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Where Were You When I Needed You?

“Is this what you wanted, Sir?” the tray was proffered.

“Here’s some food. I’m not going to let you be hungry. Not you. Not ever, boy. *Never.*”

She knew the joke wasn’t that funny but she still did the thing she always did lately – shrieked with laughter that was grating and that made her cringe with horror at herself. It was a curse. If he’d quit telling stupid jokes and the same anecdotes over and over again she wouldn’t have to emit the crazy-woman laugh, give in to that impulse to sort of back him up, but he was cursed as well, oh, was he ever. She saw the beautiful waitress pass by, her face determinedly neutral. She assumed the waitress was holding back an expression of disdain and felt grateful for the holding back. She imagined the lovely waitress after the party describing to a friend the *characters* she’d observed that evening. She wanted to grab the waitress’s arm and whisper to her, “Make me look even worse! Make me sound like a crazy old drunk crone you had to be polite to all night!” She wasn’t drunk though. Just tended to seem like it lately. She’d looked up the symptoms for a nervous breakdown. She couldn’t decide. Maybe. Maybe not.

“Why does that black Lexus keep circling the building?” he asked Ned, as they puffed their pipes outside. “There it goes again. Do people stalk parties?”

“Listen, Ricky, presenting a new hors d’oeuvre is like going on a first date.” He went on to explain: High hopes but braced for disappointment, unable to help peering into the future with both optimism and dread. Investing so much emotion in another being that you didn’t even know yet. It wasn’t fair, really, to the mini-taco, this pressure he was putting on it. This was a chattering and drinking crowd, they drank, they chattered and they occasionally plucked something off a passing tray and popped it in their mouths without really looking at it or tasting it. But he saw one guy, at least, was really into not just the mini-tacos but the grilled shrimp and the pear crepes. This guy would pile an assortment onto his plate, wander around the room nibbling, disappear out onto the terrace and return with an empty plate. Then he would do it over again. He’d like the guy to set an example to the rest: Eating was good. It would be better if he wolfed the food in plain view. Give people the idea of how it was done right.

I want to get out of here... Noisy. What’s going to happen? Anything could happen. I don’t know who I am. What does “I” means. I want to open my I. Noisy. She’s nervous and that makes me nervous. I want to stay where it’s quiet, but.. can’t. There’s a waterfall around me. That’s nice. waterfall.

He chuckled dutifully at Martin’s jokes but, really, he was steaming. Why was it the guys with all the money were so adept at patting distractedly at their pockets, making a show of looking for their wallets and then saying so easily, “Want to get that, buddy? Pay you back.”

Hah! That was probably how he *got* rich to begin with! Seriously, money was nothing to some people and they lost sight of the fact that it was a big deal to others. He had two things on his mind right now. There was that young guy, college age it looked like. When offered a fresh drink, instead of a casual, “Sure, why not?” the kid would put on a mini-show of surprise, like the idea of another drink was totally unexpected. Then he’d shrug, take the drink and look at it a moment as though wondering how he had become responsible for it. Pretending that he and the drink were separate, pretending that the drink wasn’t profoundly important to him. He noticed the boy also carefully watched what other people were drinking, probably with the futile intention of using them to monitor his own intake. He would so love to take the kid aside and say, “Hey, this is intrusive, but I...” The other thing on his mind was Martin. Thirty dollar cab fare and an absent-minded, “Wanna get that for me?” and before that, at lunch, the familiar wallet-hunt charade and guess who was stuck with the tip? He decided that the fake wallet-hunt was going to become a real wallet-hunt. He resolved that some time tonight, he was going to *pick Martin’s pocket!* In the meantime, there was the gorgeous waitress to look at and there was that tall black girl, always alone, who was she with? Where did *she* come from?

Where was that fabled ‘gaydar’ that people were always congratulating themselves on having? Would it ever become socially acceptable to introduce oneself with the addendum, “And I’m gay!” She wasn’t having a bad time, actually, considering she was only here on beard duty for Paul. She had a crab Rangoon and caught the head caterer peering anxiously at her from the kitchen as she ate it. She smiled and nodded appreciatively as she wiped her mouth, and he nearly swooned with gratitude at her mimed review. Together she supposed she and Paul made a double-beard, although she certainly didn’t care about being bearded. Whatever. *He* did. She

smiled as some old guy told a long-winded story about a kayak tipping over, but she didn't need to laugh out loud because an older woman in the group was thankfully taking on all the laughing duties. The joke-telling guy turned to the laughing woman with a big smile, then abruptly looked totally perplexed. The laughing woman immediately became anxious, touched his sleeve and prompted, "And when you got back to the dock, you..." "Dock?" asked the joke-telling man. She moved off into another group, realizing too late it was the one where the 4-month pregnant woman was holding court. One of those. *'Devastated'* she'd forgotten to bring the sonogram, which... well, thank God. She hated having to coo at sonograms. It was weird enough being the only black, involuntarily closeted lesbian in the room. And Paul had forgotten all about her, so she drifted alone...

Oh, yes, yes, yes!!! Here he comes, here he comes!!! Quiet, quiet, don't make noise, he gets the feeling this is all secret, but OH! he is so, so, so HAPPY! Happy! Hungry! Not as hungry as before, thanks to Friend, but, Oh! he could eat all night!

Did anybody here know what it was like to have a schizophrenic brother who takes scissors to your wardrobe just before you go out? Who carefully slices up your clothes for no reason that makes sense to a sane person but that somehow makes absolute sense to him? No, it's not even like he looks for or finds sense in what he does. There's no malice, there's not even a distorted sense of fun. In his world, he does what he has to do. *Has to do*. In his world there is no sense, no malice, no fun, there is just a series of imperatives that have to be acted upon, obeyed. There is no point trying to understand, although their parents are slowly breaking down because they search and search for a blueprint, a key to a code that will explain it all. She keeps

resisting the impulse to sniff under her arms -- She had to rummage through the laundry hamper for a white blouse to wear. Tomorrow she'll have to get more clothes and then figure out how to safeguard them. From her brother. She sees the waiter, Ricky, going around asking about drinks. She winks at him and the older woman who's been laughing all night catches her eye and thinks the wink was for her. The older woman stops in mid-laugh and stares at her with a look of surprised, quiet delight. Seeing the woman's unexpected pleasure, she lets the woman think the wink really was for her.

“We already knew we were going to get married!” she told them. “We just didn't know when! Then the *when* got decided for us!” She patted her stomach. “I'm devastated I forgot to bring the sonogram!” The newlyweds had decided from the start not to be coy about it. It had been a secret from no one that she'd been pregnant when she'd walked down the aisle. Her father wandered over and smiled fondly at her. “I'm married!” she chanted to him as though conveying new and crucial information. “Your little Marianne is married! Married and going to have a baby!” Her father listened intently, then slowly nodded. Her mother rushed up behind him and smiled broadly.

“See that girl? That's my date. Prettiest girl in the room. She's a counselor, a psych...psychologist, does a lot of work with kids. Graduated with honors, top of her class. Look, now she's talking with the good-looking waitress. Something I've noticed... Oh, wait a minute, you want another drink, 'cause there's... Hang on a sec. ‘Scuse me, Ricky? It's Ricky, right? You in charge of drinks? Okay, you want another? I don't know about me, but if you want, Ricky's right here. ‘Nother one? Okay then, know what? I may as well have another one,

too. Okay, two more drinks, Ricky. We'll be right here. Hey, see that guy? Don't look like you're looking at him, that guy in the kind of purple-blue tie. Been looking at me all night. Can't figure out if I'm supposed to know him or not. Makes me nervous, looks so fuckin' *serious.*"

"The waitress is crying..."

Oh! Good, good, GOOOOD! Love you, Friend! I know, I KNOW, I'll be nice 'n quiet, love you, Friend!

"Pearls before swine, Sir," agreed Ricky. "But really, Sir, everything went over great. Is *going* over great. The mini-tacos were a hit. *Are* a hit." Gregory had his hands on his hips, was staring out the back window of the kitchen, haunted, uncertain. Gregory said, "You know that one guy? In the dark gray suit, reddish hair? Now *that* guy knows how to eat. *That's* what I like to see. Why do people not know how to eat?" He turned back to Ricky. Ricky said, "They're all eating, Sir. But they're also drinking and people forget to eat when they're drinking. There's this one guy I think might need some help getting home." "Drinking," sighed Gregory, "interferes with eating. I want them to *eat.*" "Sir," said Ricky, straightening. "Sir, you'll see how much they liked the food when they do the Applauding of the Chef." Gregory's eyes froze on young Ricky's face. "The 'Applauding of the Chef?'" "Yes, Sir. It will be soon. The Applauding of the Chef. It's what they do now."

Waterfall... waterfall... waterf... Ummmm...

“...supposedly in the early stages, but...”

“Son, I need to talk to you. I know this is... *intrusive*...”

“Everything happened sooner than we’d planned. So we’re scrambling. But it’s for the best, we’re making decisions that we would have put off for who knows how long.” Her listeners nodded and she stroked her belly, sipped her ginger ale. “Zach works for dad, it’s how we met in the first place. But Zach’s never let dad make it easy for him ‘cause of me. He’d be where he is now even if I wasn’t in the picture, working his way up the ladder like everyone else. He’s not even here tonight ‘cause dad picked him to close a big deal and... Even before... even before this, dad was pushing Zach along so he can take over eventually. Truth is, he’ll *have* to take over soon. If not Zach, somebody.” She was suddenly oblivious to her listeners.

“Everything happened so fast,” she murmured to her belly. “Really fast.”

Ricky stole some time to go out back for a cigarette. Funny, nice night but no one was using the terrace. He supposed it hadn’t been made to look inviting. No little white lights or anything. Maybe people weren’t sure they were *supposed* to be out here. Which was silly, the doors were wide open. He’d heard that Stephanie had been crying. Probably that brother. Just a little earlier she’d winked at him while they both worked, she with the hors d’oeuvres, he with the drinks, she always brought out that camaraderie. He’d thought she was doing fine. Now he was worried. He froze a little, seeing movement near the bushes. It was that guy, the reddish haired guy who Gregory said “knew how to eat.” He was feeding a generous plate of food to a

scrawny dog, *crooning* to it. “I won’t leave you here,” the man was assuring the dog who, in between ravenous gulps of hors d’oeuvres, would whip its skinny tail back and forth and gaze adoringly at the reddish haired guy. *If Gregory saw this!* But he wouldn’t see it, he wouldn’t leave the kitchen till the hall was empty of guests. Well, until the Applauding of the Chef. Jesus, why had he come up with that?

There was the young kid, the boy who’d been ferrying drinks around all night. Thaddeus put a proprietary hand on the dog’s neck. “Poor guy was starving,” he said, standing up. “Must have smelled the food. Thought I’d help out our little pal, here.” The kid had tried to hide his cigarette but then, quite rightly, seemed to decide that if the reddish haired guy could feed gourmet food to a stray mutt on the terrace then he could smoke. He boldly brandished the cigarette and took a long puff. “You can see his ribs,” he commented. “Not for long,” said Thaddeus fiercely “Not for damn long.” “You know, there’s gonna be the Applauding of the Chef pretty soon, Sir.” “The ‘Applauding of the Chef?’” “It’s what they do now,” said the boy. “Just thought I’d give you a heads up.” “Thanks.” The boy went back inside. Thaddeus assured the dog (“Bouncer,” he’d decided) that he would be back soon. Not to go anywhere.

“They’re gone,” Jessie told Stephanie, and they both fought their way out of the shrubbery. “That was Ricky,” said Stephanie. “Talking to the guy with the dog. That means no one’s in there taking care of the guests!” “Ricky just went back in, it’s okay. Now, listen, listen to me. I’m gonna help you. It’s what I do, okay? I *do* this. I’ve seen plenty of stuff like what you’ve got at home, I know what’s happening. You feel sorry for the guy, ‘course you do. You wanna help and you can’t. Plus, I’ll bet anything you don’t get any attention from your parents

because they're totally emotionally invested in King Crazy, there." Stephanie gave a shocked gasp of laughter and Jessie smiled, pleased. "Now, listen, soon as you're off duty, we're gonna go have a drink somewhere and for a change *you're* gonna get to talk. You talk all you want. Talk my *ear* off, you want." Stephanie stared at this sudden goddess in her life. "But you're with someone," she ventured. "I mean, aren't you with that guy..." "Oh, him," Jessie waved her hand. "Paul. He's probably half wasted by now." She looked at her watch. "Plus, I put in my beard time for the evening. Look, I'm not leaving you alone, got it? You're not alone." Stephanie nodded. She would follow this woman off the edge of the earth, say the word. "Now," said Jessie, straightening her skirt. "We better get in there. Someone put a bug in my ear they've got an Applauding of the Chef." "For Gregory?" asked Stephanie. "I guess," said Jessie. "It's what they do now, apparently."

"My wallet, Elsie. My wallet's gone." Martin had been standing calmly, nodding his head to any voice that seemed to need a response. He was quieter now than when he'd started this evening, drifting happily. He'd jauntily thrust his hands into his pockets, smiling at the waitress who'd reappeared with mussed hair, looking pretty. Then his hands had scrambled around in his pockets, a look of alarm spreading over his face. He clawed at the pockets of his suit jacket. Elsie's hand tightened on his arm. "Martin, Martin, what? What's wrong?" "My wallet! My wallet's gone!" His voice was rising and Elsie felt faint. "Let's go over here, Martin, let's go over to this corner and talk about it. We'll figure it out. Come here."

"You just come with me, you don't have to admit anything, just come and listen to some people talk. That's all. No commitment, you don't have to talk yourself. Just hear what people

have to say, maybe give you something to think about. That’s all. Son, son, are you okay? Son, you look like you’re damned near about to cry, son. Hey, it’s all right, okay? I’m right here.”

Friend? Friend?

Ooohhh... Rolling, rolling, falling nice...

“She moved! I felt her move!”

“Don’t move, stay right here, okay? Man, I can be an asshole.” He hurried across the room where he saw Martin frantically digging at his pockets. As he wound his way toward them he saw Elsie take her little purse and press it reassuringly into Martin’s hands. Martin became still, staring at the soft little purse. He raised it to his face and sniffed it. “Martin! Hey! There you are!” “Hello, Calvin,” said Elsie, “We’ll probably be going soon. We’re both getting tired.” Calvin brandished the wallet. “Here, look. I found this on the counter in the men’s room. Checked the i.d.s to see whose it was.” Elsie and Martin gazed at the wallet. “Oh,” said Elsie. “Well, there you go. The wallet.” “On the shelf in the men’s room,” Calvin repeated. “Hope you didn’t have time to miss it. I lost my wallet once, it’s like losing your right arm.” Martin looked alarmed, then was distracted by Elsie transferring the wallet into his hands and taking back her purse. “I had too much champagne!” Martin announced, tucking his wallet away. “Usually Greta here keeps me strictly to two drinks, but I think I slipped a couple past her!” “He’s fine,” Elsie told Calvin. “We’re both a little tired.”

Just a slight hesitancy he'd allowed to creep into his voice. Just the slightest hint of indecision, that's all it took. These were the big guys, he hadn't been ready for them. *He'd* known that, *he* knew he needed more time to watch and listen. People didn't realize what they were doing to you when they looked at you with that kind of trust, that quivering confidence. He'd always mapped things out ahead of time, carefully, dispassionately, never overreaching, coolly staying realistic about his abilities. Only making a move when he was certain of success. No, he did not like taking chances, seeking the thrill of plunging into the unknown. All that shit that was supposed to make you a player. What was wrong with wanting security? He wasn't incapable of handling unexpected curveballs, in fact he was pretty good at it, could rise to the occasion. But when it all happened at once, when it all happened so fast... it messed up his approach. This deal (out on the table then swept away so quickly it had all been a blur), it wasn't the end of the world by any means. But people didn't realize how alone they were making him by putting him in this... *savior* role. If only he could count on his brother-in-law for help, but everyone knew without saying, had known for quite awhile, that Paul wasn't where you looked for help. He pulled out a two-week old pack of cigarettes. Three left. He'd been parceling them out at crucial moments and took one now. But he'd have to get out of the car to smoke it, he couldn't have Marianne getting in and smelling smoke for a number of reasons. Off around the corner of the building he could see the edge of a terrace; the last hour he'd been watching a guy periodically coming out (sneakily, somehow) and feeding a dog. Now the guy was there and another guy, sneakily smoking (sneaky, sneaky, what a sneaky night!). He got back in the car; if he'd retained his vantage point for a moment longer he would have seen two women struggling out of the bushes as the smoker and the dog-feeder left and that would have given him something to think about. He would have felt like he was watching a stage play with characters exiting and

entering on cue. As it was, he settled back in behind the wheel and picked up the sonogram that had slipped to the floor when Marianne had gotten out earlier. He looked at the elaborate blur that he'd pretended to be delighted by. "You," he said to it. "You know, I hope you end up happy. Someone should end up the hell happy. Good luck, kid."

"Sorry about that," he said somewhat sheepishly as he returned. Here he was trying to play guiding light and he'd had to take a quick break to repair damage from the asinine prank he'd played. There was more going on there than he'd realized. That was something to always keep in mind, he resolved: There always might be more going on. He saw the young man staring with complex wistfulness at the tall, black woman he'd said was his date, standing aloof but smiling across the room. Then the kid shrugged, sighed, and said, "So where's this place? I'm pretty sobered up, now, so they'll let me in, right? I'll have some coffee, too, once they bring it out. *Shit*, I'll drink some coffee!" Cal saw the quiver of violence shoot through the boy's body and recognized it. An angry death throe that would rear up again and again. "Coffee and then we'll hit the road," Cal said. "You're coming with me. Right after the Applauding of the Chef." "The what? Is this what they do now?"

"I swear, I saw this guy swiping another guy's wallet. But I saw them together earlier, like they were friends, so I don't know. Maybe it was a joke." "Which guys?" asked Gregory who was just now considering becoming known as Gregorio. He was adjusting his chef hat. He'd just worn a hair net in the kitchen all night but he figured that for the Applauding of the Chef – this new custom that he thoroughly approved of – he would wear his chef hat. "The big guy, the older guy with the wife who laughs a lot. Then the guy who took the wallet, he was this

younger guy, serious looking, not like the type to steal a wallet as a joke or whatever. I wasn't sure what to do." "Stay out of it," advised Gregory. "That can never hurt. The big, older guy, that's the one his wife told you to give him ginger ale and pretend it was champagne, right?" "Yeah, she tipped me," said Ricky, reddening. People with money were... well, they were weird with money. It looked tacky for him to be juggling a big tray and trying to stuff a five dollar bill into his pocket at the same time. "Hey, Ricky!" said Gregory, gazing at his chef-hatted appearance in the reflection of the window. "Why don't you and Steph get the coffee set up, we'll see this crowd out the door and how about you and me go get a night cap? After we clean up, I mean." Gregory had never proposed this before. "I wouldn't mind," Ricky said. "That sounds good." "We're on!" said Gregory. "How's Steph, anyhow? Was she *crying* before?" "She's okay, now," said Ricky. "She looked pretty good last time I saw her." "Hey, you know what?" Gregory snapped his fingers. "The reddish haired guy that loved the food so much? If you can manage it, put some leftovers together, slip him a doggie bag."

He doesn't know what "Half hour and we're out of here, Bouncer," means, but he quivers and says, *Yes, Friend, yes, yes, yes! Friend! I'm right here! Right here for you!*

It would be nice to get out of here now. Hauled off to a party of people she didn't know to provide cover for a very weak, sad guy. Everyone seemed nice, though. Of course, she was the only black woman – the only black *person* – at the party, so she was treated, as often happened, with a near reverence. Funny about that, but she'd seen it frequently. It was better than the alternative. Anyhow, she knew how to worry about what needed worrying about and how to consign the rest to fate. Like her friend, Paul. She could sit him down, sure, but she

sensed she wasn't his rescuer. Stephanie. She had to tread carefully with her, she'd already seen the budding adoration in her face, the poor kid was working hard to get through on her own, no cheering section because the crazy brother had hijacked every ounce of the parents' emotion. It was tough being the normal one, it was lonely. But Stephanie, she'd laughed when Jessie had said "Kid Crazy," and that was a good sign. That girl wouldn't go down without a fight. Wouldn't go down without a *laugh*, that oughta be the expression. Another way she had to tread carefully was that Stephanie was a damned fine looking girl, she'd have to be careful not to let that interfere in how she dealt with her. But she'd offered her help, so she'd give it, no matter what. They'd put coffee out, but she decided to just continue nursing her drink. Thank God she could have a drink without it igniting the flames like it did with Paul. Made her really appreciate her little gin and tonic here. "Hi," she said to the guy, the dog-feeding guy, but she didn't let on she knew he was the dog-feeding guy. He didn't know she and Stephanie had been hiding in the bushes, watching him while stifling Stephanie's sobs. He was holding a white paper sack of what appeared to be food. She smiled warmly at him and he smiled back and said, "I'm just about to go, but figured I'd wait for the Applauding of the Chef."

This was like a lifeline, completely out of the blue. Why were there people like that? How were there people like that? Her own mystification at this showed her just how isolated she'd become. Anyhow, Ricky had informed her that she was to be the one to herald this new Applauding of the Chef. So once she saw that people either had coffee now or were hanging onto their drinks from before, she stood near the kitchen door, feeling less foolish than she'd anticipated. She loudly tapped a glass with the tine of a fork, cleared her throat and said, "I hope

you all have had a lovely time!” Everyone turned and smiled at her. “Let me now lead you in The Applauding of the Chef!”

He was surprised he was as happy as he was. He shouldn't be. A marriage that had lasted all of two years. Silly woman suddenly deciding she hadn't *lived* enough, yet. Like being with him was, what, *dying*? Pffft. Oh, well, he was still pretty young, doing damned well for himself. The thing was, you had to be careful not to want too much. He'd met a nice woman at a friend's birthday party recently and they'd got into quite a discussion. When he'd told her his philosophy that wanting too much was what made people unhappy, she'd told him that this belief was at the root of some Eastern religions. So there you go. He was practicing Eastern religion and he hadn't even known it. That woman was cute, so *short*! He'd felt like putting one finger on the crown of her head, taking her by the shoulder and spinning her like a top! He hadn't quite seized the opportunity to get her number but all was not lost. He'd simply ask Steve and Winnie about her. Things were easy if you let them be easy. All he wanted was for people to *eat*, damn it! He'd dreamed, briefly of (fantasized about, really) being on one of those chef shows on t.v. But too much bickering, yelling, even. Stress. The eating of food should be quiet, thoughtful. Its preparation should not be fraught with such anguish. The reddish haired guy who took his food outside, at first he'd wished the guy had eaten those plates of food boldly, *audaciously*, in front of the other guests. But now he realized the man wanted to savor the wonderful food quietly, in private, and of this he approved. So. Soon a quick drink with young Ricky who he was unselfconsciously thinking of as a son, lately. Tomorrow inquiries into that little spinning top of a woman. But now he heard Stephanie (she seemed okay now) calling for the room's

attention. “You are a lucky fellow!” he told his reflection in the window, and moved across the kitchen.

He smiled benevolently, taking his cue from those around him. He was reassured by his mother’s light grip on his arm which she took away only briefly to applaud the chef. When he heard someone call “Hear! Hear!” he echoed it, glancing quickly at Elsie to make sure that was all right. Apparently it was, because he did not detect that pained tension on her face. He wondered if they knew this cheerful man that they were applauding. Someone’s cousin’s boyfriend? Speaking of family, “Lizbeth!” he cried, clasping her hands in his. “You looked lovely up there! To think you used to be such a shy little thing and now here you are, making announcements in front of a crowd!” Lizbeth smiled at him and murmured, “Thank you,” and Elsie said, “We’re both a little tired.”

“Oooh.” Marianne saw the black Lexus parked down in front of the building. A dark silhouette huddled at the wheel. She’d thought her parents were going to drop her at home because Zach was supposed to be... Well, something had changed. “Okay,” she finally told her belly, taking a deep breath. “Let’s go.”

I’m right here. Hold on, I’m right behind you. Are you ready, come on. I won’t leave you. You’re coming with me.

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