

Mike Lee

Spoken Words

“I waited for an hour. I have to meet with my book club in a few minutes. I do not want to be late.”

Dawn spoke guardedly, words measured in bookworm English, dusted with a Texas accent.

When she was in the state of drawing the words from tongue to air in clipped low tones it meant she was annoyed. Anger was not a thing with her; she often wrapped her hurt in a package and stuffed it in a closet.

This is a closet in danger of overflowing.

“This is the way we do things around here, sugar, and I am not at all pleased you are not following what I said to you.”

When Dawn uses words like *sugar*, they have the opposite meaning, specifically that she is angry with me. Using appellations that are assumed to be affectionate and endearing to express an opposite emotion is a commonplace means of communication in the South. When emphasized, these spoken words are hell on earth for the recipient of them to endure.

For example, the phrase, “bless your heart,” is cruel. That means you are a total fuck-up who cannot tie your shoelaces without knotting them together. This phrase is particularly dreaded. One wishes to be elsewhere when those words are spoken.

There is no blessing of the heart. Instead, when used, this is meant to turn the knife slowly.

I did not want to wait for it. I responded.

“Yes, I understand, Dawn,” I said, nodding in agreement while visualizing a door to escape through. It is a psychological construct created since childhood. I do not handle others’ anger well. Though I work on it, my anxieties kick in whenever I know someone is angry.

This may not have anything to do with me, but I take on the burden of pain. I wish I could say I wear it well.

“I have a hard time believing that,” Dawn said, her head bent ever so slightly to her left. “If you did, we would not be having this conversation.”

The clipped tones segued to a rising tide reflecting Dawn’s own anxiety. I see a door opening, and sunlight entering.

Yes, people do lie in a conversation. Not big lies, though sometimes they do. But often, they invent small fibs to change the subject, or move a conversation in a different direction. I am not adept in that regard, I am sorry to say.

I wish to be elsewhere.

I know what Dawn might do when the clipped tones transformed to a rising tide of anger. I endured the crashing wave.

Last month, Dawn hit me in front of our daughter when I accidentally locked us out of our apartment the day after my mother died. I was particularly stressed out and out of sorts and left the keys on the kitchen counter.

Dawn excused the punches with, “Well, four times in one year isn’t much.”

I straightened in my chair, preparing to take punch number five.

I took a deep breath and returned to the bank forms. Dawn had overdrawn the joint account, again. The rent check, fortunately, went through, but we needed money to pay for our daughter’s pre-K. That check was due in two weeks, and I only had one paycheck for us to live on until then, and it was not going to be enough. There were other expenses to deal with, as well. Dawn’s medical bills, and I had to pay the plane tickets to East Texas for Mom’s funeral on my American Express. That was nearly a thousand dollars, and it had to be paid in a week.

She also hit me in front of our daughter. Dawn tends to pick spots for excessive behavior knowing when I am at my most emotionally vulnerable, and doing it so the kid would see serves a purpose of keeping her in line, too.

Who is the mother, and who is the child? I see the light flowing in from the doorway I am imagining. I pretend this light is filling the room, blinding her.

I reached into my leather briefcase and passed the forms for the 401(k) loan to Dawn. This is the third loan I had to take out so far. This was intended to provide for the future, whatever that is supposed to mean. This concept of a future is becoming less apparently real right now.

“Where am I supposed to sign?” The clipped tone had returned. I relaxed.

I point to the bottom of the second page.

Dawn quickly signed, handing back the papers, jamming them into my waiting hands.

“We should get the check next week. It will tide us over.”

“I cannot understand why the plane tickets cost that much.”

“The fare was last minute. The airline did reduce the cost by thirty percent.”

“It wasn’t enough.”

“It was the best I could do.”

Dawn straightened up in her seat, her expression blank. No sense of guilt or responsibility. When she met her, my mother warned me to take care, and asked if I was going to be okay. She had a rough time of it with her two marriages.

She was sad at the wedding.

I thought about responding about her spending habits, but I learned to be careful with what I had. A truthful response, couched in combative terms would speed the spiral I realize we already were on.

A divorce shall be devastating. I will likely lose a custody battle. Dawn is capable of destroying me. I can already hear her speak in those calm, clipped tones sitting across a table across from me in a conference room, expensive attorneys at our sides, and me giving in, as I am wont to do with her.

I put the forms into my briefcase. I will go in early to the office, the paralegal will notarize them, and the forms faxed out.

Dawn does not understand the money we are losing by me doing this. It is not just the reduction to this fund, but also that I have another sixty dollars per pay period taken out to repay the loan. This is the third loan. The credit cards are maxed out.

This is only a temporary solution to a permanent problem. I already understand where this is headed.

But, for now, I am relaxed. The light fills the room, with Dawn dissolved in its glow.

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On the morning she died, I dreamed Mom had called asking me if I was okay. My daughter woke me up to tell me my sister was calling. I took the phone from her little hand. Karen informed me of our mother's passing.

Mom, I am not okay.

I rose from the couch and headed for the door.

Mike Lee is a writer, labor journalist and photographer based in New York City. His fiction is published and forthcoming in *West Trade Review*, *Dime Show Review*, *The Ampersand Review*, *Paraphilia*, *The Roaring Muse*, *The Aironaut*, *Sensitive Skin*, *Reservoir*, *The Avenue*, *Easy Street*, *The Corvus Review* and others. His photographs are currently on exhibit at Art Thou Gallery in Berkeley, California and at Darkroom Gallery in Vermont. Website is www.mleephotoart.com.