

*The Game*

2002:

By the time I get there, Fiona is already sitting in her spot in the corner, perched and ready to pounce. She watches the door and eyes herself in the big mirror behind the bar, a strategic position, she can easily surveil the room while being seen by everyone in the place. And who would not notice her, the knockout brunette poured into a cherry red dress that reveals arms, and shoulders, and ample chest, all covered artfully in floral tattoos?

"Aren't you afraid of catching pneumonia?"

"Go jump yourself, Sweetheart" she kisses me on the cheek. She makes a theatrical sniff, like Lady Astor smelling Brussels sprouts. "New aftershave?"

"Just a clove of garlic behind each ear," I kiss back. "To ward off old harlots and shrews."

"I don't like when you try to grow a beard. It makes you look like a runaway mental patient."

I touch my incipient goatee. "I don't know, I think it makes me look kind of butch."

"Well, anyway, I hate to be the bearer of bad tidings," she says with a cat's smile, "but I think I've sewn up our little grudge match over Dylan." Dylan is the hot new bartender we've both been vying for since he started six weeks ago. "That boy is mine to be had. He can't keep his eyes off my breasts."

"I'm not surprised. Your neck is cut so low I can see your cervix."

"Aren't you funny? Laugh all you want. Still, he's been flirting with me for a solid hour."

"He flirts with everyone, he's a bartender."

She waves me off, but even now the man in question is at the other end, laughing and making love with a group of khaki clad after work folks. When he sees me, he smiles and makes his way over. To say that he is stunning, an Apollo come down from Mount Olympus to dally with us mortals, would be understatement. He appears to be chiseled out of marble, there is not a muscle that does not greet us as he stands there.

“Hey handsome, what can I get you on this cold and rainy hump night?” He leans against the bar in a way that makes his triceps pop becomingly through his shredded T shirt. I can hear Fiona’s teeth grinding.

I get the same thing, every time: Tito's martini, very dry, extra olives, ice on the side.

“You like it super dirty, don’t you?” he asks, every time.

“Be careful sweetie” Fiona chimes in, nudging me hard. “You know how too much salt makes you bloat up.”

While he’s shaking up my drink, we both watch the play of his sinewy arms.

“Jesus, that’s beautiful” she sighs.

"I'm sure he's gay," I say, again.

"No fucking way," she says, again.

He wears that rockabilly dirtbag pompadour and long mongrel side burns, with just a touch of irony that cannot be heterosexual. His distressed jeans and biker boots remind me more of the Ramrod back room than Harley Davidson. And, I believe he's too young, though she insists he's at least 27. She has this rule that the youngest you can go without being a pervert is "one half your age plus seven years," so by her formula Dylan is fair game; Fiona just turned 40 a few weeks ago, though we aren't allowed to discuss it, and I will soon be 35.

Dylan places my brimming cocktail down with a flourish, it shimmers with an icy surface tension. "I hope I measured up," he says. I lean in to take that first tentative sip. It's nectar, perfection, a love token.

Clearly, it's me he wants.

As he walks away to wait on a giggle of gay boys, Fiona's green eyes never leave his backside. "He could crack walnuts with those thighs," she says, "it gives a girl ideas."

I don't need to ask what ideas she's having. We've known each other long enough that I know all her workings, and all her tricks. It was the hectic Y2K End of The World Brunch, two years ago now already, when we met, right here in these two spots at the bar in fact. Though the world did not come to an end, we've had a lot of laughs since, both awash in a sea of vodka. Still I know she'd throw me to the wolves in a hot minute if a man came into the picture. She's a born hunter, a Diana for this bright new millennium. Next to her, I am artless, clumsy at the sport of flirtation. While I tend to mumble jokes that no one finds funny but me, she makes full use of her natural attributes. She is really something to see in action.

Fiona drains her drink in a last gulp. "Looks like I need another," her fingernails tipped with blood red crimson give her a predatory air as she motions him over. She pulls out all the stops: the lowered chin and the gaze with big, luminous eyes, the moistened lips, her breasts bursting from their lycra confines, her voice lowered so that he has to lean in to hear her as she breathes, "I'm so thirsty." It's a performance, Kabuki theater, a puppet show. In spite of myself, I'm envious, and in awe still, watching her act, but maybe it's also mixed with a tinge of something else, something as yet unnamed.

Dylan, too, seems impressed. His eyes, the brown eyes of a puppy, can't help but fix themselves on her cleavage which seems to wink back at him. Through a scruff of two days' beard his baby soft skin pinkens as she looks at him, and I begin to fear that I am sunk.

And then, he glances my way.

He smiles.

The amber lights in the place seem to dim, the beehive buzz around us hushes, and it's just me and him, Dylan and I, looking at each other for our little eternity, the two of us alone as the world slips off its axis and we careen into a white void of other galaxies yet to be explored. I'd usually say something stupid right about now, but for that miraculous micro second I am eloquent in my muteness. Words seem so *unnecessary*.

And then it's over.

Lights blare again, sound roars back to life, the planet resumes its desultory orbit, and gravity once again is in play. I land back on my bar stool, a little out of breath, a little fluttery in the chest. Fiona doesn't seem to notice I've even been gone.

She's still talking: "...that's what I'd say anyway, you know?"

"Hmm?"

"Aren't you listening?"

"Hmm."

"Well! I was just saying maybe we could order something to nibble on." She hands me the menu she was reading, as if we don't know it by heart. "I'm thinking maybe the artichokes lightly breaded and roasted, finished with balsamic reduction," she recites verbatim. "Nothing too heavy, these Spanx are the fucking death of me, I can barely breathe."

I ask for the truffle fries double order, knowing Fiona will gobble down most of them. She always does. I devise a plan, a devious strategy to outflank her. All I have to say is "Want to try one?" and the fries will be inhaled in a blur, and she will be full and uncomfortable and cranky in her too tight dress, and while she's complaining, I will again catch Dylan's gaze, and he will realize his unspoken love for me, his ardor will be unsullied and true, and we will run away to get married, and we'll send Fiona a postcard from our honeymoon pied-a-terre in gay Paris, and she will be bitter, and old, and alone. With this image in my mind I smile, and ask the waitress to bring a side of mayonnaise with the fries.

It goes nothing like I schemed. Of course, we order another round, just to watch his athletic movements, just to see the workings of lean flesh under his clothes, just to sigh a little more at such beauty. "So much handsome on one face," Fiona says, "it's almost unfair."

Our food arrives. The pile of fries is fragrant, savory, greasy and glistening under a snowfall of grated asiago cheese. I watch her nose quiver like a French cochon, a wild pig on the hunt for treats.

"Want to try one?"

Just then, our cocktails are placed before us. But it's not Dylan. Some young gal with a ponytail smiles at us. She tells us her name is Jill, as if we care, and she'll be working this end of the bar for the rest of the evening, her shift just started, and she's a little late, and the manager gave her a hard time because it's not the first time. Neither of us is listening, obviously. We try to be subtle as we both crane our necks just enough to see our boy, busy at the wrong end of the room.

A pall hangs over us, the food sits like lumps on plates, our drinks go barely half drunk. Fiona looks sullen. Even her bosom seems to droop with disappointment. I don't want the fries now, neither does she. What now?

"Maybe we should call it a night, what do you say?" The place seems too brightly lit, too loud, too full of people we don't like.

I nod.

Jill eventually brings the bill, she tells us how great it was to serve us, how she hopes to see us again, how rainy it is outside, and she wishes we have a nice night, she won't shut up. We fumble with our cards and sign our tabs, all the while trying to grab Dylan's attention for a Goodnight wave, but it doesn't happen. We make our way through the crowd to the door, and the street outside, to find ourselves on the pavement in the damp night air.

"At least it stopped pouring," Fiona says, wrapping her faux leopard fur coat around her. "It's just misting a little."

I hand her my dented umbrella, knowing how she hates to get her hair wet. It's a way to feel less guilty about the attempted truffle fry saboteur maneuver. For a moment, I think how silly we've been, chasing after a kid, throwing our friendship to the winds, making fools of ourselves. I want to go back to just us, our routine of making the rounds and hating everyone else. It's the only fun I know. I'm about to call a truce, put an end to the petty game, when she goes and ruins it.

"For the record, he wants me." A quick flick of her wrist, and the umbrella opens with a flourish. She is walking away, her heels click purposefully through puddles.

"No fucking way!" I am after her.

We argue the whole way down her street.

"This is ridiculous!" I yell to the back of her head, "we can't both have him!"

Then she stops dead in her tracks, she spins around to face me. "Maybe we can, mon ami," her eyes gleam like a feral cat in the pale winter moonlight. "Maybe we can both have the darling lad."

"What?"

"What if the mother lover is Bi? That would explain everything!"

"What?"

"What if he's Bi? What if he likes to straddle both sides of the fence? Wouldn't that make things so much easier?"

"I don't believe in bisexuals," I say, "not guys anyway. Bisexual guys are just gay guys who can't quite make the jump yet. Girls maybe can be ambidextrous, girls are different."

"You are so closed minded. I can't believe it. Put aside your silly ideas, and think. If he's Bi, we wouldn't have to compete anymore. We might even join forces! We can divide him up like birthday cake, carve him up slice by sweet delicious slice. If we play our cards right, we can both have him! We'll work out some kind of an arrangement."

"Sort of a Monday Wednesday Friday type thing? Alternating weekends?"

"Mmm something like that, we'll hammer out the details eventually."

"What if he's not into us?"

"How can he resist? Look at us!"

"He hasn't nibbled so far. Maybe he's not into us at all. Neither of us."

"Don't be silly," her hand encircles my arm, she pulls me in closer, we are now conspirators, it would seem. "We've been fighting each other, blocking each other, that negative

energy is just driving him away. But, if we combined to form a unit, imagine my tits and your bumbling charm in laser focus, together, imagine, just imagine- he'd be helpless."

"You're a crazy nut, listen to yourself."

"It's either we're allies, or it's all-out War."

"No way are we tag teaming."

"So, then, it's War?"

"You should act your age! You're getting way too old for this shit."

"And you're a chicken. A queer dodo bird. You should be extinct. Without me you'd get no play at all!"

"I'd do just fine. I don't need you."

"Try it and see sometime, Sweetheart."

"Feline!"

"Chickenshit!"

We both laugh, but maybe we laugh just a little too much.

Maybe we've gone too far.

We stand there, toe to booted toe, under the bare dripping tree branches, perhaps even then both knowing that we would not be banding together in this conquest anytime soon, both knowing that we would fight each other talon and claw to get him, every one for themselves. I watch her face for a passing shadow, she looks away. The joke seems to be over. No one is laughing now.



2007:

I hadn't seen her in a long time, but of course I recognized her right away. How could I not? There she was, still at a corner spot at the bar, still with her eye on the door, every inch of her alert, every curve squeezed into lycra, every move that of the predator. It was funny, running into her like that. When she saw me, she screamed: "For Fuck's Sake!" and hugged me. She looked a bit older, we both did, but there was in those eyes still the tigress I had known. "I'm so glad you shaved off that sad attempt at facial hair," she said, "You look like you again."

I introduced her to Danny, my partner. She gave him the up and down, then looked at me with that eyebrow cocked, and it was like the old days for a minute, that minx look flitted in her green eyes. "You did alright, Sweetheart. Your man is gorgeous." She pinched Danny's cheek. "Such a Punim!"

She was with a guy, a new gay guy, the new bar buddy, a younger chip with sandy hair. "Join us?" he said. His name is Allan, I think, or something like it, Brian maybe. He seemed sweet, a little swishy. We had a round with them. It was OK. We made small talk. Work was good, the folks were good, someone died, someone got married, the weather was beautiful, Spring was our favorite time of year.

I chatted with Allan/Brian a while. "What do you think about the bartender?" he asked, with a nod over to a tall fellow at the taps.

"Not bad," I shrugged. "He kinda reminds me of someone, someone who worked here a few years ago, but that guy was beautiful, a real heartbreaker."

"What happened to him?"

"Who knows? One day he was there, and the next day he was gone."

"Hmmm."

Meanwhile Fiona and Danny were like bosom buddies, her arm was around him, and I was more than a little curious what they were talking about that was so hysterical. He loved her immediately. Who could blame him? She's the kind of woman gay men just seem to adore, all tits and hair and full of good times. She had not lost one atom of her charms.

She tossed back her head in that way she does, and when her glance met mine, she smiled. Again, I thought how silly the two of us are, me and her, how childish we were, back then, what shallow, self-absorbed people we'd been, how petty it all was. I make my way over to tell her, to say basically that, that I'm sorry so much time has gone by, that the whole Dylan affair was a stupid waste of everything.

We were face to face, and before I could say what I was thinking, she whispered into my ear:

"It was me he wanted," she said.

"No fucking way!" I started, and before I could catch myself, I said the thing I was never supposed to say, the thing I'd promised myself I'd never tell, not to her, not to anyone, I hiss at her, my voice low enough so the other two don't hear over their conversation: "I had him. I slept with him. I got Dylan. I won." I don't tell her, I'll never tell her how it came about, but it was a few weeks after Fiona and I had stopped talking to each other, after that little skirmish under the trees that night, and we just stopped calling each other. This one wintry ill-fated night, I went out by myself. My shyness was thrown aside. I would show her that I still had game, I didn't need her. Emboldened by booze, I asked Dylan flat out to have a nightcap with me by my fireplace. I

was no chicken, no dodo bird. And he said yes. Just as simple as that. After closing, we went back to my place.

She spat back. "So you won, did you? You got him to fuck you? Well I guess congratulations are in order. But guess what? So did I. So did everyone. He even banged Jill. Everyone had Dylan. He was a dog."

"Oh."

"Without a doubt, the worst fuck of my life. Hands down."

And then we both laughed.

"It was pretty bad," I agreed.

"And stupid? If that boy was any dumber he'd be a danger to society."

"He was no genius."

"Those muscles though, what a body. Like a Greek statue. Too bad he wasn't as mute. And clearly all that pumping at the gym was an attempt to compensate for *something*. Such a waste of prime man flesh.

I can't bring myself to give the details of that night, but I remembered: I played Ella Fitzgerald on the hi fi, but he didn't know who she was, had never heard of her. "You got a lot of books," he noticed, "I'm not much of a reader. I'm more of a physical kinda guy." His kiss was rough and sloppy. I ended up passing out, the fire was warm, the brandy was strong, the sex was an uninspired thumping that lasted all of two seconds. I remember he said something like, "That was pretty good, huh?" It was not. Even then, in my single drought years, I knew that it was not good. The planets did not spin out of control, nothing changed at all. It wasn't anything like I had hoped, he was not the god I had dreamed of winning. When I woke up to a blinding white

morning of snow, and a grate full of cold gray ashes, he was gone. I didn't step foot in the bar again for a long time, never saw the mutt after that.

She chinks my half empty glass with hers. "Here's to the winner."

"To the reigning champ."

Fiona and I, conspirators at last, were laughing at ourselves again while Danny and the new gay guy looked on, and it was just like in those days when it was just us two, me and her. It would never be the same, not really. We both knew it wouldn't be. Still, we laughed.

In years to come, whenever we'd run into each other at one of the old places, there would be that knowing wink and a smile-

but neither of us would ever mention the name of the cur again.