

TRIAL BY FAMILY
a novel

By Roselee Blooston

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Alvin Segal inched his way down the hall past his first wife's paintings. Fay had hung them to make him feel at home, but set against her flocked wallpaper, the abstract sweep of Estelle's brushstrokes shook his equilibrium and made him feel all the more displaced. He found himself walking with blinders, looking neither left nor right.

Alvin planted his shaking foot on the first step. It would take him a while to get down the stairs, but he was determined not to call for help. Fay would send Consuelo and grumble that she wasn't getting her work done, and it would be his fault. He didn't want to start the morning with trouble. Not today.

At the bottom of the staircase he loosened his grip on the banister and straightened his jacket. Alvin prided himself on dressing well, even in retirement. It made him feel stronger and more able. The process took longer than it used to, what with his blurred vision and tremors and the confusion that sometimes overcame him in the middle of brushing his teeth. On Tuesday—or was it Wednesday—he'd brushed until his gums bled. This morning—it must have been Friday—he entered the bathroom twice,

and couldn't remember what he'd done until he ran his tongue along his upper teeth and tasted the mint film.

"ALVIN! WHERE ARE YOU?" Fay's screech shot through him like an air-raid siren. He had trouble with his hearing, but he wasn't *that* deaf. She was so much louder now than when they met.

"Coming! I'm coming," Alvin called back, knowing his voice wouldn't carry. He adjusted his trifocals and headed for the kitchen. He liked the sunny room, the way the light from the window bounced off the white tiles, but even after two years, he missed his home on Essex Street in the quiet Maryland suburb of Dorset, and Estelle's copper pot collection. He was glad Alyssa had kept the display intact. Fay was a collector too, though not with Estelle's taste, or Alyssa's for that matter. Tourist tchotchkes from their honeymoon year sat on every surface: Eiffel Towers in half a dozen sizes on the wooden shelf above the stove; Bahamian shells rested on oval platters; dishtowels scrawled with *Palm Beach* draped the deep porcelain sink. Alvin appreciated the sentimental tokens, though the honeymoon seemed a long time ago.

Fay bustled back and forth from the chrome and laminate kitchen table to an old-fashioned standing desk she used for bills and mail. Her thinning platinum hair, exposed in the streaming sunlight, looked to Alvin like a fuzzy halo. She had a pen in one hand and a pad in the other. "There you are," she said eying him while writing something in large strokes. "Don't you look spiffy."

Alvin was pleased she noticed. Maybe he would take her to that new bistro on K Street for lunch after they completed the business at hand. He loved wearing this suit, the Burberry Estelle had picked out on their last shopping trip together, just before she went into the hospital. He hadn't wanted to go. "I don't need anything sweetheart," he

pleaded while she steered him by the arm through the mall, dragging her oxygen tank behind her like a reluctant toddler.

Fay tilted her head and studied him through her enormous dark-rimmed frames, which magnified her tiny eyes into giant black marbles. "But the tie is a bit much, don't you think? Oh, of course, you can't tell, can you?" Fay laughed.

It was true; he was colorblind. Estelle used to put blues on the left, reds on the right. Alvin thought this was the special rep tie he had worn for his last District of Columbia court appearance. Oh well. He dressed himself by pattern now, and mockery was the result.

Fay stabbed the pad with what must have been a period, then steered him to a chair. "Here. Sit." She shoved a huge bowl onto the Tower of London placemat. "I made your favorite."

Alvin peered down at the cereal; the steamy mush pooled in gray lumps. He didn't know how Fay managed to ruin oatmeal, but she must have neglected to measure the water. Why did she bother anyway? Why didn't she just ask Consuelo?

Their housekeeper had been standing at the sink all this time, her back to him, scrubbing last night's dishes. Alvin found her continued presence in his life a comfort. Consuelo Marti hadn't changed much in the thirty years she'd worked for his family. Same thick Dominican accent. Same solid frame. Only wider and grayer.

Fay swished her caftan-covered form past him. The paisley design threatened to give him vertigo. "Eat," she ordered. "He'll be calling any minute." She was in a dither. Something had changed since their first year together when nightly foot-rubs were the

norm. Fay seemed pre-occupied lately, less available. She stayed up all hours watching ridiculous British sitcoms. Wouldn't come to bed, even when he begged.

When they did talk it was usually about money. "Alvin, let's sit down with your lawyer. Discuss the estate plan." Over and over again until he relented. They met with his long-time attorney, Martin Patras, a dear friend, almost a son, who reminded him of Kenny. If only he hadn't pushed the boy so hard. "I don't like the way Alyssa treats you," Fay said, more for Martin's benefit than Alvin's. He had heard it all before. "She didn't even come to our wedding." Then Fay shocked Alvin with a suggestion that prompted Martin to ask her to step out of the room.

After Fay left in a huff, Martin whispered, as if she might be listening at the door. "Alvin, do you really want to cut Alyssa off?"

Alvin pictured his troubled youngest child: her round pale face, thick hair and short neck so much his mother's that the war flooded back just looking at her. No matter what Alyssa had or hadn't done, he couldn't punish her like that. Alvin said, "No."

He hoped his firm rebuff would quiet Fay, but it fueled even greater demands. "We need to talk to the broker. Soon." Alvin didn't understand her concern. Hadn't he taken care of everything they needed? But Fay continued to push, so here he was, about to do her bidding.

Alvin stirred the murky goop. It reminded him of the flour and water paste Estelle used to mix for the children's papier-mâché projects. Too bad he couldn't make anything out of this.

“Now don’t forget, it’s Mother’s Day this weekend.” Fay pointed to the wall calendar Alyssa had given them, the one with the oversized numbers. Today was May 12th. “Gretchen, Pablo, and the girls will be here for brunch on Sunday.” Alvin got along well enough with Fay’s family. Her son-in-law was a bit creepy with his oily solicitude, and her daughter was respectful if remote, but the little girls charmed him with their hugs and kisses.

He missed his own grandchildren. Every morning he looked at a picture on his dresser of the Roosevelt Monument—a bread line of bronze men, with him and then nine year-old Jamie leading the way. Lorraine had sent the boy down from New Jersey. The first year without Estelle, had been Alvin’s loneliest, worse than 1941, when the letters from his parents in Poland stopped coming. Seeing his oldest grandson had helped. It took some persuading to get Fay, whom he had just begun dating, out of the car to snap the shot. Alvin loved showing Jamie around the nation’s capital, just as he had done with Lorraine, Kenneth, and Alyssa decades before. God willing, he would do the same with Ken’s babies. The monuments still retained their power to thrill Alvin. “Roosevelt was our greatest President, next to Lincoln,” he told the boy, proud to say “our.” Then he added, “A government of laws, not men. *Men* are fallible.”

In the photograph, Jamie’s head almost reached his. Alvin looked below the kitchen table at his pants, the cuffs covering his shoes. He was shrinking. His grandson must have surpassed him by now. Since his wedding, he hadn’t seen much of Lorraine or Jamie, or Ken’s family for that matter. Oh well. They have their own lives. He would call Lorraine on Sunday.

Alvin watched Fay bend over the desk. The felt pen tip squeaked as she wrote. She was the first woman to take notice of him after Estelle died. A friend of a friend set

them up at a dinner party. Fay sat next to Alvin the entire evening, and engaged him on books, the theatre, presidential peccadilloes, and art. Fay was no artist, but she loved museums. Good enough. He listened to her babble on, and felt at ease. Estelle had been a talker too. He needed a lively companion and Fay fit the bill.

“Alvin!” Fay snapped her fingers. “You’re drifting.” She pointed to the congealed mass still in his bowl. “Eat up. We have work to do.” Then she tittered in the high-pitched girlish way he hadn’t been able to resist. No one had ever flirted with Alvin like that before. Certainly not Estelle, who had been an innocent nineteen-year-old when they married, and grew into a strong, willful woman. Alvin found feminine force, in any form, irresistible.

Fay looked at her watch, then at the wall clock, then back to her watch. Impatience hardened her face. She wasn’t beautiful like Estelle, but at eighty he couldn’t afford to be choosy. He liked that she was Jewish, short—he didn’t want a woman towering over him—and close to his age. She wouldn’t tell exactly how old, an absurd vanity Alvin humored. No matter. Fay had aroused Alvin from his widower’s coma, and for that he would be forever grateful. And hadn’t Estelle begged him to find someone? She had said so, or rather, scribbled, after the operation robbed her of speech. “Find someone,” she wrote. He wished he had kept every scrap.

Alyssa told him that she had seen Lorraine, in the hospital, stashing her mother’s notes. It was obvious from the way Ally bit her lip that she didn’t approve. This made no sense to Alvin. Didn’t Alyssa keep a lot more than mere paper? Alvin couldn’t understand why his youngest and oldest didn’t get along. Estelle had tried to reconcile them, but it didn’t take. Now, he was too tired to make the effort. They would have to work things out for themselves.

He comforted himself with the thought that he had done what Estelle had asked. The children wondered why, at this stage, he would get married. "Fay wants to," he told them. They fell silent, except for Lorraine, who was very like her mother—pretty, sharp, and opinionated. She warned him to "be careful," though he couldn't remember exactly what she meant.

Alvin brought the soup spoon to his mouth and sipped the gruel. Fay turned her head without looking at him. "Finish up, Alvin." He put down the spoon. He had lost his appetite. "And drink your juice, or your voice will sound dry." He hadn't said a word, but did as he was told. It was simpler that way.

"Consuelo, clear Mr. Segal's dishes, and then go upstairs and scrub our bathroom—floor, toilet, everything. Roll up the oriental too." Fay scowled at Alvin. "It'll have to go to the dry cleaners."

Fay was still fuming about his "accident" the night before, especially about the rug. She had screamed her head off about that. He couldn't help it if he sometimes missed the bowl. But he hadn't defended himself when it happened, and he wasn't about to now. Not in front of Consuelo, who looked at him with sympathy. He considered mentioning the tie tack he'd dropped on the carpet that morning and was too stiff to retrieve. He pictured the vacuum sucking the pieces into its metal tube. He sat between the two women—one subservient, one in command—and sank into paralysis. If he said something, Fay would berate him all over again. He couldn't bear more shouting, more indignity.

Consuelo removed his dish. "Yes, Mrs. Fay."

"And Consuelo?"

She turned slowly and faced Fay. "Yes, Missus."

"I'll be going out shortly, for the rest of the day. Watch Mr. Segal." As if he were the family dog.

"Fay, no. Please. Let me come with you. We could have lunch at that French restaurant you love."

"Don't be silly Alvin. I'm meeting my *friends* for lunch and shopping. You know you aren't comfortable with girl talk." Alvin sighed. He still wanted Fay's company even if she no longer wanted his. He was partly to blame. He had given Fay charge accounts, and put her in touch with Estelle's personal shopper, a jolly man who had attended the funeral and was eager to oblige.

"Watch him," Fay barked. Consuelo nodded and turned away from Alvin, saving them both embarrassment. Then she went upstairs to clean up his other humiliation.

Fay handed him the paper she had been writing on. "Use this when you talk to Stackwell. I don't want you getting confused." She had written out a script for him to follow in huge block letters. Alvin read the note and rubbed his forehead. They had made a plan. He had agreed. Still, he had the distinct sensation he was missing something, something more crucial than brushing his teeth. But he couldn't force the bit to the surface. If he felt around, dipped down into the sediment, he'd force it further into the muck. That was what his mind had become. Oh well. If it was important enough, it would come back to him. He read the note again. Yes, it was a lot of money, but if he did what Fay wanted, maybe she would stop harping.

The telephone rang. "Yes, Jimmy, he's right here." Fay handed Alvin the receiver, stood behind him and pressed down on his shoulder, holding him in place.

Alvin read the words into the phone, and answered the broker's kind inquiries about his health. "I'm fine," he said, clearing the sludge from his throat. He would be better when this was done. He sounded far away, even to himself.

Afterwards, Fay clapped her pudgy hands and kissed his forehead. Her saccharine perfume choked him and he coughed. "You've made me very happy, darling," she said, and slung her gigantic handbag—ripe for stuffing—over her shoulder. She blew him another kiss. "See you later dear. Be good."

Alvin stared at Fay's wake. Alone again. He willed himself to move and walked slowly into the living room. He lowered his aching body into his favorite chair—the Eames with the ottoman that Estelle had given him when he made partner. It didn't fit with the over-stuffed sofas Fay preferred, but it fit him. He listened to the thrum of Consuelo's vacuum. Its monotone blast couldn't drown the disquieting fusion of uneasiness and reprieve that rumbled inside him. Alvin had done what he had to, he told himself, not entirely convinced. He had made his new wife happy. He hoped her contentment would last. Maybe then he would have some peace.