

3345 words

To Love Is To

1.

*When a girl, Suz served slugs and grass on little plastic plates rimmed with hearts and daisies. She filled pink plastic tea cups with water from the hose. She played hostess, waitress, and nurse, sitting her stuffies in chairs and tucking them under covers, talking to them all the while. Sometimes she convinced her Dad to play along.*

*The way he retold it, she would arrange each plate just so and garnish them with honeysuckle or blackberries or whatever she could find in the yard. Then, she would offer the plate to him all manners and courtesies, saying “here’s your order, sir” and “would you like anything else?” Telling this story, he’d add (proudly) that it wasn’t easy to keep a straight face when you’re being served grass and hose water as if it were lemon cake and tea.*

Suz isn’t sure how much of those tea parties she remembers-remembers. Real memory has gotten so mixed up with her parents’ stories. Her best friend Mary (who lives clear across the country in Boston, who she never gets to talk to except on the phone) says Suz is a caretaker. “Which isn’t a bad thing,” Mary always explains, “unless you forget to take care of yourself.” Mary and Suz met at Whitaker’s, where they both worked in women’s clothing (before Suz’s promotion to housewares; and before Mary went away to college at the same school her mother and her mother’s mother had gone). Mary bugged Suz about college all the time back then, urged her to go, but Suz couldn’t imagine why. She didn’t want to be a doctor, or a teacher, or an engineer. She didn’t want to *be* anything.

Three months after Mary went away to college, Suz's destiny walked up to her counter at Whitaker's, just as she was about to take her lunch break. Robert bought a set of maroon towels and a coffee pot from Suz. Flirting, he said he needed to outfit his bachelor pad. After some coaxing, she wrote her number on the back of his receipt.

The very next weekend, Suz rode beside him in his convertible through Sonoma Wine Country, feeling as abundant as the bunches of grapes, row after row, as free-wheeling as the gilty fanfare the farmers tied to the stakes.

"Are they just for decoration or do they have a purpose?" she asked Robert.

"They are supposed to scare off the birds." His eyes left the road for half an in-breath.

"Like how people put empty milk jugs full of water on their lawns to keep dogs from crapping there."

He knew things, and he looked at her as if he'd like to devour her. When, six weeks after they'd pinwheeled through wine country, he asked: *Will you?* Her *Yes!* emerged unbidden. Right up to the wedding day, her parents regarded the match with skepticism. Now that he'd played his part in bringing them a granddaughter?

"Honey, marriage is hard. You have to work at it," her mother said when Suz told her Robert didn't seem interested in her anymore. "Just ask your dad."

Suz didn't bother to ask her dad. She knew he would agree.

Tonight she will play hostess for two of Robert's colleagues and their wives. Six grown-ups will sit around her round dark-wood table. She will serve steak, oven-roasted rosemary

potatoes, and a salad made of baby spinach on cloud white china purchased on her employee discount before she quit her job to stay at home with the baby. She doesn't even know one of them well enough to share a secret with, or act without fear of shame, even though Robert has worked with Jim and Caleb since before he met and married Suz, who will soon turn twenty two. Robert is thirty-five.

She hopes her performance as hostess might turn things around between Robert and her. The library book she read sitting cross-legged in the aisle last week painted a rather bleak picture: Biology, the author proposed, predetermines that we want most what we cannot have. That pretty much ruled her out since they shared a bed and she never said no. It also explained his indiscretions, what he called mistakes. She didn't check the book out, though she sat reading it a while. Instead, she checked out a book on positive parenting which she read to Robert while he did his crossword puzzles.

Asking Beth to babysit Melissa was Robert's idea. "Let's just be adults for one night," he said. Robert often urged Suz to be more adult, to "grow up," to not "make molehills into mountains." He used to say she was his Little Suzie and that her laugh reminded him of pansies. Beth would babysit pretty much anytime they asked her. Though there has always been more than a current of sibling rivalry between Suz and her pretty-girl, favored-child, younger sister, that same emotional distance did not extend to Melissa, whom Beth called Melly. Suz appreciated the gentle, attentive way Beth squatted down to Melissa's height and looked her in the eyes. Teaching Suz to love her sister again was one of many gifts she credited the little human she raised with giving her.

Thirty minutes before their guests arrive, Suz puts on the finishing touches: mascara, eyeliner, lipstick. She fluffs her thick blond hair, curled up at the shoulders. She waits in the kitchen, pots of food warming, crisp green salad on the counter ready to serve. She opens the oven, dips a serving spoon full of potatoes out of the pan and carries them over to the sink, her hand acting as a net to catch what might drop. She blows, then nibbles, blows, then nibbles some more. Just the right amount of butter to make the rosemary and potato hum in her mouth.

The doorbell rings. She feels silly for her churning stomach, and for peeing four times in the last thirty minutes. This is just dinner. She has done dinner before. This one reminds her of middle school, of the waiting-time after sending a note in class with the question *Do you like me?* above hand-scrawled boxes for checking yes or no.

It's Jim and Linda, in their fashionable neutral-toned Mod clothes. Linda wears beige circle earrings that swing from side to side as she hands Suz her neatly folded London Fog.

"Hello," Jim says, wide smile, hand extended.

Suz shakes hands, takes their coats, offers each a drink.

"Robert will be here soon," she calls from the kitchen. "He's coming right from the office." Ice cubes clink. She pours the tonic.

Suz notices how Jim and Linda sit together on the couch, their shoulders, elbows, hips, knees, and heels touching. She holds both their drinks aloft in one hand, her own in the other. After setting her own drink on the end table, she extends her arms--a drink in each hand--offering.

"How's the little one?" Linda asks.

“Wonderful. Being a mother is the best.” Suz, like a good hostess, moves the focus back to her guests. “I understand the two of you are trying.”

“Yes, we are.” Jim squeezes Linda’s hand.

Doorbell.

“Fantastic! You will be such good parents.” Suz says, on her way to get the door. “If you hurry up, we can do play dates.”

Caleb and Jess, the tall beautiful couple in classic, elegant dark tones that complement their sharp lines.

The time between when their guests arrive and Robert shows up feels slow-motion. Suz feeds questions to each couple, then watches the way they eat them, growing more nervous. They’ve all read the same newspapers, it seems. They attend the same parties. She doesn’t have anything to say about anything they talk about. How long before they turn on her? Jim and Caleb are both dentists, like Robert. Classmates, in fact. Linda and Jess? Hygienists in their husband’s offices. Both second wives. Just looking at Caleb and Jess brings pink to Suz’s cheeks. The way they sit tall and apart from each other, the electricity between them.

“I hear you are remodeling your kitchen,” Suz says to Caleb.

“Almost done.” Caleb looks to Jess, whose eyes more than approve.

“Caleb did a lot of the work himself.” Jess squeezes Caleb’s knee in approval.

“I’ll bet you saved some money that way,” Jim says to Caleb. “Kitchen remodels are so expensive. We’ve been considering taking the plunge ourselves, but so far all we’ve done is dip our toes in the water. A little research here and there. Some color swatches.”

Suz notices how Linda stiffens, shifts away from Jim, how Jim shifts to close that space, puts his arm around her. Doubt nibbles at Suz's confidence that her performance here will turn things around between Robert and her. She chases that doubt away, chanting to herself how and what order she will serve the food, reminding herself to smile and to always turn the conversation back to her guests. What is keeping Robert, anyway? A knot starts in her stomach. She rises to take Caleb and Linda's empty glasses and goes to the kitchen.

Returning, two full drinks ride in the palm of Suz's right hand, a plate of crackers and cheese on her upturned left palm. When Robert bursts through the door, she stands statuesque, a goddess of hospitality. She couldn't have planned his entrance better. She pauses just long enough to be seen, hands Caleb and Linda their drinks, sets the crackers on the coffee table.

"Would you like a drink?" Suz asks Robert.

"Please."

Robert settles in the armchair opposite Linda and they fall into conversation without hesitation. She hears *that Carter* and is jealous, though she can't make out much else. Three months from the election and Robert and Suz have not once discussed the election.

2.

*Suz's first challenge as a hostess came from a boy across the street named Max. She was eight. Max must have been bored that day. He came over, begging Suz to play. She agreed to play cap gun wars with him if he agreed to play tea party first.*

*While her stuffies always said their pleases and thank yous and asked for more, Max criticized.*

*"This isn't chocolate cake. It's roly polies. Ewwwwwww."*

*Didn't he know he was supposed to pretend?*

The cab-blend from their wine club, the baby spinach salad with walnuts and blue cheese, the baked-today rosemary bread to start--all real. They sit in a pattern around the table: male-female-male-female. They entertain each other's spouses.

"You must feel the odd one out here," Caleb says to Suz.

Suz sits up straighter. "How do you mean?"

"Being the only one of us who doesn't work in a dental office. You must get bored of teeth."

"Do you and Jess talk about work all the time?"

Suz fills Caleb's glass with wine first, then refills her own.

"Well, no. Of course not..."

"I'm sorry. I guess maybe that is a sensitive subject with me," Suz says, blushing. She pokes at the meat with her fork, shifts her salad.

Suz glances at Robert, who is leaned in close to Linda while telling one of his stories. A born storyteller, he is. One of the things that turned her on about him at the start. He finishes his point, then shovels a forkful of food into his mouth.

"You don't work at all, now? I mean, since the baby?" Caleb asks.

"I'm thinking about going back to work weekends. Maybe in a few months."

"What is it you do again?"

"I supervised the Housewares Department at Whitaker's. But if I go back, I'd just be sales."

“Great store. And local, too.”

Suz considers the years between them. A decade of experience she lacks affecting his view of her. When he was her age he would have been in college. She thinks he must consider her naive and unambitious.

Caleb’s loafer brushes the back of her calf.

Or not.

Suz looks around the table, noting the way Jess and Linda glow and how their conversations spark. She doesn’t know anything about Caleb, she realizes. Nothing that matters.

“Why did you become a dentist?” Suz asks, passing her mother’s gravy boat to Linda.

Caleb pauses and Suz hears truth in that pause, some truth she will probably never know. She isn’t about to tell Caleb about the restaurant she has been planning to open since she was a girl.

“My father’s a dentist. Two of my uncles, too. A family calling, I suppose.”

Suz lets her eyes scan the table, looking for some inspiration to get this conversation off the ground. What she finds makes her drop her fork. Robert’s fingers touching Linda’s, squeezing her hand, the pretense of the gravy boat between them. She dives under the table to retrieve the fallen fork just in time to see his foot retreat like a dog caught stealing food from where it had clearly been between two sandaled, pink-painted sets of toes.

Suz emerges with the dropped fork, sits up straighter than before, attempts to recover. *Not again!*, she thinks.

“Must be nice to have a break from mom duty.” Jess speaks to Suz.

“It is,” Suz says. “Though I miss her. I have to force myself to take time with grown-ups. Robert is good that way. He won’t let me forget myself entirely.”

Suz and Robert exchange smiles like business cards.

“It must be difficult being so young,” Linda says.

Jim squeezes Linda’s shoulder, a silent communication Suz can only guess at.

“My age has nothing to do with it.” Suz meets Linda’s gaze. She has worried enough about the years between her and everyone else at the table.

The meals, the set-up, her conservative black dress and pearls. All of these choices made with her age in mind.

She should have known. Her friends had warned her these things never happen in isolation, that she should get out now and save herself pain later. But friends always give advice like this. Dictums compete with sense experience: lips touching for the first time, holding hands, falling asleep in each other’s arms. Love flowed between them. Couldn’t it again?

Suz scans the table. Empty plates, mostly. Just fat and bones and bits of bread and greens. Her own plate only nibbled at. Parched, she finishes her water, pours more.

“Dessert?” Suz asks, rising.

Mutterings of yes and polite appreciation.

Suz collects the empty plates, carries them off to the kitchen, then returns with chocolate cheesecake on dessert plates that match the Spode white dinner china exactly.

She finds herself about to spill the words that are rising out of her sad-blue eyes, about to smash the plates and ruin the whole damn scene when she hears the front door open, happy shuffling in the hall.

3.

*Suz's mother had a habit of signing her up for things her sister Beth did, like ballet. Clumsy Suz preferred sitting in the apple tree out back, reading mystery stories or tying a lunch to a stick and walking their neighborhood trails that snaked for miles.*

*"It's not personal," her father said, when Suz cried and cried. "Your mother has high expectations of everyone else because she is so hard on herself. She loves you."*

*Suz couldn't always be sure her father was right, but when her own friend Mimi called her mother a bitch, Suz defended, "She's harder on herself than anyone. Give her a break."*

"Hello? We're here!"

*Beth, with Melissa. Thank God!* Suz stands, clutching the back of Caleb's chair. Her heart-rhythm leaps.

"Excuse me." Suz nods to her guests, smiling soberly.

When Suz turns the corner out of sight, a smile blossoms across her face. She wraps her arms around Beth, who still holds Melissa's hand. She squeezes.

"Hey, hey," Beth says, pulling back just a little. "You all right?"

Suz nods yes, her blue eyes shining.

She releases Beth, puts her hands above Melissa's waist and lifts her above shoulder level, meets her eager eyes, then shifts her baby girl to her hip. Melissa grabs fistfuls of Suz's little black dress.

"Better than all right," Suz says, placing her hand on Melissa's back to support her, to ease her tugging too.

Beth plants a kiss on Melissa's forehead and says goodbye, as is their routine.

"Thank you," Suz says, looking after her even after she closes the door.

Suz parades Melissa on her hip into the dining room, her best show yet. Melissa waves, a princess, to the adults who smile and compliment. She's getting so big. She has her mother's eyes, her father's hair.

Oh, she is adorable!

Suz steers the princess, who waves and smiles, around the table so each guest can hold her pale soft hands, then carries her out of the room and up the stairs.

"She'll be down once she gets her to bed," Robert explains.

It is dark but nearing morning when Suz wakes, the picture book she fell asleep reading poking into her hip. She stretches, yawns, rolls over, places one arm around Melissa. The growling in her belly makes her aware of her hunger, sharp and real.

4.

*The day her mother came and asked Suz if she wanted to get rid of the little plastic plates, the table and chairs, she lay sprawled across her comforter doing Algebra homework and bopping to an Everly Brothers 45, a love note she wrote in third period to Jeff Shumacker tucked safely in her pocket.*

*"What?" she asked.*

*"Do you want to keep your table and tea party things? I think your Cousin Lynn could use them."*

*"Oh, yeah. That's fine. She can have 'em."*

*She was humming to the music again before her mother clicked the door fully closed.*

Suz descends the stairs, recalling the details of the party: her nervousness, Caleb, Robert's indiscretion. She sets the coffee to brew, busying herself with picking up the dinner party mess. Robert didn't bother to put anything away and she's mad about that, but even madder that she knows she'll forgive him before he even says I'm sorry. She has half talked herself into forgiving already.

They haven't been as close as they once were. She has been so down she barely wants to be around herself. Can she blame him?

She takes a slice of room temperature cheesecake for herself before she puts the rest away. There are two slices left. She can hear the garbage truck outside and hopes Robert didn't forget again, considers running out to check.

She sits at the bare, cleared table, eats the cake slow, her thoughts jumping stones, lost, trying to find their way home.

She can blame him.

The richness of the cheesecake pops in her mind and she licks the filling and chocolate cookie crumbs off her fork as she considers just what blaming him might look like. She should probably go back to school. Where would she live? How would she explain it to Melissa? Her parents?

5.

*Suz lost her virginity in the back of Jimmy's parents' car, parked way off where no one would catch them. To say she felt angry when she heard he'd taken Liz Turner to that same spot doesn't even begin to describe the way she ached like she would surely die.*

*Even if he begs, her whole bodied cried and cried. Even her mother was moved. She stroked her hair, whispering “Shhhh. It’s all right, honey.”*

When, Robert leaves Suz two weeks later, she calls Mary in Boston first, though she can barely speak through her sobs.

“Good riddance. You should have left him a long time ago,” Mary says.

“I know,” Suz sobs, remembering that slice of cheesecake, that moment of resolve, vowing she won’t take him back, even if he begs. But he doesn’t call, though she watches the phone and it’s two weeks before he comes to take Melissa for the weekend, and even then he waits in his car for Suz to bring her out to him.