

FLY BOY

Lynne Marino

Phoenix College

Honorable Mention, Fiction

“YOU WANT ME TO DO WHAT?” He bellowed out the words and hoped their force would make his two sons run for the door.

“We want you to take a mental competency test,” his older son said with a tone so measured it belied the anger and delight beneath.

“If you want to drive, you have to take the test. Or,” he said, this time his glee barely disguised, “I’m keeping the keys.”

“You always were a horse’s ass. You’re just like your mother’s brother. He was a wiener, too. And you,” he turned to his other son, “can’t you do anything without him? You couldn’t stand up to your big brother if your life depended on it.”

Peter hung his head like he had when he was young, only now there is a bald spot on the top, a perfect circle the circumference of a custard cup. “Dad,” Peter said, half pleading and half demanding, “bark at us all you want. You’re still taking the test.”

Slowly, which these days was as quick as he could go, our father rose from his chair and winced as he straightened his knees. “Both of you get out.” He pointed to the door of his studio apartment. “You’re not the only kids I have.”

This is how I imagine the confrontation between my father and brothers. It fits both their stories with embellishments on my part, like David’s glee when he delivered the news to my eighty-three year-old father. In truth, his delight would have been so subtle that only someone who knew him well would be able to see it dancing just beneath the surface. David and Dad have been butting heads ever since my brother turned thirteen. Taking Dad’s keys would be David’s ultimate coup. He would finally be the alpha male.

My part in this brouhaha, as Dad likes to call it, started with a phone call from Colonel Glynn Crawford, United States Air Force, Retired. That would be my dad, and I would be his youngest child and only daughter—better known as, *The Baby*.

“They’re trying to get me,” he says when I pick up the phone. It’s one of those moments when I’m trying to do six things at once. I spend half my life trying to do six things at once. The other half I spend trying to recover from doing six things at once.

“Dad?” I say into the phone. “Who’s trying to get you?”

“Your brothers. They took my car keys. You’ve got to come and stop them.”

I try to hide my sigh of exasperation and switch the phone to my other shoulder so I can use my right hand to empty the dishwasher. I grab two plates between my fingers and say, “I can’t just drop everything. Amy’s play is in two days,

and Brad's soccer playoffs start Saturday. I'm going to be driving from one event to the next with Jimmy in the back of the car pouting because he's not the center of attention. I'll be lucky if I have ten minutes to drive through McDonald's for a salad." Actually, I am savoring the possibility of French fries, but lately I'm trying to be good. Middle age and saturated fat don't go well together. When you hit fifty all you have to do is look at something fried and you gain weight.

"They want me to take a test," he says belligerently.

"A what?"

"They want me to take a test before they'll give me back my keys."

"Where's your car right now?"

"The head horse's ass has it."

"Who?" I know he means David, but it's better to play stupid. If I act like I know who he means, it would be an admission that David is a horse's ass. At some point in this mess, Dad might tell my brother that. I don't need any more bad feelings between David and me. There's enough already.

"David has it locked in his garage."

This is so typical. "Would you like me to call David and Peter?" I ask, dreading my suggestion.

"I want you to come here."

Bingo. I knew he'd get stuck on that one. "Look, let me give Peter a call and find out what's going on. I need to hear their side of it. Then I'll call you back, okay?"

"There's only my side. Those two want to clip my wings. I raised your brothers. I wiped their butts when they were babies."

"Mom told me you never changed a diaper." She told me this after my eldest was born and she watched in awe as my husband changed her.

"Well, I paid for every little nappy they ever pissed in."

I laugh, even though I don't want to. They don't make men like my dad anymore. He is like a marvelous antique. Something to be cherished, but never reissued.

"You don't remember when we lived in Germany, in Stuttgart," he says.

"Yes I do."

"You were a baby."

"Dad, I was six when we left." He can never remember how old I was. When we moved back to the states, he enrolled me in the third grade when I was only in the first.

"I took those boys all over Europe. They skied in the Alps."

“What are you saying, Dad?” I ask.

“I raised those boys and look how they treat me.”

Another myth Dad operates under. My mother raised my brothers and me. He was there for the fun, she was there for the work. And, before I begin to sound too mean, I must mention that Dad taught me how to enjoy life like no one else. He tells the best jokes, knows the best gags, can short sheet a bed like no one else, and he passed it all on to me. Somehow, the lessons got lost on my brothers.

“They’re just trying to look out for you.” I’m sure they are, but it’s the heavy-handed way my brothers go about it that causes problems.

“When are you coming?”

“Let me call Peter first. Then I’ll let you know when and if I’m coming.”

“Ten-four, sister. If Peter gives my car back, I can pick you up at the airport and he won’t have to. You tell him that.”

Dad had come up with a sweet little angle, but it wouldn’t work. My brother Peter is a professor of sociology at Southern Illinois University. He and his wife live two miles from campus and he rides his bike to work. Like a typical academic, he is quite sanctimonious about hardly ever using a car. While David can always talk Peter into something, Peter can never get David to do anything he doesn’t want to. I knew David would not turn over the car.

I pick up the phone and call my brother. “Peter?” “What did he tell you?” my brother asks.

“That you and David took his car keys.”

“David did it.”

So what else is new? “Can you tell me about it?”

“Dad’s out of control.”

“He’s always been a wild man,” I say. “All those Fly Boys were. Who else do you think would climb in an airplane and shoot at the Luftwaffe for two solid years?”

“This is different. He’s driving around in his convertible and tooting at anything in a skirt from the age of sixteen up.”

I cover my mouth with my hand so Peter won’t hear me laughing. “He’s just having fun.” You should try it sometime, I think to myself, but I do not say it. I’m not stupid.

“Fun? Sarah went to visit him three weeks ago and caught him making out in the elevator with an old woman. He’s eighty-three. What’s he doing kissing women?”

I silently root for my father. Heck, Mom has been dead for ten years. “Just because he’s old doesn’t mean he’s dead. I’m sorry your wife was embarrassed.”

Peter tries to be fair to everyone, just like Mom used to be. Ever since I've been born he has felt caught between protecting me and honoring David. David and I are like oil and water. I am fifty-two, but he treats me like I'm a dopey little kid. I have a Ph.D. in art history. Like I said, I'm not stupid.

"That's not all," Peter reports. "David says Dad shows up at the Palmyra Diner and expects the waitresses to stir his soup when it's too hot."

"Just like Mom used to." My mother had him so spoiled. She was the perfect military wife, right down to her freshly pressed day dress. I could never pull it off even if I tried, which I have no desire to do.

"Well, don't you think that's odd?"

"I think it's very Dad."

"Mary." I could hear the irritation in Peter's voice.

"What does making out with old ladies at the retirement center and asking waitresses to stir your soup have to do with the visual and auditory skills necessary to drive a car?" Ha! I've got him now.

"His hearing is shot."

Like I said, Dad had been a fighter pilot over Europe in World War II, and the artillery noise made him hard of hearing in both ears. "Get him a hearing test then," I say. "Why are you guys pushing this?"

"Because David says he's getting squirrely."

"Well, what do you think?" Now it is my turn to sound irritated.

"I think David lives closer to him and sees him more, so he's probably right."

I figure it is probably Gail, David's wife, who sees Dad more than anybody. She's always doing David's dirty work. For this, my brother keeps her in the style she's always wanted to be accustomed to. It's hard to dislike my sister-in-law, but somehow I find a way. Gail is perfect in every way I am not. Perfect house, immaculate clothes, immaculate kids, and a big status car. She is high maintenance materially, but low maintenance emotionally. Just perfect for my brother.

I am eternally grateful to Gail because she checks on Dad once a week. She knows half the town of Palmyra, so she keeps tabs on him one way or the other. This allows me to live far away in Virginia with my mentally healthy husband, raise my kids in sanity, and teach part time at a junior college. I also edit art history texts that I could write myself, if I had the motivation to do so.

David is a developer who builds tract castles all over the greater St. Louis area. Some people call them McMansions, but I refer to them as pieces of, well, you get the idea. I hear the market in mini-castles has bottomed out, so David has turned

to building luxury condos for boomers who want to downsize if they can manage to sell their homes on steroids.

“Peter, Dad wants me to fly there and mediate this whole thing,”

“Come on. He wants you to come here and get his car back for him.”

“Yes, he does, but if he doesn’t pass the competency test, don’t you want me there anyway?”

We are sitting in the psychiatrist’s office at the medical center of the university where Peter works. This particular doctor specializes in geriatrics.

David is jingling the car keys and it is driving me nuts. He drives me nuts. I’d ask him to quit, but it would probably start a fight.

Peter is sitting calmly with his hands folded. He isn’t talking to either of us, not because he is mad, but because he is trying to stay neutral. If you don’t have anything nice to say, don’t say anything at all. That’s what our mother drilled into us as kids. This is a lesson Peter paid attention to. Unfortunately, David and I did not.

I am thinking of my father in there with a shrink, subjected to the humiliation of defending his mental faculties. This is a guy who grew up on a farm, married the town beauty, and went off to fight the only war everyone agrees was worth fighting. He served his country well, and retired only when he had to. My dad was constantly in motion. Over the years he’s owned motorcycles, ATV’s, small-engine planes, and always a convertible. He is a consummate movement junkie, and now his sons are demanding he stop. Frankly, I’m not into taking anybody’s toys if I can help it.

“Will you let me be the one to talk to him if he fails?” I ask my brothers, pleading just a little.

David snorts. He can’t look at me in the face. “Go ahead,” he says.

“What if he passes?” I ask.

Another snort. “He won’t.”

“Are you prepared to live up to your part of the bargain if he does?”

“Yes.” He acts like I have just proposed the absurd.

I can’t completely blame David for his rancor towards my father. Dad always wanted David to be someone he isn’t. He wanted him to go to Annapolis and learn to fly jets on and off the carriers. It’s a dangerous maneuver, and requires someone with visual acuity and coordination. Someone like Dad, not David.

David turns his eyes on me. They aren’t friendly. “Are you prepared to stand by our decision, or are you going to be Daddy’s little girl?”

Forget any sympathy I expressed about his plight. “Shut up, you horse’s ass,” I say, with a degree of loathing that even my emotionally amputated older brother can’t miss.

“Shut up,” he says back.

Peter gets between the two of us. “You two both shut up.” He pushes his arms out as he yells, “and while you’re at it, grow up.”

I feel shame coat my anger. Here I am, fifty-two, and I have allowed my brother to reduce me to the verbal equivalent of a thirteen year old. I can’t look at Peter because of what he just said. I have to admit, I deserve it.

The door opens. Dad and the psychiatrist step into the outer office where the three of us are waiting. My brothers stand at attention. Dad is beaming from ear to ear, so I know what the results of the test were. He is still the alpha male. David reaches into his pocket and plunks the keys on my father’s outstretched hand, which close around them immediately.

“Can we all sit down for a moment please?” the psychiatrist asks.

We turn to look at the man in the white coat while each of us grope for a seat.

“Your father did indeed pass the test, by one point.”

David lurches forward. You can hear him swallow air and choke on it.

“Because of the closeness of the score, I’m suggesting, Colonel Crawford, that you retake the test in six months. In the meantime, I should tell you that if you were my father, I’d make sure you drove in daylight only and not during peak traffic hours.”

I flash a look to David and Peter that says, let me handle this. David ignores me, and Peter nods in agreement.

I am wondering why I said I would help him, because as I put his last bag in the trunk, I am worried. In my mind, I see pictures of small children and families in their mini-vans, a beloved son, a teenager, an inexperienced driver. These are people Dad might hit, and people who might hit Dad. What am I doing, I wonder as I slam the trunk shut. Am I the bad child, the irresponsible one who’d rather say yes to fun, because it’s too hard to say no? Am I, as David says, daddy’s little girl?

“Okay, Dad,” I ask, “What are the rules?”

He looks at me like a chastised child. “No driving at night. No driving during peak hours.”

“That means you’re off the road by four-thirty, and not back on until after nine in the morning.”

“Ten-four, sister.”

This morning at breakfast, we talk. He has never seen Johnson Shut-Ins, and he remembers I went camping there years ago on a road trip of my own. It's a part of the most beautiful place in Missouri, the east fork of the Black River. Big rocks and blue water. I swear you can see straight down at least twenty feet, it's that clear. I offer to drive both of us there, but that's not what he wants. He wants one more quest. Then, I think he might give up his keys.

"And you call me every evening when you get off the road."

He nods, but says nothing.

I have to try hard not to laugh at the reversal in roles, because this is serious. I remember so clearly the lecture he gave me when I got my license.

He circles round me in the parking lot as I wave goodbye. Then he takes off in his convertible, top down. His last adventure. "Fly away, Fly Boy," I say as I watch him drive down the street until I can no longer see him on the horizon. "Fly away."

