

Small Minds, Spiteful People

by H. W. Moss

Jeannette made a point of looking at her watch which was all she wore. She wanted Seth to see her do it. When he failed to reflect the fact they were on a schedule and he was throwing them off, she said, “You don’t know my brother.”

“And for this I am eternally grateful,” Seth said as he placed a steaming plate of buckwheat pancakes slathered with butter on the kitchen table in front of her. “From what you tell me, he’s a snake charmer and a charlatan all mixed into one. He’s a mortgage broker specializing in sub-prime loans who buys buildings in default before they go to foreclosure. That’s illegal in this state, y’know. Or, at least you have to make so many disclosures the debt ridden homeowner ought to get the idea maybe he isn’t getting such a good deal after all.”

Jeannette ran a knife through the stack, drizzled several ounces of maple syrup on the fork full she speared off the plate and plunged the mass into her mouth before she dared reply.

Delicious. Yes, Seth knew how to make a great breakfast. What the heck, eat. Take a shower, put on some clothes, get on the road by noon. What the heck. Naked breakfast. The pancakes tasted great.

She made no response to his condemnation of her sibling whom he had only met two times: Once at her mother’s funeral and once in the City when Daryl had business in town and took them out to lunch. Jeannette contentedly sectioned off diamonds of dough drenched in butter and syrup as Seth, too, sat down and began eating.

Because he cooked, she cleared the table. The sink was filling with rising soap suds when Seth walked up behind her and cupped her breasts in his hands. The aureoles grew firm beneath his touch. “Care for a quicky?” he asked as his hard on pressed against her pale pink ass cheeks. How could she refuse such a delightfully salacious offer?

When they were finally in the car and after having driven down Lombard, they came upon the entrance to the Golden Gate Bridge and were slowed to a crawl in one of the northbound lanes.

He said, “Now I know why everyone is leaving town. Look at that sign: No Toll Northbound. See, it’s free. Of course everyone’s leaving. No toll.”

Way behind schedule and stuck in traffic trying to get out of the city, no point in letting it get to you. She had a Vogue open in her lap, a soda in one hand and wore dark glasses which made her feel like a famous actress in retreat. “Unh-hunh,” was the best she could muster.

Seth noted her concerned unconcern. He put a hand on her knee, steered with one hand while crossing the bridge slowly. It was a form of nonchalance he liked in her and it was not unusual for him to be the cause of it, the spark of it, to be the formative source of whatever brought her to the brink of this eye fluttering “give me a break” attitude. It couldn’t be their destination, her brother’s house in Chico which was three hours distant if they were lucky and hit no more traffic snarls. More like four.

She didn’t like Daryl any more than Seth did and, Seth would be the first to admit, he had no desire to know the man and his family better than he already did. But it was Maryann’s birthday so Jeannette convinced Seth to take the weekend and drive up, stay

the night, come back Sunday in time for him to Bar B Q, drink home brew and watch “60 Minutes” which he did every Sunday night.

“You don’t have to like them,” she said without raising her eyes from a page full of purses. “You just have to go there and be nice.”

“Right. Fish got to swim, man got to fuck.”

Her eyes rolled again.

Three and a half hours later they were in scrub brush country on a dusty private road that led to a sprawling palatial custom built home with an asphalt parking area the size of a basketball court. Over lunch that day in the City, Daryl boasted, although he would have called it “confided,” about his new home which had 7,000 square feet of interior living space.

“Living space?” Seth was astounded. “That’s more like too much space. Why, that’s ten one-bedroom apartments in this city and we’d have three people living in each. Did you have them build a six or eight car garage to go along with it?”

“Sixty feet of garage doors, but that’s just the top level. Why, I dug her out underground and got that much more space for storage.”

They parked in Daryl’s driveway next to his black Mercedes. Seth’s American compact was dwarfed by the German giant. A Hummer sat next to the Mercedes.

“I see Maryann has her own muscle car,” Seth remarked dryly.

“She’s a soccer mom with two kids. She needs the room.”

“Whatever happened to piano lessons?”

“I never want to have children,” Jeannette replied cattily. “That’s why I date them.”

“Yah, well nobody buys a Hummer unless they want to intimidate everyone else.”

The front door opened and Daryl's barrel chest filled the frame. His arms were crossed and he had the air of someone who could wait until you came to him. None of this Mohammed and the mountain in his world. Daryl was not going to step out to greet his sister and her boyfriend, would not venture beyond the boundary of his fiefdom nor would he volunteer to carry any of their belongings into the guest room.

Seth took all this in at a glance, did not even bother to say hello until he had his and Jeannette's bags slung over his shoulders and was walking past Daryl into the huge living room with its vaulted 18 foot ceiling.

Daryl said, "You're late," and followed them into the house.

"Yah, well, traffic, you know," Seth replied lamely.

"Four hours?"

"Oh, c'mon, Daryl," Jeannette said in their defense. "It's not four hours, more like three. And we didn't have an exact ETA anyway. I said some time Saturday, didn't I?"

"You said you'd be here around noon. It's four o'clock."

Seth put the bags down on the carpet next to the couch. "What? Did you make dinner reservations or something?"

Daryl had always been a stickler for punctuality, but he was also prone to set his own time parameters. When their mother died two years ago on December 24, Christmas Eve, Jeannette phoned Daryl with whom she had nothing in common other than the now deceased parent. They had seen each other only at family reunions for the last ten years, but she instantly recognized the voice that answered when he picked up the phone.

“Mom died,” she said. There was silence. “I’m making arrangements for the funeral.” She waited for some sort of response but there was nothing. “I was thinking on the 27th or 28th what with Christmas and New Years and all.”

Daryl finally said, “Oh, no. I hate to travel on holidays. Can we make it some time in January?”

So their mother was embalmed and the funeral was held on January four.

Daryl pointed at the bags on the floor and said, “Want to take your things into the guest bedroom?”

It took a few seconds for Jeannette to realize this was a suggestion, not an offer. She looked at Seth who shrugged and picked the satchels up off the thick pile carpet.

“Which way?”

Daryl pointed. “Down the hall, first door on the right.”

Seth returned to find Jeannette and Daryl sitting opposite each other at the kitchen table. As he entered the room, Daryl indicated a woman at the sink with the faucet running. “My wife, Maryann.” The woman was washing and peeling vegetables and made only the most modest of shrugs as she turned slightly in Seth’s direction and nodded. She wore what Seth considered a fashionless dress, a ballooned out moo-moo that draped to the floor and revealed absolutely nothing about her figure.

All the counter tops including the island in the middle of the room and the surfaces that ran beneath the cupboards were rose colored marble which even Seth realized was about the most expensive design concept in kitchens.

He took a seat next to Jeannette.

Daryl said, “I don’t want to tell you about my pain. Oh, all right, I will. It’s these two top teeth. See?” He raised the upper lip on the left side to show a gap where teeth were missing. “Implants. I just got ’em. Let me tell you, the most painful thing I have ever willingly done to myself. Dentist drilled into the jaw bone and put bovine bone graft in to build up the jaw, then he screwed two titanium posts in which the gums have to grow over before I can have crowns put on them. Hurt like hell, lemme tell you.”

“Yah,” Seth volunteered after he heard this tale of woe, “I met a couple dental technicians in a bar a few months ago. So I asked, ‘Why does an implant cost so much?’ One of them said, ‘Cuz I want a new car this year.’” After the obligatory chuckle over this comment, he asked Daryl, “So what hurt the most: getting the actual implants or the price? I understand it’s five thousand dollars a tooth.”

Daryl apparently did not catch the ironic suggestion in Seth’s remark that Daryl found money painful to part with.

Daryl said, “And insurance doesn’t cover them. Considered cosmetic and therefore elective.”

The conversation flagged. In order to change the subject, Seth ambled over to Maryann who, he realized belatedly, had the water running to camouflage a plentiful flow of tears.

Seth approached her from the left side and only then did he realize something was bothering her, but he had no idea what it could be. She flashed her face toward him as he came near and he saw her brow was wrinkled, her eyes had a glare as she turned quickly back to stare out the window. He caught a glimpse of her lips pressed tightly together and saw her chin quiver. What appeared to be real tears welled up in the corner of her lower

eyelash, an area dark with mascara. She blinked and Seth was reminded of someone wearing a fat suit as chipmunk cheeks expanded with a deep lungful of air released in concert with a child's whimpering cry of anguish.

Although Seth barely knew the woman, had just met her actually, he felt compelled as a human to offer sympathy, one person to another. He had no idea what brought on this huge unhappy sadness. Perhaps a relative had just died or maybe Maryann had received bad medical news or a pet was lost or some other grave calamity had befallen which the woman had no power over but which affected her greatly, caused her to reel internally and project this horror toward the sink where she labored rather than allow the others in the room to see her suffering. To console her, Seth attempted to put his arm around her shoulders, realized just how overweight she was when his stretched out forearm failed to cover the upper back completely and instead his fingertips sank to their first knuckle at the fleshy neckline which he touched and was repelled by: his fingers discerned the soft marbled layering of lard that rode on her clavicle and covered her entire skeletal superstructure from forehead to ankle.

He overcame an impulse to gag and asked, "What's the matter, Maryann? You can tell me." He mustered every ounce of sensitivity, which he was not used to conjuring and which really did not amount to much anyway, into his voice hoping this would offer her comfort and at the same time elicit an explanation.

The room was silent except for the faucet cascade.

She turned to face him and timed it perfectly so that a stream of liquid fuelled by a huge wet drop fell from the corner of each eye. The water streaks stood out on her heavily powdered face and turned black with melting mascara. The fluid cleared two trails

down the pore laden skin before it splashed somewhere out of Seth's sight on the floor. Maryann sighed so deeply he was reminded of his own huge unhappiness at his father's funeral and how he had sighed like that for a week.

"Some day you'll know," Maryann replied enigmatically. Apparently it was so horrible a tragedy she was unable to express it in words.

Seth tightened his grip on Maryann's shoulders by bringing his other arm around to console her from front to back in a sort of big hug, but the width of her shoulders was too great to allow his hands to meet, so he settled on murmuring, "It's okay. You're going to be fine. It's okay."

Maryann shrugged but not enough to throw him off, merely enough to demonstrate her disagreement with his statement, not her displeasure with his presence. At least, that's how he interpreted her movement.

She whined, "Everything is ruined. It's all ruined."

"What is? Come on, you can tell me."

Her arms flapped like duck wings and the flabby skin below her biceps jiggled like jell-o.

"So tell me, what is? What's ruined?"

"Oooooohhhh. The whole day. All my plans. Everything is ruined."

He still had not figured out what she was referring to as she made these statements and he certainly had no idea that he was in some way involved with the woman's problem.

He tried to worm it out of her: "What plans? What's ruined?"

“Oooooohhhh. The whole day. Because you were late. You were supposed to be here by noon, instead you got here at nearly four. The whole day is ruined.” At this juncture she began sobbing in his arms, an inconsolable weeping that drenched his shirt with tears and black mascara which spread across her entire face as her whole short, fat encrusted body shuddered like a sail left slack to flap in the wind. Then she began weeping openly, loudly, with great heaving sighs and more tears than seemed humanly possible spilled from her eyes as Seth stood there at the sink with the woman wrapped in his arms and dawning awareness spreading over him.

It took Seth a moment, but gradually he grew astounded with this admission: Maryann’s pain was because he and Jeannette had been late, and Maryann blamed him. He was the cause of her gut wrenching pain, her failed future and all the important things she had planned between twelve and four and it was all due to the fact he wanted to get laid in the morning.

And that just pissed him off. He withdrew his attempts at manly consolation and stood back in order to look down upon the teary eyed woman who must have stood five feet of fat exactly. He was repulsed by her gargantuan figure and her misdirected anger which he now realized was meant to make him feel guilty, an emotion he rarely suffered and, if he did, never endured for long. He grew out of guilt when he left home to go to college. It was something his mother was good at laying on him, but no one else came close to making him feel.

Daryl got up from the table and stepped between his wife and Seth. He swung her around, pulled her to his chest and held her while she began a loud uncontrolled sobbing that included wheezing, wailing, shuddering and shaking that further disgusted Seth.

Daryl was a large man, heavier, wider and taller than Seth and he had big ears. As he walked Maryann out of the kitchen in baby steps toward the bedroom wing of the house past where the guest room was located, Seth was distracted by Daryl's head. He wondered if the rest of Daryl's family and friends ever commented on the shape of his ears because he had Buddha's ears: large butterfly wings with no lobe, the skin of each ear tied at the bottom to their respective cheek.

Seth caught Jeannette gazing at him without an expression on her face; not blank, more uncomprehending. She hissed in a whisper, "You better be careful! They're both so righteous when they're indignant. Like the Second Bush administration, they're not only staunch Republicans, they believe anyone who doesn't agree with them on any subject whatsoever is against them. There is no negotiation, no concession, no wavering from the path. And, also like that president and his administration, they do not consider themselves to ever be wrong. They never question whether what they're doing might be illegal, because they are the law."

Seth had no reply to this, but decided to throw out a *non sequitur*. "Ever notice your brother has ears like Kiefer Sutherland? They both have Buddha ears."

Jeannette's face developed a startled expression and her head bobbed backwards. "What are you talking about? Buddha ears? My brother has Buddha's ears?"

"I heard that," said Daryl from the living room entrance to the kitchen. Seth had no idea how long he stood there in the alcove before re-entering the room. However, the comment seemed not to bother him at all as he headed straight toward the liquor cabinet, turned to the two sitting at the table and said, "Brown or clear?"

Seth had no idea what he meant by the question and said as much.

“Scotch or vodka?”

“Ah-hah! A beer please,” Seth said

“What a wimp. Beer is for Bar B Ques. But if you insist. How about you, sis?”

“Red wine, if you please,” she replied as Daryl poured himself a hefty drink from a liquor bottle. Seth saw that it was brown, but could not be sure if it was Scotch. Daryl passed a cold bottle of lite beer to Seth and handed Jeannette a stem glass full of red.

Seth asked for a glass, poured the beer slowly and carefully into it before sipping. As expected, it had a boring flavor. He wanted to let Daryl know he never drank anything “lite,” but having heard Jeannette’s admonition did not know quite how to phrase it. Then he said, “I make beer.”

This seemed to get Daryl’s attention. “Really? Where? In your house or at a brew club?”

“We live in a two-bedroom apartment, but I have a closet in my office where I make it. Takes very little space. I’m quite proud of my home brew which is always an India Pale Ale with at least twice the alcohol content of a commercially available IPA.”

Seeing Daryl’s interest, Seth went on a lengthy description of the process. “It’s like cooking. First you make tea, then you make soup out of the tea and then you add yeast that eats the soup.” After a while, he felt confident enough to describe specific gravity and how that was related to the bottling process which was where carbonation occurred. He wrapped up by saying he’d bring a bottle some day and was certain he had skated around several incidents or concepts that could have exploded into full fledged warfare between him and Daryl. Suddenly they had a subject in common.

“Have you ever made distilled liquor?” Daryl asked.

“No. But it’s not a difficult process I’m told.”

The conversation lapsed into silence as each drew down on their beverages. Then, as if to fire his own volley, Daryl made a cutting remark about where they lived. “Know why San Francisco is like a bowl of granola? Because after you take out all the fruits and nuts, there’s nothing but flakes left.”

This particular smart hit Seth directly between the eyes. He turned to Daryl and said, “That’s what’s so nice about San Francisco. Everybody knows the joke. They’re all in on it. I mean, it could have been a woman, you never know in that town even if the voice sounds like a man. But that’s what the joke is all about, see, same as Las Vegas which has its famous motto about how you don’t take it home with you unless it’s winnings. Everybody knows the same joke and that’s why we have this knowing smile, see, like this.” He fell silent and made his face display a beatific straight lipped still life which he held for a few seconds then broke with, “Except out here in the provinces, here where no one gets the joke, no one even knows the joke exists and we all know that you and everyone else between New York and San Francisco are laughing at us, not with us, and we revel in that, we love that because all of us know the joke and you don’t. The joke is really that out here, you think sex is dirty and there is no homosexuality whereas we know sex is good clean fun and a man can love another man, a woman can love a woman, but you don’t know that and THAT’S the joke. We all know the joke and you don’t.”

Daryl looked away from Seth directly at his sister. “We have two kids. But you don’t have any. Is that because you use abortion as a form of birth control?”

Jeannette’s face reddened, but she said nothing in reply.

At that moment the young arrived from their end of the house, Maryann between them. Ben was big for his age, nine, and wore glasses. He had already begun to outsmart the adult humans with whom he came in contact.

Jill was seventeen, a senior in high school and waif thin. She had a ring in her left nostril, wore torn at the knees jeans and a bright yellow necktie over a sequined blouse. Her eyes were heavily darkened above and below, perhaps even more so than her mother's eyes. Jill wore her hair cut short and dyed jet black.

Maryann's face was composed and her makeup restored. She still wore a moo-moo, Seth observed, but a different one, more colorful than the one she had on when she left the room. "You didn't even wish me a happy birthday," she said with dour glee.

Seth replied, "I didn't have a chance."

"Happy birthday, Maryann," Jeannette dutifully chimed.

Ben turned to Seth. "Can I ask you a few questions?"

Seth said, "Sure. Go ahead."

"What's your favorite color?"

Just to be cantankerous, Seth said, "Black."

"And what's your favorite food?"

"Buckwheat pancakes."

"Where do you live?"

"San Francisco."

"What was the first question I asked you?"

"You asked, 'What's your favorite color?'"

Ben paused for effect. “Well, no. Actually, my first question was, ‘Can I ask you a few questions?’”

Daryl beamed as his son put Seth in his place. Maryann pulled Ben close and kissed him on the forehead as Jill looked pained. Jeannette did not know how to console her lover but reached out and tugged a belt loop.

“Let’s all retire to the living room and watch the game,” Daryl suggested as he rose and began leading the way, drink in hand. “It’s almost over.”

Daryl had a lazy boy chair with a table in front of it for his drink. The women took places on the couch, Seth and the children in various chairs which faced a gigantic television screen spread across one end of the room. It was already on, but its display was an array of tiny screens, a cube full of cubes which Seth guessed was probably as many as there were channels to chose from, literally hundreds.

“What game?” Seth asked before he realized this was a *faux pas* of infinite magnitude.

Daryl held the remote in his hand, but stopped to stare astonished at his guest. “The 49’ers of course.”

Seth attempted to make idle talk. “So, how are they doing?”

“They’re heading for the Super Bowl, believe me.”

At that instant the screen filled with two teams on opposite sides of the scrimmage line about to launch, each player as real life sized as everyone in the room who watched. Seth was immediately impressed with the quality and up-close 50 yard viewpoint.

“How big is that screen?”

Above the din of the announcer explaining the play as it unfolded, Daryl displayed a pride when he said, “Eighteen feet wide. Biggest plasma screen available today. Had the front entrance of the house built to accommodate it. Can’t get something that big into an apartment in San Francisco, believe me. Won’t fit past the door.”

Daryl told Jill to get Seth another beer from the kitchen and she promptly complied.

Seth was beginning to feel at ease with this radically different lifestyle. Maybe it was the alcohol, maybe the family environment that, at least superficially, lulled him into asking what he thought was another innocuous question. “You had the house built to your own specifications?”

“Yep. I’d planned on putting in a housing development, but the county and the state prevented me.”

“How so?” Seth sounded genuinely interested.

The play ended and a truck commercial came on. Daryl hit the mute and said, “I could have gotten rich, truly wealthy, but it was people like you who stopped me from developing my land, my acreage. I could have put 400 houses on that plot outside,” he waved an arm expansively as if the gesture would make his listeners see exactly what he was talking about. “But it was declared a wetlands, a flyover stop for birds for God’s sake on their way up and down North and South America in spring. I can’t build on it now. Only one house, this house, is allowed, so I figured I’d make it as big as I could. I lost a fortune because of left leaning people like you who stick your nose in other peoples’ business and killed the deal.”

Seth acted as if he was shocked. Jeannette leaned a little closer to him on the couch as if transmitting her thoughts: “Don’t say anything. Keep quiet. Don’t let him egg you on.”

But Seth would not be deterred. “What? You think I’m a tree hugging, conservationist, an anti-growth, anti-logging save the whaler? You think I go out to dinner every night and eat artichokes and sushi?”

Obviously he had Daryl pegged and Daryl obliged by replying, “Artichokes are the dumbest vegetable on the planet and sushi? We call that bait. And that’s another thing. I bet you’re an atheist and deny God’s existence. Am I right? Hunh? Am I right?”

“Well, yah,” Seth admitted. “Being an agnostic is too wishy-washy for me. At least denying the existence of God is a solid point of view.”

“Speaking of which,” Maryann said out of the blue, “we’re going to mass tonight. Want to join us?”

“No thank you,” Seth said adding, “Mass on a Saturday night? Since when did Christians borrow the Jewish Sabbath?”

“You a Jew?” Daryl’s question sounded accusatory.

“Well, now that you bring it up, yes,” Seth said. “I was born in Israel of American parents who decided to come back to the States where they thought it was safer and life was easier.”

“Jews don’t believe in Jesus,” Daryl added.

“That’s not exactly true. We think he was a prophet just like Abraham and Mohammed, but not the son of God, you’re right about that.”

Maryann sounded truly surprised. “But if you don’t believe in Jesus, how come you don’t kill people?” she asked. “Or rob and steal from everyone?”

“And you don’t follow sports,” Daryl observed contemptuously. “Your own damn city, for God’s sake, you don’t even know the 49’ers are winning. I mean, that’s downright un-American. I bet you have no idea who the Giants are or that they’re in the race for the pennant, do you? That’s baseball. Don’t follow sports? That’s Communist, that’s what it is, not to follow sports.”

“Ever heard of The World Cup?” Seth sounded sheepish.

Daryl stood now in front of a case with a clear glass door in plain sight in a corner of the living room. At least half a dozen weapons from large bore shotguns to small gauge range rifles, lined the interior. On a top shelf were boxes of ammunition and Seth rose to examine these. He stood transfixed by a waist bandoleer filled with cartridges and a pistol in the holster.

“You don’t keep that thing loaded, do you?” He was incredulous.

“Course I do. You can’t shoot a intruder with an empty gun, now can you?”

Daryl hit the mute and the announcer yelled, “Touchdown!” The volume rose in intensity with the crowd’s frenzy. Seth stared at his empty beer glass, inhaled fish and chewed sausage. He was getting hungry.

“We’ll eat when we get back from church,” Maryann said rising. She turned to Jeannette and said, “You care to come with us? The men can stay here and watch the game.”

Seth was surprised when Jeannette said yes.

After the door closed behind them, the game ended and Daryl brought Seth another beer. He clinked his glass against the can and said, “They hanged Saddam. What do you think about that?”

“You’re baiting me.”

“Well, yes, I am.”

“What do you want me to say?”

“It’s not what I want, it’s what I know you’ll say. I just want to hear it.”

“We should have done it ourselves instead of hiding behind the supposed government of Iraq.”

Daryl seemed pleased with this. “Not bad. I agree. Here.” He held out a hand rolled cigarette. “Want to smoke a doobie with me?”

Seth did a double take. “Smoking dope? You smoke dope?”

Daryl sounded proud of the fact he did and said, “Sure thing. We got some of the best Humboldt hemp growing right down the road. They ought to make it legal along with hanging leaders of foreign governments.” He lit the joint, inhaled, held his breath and passed it to Seth who did the same.

“Got to finish it before they come back,” Daryl said slyly. “Otherwise they’ll want some.”

They were ravenous when the women returned with two large pizzas and everyone sat down to dinner. Seth was not upset when he finally hit the sack that night. As he snuggled under the covers up against Jeannette’s pajama-clad body, it never occurred to him to wonder about her new found modesty. He had developed some of his own.

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