

Academy Award Afternoon and Evening

Lila and Dave have us over for the Academy Awards, a mini-party to use their big-screen TV one last time before they sell the thing. The monster set doesn't fit their newly remodeled living room, which has new oak wood floors. Blond flooring vs. a walnut cabinet is the deal. I've been feeling disconnected lately, what with taking on too many freelance assignments that explain the God-damn computer of all things—keeps me up too many nights with bad coffee—who reads these things anyway?—so the point is I can use a good party.

My wife and I show up at four, and the first thing I notice is the new Mercedes in the driveway. It looks like an ad: silver body, chrome wheels, moon roof, sparkling on the red brick driveway under a sun that also shines across town on movie stars and next to a lawn so perfect and green you want to open up his trunk, pull out a golf club, and hit a ball so hard and imperfectly it leaves a divot the size of Texas on what otherwise is an emerald carpet. I know for a fact he keeps the grass so lush thanks to an automated sprinkler system that senses when the turf is thirsty, and valves open and probably spray Perrier onto each perfect pixel before anything is able to choke or strangle or die. My system is that

when my lawn is brown and gasping and seeing mirages of Turf Builder, I hope and pray that a good hosing will help.

We enter the house, admire the remodeled living room, its inlaid oak floor, the built-in bookshelves, and the ergonomic Herman Miller chairs. A marketing man, Dave smiles and nods, being the friendly, unassuming guy he is. He wears a pastel Polo shirt that matches the walls and betrays the fact he’s followed through on his New Year’s resolution to get in shape. He hits the gym each morning at 5:30 when more sensible souls like me are sleeping. His belly is flat. “So you like it,” he says, his arm wavering over the living room like Vanna White pointing to a Porsche.

“Yes, beautiful,” says my wife, gathering reconstruction ideas in her eyes, making me wonder how many more articles I’ll need to write. “Great,” I say, noticing Lila in the kitchen, dark, a mere smudge in the background. As we approach the counter that divides the two rooms, I see Lila wears a baggy, gray sweatshirt that gives little sense to her form, as if she is out of focus. I then notice her uncharacteristic frown.

“Hey,” I say, and she smiles bright like a snapshot of snow and yanks off the plastic wrap to a Gelson’s hors d’oeuvre platter of shrimp, cheese log, crackers, and liver paste and offers me a taste.

“You’re just in time,” she says, “They’re still arriving.” She points to a small screen TV in the kitchen. Little bitty movie stars wave. Lila lifts a remote control and aims it into the living room like Luke Skywalker with a laser sword. The large screen leaps to life, basso profundo, showing the red carpet canyon leading into the Shrine Auditorium with columns of Oscars bigger than Buicks. Hillary Swank in an olive gown, a chandelier of jewelry, and all those teeth, hugs her husband Chad Lowe and says that “the role afforded me an understanding of humanity.” I wish I had that. An understanding. I’m in the dark. Salma Hayek sweeps in with pink diamonds and deep cleavage—actual size on the big screen—and she hopes Pedro will win that night. Roger Ebert, a blimp in black,

just grins. I’m with him. Being married for fifteen years, I don’t see many naked breasts anymore.

The four of us sit on the sofa and talk. The platter goes around. Dave pours margaritas into martini glasses. We look elegant, get a little silly, glance occasionally to the movie stars inside the auditorium—Nicole Kidman in a backless gold gown, Faye Dunaway in white, and perfect Jack Nicholson gets away with sunglasses in the front row.

“We ought to drive to Mexico together sometime,” says Dave.

“Sure, why not?” I say, thinking at this point I’d better get another credit card. “Let’s go in your Mercedes,” I add.

He laughs and says, “I’d love to drive. Have you driven a Benz? It handles better than a BMW.” He says we’ll go to La Fonda and eat steak and lobster on the shore, drink mescal and think of our youth. I realize our youth, like these margaritas, has fled.

As we eat the ideal salad from a crystal bowl, the tomatoes red, cubed, and flavorful—several staining my tan pants—this is around two hours in during the Best Short Documentary Award and with some guy in a wheel chair—I look to Lila and thank her. You can never thank anyone enough. She stares at me seriously. Am I frowning? I hope not. Lila says, “So if a Mack Truck hit you right now, what would you say to this all?”

“Ouch,” says my wife, and we laugh.

“I’ll sue you,” says Dave and we burst out again.

“What the fuck are we here for?” I utter. No laughter. “Why?” I ask. “Why ask about this all?”

“Oh, well, my mom died last night.” The words come out as if she were ashamed. She didn’t mean to ruin the party. The big screen TV, which does not seem so big now, is mute. “She’s been sick and out of it for a while,” says Lila. There’s an awkward pause at the Academy, as if they’re trying to find the script. Billy Crystal, the host, stares directly at us. Lila says, “She finally gave in last night.”

“Good ol’ Dorothy,” adds Dave, raising his empty margarita.

We raise our glasses and sip nothing. I didn't know Dorothy was her mother's name. I don't really know Lila at all, I realize, but I do know that a mother's a mother. Lila is a mother. Their little boy, age seven, is back in his bedroom playing Nintendo. He's been doing so all night, out of sight, and I now hear the distant sounds of bombs dropping and jet fighters crashing. What else do I know about Lila? She is the wife of Dave and does something or other at the Rand Corporation. It's a think tank, as they say, so she must think for them. What does she think? What do you say?

“I'm sorry,” says my wife. That's a good thing to say, and I echo it. Lila stares out blankly. Dave says nothing. I hear the sprinklers turn on.