

Dinner on Sunday

A tall, gray-haired George Dandridge handed his topcoat to the cloakroom attendant, slipped the claim check in his pocket, and followed a waiter to his regular table at the Bartok's. After getting comfortable, he announced to his sons, "Of all our Sunday dinners over the past ten years, this should be the happiest. Ever since our first Sunday dinner after your mother died, you've both urged me countless times to update my will. You'll be glad to know I have an appointment with Morton to do just that this week."

Mark said, "As healthy as you are, you're not likely to need it any time soon. You go to the gym more than I do, for Chrissake. Still, it's better to take care of it. No need to remind you how Barry and I have fought over every bone in the yard since we were kids." He paused slightly. "And," he added, staring at his older brother, "we know who got most of the bones."

As soon as their drinks were served, they placed their orders. Dandridge liked his steaks rare; neither of his sons did. As soon as the waiter brought their salads and had gone away, Barry, the older brother, said, "I'm glad you're doing this, Dad."

"None of us has ever wanted for anything," Dandridge said, "thanks to my grandfather. Few people know his invention is the only part of the modern automobile that hasn't changed since cars were invented."

"True," said Barry smiling. "Those tire valves are still doing their job. We're lucky Great-grandfather had the good sense to invest his profits in Bell Telephone and Standard Oil."

"Thanks to Ma Bell and Rockefeller, you both stand to inherit great wealth. I've tried to set a good example for you. You know all the charities that have received large

sums from our fortune. I've always believed others should benefit from what we've accumulated."

Staring unsmiling at his younger brother, Barry said, "Well at least one of us will carry on the family tradition. That's probably the best we can hope for."

Dandridge gritted his teeth so his jaw muscles stood out. He folded his napkin, placed it by his plate, and pushed his chair back. "You fellows enjoy your dessert. I'm tired. I think I'll call it a night."

"You're taking your meds, aren't you, Dad?" asked Mark. "You're not Superman. We don't see you every day, so you're on your own to watch your blood pressure."

Dandridge lifted his brows slightly. "I feel good. I see no reason for you to worry," and he walked away.

Mark waited till his father was out of earshot. He looked Barry directly in the eye. "What do you think he's worth?" he asked.

"Do you mean 'What is *he* worth?' or 'How much *money* does he have?'"

"You know what I mean, jerk. He won't split it down the middle. You've always been his favorite," Mark said.

"That's because I don't borrow from everyone I meet. I'd be willing to bet, right now, you're holding off people you owe with a promise you're in line for a big payoff. You've always been stupid about money."

"I pay my bills."

"Be grateful for small blessings," Barry rolled his eyes. "You always take more risk than you can cover. Like when we were at Marshall. Dad gave both of us \$100 to give to the English teacher whose wife died. You gave him \$50 and used the rest to pay off your bets on

the New York Jets. You only pay your monthly bills because dad gives you a monthly allowance. If you had your inheritance, you'd run through it like a Texas tornado."

"What about you, big brother? Still hanging onto the first dollar Dad ever gave you? Probably sleep with it under your pillow. I figured out why you've never married Grace after living together for four years."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean if you get your inheritance before you marry, it's all yours. If you marry after you inherit, it's community property. If she ever wanted to haul ass and quit your lousy company, it's half hers. That's what I mean."

"At least I have a relationship, which is more than you can say."

"If you want to call a live-in girlfriend who gives you freebies a relationship, be my guest."

"This discussion is pointless. I'm outta here."

The next morning Dandridge rose early. The gym opened at 5:00. He finished his workout and was home and had coffee brewing before he spotted Mrs. Guerrero on the security camera walking up the driveway. At 8:00 he heard the lock in the front door turning and in came his housekeeper.

"Good morning, Mr. Dandridge. How are you feeling today?"

"Fine, thank you, Mrs. Guerrero. How about French toast for breakfast?"

"French toast, it is. I brought fresh strawberries. Shall I scramble you an egg?"

"That would be nice." Dandridge poured himself a cup of coffee and went through French doors to the table by the pool. He had finished browsing the morning paper by the time she brought his food. The French toast was just the way he liked it, with a touch of cinnamon. "I'll be gone most of the morning, but I'll be back for lunch."

“Any special requests?”

“Surprise me. You’re such a great cook. I’m lucky to have you.”

Dandridge, in a turtleneck sweater and slacks, left by his back door, walked past his pool, and entered the garage. He chose the MG because, by the time he came home, the weather would be warm enough for him to drive with the top down.

Inside a marbled building labeled Gregg and Dennison Law Firm, his lawyer greeted him. “George! How’s it going? Come right in. Shirley, hold my calls.”

“Good morning, Morton. Hi, Shirley. I’m well, thanks. I’m here to update my will. My boys have been pushing me, so let’s get it done.”

“I agree with them. I’ve always been flabbergasted a man of your wealth hasn’t kept his will up-to-date. Perhaps now I will be flabbergasted no more.” Dandridge sat at a mahogany conference table as Morton Gregg continued.

“I think we have a complete list of your holdings: stocks and bonds, property, your wife’s art collection.” He handed Dandridge a handful of papers. “Look these over to see if you spot any omissions or discrepancies. You had a small army keeping an eye on your fortune before you retired. Now you seem relaxed, too relaxed. It’s not like you to leave loose ends.”

“I hope they’ll all be tied up soon. I want your counsel. You know my boys. Mark’s tightfisted. Barry’s a loose cannon. I’ll provide for them, but I also want to be sure my wealth does some good in the world. I wouldn’t be happy with it just multiplying somewhere in Mark’s bank account, and I shudder to think how Barry might handle it.”

“I don’t know how you managed to raise two boys so different from each other.”

“I don’t know either. Once, 30 years ago, we took them on a picnic. Barry wanted to show how high he could climb in a tree. Mark grabbed his foot and dragged him to the

ground. After a couple of hard landings, Barry went crazy. We had to take them home. I was afraid one of them would hurt the other.”

“I know they’ve never been fond of each other,” Gregg said.

“We went to a school outing when the boys were at Marshall. Mark ran in a couple of races. He won neither of them. Barry followed him around chanting, ‘Loser, Loser.’ Finally, Mark bloodied his nose. It ruined the day. After Phyllis passed away, I stopped trying to figure it out.”

“There are a lot of ways you can go other than a simple outright equal division between them. You could put the money in trusts managed by a third party. You only have to decide, then we’ll write it up for your signature.”

That evening, Barry phoned. “Dad, I’d like to drop by for a few minutes if you’re not busy.”

“Fine. I’ve had dinner, and Mrs. Guerrero’s gone. Come, say, in an hour or so.”

Exactly one hour later Barry appeared at the front door and let himself in. He went straight to the library where he knew his father was waiting. Dandridge was seated in a wingback chair in front of a stone fireplace with only a small flame. “This seems sufficient to take the chill off,” he said.

“It feels good to me,” said Barry, standing with his back to the fire. “I’ll come straight to the point. We both know Mark can’t handle money. His whole life he’s never been able to hang onto a quarter. I don’t think there’s a cure for that, do you?”

“You’re right. Mark doesn’t handle money well, even in small amounts. You have a proposal?”

“This is just an idea, but what do you think about naming me Mark’s trustee? You know I’m reliable when it comes to handling money. I’m not a spendthrift. I’ll make sure

Mark has at least as much income as you are giving us now, plus more if it seems appropriate.”

“How do you think Mark would feel about having to look to you for his income?”

“You could stipulate a minimum amount to assure him an adequate income. That would leave it only partially in my control.”

A loud banging sent both sets of eyes to the library’s double doors. They flew open and in stalked Mark, eyes burning with anger. He sneered, “Just as I thought! When I saw your car in the driveway, I knew you were here, needling, getting your pitch in early, working your black magic. You never change!”

Barry said, “There’s no question in the mind of anyone in this room who knows how to handle money! And it’s not you, little brother.”

Mark sprang towards Barry with his fist clenched. He drew back his arm as he grabbed Barry’s collar.

“Stop it, Mark!”

Mark’s bulging eyes and pursed lips said he had not heard his father’s voice. “I’ll smash you to kingdom come! Get out of my life, and stay out!”

“Mark! Stop! Sit down! Now!”

Mark shoved Barry into a chair. A lamp crashed to the floor and shattered. Barry sprang back and grabbed Mark’s jacket. His face was red. He was nose to nose with Mark.

Dandridge jumped out of his chair and shouted, “Barry! Mark! Calm down. Just listen.”

Mark sat down, breathing heavily. His expression did not change. “Once a rat, always a rat!”

Barry’s face was flushed.

“Will you both listen? I have a few things to say to both of you.”

Barry and Mark retreated to sofas, glaring at each other across a coffee table.

Dandridge returned to his chair and said, “I’ve been trying to think of a way, any way at all, to bring you two together. I don’t know why you can’t both act like adults. Why do you fight every time you’re together?”

“Barry thinks he’s God. He never does anything wrong. He tuns off lights to save pennies. He lives with no style. He has to control everything, or he takes his marbles and goes home. He can’t stand not being in charge.”

“Right. And you never do anything right. You don’t take care of your money. You carouse your way around town, and your reputation isn’t worth discussing.”

“Maybe I’m not a number one citizen, but at least I have a life. I have fun. So what, if I have a few fair-weather friends? Everybody does.”

Dandridge spoke. “What I fear is the day of my funeral will be the last day you set eyes on each other. Seeing you at odds when the family has always been important to your mother and me, I don’t know if I can bear it.”

“Dad, I apologize. We both love you. We want to do what mother would have wanted but face it. What separates us is money. We see possessions differently. We handle finances differently. In many ways,” Barry said, “we’re exact opposites.”

“That’s clearer to me now than it ever was,” said Dandridge. “I’ll have to sleep on it—if I can sleep at all,” he said, raising his right hand to his temple. “I am tempted to say you two disgust me, but that’s not the right word. I just feel sad. You run along now.”

His shoulders slumped. “Too much excitement has made me tired.” His voice trailed off.

After Dandridge went upstairs, Barry and Mark sat silent. Mark's eyes lit up, and only the hint of a smile curved his lips. "You know, I played you like a violin when we were teenagers."

"How so?" asked Barry.

"When we left the campus to go to town and troll the girls, I always took you along. Do you know why?"

"Sure. Do you think I didn't know? You were more popular with the girls than I was, but you could only take one. That left all the others for me."

"Dog!"

"You used me. I used you," said Barry. "I guess we didn't fight about everything, did we?"

The following Sunday evening, Barry was waiting on the sidewalk when Dandridge arrived at the restaurant. "It's a bit chilly to be waiting out here."

"I didn't want to go in till you got here. If I did, Mark and I would be arguing by the time you came in. I thought the meal might be more peaceful with you present."

Mark was looking over a menu when his father and Barry entered. He put the menu on the table and looked at them. His eyes squinted and his lips tightened. "Did you come together?"

Dandridge shook his head, "That question is uncalled for."

The meal was another five-star meal. The first topic, health, took up several minutes. They were all healthy. Dandridge checked his watch. Then came weather, including a possible trip to Aspen to get in some skiing. Another check of his watch told Dandridge they were more than halfway through their meal.

Food was their next item for discussion. They compared meals they had shared around the world to the meal they were now enjoying. This meal was right up there with the best. When dessert came, Dandridge was satisfied they would make it without any backbiting. Each had peach Melba, served at the moment of perfection.

“I must be dreaming,” Dandridge said. “We’ve gone through an entire meal without a disagreement.” He smiled. “There’s hope yet.” He rose to leave.

Mark said, “Dad, you always rush off. Stay for a while.”

Dandridge hesitated. He looked at Mark, then at Barry. Barry nodded. A smile brought small dimples to Dandridge’s cheeks. He slowly edged himself back into his chair to enjoy the rest of his coffee.

Tuesday morning at 8:15, Barry’s home phone rang. Grace answered. Her eyes widened. She handed the phone to Barry. “It’s your dad’s housekeeper.

“Something’s happened,” Mrs. Guerrero said.

He listened a few seconds then raced out of the house. His tires burned rubber as he sped away. As he maneuvered traffic, he called Mark. Mark didn’t answer.

“Mark, I hope you get this message soon. It’s 8:20 and I’m on the way to Dad’s. Mrs. Guerrero says something has happened to him. She’s called 9-1-1.”

Barry slammed on his brakes behind the emergency vehicle and dashed up the walk and through the open door. He took the stairs two at a time and rushed into his father’s bedroom. Mrs. Guerrero stood at the side of the room holding her hands, tears in her eyes. Medics were working on Dandridge. His father’s hand felt cold to Barry.

One of them said, “Sir, your father is non-responsive. We’ve done all we can for him. Do you want us to transport him to the hospital? Does he have a DNR?”

“Take him to the hospital.”

As Barry started toward the door, Mrs. Guerrero stopped him. “Mr. Dandridge gave me these papers and said I should give them to whoever comes—in case something happened to him.”

She handed papers to Barry. The top paper was labeled DNR: Do Not Resuscitate. “Thank you, Mrs. Guerrero,” Barry said and ran down the stairs to his car. He took off following the ambulance and again tried Mark’s number. Mark picked up.

“Where’s the fire?” he shouted into his phone. “Do you know what the hell time it is?”

“It’s Dad. I’m following the ambulance to the hospital.”

When Barry reached the hospital, Mark was already there, watching the EMTs transport Dandridge on a gurney to the emergency room.

“He looks bad,” Mark said. “What happened?”

“I have no idea. I think he’s gone.” Tears slipped from his eyes.

Ten days later, Mark and Barry were ushered into an inner office of Gregg & Dennison Law Firm and offered leather upholstered chairs.

“Before we open the will, I’d like to say what a beautiful service your father had. I was not surprised the church was packed. Your dad has been an outstanding citizen, a generous benefactor to many charities and causes, a kind and beloved individual. You have so much to be proud of.”

“Thank you, Mr. Gregg. We’re still feeling the loss. Dad had been ailing, but this was a surprise. I think we’re still in a bit of a shock,” said Barry.

“No one else is mentioned in the will besides you two, no siblings since your father was an only child, no nieces or nephews. Your dad labored over his will. I think you’ll find it’s not ordinary in any sense of the word.”

Barry and Mark looked at each other, puzzled. “Knowing our history, I can’t imagine what he finally decided,” Barry said. “He never shared it with us.”

“The first stipulation is the simplest. Your present income will not change except for inflation. What you have been accustomed to receiving monthly you will continue to receive.”

“That says nothing about the bulk of the estate. What will happen to it?” asked Mark.

“Your father has chosen a peculiar path. He and I had discussions about your strained relationship in the past.”

“An understatement,” said Barry, “but I think we have found a little bit of common ground so we won’t be at each other’s throats like we have been in the past. We just try to stay off certain subjects.”

“I’m glad to hear that, and I think you’ll be glad, too, once you hear your father’s will. He talked about the creation stories in the Bible, the tale of two brothers. One became jealous and killed the other. When confronted with his deed, he asked the question, ‘Am I my brother’s keeper?’ The implication was, ‘No, I’m not.’ Your father thinks he got it wrong.”

“You’re not going to preach a sermon, are you?” Mark said.

Morton smiled, “Rest assured, I won’t. With that in mind, however, what your dad has placed in his will is that, other than your base allowances, which remain in place, neither of you will be able to control his inheritance until you are age 50.

“During the interim, the estate will be divided equally and placed in a trust. The unique provision is each of you will be the sole trustee of the estate of the other. Barry will

manage your inheritance, Mark. Mark will manage yours, Barry. You must consult on every financial transaction that's made.

“You are both your brother's keeper for years into the future. This was your father's wish.”

“That's weird,” said Mark. “But,” he added, “we can handle it, can't we, bro? I'll see you Sunday night.”

