

Stay when they leave

by Ben Rogers

Duane and Dorothy Crason are my hosts tonight. Tonight is Tuesday. They are dying.

“Do you smoke?” they want to know. “Do you do any of that other *magical* stuff?” “Does your family say grace?” “What faith are you?” “Oh, how nice! And will you be married in a church?”

I am living with them this week. It’s like a sleepover interview, I guess. Then they’ll decide if I can stay when they leave. I don’t want to pay rent this summer; they don’t want anything to happen to their house.

Duane has a bloodhound’s jowls. They sag from the bones of his face and I imagine that if he hung his head out a car window, they would flap back and cover his big ears, big lobes. Deafen him.

“What!” he’d be saying, but these days it’s his faithful (house)wife doing the what-ing. She’s worn six different hearing aids over the last 40 years. *Too much hard rocking as a kid*, Duane insists. Then he removes food matter from between his teeth with tongue-pressurized spittle. Long ago, back in South Dakota, Dorothy says she was first attracted to Duane’s sporty thighs (exposed by old fashioned, high-cut basketball shorts).

The Crason's make it very easy to doubt either of them did any *hard rocking*, or any level of rocking whatsoever, save the type requiring picks, shovels and C4 explosive. Maybe she helped build Mt. Rushmore. Maybe, rather than his legs, Dorothy saw something presidential in Duane's face in the uncynical years before Nixon made jowls uncool, crooky. Maybe Dorothy hears just fine. Maybe, like me, she just doesn't want to listen to Duane discuss corn shucking techniques, as he's doing right now, and therefore feigns deafness. Maybe.

They are two generations removed from my generation, generation X. They are V, or something. Cancer runs in Duane's blood. It took his prostate, then his sister, and soon his brother. His brother lives in South Dakota and pulls every breath from a tank of O₂; his lungs are old barbeque grills, the ones at the park encrusted with decades of charcoal. He still smokes. He is dying.

"Every time the phone rings you're ready," Dorothy says. "Everyone our age is in that age bracket."

{time to die}

Each night on speakerphone Duane and Dorothy catch up with folks in Minnesota, South Dakota, and down the block. She sits on a chair-stool in the middle of their carpeted kitchen and turns her good ear to the bad news.

Their siblings and friends have names like George, Ruth, Norma, Frank, Marsha—obituary names. My siblings and friends are Tyler, Judd, Jill, Joe, Adam—sitcom names.

I am DVD. Duane and Dorothy are black and white. I am email, they are ham radio. I am younger than the home they bought new. I am younger than the whites of their fingernails. I am planning, ready. I am doing pushups. They are waiting, patiently, for their turn to get out of my way, to clear up some space. They are watching me take risks in a world they know better than to take for granted.

Miscarriages. Melanomas. Metastasizing. That's them.

"You might live on Mars someday," Duane tells me. "You're young. Plenty of time left. You never know."

And I'm young enough to actually consider such a thing; so I nod without the sarcasm his suggestion merits.

The Crason's find solace in routine. Here is one: Duane sidestepping through a screen door that wants nothing more than to swing closed with a raucous bang but is impeded by a strut at its hinge so that it closes in degrees, leaving just time enough for Duane's unscathed entry. He yells "four or five minutes to go," referring to whatever is cooking on the grill outside. Another routine: his shirt and pants. They are changed weekly, right on schedule.

I scribble phone numbers on my hands; she coats hers in hot paraffin to alleviate arthritis. I can do 86 pushups, 86 more than her. Give me a high five.

Her hair is immobile, a tribute to hair spray. Her teeth, small and square, were never subject to orthodontia. I am a smile on a Crest commercial. Her nose is petite, as are her eyes. I didn't realize just how small her eyes really were until one morning at breakfast when I saw her without her binoculars, excuse me, glasses, on.

I am the tachometer, needle sweeping clockwise. They are the odometer, leftmost dial on its second go around.

Duane just farted. Because he walks around and farts, whenever. His walking farts are so perfect you'd think the floor was covered with wet whoopee cushions. And long farts too. Sloppy, soupy, slappy ones. Apparently, Dorothy didn't hear this one, or at least that's her story and she's sticking to it.

They show me around their house. It is locked up. All the exterior doors can only be locked and unlocked by keys; and there are no handles to turn, no knobs, even on the insides of the doors. It is possible, you see, to become locked inside the house if you do not have a key. When I leave I am to double-lock every door and the screen doors to boot, and take every single

copy of every key in the house with me in a tiny leather purse. This is to ensure that, should a burglar get in, he or she won't have access to any of the keys and therefore won't be able to use them to get in next time, or at least that's the only reason I can come up with to explain the practice.

Most of the house has a sailing theme. Call it a sailing mantra. Sailboats hang in wind chimes and mobiles. Spinnakers billow in graphic relief paintings. There are gigantic, white triangular sails of stained glass in a window scene the Crason's had commissioned depicting Catalina Island. The bathroom wallpaper is a montage of nautical sayings: "Very gung-ho Navy," "Midshipman's first voyage, rough seas forecast." These sayings are spaced evenly among pictures of boats and whales and signal flags and even an effeminate pair of twins donning sailor suits under whom is written, "two *very* nautically inclined youths" [italics not mine].

The house has other themes. The Fragile Dust-Collecting Trinkets In Glass Cases Theme, the Professionally-Done Portraits That Should Never Have Seen A Darkroom Because One-Fourth Of The People In Them Aren't Even Close To Looking Into The Camera And The Blue Backdrop Looks Like Old Fraternity Carpet But Let's Just Hang This Picture And All Others Like In Every Hallway In The Damn House Theme, the Nothing Matches Theme, the No Theme Theme, and the Old Furniture With Tiny Drawers Theme.

We tramp downstairs to the garage. It has barely any room for cars. Lined with home-built shelves and cabinets, the two-car space now comfortably houses one ancient Oldsmobile (boat theme) and the musty, growing manifestation of what appears to be a lifetime spent hoarding rusty tools, worthless appliances and clothes that even the Crason's are too good to wear. (After all, there's only 52 weeks in a year.) I pity the unsuspecting clerk manning the collection counter the day the Crason's stroll up schlepping donation bags...

Duane: "These suspenders ought to make some poor Christian kid real happy. Keep his pants up too, what with the way I see some of these hoodlums wearing trousers these days."

Dorothy chimes in: "And this sailor outfit too!"

Duane: "How'd that get in with this stuff? Gimme that!"

Today I rode my bike along the beach to slalom amongst tan homeless men and silicone mammary glands and lots of other interesting things. Duane and Dorothy shopped at Price Club, where Duane became verbally enthusiastic about long distance rates currently available with Price Club prepaid phone cards. He's still excited. 4 1/2 cents per minute, eh? Eh? Not bad, son! not bad at all!

We are eating dinner. They talk with me and with each other. They never bicker. I get the feeling they never French kiss either. Their marriage is a thing like an ocean or a mountain. A noun, not a verb—not subject to change. It is original, not a rendering or a photocopy or an impression. Their misunderstandings are resolved in mere seconds. Like a symbiotic cat and dog they share a room, and when the bloodhound acts too doglike, the Persian need only swipe her claws once and squint her cat eyes before the dog is back to whatever he was doing, only doing it more catlike. Debates over which Air Force base good ol' Herb and May were transferred to are ended as quickly as they begin. She is picking at a stray shred of grilled chicken breast, muttering "I'm just sure it was Fallon, Nevada." He is holding his fork like Fred Flintstone and shrugging at me. His lower lip juts out, his eyebrows rise. Whad'ya gonna do? he wants to know. To whom does he refer this question when I'm not at the table?

When she talks, she pauses, and when she pauses she pulls her wet tongue off the roof of her mouth over and over again, as old ladies do. It makes a nice noise. Her lips and her days are thin.

It is Thursday. I am ashamed. They are unaware.

They are grandparents. They attend Little League games and root as their grandson rounds the bases on an in-the-park homer. Duane is intimately

familiar with the roads of San Diego and she with the restaurants. He pulls out a map and I can see the power of his big fingers as he points out shortcuts. His big knuckles look silly when they delicately trace roads and highways, his calloused skin moving across the weathered paper.

I mean, for Christ's sake, they sail. As in *sail*, sail. As in live on a damn sailboat from June till September, island hopping—which is where I come in.

I am judgmental. They are patient. I am an MTV attention span, ready to slap labels on their hunched backs and call it a day. Lazy me.

Humans fart and humans die.

I am fart. I am human. I am 23.

Forgive me?

It is dark now, this Thursday night. Dorothy is talking of friends who've had their hips replaced and neighbors who've lost wives and sons to cancer. She knocks on wood. She still loves to laugh. She's not ashamed to say "what?".

"There goes Sea World," she says abruptly, referring to the nightly firework display at the amusement park across the bay. We can see it through the back windows. We move to the window and watch. She tells a story of her cocker spaniel who used to hear the fireworks, run to the nearest

bedroom, “jump on the bed and piddle.” She says fireworks used to be louder, and I can’t tell if she’s joking or dead serious.

The show continues. We see the explosions, then a few seconds later we hear them. Twice she insists, “this must be the finale,” only to take it back. A brighter, more orgasmic round of big ones and little ones and late bloomers and streakers and duds and Daddy-look!’s are still to come.

“A hip replacement lasts ten years,” she says. “I keep putting mine off, but I need it.” She scratches her hair. It moves as one big helmet. “Ah, now *this* is the finale.”

“Must be.”

“It’s really something.”