

The Whittling Place

by
Patrick Gabridge

Patrick Gabridge
19 Netherlands Road, #1
Brookline, MA 02445
(617) 959-1437
pat@gabridge.com
www.gabridge.com
copyright 1996 by Patrick Gabridge

The Whittling Place

Characters:

Talcum An old man.

Dusty 20s

Odessa 40s, owner of The Whittling Place

Jack 30s

Time:

The Present.

Place:

The Whittling Place, in a large Northern city (New York)

The Whittling Place

Bare Stage with multiple piles of woodshavings on the floor. An old man, TALCUM, enters, limping, carrying a wooden box (or crate). He sets it down center stage, then exits again. He reemerges carrying a stick and a knife. He sits on the box and starts whittling the stick, occasionally stopping to look at his progress. He's extremely nearsighted, and has to hold the stick right in front of his face to see it. Every once in a while, he pulls out a bottle of talcum powder and shakes it on his hands, rubs them together and resumes whittling.

After a few moments, DUSTY enters (he's in his early 20s). He carries another wooden box. He sets it down, exits, and returns with a stick of his own. He pulls a knife out of his pocket and begins to carve. His work is much slower and more detailed.

Talcum. DUSTY

Dusty. TALCUM

They carve in silence.

How you been? DUSTY

The same. TALCUM

I've been doin' okay. DUSTY

Hm. TALCUM

DUSTY
Me and Daisy, we split up. Last week. She was a fine woman. Sweetest kisses I ever tasted. I never kissed a flower before, but I figure kissing her was like kissing a whole honeysuckle bush.

That so? TALCUM

DUSTY

But I think I finally found the somebody that's right for me. Somebody we both know.

TALCUM

You talk to that guy I told you about?

DUSTY

Oh, yeah. He was right where you said he'd be. You got a real way of discernment about you, Talcum. I never seen a man more in need of a little whittling time. He seemed real open to the idea.

TALCUM

Is he coming?

DUSTY

Said he would.

TALCUM

Today?

DUSTY

That's what he said. Real friendly.

TALCUM

What'd he look like?

DUSTY

Oh, he was the right guy. Sounded and looked just like you said.

TALCUM

Hm. Was good of you to do the man a favor.

DUSTY

I feel good about it. Might do him a world of good.

TALCUM

(yelling)

Hey, Odessa. Can you turn on the sound?

No reply, but the sound of the city rises after a moment--cars, horns honking, sirens.

TALCUM

What's the matter with that woman? She thinks I want to hear the stinkin' city I listen to all day and all night?

DUSTY

She should know better. Talcum, she--

TALCUM

(yelling)

Odessa, turn off the goddamn city! Give us some countryside.

The city noises stop and are replaced with country sounds--crickets, an occasional cow, birdsongs, the wind.

TALCUM

(yelling)

Thank you! Goddamn city that never sleeps. Noisy, cold. I hate this damn cold weather. Seeps into me. Every morning's like getting up after a fist fight. Only I don't have a black eye and there ain't no other fella wondering how his nose got broke.

DUSTY

Your leg botherin' you?

TALCUM

Like it's swarmin' with fire ants. Carvin' helps.

DUSTY

What you makin'?

TALCUM

Somethin' I been puttin' off for a long while.

DUSTY

What is it?

TALCUM

A stick.

DUSTY

Decoration or utility?

TALCUM

Utility?

DUSTY

Means useful, has a purpose.

TALCUM

I know what it means, just surprised to hear you using it.

DUSTY

I'm trying to improve myself for my new lady... I bet you're bustin' to know who my new gal's gonna be.

TALCUM

I can hardly contain myself.

Odessa.
DUSTY

What?
TALCUM

She's the one.
DUSTY

One in a long line. You can't do this to her.
TALCUM

Oh, I mean it this time.
DUSTY

You've gone through seven women since you been comin' here.
Trudy, Melissa, Margaret, Betty Jo Ann, Nancy, and that other
one. Last summer. Tall, blonde, walked like a duchess?
TALCUM

Felicia. That was in the past. Odessa is special.
DUSTY

That's why should you leave her alone.
TALCUM

I would never break her heart.
DUSTY

She's practically old enough to be your mother.
TALCUM

And young enough to be your daughter.
DUSTY

What's that got to do with it?
TALCUM

You had your chance, Talcum.
DUSTY

We got nothin' goin'.
TALCUM

Not from lack of wishin' on your part. I'd be willing to
stand aside, if I thought you'd take a step towards her.
DUSTY

She ain't waiting for me.
TALCUM

That's my whole point.
DUSTY

TALCUM
You do what you want.

DUSTY
I'm carving something for her. To show her how I feel. Lots of hearts, maybe some flowers.

They carve in silence for a while.

Talcum has whittled the end of his stick to a sharp point. He inspects it carefully.

DUSTY
That's a sharp stick.

TALCUM
Still workin' on the handle. But the point looks about right.

DUSTY
About right for what?

TALCUM
Eye pokin'.

DUSTY
Who you got in mind?

TALCUM
Nobody you'd know.

DUSTY
Maybe you should put a barb on the end, make it a little scarier.

TALCUM
Hmm.

Talcum takes out a whetstone and sharpens his knife, then he starts barbing the end of the stick. ODESSA, about 40, enters with a broom and dustpan. She starts sweeping up piles of shavings.

ODESSA
Gentlemen.

DUSTY
Hi, Odessa.

TALCUM

Thanks for the country sounds.

ODESSA

Sorry about the city noise. Shueman was last one in here, and you know him--Brooklyn, born and bred. Can't never be away from the city, even inside.

TALCUM

Shueman's pretty good with a knife.

ODESSA

Marty's my favorite. Showed me some of his roses once. If they'd been pink, I woulda thought they were real.

DUSTY

Marty's a flamin' fag.

ODESSA

What?

DUSTY

Marty's a queer, limp-wristed, moustache wearing, leather strapping queen.

TALCUM

Who asked you?

ODESSA

And is that some business of yours?

DUSTY

I was just making a comment.

TALCUM

Keep 'em to yourself, pea brain.

ODESSA

Do you have something against Marty?

DUSTY

Not besides the obvious.

ODESSA

The only one with an obvious problem is you, Dusty.

TALCUM

Can I slug him now, Odessa?

DUSTY

You want a go at me old man?

ODESSA

You sit down right this minute. I will not have fighting in here.

DUSTY

Sorry, Odessa. Don't know what got into me.

ODESSA

This is a peaceful place and I intend to keep it that way... What you makin', Talcum?

TALCUM

A stick.

DUSTY

An eye pokin' stick.

TALCUM

Shut up.

DUSTY

You told me--

TALCUM

Doesn't mean you have to tell everybody.

DUSTY

You didn't say it was a secret.

ODESSA

Talcum.

TALCUM

I know what you're thinkin'.

ODESSA

I won't have it.

TALCUM

It's my stick, I'll carve what I want.

ODESSA

It's my place.

TALCUM

It's something that needs doing.

ODESSA

Work on something else while you're here. You carve that thing at home.

TALCUM

It has to be here.

ODESSA

Why?

TALCUM

There's no place better for carving in all of New York.

ODESSA

Who you gonna poke?

TALCUM

I ain't exactly sure.

ODESSA

People don't make an eye-pokin' stick without somebody's name on it.

TALCUM

Haven't carved the name yet.

ODESSA

Talcum, you're the finest whittler I know. Don't carve something like this. I've seen you carve a hundred pieces of beauty, passion. Wounded calves, triumphant stags, old farmers, a replica of the Pieta.

DUSTY

I'm carving something you'll like, Odessa. Real peaceful. Trying to show the contents of my heart.

ODESSA

For a girl?

DUSTY

Oh, she's a woman. Finest one I know.

ODESSA

Talcum, take this young man's example and carve something with a little love in it.

TALCUM

As soon as I finish this.

ODESSA

Put this aside. I need you to carve us an entry for the Andersen Competition.

DUSTY

If Talcum ain't up to it, I'd be glad to help out.

A bell rings.

TALCUM

This must be the new fella.

DUSTY

The one I told you about.

The bell rings again.

TALCUM

Impatient son-of-a-bitch, ain't he?

ODESSA

Excuse me, boys.

She exits and Dusty watches her go, dreamily. Talcum gets back to work, trying to concentrate.

DUSTY

I think my heart is going to explode. Ever notice how her lips are just the perfect shape?

TALCUM

I might have.

Dusty suddenly resumes his carving.

DUSTY

When I show her this... You're not doin' the contest are you?

TALCUM

Don't know.

DUSTY

I'll do it. Do her a favor.

JACK enters carrying a wooden box, a stick, and a knife. His hands are full, and he looks like he could drop everything at any moment. He is dressed in a cheap blue business suit and wears a patch over one eye. He's in his early 30s. He drops his things loudly. Dusty and Talcum just watch.

JACK

Hi. Dusty, right?

DUSTY

Right. Glad you found the place.

JACK

Yeah, it was no problem. (to Talcum) I'm Jack.

TALCUM

Jack, huh?

DUSTY

Talcum here is actually the one who noticed you.

JACK

Is that what you guys do? Look for people who seem stressed?

DUSTY

Not really. No.

Talcum and Dusty resume working. Jack arranges his seat and prepares to carve.

JACK

This is quite a set up.

TALCUM

What do you mean?

JACK

I've never heard of a place like this.

DUSTY

Very rare.

JACK

I thought I'd tried everything. Spas, saunas, t'ai chi, herbalists, moan therapy. This isn't really my thing, but what is there to lose, you know? Maybe, I'll get down to work.

TALCUM

There's a thought.

Jack makes a few half-hearted attempts at his stick, then just stares at it for a while.

JACK

The woman up front, uh...

DUSTY

Odessa. Ain't she something?

JACK

Sure. She said the sound can be changed. Whatever ambience you want.

DUSTY

She's got just about everything you could ever want. I know one guy, likes to carve to the sounds of Antarctica.

JACK

These crickets are driving me crazy. Makes me feel like I'm in the middle of a field, with flies and bugs everywhere. It makes me itch.

He exits.

DUSTY

What do you think, Talcum?

TALCUM

I ain't quite sure yet.

DUSTY

Don't like to sit still, that's for sure.

TALCUM

Something's bugging him. Don't you think?

DUSTY

Seems that way.

TALCUM

A man with a clear conscience don't wriggle around like a bucket of snakes.

Jack returns.

JACK

She said I'd have to ask you. First come, first serve.

TALCUM

That's the rule.

JACK

Would you mind if we changed it to the ocean? I could really use the sound of the waves.

TALCUM

You a sailor?

JACK

I used to be. That's how I lost my eye. Sailing accident.

DUSTY

I like the patch. Pretty tough lookin'. Don't see many eye patches these days. Most people go for a glass eye. I seen a shop down on 57th Street that sells 'em.

JACK

Too much scarring.

DUSTY

I like patches better anyway. Glass eyes give me the creeps.

JACK

Right... So, do you mind if I have her change the sounds?

DUSTY

Talcum was here first.

JACK

Talcum?

TALCUM

Ocean waves?

JACK

Right.

TALCUM

No.

JACK

What?

TALCUM

I want my country fields.

DUSTY

Makes him think of spring sunshine. Helps get rid of the chill. Personally, spring makes me think of romance.

TALCUM

Cuttin' your toenails makes you think of romance.

DUSTY

Odessa in the sunshine.

JACK

Just think of the beach on a hot day. Tall waves, hot sand, smell of suntan lotion. That'll warm you up.

TALCUM

I hate the beach.

JACK

Think about being out on a sailboat. Salt air pressing against your face, sun beating down, cool breeze. We all lean over as she comes about.

TALCUM

Can't swim.

JACK

Look, Mr. Talcum. The sound of the waves is the only thing that soothes my eye. On days like this, lately more than ever, it starts to ache. If I could just hear the spray, the waves against the hull, it would go away.

DUSTY

No kiddin'?

TALCUM

Bullshit.

DUSTY

He's in a grumpy mood.

TALCUM

Don't you comment on my mood.

JACK

You don't believe me?

TALCUM

Nope.

Talcum holds up the stick to look at the barb, then starts working on the handle.

JACK

I lost it in a storm. Fifteen foot swells. Gale force winds. It was the middle of June and it felt like the middle of December. We were on a forty-footer, trying to work our way back to Hyannis Port. The wind shifted, and a wave hit us broadside, the boom slipped loose, whipped around, and caught me right in the eye.

DUSTY

Wow. And you still like the sound of the ocean?

JACK

It makes me think back to good times. Good summers. If I think hard enough, I go back there and the bad times vanish.

TALCUM

If you want to hear waves, go to Jones Beach.

JACK

Hey, it's your call... All right. All right. I guess I just need to make meadow sounds do the trick.

Hm.
TALCUM

They work in silence for a little while. Talcum sharpens his knife.

JACK
Hey, um, Talcum. Could I use your sharpener?

TALCUM
My stone?

JACK
I rented the knife from up front, but I didn't get a stone.

DUSTY
I been meaning to offer to help Odessa sharpen everything.

TALCUM
You want to use MY stone?

Dusty pulls out his stone and tosses it to Jack.

DUSTY
Here. (to Talcum) What is the matter with you, old man?

TALCUM
None of your business what's the matter with me.

Jack sharpens his knife while Talcum watches.

JACK
Thanks.

He gives the stone back to Dusty.

DUSTY
If you enjoy whittling, you're gonna have to invest in some tools. I could help you find some cheap.

JACK
Great. Thanks.

They carve, but Jack stops and stares at his wood again.

JACK
What are you fellows making?

TALCUM
What?