

The Supporting Oscars

by Todd Maupin

Thursday was game night for the Oscar Family. What they played varied each week, a revolving choice awarded to each member of the family. Sometimes, in consecutive weeks, they played the same game. This was not because they did not finish playing a time-consuming game like Monopoly, Risk, or Axis and Allies. They always played each game to completion on Thursday night. This was the rule. If anyone chose to play the same game as played the Thursday prior, it was only due to vengeance, sadism, or masochism. And the others were tolerably supportive of that choice.

This particular Thursday was Garrett's night to choose. Garrett Oscar was the youngest member of the Oscar family of four. He was 15. His sister, Melody, was 16. Their mother, Helen, was older. It would not have been polite to ask Helen's age. She was old enough to be Melody and Garrett's mother. The patriarch of the Oscars was Dalton. He was forty-two, three years older than Helen. Oops.

The game the Oscars were playing this particular evening was secondary to this story. For those who crave these background details, Garrett's choice was Pay Day, his current fixation. For years, he had selected Uno. His fascination with issuing Draw Fours was toppled by Jenga. Then Garrett graduated to Life, and as he advanced in his own, he now opted for Pay Day.

The worn Pay Day box had supplanted dinner on the dining room table. The Oscars had each taken a seat. Rarely, did they sit in the same chair in which they occupied at dinner. Game night was a departure from the daily routine, even if it was a weekly one.

The intention of game night was family togetherness and cohesion. Perhaps the idea had originated when Dalton had sheepishly read from a copy of Good Housekeeping at the dentist's office. Or maybe

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Helen had the idea to get her family together. Whatever the source for these nights, the practice had also led to an accentuation and a continuation of the dinner conversation. At dinner, Melody had been telling the family about an experience at school.

Melody resumed her story as she helped Garrett unpack and arrange the game. That they no longer fought over who did this was a sign that they were growing up.

"Molly was accused of cheating but I knew she did not do it. The entire class knew, except for Mrs. Stevens," Melody said as she slid a game piece across the table.

"This is Molly who lives across the street? Why didn't someone speak up?" Helen asked, barely preventing a tone of disappointment from creeping into her voice.

"Because if anyone had told the truth about Tommy, he would have been expelled. Tommy was already on probation for fighting."

"Why was Tommy fighting?" Dalton asked, perhaps a bit too enthusiastically.

"Tommy had written that article in the school paper, revealing the scandalous amounts of fraud in the school administration. He had also been defiant against censorship of the student radio station, where Molly is also a deejay. Then drugs had been found in his locker, but Molly knows that they were not really his. He was framed," Melody explained.

"How does Molly know?" Garrett asked impatiently.

"Molly and Tommy are secretly dating, but no one is supposed to know because his family hates her family ever since their parents all used to be friends but had a falling out because of the manipulation

of the water quality reports. There was a trial and everything," Melody finished wistfully.

"I remember that trial. Your father and I sometimes passed by the courthouse while it was happening. You are friends with Molly and Tommy?" Helen wondered.

"Sort of. I am often around when they are. Sometimes, I say something encouraging, or I nod. When they say something dramatic, I usually react. You know, that kind of thing," Melody shrugged.

"Can we just please play?" Garrett asked, using the word please in the non-polite way that only teenagers can.

"Sure we can, sport, but you have to tell your mom and me about your game last night. We're sorry we missed it because we both had meetings," Dalton said, sincerely regretful.

"Well, we won. Just barely, on a home run in the final inning, in the last at bat," Garrett said, with less excitement than one might expect from someone whose team had tasted victory in such a thrilling fashion.

"That's great, Gare! Tell us about it," Dalton was genuinely interested.

"We were down 8 runs, Maxwell was having an off night pitching, and no one was hitting well. Then, Dougie pulled everyone into a huddle and told us we could win it. Dougie bunted then stole a base, Maxwell had a hit, then another, then Dougie, then Maxwell again..."

"But what about you, son? How did you do?" Helen chimed in.

“Umm, I got hit by a pitch, and I clapped a lot for the other guys, and I was right there to hoist them on our shoulders when we won. The coach said we're a good team, but he was looking at Maxwell and Dougie when he said it,” Garrett added neutrally.

“That sounds very exciting, Garrett,” Helen beamed. Dalton smiled back at her.

“I guess so,” Garrett admitted, unimpressed. Melody seemed equally apathetic. Solidarity.

The Oscars proceeded to play Pay Day for a few minutes with the discussion at the table centering on gameplay. Finally, Helen broke ranks again.

“Well, I had a heck of a day,” she revealed with a sigh. Her three interlocutors interlocked a glance towards her.

“What happened, dear?” Dalton asked. Garrett and Melody put their cards down in expectation of an expositional onslaught.

“Today we had closing arguments for the Gransky case.” A hush fell over the crowd, engulfing Helen's family in the topic that the entire town, the state and even some national news outlets had been discussing for weeks. Helen had even been seen standing in the background during televised news conferences and interviews. Occasionally, she was even in focus.

Helen was one of a few prosecuting attorneys in the district attorney's office. Theirs was not an easy task. Cecil Gransky was on trial for the murder of his wife. Almost everyone following the case wanted him to be exonerated. Gransky was a popular and beloved figure in the community; no one believed that he had actually committed the crime. The evidence to the contrary, however, had been stacked at an apparently insurmountable height.

Unfortunately for Helen and the district, Gransky's lawyer was more metaphorically skilled at Jenga than Garrett had ever been and effectively shook things up. This brash upstart lawyer with the rugged handsome appeal that would have had studio executives salivating at the idea of him playing himself in the film adaptation had navigated the intrigue, pieced together the clues, called the key witnesses, and had all but proven Gransky's innocence.

Helen had heard that had even been some suspenseful and harrowing chases while the defense lawyer pursued the truth at all costs, even that of his own life, and he had only narrowly escaped a grisly fate. He uncovered embroiled entanglements and corruption, unearthing the conspiracy that would shock the masses and shame the elite. This while Helen was probably at home watching the Discovery Channel. In light of the new discoveries made by the defense, the jury would certainly present a not guilty verdict, she thought.

"How did it go?" Melody asked, while Dalton nodded in encouragement. Garrett discreetly tried to sneak a glimpse at the clock on the wall but his stealth was wasted by the fact that no one was paying attention to him.

"The defense has been tremendous. We've been left backpedaling for weeks, reacting to the bombshells and developments uncovered at every turn. There have been twists and turns to which we could barely react. The closing arguments were more of the same. I was nearly moved to tears, as was the entire courtroom. Even the judge sniffled a little. Our closing statement was almost an apology for bringing the case to trial," Helen admitted.

"I'm sure you did your best, Mom," Garrett reassured her.

"That's right, dear. Someone has to win these things," Dalton agreed.

"Honestly, I was in awe much of the time. Just to be a part of this was something. After the verdict, I will approach the defense lawyer to bury the hatchet," Helen decided.

"The hatchet they say that Gransky used to kill his wife? You can do that, Mom?" Melody asked, her eyes enlarged to the level of an anime character.

"It's a figure of speech, sweetheart," Dalton explained, but appearing not fully convinced, looked to Helen for confirmation.

"Yes, I mean that I will just make peace with him, express my admiration, tell him that there are no hard feelings, that the best lawyer prevailed, justice was achieved. You know, an uplifting moment of encouragement, redemption and tender esteem that will resonate," Helen explained, exuding magnanimous warmth.

"Helen, you almost sound like you could be a love interest in this story, conflicted by your feelings and loyalty to both sides, standing by this guy in spite of it all. You are married to me, though, so that would just be silly and preposterous," Dalton observed with a laugh. Helen laughed nervously, but did not contradict her husband.

The game of Pay Day resumed. The Oscars played on for several minutes before Dalton inevitably spoke. A recap of his day could no longer be contained. The others rested their phony game money and settled into their chairs.

"My day was really something, too," Dalton stated and did not continue. Helen silently gritted her teeth. He was vaguebooking again and in real life! Do we really have to follow this ritual each and every time?! We know he wants to speak. Just... out with it!

Suppressing her screaming thoughts, Helen sweetly coaxed her husband to continue. "Go on, honey. Was it Dr. Thomas again?"

"Yes, that woman, I swear. Today she overruled my diagnosis and ended up saving the patient's life. Again. It was worse than last time even," Dalton admitted, furrowing his brow while he rubbed his forehead.

"But that's good, right, Dad? She saved a patient," Garrett contributed, his naive and innocent logic amplifying his words.

"In the greater scheme of things, yes, son. Yes, it is. She really is a skilled and talented doctor. A prodigy really. She has not yet completed her residency at the hospital but is making an indelible mark," Dalton said somberly.

"Why was it a bad day then, Dad? I don't understand," Melody admired her father and disliked the delusion he was exhibiting all due to this upstart doctor.

"You see, Melody, Dr. Thomas and I have an antagonistic history. It is a sort of belligerent mutual respect..."

"Mutual?" Helen asked doubtfully, her raised eyebrows projecting their lawyerly best scrutiny.

"Okay, maybe she respects me, I don't know. I am the belligerent one, but it is just for her own good, to make her a better doctor. I am reprehensible, contrary, and a constant obstacle to her existence. A powerful foil, like one that Kevin Spacey would have played, but now it would probably be John Ortiz or Walter Goggins. Anyhow, today she was right and I was wrong. Again," Dalton concluded meekly.

"It's not all bad, honey. A patient lived, thanks to her. That's something that is bigger than both of you, and certainly rises above your petty crusade to have her earn her right to be a doctor. To overcome some undermining hierarchy that only you care about," Helen pointed out coolly. Garrett and Melody might have been shocked by their mother's candor, but the minds of both had started to wander and speculate about the quantity of smartphone notifications they were missing.

"It's true, dear, and I did pull her aside to have a heart to heart with her, even offered an abrupt and begrudging apology. It was one of those character building and defining moments. Honestly, I think subconsciously my mistaken diagnosis and subsequent obstinance was actually an emboldening act of motivation for her. There is so much drama in the hospital, few people succeed in making a scene, but I think I might have created a memorable one," Dalton pondered.

"Memorable for her, you mean," Helen reminded him. As much as he was chewing the scenery now, she could only imagine how over the top he may have been then.

Dalton gazed at her blankly for a few seconds. "Oh, right, yes, for Dr. Thomas, of course."

And the band played on. The game of Pay Day continued unabated while each of the Oscars mulled over his or her thoughts, each of them only speaking to advance the game.

The game concluded with no real winner. It was another four-way tie.

"Oh man! Why do none of us ever win?!" Garrett lamented.

"What's wrong with being second, champ?" Dalton asked. Only Helen detected the irony of the nickname, which she felt was unintentional in this case. Thankfully, Dalton rarely brought his professional contempt home with him. His adherence to work-life balance was indisputable.

"No one wins, but at the same time, we all win, for helping each other," Helen added. As a lawyer, she was fully cognizant at how lousy an argument she was making.

"I guess," Garrett pouted. He was still coming to terms what the others in the family had come to accept.

Melody looked to her brother and consoled him by applying the wisdom she had gained in her extra year of life. "You'll get used to it, Garrett. And really, it means greater opportunities along with lesser expectations. Everyone counts on us, but in a way, no one counts on us for anything."

Helen and Dalton exchanged a tender look that was teeming with pride. Dalton leaned over and put his arm around Helen, who leaned into his embrace. Their children were destined to experience at arm's length all that life had to offer.

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