

Stuff

BY JUDY HUGHES

Well, then, so here we are.

Do you mind if I talk about sex? I mean, I know you don't know me from the whore of Babylon, it being my first time here and all, but I figure the sex stuff is at the root of things and I might as well get it out of the way right off the bat. Zeroing in, y'know, the wheat from the chaff and things like that.

I like your place, by the way. It's ordinary. I like that. The furniture's a bit ugly and persiany rugs really depress me. I wonder why? Especially worn ones. Like yours. I bet it's the Academy. That's it. When I was a kid. Miles of highly polished hardwood with occasional persian rugs, worn and faded. Not occasional in the sense of size. In fact, each was vast and endless in its dreariness. Occasional in relation to the total acreage of highly polished hardwood. Every acre or so a hideous oak plant-stand with the varnish thick and blistering, and sitting on top, a parched yellowing fern. Always a fern. Only ferns. And the little black nuns, scuttling around silently, their eyes cast down in humility.

Once I made the mistake of looking hard at one of them, full in the face. A hiss spat itself out from somewhere between the stiffened white walls of the coif.

"Cast your eyes down, boldface."

I never did that again, I can tell you. They loved ferns, those little black scuttlers.

I fancy they washed the rugs in bleach and put them in the sun to remove those sinful passionate eastern colours. Still, to tell you the truth, I don't know why your rug should depress me. It didn't bother me then, as a kid. The convent, I

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mean. I think I kind of liked it better than home. Peaceful, y'know, and clean and orderly.

I'm really babbling aren't I? But that's OK, isn't it? I mean that's sort of what you're for, isn't it. Anyway, it just hit me, maybe that's why I like your place. It's like the convent, peaceful and orderly and sort of timeless. Not in fashion. Your paintings, for instance. Non-threatening. Isn't that the sort of thing people say? You seem to be more interested in the subject matter than the art. I don't mean to put you down. In fact, my point is, your paintings don't put me down.

Still, I'm a bit nervous. I've only been to one of your people before. It was because of my crazy kid. He was twelve or thirteen then, and really round the bend, it seemed to me, and rotten as well. Mostly to me.

I cried all the time then, every day. The alarm would go off in the morning. I'd shut it off.

"Oh my, it's late. I must get up this

instant. I've got so much crying to do and there's only so many hours in the day."

That was about it, honestly. So the pediatrician said he thought our family would benefit from some nice chats with a fellow he had up his sleeve. Just the ticket, this fellow, for families that needed to learn to chat. He was the ticket all right. Ticket to the funny farm, as far as I was concerned.

Looking around your place here put me in mind of this other fellow and his place. His place, I couldn't believe it when I first walked in. We were all scared to death anyway. It was one of those posh uptown high-rise office buildings, y'know, and of course the meeting was in the evening to accommodate normal working people with nine to five jobs, so it was kind of eerie. Like coming aboard the Marie Celeste or something. You got the feeling there wasn't a soul in the whole huge building, and up you went in the elevator, silent and soaring to God knows where and what.

So, when we got up to his place, I'm telling you, there's this mushroom coloured carpet. Deep, deep pile and broadloom like forever. You got the feeling it went right up the walls and across the ceiling. Walking on it was like bouncing and floating all at once. Like walking on the moon or something. The seats were all rose and burgundy and mushroom. Crewel work, it's called, I think. Deep cushy wing chairs and sofas all over the place, in settings, y'know, with low lamps and coffee tables and end tables. Sort of like a classy cocktail lounge, y'know? Anyway, we bounced and floated to whatever chair or sofa, each of us fighting to

get the one closest to the door. For a quick getaway, y'know. What a joke.

We went for a couple of months. It was so odd. Really strange, I thought. There we'd sit, week after week, exactly the same. My husband. Well. It was like he wasn't there at all really, staring at those mushrooms on the floor. My daughter, Miss Prim, bolt upright with care, as my mother used to say. Legs crossed at the ankles, feet not touching the floor, like a six-year-old, though she was seventeen at the time. Her hands folded neatly in her lap, a small polite smile, shiny eyes, and, on her cheeks, two delicate pink spots which grew larger and fiercely red as time progressed. And the kid. Well. Always a chair, never a sofa, and the chair furthest away from the rest of us, and indeed the one closest to the door. If one or the other of us got to that chair first, he'd say, "Move, that's my place." And here's the funny thing, none of us ever ever said, "No, sorry, I'm staying put." Not ever. We'd just get up and move, with him glaring

until we sat down some place else.

And then he'd sit. And then he'd get into his fetal position. Fetal position sounds sort of warm and soft and cozy, but his wasn't like that. It was like a frozen seizure, or like he'd got half way through a spasm and decided to leave it at that. Anyway, there he'd be, huddled and hunched, raging black eyes glaring and shooting from one of us to another. And not a word. Ever. Pale as death, so small and thin.

Once we'd got settled, out would come elastic bands. Two or three. Never one. Nothing was ever said about them. I never saw him popping them in his pocket before we left the house, for instance. I've never seen him with them at any other time or place before or since.

He did lots of things with them—cat's cradle, bracelets, twanging them on his teeth like a jew's harp. But his favourite, and what he did most consistently, was to make a taut circle of them around the spread fingers of one hand, play them like a harp,

holding them very close to his ear, head down, earnestly listening to the twing twing of them. The last thing, always, was to wind them in and out and around all the four fingers of each hand, and thumb, too, just the tips, round and round, until it was very very tight and then he and I would just sit there and watch his fingertips turn blue, and sometimes, if it was a longish session, even black. Funny eh? That's all he did there. For two months. Every week.

As for me, I just sobbed and bawled and heaved and my nose ran down my swollen upper lip in two rivulets into my mouth, just like a baby. A lovely sight I must have been.

"Would you like a tissue, Mother?" the doctor, would ask understandingly, gesturing to the coffee table.

He always called me Mother.

"Oh, do you mean a tiss-you from one of these cunning, colour-coordinated, mix and match, mushroom, rose and burgandy crewel work tiss-you boxes I see before me?"

Well, I didn't actually say that. So. Week after week it went on. After each session, we'd pile into the car and hoot and holler and make fun of him. "Would you like a tiss-yeewww, Mother?"

We all hated him. So after two months I phoned him and we quit. Still, sometimes I think that maybe we didn't all hate him. Maybe only I did and they said they did because I'm the boss, y'know? Sometimes I'm so scared. My son got worse after that.

Y'know one of the things I like about your place? The way you've got the clock behind my head so you know when it's time to wrap up. Then you can, ever so gently, guide me to a close. Joke's on you, though. That clock reflects in the glass behind your head. So. You don't need to gently guide me. OK? Times up. I know.

We didn't talk about the sex stuff, did we? Funny. Next time, for sure.



Diana Dean, "The Artist's Daughter," (Sophia II), 45" x 48", Oil on Canvas, 1998.

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