

Kevin Wenger

Cool Factor

When Donald accidentally burned down his backyard on the fourth of July he got away with it, kind of. He wasn't charged with arson, but the cops and his parents gave him lots of stern looks and harsh words. He was twenty two, but never grew out of the shame that came from his parent's disappointment. The state trooper at the scene clenched his jaw, showing off his mean bones. Donald's father, Don Sr, argued with the cops.

“What do you mean you're not charging him? He burned down the whole damn backyard! Put his ass in jail!”

Donald's mother, Karen, said:

“It was an accident; he's very accident prone.”

She showed the cop the melted splotch of skin on Donald's wrist from when he burned it on the stove as a child.

“Very accident prone,” she said.

The backyard looked and smelled like a wet campfire for a few days. Donald didn't see or smell this from his new windowless basement room, unfinished with exposed insulation. His father had cleared out his office downstairs and ordered Donald to move his things down there as punishment—which was a remarkably mild for Donald. When he was thirteen and punched a hole in the wall, Don Sr. responded by taking a sledge hammer to the walls of Don's room.

“If you're gonna put holes in my walls I'm gonna put holes in yours,” he said.

And after he was caught smoking weed in high school, he and his father got into a shouting match which turned into a fistfight and ended with Don Sr's knee in Donald's back threatening to break his arm. Donald stared into his mother's face then, pleading through his pain. Karen stood by and looked on with an anguished but scornful *you should have known better* face.

But as he grew into adulthood, Donald made it a point to avoid making his father angry. He was tired of being corrected, and it seemed his father grew weary of dealing with him. Years ago his father's belt would have come off for something like this.

A week or so after the fire construction began on something in the backyard. Donald, jobless, would make sandwiches around noon and watch day laborers haul in two by fours and drywall. He asked his father about it,

“What are you building out back?”

and Don Sr. walked past, ignoring his question. Donald looked out the window and briefly felt the urge to do something spiteful. He thought of watering the dirt so they couldn't pour the foundation, or scrawling *fuck you* in the concrete; hiding a few two by fours in the woods. But the thought of his father's reaction quelled the feeling. Karen came into the kitchen.

“Do you know what dad is building out back?” he asked.

“Just another Don. Sr. project. He said he's building his own little retreat back there. I guess the garage wasn't big enough.” She let out a little laugh, and Donald wondered what was so funny about his dad avoiding the family.

“It looks like it's gonna be as big as the house,” Donald said.

“Probably larger. It's your father after all, he loves to show off.”

Don Sr. had a six figure stay at home computing job that he never fully explained to his family. He brought home a paycheck, so Karen was satisfied, and Donald didn't care enough to ask. One time Donald overheard his father tell a neighbor at a BBQ that he worked in defense, specifically missiles. He had bought a boat, two muscle cars, four TVs, a privately managed high speed Internet connection, an RV, a Land Rover, a pool table, a dart board. When they hosted neighborhood BBQs, his father

would show off his “toys.”

“Most pool tables only have one color felt on them, but you see, I got this guy to get me two-tone felt. Tell me, have you ever seen a pool table with two colors of felt on it?”

The neighbors would *hmm* and *ahh*.

“That's what I call the cool factor. Anyone can buy a pool table, but this is special.”

Donald spent most of these neighborhood BBQs stoned running his hand through the fur of a neighbor's dog. He would talk to adults when it was required. When a friend of his mom's asked something like, “Where's he going to college?” and Karen couldn't bear to say the words herself, Donald knew to say “I'm taking a year or two off to work to pay for it myself.” Which was partially true. He failed two of his classes his first semester and Don Sr. forced him to withdraw and refused to pay for anymore semesters. Donald understood why his mother didn't tell people this, but he also wished that she did. She had a way of restructuring memories that irritated Donald.

“And how did you get that scar on your wrist again?”

“The stove when he was younger,” she said, “he's always been accident prone.” and she'd gesture to the barren backyard and laugh. And somewhere inside the house Don Sr. was showing off his genuine horse hair dart board and ebony darts with mother of pearl inlay.

“These don't come cheap,” he'd say, “you pay that extra bit for the *cool factor*.”

Donald had taken to helping his mother around the house with small chores. He would help her vacuum and dust. She didn't pay him for it, and often said:

“Why don't you go out a get a job cleaning houses?” followed by, “I mean I appreciate having you around helping with things, but you should really get a job. You know how your father feels about that.”

Donald mouthed the words “I will” knowing that he wouldn't. He was comfortable living in the basement, smoking weed, and helping his mother with chores. Refusing to look for work was Donald's last silent spiteful move against his father who repeatedly threatened to kick him out.

One day, the vacuum cut out and Karen said, “Oh will you look at that, there's an ambulance at the Martinelli's.” The Martinellis lived across the street. They were both well into their seventies. Mr. Martinelli waved and smiled when he saw Donald mowing the lawn. Mrs. Martinelli would glare and say, “Remember where the property line is.”

“I wonder if that ambulance is for Mr. Martinelli. I know he had heart problems.”

Karen and Donald watched on with Karen saying things like “Oh I hope nothing happened,” and, “he was such a sweet old man.” Eventually they saw two state troopers slowly carry out a zipped up human size black bag and put it on a gurney in the back of the ambulance.

“Oh my god, I wonder if he died,” Karen said.

“It looks like it,” Donald said. The ambulance left the neighborhood slowly and alarm-less.

Karen brought it up at dinner.

“You know Don, I think Mr. Martinelli may have died.”

“Oh yeah?” Don Sr. spoke through a mouthful of cold pasta salad. He sucked some coke out of a can. “What did he have a heart attack or something? He had a bum ticker didn't he?”

“Well see I just don't know, an ambulance was there earlier, and they took out someone out into the ambulance.”

“Well maybe he fell or something,” Don Sr. said.

“He was in a body bag though,” Donald said to his father.

“How do we know it wasn't Mrs. Martinelli?” Don Sr. said still talking to Karen.

“Well it could have been,” Karen said, “it could have been. And you know I asked the Welches but they said they didn't see it.”

“Larry Welch wouldn't see brown if a donkey was shitting on his face,” Don Sr. said.

Karen swallowed and looked down. It was silent for a few seconds then Donald said, "Maybe just keep an eye on the obituaries."

"That's a good idea," Karen agreed.

"Had Donald found a job yet?" Don Sr. asked, addressing Karen.

"No," Donald said.

Don Sr. dropped his fork and knife and turned to Donald.

"Are you proud of that or something?" Donald thought about grabbing the knife off of the table. He clenched his jaws. "Huh? You happy with your life? Jesus Christ, you don't do shit do you?"

"Are you happy with *your* life?"

Don Sr. backhanded Donald leaving the hexagonal imprint of his high school ring on his face.

"Donald, don't talk to your father that way," Karen said.

Don Sr. swallowed another un-chewed mouthful of cold pasta salad and stood up. "I'm takin' the Challenger out for a spin." He left his dirty plate on the table, and slammed the front door as he left.

"Donald, you know better."

Donald stood up and glared at his mother.

"And you do too," he said. Karen looked down and Donald left the kitchen. As he went to the basement he heard her whimpering and he smiled. Then he laughed. He smiled and laughed all the way to his basement room, and when he got to his room, he started to cry.

The "man cave" was completed a few weeks after the Martinelli confusion. Don Sr. called his family out to the backyard to make an announcement. It was apparent a week or so before that it resembled a large two story garage, but the inside was still a mystery to Karen and Donald.

"As you know, I've been building something here in the backyard and I just want to let you all know that it's finally finished. No more loud drilling or trucks backing up. The *man cave* is complete."

"Man Cave?" Donald asked.

Don Sr. didn't respond, and pressed his thumb against a glowing keypad. The garage started opening.

"Fingerprint recognition. Anyone can copy a key, but you can't copy a fingerprint."

"The cool factor," Karen cheerfully played along.

"That's right."

The doors opened up and they went inside. The bottom floor was a garage complete with brand new red and chrome tool chests and a spotless poured concrete floor. Donald noticed a TV in one corner showing the back of their house.

"Security cameras," Don Sr. said, "that means I know when *you* are coming and what *you* are up to."

He took them upstairs to the second floor.

"Brand new plush carpet: champagne colored, Lazy Boy recliner: black leather with matching love seat and sofa. That table over there is rose-colored glass, that's very hard to find. Fifty-two inch plasma DLP High Definition television with five point one Dolby Surround sound... what are you doing! Stay out!"

Donald had opened a door into another room. He briefly caught a peek of computer monitors and wiring before he felt the ring on his father's hand on his head. Karen tensed up and gave Donald a *you know better* look

"Off limits!" Don Sr. barked. He continued on with the tour. Donald followed along, and when they were all back outside, Don Sr. explained that this was his new little sanctuary and that he needed a place to himself. He said that if they wanted to reach him, he'd have his cell phone on him. He went back inside, and closed the garage doors.

"I'm happy for your father. It's nice that he has his own little place now," Karen said.

"Yeah, I'm happy for him too," Donald said. But he was happy for other reasons. He went back

in the house, took a bong hit, and roamed around the house in his socks. This was his home, and he felt that for the first time in a long time.

Fall was closing in and Karen decided to throw one more neighborhood BBQ at the end of September. She sat in the kitchen writing out invites while Donald licked envelopes and stamps.

“I wonder if I should send one to the Martinellis? Do you think I should send one Donald?”

“They've never come to one before.”

“Well no, but I don't want to exclude them especially if Mrs. Martinelli is grieving.”

Donald shrugged and licked stamps. Karen sighed and made little thinking noises with her mouth.

“Wait, Donald, I've got an idea. You go over there and personally deliver the invite. See if Mr. Martinelli answers.”

Donald agreed, and when Karen had finished writing out an invite, Donald took it over to their house. He rung the doorbell, and Mrs. Martinelli answered through a crack between the screen door and house door.

“No solicitors,” she said, “do you see the sign?” she started to close it when Donald said,

“I'm not soliciting; I'm from next door. We're having a neighborhood barbecue and I just wanted to let you know that you're invited.”

“I'm not interested.”

“Is Mr. Martinelli home?”

She glared at him then shut the door.

“She just shut the door in my face,” Donald explained.

“Well did she seem depressed? Did she look like she had been crying?” Karen inquired.

“No, I asked if Mr. Martinelli was home and she just shut the door in my face.”

Karen thought out loud again,

“Well even if Mr. Martinelli did die, I doubt she'd be the kind to stay up all night crying about it.”

That night, after the pizza delivery man dropped off their dinner, Karen gave Don Sr. a call on his cellphone. Donald heard him say the words “I'm busy” and he raised his voice about something but Donald couldn't make that out.

“Well you need to eat, Don,” Karen said.

“I'm busy!”

Karen looked startled and hung up the phone. She put a few pieces of pizza on a paper plate and wrapped it in tin foil.

“Donald, take these out to your father.” She handed him the paper plate. He opened up the screen door and walked down the step to the man cave's garage doors. He knocked loudly on the doors, the flexible panels bending inward as he did. He waited a bit, and then knocked again. Nothing. He stared at the black bulb of the security camera, and then heard a slow hum as the garage doors started to lift. The lift went to about knee level, and then stopped.

“Slide it under,” he heard his dad say. His voice was dry and deeper like he had been shouting for a while.

Donald slid it under, and the doors started back down. That was the end of the exchange.

A few days later, Donald took a bong hit and went upstairs to make a sandwich. He heard his mom come in and quickly checked to make sure he didn't smell too strongly of weed.

“Donald, you won't believe it, I just saw Mr. Martinelli.”

She dropped bags of ribs and chips and sauces onto the counter.

“Yeah?” he asked.

“Yeah he was out getting the mail. I asked him how he was doing and he said he was fine. Apparently in good health and everything.”

“Well what was the ambulance about?”

Karen filled a pot with water and put it on the stove.

“I asked him about that and he said that he didn't remember an ambulance being there. Isn't that weird?”

“Maybe he's getting dementia,” Donald said.

The metallic coil beneath the stove glowed red.

“Or maybe it wasn't at their house. I mean that seems like such a long time ago. Maybe it was the Welches next door.”

Donald smelled the heat from the rings of the stove, and thought back to the ambulance.

“It wasn't,” Donald said “How do you not remember?” He was irritated and serious. Karen laughed it off.

“Oh Donald, you know me, very forgetful. It's a good thing I have you around to help me remember.”

“Yeah. Good thing.”

Donald cut his sandwich in half and went back down the basement.

The day of the BBQ came and Karen was frantically rushing around the house.

“Donald, have you seen your father?”

“No, I think he's in the man cave.”

“He's been spending a lot of time in there hasn't he. Do me a favor and give him a call, I really need his help setting up.”

Donald called his father's cell phone. It rang fifteen times, and finally he hung up.

“He's not picking up.”

Karen groaned.

“Well go out there and knock on the door and get him to come out.”

Donald went out back to the garage doors, and rapped on them. No answer. He knocked again, this time the panel of the garage door bent in and didn't bend back out. Still no answer. He stared at the camera for a bit and went back inside.

“Maybe he's asleep,” he explained.

“Donald, I don't have time for this; go wake up your father!” Karen handed Donald a plate of well-sauced ribs. “Wait, first, go put these on the grill.”

Donald went out back on the porch and fired up the grill. He stared at the man cave as the grill warmed up. It had no windows. No main entrance. He watched his mother through the sliding glass door; she had the phone squished between her head and neck and was sighing in short bursts.

The grill warmed up and Donald threw on the ribs. The sauce dripped down through the grate and flames licked up charring the skin. Donald turned the heat down.

“Donald, I need to run out to the store and get some ice. If your dad calls, pick up.”

Her worry had a different tone now. Donald nodded, and went back to watching the ribs.

When the guests arrived, Donald had already taken a few bong hits. Karen put on her hostess face, but was now visibly worried that Don. Sr. was not present.

“I think he's out in his new man cave, but he'll be out soon,” she said when guests asked.

Donald was not going to back up any of her statements. He sat on the couch and ran his fingers through the shaggy coat of someone's dog.

“Have you seen your dad around?” an adult asked. Donald looked up and nodded no.

“That's some man cave he's got out there. You help him fix up the challenger in there?” The adult was taking sips out of a tumbler glass of scotch.

“No,” Donald said. The adult waited for Donald to carry on the conversation, and when he didn't, the adult walked away.

An hour into the BBQ, Donald went out back to get some ribs. There was an odd meat smell, and Donald wondered if he overcooked the ribs.

“Donald, call your father again,” Karen said.

“He's not picking up...”

“Call your father!” she growled. She was in full hostess mode, and was not tolerating any counter arguments.

Donald called again, and let it go to voice-mail.

“This is Don, not here right now, leave a message.” Donald didn't have anything to say and hung up. The BBQ was wearing on him, and Donald thought about smoking again.

At some point someone else made a remark about the odd smell in the backyard.

“I think Donald overcooked the ribs,” Karen said.

“I don't think it's the ribs, the ribs taste fine,” someone else said.

“Well maybe it's the chicken then, Donald is very accident prone.”

And Donald sat in a lawn chair with hand in the fur of someone's dog. He looked at his scar. It was true; he was very accident prone. He had knocked over a potted plant when he was seven.

“Where is that smell coming from?” someone said, walking over to the man cave.

And Donald knew the difference between burnt chicken and burnt skin. He remembered the smell of his hand held against the red coil of the stove as atonement for the plant mess. This didn't smell like either of those.

“I think it's coming from Don's man cave.”

It had gotten considerably warmer since the morning, and the stench hung over the barbecue. No one could ignore it. Donald continued to pet the dog and watched as men set down their tumblers of scotch to try to open the garage doors. They didn't call the cops till maybe a half hour later, and that's when Karen started tearing up. Donald watched her crumble in a lawn chair and he looked on with a *you should have known better* face.

Donald remembered learning in social studies class in middle school that when Egyptian explorers opened up King Tut's tomb, the first burst of air that came out smelled thousands of years old. When the fire department finally pried open the garage door, the smell that came out wasn't old, but ripe. They found him face down on the newly two-toned carpet: champagne with dark burgundy swirls.