

BOARDROOM

BY: GUS DICK ANDROS

I recently visited Dorothy, who had danced with me in a number of shows, and has remained a dear friend. She is now an executive of a large publishing conglomerate. I was very impressed by her position as she took me into the boardroom so we could talk without interruption.

"What do you think of corporate America?" She asked.

"Wow! Who would have thought that a girl from the chorus would wind up here?" I said, wanting her to know how proud I was of her.

The room was large with wood paneling. A large oval table surrounded by chairs, occupied the center of the room, and a large gold-framed picture of the founder was hung at one end of the room. A couple of landscapes adorned the other walls.

Dorothy and I have total recall and no matter how many years pass we can conjure up a memory of our past. Laughter has always been part of our rapport. While she was telling me a story, my mind wandered to another time and to another "boardroom" in our house, "the john". My brother Dee and I shared the same bedroom, and for years we slept in the same bed until mother could afford twin beds for us, but I don't remember ever discussing anything with Dee except in our "boardroom."

Compared to this over-sized room where Dorothy and I were sitting, our bathroom was very small -- only large enough to accommodate a bathtub, sink, and a toilet. The room was no more than 6 x 9, old fashioned by today's standards; but it was inside the house with cold and hot running water, and the toilet flushed, so we didn't complain.

You couldn't have asked for a better brother than Dee, who didn't talk unless there was something important to say. I remember when I started smoking -- I was the first in the family to start the nicotine habit. Needless to say I never told anyone in the family I was smoking, but all my friends smoked and when I was out I always had a cigarette in my mouth. One time at a school function I was smoking in front of Dee. He paid no attention to what I was doing, but once we were in the house, Dee followed me into the bathroom and locked the door.

"That was a disgusting thing I saw you do tonight." he said.

"What do you mean?" I really didn't know what he was talking about.

"Don't give me that shit. You know damn well what I'm talking about."

"Honest, I don't." I was confused.

"When did you start smoking?"

"Is that what this is all about?"

"You know you have never seen anyone in this house smoke, and I don't want to see you do it again." he insisted.

"Dee! I'm old enough to do what I please." I snapped.

"You wise ass, you may think you are, but you're not going to do it in my presence, and if you do it in front of mother, I will beat the shit out of you." I couldn't remember Dee ever talking to me like that. He didn't have it in him to lay a hand on me in violence. Lord knows we argued, but we never hit each other.

After he left the room I thought he was even more special because he didn't tell mother and waited until we got home in our conference room to make an issue of this. Many others would have embarrassed me in front of my friends. Needless to say, I didn't stop smoking, but I was more careful where I did it.

When Dee was going into the Marines, I found myself in the bathroom with him again. "Why did you lock the door?" I asked.

"I want to talk to you."

Remembering our last confrontation I said, "What did I do now? What are you some kind of chaperone?"

"You didn't do anything I know about, but I want to talk to you about me going into the service. You know with Plato (our older brother) and me gone, you'll be here alone with mother, and I want you to take care of her."

"Isn't she old enough to take care of herself?" I questioned.

"That's not the point. Mother has never been alone before, and I want you to behave yourself and not cause her any grief." He was very emphatic.

"May I ask when I have ever caused her grief? You're the one that gets into all the trouble."

"You are at the age now when things will happen to you. I know you think you're a big shit, but take it from someone who knows, you could easily be led astray." It was funny hearing Dee say this because he was only sixteen months older than me.

I knew mother had a problem with my growing into manhood, and she didn't know how to handle it. I would get letters from Dee telling me "to knock it off," and at the same time, my mother would get letters indicating it wouldn't be long before I would be in the service and I should have a good time while I could.

The conference room got a rest after Dee left, and I was soon to follow him into the service.

When the war was over and we returned to Oklahoma, Dee, his friend, and I tripled dated and on the way home Dee and his friend argued over who would pay the check. I thought that in front of our dates this was inappropriate. I said nothing, knowing that when we got home I would take care of my share. We took our dates home and we dropped Dee's friend off, leaving the two of us together. As if time had stood still we didn't talk, but when we got home he led me to the bathroom and again locked the door. We both had been sergeants in the service, but here he outranked me because of those sixteen months.

"You're the cheapest son of a bitch I've ever known," he began.

"Are you talking about the check?"

"You know damn well what I am talking about. You didn't even offer to pick it up."

"Let's say I don't quibble over money in public." I unlocked the door and left the room.

A few years passed and I came home for a visit from San Francisco. Plato and his wife had a party and I attended. I will admit that I drank more than anyone should and ended up behind the couch with a married woman. I was too drunk to get home by myself, so Dee led me by the hand and got me in the house without disturbing mother. We found ourselves in the conference room -- with me propped up on the toilet and Dee washing my face, first with cold and then hot towels.

"You bastard, how could you make such an ass out of yourself? Didn't you know that she was married and her husband was there?" His voice was reaching my ears, but the meaning was not. After he got me to bed he had to take his girlfriend home. I will never know how he did this without waking our mother.

The next day Mother had a big family dinner for me with all our relatives there. Plato, who could never stand for me to get any attention, told the family about me and the married woman behind the couch. I have to admit that he did not exaggerate his story.

Mother looked at me and said, "He's making that up, isn't he?"

"Mother, has Plato ever told the truth in his life?" I lied with all of the innocence I could muster. I thought at any moment Dee would speak up, but he just sat there looking into his plate and that was all there was to it. I knew I owed Dee, and maybe I could never repay him.

"Let me take you to the private dining room and we'll have lunch with the biggies." Dorothy said.

"What did you say?"

"You're not listening. I said let's have lunch."

"Sounds great to me. I feel very important with you." Once we went into the hall, Dorothy was all business.

As she shut the door, I heard it click and it made the same sound as our old bathroom door. I knew I had missed the advice that Dee use to give me in our own private boardroom.