



THE LIVE AND DEAD SILENZIOS

By

Domenick Acocella

WHY I LIKE IT: *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes...*

“(And you should warn readers that digressions, which you write consciously, are common in the writing that follows.)”

Domenick Acocella's, “The Live and Dead Silenzios,” will talk to you (and with good reason) – it's like a faint echo of a familial ghost story weaved through metafiction (or whatever you'd like to call self-referential fiction) and a touch of John Fante.

“The point is misreading.”

I’ve written stories that relied on using real people and knew that those real people were going to know who they were.

I think that amount of honesty is a large bridge to cross when you either care for that other person and are using them for some form of emotional inflation or perhaps confession, or when they care for you and there isn’t quite a good way to say what’s on your mind so you have to write in metaphor.

There is a great love that exists in this story, one that goes back generations and begins with the stories that we tell ourselves around the table. Stories that remind us of those that we’ve lost (and who are sometimes the easier of choices to talk about because live people can still say their opinion) or those that make us laugh or those that make us smile with the past.

These are the stories that talk to each other across time and space and alter and change as are needed for effect because that is the nature of stories.

Acocella has done some fine tuned and careful work, and there is heart here, heart for the medium, the story, and the word.

Enjoy.

Five Stars.

QUALITY QUOTABLE (for the love of language...)

Vindicated he’d become because he was now getting more than just the seltzer, and he’d stood there and marveled at his ability, after all these years, to associate and as he’d walked with the seltzer and pretzels without salt toward the checkout line, he’d seen an attractive young woman get in line at the register just before him and he’d noted that she had a lot of groceries and he’d thought how even if she’d seen him and had borne witness to what he wanted to buy she wouldn’t have, *because kids these days don’t even know how to respect elders and we elders lack the power we had in my heyday at the school to teach them respect*, let him go in front of her to pay for his Vintage Seltzer and Herr’s Super Thin Sourdough unsalted pretzels.

He liked having seltzer around. It gave him comfort. So he was never one to just go without, if he indeed did not have seltzer. And if he did have seltzer at home? So what? He would rather have too many bottles of seltzer than no bottles of seltzer---even for one evening. So he’d decided, there and then, that he would have to relinquish the parking spot and drive over to Stop and Shop. *I’m not sure that I am out of seltzer, but I don’t want to regret it*, and so he’d said to himself that *he might as well get the seltzer now*, because he hadn’t *actually parked the car* and also he had grown up in times of want---and had signed up for the rigors of want when he had chosen, if the word even applied back then, to join the army---and never again did he want to be

in want, even for seltzer, so he'd driven off, to the supermarket, the one that has that Vintage Seltzer, which *is cheap and good*, and as he parked his car in the supermarket's parking lot he thought about what else he needed from the store and nothing, nothing, nothing came to mind and he uttered "God damn it all."

The Live and Dead Silenzios

Domenick Acocella

You carry the people, living and dead, and their lessons with you everywhere, and whenever you do something counterintuitive to what they'd shown you is the right or appropriate thing to do, you get a headache. It's not a bad headache. It's, in fact, a mild headache, a headache that reminds you of what you'd learned at this particular person's foot when you were just to their knee.

Now, some of the lessons, like the ones imparted by Cousin Freda, are pretty awful as far as social decorum and basic humanity go. But she's alive, and you hesitate to write about her teachings---there is a chance she will one day read what you've written about her. And she doesn't seem on her way to Hades anytime soon.

So you often write about the dead or, if you write about the living, you write kind or gently humorous things about them---at least, in your estimation, you write kind or gently humorous things. The dead are another matter, literally and metaphorically. Everyone has opinions about this and that person who'd lived this and that many years ago and led such a this-and-that life and how good a person or bad a person that person, now dead, had been. The dead ones you can write about with almost no worry about their saying that you fucked something about them up---you think and say "almost no worry" because lately you have been having, let's call them, experiences in your apartment, where you live alone, after midnight, experiences that you cannot tell anyone else about because the last thing you want to do is go, once again, before a group of shrinks and talk about those voices and the doubts about reality that you and the voices find yourselves, for lack of a better word, discussing as you spoon, directly from the jar because you do live alone, peanut butter into your mouth. But the dead can be written about. You can write about your grandparents and uncles and aunts and tell their stories in dotting and loving and critical and self-righteous and always---always---humorous ways, humorous ways that the living, those pesky bastards, are sure to understand in all the wrong ways.

You're disrespectful, Dan, they'll say.

And you'll say, because you are supposed to, you think, say something, *I don't mean to hurt or disrespect anyone.*

And they'll look at you, shake their heads, and say something that says they understand that you've apologized but that the apology is too late. The damage has been done.

They'll say: *You're so lucky he's (or she's) not around (or not here anymore or no longer with us or forgiving and loving) because this is just, I don't know, this is just, just wrong.*

And, again, you'll say something about creating someone who is not the same someone they think you're writing about. Because you're not. You're creating a character.

Say: "I don't write about people we know."

I don't write about people we know.

Say: "I write people I imagine with qualities of people we might have known." And then pause.

I write people I imagine with qualities of people we might have known.

Now pause. Silently count to three. Don't tap.

(...One

Two

Three...)

Say: "It's not the same."

It's not the same.

They almost say something. They always do. Without thinking. This time, however, they pause. Then ask.

You're not writing about me, are you?

You shake your head. They doubt anyway.

I hope not.

And when you say, *no, I am not writing about you. Don't worry*, and you see disappointment transform the face of your interrogator---Mom, Melanie, Tania, Stephan---from mildly agitated face to just-shy-of-sorrowful or just-shy-of-resentful or just-shy-of-hurt or just-shy-of-disappointed face, you idiotically decide to explain that you use the present interlocutor, who is also a close, living family member, as a muse, as an inspiration, as a set of values or characteristics from which you then "spring mix" into a creation of personal imagination and common history, that you use the person, someone like Melanie, as an idea and then embellish her many fine qualities to change her into some kind of image or icon, and she, Melanie, will look at you, staring to see if she can read the mockery on your face and that's when you sigh and excuse yourself while thinking you might as well have tried to explain *Catch-22*---a book you

love---in French---a language you cannot speak---to her), claiming you've recently eaten a lot of raw vegetables, and run to the restroom.

Sitting, minutes later, on the toilet, amazed that such an urgent pain only minutes ago now produced so little---because, indeed, you actually *were not lying* about having to use the toilet because you had, in fact, consumed one head of raw broccoli, three plum tomatoes, half an eggplant, a cucumber, an avocado, and seven mission figs drowned in olive oil and an intensely delicious fig vinegar you had picked up on Mott that your professor recommended because it was like no other in the world, impossible to find elsewhere, he claimed and that you bought, despite its twenty-dollar price tag and the thirty-minute wait to buy it because some transplant from somewhere in the United States, a place that seems to believe that Olive Garden is fine Italian dining, had to learn all about (and taste every one of) the different cheeses imported directly from Italy---you think about the living.

Writing about the living, you think, sweat streaming down your face, is hard...work...

Careful, Dan, with the living. There is a chance, a slim chance, but a chance it is, that the living may live long enough to see something of yours about one of them in print.

(Cut that cynical laughter out. Yes, at the present rate of rejection, far better than the present rate of non-response [I am thinking to make the following a footnote: non-response---as any writer should know but many non-writers who do not pour their blood onto pages or screens and mail or email those bloodied pages to other writers, called the editor or the editorial board, might not know---must be understood as "not read" or "read but so badly received that the editor or editors do not care to respond" or "read but not impressed but the editor or editorial board is trying to craft a response that is called 'no' or 'gentle no' so as to say, indirectly, *please never send us anything else or please do not send us anything else but please consider subscribing, debating whether to offer a 'discounted' rate because, let's face it, these publications do not have a massive budget thanks to the university's need to cut here and there so that they can pay yet another vice president of something her or his six-figure salary and housing stipend.*"], the chances of anyone seeing any story of yours in print or on screen that you have not yourself printed and handed to him or her or have not emailed a PDF of are laughable. But this toxic reader possibility is serious. Besides, this is not a discussion about publishing.)

And as things have a way of working out, as they always have for you and your family, the one thing that makes it to print will center on the one or two people who, first, can read (some family members have very bad eyesight and some have very little patience, they tell you as you hand over two pages of a short story for them to "see what it is you do in college, anyway"); second, will read anything you write; and, third, are still alive and able to understand a slight even if that slight is enveloped in humor and love. Worse. You feel that even if the living person does not read what you have written---to this day, not one person in the family has completely read anything of yours and this includes the extended family, Dan; the closest anyone whose name has a familial adjective placed before it (that is, *Cousin Freda, Uncle Joe Joe, Zia Fioretta*) has come to having read anything of yours has been, so far, when you provided your Uncle Patrick with a meandering, barely comprehensible synopsis of a story in progress and even then he didn't hear you out---there is still a good chance that someone else will read it and that that

someone else may know the person about whom you are writing. That reader could be another family member. That reader could be a family friend who recognizes a certain physical or emotional quality.

Or!

(And here you will have to ask readers to just be, you know, generous and go with the flow of the thoughts. Readers, here is a mantra:

Just

Go

With

It...)

That reader could be a *stranger* who *happens* to be carrying around your book in her over-the-shoulder bag and the spine of the book (yes, given the state of your personal experience with publishing anything, this scenario requires a generous suspension of beliefs on the part of your present reader) is facing up and visible from behind her as she waits in line at the supermarket and that family member about whom you've written may be---no, is, *is* standing behind her, Dan, yes, standing behind her, waiting to pay for the Herr's Super Thin Sourdough unsalted pretzels and Vintage seltzer water he's come to the supermarket to buy. Imagine, if you will, that he'd almost been home and he'd just about parked the car and, as he had been backing up to parallel park and looking in the rearview mirror, he'd seen it, Dan, an aluminum can, in the street, next to the curb of the space in which he'd been about to park his car and it was a flattened aluminum can, and he'd thought, *hey, that's five cents*, and so he'd put the car in park, as there was no one around and he could double park for the couple seconds only it would take to pick up the can and collect the nickel, and that's when he'd seen that that can contained or, rather, had contained seltzer and he'd had a thought, a lingering thought. Did he have any more seltzer at home? He could not recall. He liked seltzer---did not love it but liked it. He liked having seltzer around. It gave him comfort. So he was never one to just go without, if he indeed did not have seltzer. And if he did have seltzer at home? So what? He would rather have too many bottles of seltzer than no bottles of seltzer---even for one evening. So he'd decided, there and then, that he would have to relinquish the parking spot and drive over to Stop and Shop. *I'm not sure that I am out of seltzer, but I don't want to regret it*, and so he'd said to himself that *he might as well get the seltzer now*, because he hadn't *actually parked the car* and also he had grown up in times of want---and had signed up for the rigors of want when he had chosen, if the word even applied back then, to join the army---and never again did he want to be in want, even for seltzer, so he'd driven off, to the supermarket, the one that has that Vintage Seltzer, which *is cheap and good*, and as he parked his car in the supermarket's parking lot he thought about what else he needed from the store and nothing, nothing, nothing came to mind and he uttered "God damn it all." And he made this request for God to damn it all because at his desk at home sat his grocery list but he was not about to *drive back home* and then back to the store for a measly list. And so he'd said, *oh well, need the seltzer*, and on he'd walked to the supermarket and he'd walked in and felt the

way too cool air and thought *the air conditioning is on too high again* and he'd walked around the perimeter of the store until he'd then remembered that seltzer, because it is *a bottled beverage, is not located along the perimeter but in the aisle* and he'd walked, arms pumping, to the aisle with the soda and chips and he'd stopped and thought, again, *ah, hey, that's right---unsalted pretzels!* Els (his wife) *got the wrong ones, the ones with the salt in them...I need the unsalted ones.* Vindicated he'd become because he was now getting more than just the seltzer, and he'd stood there and marveled at his ability, after all these years, to associate and as he'd walked with the seltzer and pretzels without salt toward the checkout line, he'd seen an attractive young woman get in line at the register just before him and he'd noted that she had a lot of groceries and he'd thought how even if she'd seen him and had borne witness to what he wanted to buy she wouldn't have, *because kids these days don't even know how to respect elders and we elders lack the power we had in my heyday at the school to teach them respect*, let him go in front of her to pay for his Vintage Seltzer and Herr's Super Thin Sourdough unsalted pretzels.

So, now, he stands behind her and he sees her over-the-shoulder bag. [The writer's note: It's the sort of bag the designers of which never conceived of the potential use by their owners' out of doors---not on some runway---walking about outdoors, say, New York City and surrounded by people who can just so easily reach in and take things out of said bag without the owner's even noticing. No, these sorts of bags are not meant for utility. They are a fashion declaration. These bags say "I trust my brothers and sisters!" That must be these over-the-shoulder bags' reason to exist. Sort of like the shoppers at Whole Foods. They don't shop merely for the food. They also like the idea of shopping at and then advertising for Whole Foods as they haul two doubled paper bags in their left and right hands and walk from their local Whole Foods to their doorman-guarded condominium in their Tribeca neighborhood.] Uncle Pat stands, almost impatiently, behind this woman. He has three bottles of Vintage Seltzer on his left side, two under his forearm and one in hand, held by the neck between the index and middle fingers in a claw-like fashion, and two sixteen ounce bags of the Herr's Super Thin Sourdough unsalted pretzels pressed to his chest by his right hand. He looks as though he stands in awe of a saint or suffers angina. And there, staring up at him, almost smiling, is the spine of the book with your name on it, Dan. There it is.

The Silenzio Stories.

Your last name, his last name, on the spine.

And he says to the young woman, *hey, that's my little cousin's book!*

And she turns, looks at him, a small, tight smile flashing across her lips, and looks away.

And so he starts to tell her back and her over-the-shoulder bag his stories about you. He can tell a lot of stories about you. He knows you really well. He has known you all your life. He can tell the stories you cannot recall and he probably can tell the stories you would never tell to anyone, never write on any page. Embarrassing stories. Very personal stories.

But he is not you.

And so the story you imagine he would tell is not really an isolated story but rather a character sketch of your relationship, about how he'd used to take you to Carvel for ice cream, for instance, and always tried to spark your interest in playing---though, he notes without malice but rather with the directness of a coach, you weren't particularly good at any of them---soccer, baseball, and football.

And on and on he talks, barking about his Danny and because she is a reader and a liberal (this is how the story is unfolding in your head) and understands that even the very old should be respected, she turns and says *oh that's so sweet of you* and turns around to walk to the end of the counter to bag her groceries in the reusable, sustainable WNYC tote bags she always carries in her over-the-shoulder bag for her groceries.

WNYC. Maybe, he thinks, she'd have let me pay first.

And your uncle, to whom you often refer to as your cousin, after buying his Vintage Seltzer and his Herr's Super Thin Sourdough unsalted pretzels, decides to see if he can find your book at the public library.

(And note that he doesn't care that he hadn't known about your book.

He also forgets that you are divorced.

And before that, he forgets that you were married.)

And, so, instead of going directly home after his grocery shopping spree, which, along with his conversation at the checkout line, has exhausted him, for he is, after all, eighty-six years old, he trips over to the New Rochelle Public Library and asks, slowly and deliberately---because he was in the United States Army communications division and he was also a physical education teacher and had also taught English as a second language, night classes in which he met his Els, so speaking slowly and deliberately is how he speaks without condescension though rare is the person to whom he speaks so slowly and so deliberately appreciative---the librarian behind the circulation desk *whether this library has a copy of a book by Donato Silenzio* and she looks up the name, and squints, and sighs, and curtly says, *yes, this branch does*, and writes for him the call number on a two-by-four inch piece of paper and she sighs, again, as she holds out the piece of paper because, you know, he could have gone to any of the computer terminals in the library and found the book and its call number himself, and she tells him where the book is located among the stacks and he goes over to that section of the stacks, where the book is supposed to be.

And, of course, he finds the book.

The book has never been opened. A thin layer of dust, sitting on its top and spine, now dances around Uncle Pat's eyes and hands. The book creaks when he turns over the cover. And he flips the book open to the following story the draft of which readers are about to read.

The story is “Cousin Pat; or, A Work of Fiction”---a title no one bothers to read, let alone attempts to understand, before reading the entire story. Well, not no one. The present readers have read the title and they have not read the story yet. Because they can’t. Because they haven’t gotten to it yet.

But they will.

And they will read it as a work of fiction.

But that’s not the point.

The point is misreading. That’s what this is all about. Well, there’s more that this is “all about” but misreading is a major part. And, so, that’s what you’ll call these episodes.

Let’s step back to a time before publication. You are home, visiting the family. You have had an exchange with Melanie about a story of yours. She had not read it but your description of it moved her to say that she is not like that.

“Like what, Mel,” you ask.

“Like that, like that person you are writing about with my name. I am not that loud,” she intones.

You look at her and look away.

“That person has my name. You are writing about me.”

“That’s not you,” you say. “That’s a character in a story.”

“Dan, please. I know what you’re doing. That time, I was in a very bad place and I needed to speak my mind.”

“Guys, please,” says your mother.

“But he’s always pulling this shit. And I can’t just let it slide. Not this time. You said,” she turns to face you, “that this is going to be published? Nice. So now people are going---”

“---Mel, please. It’s not you. And the twenty people who do read the story will never meet you. Trust me.”

She does not trust you. She says she hates you.

So you are sitting in the bathroom, the one place you can escape to when you become too much for them and they for you. You should have known. You should have pushed, you think as you strain and strain and strain, wondering why you inherited, of all her fine qualities, Mom’s inability to excrete on demand. The following story about Cousin Pat (which is not his real

name) and all the stories should've come with the following preface that you are composing, again, as you sit, with no results and plenty of time, on the toilet in the house in which you grew up from the years nineteen eighty-four to nineteen ninety-one. Your eyes scan the bathroom walls and floor thanks to the unfortunate fact that, in your haste to get away from them, you'd failed to procure reading material and, eventually, you zone out, your eyes having come to stare out the window, which you have memories of since you helped scrape paint that had been splattered all over it because the men hired to paint the house hadn't bothered to line the window frames and cover the glass as they painted with rollers up and down the sides of the house, changing the color of the house from a mild, inviting color to something wild and unique and eye-catching (said Mom) or utterly repulsive and humorous (thought and then said you) and compose the following preface:

To the reader: Works of fiction are misunderstood often by the readers who might have inspired the work. In this work's case, these readers are my family. It is my intent to confront this issue immediately with a note, right here in these very pages, to all family members, living and not, of the tribe Silenzio and its offshoots and connections, familial and friendly.

If my family were to read this or if one of you of my family is reading this work, read what follows first (that means, Melanie, no skipping).

Dear family,

You have inspired me to do a lot of good and not-so-good things in my life. For the former, I went to college and learned to think, a good thing. For the latter, the not-so-good, I'd been subjected to years of torture and abuse via your insistence that I heed the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, particularly through the teachings of the Church of the Holy Name of Jesus Christ, in which a monsignor once asininely boasted, from the pulpit, that my dear and loud grandmother's passing was a good thing because she was now with walking with Christ and happy and no longer in the painful grip of Hepatitis C. It is thanks to you, particularly to Mom and to Dad, I owe such enlightening lessons in life. But I digress.

(And you should warn readers that digressions, which you write consciously, are common in the writing that follows.)

*My family, you have, as I said before, encouraged good things. My writing is a good thing. It has kept me out of harm's way many times---I once stayed home on a Friday night, ostensibly to work on *The Novel*, and my friends went out and ended up wrapping themselves and the car they were in around a telephone pole compliments of the sand-and-oil concoction purposely placed in the middle of the street, by high school students, to make the hairpin turn that much more exciting (so they could achieve even more violent swings of the fishtailing) for the witting latter and deadly for the unwitting former---and it has also provided me with a forum for if not understanding then, at least, for coming to terms with my own limits and problems.*

Let me be clear: The fictional character of Donato Silenzio or his even more fictional self Domenick Acocella and the families and experiences of these characters are products solely of my imagination.

Dear Melanie and Catherine and Tania,

If I use names like “Melanie” or “Catherine” or “Tania,” names (love you!) that you happen to also have, I do not intend to invoke any of you but rather invoke, perhaps, a quality or likeness of you. Of course, as we all well understand, pleasing or convincing all involved in the act of creation, especially when it comes to representation, real or imagined, no matter how minor an involvement each one may play, is akin to the impossible. But try I must and try I have. No matter what I say, one of you, I don’t want to say who, will take exception. What can I say? It’s in your nature.

To date, my family and close friends do not know that I have written the following stories. I have purposely kept this from them for the reasons noted above. Thus, to all readers, I ask this: do not talk to my family about this book or any of its content. Sure, your paths may never cross; and, sure, they may discover this work on their own; but I have it in mind that where there is possibility, where there is coincidence, where there is some god with a lot of time on his or her hands, there is a way that somehow Melanie or Catherine or Tania or Pasquale or Angela or Freda or anyone else in these pages will come across these pages and then, as history repeatedly shows whenever this actual family is concerned, there is a Silenzio situation and there will be blood. Or at least a lot of shouting for blood.

So I ask, dear readers, please, talk about the weather. Talk about unsalted pretzels. Talk about how kids do not respect their elders as they used to. Talk about anything---but please, please, please, don’t ever talk about this book with any Silenzio, living or dead, real or imagined.

Of course, you do not have that preface, or something like it, because you had not written what you’d thought, just as you have not written as you sit there now, waiting for the relief. And worse: the publisher thought, when you suggested a preface, the very idea of such a preface to be too metafictional. Charlie Dannington, the agent representing the publisher at the time (upon his firing based on his risks that rarely ever panned out and cost the company untold amounts of money he moved to France and took up dairy farming) insisted on calling it metafictional and asked you to stop playing at this idea of warning readers.

“The novel, Dan,” Charlie argued over the phone, “is already too long for today’s reader and market, and, shit, if your sales reach over a thousand I have to say I will be shocked to near outrage. Whom do I see buying this book?” he paused, his expectation for your answer audible, as though you had any answers.

“Readers?” you said into the phone’s mouthpiece, slowly.

“What kind of readers, Dan?”

The window out of which you stare, as well as all the others around the house, were scraped by one Pat Silenzio, your cousin, and you, his assistant. You remember, as you sit there on the toilet, waiting patiently as your bowels slowly start to move, working on these windows with Cousin Pat. He scraped and cursed the dried paint and you held the ladder. But it wasn’t about cleaning tiny spots off of windows. That day should have taught you something about doing

things right the first time, about taking the time to do a job well and that doing a job well meant doing a job carefully, about being responsible, about caring about quality and all that other stuff that you actually never did learn. It wasn't that no one---Cousin Pat included---had tried to teach you. So many people had tried and have tried and continue to try to teach you those things that turn a boy into a man and here you are, stuck on a toilet, uncomfortably close to forty, divorced, barely employed, and just now getting an understanding of how your bowels work, understanding that Cousin Pat, finally, was and always was and never was not a teacher in the most basic sense of the word.

Which is why he, too, was on his second marriage. Because, let's face it, no one likes a teacher when a teacher acts like a teacher outside of the classroom. But that's another story and besides, those two---Cousin Pat and Cousin Els---have been married forever.

“Cousin Pat’ or, A Work of Fiction”

by Donato Silenzio

“See that, Danny,” bellowed Cousin Pat, “Do you see *that*? God damn it. People. No sense of how to do things right the first...ah shit...time. They can't take the two or three hours extra to tape and line these damned frames so that the paint doesn't get on the glass. I'm telling you, boy oh boy.”

He scraped and grunted and looked up and higher along the frame's edge, his face almost pressed against the pane, and shook his head. Dan, looking up to see what the that about which Cousin Pat was shouting was, could see long gray nose hairs shooting out with each exasperated exhale.

“Now I have to spend all this time cleaning up after them. Boy, I tell you. And they're the professionals! Huh! Nothing worse. No one takes their time anymore.”

Cousin Pat wasn't looking at Donato. Standing on a squeaky but sturdy ladder, he was talking to a window, one of twenty-eight windows that had specks, splotches, and streaks of paint left on them. Dan's father hated painting. It was the one part of the home construction process he refused to have anything to do with, so he'd hired professional painters and in four days they painted the house peach.

“It's not peach,” Dan's mother corrected when Dan, visiting from college one weekend, gasped at the color.

“Mom, it's peach.”

“It's Light of Day.”

“Light of Day?”

“Light of Day.”

“What the fuck is Light of Day?”

“Dan!” warned Tania, who had always seemed to forget her own penchant for foul-mouthed rhetoric whenever someone angered or confused her. And she always seemed to forget when Mom was around.

“It’s a nice color,” said Melanie. “It’s not too bright and so much better than that yellow-orange crap it used to be.”

“It’s peach.”

“It’s not peach, damn it.”

“Look at this, Danny. Peach shit all over every Goddamned window. Christ’s sake. They couldn’t take their time.”

“Cousin Pat, please don’t take the Lord’s name in vain.”

Cousin Pat, for the first time since having climbed up the ladder, turned around and looked down at Dan, who was holding the ladder. Dan had held a lot of ladders in his days as a laborer--arguably the worst in history---for his father. No ladder had ever threatened to fall over suddenly or seemed to need any help but there was Dan holding ladders, staring up at men’s overfed, sagging asses and rubbing dirt and dust into his eyes. He held ladders because that gave him something to do. Sure, another uncle had fallen from a ladder---suing and being offered a massive settlement so thick he never had to work again---but that was a long time ago and off a ladder made by a different company.

“What, Danny?”

“I said you should make them pay you per window.”

“Ha, ha, ha, you’re right,” he said and turned back to the window.

Cousin Pat was Dan’s dad’s oldest living cousin. Cousin Pat was the same age as his own father’s youngest half-brother who lived in Italy. Seventy-one years old, he stood at five eight, a giant in this family, and played golf every Thursday and ate no salt and only whole wheat, unless it was pasta, which was never bad because pasta is Italian. Soda was bad. Seltzer was fine. Wine, homemade and in moderation, was an integral part of being Italian and, therefore, good for him. Cousin Pat went to NYU on the GI Bill and studied physiology. He taught physical education for, what seemed to Dan when he was younger, hundreds of years to millions of students at New Rochelle’s Isaac Young Junior High School where he was loved and feared. Like Donato, Cousin Pat was the son of immigrants and he and Dan’s father shared a grandfather. Cousin Pat’s grandmother died, leaving two boys who moved to America to start new lives. They were gardeners and worked seven days a week and saved so they could one day marry. After a few years, the two brothers returned to Italy to find wives, found and married them, returned to the States, and had children. Cousin Pat was the first of those children.

He and his three sisters who followed were American and Italian in a way that Dan's father was not. Dan's father grew up in Italy and left at nineteen to work in Switzerland. After eight years in Switzerland, Dan's father moved to the United States.

"Danny!"

"Whoa," said Dan, "what's up?"

"What are you, asleep? Boy, I tell you. Hand me that spatula. There's enough Goddamned paint on this window---some of it is not even *dry* yet. Lousy...fu---hm. Goddamn it!"

In South Korea Dan's monthly mail consisted of building maintenance fees; gas, cell phone, and internet bills; and, he presumed, junk mail. He didn't know if the mail was junk mail. As geography would have it, the mail was in Korean and none of the Korean matched the Korean he'd learned in his free beginning Korean classes at Ansan City Hall. Eventually, Dan stopped opening the previous tenant's cell phone and internet bill, after numerous mistakes that were greeted with a horrified smile by his co-teacher who said, quickly shaking his extended hand left to right, that the bills were not his and, what appeared to Dan to be furtive looks around, "not to worry."

One Tuesday evening, Dan got a letter from the United States. Addressed to him. In English. The only other people who sent Dan anything were his parents and oldest and youngest sisters, who sent holiday cards with Dan's nieces' and nephews' photographs. It was from Cousin Pat and Els---short for Elsmereida---who also sent a wonderful note, in that it was beyond pictures of kids who seemed to be growing taller and taller and included words, each holiday season. Reading the note was a pleasure.

"Dear Danny,

Els and I want to wish you a Merry Christmas and Happy New Year. We miss you. We hope you are okay and getting along well there in South Korea. How is the weather? Have you made any friends whom you can go to a movie with or have dinner? We hope you are happy.

We are well. It's very cold here. But we are, as we usually do this time of year, getting ready to drive to Florida on the twenty-first to be with her sister, Alexa, and her husband by Christmas Eve so unfortunately we will not be at Mom and Dad's that night.

Otherwise it's the same. Els is doing well and taking it easy. I still, when the weather isn't too cold, play golf and go for my walks.

Hopefully, we can talk on the telephone one day.

Love,

Aunt Elsmereida and Uncle Patrick"

Uncle or cousin. Dan smiled. The family never got that part straight. There was an Italian way to call him: “Cousin Pat;” and an American, “Uncle Pat” and Dan often confused the two. The face and wonderfully entertaining demeanor were the same, always, whether he was “cousin” or “uncle.” When Dan was a little boy, Cousin Pat would often come around and take him to get ice cream or bring him a new baseball glove. Walking around town with him was like walking around town with the mayor of a small, intimate town. Former students of all ages, men with comb-overs and young troublemaker-looking twenty year olds would shout from across the street “hey, Mr Sil,” Silenzio having too many syllables to utter in gym class. Mr Sil was not Cousin Pat. In class, his benign ice-cream-buying self was supplanted by a man who treated his students as he was treated in the military. (At present, Dan was holding the ladder, he now realized, for Mr Sil.)

One of Dan’s favorite stories is about Gregory, a student Cousin Pat had once knocked out with a perfectly thrown basketball to the forehead. Cousin Pat had thrown it the way soccer players throw a ball back into the pitch and back into play from the sideline: over one’s head with both hands and feet placed firmly on the ground. Gregory was the school star ball player but he was having a bad day and so Cousin Pat gave a pep talk.

“Gregory? What the hell is the matter with your legs?”

“What?”

“What!”

“Sorry, yes, Mr Sil?”

“Are you deaf? Christ’s sake. I asked you clearly: What is the matter with your legs?”

“I don’t understand...Mr Sil, sir.”

“And he’s dumb. Why are your legs moving like that?”

“Like what---Mr Sil?”

“You’re not moving your legs fast enough. This is basketball, not ballet. Come on! We want to win a game not make the other team’s players feel good about themselves.”

“Sir, I’m trying.”

“Try harder! And stop eating so much Goddamned junk food!”

“What---sir?”

“What? Did you just ask me ‘what?’ Are you trying to tell me that I cannot see?

That my glasses don’t work?”

“No, I---”

“Shut it! What do you think I am? I see you after school. Don’t think I do not see you. I see you after school eating McDonald’s and pizza with that girl. Who is she? Is she your girlfriend? Is she fattening you up? Turning you soft?”

“No, no---sir. She’s not!”

“Not your girlfriend?”

“No, no---sir---she’s not fattening me up!”

The rest of the team was laughing, some undoubtedly thankful that it was Gregory and not they who were the target of Mr Sil’s inquisition.

“Holy cow, Gregory has a girlfriend! She’s making you soft! You are not allowed to see her.”

“What---sir? Why, but’m trying!”

“Nonsense, you are half-assed, son. You’re an embarrassment. We’re playing Mount Vernon! You remember Mount Vernon, don’t you? You remember what happened last time, don’t you? Get off my court. Hit the showers.”

Dan never believed that his uncle was the same man as the gym teacher who coached basketball and was loved and feared by his students. At his retirement party, he was given an engraved wood paddle, about the size of a rowing paddle but not as long. Amidst guffaws and snickers, a couple of former students lined up on the stage and presented him with it. Mr Sil used to keep one in his office in the gym to use on miscreant students. And as he’d told Dan, he hit these miscreants to make a point. Students couldn’t sit so easily after a couple of whacks. At the dinner, years later, some of the students who’d experienced the form of discipline lined up to give him his wallop and every former student and colleague of Uncle Patrick’s was in tears according to Els.

Mr Sil. Uncle Patrick. Cousin Pat.

And there he was, in his seventies, years later, condemning the shoddy work of professional painters who failed to take the time to do a neat job. This was Mr Sil. If these painters were in front of him at that moment, he’d have them “do pushups until they puked” or he’d have “paddled them something memorable.”

“No way. I cannot believe they charged Daddy for this. Jesus. I cannot believe your father paid for this. Look at this.”

“It’s a crime. It is.” Dan was not as upset by this as his uncle was. Cousin? Uncle? He was entertained by Cousin Pat’s rage and hilarious comments. “Maybe we should find these guys and whack ‘em. What do you say?”

“Mr Funny Man, Danny. Ha. Ha. Ha. No, we’re not going to kill anyone.”

He continued to scrape and Dan continued to hold the ladder, which never moved except when Cousin Pat became Mr Sil.

“So, Danny. How’s school going for you? This was your junior year, correct?”

“Yes, it was. It went really well. My grades were high enough and none of my professors found out my secret.”

“That’s good---secret? What secret?”

“Oh, that I don’t have a clue about my subjects and I bullshit relentlessly on essays.”

“I see. I see.”

Had the house been on fire, with Dan’s mom and sisters running out of it, hair ablaze, screaming “the house is on fire” Cousin Pat would’ve continued to scrape. He wouldn’t have noticed the screaming women, his cousin and nieces, with their hair ablaze. Dan didn’t mind that his sarcastic humor---at least he thought it was humor---didn’t always register with his uncle at times like these, times when his uncle was drawn to these tasks, tasks which struck Dan as mindless. But that was Cousin Pat.

“If I’m going to do something, Danny boy, I do it right. The first time. There is no point in doing something half-assed because you’ll only have to do it again more carefully the second time. And waste your time. You can waste your time if you want to. I cannot do anything about that. But this,” he pointed to the house and its windows, “*this* is now wasting *my* time, see? I remember,” he said, almost singing, “when there was this kid back in my Isaac days. He was a good kid but a bit of a space cadet---like you, you know---and one day I am standing in front of them and there he is, sitting down on the floor of the gym, after we had our practice. After each practice, I gave a talk, commenting on their work on the court. And maybe a little encouragement---God knows they got so little of it off my court, you know.

“I had kicked Greg, one of my star players, off the court. I called him back---he did not leave, just sat on the top row of stands in the gym. So I called him back, gave him another chance, you see. As I am speaking, I look at each player, all their eyes on me, and I note that Greg is not looking at me. He’s looking at the floor! The floor! So I call out to him. ‘Greg, pay attention,’ I say and the others giggle and the giggle becomes laughter as I stare at this young man.

“I shake my head. I continue.

“I talk about how they have to work as a team but also have to be individually responsible for their individual performances. And I am there talking and looking around and my eyes again fall on Greg and, again, he is looking at the floor! ‘Greg! Gregory!’ and he is still looking at the goddamned floor. ‘Gregory!’ No answer. Eyes down on that floor.

“I had a basketball on me. It was pressed against my hip, my right arm casually holding it up. ‘Gregory HR Smith!’ Nothing. So I took the ball with both hands and, soccer style, threw that ball hard at him and boom! Danny, that ball hit that boy square on the forehead and he just fell over. Haha. He was fine, of course, but, let me tell you. He never again failed to pay attention.”

“Did his parents say anything?”

“Parents? Ha. These were the days when parents expected us to discipline. Not like today.”

“Have you seen him, Greg, since?”

“Oh, I see him sometimes. Good man. Owns his own business now. Fine man he grew up to be.”

How it came about that Cousin Pat was to scrape every window, and to “waste” his time, was that Dan’s mother had noted that there was a little paint, hardly noticeable but there, on one windowpane in the kitchen. Cousin Pat just happened to be coming in through the door, on his way to play golf, and he’d overheard her lament these specks of paint to Dan’s father, who merely shrugged.

“What?” said Cousin Pat.

“Ah,” Dan’s mother hesitated. “It’s one spot. I can do it.”

“Let me see. Dan,” now Mr Sil took over, “go get me a ladder,” adding a “will you, buddy” to soften it up a bit.

The “will you, buddy” was something he’d never done with his students. In his day, there was no need to. He was a teacher, a leader, a man entrusted by the public to produce the best youths in and out of school and if it took unfaltering honesty and unapologetic demands, Mr Sil would do it.

Here, in the Silenzio home, he was Cousin Pat. He wasn’t on duty. This was not the gymnasium. These were his cousin’s son and daughters. They were not his charges. This was not the basketball team. And there was no defiance to deal with. If Cousin Pat wanted to climb up that ladder to scrape away the specks of paint on a beautiful Thursday morning in May, no one was going to stop him, especially not now, thought Dan, because it was Dan who’d been recruited to assist Cousin Pat who was now Mr Sil.

Yes, just like that. Cousin Pat---sweet, sincere, ice-cream-buying, baseball-glove-gifting---changed once he saw those specks of paint and he was now on a mission. The only man for such a mission was Mr Sil, United States Army-trained, and Dan was now slated to be his unwilling partner, namely the ladder holder. There was no getting out of it, no use in trying.

Dan wanted to shout into a pillow but instead he angrily stomped over to the shed at the other end of the backyard, suppressing the urge to cry on the way there, and dug out the long ladder and twenty minutes later, Dan was staring up, at Cousin Pat's ass.

I got A's in every class this semester, he thought. This is not what an A student should be doing on the first days of his well-earned vacation. I should be reading those books the professors mentioned in class or talking to some (college) friends about lofty ideas and ideals. I should be arguing Plato and not handing over spatulas to retired gym teachers with too much time on their hands. Doesn't he read? Or watch professional golf? Can't he go somewhere? Why did he stop by? Why is he not playing golf? Wasn't he on his way to golf? Is Florida still too hot? Why does he care about these tiny specks of paint on panes of glass fifteen feet in the air? He's a pain. The only person who will ever see---no, not see, *know about* those really tiny paint marks is my mother, who washes every freaking window every week, and she already has said she doesn't care. The other person will be Cousin Pat. Perhaps this will drive him nuts. He's obsessive compulsive. He has to be. I need to talk to my psych department buddies. They can tell me what's wrong with him.

"Danny! Hold the ladder, will you? If I fall, I fall on you. Got it? Danny! Donato Silenzio!"

"Yes, I got it. I got it."

I'd have been one of the students he'd have paddled. There is no way I could go along with this military approach to work of any kind without bursting out in laughter at the wrong time or making comments, the sort of comments that landed me in trouble with Mr Bill, my gym teacher in third grade, when I commented that he looked like he hadn't gone to the bathroom in over a week and Shane Jacobs, that skinny little stool pigeon, sang like a bird on me, and Mr Bill grabbed my arm, opened the gymnasium door, and swung me out of the door and with such force my back slammed into a wall and made a loud thwap, like raw meat slammed onto a cutting board. I didn't get hurt or anything like that. But I was embarrassed and shocked. Mrs Campwell saw the whole thing and rather than say "I told you so" as I'd thought she would, because in her class I was often a troublemaker and so noisy she taped my mouth over with that wide beige boxing tape, she looked---

"Dan! The ladder!"

"Sir, yes sir!"

---on with horror and her sympathy sparked in me a feeling of injustice and rage that manifested in my crying (a little, a little more than a little) in front of her. Teachers by my time were not allowed to hit anymore. In my cousin's time, I'd have been paddled. I have no doubt.

"Okay Danny, baby," he said, happiness overwhelming him. "Last window. We're almost, almost there."

Dan glanced at his watch. Four thirty. The whole morning and afternoon were gone. But the windows were clean. Gone were the paint marks no one would ever see but that Cousin Pat and Dan's mother would know existed. The threat was abated. Life could continue.

A look at the story suggests there are some parts that need elaboration and some that need truncation. There is another *-tion* word in there somewhere. You are starting to feel a headache.

Cousin Pat died a few years ago and you are not sure what else, in that story about him and about, it seems, other things, to talk about. There is a lot to say but you are not ready to say it. Not in that story.

So for now, move on, Dan, to another chapter.

Perhaps you can write about Cousin (or Aunt---you'll have it figured by publication time) Freda, who has been on the extended family list (last count, one hundred twelve people in the United States alone and many others in Venezuela, Argentina, Toronto, and Italy, and, maybe, but you're not sure about this one, Turkey) of intriguing family members forever.

Yes, you think, your head pounding now, she is next.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *The piece explores two things: a heavily fictionalized reflection of a vivid memory centered on a hard-ass uncle who was my teacher of things Americana and the meta-task of creating (perhaps) a chapter of a novel (forever in progress) in the life of a character who is basically yours truly but with more hang ups, anxieties, and a keener eye for detail and ear for attention. My fiction workshop professor, Mark Mirsky at The City College of New York, once asked me to tell my stories and to explore my voice. This work stems from that conversation. Much to his chagrin, however, my influence—the key writer who got me to start writing serious fiction—is Philip Roth. But of course, there are too many others—some still alive—to name. Right now, I am reading and devastated by Oates. My style is get it on the page and see whether I gag or cringe (not in the good way) when I read it a week later. I don't think of theme or issue when I write. I think of character and tone and immediate problem—such as the need for unsalted pretzels. (My uncle loved unsalted pretzels.)*

AUTHOR BIO: Domenick teaches composition and creative writing at Borough of Manhattan Community College.

