of a small Caribbean resort one winter night a number of years ago. I can hear the tune the trio is playing – *Blue Moon*, the same song I introduced Willy to yesterday. Is that just a coincidence? I remember it because that was just how the tropical moon looked that night, perched low in the sky over a corner of the dance floor. And now the lyric drifts back to me from across the patio. . . .

"Blue moon,  
You knew just what I was there for,  
You heard me saying a prayer for,  
Someone I really could care for."

"Someone I really could care for". . . that was Ruth, all right – but now, as the lyric from the first eight bars reveals, I'm "standing alone. . . without a love of my own."

"I'm sure it's tough for you, Dad," John says with authentic sympathy. "I really miss her, too."

I snap out of my wistful reverie. "But I'm not completely idle. I still do some part-time consulting and can increase the amount if I choose to. And I'm getting a lot of personal things accomplished – things I've always wanted to do but never had the time for. So, I'd say that my time is being spent productively – I've really got no complaints."

John seems relieved that we've gotten onto less emotional ground. He clears his throat and half-turns toward me. "Speaking of consulting, I've got a business problem that has really been bothering me. I'd love to have your advice on it."

"Shoot."

"Well, there's a certain vice president at the company. . . ."

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Later that Friday, I'm sitting in the kitchen, nursing a cup of coffee, when Helga enters the room. My greeting is polite, but I immediately notice an edge to her response. She remains near the door, looking tense and conversing in a gruff tone, unsuited to the small talk we're making. Once again, that "v" sound in pronouncing her son's name has returned. I sense that she's marking time, waiting for an opportunity to change the subject to something she cares about. After a few minutes, Helga moves over near the sink and gets to the point.

"G/D, I noticed a new book in Willy's room today – a volume of short stories by Damon Runyon. I was wondering if you might know how it got there."

I don't hesitate. "That's easy, Helga – I gave Willy the book as a present."

"I see. . ." she says.

"He's probably a little too young to appreciate Runyon," I go on, "but they're wonderful stories – several of them, as you know, were the basis for the musical *Guys and Dolls* – and I recall reading and enjoying them at some point in my teens. It's one man's fanciful view of the Big Apple – which, after all, is the source of Willy's family roots on his father's side."

I take a sip of coffee. The only sound in the room is the whirring of the dishwasher. When Helga speaks, she looks squarely at me, her gaze as intense as her delivery.

"G/D, I wish you would check with me before you give Willy any new reading material. Since he was a small child, I've been laying out his reading syllabus with great care and precision.

The boy has only a certain amount of time that he can devote to reading, and I want to make sure he absorbs the right influences – taken in the order that I think appropriate. Right now, he's reading Stevenson's *Treasure Island* for his fiction portion; a simplified text on the workings of the U.S. government for his non-fiction; and for his biography, a boy's life of Thomas Edison. There's just no room for *Guys and Dolls*."

I put down the coffee cup. My first reaction is that this must be Helga's idea of a joke – she's just pulling my leg. But I quickly realize that's wishful thinking – the woman is dead serious. And I have to decide how to respond.

My habitual means of dealing with overwrought people is to use humor – a gentle poke in the ribs to cut through the self-righteousness of their position. My mind whirs off in that direction – perhaps a word play on one of the songs from *Guys and Dolls*, something like, "Hey, I feel like one of the sinners being told by Nicely Nicely Johnson, 'Sit down, sit down, you're rocking the boat' . . . ." But no, I realize, satire won't work with a woman who has no sense of humor.

Helga's position is preposterous. I can easily annihilate it with cutting barbs and sarcasm – the nuclear weapons of family intercourse that I've always tried to avoid. I could use or paraphrase metaphors from Nazi book-burning days – "today, Runyon; tomorrow, the world" . . .

I calm down and try to think rationally. It's amazing how many thoughts can go through your head in a few split seconds of time when a decision calling for immediate action is required.

The issue here isn't Runyon, it's Willy – Helga's attempts to control the boy and to exclude me from having any meaningful role in his upbringing. On that issue, I do have strong feelings; and I now realize that if I want to preserve my interest, a direct clash between Helga and me is becoming inevitable. The real question is, should this be the time, and over this subject? I can hear Ruth's voice in my head, answering my queries, "yes" and "yes".

It's a close call, but I decide not to let this escalate into a confrontation. The main reason I come out this way is because John isn't there and hasn't been consulted – I don't want to let the news of my taking Helga on catch him unawares.

But even as I make the decision, I wonder whether it's just a rationalization. Is my reluctance to confront Helga a form of cowardice – a fear of losing the battle of wills – or if not that, at least an unwillingness to let a potentially ugly confrontation mar the prospect of my long-awaited holiday?

Rather than mull these thoughts over now, I assuage my qualms with a firm resolve for the future. If there is a next time, I'll be ready, no matter what the consequences – I've let things go too far already.

When I finally speak, my voice is controlled, my face expressionless. "I'm sorry, Helga, I didn't know the rules. It seemed innocent enough."

"I'm sure you meant well, G/D," Helga says, although her tone implies the contrary, "but, as you can see, I feel very strongly about this."

"I can see that. Don't worry, I'll tell Willy to put Runyon aside for a while, until he's finished what he's supposed to be reading."

"That's all right," replies Helga. "I've already taken care of it."

"You have?"

"Yes. I've removed the Runyon book from his room. Wilhelm understands why."

\* \* \*

"I don't believe it!" wails John in a mixture of bewilderment and mock outrage that such a thing could be happening to him. "Double fours! The kid rolls double fours – the *only* roll that gets him out of my carefully constructed trap. . . ."

Willy's face breaks out in a broad smile as he moves the counters over the surface of the backgammon board. "Not only that, Dad," he says, with just the right interplay of fun and sly menace in his voice, "but how do you feel about *this*?!" – at which point he picks up the doubling cube from his side of the table, turns it over so that the "4" is on top, and thrusts it forcefully across to John's side.

"Well, John," I say in a playful voice, "now you've got a tough decision to make – or should I say, 'we have'. Do we take Willy's double or do we drop?"

The three of us are seated around a table in the recreation room the next day, engaged in one of our favorite activities – a backgammon chouette. Two of the players team up against the third in each game, with one of the two taking the lead on all decisions for the pair. After each game, depending on the winner, either the alliance shifts or the decision-maker changes.

It's a game that I taught to John and his sister, Meg, when they were little, and that John has now passed along to Willy. The stake for the adults, which in my day was a quarter per point, has now escalated to a dollar; for Willy, each point represents a service to be performed – like going into the kitchen and mixing me a grape juice and ginger ale. When one contestant senses a real advantage on the board, he can offer to double the stakes. The other party then either accepts the doubled stake and plays on, or drops out of the game, allowing the doubler to pocket the undoubled stake.

"I know what you *think* Dad's going to do, G/D," Willy says with a wise smile. "You think he's going to refuse the double and drop – you once told me that's what he *always* did when he was my age."

I grin. "Willy, you're so right. It didn't matter what the situation was – your father never liked to increase the stakes when he was behind."

My eyes close as I go deeper into the reminiscence. "Meg, on the other hand, never refused a double, no matter how foolhardy. I guess she was just too anxious to see how the game would ultimately turn out – she couldn't stand for it to be aborted by dropping."

"Well," John says, his voice taking on a mock pompous tone, "that might have been the case a generation ago, but I'm far more mature today. Now I weigh all the facts and make my best judgment about a double, whichever way that judgment takes me."

I jump in with the straight line. "And, if I may ask, which way does this one take you?"

"This one," answers John, timing his response perfectly, "takes me right out of the game! I drop."

I laugh out loud. Willy chortles, "I knew it, I knew it; I knew you would, Dad." Now the boy looks over at his grandfather. "And how about you, G/D.?"

When the team leader drops, as John has done, his teammate has the choice of following suit, or of taking the double and staying in the game alone. The decision is up to me. My analytical judgment is to accept the double – Willy's position isn't that much better than our own; and in backgammon, given the crazy way the dice can behave, the chances of coming from behind aren't at all remote. But I wonder if that response will reflect adversely in Willy's eyes on John's decision to drop – make it look like the boy's father is still reaching the same ill-considered determinations as he had at Willy's age. I hesitate longer than usual.

"Come on, G/D, stay in the game," says Willy. "Aren't you curious how it will turn out?"

Willy's direct invitation takes me off the hook. "I am – and I will." I slide the cube closer to my side with a swaggering motion. Willy picks up the dice to make his roll.

Just then, the door opens, and Helga enters the room.

"Hey, Mom, come over here and look at this," exclaims Willy. "I'm already ahead seven points, and I've got G/D in a real tough position."

Helga walks over to the table, frowns, and says, "Willy, you know that this is the time you're supposed to be doing your homework. Please go up to your room and start in on it right now. There's less than an hour left before dinner."

"But Mom," wails Willy, "just let me finish this game . . . ."

"The game is over," says Helga, her voice stern.

I can see the boy's disappointment, but given Helga's non-negotiable attitude, I decide to defuse the situation. "No problem, Willy," I say. "We'll keep the board set up so that we can finish the game later on. I won't get off the hook! – at least not yet."

After Willy leaves the room, Helga turns to her husband. "Do you really think this is a good idea, John, to teach Willy how to gamble at his age?"

"Oh, come on, Helga," replies John, "it's harmless enough. . . ."

"That's what you say; but winning at games of chance is heady stuff for a small boy, and it may leave a residue of expectations that will have a darker reflection in later life. I don't like it at all." She turns to leave the room. "Dinner is at seven."

The two of us are silent for a few moments. I wait for John's reaction before saying anything.

"I . . . uh . . . apologize for Helga, Dad," John begins. "She was way off-base. I don't know what came over her – she must be under a lot of pressure."

I realize that I've been pussy-footing around too long – that this is the right moment to voice my concern. "Do you really feel that way, John? It seems to me that her performance just now was very much in character."

My words seem to catch him by surprise. John's eyes widen. "What do you mean by that, Dad?"

I sip my drink. There's still time to pull back, I realize, but now I decide to press ahead.

"I just mean that Helga has a very well-defined sense of what is good for Willy and what is not, which she's not at all reluctant to express; and that what falls into the 'not good' category are many of those little delights I've always felt make life full and enjoyable."

John peers closely at me. "In other words, you think Helga is too strict with Willy?"

It would have been a simple matter for me to agree and leave it at that – a relatively harmless critique that would be unlikely to take on a life of its own. But I'm not feeling so benign just now.

"If it were just a matter of strictness, I'd let it pass. What's frankly more disturbing to me, John, is that Helga's behavior these past few days has taken on a decidedly anti-G/D tone."

"Oh, no, Dad," John counters quickly, "I'm sure you're wrong about that. Helga loves and respects you. She's never said a word to me that would indicate otherwise."

It always bothers me to see John become agitated, so I decide to end the conversation for now – although I know we'll come back to it again. "Well, John," I say, rising from my chair, "I've got some things to do before dinner. I hear you, but for the moment let's just agree to disagree."

Before leaving the room, I pick up the backgammon board, taking care not to move the counters, and place it upright on a table in the corner.

\* \* \*

The door to Willy's room is open. Peering in, I see the boy reading at his desk. I tap lightly on the door jamb. "May I come in for a minute?"

Willy looks up. "Sure, G/D. Come on in. I'll tell you this – I'd rather be playing backgammon any day than doing this boring homework."

Sitting down on Willy's bed, I clear my throat, as I often do when I'm about to say something uncomfortable. "I have a feeling that if it's left up to your mother, there won't be too many more games of backgammon for you."

Willy puts down his book. "I know what you mean, G/D. Mom's not much for board games."

"Or for baseball on TV."

"Or for baseball on TV."

"Or for popular music."

"Or for popular music."

"Or for certain books . . . ."

Willy gets up and walks over to where I'm sitting. "So you heard about the Damon Runyon?"

"Yes."

"I wasn't going to say anything about it."

"I understand." I put my hand on Willy's shoulder. . . .

No, no, I realize, this is wrong. I should not be trying to turn the boy against his mother – even by innuendo. She and I may have our issues, but that shouldn't affect him.

"Well, Damon Runyon can wait his turn. *Treasure Island* is a great book, and the other ones you're reading have real value – you stick with those for now."

I rise from the bed and walk toward the door. "I don't want to keep you from your homework. See you at dinner."

\* \* \*

I retire early that evening. Lying in bed, I'm sorely troubled. So far, I haven't allowed myself to rise to the bait with Helga. But she hasn't exercised any restraint at all. Ruth was right – Helga is trying to turn me into a non-person where Willy is concerned.

Now Ruth's image appears before me again, and I find myself back on the Caribbean patio, dancing with her to the strains of *Blue Moon*. Only now, instead of her whispering "please adore me" (like the lyric in the bridge), she's counseling me to speak up – to put a stop to this exclusion business, nip it in the bud.

I shift the pillows, trying to slip into a more comfortable posture. I agree with Ruth, this can't go on. Hell, the boy needs my leavening touch. He deserves spontaneity in his life – some fun and games along the way.

Today, I planted the seeds with both John and Willy. This woman has underestimated me; she doesn't know who she's up against. . . . Not that I want to turn them against her – or do I?

I roll over on my other side. It's clear that I have to confront Helga directly, and it ought to be done without delay – tomorrow, if possible. Should the two of us be alone, or should John – but certainly not Willy – be present?

What ought to be the substance of my message? You're doing a great job, Helga, but leave a tiny bit of room for me? Or, you're ruining the kid – get off my back and let me take a shot? Or, here are the seven specific areas in which I want some input. . . .

I still haven't resolved these details when, exhausted by the exertion and uneasy over the possible consequences, I doze off to sleep.

\* \* \*

I awake around midnight with a strong urge to relieve myself. Putting on my slippers, I pad quietly down the hall to the bathroom, trying not to awaken anyone. The door to the bathroom is open. I go in and silently close it behind me.

". . . really bothering me, John, I can't help it. I know you don't like to hear this."

The voice is Helga's. The bathroom, I realize, is adjacent to the master bedroom – there must be a vent open between the two rooms.

"You're damn right I don't like to listen to this crap, Helga. And I don't want to hear any more of it."

John's voice is angry, exasperated. I dislike being an eavesdropper and might otherwise leave the bathroom, but the urge to stay there and urinate is very strong.

"I can't help the way I feel. Having your father here is upsetting the rhythm and balance of the household. It's very disturbing, and it makes *me* upset.

"I told you, Helga, *no more*."

"He's filling Willy's mind with ideas that directly contradict what I've been working on for years. He lures him with games. . . ."

"*Stop it!*" John's voice alarms me, the rumbling tone so at variance with his usual soft-spoken manner. I remember hearing that same tone in the next room many years ago, when John got mad and thrashed his friend. I'm suddenly fearful what John might do to Helga when provoked like this.

Helga presses ahead. "Even worse, I don't like the effect your father has on *you*, John. You're distracted, you're reminiscing, you're living in the past. It reminds me of how you were when we first met, before you pulled yourself together. . . ."

"That's enough!" bellows John. I hear the bedroom door slam and the stomp of heavy steps on the staircase.

I wait an uncomfortable five minutes in the darkened bathroom. Then I turn on the light, urinate, flush the toilet, and return to my room.

\* \* \*

Back in the bedroom, I wrestle with this new development. Before overhearing that husband-wife exchange, I knew what I needed to do regarding Helga, although I hadn't worked out the details – has anything now changed?

Yes, it has – now I'm even more indignant and itching to take on this hateful dame who despises me so. Upsetting the household, filling Willy's mind with bad things, luring John into the past – what a shabby indictment! Oh, would I love to put the screws to her . . . .

If Ruth were here and had heard what Helga said, I'm sure she's be urging me on: "Who does this bitch think she is – it's time to knock her block off!"

Or is that really what Ruth would say? Now I probe the past a little deeper, recalling how my wife actually responded to provocations like this. And a different Ruth gradually comes into focus.

Calm down, she might begin – you can't think straight when your fists are clenched. Then she would urge me to look at the totality of things. What's most important here, she'd say – not only to you, but to those you love?

Viewed this way, I recognize the situation is more complex – it doesn't involve just Helga and me. There's Willy, the delight of my life, to think about. And John also – it's distressing to hear him as overwrought as he just sounded.

I begin to see that for the sake of Willy and of John, this Phoenix family ought to stay together. Whatever Helga thinks of me – or I of her –it's clear she loves John and Willy in her own way, and they in turn love and need her. Whatever I decide to do, I realize, shouldn't upset that equilibrium.

But how about *me*? Willy and I have a special relationship – I want it to continue. It's good for him to be exposed to my influence, and it's priceless for me to spend quality time with this marvelous boy. What might happen to our warm bond if I came to blows with his mother now? Could it be undercut irrevocably?

On the other hand, if I cut and run, who's going to expose Willy to the really enjoyable things in life? Like playing piano from a fake book? Or learning to appreciate Mel Brooks? Or how best to handle a 6-4 opening backgammon roll?

Then Ruth chimes in again, reminding me that being a grandfather across a continent isn't the same as being a father on the scene. I have to trust that John – who I've indoctrinated well over the years – will pass on to Willy the kind of stuff I consider worthwhile.

As a degree of calm returns, there's something else I'm forced to admit. After all, it's not as if Helga is force-feeding the boy some weird troubling notions. Classical music, *Treasure Island*, the evening news – those are worthwhile influences for a teenager to be exposed to.

But still, I must not divorce myself completely from Willy. It's just that I can't be as free-wheeling as I've been. What's called for is a degree of stealth . . . and I find myself recalling the underground role played by the French Resistance in World War II. . . .

And so, in fits and starts over the next hour, I come to grips with reality and formulate my game plan.

\* \* \*

The others are seated at the breakfast table the next morning, Saturday, when I join them.

"Good morning, everyone – sorry I'm late."

"Did you sleep well, Dad?" asks John in an even tone, apparently over his midnight blow-up.

"All right. I'm afraid, though, that I have some bad news. The reason I'm late for breakfast is that I've been on the phone with my office in New York. The consulting assignment I've been working on part-time this past month has heated up, and I'm needed back there as soon as possible. I'm afraid, much to my regret, I'll have to cut short my stay here."

"Oh, no, G/D!" Willy erupts, "You were going to stay for two whole weeks."

"I know that, Willy, and I really wanted to. But I'm afraid it's impossible now."

"Dad," asks John, a trace of suspicion in his voice, "how come you haven't said anything about this 'assignment' before? Did you suspect it might interfere with your stay here?"

"I really didn't think it would. The sudden pressure just came out of the blue."

"What plane will you be catching?" asks Helga.

"Five o'clock this afternoon."

"Then John will give you a lift to the airport."

"Fine. And John, would you mind if I borrowed the car for an hour or so this morning. I've got some errands to attend to."

"Sure, take it," John replies.

"I want to go to the airport with G/D," says Willy.

Helga wipes her hands on the apron she's wearing. "Unfortunately, Willy, you have your piano lesson at four today. So you'll just have to say goodbye to G/D at home."

\* \* \*

"Dad, where are you?" John calls into the house from the front steps. "We better leave for the airport now or we'll be late."

"I'm coming, just a minute." In the parlor, I turn to my grandson. "Willy. . . ."

The boy throws his arms around me. "I'm really going to miss you, G/D."

"And I'll miss you terribly. But we can talk on the phone and send each other emails. And we'll have some wonderful memories from these few days together."

"Sure," says Willy, "but I'd much rather you were still here."

"Me, too."

"I love you, G/D."

"I love you, Willy."

\* \* \*

"I'm still puzzled, Dad, by the sudden interruption of your visit with us . . ." John and I are driving in his car on the road to the airport.

"I'm so sorry this happened – I was having such a wonderful time." Before John can probe further, I change the subject. "I did want to mention something to you, John, before I forget. It's with regard to Helga."

John looks apprehensive. "Dad, I know what you've been thinking, but . . ."

I interrupt him. "Remember what you were telling me the other day – about how terrific a mother and wife she has been? Well, I've had a good opportunity to observe her in action these past few days, and I just want to say – " I pause.

"Yes, Dad?"

"I just want to say that I think you're absolutely right. Forget what I may have implied the other day – I was just miffed that we couldn't continue the game. You've got a real treasure there, John, and I'm glad you appreciate that fact. And Willy is a lucky boy, indeed. . . ."

\* \* \*

I'm sitting in the plane on the tarmac, waiting to take off. I close my eyes and try to visualize the scene that's taking place just about now in the house. . . .

There's Willy going up to his room after the piano lesson. No one else is home. On his dresser is a package, with an envelope taped to the outside. He opens the package first. It's a book of music, with the words "World's Best Fake Book" on the cover. Two of the pages are clipped.

I watch Willy open the book to the first clip. His eyes move down the page, shifting from the music to the words. He reads a few lines:

"Blue moon,  
Now I'm no longer alone. . . ."

Next I envision the boy opening the envelope, which contains a short handwritten note.

“Willy –

It was great to spend these past few days with you. You're a terrific boy.

I hope you'll continue your classical music training. I admire your mother for wanting you to become skilled at that, and for the other good habits she's teaching you.

But every once in awhile, you might want to sneak down to the piano when no one's home and try out a few of these tunes. I wish I could have stayed longer to show you in person how to play from a fake book, but there's a section at the beginning that shows you how to do it, and I can tell you more about it over the phone.

By the way, it wasn't easy to find a book that contains both *Blue Moon* and *Truckin'* . . . .

All my love,

G/D”

Then I visualize Willy taking the book under his arm, running down the stairs, and heading for the piano in the rec room. As he hurries through the living room, he passes close to the big round table – but I can see he's so excited that he doesn't notice the picture, standing tall in its own brass frame, of himself curled up on a couch alongside G/D. . . .