

Decision Day

By Sophie Littlefield

“I hate you,” Dalton Clevenger said with all the menace he could muster, “and I hate your fucking little face.”

He was kneeling against the blue loveseat, the one that Marcy had special-ordered the Italian fabric for – that took six months to arrive at the shockingly overpriced upholstery studio in Westport, where Marcy’s decorator had it made into a chair which, in the end, didn’t seem much different from anything he’d seen on the floor at Macy’s.

Six months of Marcy bitching about the empty spot in her almost-redecorated living room. Dinner parties had been delayed pending the chair’s arrival – and now the thing was here, and Bentley had turned it into a dog bed in a matter of days.

“If you keep barking at night I’m going to yank your tiny little balls off with a pair of pliers,” Dalton continued, but the dog merely breathed its execrable breath in Dalton’s face, the picture of calm. Little tufts of its fur had come loose and lodged all over the chair’s cushion – the nubby fabric seemed designed to attract it, in fact. There was something wrong with this breed of dog: its lips didn’t quite cover its teeth, so it looked eternally pugnacious and buck-toothed at the same time. Hideous, but Marcy and her friends all had one.

Or a pair.

Marcy wanted another. Bentley was orangeish; wouldn’t it be sweet to have a little white one, a female? – she wondered as they were having after-dinner drinks with the Swifts and Mracks last night. *No, it wouldn’t be sweet*, Dalton thought but didn’t say; *it would be a travesty*. Another creature in the house who would make demands of him and chip away at the paltry reserves of serenity he still had left, giving him nothing in return.

They’d finally got the kids through college, and the memory of those last few years of living together was fresh and objectionable enough that his son and daughter were keeping their distance. They had jobs in cities hundreds of miles away – Laurel in D.C., Cooper in Chicago – and while Dalton figured that soon enough there would be weddings and, God help him, grandchildren, he desperately wanted to be left alone for just a little while.

“If I find your shit in the family room again, I’m going to pry your jaws open and stuff it down your throat,” Dalton said, but the dog appeared to be bored with the exercise; he put his chin on his paws and stared at Dalton dispassionately.

Dalton creaked to his feet, taking it in stages. At fifty-three the best he could do was pretend his aches and pains were the result of sports injuries, of long-lost victories on collegiate fields, with pretty girls in wooly scarves calling his name and waving mittened hands as he took one for the team.

Sunday drained itself away both too quickly and too slowly and then it was Monday again. Face-the-music day.

There hadn't been any point in telling Marcy, but Dalton's fate lay somewhere on the continuum between cluster-fuck and complete ruin: they just might choose him to sacrifice this time.

With fourteen years and several such crises behind him at Bain Goldwyn, Dalton sensed that his number was due to come up. It was always a guy like him – successful, but not quite successful enough.

He suspected that if he had the benefit of a perfect memory he could pinpoint the exact moment on when his fate turned. When his path, which he'd hoped would lead to a directorship, had instead veered off toward mediocrity. He'd stayed a vice-president a little too long, turning in numbers that ranged from adequate to not half bad.

Bernard Kaminsky, though – why him? Bernard had just as many dirty fingers in the current pie as Dalton, but word was he was being tagged to take over Institutional Equities. The Credit Strategies department would be nothing but a bad memory for Bernard six months from now, and in what Dalton was quickly coming to believe was a permanent inversion of justice at Bain Goldwyn, six months should be exactly when Institutional Equities would start to level off from its current freefall, and Bernard would end up being hailed as a visionary.

Dalton got to work early. In a rare deviation from routine, he drove all the way to the city. Got to the Metro North stop, observed that there was still plenty of parking available, and then for some reason drove right past. Something about driving along I-95 in the dark, the sky cracking into bloody fissures of dawn. Something about the silence of the road, somehow more profound when he and his fellow drivers sped along in concert, with none of the afternoon rush-hour dodge-and-feint.

He parked in the twenty-eight dollar lot a block from his office. Two blocks further there was another lot, charged twenty-two. Dalton muttered *fuck it* under his breath. Ate some Tums and a couple of hard Bavarian pretzels from the bag he kept in his desk. Fat-free. Drank two cups of coffee, then a Diet Pepsi.

Went through email. Around eight, there came one from Marcy. She liked to sit at the computer with her coffee every morning. She and her friends had discovered blogging; they couldn't stop talking about it. Like they'd invented the fucking things. One of them had a tennis blog. Another did Westport historic landmarks and wrote endlessly about her Abyssinian cats. And so on. Dalton knew this because they all linked to each other; Marcy's was a potpourri of inspirational passages she'd found in her Oprah books and reporting on the renovation and redecoration of the house.

"I forgot to tell you that the table came in," Marcy's email read. "They're delivering it today. I'll make scaloppini and we can break it in tonight!"

Dalton had to think for a minute before remembering that they had ordered a new kitchen table from some jerkoff in Vermont who only made them one at a time.

He was tempted to email Marcy back that he'd be stuck in the city for dinner, but that was risky. If the shit blew up today, he wouldn't be sticking around, not even for the traditional outing to Methaney's. He wasn't sure if he could pull off the cynical, ruthless drinking and gossip that masqueraded as bonhomie whenever the axe came down.

Another email from Marcy. "Statue" was the subject line. Dalton clicked on it with a sinking feeling in his gut.

It was as bad as he'd feared: "Just thought you'd want to know, the Columbus Circle statue is a Russo," Marcy had written. "And it's spelled 'Gaetano' not 'Gitano'."

There followed a trio of smiley faces and a row of x's and o's, and below that, the text and images cut and pasted right out of the fucking wiki article, the familiar marble phallus looking unusually regal from the camera angle – the photographer must have lain down on his stomach in the middle of 8th Avenue to get the shot.

Whenever Marcy corrected him, she did so with a flurry of affectionate little gestures, as if to defray the impact of her officiousness. This was a puzzle to Dalton. Whatever Marcy was, she wasn't a complete idiot. She was cum laude in Psychology from Colgate, for Christ's sake. So if Marcy, with her superior understanding of the human psyche, was aware of how it galled him, how it reached into his gut and tore him like a chain saw, then why the hell did she keep doing it?

This last time was the Stark/Mrack dinner two nights ago. Lucy Stark was going on about being named to the board of the Burroughs Landmark Society, and she had tapped Marcy and Ginger Mrack for the benefit committee. The three of them were discussing what image to feature on the invitation as though anyone receiving it would actually give a shit. Lucy suggested the Columbus monument, and Dalton – why, why, why had he felt the need? – had decided to jump in and add a little something to the conversation, because he and Dick and Milt had been sitting there dumb and unmoving, like three gutted deer carcasses.

“That was by Ximenes, wasn't it,” he said, aiming for an offhand tone. Because the truth was – and admitting this to himself at 8:15 on a Monday morning that might well go down as the beginning of the end of his career, with the burn in his gut only slightly ameliorated by the Tums he was chewing one after another, was about as painful as, say, passing a kidney stone – the truth was that Dalton liked to think he knew a thing or two about the arts himself.

During an awkward stage that arrived unexpectedly during his last year of middle school and lingered painfully until he went on to Portledge Prep, he had turned to art. He took the subway to the city several times a month to wander the Metropolitan Museum looking for the secrets to himself. Instead, he found the European sculpture court.

That was why, when Marcy had gently asserted that the Columbus monument was a Russo, and Lucy and Ginger looked on with polite smiles frozen on their faces, and Dick and Milt smirked and topped off their cognac, Dalton had not only not backed down but had argued with some force that he was positive it was Ximenes. In the end, Marcy had given him a chilly smile, said “I'm sure you're right,” and changed the subject to Ginger and Milt's upcoming Baltic cruise.

Dalton deleted the offending email, muttering “cunt” under his breath, then felt the blood hot in his face. That was a word he rarely used. Early in their marriage Marcy had taken a stand against it. The word, he had been made to understand, was political.

Dalton continued going back through his email, deleting and archiving and replying. In this way he made it to lunchtime, and still nothing had come down. His assistant had a sandwich sent up from a place he liked, but today even the bread's perfect crust could not cheer him, and he threw half of the sandwich away.

At two-thirty, Rezano tapped on the door to his office.

“Did you hear?” he said. “They're doing it tomorrow. They're waiting for Kaminsky to get back from L.A.”

“Christ, Kaminsky...” Dalton said, considering the implications, mentally limning the interdepartmental relationship grid in his mind, an imaginary org chart forming and breaking on the back of his eyeballs.

“Yeah. Doesn’t look good.” Rezano gave him a smile that was mostly grimace, and slugged the door frame one last time, decisively. “So...Methaney’s?”

Dalton produced a smile of his own – *what’re-you-gonna-do*, he tried to telegraph – and shook his head. “Marcy’s doing scaloppini. I better get home.”

Rezano nodded. “Okay, tomorrow, then.”

“Tomorrow. Yeah.”

Getting the grin off his face took conscious effort as though, once trained, his muscles had lost their memory.

He made the 4:40, but it was dark as midnight when he got home. In the house, there was a faint new scent, and he sniffed at it while he put his coat in the front hall closet – like some sort of exotic decay.

“Come see!” Marcy called from the kitchen.

He went with trepidation. Every time some new purchase came home, he was called on to admire it, and he never seemed to get it right; too unenthusiastic and Marcy sulked; too much enthusiasm and she regarded him with suspicion.

In the kitchen she was standing with her hip against the thing, hand resting reverently on its surface. But it wasn’t any one-of-a-kind piece from some craftsman in Vermont; it was dark and ancient-looking, like something that might have come out of a blacksmith’s barn, wormholes and deep grooves and what looked like charred areas incongruously polished and waxed to a high shine.

“What happened to the Vermont thing?” Dalton asked.

Marcy’s smile slipped a little. “Dalton – you know we cancelled that. Remember? We decided to do Italian rustic?”

Dalton didn’t remember a damn thing like that. He looked at the table, resting on the tile that Marcy had spent the better part of a week driving out to a warehouse in Queens to choose one by one, and he hated it. Hated the uneven ends of the century-old planks; hated the smell; hated the big square pegs that some poor peasant bastard had driven into the boards with a stone sledge.

Without a word he went to the cabinet and got the bottle of Jameson’s and a tumbler and came back, and slammed them both down on the table. The chairs were new, too. Or more precisely antiques with new cane seats, probably done for eighty bucks an hour in the designer sweatshop in town. He didn’t feel like sitting in the chairs.

“Oh,” Marcy said, a little nervously, the corners of her mouth stretching into deep-lined brackets, “I know this is silly, but, you know, just that it’s so new-- “

She reached for a little drawer tucked under the table on the long side, slid it open – it slid smoothly, Dalton observed, and had nice-looking tongue-and-groove joints – and took out a cork coaster. She put the coaster on the table and picked up Dalton’s tumbler and centered it on the coaster, and then she looked at him with just a little edge of defiance in her eyes.

Dalton stared back, feeling his heartbeat ratcheting faster in his chest even though he hadn't moved a muscle. "You want me to use....a fucking....coaster?" he demanded, his voice cracking unexpectedly.

There was a jingle from the family room, and Dalton looked through the arched doorway just in time to see Bentley jump delicately off the blue chair and come trotting into the kitchen, an expression of concern on his face.

The dog knew he meant business.

Bentley came halfway between Dalton and Marcy and looked up at him with an air of challenge.

"I said you want me to use a fucking coaster?" Dalton repeated, roaring now. He picked up the tumbler and slammed it down on the table, and the glass shattered, shards flying all around the kitchen. "How much of my money did you spend on this piece of shit, anyway?"

Marcy looked a little scared, but more than that, she looked excited. Her lips parted slightly and her face flushed with color, and she absently tucked a few strands of her platinum-blond hair behind her ear. "I'm not going to answer you," she said breathlessly. "Not when you're like this. I'll wait until you're calm enough to talk about it rationally."

"You want to wait--" Dalton slammed his fist down on the table, which was surprisingly solid. "--until I'm fucking calm?"

Slam.

Marcy folded her arms across her chest and gazed at him. "Is this really about Geatano Russo?" she asked.

For a moment neither of them moved, neither said anything. Between them was a volley of stored grievances electric with tension, a gulf of resentment that had been exquisitely nurtured for decades.

Dalton looked wildly around the room, which he saw now had changed more than he realized; though he'd been sort of aware of the hand-painted backsplash being installed; of the faux finisher and her endless plastering; of the new drapes showing up one day on the massive iron rods – though he'd marked the steps of the renovation by writing checks and glancing at paint chips and flipping through the Consumer Reports on dishwashers – all at once he saw that it had become an alien place, a place where he was no longer welcome.

On the counter next to the veal, flattened between sheets of plastic wrap was the meat pounder – a heavy, expensive, all-metal model Marcy bought at Sur La Table. He picked it up. Then he bent down and picked up the dog, and slammed Bentley down on the table. Bentley made a surprised yelp and scabbled frantically but Dalton held him on his side with one splayed hand.

It was ridiculously easy to keep the dog in place.

Dalton looked at Marcy and noted with satisfaction that finally – finally! – her smug expression slipped, that in its place was a look of genuine horror. She expelled her breath in a hoarse "*huhhh*" sound and Dalton knew that he had only a moment to make his decision.

Only a moment before Marcy found her wits and came at him with all the fury of her years of suburban dissatisfaction and the sheer power of that personal-trainer-cultivated firm body.

He hefted the meat pounder and his lips curved into a smile at the realization that it was wide open – he could choose either. He would bring the pounder crashing down with all the force of his fury and coiled readiness and it would release him, it would free him from the terrible waiting and uncertainty that had been settling over him for months now.

His wife. His dog. Dalton grinned in anticipation, because finally someone was going to be held to account.

Sophie's short stories have appeared in ThugLit, PulpPusher, and other 'zines. Her first novel, A BAD DAY FOR SORRY, will be released by Thomas Dunne/St. Martins in August, 2009. Sophie lives with her family in northern California. Visit her at www.sophielittlefield.com.