

# JOY

We all sit in awe when the woman comes back with the drinks and lights up the one I've ordered. It's kind of dim in the restaurant and Shauna's mother—her name's Collette—has been shining a keychain flashlight all over the menu for the last several minutes trying to decide on small dishes. She's got glaucoma, or something. Her husband watches her with an expression that should be neutral but somehow winds up cruel. His name is Dave.

"Do you want it smoked?" the waitress asks, and Dave turns his glance to me. "Ye-es," I pronounce hesitantly. I'm trying to figure out if Dave thinks I should smoke it because the first and most important rule of getting wined and dined by your girlfriend's rich parents is that, for the length of time you're together, you do exactly what they think you should do.

The waitress smokes the drink and then pulls the burner off the top. Little curl-e-cues of vapor rise from the surface. "Oh, wow!" Collette says, too loudly. "It looks like a science project!"

Dave eyes me for a minute as the waitress stands there. "Aren't you gonna take a sip?" he says, "While it's still smoking?"

"Should I?" I ask.

"Well, that's the whole point."

As I reach for the drink the waitress shifts and says, "Um, sir, I wouldn't recommend doing that." Dave breaks into a laugh that's somehow both full-bodied and all throat, and I realize that this has been the test all along: he's trying to gauge whether I really have any idea what I'm getting into, with the fancy smoked cocktail thing. Or maybe not gauge; maybe it's more like *confirm to himself*.

"Thanks," Dave says, and the waitress is dismissed. Then, turning to Collette, he says, "Jesus, Coll, it's not the Magna Carta, it's a tapas menu."

Shauna looks at me and smiles. She looks very pretty; she's done her hair up and carefully applied some richly toned makeup. I try to choke out something in response as the smoke rises, into my hair, into my eyes, into my throat, and whatever I manage is horribly strained, but she bats her eyes at me anyway; it's good enough for her.

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That morning, Shauna volunteered to pick her parents up from the airport while I cleaned the bathroom. "My mom's a freak," she said.

"You mean generally?"

"No, about bathrooms."

"You mean generally?"

"No," she said. "You know what I mean."

So I cleaned the toilet and the sink. They weren't really that dirty, but the bowl had this little ring in it that I spent about twenty minutes scrubbing out. I couldn't tell if I was bad at the scrubbing or if the toilet had actually gotten kind of unclean. By the time I finished they were walking through the door.

"Owen!" Collette has this way of greeting you as though she's surprised to see you even when the seeing has been planned ahead of time and is entirely expected. She gave me a hug. Dave didn't say anything, but gave me a firm handshake, the too-firm kind that tries to feel out whether you're a real man. He seemed disappointed when I matched the grip.

“This is a great apartment,” he said once they’d sat down on the sofa. He was eating a bonbon; they’d brought us bonbons from the airport. His was filled with Jack Daniels. “I love the high ceilings and the fans.”

“So Shauna,” Collette said, “how have things been going with work?”

Shauna’s a freelance writer. Things are always going the same way with work: they’re not going much at all. Shauna frowned a little and rocked her head from side to side as though she was really thinking it over.

“They’re good,” she replied. “Lately I’ve been getting a lot of strange pitches.”

“It’s so much space, too,” Dave said. “What’s the square footage here?”

“I’d have to check,” I answered.

“I hope you’re not doing anything unsafe,” Collette said to Shauna. “When you’re starting off they always make you do the jobs that nobody wants to do.”

“Must be at least eight or nine hundred.”

“You know, profiles on the homeless, things like that.” Collette shivered and took a sip of her cucumber soda. They’d bought cucumber sodas, with the bonbons. Then she looked at me. “Owen, have you ever had cucumber soda?”

When I tried a sip it tasted a bit like someone had been soaking a stick of Irish Spring in the soda water for the last several years.

“Wow,” I said. “Really good.”

“It’s kind of, you could say, cucumber-forward,” Dave put in, and winked at me. Then he said, “What are you all paying for this place?”

“A thousand even,” Shauna replied.

“Wow. That’s great.” Dave looked around the place again. “I just love these high ceilings. And the fans.”

“That’s so cheap,” Collette said. “Who knows what a place like this will cost you when you move to New York.”

“We’re not moving to New York, Mom,” Shauna said.

“I’ll break you down,” Collette replied. “Just give me a few more years. You’ll be right around the block. And besides, you know, you’d *love* New York.”

“I lived in New York for eighteen years,” Shauna said.

“You know what I love about Collette?” Dave looked around the room. Then he said, “She doesn’t project her feelings onto anyone at all. Never. Collette never does that.”

“I’m not *projecting*...”

“She listens to what other people have to say, always.”

“Dave.” She looked really offended now. “Stop it, Dave.” Dave stopped it.

Then Shauna leaned toward me and pretended to whisper something in my ear. She did it at an awkward volume, though, not quite loud enough for it to carry off as a joke. The thing she said to me was, “You should be so proud of me. I conned them into buying me clothes.”

“What was that, Shaun?” Collette asked.

“Oh, nothing.”

“I’ll tell you,” I said. “She was bragging that she conned you into buying clothes.”

“Oh, that.” Dave waved a hand and took a sip of his cucumber soda. “I don’t have to be conned. I’m easy. I’ll just do it. It’s your mother that has to be conned. Coll, remember when...”

“Yes,” Collette said. “When I made Shauna pay for a tripod before I’d buy her a camera. Yes, I remember.”

“Get this,” Dave said anyway. “She made Shauna buy a tripod before she’d buy her a camera. *I’m very proud of you, Shauna.* That’s what she said. She said, *I’m very proud of you, Shauna. I’ll meet you halfway.*” Dave shook his head, laughing. Then he took another sip of his cucumber soda.

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Before we went to dinner, we had to go back to Dave and Collette's hotel room, because Dave had forgotten to take his pills. Around three o'clock, he'd turned to Collette, and demanded, "Did you bring my pills?"

"No," Collette said. "I only have mine. Why would I have brought your pills?"

"You might have thought of it," Dave said.

"Well, I didn't."

So we had to go back to the hotel for Dave to take his pills. They were staying in an executive suite, the kind with the private entry and the big taxidermy lounge. "They've got a deer motif," Dave said, and pointed at the buck head mounted on the wall. I thought about whether to laugh or not and spent so much time thinking about it that I ended up saying nothing at all.

When we got to the room, Shauna told Collette to watch her step, because there was a big doorjamb. Collette looked at her with misty eyes.

"That's one of the things I love about you, Shauna," she said. "You're always looking out for me." Then she turned toward me, as though I hadn't heard any of what had just happened. "She's always looking out for me," she said. "You know, I was actually talking her up, just the other day. That Shauna always looks out for me when we're walking somewhere. She's the only one that tells me where it's safe to step."

"You say that like it's a surprise," Shauna said.

"In a rare twist of events," Dave said while fiddling with the room's telephone, "Collette was *actually* saying nice things about her daughter. Hello?" He had finished dialing the number while he talked. "Hello, yes, this is room 161. Who do I, excuse me, who do I speak to about getting some

feather, I mean, no, some foam pillows sent to the room.” He paused a moment. “Well, I’d asked for foam beforehand, but the ones here are definitely feather.” He pounded one of the pillows as though the person on the phone was there to see him prove the point. “Okay. Thank you. Thank you. Bye bye.”

He turned to me. “I’m allergic to feathers,” he said. He said it in a way that accused me of accusing him, although I was pretty sure I hadn’t said anything at all since before he had pointed out the deer motif. Then he sneezed.

“I talk about you all the time,” Collette was saying to Shauna.

“Sure, Mom.”

“No, Shaun, I *do*, all the time.”

“She definitely talks more about Brady,” Dave said, popping some cashews into his mouth as he reclined on the bed and reached for the tv remote. Brady was Shauna’s older brother. He was a successful composer on Broadway.

“I do *not*, Dave, stop it.” The television came on. The volume had been turned up high. Dave studied the screen carefully. “What’s this?” he asked.

“Looks like Nicolas Cage,” I said.

“Oh, I know what this is,” he said. Collette was digging through her purse for something. Dave leaned confidentially toward me and Shauna. “Watch this. Your mother loves this movie.”

“Oh, oh, oh!” Collette had begun waving her arms around. “That’s, it’s him and, and Cher, that’s, oh, that’s *Moonstruck!*” She gasped suddenly, as though there were a second revelation taking place. Then she looked at me and said. “I *love* this movie.”

We watched it for about a minute, Collette completely engrossed. Then Dave said, “Alright, let’s keep looking around.” It occurred to me that I hadn’t seen him take any pills.

“How is Brady?” Shauna asked. It sounded forced when she did it.

“Oh, Brady’s *great*,” Collette said. “He’s been...”

She started listing Brady’s accomplishments while Dave flipped through the channels as if we weren’t even in the room. Brady had finished up a new score. Brady was joining an artist’s collective. Brady’s best friend had moved out of New York, but he was persevering, really persevering, and of course they were helping him out, while he found work, so he could focus on his writing. “It’s really important stuff,” Collette said. “It would be wrong for it to not get written just because, I mean, because he was worried about *bills*...”

“Yep,” Dave said, like the conversation had just started. “Brady’s doing great.”

“He’s so talented, your brother,” Collette said.

“Don’t worry,” Dave said to us then. “You’re both smart cookies. You’ll wind up with real jobs soon enough. Especially, Owen, you’re almost out of school. And Shaun, you’ve got so much experience.” He hadn’t peeled his eyes from the television. “You’re gonna turn out fine. Oh, look.” He pointed at the screen. “It’s this.”

On the screen, a woman in a muumuu was standing tersely next to a big red button. A guy in a suit was standing next to her. They were on a blue-lit stage. The woman had a look of enormous concentration and the guy a look of practiced concern.

“Honey,” Collette said. “What’s this?”

“It’s a show,” Dave said.

“Right, but what *is* it?”

“It’s a good show,” he said. “Watch.”

“Okay,” the woman in the muumuu said, finally, strainedly. “I’m gonna play.” Then she pressed the big red button and there was a whooshing sound and a big red ball got sucked up a tube and placed at the top of a big wall of pegs. At the bottom of the wall were little slots with amounts of money written into them. \$1. \$10. \$100. \$500,000.

“Caitlin has decided to play!” the man in the suit shouted, and the crowd cheered.

“What is this show?” Collette asked.

“Okay. See that amount there.” Dave pointed at the bottom right-hand corner of the screen, where a display read *\$1,040,500*. “That’s how much she won earlier. Her husband is waiting somewhere else. He doesn’t know how much she’s won. He’s got a guaranteed amount. It’s probably like a hundred thousand dollars.” He popped some more cashews in his mouth. “Now she’s gotta drop some balls into the pegs, and the amount they land on, that’s the amount that gets taken off of her total. Then the husband, he won’t know how much she’s lost or won, but he’s got to decide if he’s gonna accept the guaranteed amount, the hundred thousand, or if he’s gonna go with whatever his wife has won instead. Which he doesn’t know.”

“Oh, wow,” Collette said. “High stakes.”

Dave said something else and as he did I turned to Shauna on the little loveseat. She looked at me. “Evil,” I mouthed. “This is evil.” Shauna shrugged. On the screen, the guy in the suit pulled a lever and the ball started dropping.

“Oh, oh, look,” Collette said. The ball jostled between the pegs. I clenched up as it got closer to the bottom, as gravity decided. The ball ping-ponged around for a moment before settling into the slot for \$10. The lady in the muumuu fell to the ground.

“OH!” the guy in the suit said. “That’s a big win!”

“This is kind of messed up,” I said, but nobody replied. They were watching the next ball, which had been sent up into the chute. “Only one more ball to go,” the guy in the suit said. The woman in the muumuu thrummed with pure pained hope, and the host stood there diplomatically, ready to move things along. The ball dropped again. It ping-ponged around. It got awfully close to landing in the slot for a million dollars. Then it landed in one for \$1,000 instead.



“OH!” the guy in the suit said again. “Oh, you can’t complain about that!” A thousand dollars disappeared from the woman’s total. She had collapsed to the ground again while the camera focused in on the smiling face of the host. It was over. She was on all fours, like an animal. She was sobbing. “Tears of joy,” Dave said absent-mindedly, but I thought he was wrong, dead wrong. She had a million dollars in her hands and the way her body heaved was not with joy, not even anything close to it. She was heaving with relief.

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When the show ended Dave flipped to another channel. It was that movie from the 90s, with Matt Damon and Ed Norton. *Rounders*. “Oh, it’s good,” Dave said. “It’s like *Good Will Hunting*, but it’s a lot more interesting, because they’re playing poker.”

So we watched about half an hour of *Rounders*. Matt Damon lost a bunch of money to a Russian man he kept calling KGB. “You’ve got to love him” Dave said at one point, referring to Matt Damon’s character. “He’s scrappy. You’ve got to love it when a guy scraps his way from the bottom. You know,” he said, “guys like that, guys who drive delivery trucks, who go to night school, that kind of thing. A lot of times they’re the hardest workers you’ll meet. It’s true. I’d much rather hire them than some kid from Cornell.” Dave is a CFO at a bank. “They work harder. They mean it more, the work they do. They mean it more.”

Then we had to leave *Rounders* behind because they had made a reservation for 6:45 and it was already 6:15. “I feel like I have to find out how it ends,” Shauna said.

I sounded a little more bitter than I wanted to when I replied, “I’m pretty sure I know how it’ll end. I’m pretty sure Matt Damon will beat KGB at poker and win all his money back.”

“You don’t know that,” Shauna said.

“Yes I do,” I answered. “That’s always how these things end.”

When we left to walk to the restaurant Shauna decided to take the lead, but she didn’t know her way around the city. She ended up following the map on her phone into a dark area down by the train tracks. We passed a man in a doorway holding out a cup for change. Across the street, a throng of people clad in threadbare jackets stood underneath a flickering sign that read *Community Outreach Center*. Dave pulled Collette closer to him and shot them an accusatory look. Then, after we had passed, but not after we were out of earshot, he turned to Shauna and said:

“Can we take a different route back, please?”

I shoved my hands into my coat pockets.

“Yes, of course,” Shauna said. “We’re definitely not going to take this way again.”

I tried to walk further behind them. I kept thinking to myself, *how far behind them can I get away with walking?* I was thinking that if I could walk far enough behind them, the people in line at the Outreach Center might not think I was with them, not really. They might think that I was at least somewhere in between.

“I can’t stand homeless people,” Collette said. She was wearing a fluffy parka that was pure white, with a ring of fur around the hood. “The way they look at you.”

“You’ve gotta just ignore them, Coll,” Dave said. “Just pretend like they aren’t there.”

For some reason, I found myself speaking up. “It is kind of a sketchy part of town, isn’t it?” The minute I said it I wanted to take it back. But Dave and Collette didn’t seem bothered by it at all. In fact, they seemed to approve. As though I had chosen my tribe.

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“Owen,” Dave said to me in the tapas restaurant, after the waitress had smoked my drink. “Have you ever had the chance to go to a place like this before?” He looked around the restaurant, which was both ritzy and cozy. The items on the menu—the small dishes—all had double-digit prices.

“A couple of times,” I answered.

“Well, we’re happy to take you out to one,” he said. “You’re a good kid.” Then he waited for a moment until I thought of what to say.

“Thank you,” I said. “Thanks so much for taking us out.”

“You’re welcome,” he answered. “Any time.”

“Yeah, thanks, Dad,” Shauna put in. She was sipping an enormous cranberry gin and tonic through a straw.

“That elevator to the hotel smells like piss,” Dave said. “They should really do something about that.”

“You could take the stairs,” I hazarded. The comment seemed to fly past him.

“No,” he said. “The stairs are even worse.”

“Have you watched any good tv lately?” Collette asked. Then she started listing tv she had seen lately. Most of them were the kinds of detective shows with interchangeable names. Then she mentioned one that had come out earlier that year, a satire about wealthy families staying at a resort in Hawai’i. I mentioned that I’d watched it.

“Oh, you have!” Collette smiled at me. “That one’s really good.”

“I agree,” I said. “I thought its critique of class dynamics was really trenchant.”

“Can you tell he’s an English major?” Dave said.

“I don’t know about all that,” Collette said, “but it was really great to watch, because, Dave and I, we actually stayed at a resort right next to the location where it was filmed. It was so funny to see it again, it was like reliving the vacation.”

Then she took out her phone and showed me a picture of some palm trees. “Look familiar?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said.

“I’m so bad about watching tv,” Shauna said.

“You should get better at it,” Collette put in. “Your brother says that tv is where all the money is right now, when it comes to writing. Nobody reads print journalism anymore.”

“Or novels.” Dave looked at me when he said this. “The best thing that can happen to a novelist is that their book gets turned into tv. Or a movie. That’s how they make their money.”

“And you’re both so *talented*,” Collette said. “It would be a shame to let that go to waste.”

“We won’t, Mom,” Shauna said. She looked a little hurt.

“I just mean, your brother, I mean, *what* a talent, and I just have no idea how he’d be able to put his work out there if he wasn’t in New York.”

“Mom, come on.”

“No, honey, I’m serious! I’m just saying, New York is where the action happens.”

“Or L.A.,” Dave said, which caused Collette to look at him in horror.

“Oh, *don’t* say that, she can’t move to the west coast.”

“I can move wherever I want,” Shauna said.

“Not if you want our help, you can’t.” I looked toward Collette and almost fell out of the booth. Her face had become wicked, lined. All the pleasantries had been dropped. It was like we were sitting with a completely different person. Then Dave said:

“Coll, Maine’s not so far from us. That’s only three or four hours. I’m sure we can visit them all the time.”

“I know,” Collette said. “I’m just saying, we’ve got connections in New York. The whole family’s there.”

“I don’t like New York,” Shauna said. “I’m tired of it.”

“Owen.” Collette turned toward me. “You’d live in New York, wouldn’t you?”

“Sure,” I said. “I guess I would.”

“See?” Collette said to Shauna. “Owen wouldn’t mind living in New York.”

“Okay, Mom.”

“You know, you’d make a lot more money in New York,” Dave said. “Median income’s way lower in Maine than it is in New York.”

“The cost of living’s higher in New York, though,” I said. “It balances out.”

“Live a few years on your own, champ,” Dave said to me. “Then maybe we can have a conversation about the cost of living.”

“What are you going to report on in Maine?” Collette said to Shauna. “Nothing happens in Maine. Just lobster bakes and winters.”

“I guess I’ll write about those, then,” Shauna said.

“You know, there’s a lower homeless population in Maine than there is in New York,” I said. Shauna laughed, but her parents didn’t. In fact, Collette tilted her head for a second and then said, “I guess that’s true...”

“Oh, look,” Dave said. “There’s the charcuterie.”

They started bringing out plates, then, heaping plates of prosciutto and cheese and oysters and roe, cavalcades of food, and we ate it, because it was there. Because it seemed like if we didn’t eat it as

fast as possible we'd get behind by the time they brought the next plate out. Dave ordered us another round of cocktails. He was talking about baseball now.

"I'm a Yankee fan, always," he said. "But I've got to have respect for the other teams. Especially for the Red Sox. You've got to respect the Red Sox."

"That's refreshing to hear," I said.

"Well, you know, it's funny. For the longest time their whole identity was that they weren't the Yankees. The alternative to the Yankees. You know, the Yankees, they won, they had all the money, all the best players... and the Red Sox, they were scrappy. But now, they've gotten good. They've won four championships this century. You start to wonder, it starts to feel like they've lost their identity a little bit. *We won. Now what?*" He builds a cracker with meat and cheese before tossing it down the hatch. "It's hard to recover from something like that."

"I agree," I replied.

"And don't even get me started on the Mets," he said.

"Oh! The Mets." Collette shook her head sadly and sipped wine.

"You want to root for them, too," Dave said. "Because they're the working class team. But they just never win. It's hard, to root for a team that never wins."

Then Dave started listing guys who have been locked out of the Hall of Fame for using performance-enhancing steroids. He said there was no reason you shouldn't be allowed to enhance your performance if you could find a way to. Increase your odds, he said. Then he ran out of names to list and declared that he never liked Barry Bonds anyway.

"Hey, you guys," Collette said. "I found one of those lists online, of questions you can ask, you know, to start conversation..." She took out her phone and propped her glasses on her forehead.

"I thought we could... oh, I can't see anything in this light..."

"We're having a conversation, Coll," Dave said. "We've got it covered."

“Oh, I know, but it’ll be *fun*.”

“I’ll read them, Mom,” Shauna said. Collette handed her the phone. Shauna scrolled for a minute and then said, “Okay, here’s one. What was the best first date you ever had?”

“Oh, oh, I’ll answer this one,” Collette said. “Well, so, it wasn’t really a first date. But it felt like one anyway. Your father had just finished school, in Chicago. And he’d just gotten his first job. He invited me out to come see him, show me the new apartment and everything. And so I flew out to Chicago, took a cab from O’Hare, you know. And so—” She looked at Dave affectionately here, as though she was seeing him as he had once been, “—the cab pulls up, and I get out of the car, and I ring the buzzer, and your father lets me in, and when I get upstairs the whole room is dark. It’s dark and there are only a few candles, and some slow jazz. And the table’s been set, with wine, and a checked cloth, you know. And Dave had never had much money then, so it meant a lot, you know, it was a fancy wine. And then Dave comes out of the kitchen and he’s holding this big tray. This big tray of—”

“Chicken parmesan,” Dave said, nodding smugly.

“He’d learned to make chicken parmesan,” Collette said. “Just for me.”

“I taught myself to make chicken parmesan,” Dave said. Then Collette looked over at him in a strange kind of way that made me droop a little. She was looking at him with bald sadness as he made to make another sandwich out of the crackers on the charcuterie board.

“What ever happened to that skill, honey?” she asked.

Dave shrugged and wiped his hands on a napkin as he chewed the sandwich. “I guess it left with the years.” Then it got quiet, except for Dave’s chewing.

“My best first date was with this one,” Shauna said after a while, and pointed at me. “We went for pizza and, get this, he was so nervous he couldn’t eat a thing..”

The next several questions passed as we moved through the tapas plates. *What's your favorite song? Would you rather be deaf or blind? What's the most amount of money you'd spend on one meal?* (“We’ll find out tonight,” Dave said.) Then Shauna got to one that made her pause for a moment, before she tried to quietly move past it. But Collette insisted.

“No, honey, read that one. What was that one you skipped?”

“I don’t know, Mom, this one’s kind of weird.”

“Oh, go on, read it. We’re all family here.”

“Okay.” Shauna looked down at the phone. “What do you think joy is?”

There was a pause, and then Dave said, “You’re right. That’s a weird question.”

“We don’t have to—”

“No, come on!” Collette said. “It’ll be fun! It’s very... this one, it’s very philosophical, isn’t it?” She looked at me, for some reason, and I nodded, to tell her that I, too, thought it was philosophical. Then she said, “For me, joy is being a mother. I love being a mother. There’s just nothing like it. You give and you give and you give and somehow you wind up feeling rewarded. Like your kid is this big reward you get at the end of the day, for all the work you did.” She grinned at Shauna, who smiled back weakly.

“Joy, for me,” Dave said, “is—”

“Is a bloody Mary,” Collette said.

“Is a bloody Mary and a day of golf,” Dave said. “Just pure bliss.”

“What about you, Shaun?” Collette asked.

“I don’t know,” Shauna said. “I have a hard time with this one. I guess for me joy is freedom, probably. Freedom to move, to not be seen. To live my life the way I want to live it, without anyone else butting in. Like, I’ve always enjoyed being in the city alone, being a total stranger to everyone. It’s like a little fresh start, almost. Every time.”



Dave and Collette looked at her blankly. “What’s that supposed to mean, Shauna?” Collette asked.

“I don’t know,” Shauna said. “It’s my answer.”

They were silent. Then Collette said, “And you, Owen?”

I thought about it for a moment and then I settled on something. What I wanted to say was that joy was forgetting. It seemed like the truest thing to say, even if I wasn’t quite sure what it meant. But before I could put it into words the waitress came back with a big bowl of poutine.

“Here’s the poutine,” she said. And there it was.