

MY TURN

Linda S. Buyer

inspired by

Garlic

Oil on Canvas

James Michael Ostlund



My Turn

Susan was preparing dinner when Walt came out of the office and into the kitchen. "Smells good, what're you cooking?"

"Nothing yet." She smiled. "You always ask when there's nothing but garlic and olive oil in the pan. I'm about to saute mushrooms for tonight's pizza."

Susan used the handle of the cast iron pan to rock the contents side-to-side and make sure the bottom was coated before adding the sliced shiitake mushrooms. She stirred the mushrooms, releasing even more of the garlic scent. Letting the pan rest on the heat, she ran her fingers through her short graying hair.

Walt watched Susan while he hovered in the doorway between the kitchen and the front hall. "Sounds good. It's really nice of you to go to all this work, even making Italian sausage so it's salt-free."

"It's no biggy." She walked out the door on the opposite side of the kitchen, got some red wine vinegar from the pantry behind Walt and returned to the stove the long way around.

Susan turned toward Walt and smiled warmly, her large hazel eyes crinkling at the corners. "Have you given any thought to your birthday in September?"

"Not really. Not sure I want to celebrate it. Speaking of ..., did you pick up a birthday card for Chris while you were at the store?"

"Yes, don't change the subject. You just met what's his name for the first time, the cardiologist you switched to when Lacey retired."

"Dr. Shikander."

"You told me Shikander said he expected someone decrepit, given your age and heart attacks, or," she hastened to add, "whatever you want to call them, and you're not. Made you feel good. Why not celebrate your 90th?"

She used a fork and whisked Dijon and vinegar together in a small bowl before adding olive oil and a pinch of sea salt from the corked, wide-mouthed jar on the counter. "Think about what you'd like. Sightseeing without a lot of walking? A river cruise? Train trip? You've talked about Norway and doing the ride over the mountains again. You loved that. A big party? Maxim's is re-opening. Our 25th anniversary there was really fun. I still can't believe they let us have all those kerosene lamps, but wouldn't let people smoke." She chuckled. "A small dinner party with your old college chums? John and Carolyn? Charles and Michelle? Mark and Lizzie?"

"I'll think about it. Can I help?"

"No, all that's left is assembling the pizza and dressing the salad." She took the pan off the hot burner and set it aside.

"Dinner at eight."

Susan beckoned. "Come sit in the living room with me and let's talk about where we want the floating shelves over the new cabinetry. I'd really like this remodeling to be finished before Labor Day, and that's only a few weeks."

"Do whatever you'd like. It'll be fine."

"Jeez, I know you mean 'good' or whatever, but I hate that word. To me, it means barely acceptable." She grinned. "How about watching a movie with me?"

"I don't want to invest that much time, you go ahead and watch. I want to get back to my programming."

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Walt sat at his corner desk, facing the lake. Susan stuck her

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head in the office. "I called the Horners, Michelle said 'yes;' John said he and Carolyn can make it; but Mark said Lizzie's going to be out of town. Who do you want me to invite to your party next week instead?"

"How about Paula? She's always good company and she's right next door."

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"What smells so good?" Walt followed his nose from the office into the kitchen doorway.

"As always," Susan grinned, "nothing yet. Just browning garlic in olive oil. Ready for your birthday dinner?"

"Yeah. It'll be good to see everyone. Remind me again who's coming."

"The Horners, the Blanchards, Mark Kearney, and Paula. Us. Perfect number for a dinner party. Per your request: beef tenderloin, asparagus, and grilled baby potatoes." Her eyes crinkled at the corners. "Since you think cake is boring, key lime pie. Whipped cream with it?"

"Sure." Walt's almost lashless eyes smiled back. "That'd be fine."

"Can't you ever say 'good'?!"

*

The phone rang and the doorman said, "I have John and Carolyn here in the lobby ..."

Susan smiled at the phone. "Great, send them up, Ed. Thanks."

Susan stood in the doorway. John, limping noticeably, continued down the hall while Carolyn stopped between the elevator and the apartment, checked her compact mirror, fluffed her short blonde hair, and reapplied her neutral lipstick. Carolyn reached the apartment first. Susan stooped slightly to hug her. "Good to see you. You look terrific." Susan turned to greet John, raising her voice. "I thought your hip replacement was supposed

to cure the limp."

He leaned down to kiss her. "It did. This is new. Myasthenia gravis."

"I'm so sorry." Susan patted his shoulder. "May I take your coats? Go in, the Horners are already here."

John shrugged off his Sherlock Holmes cape, and watched Carolyn remove her tan wool car coat.

Susan took their coats. "John, as always, you're a vision of sartorial je ne sais quoi." She smiled. "Where did you find those plaid slacks?"

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John settled into the large striped armchair and turned toward Charles and Michelle who were seated to his left on the oversized couch. "Guess who I ran into yesterday? Frank, Paula's ex."

"Frank?" Michelle turned toward John. "Haven't thought about him in years. He still doesn't know? Amazing he never saw the resemblance. What's he doing these days?"

"Settling into retirement." John stretched his long legs toward the claw-footed coffee table and crossed his bare ankles. "Boring as ever, seems to spend all his time watching sporting events ..."

Susan came into the living room after depositing the coats on the bed. "Who're you talking about?"

Charles turned toward her. "John ran into Paula's ex yesterday."

Susan grinned. "I'm pretty sure Paula only married Frank because she got pregnant. They got divorced right after Chris was born."

Walt stood on the kitchen counter side of the oak-topped bar between the kitchen and living room. Making sure Susan couldn't see him, he grimaced at John, who shrugged. Looking around, Walt said, "I'm having a martini. Who wants what?"

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Michelle smiled sympathetically and adjusted the dull blue and beige scarf she wore tied around her neck. "I'll have straight vodka. I think Da Bulls and Da Bears was what ended that marriage. She was a punk rocker, and he was a couch potato."

Walt called to Susan who was heading toward the door. "Want something?"

"Yes, please. Malbec."

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Susan met Mark at the door she had left propped open earlier.

"Mark, you look as much like a Marlboro Man as ever. May I take your jacket?" She stretched up on her bare toes to kiss his cheek. "Come on in."

"Lizzie's really sorry she couldn't make it."

"Her special on climate change being up for an Emmy is an excellent excuse not to be here! It's horrible the doctors won't let you fly so soon after surgery." She tucked her arm into his. "Walt's just getting everyone drinks. What would you like?"

"Do you have a beer?"

"Cold even!" She grinned. "We knew you were coming ..."

*

Mark sat on the couch next to Charles, who was looking around for a coaster to put under his martini.

Susan placed a tray of appetizers on the coffee table. "It's polyurethaned. Just put your glass down. Try this candied bacon."

Charles noticed coasters stacked under the explosion of Stargazer lilies in the vase on the corner of the coffee table, and took one for his drink before helping himself to the bacon. "This stuff is like crack, impossible to eat just one."

"Walt loves them ... If you want something healthier, I'll be back with shrimp in a minute."

*

Susan put one bowl of shrimp on the coffee table and car-

ried the other toward the balcony where John and Walt were standing, facing Lake Michigan while Walt smoked. John didn't indulge in what he called 'fiery snacks' anymore, but he inhaled the smoke from Walt's Parliaments eagerly. As Susan opened the balcony door, she overheard John say "Are you ever going to tell Susan, or are you just going to leave it to Paula to explain the bequest?"

"Tell me what?" Susan placed the shrimp on the small teak table between them. "What bequest?"

"I'm sorry, I was going to tell you later. I've included Chris in my will, along with Nina and Robbie. They'll share half the estate, and you'll get the other half."

"I don't understand, why include Chris?"

"Can we talk about this later?"

Susan saw Paula come around the corner into the living room, raised her eyebrow at Walt, then put on a smile and went to greet Paula. Paula eyed the table settings, counted the guests, and chuckled. "Of course, I only had to come next door and I'm last. I brought back your bridge boards and bidding boxes." She smiled engagingly. "Too bad you couldn't play Thursday. Should I close the door?"

"Please. Fashionably late, as always." Susan took the small, glossy black shopping bag Paula offered. "How was Croatia? When did you get back?"

"Trip was great. Last night. So nice of Chris to make it my birthday present. Did I tell you my Chrissy-Chris made a pitch to Bill Gates right before we left?"

"Fifty and still 'Chrissy-Chris'? You didn't. What about?"

"Not sure." Paula shrugged. "Something to do with mosquitos."

Paula watched Walt return from the balcony. "His walking's getting worse." She turned to Susan. "Can I help in the kitchen?"

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"No, everything's ready. Walt's fine. He's in great shape for a 90-year-old!"

Paula held her long, wavy brown hair back from her darkly tanned face and inhaled deeply. "Smells wonderful. Everything my Italian mother cooked started with garlic in olive oil. It's home to me."

"Walt and John were just telling me about including Chris in Walt's will. Do you know anything about it?"

Paula tensed. "Yes. Walt told me. I think you should let him tell you."

The timer went off in the kitchen.

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"Dinner's ready, come to the table." Susan called from the kitchen.

Susan put the asparagus and a small pitcher of lemon butter sauce next to it on the table. She took another trip to the kitchen, carrying out an ornate silver serving platter on which the sliced tenderloin and potatoes were artfully displayed, and placing it on the table.

She reached for the Malbec and poured herself a glass. "Everyone have a drink?"

She looked around the table. "Let's toast the birthday boy." She raised her glass. "Happy 90th, my dear. If we're lucky, we'll all age half as gracefully as you have."

"Cheers!"

"Happy birthday."

"All the best!"

Carolyn raised her water glass as Susan sat. "And many more!" She continued, "Nathan and Jeanette send their best. They came in to change their wills yesterday, now that their grandson, Isaac, has arrived."

Susan eyed Walt from across the table. "Speaking of wills, we're all old friends here, no need for secrets. What's going on?"

Why include Chris in your will?"

Walt held his glass and closed his eyes for a moment. "I said I wanted to talk later, when we are alone, but if you insist. I suppose this way we can discuss it calmly."

"Why are you leaving anything to Chris?"

Knowing glances were exchanged around the table. Everyone braced for the revelation they knew was coming.

"Because, back when I was divorcing Marge, and Paula was an undergraduate married to Frank, Paula and I had an affair, and Chris was the result. I'm 90 and I need to put my affairs in order. I'm much closer to Chris than I am to Nina and Robbie. Marge turned them against me. I can't treat him less."

"Chris is YOURS?" Susan interrupted. "I don't have the children I so desperately wanted because you wouldn't have any with me, and Chris is your child? You lousy son-of-a-bitch."

Susan looked around the table. She glared at John. "How long have you known?"

John looked at Walt and shrugged. "Since before he was born. When Walt and Marge were divorcing, Walt asked my advice about acknowledging the baby. I recommended that he not do so because it would give Marge the upper hand in the divorce. I also recommended that Paula stay married to Frank long enough for Frank to be the legal father."

Susan's face crumpled. "How could you have told me so many times that Robbie's colic lasted for 2 years, that it was perfectly reasonable that Walt didn't want more children after experiencing that? I wanted a baby so badly. You knew his child was growing up right next door!"

Susan turned to Walt's oldest friend. "Carolyn, did you know Chris was Walt's?"

Carolyn nodded yes, and smiled ruefully. "It was never my secret to tell."

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Michelle put her empty wine glass down. "Susan, I'm really glad this is finally out. We all know. Until Paula started graduate school, the only people it was a secret from were Marge and Frank."

"You all knew? And no one told me?!"

Michelle poured herself some white wine and took a sip. "Well, you and Paula started grad school the same year. Walt didn't want people to think Paula was getting special treatment because of Chris. As far as people in the psychology department were concerned, Chris was Frank's. At the time, you were just another student."

Susan turned to Walt. "Why didn't you tell me when we started dating?"

"I'd dated other students before, Paula among them, and none of the relationships lasted. I didn't think there was any reason to tell you. Besides, by then Paula and I were completely over. She and Charles were having a thing."

"Excuse me?!" Michelle turned to Charles. "You and Paula were having 'a thing'?"

Charles cleared his throat. "We were separated. It only lasted a few months. After it was over, and you and I were back together, it seemed best not to say anything because she lived next door to Walt and we'd be seeing her all the time. I thought it might make you uncomfortable."

"You did, did you?" Michelle put her glass down. "Mark, you're his best friend, did you know about them too?"

"Um, yeah. I did." He squirmed in his seat. "I stopped by early one morning on my way to work to return an album Walt had loaned me, and ran into Charles just coming out of Paula's. He told me he was seeing her. You two weren't together. So I didn't say anything. By the time you and Charles were back together, Paula had moved on with that doctor, and it seemed

like old news. It didn't seem right to rock the boat."

Michelle turned to Charles. "Mark and Walt both knew about you and Paula, and you never told me? We'll discuss this when we're alone, later."

Susan picked up her glass and took a large swig. She pointed in turn at Charles, Walt and Mark. "So, you had an affair with her after he had a child with her and you knew about both." She turned to Paula. "I used to think you were my best friend, but Chris is Walt's, and you never said a word! You knew how much I wanted children. You suggested I be patient; that he'd change his mind. I waited so long it's not even possible anymore. And you had what I wanted all along."

Susan started jerkily forking potatoes and slices of tenderloin onto the dinner plates and handing them around. She continued, "Did you all have some meeting? Decide I didn't need to know?"

Paula put her glass down. "What Walt and I had was a long time ago. Chris was 10 when I started graduate school. It was a long time ago even then. By the time you and I really got to know each other, you were already in love with Walt. It was water under the bridge. We all decided not to tell you. That it would only hurt you."

Susan looked around the table at the people she had entertained so many times over the years. "You decided?! You all need to leave. You too, Walt. Get out. I've bent over backward for you. Spent all those weekends at the damn beach with nothing to do but entertain your friends. I hardly know anyone my own age. I always put off what I wanted because you were old and 'we should do what you want now and I can do what I want later.' Well, you're 90 and my later is now. I want to live my own life."

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"I feel trapped." Susan said. She was sitting in the armchair across the room from Dr. Lieberman with her brightly colored summer cotton skirt draped over her crossed knees. She crossed her arms and held her shoulders so tightly, she made white fingermarks in her tan. "How could he have lied to me for so long? How could they all?" Her face crumpled. "But you don't get to divorce 90-year-olds! He's not okay. I'd feel terrible if something happened."

"This is very painful for you." Dr. Lieberman leaned forward with his elbows on his knees. "It calls in question who can give you emotional support during this very difficult time ."

"Difficult isn't the half of it! He lied to me during our entire marriage. If he'd been honest about not wanting a child with me, I could have made a choice. He never actually said no. He always said maybe."

Susan turned toward the window, "He only just now told me he decided a long time ago that he didn't want more children."

Dr. Lieberman waited to see if she would continue. "How do you feel about that?"

She released her shoulders and clutched the padded arms of her chair. "Really hurt. I gave him so much of my life. I've spent virtually every weekend of my adult life with him and his friends in Michigan City. It was my own stupid choice. Whenever I'd tell Walt I didn't want to go, he'd say "that's fine, we don't have to go" and then eventually, I'd change my mind and decide that I'd go anyway. To spend time with my husband, I'd choose to go. I haven't made any friends of my own since college, and I only had a few then."

She started to cry great, gulping sobs. "Except Paula! She was supposed to be my best friend. Didn't want to hurt me?! What does she imagine I feel now? Delighted to know the child I babysat so often is my husband's?" She tried to laugh, but

began to cry. "Why don't I matter to anyone?!"

Dr. Lieberman leaned back in his arm chair. "We've talked about how Walt's group of friends, and Walt, was right for you when you and he first got together. How much you appreciated the intellectualism and lack of drama. But not telling you the truth feels like a betrayal of your trust in them."

Susan interrupted. "Now I can't seem to trust anybody any more."

"You want to feel loved and Walt doesn't seem able to meet that need. Sometimes, we repeat patterns. Do you think that Walt is a stand-in for your parents? They couldn't meet your needs either."

Susan stared at him. "Why on earth would I want to replicate that nightmare?" She started to laugh, then said slowly "But I do replicate it, over and over ..."

"Something to think about until next week. I'm sorry, we have to stop for today."

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Susan was standing at the kitchen counter, staring across the living room at the lake when the phone rang. She checked the caller ID, saw it was the doorman, and answered the phone.

"Thanks, Ed. Send Steven up, please."

Susan went to the door, used the doorstop to prop it open, and returned to the kitchen.

"Hi." Steven greeted her as he entered the apartment. "Thanks so much for inviting me over. Lovely to have a home-cooked meal. Only took you 35 years to return the favor." He smiled warmly and his deep-set, dark brown eyes twinkled. He paused in the kitchen doorway and inhaled deeply. "Whatever you're making smells terrific!"

Susan startled, and then started to laugh. "It's nothing but garlic and oil. Walt always said that. Sometimes, I miss him ."

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"How're you doing?"

"We're managing. I'm living in the condo here in Chicago. He's living in our condo in Miami. We 'speak' twice a day. He texts when he wakes up and we talk on the phone every evening. Even so, I worry about him living alone at 91." She strained not to cry. Wordlessly, he stroked her shoulder. When she composed herself, she continued. "For right now, it's just wonderful to spend time with an old friend and not do everything alone all the time. It's lovely to have someone to eat with." She smiled warmly. "I felt like French tonight. I hope you like it—Poulet aux Quarante Gousses d'Ail."

"Chicken with ...?"

"40 cloves of garlic. Not exactly top of the must-do instruction list for getting back into the single life." She winked. "Not that I'm single, exactly. If we both eat it, we'll be equally stinky." She smiled and gently touched his shoulder. "Let's open a bottle of wine and get comfortable in the living room while this cooks. It's going to be a while."

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Linda S. Buyer,