

A Speech

Since the last dinner party had been held at the Handley's it was decided that this evening's meal be hosted at the Bryant residence. Cocktails would begin at 6:30 along with appetizers: assorted crackers, smoked salmon and steamed shrimp from Pike Place, as well as herb and garlic boursin. Tradition held, in that the men convened near the TV and the hors d'oeuvres plate, beers in hand: commiserating lightheartedly and snidely insulting their unanimous political opposition. Meanwhile the women would choose wine over decadent morsels; then surrounding the hostess – that is Kate Bryant – they would offer no helping hand as they commenced to drink to the gratifying rhythms of gossip that spared no individual nor group excluded from the function.

As the drink glasses met their second or third refills that bright internal warmth, which expands and consumes, lubricating the need to communicate, to belong to the evening and to one's peers in what could only be dubbed comfort, had begun to show itself in the cheeks and the hand gestures of the merry gathered; the eyes sparkled more, laughter rolled contagiously, mounting to ever pleasanter heights in which one could look at his fellow man or woman and ever so briefly believe that he or she was not only breathing the same oxygen, but perhaps the same blood pumped through their veins.

The music, too, so skillfully chosen, did nothing to discourage anyone from harboring these bloodwhispered sensations of kinship,

Outside the giant kitchen window the remains of the sun left the sky a deep shade of blue, discolored in places by pink and gray strips of clouds meandering sluggishly over the black heads of the tall pines of the Highlands; so that the bodies of the women inside the kitchen were like performers against the backdrop of a dark blue horizon, their features and luxuriant dinner attire illumined by dim lights that lent all which they touched a dazzling, almost sacred quality.

On the waves of alcohol so did the chatter flow.

–It's a bad time for business.

–Mine too.

–Nobody is building houses now.

–Keep getting inquiries, but the bids are always too low.

–Should've seen Hartley last week at Bear Creek.

–She did what?

–What did he do?

–You don't say.

–I used to exercise with her at Columbia.

–Always was kind of a – forgive my French –

–Oh God, I thought he'd bring his damn fivewood against the guy's neck.

–A bitch.

–You catch the Marquette game yesterday?

–She’s Stephen’s mother?
–I thought her name was Irene.
–No, but I got it recorded.
–I hear they have to move out of their house, that it’s too expensive to live there.
–Threepointer right at the buzzer, damndest thing I ever saw from that kid.
–I said, Susan, why the hell would I know where your kid is?
–Joan told me, but please don’t repeat that.
–The nerve.
–Oh yeah, how’s Jim doing in college?
–Stuck in the sandtrap for the rest of my life.
–Does he like it?
–I would just die.
–Empty Nest Syndrome.
–Another beer?
–I’m gonna run to the bathroom.
–All right, I think we’re about ready to eat.
–Something sure smells good.

The men and women slowly began to rally, rising if they were seated, refilling their glasses and hovering expectantly around the granite island tabletop. Kate Bryant was putting the finishing touches on the salmon and the potatoes, a look of regal consternation in her face. Dull harmless anecdotes stirred between men by the bottles.

–Can I help you with anything, sweetie? Jacquie Handley cooed, patronizingly, having no real desire to do anything but sip her vodka drink.

–Yeah, Kate, please, just give us a task, added Jane Yeger, I feel bad you’re doing everything yourself.

Wise by experience Kate knew full well her friends had no intention of acting as souschefs, and would either use the bathroom, their phones, or another drink to keep their hands clean. And though striking her rude, Kate preferred to oversee her own meal anyway, being the most capable cook of all her peers...

–No, thanks, she said, checking off items on a mental list, It’s all ready, if you want to start dishing up.

–My pleasure, drawled Steve Yeger, lifting up a plate, sucking down his saliva.

–Rob, would you like another? John Bryant asked: ever the amicable host.

Rob Handley demurely handed over his rattling glass, thanking John when he’d received it back.

–Bill, how are you doing? John asked, a glimmer in his grayblue eyes.

Bill Taylor, an old acquaintance but firsttimer to Dinner Club, held himself happy yet apprehensive – perhaps fearing a gaffe. He had brought a bottle of expensive wine and his second wife, Sherilyn, whom had brought strawberry shortcake that she prepared herself. She was currently sipping a glass of chardonnay and chatting with Jacquie Handley and Wendy Perrigo. Being a Pacific Islander, her dark charms made her somewhat novel in this gathering. Bill saw how well she was getting on now and this buoyed his pride, comforting him and easing his decision to have another:

–Sure, thanks you, John...hell of a place you got here...you built it yourself, didn’t you?

–If *paying* for it counts, John deadpanned, holding out Bill’s drink for him.

–Chuckling, Bill’s glass was sipped and raised:
–I hear that. ...Cheers.
John clinked his glass against Bill’s, mirthfully.
Rob also cheered, a shy grin on his noiseless features.
–This looks delicious, Kate, admitted Wendy Perrigo, trying to stifle her infamous jealousy.

Per usual, the cook in all her modesty openly expressed her doubts. By setting the bar low she thought something more than sheer displeasure could be had; for example when gifting present to her family members she would preface their unwrapping by saying something like: –It’s nothing exciting, but I thought you could use it. This downplaying was usually unnecessary and idiosyncratic, as was soon evinced by all the light clanking of metal and the bouts of mouthfilled silence.

First served Steve Yeger was also first to get seconds, but it could easily be taken for preemptive thirds as well; a hearty portion to be sure.

–This fish is excellent, cried Jane, giving Kate a look that seemed to say: –Excuse my clod of a husband: he’s thick.

She made this silent appeal for his gluttony, but never for all the times he drunkenly squeezed or patted the behind of the other men’s wives. Out of embarrassment maybe, or perhaps she was in the dark. It was never welcomed, yet no one wanted to further injure or alienate a man whom they’d already deemed pathetic.

Others also seemed to be enjoying themselves. And Earl Goodman, urged on by his wife – and keeper, got to his feet while gently rapping a salad fork against the side of his wineglass. His spectacles swam with jeweled white lights, obscuring his eyes, as he revolved his skinny neck to better take in his audience. His better half, Karen, sat eagerly by in her chair, like a young mother watching her preschooler deliver an oral presentation, which they’d spent hours rehearsing together and listened for any mistakes. Clearly he was in his cups a bit, and was also feeling somewhat romantic after the delicious meal.

He started, choked up, then began again:

–Friends. I feel so grateful for so many things. First off, I’d like to thank John and Kate for opening their home to us and for cooking us this beautiful meal... Truly, it was first rate... Secondly, I feel – that is, *we* feel so lucky to have such good friends. Twentytwo years ago we arrived here, in Kirkland. I can’t even believe how time flies. It’s almost scary. I was just a poor, young entrepreneur with my beautiful fiancé in search of a slice of the dream... I would never imagine this: a beautiful home on the lake, a thriving business, a good son, a wife: my friend and partner, and a family dog, too... The all American life, right? We feel so blessed to have become involved in such a unique community, it was unthinkable to us that there would ever come a time when would ever want for anything else...

He paused a moment to look down into his wife’s eyes. She cradled his hand in her own and rubbed it, soothingly, coaxing him to the conclusion of his speech. He nodded at her, and with his free hand he ran a finger under his glasses lens to absorb a tear, and then continued:

–Well, the unthinkable has finally arrived, he said, chuckling in spite of the obvious pangs of bittersweet sorrow he felt.

John Bryant and his wife exchanged a look. Others did also. The man's sentimentality, his emotions – after years and years of repression – often reared their many heads in unusual ways, given the right amount of a certain type of liquor, so that John Bryant privately nicknamed him The Scylla of Schnapps. Perhaps they, like many others, were now remembering an episode from a few years prior when at a Christmas party at the Murphy's, Earl had drunk too much and became frustrated over something. He told Karen that he wanted to go home, but it was still early and she was still enjoying herself; all the while it had been snowing steadily outside, causing the steep hill the Murphy's lived on to become slick and dangerous. Of course, being that he was clearly drunk, his wife forbade him from driving, so with that bee in his bonnet, to go home, he flung up his arms, and practically screaming, he announced his departure. Then like that he left on foot for the other side of town. But not before tying his tie around his head like a bandana...

Needless to say this left an impression on the other guests; especially the men, who went rushing to the window, bedecked in lighted holly, and crowded round it together to watch their peer slipping and sliding angrily down the hillside in the orange areolas of the streetlamps.

–Now that Erik is in college we're looking towards a new adventure, continued Earl; he then removed his glasses, and with eyes sealed and mouth ajar, he rubbed one moist tearduct before replacing the glasses on his beakish nose.

Kate subtly and politely removed herself from the table to prepare dessert. Others, too, began suffering restlessness.

–So we're finally doing it: a dream we've had for a long, long time.

–What's that? asked Wendy Perrigo, eyeing the pecan pie that Kate was hewing into slices.

Smiling proudly Earl announced that he and Karen were moving to Leavenworth, a Dutchstyle village in the southeast, to run a bed and breakfast. The look on the couple's face was hopeful, expectant of congratulations. They received their expected wellwishes and questioning, only because it was so evident they needed that. People began to rise and deposit their dirty dishes to the sink. More drinks were got. All the while since Earl's closing statement Bill Taylor had been mulling something over...

Were speeches common? Should he make one? It *was* his first dinner party. Was he expected to say something? These along with other thoughts bubbled up in his mind without relent.

As the diners moseyed about, ran to the bathroom, refilled their drinks, received slices of pie or strawberry shortcake from Kate or Sherilyn, whom had taken the initiative to help Kate serve those seeking dessert, an incessant tinkling cut through the din, causing heads to turn, some with skepticism, while others looked round with amusement. Bill Taylor was standing in front of the oven tapping his glass with a spoon, looking dutiful as colonel in his herringbone suit.

Speeches were exceptionally uncommon in this circle, so that Earl's had struck veterans as novel, even eccentric. But now for there to be a followup, and in such a serious manner – it was shaping up to be a rare evening. John Bryant filled Jacquie Handley's wineglass, abstractedly, awaiting what was to come next. The hostess, too, held her weighted pie server aloft a moment longer than was natural. Sherilyn Taylor's cheeks passed from a shade of caramel to one of rose.

–Hear, hear! said Bill Taylor, in a kindly bark.
Steve Yeger, somewhat drunk across the living room, chuckled with his bully’s mouth.

–Well, to get the ball rolling, I’d like to thank John and Kate for having Sherilyn and I in their lovely home...for what was a lovely meal. And of course for the generous refills – no bar would ever hire you, John – haha!

Mr. Bryant feigned appreciation, smiling and laughing with his face.

Bill laughed, raising his glass:

–Cheers, everybody – to the Bryants...

People drank, sheepishly. Jacquie slowly nodded with an insincere smile in Bill’s direction, as Wendy Perrigo whispered in her ear.

–But seriously folks, like Earl said, I feel like a blessed man. Sometimes...sometimes we are given trials. Sometimes we mistake a curse for a blessing and a blessing for a curse. Trials, all it is... What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger, you know. Then one day when all the rain has dried you find that you are alone – that it’s up to you to find meaning – to build your life anew...

As he glibly rambled for direction, Sherilyn glared at him from behind scarlet mortification, but to no avail. He continued.

–Take me, for example. When Lori and I divorced I thought life was over. ...The only thing that kept me from killing myself was my kids... But then God felt I’d taken enough and he rewarded my efforts; he saved me. He said, Bill, I want you to meet someone very special –

Bill looked across the room, searching.

–Sherilyn, where you, darlin’?

Spotting her, he smiled and gestured her over.

–Come over here, baby, Bill said, beaming.

After some smiling refusal – not wishing to complicate things any further – Sherilyn Taylor joined her husband in front of the oven. He wrapped her in his free arm, making a sound effect connoting a bear’s strength.

–This woman right here. That’s what makes me a rich man. Yessir! Haha. A good woman, that’s what’s behind every good man. So in honor of the ladies, let’s have a toast.

Men politely lifted their glasses to the ambiguous laughter of the women, awaiting Bill’s finale.

–To you ladies, for putting up with us, we toast you!

The men drank. Laughter availed. Dessert was had, as were secrets. Most everyone silently agreed to overlook what would grow to be an infamous toast in years to come. Steve Yeger attempted to pass his slurring critiques off on Bill Taylor, but luckily John Bryant intercepted him; a few minutes later the Yegers said goodnight and walked home. Steadily the other couples parted, thanking their hosts at the door, none more effusively than Bill Taylor who took John’s handshake in both of his warm eager hands and shook wildly; when it came time to say goodbye to the hostess, he took Kate Bryant in an embrace and planted a friendly kiss on her cheek. Sherilyn was reserved but thankful, carrying her empty dish in front of her on the way down the steps to the car. The door closed and only the hosts remained.

John quieted the music and met Kate in the kitchen. The two joked together as they washed the stack of dirty dishes. Half an hour later the majority of the dishes were in

the dishwasher. A few scummy pots were left to soak in the sink. John said he would finish them in the morning before golf. They kissed goodnight and John went to bed.

Kate then poured herself a small glass of chardonnay, sighing with relief.

After putting on her white winter coat and rummaging through a drawer for her cigarettes, she stepped outside to indulge in the pleasures of silence and solitude.

Like a statue's toenail, the moon shone through the pines.

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Kate Bryant awoke to find it was an overcast Saturday morning, her head felt heavy and muddled. But she was happy she'd slept in; she needed a rest after all the cooking and entertaining she'd done the night before.

She went downstairs to make breakfast. The pots had been put away: a practical sign of love.

She had tea and a cheese omelette with smoked salmon.

She then checked on her youngest son, Michael. He was safe, asleep in his bed. She thought about her other sons, David and James, who were off at college. She hoped they were safe, too. Then she went back to her bedroom to get ready for the day.

There were a few errands to do. First she needed to stop off at the bank downtown to deposit a check. For when she wasn't acting the matriarch, she catered parties with a prestigious catering company in Seattle. Many of the clients were Microsoft executives. On more than one occasion over a given month she was chatting with some of the wealthiest people in the country, even the world. But she did not try to borrow prestige and when asked about the clients, she would say that they were really just like ordinary people, only much wealthier. Not only did she veil her own activities in modesty, but she extended this modesty to others as well.

Arriving at the bank she saw that the two ATM machines outside were in use, so she sat in her car, where it was warm, waiting for her turn.

A sleek sportscar drove through the alleyway and slowed behind one of the many art galleries in town. For some reason it peaked her curiosity and she watched it stop and idle while the shapes of the passengers fumbled about behind the dark windows...

Small plumes of exhaust coughed out the tailpipe. The driverside door was opened to half, tentatively. A moment more and the driver finally emerged into plain view. Upon recognizing the man staggering around the car to open the passengerside door, Kate reminded herself that her car windows were tinted. Still, she wished she were someplace else.

His herringbone suit was rumpled, his jowls looked like cold white wax, and apparently he'd slept little if at all. He looked around with an air of nonchalance, though clearly he was in a hurry to be on his way. A head of disheveled blonde hair rose into view from behind the passengerside door. She was something between a girl and woman. Her dark makeup was past its finest hour, as was her sequin dress. She kneaded her skirt flush, holding her tiny handbag against her thighs. Her legs must be cold whoever she is, thought Kate; and sure enough the girl's thin white knees began to wobble in the cold gray air, like two strings plucked gently.

