

INNER CHESAPEAKE

by John Luther
www.john-luther.com

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Lianne takes the ham casserole and garlic bread out of the oven while I nibble on pretzel sticks and wonder when she'll ask Gene for the money. He's standing beside me, pouring the ginger ale.

Our landlord raised the rent last week, with orders to vacate by the end of the month if we don't renew the lease. I called him up to talk about it, and he said that "market forces were at work" and he was only watching out for his own interests. We started looking for a new place, but most want at least \$2,500 up front for first and last month's rent, plus security deposit. Lianne and I argued about it all weekend until she finally agreed to ask Gene for a loan. She wanted to try for a credit line at the bank, but I convinced her it would be stupid to pay 18 percent interest when her own father is sitting on a small fortune. He drove twenty-six years for Snap-On Tools and took a hefty retirement package when he was only fifty-three. That was four years ago, and since then he's spent most of his time buying lottery tickets and shopping for food. I doubt if Gene weighs more than one-seventy, and he lives alone, but he keeps enough food on hand for a football team. He shops at one of those warehouse places where people buy fifty-pound bags of chicken wings just because they can't believe how cheap they are. There's a whole wall of canned stuff in his garage, and his freezer's so full that you have to fend off an avalanche of Snickers bars and frozen peas every time you want an ice cream sandwich. It's like he's planning for the apocalypse or something. Lately he's started inviting us over on Sunday nights to help trim the stockpile.

"Ice?" Gene asks me.

"Sure, thanks." He fills my glass with ice and ginger ale while I lift Boo into the high-chair. I don't strap him in because he's getting too big and the belts make him fidgety.

"Dinner is served," Lianne announces, and tells us to sit down.

"Wow," Gene says to me, "what a spread." He admires the bubbling dish of creamed ham, peas, and noodles. "This casserole is something, huh, Chef?"

"It sure is," I say.

"She must have learned it from you." He turns to Lianne and says, "I remember once, when you were

little, you asked me how to make scrambled eggs. Remember what I told you?"

"I'm not sure I want to know," Lianne chuckles.

"I said, 'you pour them out of the carton, honey.'" When he sees that we don't get the joke, he says, "You remember Egg Beaters. Those fake egg things in the little milk cartons?"

Lianne says, "That's right!" like she just remembered the name of the first boy she ever kissed.

"Kelly was allergic to eggs," Gene tells me, "so we had to eat Egg Beaters."

"Huh," I reply, "I never knew that."

"They were so gross," Lianne says. "They looked like wood glue."

We all crack up while Boo bounces around in his chair yelling, "Wood goo! Wood goo!"

Gene says the blessing and then tells me to start into the salad. After taking my share and piling some onto Boo's plate, I pass the bowl to Lianne. She smiles and gives me a wink. She does this a lot lately—the smile and the wink. I have no idea why it started. She does it all the time at work, when she thinks I'm stressed out. "Thanks, baby," she'll say, picking up an order, then she'll wink at me.

That's where we met, at the King's Crest boat club. Lianne had just finished college. She did a two-year Associate's degree in marketing at the state university, but when she couldn't find a marketing job she came back to wait tables at the Crest. I'd only been working there a few weeks. We used to flirt and bum cigarettes off each other, which led to movie dates, sleep-overs, and so on. We dated for a few months, then Lianne got pregnant with Boo and I found myself filing for a marriage license two weeks after my twentieth birthday.

I'd only met Gene twice before the night we told him about the baby. After Lianne assured him that she wanted to keep it, he took me by the arm and led me out to the porch. He was still working back then and was pretty fit, so I thought he was going to kick my ass. Instead, he sat me down on the porch swing and told me that fatherhood was a long haul, and that it would be the hardest job of my life. "Everything you do from here on out is for your family," he said. "I mean everything. I raised two girls by myself, and I know what I'm talking about. If you're not

ready, you better tell me now. Me and Lianne will take care of the baby ourselves.”

He was scaring the shit out of me, but I said, “I’m ready, Mr. Palinsky. I want this baby. I love your daughter, sir.”

“I hope so,” he said, and stormed back inside.

Pretty soon after Boo was born Gene developed his so-called “lung condition” and the strangeness set in. He taped all his windows shut and started sitting around the house all day. He eventually quit the Moose club, sold all his tools, and stopped fishing with his old work buddies. These days he only goes outside to shop at the warehouse club and play his lottery numbers.

Lianne’s mother died when Lianne was a baby, and Gene never remarried, but he has Carla. They’ve been dating—I guess that’s what you’d call it—since his last year at Snap-On. He met her at the mall, where she cuts hair. She’s about fifty, divorced twice, on the rocks with her kids—that whole scenario. She’s a nice person, and she loves Boo to death, but we don’t really connect. She has two subjects for conversation: the “riff-raff” she deals with at the mall, and Country & Western music. She drove all the way to Nashville last year to stand outside the Country Music Awards and scream at Ricky Skaggs to sign her autograph book. Ricky signed it “To Darla, with meh Lve.” She also has two copies of every Johnny Cash record ever released, one set for listening and one set still in the wrappers. She keeps the wrapped ones insured for \$3,500 and locked away at a fire-proof facility in Annapolis.

“Mike,” Lianne asks from across the table, “can you pass me the casserole?”

I hand her the dish, then glance over at Gene, who’s picking through his salad like it’s full of rust or something. Lianne passes the casserole to him. He spoons a little heap from the pan, uses his finger to slide it on to his plate, then puts the dish back on the table and picks some more at his salad.

I notice the edge of his checkbook sticking out of his shirt pocket. Of all the things Gene is weird about, he’s weirdest about money. He spends fifty dollars a week on lottery tickets, but if I point out that his shoes are falling apart, or that the paint is flaking off his house, he’ll tell me to mind my own business. Or he’ll remind me that he and Carla are

saving up to move to Arizona, where the air is drier. Like I said, he thinks he has this lung condition and the Chesapeake humidity is suffocating him. He’s always wheezing and blowing his nose. He even outfitted his place with central air and bought a portable oxygen machine. The machine looks like a miniature air compressor and it has a long breathing tube attached to it. It’s a bizarre little contraption, and when it runs it hisses like a leaky tire trapped under a feather pillow. Gene drags it with him all over the house, plugging it into the nearest light socket.

Boo glances Gene’s way, and Gene gets very dramatic about his condition and starts a wheezing fit. Boo stops chewing and his eyes get real wide, like he’s listening to a ghost story.

“See this, Harold?” Gene asks Boo, pointing to his own chest. “This is from cigarettes. Your old Grandad can’t breathe because of cigarettes. Don’t you ever smoke, Harold.”

Harold is Boo’s real name, from Gene’s father. We call him Boo, as in “peek-a-boo,” because he likes to sneak around the apartment and hide under our bed. That and the fact that Harold is a suitable name for a Social Security recipient, not a three year-old kid.

Gene reaches into his lap and brings out the oxygen tube, jams the green splitter piece into his nose, and straps the rubber band around his head to hold it all in place. “Can you hit my machine for me, Chef?”

I reach down and flick the switch. The thing starts jiggling to beat hell. It must have a bent piston rod or something. The force from the jiggling sends it inching across the linoleum floor, hissing and buzzing while I try to eat in peace.

After dinner, Gene keeps his machine going while we wait for the coffee to brew.

“Look at that crazy thing,” he says, pointing proudly at his machine as it roams around.

We all watch the machine like it’s better than TV or something. It crawls under the table and bumps into the corner cabinet and gets stuck in the space between the sink and the refrigerator.

“Look,” Gene says, laughing. “It’s like a puppy!” He tugs on the tube and the machine turns and starts back toward the table. He laughs some more

and watches Boo. “Look, Harold,” he says, pulling on the tube, “here doggy, doggy!”

Boo wails and slides out of his chair to run upstairs.

“Dad!” Lianne shouts.

I go after Boo as Lianne lectures Gene about being careful with a child’s imagination. When I finally get him out of the bathroom, he says he hates Grandpa’s doggy and wants to go home. I take him down to the family room and plunk him in front of the TV. We watch a few minutes of Nickelodeon, but pretty soon I start nodding off and realize that I need another cup of coffee if I’m going to drive home.

“I got called back for a second interview,” Lianne’s saying over her shoulder to Gene while she runs water for the dishes. “Maybe they’ll make an offer then.”

Gene digs a toothpick between his front teeth and says, “What kind of money are they talking?”

“I don’t really care about the money, not to start. I’m after the health insurance.”

I pour a cup of coffee and search for the half-and-half in Gene’s struggling refrigerator. I’d kill for a cigarette. I’m not allowed to pollute Gene’s precious air, though, so I take a seat and nibble on some Oreos.

“While we’re on the subject of money,” Lianne says.

“What about it?” Gene asks.

I feel a tightening in my chest.

Lianne explains our situation: the need for a cheaper apartment, our bills, how hard it is to raise a kid on what she calls “service sector” incomes. She winds up by telling Gene we need \$2,000 to get on our feet.

Gene sits there a minute stirring the toothpick in his coffee. He clears his throat and tells us about how he isn’t made of money like we think, and that his breathing is worse than ever this summer; he feels like he’s living inside a bag of water. “And condos are way up in Arizona,” he says. “You can’t touch anything out there for less than a hundred and a half.”

He goes for his machine, which is stuck rattling under the microwave cart. He puts it between his feet and adjusts the nose tube.

“And I don’t mean to scare you,” he says, “but I think it might be tuberculosis.”

Tuberculosis! I almost drown in coffee trying not to laugh.

Lianne rolls her eyes and asks Gene if he’s coughed up any blood or seen a doctor about this alleged TB. He mumbles something about an appointment with a specialist next week. “TB is hereditary,” he says. “My grandmother had it, but back then they called it ‘consumption.’ They took her to Arizona and the dry air cured her in a month, like magic.”

“Isn’t TB something that kids get?” I ask.

“What the hell do you know?” Gene snaps at me.

“I think I saw a thing on TV.”

“Yeah, well, I have the real thing, not television. And I saw a thing on television, too—on public television, and it said that TB is coming back. They’re dropping dead down there in Haiti.” He pauses to see if Lianne is still watching. She leans against the sink and crosses her arms. “What I mean is,” Gene says to her, “let me think about it.”

“Okay,” Lianne replies, and goes back to scrubbing the dishes. The room is too quiet, so I get up to pour my third cup of coffee and grab a few more cookies.

Gene gives me a suspicious look. “What about you? Still throwing your money away on dope?”

“No. Not that it’s any of your business, anyway.”

“Huh,” he snorts. “Two thousand bucks kind of makes it my business, Chef.”

“You know, Gene, I’m not really a chef. I’m a line cook.”

“Chef, line cook—I don’t know the goddamn difference.”

“Yes you do,” I say. My throat’s tight and my ears are getting hot and prickly. “I think you do know, Gene.”

“Well,” Lianne interrupts, “he’ll get in with the Highway Department this fall, won’t you, honey? My friend’s husband is on the road crew. He’s putting in a good word for Mike.”

Gene turns his chair to face Lianne. He tells her how he read that smoking pot is ten times worse for the lungs than tobacco.

I stomp into the living room to check on Boo. He’s laying on the floor watching an infomercial. A pudgy bald man and his ditzy wife are saying how everyday people can make a fortune with their own Web site.

Boo giggles and says, “That man is fat.”

I crawl up beside him and Dutch-rub his head, but he stays glued to the TV. When I zap him with the old fingers-in-the-ribs, he wiggles out of my reach.

“Boo,” I say, making a weird face. “Hey, Boo. Look here. Look at Daddy. Peek-a-boo!”

He’s not in the mood, though. He just goes on watching Mr. and Mrs. Web Site, giggling like a maniac.

I finally give up and step out to the porch for a smoke. The evening is muggy and thick, and I can smell the Bay in the air. A tone-deaf woman is singing along to “Stairway to Heaven” a few doors up, and some kids at the end of the block are arguing over who got killed first in their game of Army. After a while, a couple of sour-faced old timers stroll by carrying fishing rods and wicker creels. I ask if they caught anything.

The taller guy shakes his head and says, “Couple perch. Not even worth the bait.”

The short geezer jerks his thumb in the direction of the Bay. “It’s the weather,” he says in a heavy accent that I guess is Italian, maybe Greek. “Too hot, no rain. The water temperature, it’s way up.”

The taller man scowls at his partner. “You and your water temperature.” He turns to me and says, “The inner Bay’s fished out, plain and simple. Too much commercialization. When I was a kid, you could cast a hunk of mackerel off that jetty and hook a striper as long as your leg.”

“That’s why I keep telling him,” the other guy pleads. “Inner Bay’s too warm. We gotta get out to the real deep, where it’s cooler. That’s where they hide.”

“Fish don’t ‘hide,’ Nick.”

I join Nick in suggesting that they venture out a bit further. “How good’s your boat?”

“Boat?” replies the tall man. “What do we look like, millionaires?”

I suggest they try a charter. “Me and my buddies hired a guy once out of Fair Haven. Connor, O’Connell, something like that. He’s in the book.”

“How much did that run you?”

“Fifty a person, including bait. You can’t bring your own beers, though. He charges three bucks a can.”

Nick whistles like a falling bomb.

“That’s nuts,” the tall man says. “You shouldn’t have to pay some asshole just to catch decent fish. Anymore, the whole damn Bay just disgusts me.”

We say our good-byes and they amble away down the sidewalk. After taking a last drag off my cigarette I squash it on the steps and head inside.

When I get back to the kitchen, Lianne’s rinsing the dishes while Gene stands beside her drying them. His machine is still going, pinned between his foot and the cupboard. He smirks at me. I take it as an apology for the pot-smoking jab and smile back.

They finish the dishes, hang up the towels, and return to the table. Gene takes out his checkbook and starts writing.

“Me and Lianne talked it over,” he says, handing me the check. “I’m pretty tight now, myself. I can only manage fourteen hundred.”

“Thanks, Gene,” I say. “That’s really generous.”

He grabs an old Snap-On receipt book from the junk drawer and writes out what he calls a “Promissory Note.” After I agree to pay him fifty dollars a month he asks me to sign the Note.

“That’s your copy,” he says, handing me the pink copy. He tears out the yellow copy, folds it into his checkbook, and shakes my hand, gripping my elbow with his other hand. “I raised two girls all by myself. I know it’s tough.” He glances at Lianne, and she gives him the wink. She mentions the time and says we’d better get Boo home.

“You bet,” Gene says, “just let me finish up my ice water.” Ice water supposedly stiffens his phlegm and helps him breathe.

Lianne ties her shoes while I put the plastic containers of casserole and salad and some other stuff in a grocery bag to take home. Gene asks her if we won’t wait a few minutes and say hi to Carla.

“Maybe next time,” Lianne replies. “It’s way past bed time already.”

“Okay then,” he says, taking the tube configuration off his head. “Let’s get my grandson off to bed.”

We parade through the dining room and into the living room, where Boo’s laying asleep in front of the TV. Gene picks him up and kisses him on the head.

“Boy,” he whispers, “he’s really zonked.”

Outside it’s just getting dark enough to activate the street lights. The whole neighborhood has gone quiet. Gene tucks Boo into the car seat and buckles

him up. Lianne kisses Gene on the cheek while I light up a cigarette. Closing her door, she promises to call him this week.

“Will do,” he says. “I gotta get some coffee on for Carla. Have a good week.”

I close my door and turn the key in the ignition. The starter catches after a few cranks and sets the fan belt squealing.

“Well,” Lianne sighs, “that wasn’t so bad.” She turns on the radio and tunes it to a quiet classical station full of violins and flutes. She wrinkles her nose at my cigarette. I take a deep drag and toss it out the window.

As we back out into the street, Boo wakes up and complains that he’s too hot. He says he wants to go swimming.

Lianne reaches back to squeeze his ankle. “We can’t go swimming, honey. It’s getting dark. We’ll go swimming tomorrow.”

He’s not satisfied, though, and he’s still chanting “sim-ming, sim-ming, sim-ming!” when we get onto the interstate.

I look at him in the rear view mirror. “Hey, Boo.” He stops chanting and cocks his head to stare at my reflection. “Watch Daddy turn on the air conditioning.”

I jam the accelerator to the floor and hit all the buttons on my armrest. The breeze rushes into the car like thunder.

Lianne reaches over and turns the radio off. “That feels great,” she says.

“Better than the real thing,” I reply, and settle in for the quiet ride home. ♣