Killing the Fetid Calf

*(This was my second-ever published story. I'm amazed at how little memory I can dredge up about it. How come I had to find it in an old journal—Writers' Corner 1980, a pretty decent VCU lit mag—to even recall it existed? Perhaps because it began as a wordplay piece, inspired by the joke title? It may be set in my childhood home; the mother may remind me strongly of my mother—but the father-son relationship is entirely fictional. I feel no emotional connection to the piece at all. I do still kind of enjoy it, though.)*

Maurice Finch, a prodigal son, was coming home to the suburbs of east London. He didn't expect much to come of it. But home is where, what's the phrase? Where the head games are? Where the hurt goes, where it cries out for its mommy? Where the heart was whole, once? Len, his father, smirked as his son appeared in the living room doorway. An unpleasant smirk, an *Aha, so I was right* smirk: his father's fallback expression. Louise, his mother, seeing him for the first time in six years, said only, "Maurice, your hair."

Where the patterns calcify.

But in her mother's case at least it was only a reflex. She was smiling, genuinely pleased to see him. Maurice replied, "Yes, I know, mum, I've been meaning to get it cut… I suppose you've heard about me and Jennifer?"

For reply, his father lifted a newspaper, as if the news had been international. He smirked again. "How did you get in, then?" he added. Maurice's old key was useless, since the lock had been changed after a burglary, but his parents still hid their spare key under the same rock in the rock garden that they had always used. Maurice didn't point out what he knew his father understood. What the son of a bitch had meant was why hadn't Maurice rung the bell like any other stranger coming to call on them. It had been a dig at him—obscure to the uninitiated, but then there were none present.

But he had vowed to be conciliatory. He responded with an apology. "I didn't mean to be presumptuous, dad. If I'm honest, I just wanted, I suppose, to feel as if this was still my home. Still *is* my home."

"Tired of America, are you?"

"No. I like it. It's not at all the way you think, dad." The preconceptions of friends visiting the US from the UK were typically quite lurid. A pop culture style shoot-out might break out at any moment! "But I'm not *from* there, you know. I still feel…"

"Would you like a cup of tea, Maurice?"

"Yes, please, mum. Oh, I brought you presents—I left my stuff in the hall—let me just go get them."

"There's no hurry, Maurice," his father put in quickly. So the old patterns re-established themselves: Louise resolutely cheerful; Len nursing his obscure resentments, warding off gestures of appeasement. Back off one pace, circle, return to the clinch. "You still feel what?"

"I still feel English. That this is my home town. You know."

"We've read your novels."

"They're fiction, dad. The parents aren't you and mum. That place isn't here."

"You spell your name *Morris*, we noticed. 'Who's this *Morris* Finch?', your uncle Bill asked. Not much of a secret identity, he thought."

"There's no mystery to it, dad. It's just so that it gets pronounced right. Americans tend to stress the second syllable where we stress the first. George Ber*nard* Shaw. Lawrence Dur*rell*."

Louise chuckled. "That's so peculiar, Maurice. So they call you Mau*rice*?"

"Ponce's name, Mau*rice*. No wonder Jennifer left you."

Maurice gave a polite little laugh, ducking the blow.

"How did she like the second one?"

"She didn't, much, but that wasn't the reason, dad. We were in trouble right from the start, and the book was fiction. The root of it was more what you said when I met her. Do you remember? I should have listened to you."

He could see his father's hesitation. Maurice was pandering; such obsequiousness would get the boy nowhere, but to say so openly would sound sullen, and risk putting Len himself in the wrong. So he nodded, and asked Maurice to come out with him to the pub—adopting a tone just a touch more affable than Maurice's had been—there was a repressed anger, but one would have to be Len's son to perceive it. And there was an eye-gleam of calculation; his father was up to something. Maurice cursed himself; his stupid bit of flattery had made things worse. With crestfallen enthusiasm, he accepted the invitation.

"I'll just go put on something warmer, son," Len concluded, "and I'll be right down."

It was a relief to speak to his mother alone, to lift his guard and just chat. Eventually the small talk relaxed them, and they came back to their larger concerns.

"He's missed you, you know, Maurie. Don't pull that face, he really has. He needs someone not-me to talk to." Someone not submissive to argue with, more like. What his father missed was the devious cut and thrust, the probe and parry. And someone to disapprove of—for in Len's eyes, Maurice was a wastrel. It was nothing to do with money, or idleness. What Maurice wasted, as best he could make out, was his affection. Outside his terse, brittle novels, he was as quick with kindness as his father was laggard, as genial as his father was sour; and he was reckless as to who might take advantage. Until Jenny, no one had managed to hurt him enough for him to notice. His father had never liked her, but was perversely smug about whatever it was his son would be getting into, convinced that he was about to be taught a hard lesson. And so, Maurice supposed, it had proved. Still, Jenny had loved him for a while. Had *Len* ever loved him, once he grew up and became this model of everything his father, apparently, loathed? All he knew was that he had never managed to breach his father's defenses with the kind of warmth that worked fine on everyone else. He had vowed to do better on this visit.

He would do better. How much better, though: well enough to make a difference? That would be hard.

No, he told his mother, he wasn't feeling too jetlagged. He'd slept on the plane and then again on the train. Hungry, but he could get something at the pub. She was absurdly pleased that he and his father were going out to celebrate his return, trusting that at last they might be reconciled—and Maurice quickly decided to act as if he believed it also. His strategy for the evening fell into place. Let's see what his father could do against unbridled filial affection; he'd wear down the old bastard yet.

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Len paid for his meal—a stale corned beef sandwich and trimmings—and made a show of welcoming him home. But soon it was every bit as bad as Maurice had feared. They were in a geezer pub—there was not another soul there close to his age. His father was a caricature of sociability, re-introducing him to everyone who could possibly ever have heard of his existence, humiliating him with jocund tales of his pre-teens, then turning enthusiastically to local gossip about which Maurice could have no interest and nothing to say. At first his son's joviality, as extravagant as his own, startled and puzzled Len. He took to punctuating the anecdotes and local gossip with hints and pointed looks—you're ancient history around these parts, my lad (was their unspoken message), you never had much in common with us and if you ever belonged you certainly don't now. And finally, citing and garbling half-digested chunks of Maurice's first novel, *Spring in the Cement Gardens*, you have mocked us and betrayed us and the dislike is mutual. Maurice steadfastly refused to acknowledge the undertow, reacting only to the surface currents. His father's cordiality began to lose its polish; Maurice's good cheer acquired some smug spitefulness; the pub's patrons grew less and less sure how to treat the pair of them.

Maurice was interested to note, though, that even his father's reductive distortions of what he'd written about his home town, its greyness, its charmless stodginess, failed to offend his audience. They remained friendly through their bafflement, and as the Finches' maneuverings arranged themselves as dance steps—which hardened into thrust and parry; which was clearly not for play but to skirmish—they adjusted their stance. They were to be spectators, not participants; but this was theatre, not sport, and they were not to take sides. Most of them lost interest. A few gathered to observe: alert and well-mannered, curious but impartial. As the father grasped his son's tactics, he became openly belligerent, while the son, encouraged, grew more and more affable. The pair of them, by now quite drunk, if too preoccupied to care, backed deeper into their corner, a pair of fighting cocks bobbing and weaving in the space roped off for them.

(Later, Maurice wrote that this isolation in a crowd showed that he and his father had more in common than could be wiped out by their petty estrangement; that they were two faces of the same coin, bound together inextricably, by their shared life, their shared genes. The next day he would read what he had written and delete it, embarrassed. He would snort out loud, in fact, at his own romantic idiocy. He would hear this snort and recognize it, dismayed, as his father's.)

As their small circle of watchers faded into background blur, and the attention of the two protagonists, snake-like, constricted, Finch senior jabbed Finch junior on the shoulder, and got set to proclaim a verdict. "Let me tell you something. You're a ponce. You've always been a ponce. The first thing I thought when I saw you today through the lav window, poncing around in the rock garden, looking for the spare key, with your hair flapping in your poncy face: what a ponce. My son the ponce. Even your name's poncy. The Yanks always know, don't they? Mau*-rice*. Your mother's idea, that. Always wanted to be genteel, your mother has. *Mau-rice*!" This second time he said it falsetto, two stressed syllables with the final *ss* sound whistling through his yellowed front teeth. God, but his father had such awful, such *English* teeth. Maurice immediately echoed him, "Leo*nard*o!"—then remembered he was blowing his cover, agreeably appending a disclaimer. "You're right, I have to cheat to make yours in *any way* poncy, there's not a single thing poncy about *Len*." Oh dear, he hadn't meant to, but he was sounding sarcastic, wasn't he—but he couldn't stop. "It must be easy to grow up rugged with a name like *Len*."

His father went quiet for a moment, brooding. Maurice, desperate to take a piss, found he couldn't get up. This was due not to physical incapacity but to a slump of spirits as it struck him how far things had strayed from his intentions—confrontation without conciliation. How he wanted to soften it all, to make some kind of gesture of peace! But he couldn't see where to begin. He was determined to avoid the kind of truce that had plagued them in the past: accommodation by mutual avoidance.

"And another thing," his father erupted. "You're such a fucking actor. Always fucking *acting*. Why for once can't you fucking say what you fucking actually *mean*? I'm going to go piss."

Maurice had never heard his father swear so much. He was vaguely exhilarated. He had got the man absolutely soused! But then he himself must be drunk to be capable of such swift mood switches. Seeing Len elbow his way towards the Gents, he was reminded of his own bladder; oh dear! He hurried off after him. At the door, his father, holding it open, half-turned and saw who was behind him. "You're fucking following me now?" Then as an afterthought: "The Ladies is back that way." They stood in silence before the urinal, with the final *ss* sound of Maurice's name echoing off the marble.

They trudged home side by side, battered and spent, considering each paving slab with skew, squint eyes. Maurice was trying to frame a conciliation speech. "To be honest, then…" But what next? "I love you but you scare me shitless?" In his head the words slopped and spilled, refusing to clarify; he retreated to his key phrase and started over. "To be honest, then…" Honesty was what his father wanted. He'd be taken aback at first, but he'd respect Maurice for it. He would laugh, maybe cry a little at the same time; they would hug each other and stagger home with their arms entwined.

"To be honest, then," Maurice said at the garden gate, finally having found his courage, "I've always thought you a mean little sod."

Len Finch's fist landed flush on his son's chin, toppling them both in among the dahlias. Maurice's glasses flew from him. They groaned, in unison; the ground hurt, and the breath was knocked from them. They rolled around and clambered onto their knees, hurting the dahlias.

"Mean little bully of a sod," Maurice murmured to himself. But it was late. It was dark. It was starting to rain. He found his glasses; broken. His father, scrambling upright, was already out of punching range. So he struggled up after him, to where a door was being held open for him, and thanked him as he entered the house.

They made it up the stairs, into their adjacent rooms. There was only one bathroom. They would let the other go first. Needing to shower, to brush their teeth, to piss again, they would outwait each other.

Spreadeagled across his old bed, in this fusty museum that was once his room, Maurice recalled how his father would barge in here sometimes; how he had once provoked the man to. What was Maurice then, twelve? He had perched a full bag of flour, its mouth loose, atop the door. He peered, a little blindly, in the general direction of the door jamb, straining to see. Oh, the mess it had made! And oh, his father's face! He fell asleep giggling, like a child.