

## And the Weather, Just Perfect

When our son tells us he is getting married, we are in the kitchen, preparing dinner for the annual neighborhood party. For just a moment, as he says it, I think he means to a woman, and my breath catches even though I don't mean it to. George looks up from the table where he is slicing lemons, knife in one hand and half a lemon in the other. David is in charge of the salsa, and after he says it, says, *I'm getting married*, just as if he is saying, *I'm going to step outside for a second*, or, *great day for a party*, he just goes on chopping the onions into tiny cubes.

"To Tom?" George asks, and I barely let him get the question out.

"Of course it's to Tom! What a silly question," I say, and wipe my hands on my apron and rush over to David. "Congratulations," I say and hug him.

"We were going to tell you together," David says, putting down the knife for the first time, "but Tom can't be here tonight. And, well, I just thought you should know."

"Of course we should know! We're your parents," I say, and immediately am embarrassed by that *we're your parents* part. That's not what I should have said, too obligatory, too reminiscent of the *of course we love you* conversation, but it's out and now I have to make it better, because George has started slicing again and it's all up to me to make this good.

"So when's the date? Do Tom's parents know? Did you tell anyone else?" I can't think of any more questions.

"I don't know any of that yet, Mom. We just decided and wanted you guys to know right away. Nobody else knows yet." Now he seems frustrated. "Maybe I should have waited."

"Don't pressure him, Laura," George says, but he doesn't look at me when he says it. George doesn't like Tom, which is ridiculous. He's a nice man, a few years older than David. An architect. It's ridiculous that George doesn't like him. They're going to be married, so George will just have to learn to

like him. I can tell David is upset now because he is chopping the onions again, even though they are small enough already for the salsa.

“Well, I’m just so happy for you, honey,” I say, wiping my hands again, and then my eyes start stinging from David’s onions.

“Where are the avocados?” David asks me, and even though I just bought the avocados this morning, I can’t remember where I put them.

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When David returns from picking up Poppi at Riverside, most of the food is ready, in bowls and on plates in the refrigerator, on platters around the counters, waiting for our neighbors. We have six kinds of cheese, four of which come from local organic farms and the other two are imported from France. I made shrimp rolls with ginger dipping sauce, and stuffed mushroom caps. Of course we also have salsa and guacamole, David’s favorite, and George insisted on a bowl of mixed nuts. Dinner, as usual, will be mostly grilled foods, though I have three different kinds of salads. Last year it was the Fitzgerald’s turn and their dinner was really a disappointment. George is so good at the grill, so it’s unfair of me to judge others, but I can’t help it when I eat chicken that is overcooked. Chicken should be tender. That’s just the way it is. And Don Fitzgerald’s chicken was not tender. Ann’s salads were fine, but just not very memorable. I told her I would give her some of my recipes, but Ann doesn’t really care about salads, not as much as she should anyway.

George is puttering around the garage, getting his grilling tools out. I want to talk with him for a moment, so when I hear David settling Poppi into his chair on the back porch, I sneak into the garage and shut the door behind me.

“Do you know where I put the grill brush?” George asks without looking up. “Last time I saw it was when I put it away right here.” I can see the grill brush over to his right, but that’s not why I came in

here.

“Should we make an announcement tonight?” I ask him, and then, “There’s the brush, right there, right where you put it.”

“No,” George says, meaning no to the announcement. “Let him tell people if he wants to. It’s not our responsibility.”

George is wrong, but his answer will make dinner easier. Unless of course David decides to tell everyone, in which case we will look terrible for not announcing it. I tell George this. He shrugs.

“Do what you think is right,” he says and picks up the tools and walks out of the garage. He leaves the tool cupboard open, and as I close it I notice a box to the left that is out of place. George must have taken it down from the loft. In blue marker on the top of the box, in David’s blocky handwriting, are the words DAVIDS STUFF KEEP OUT. It’s a box of old toys that David packed up when we moved here from Albany, when he was eight. He had fought us over that move, said he would hate his new school and his new friends. George had tried to reason with him, “but if they’re your “new friends” you won’t hate them because they’ll be friends.”

“Then they’ll be new enemies,” David had snapped back.

I hear George in the kitchen, then Poppi yells from the back porch that he’s thirsty, so I leave the box where it is. We saved all of David’s things so he could show his children someday. Our grandchildren. George must have had a reason to take it out. He’ll put it away later.

David finishes making Poppi’s drink, a scotch and soda, but I stop him before he gets to the door.

“Here,” I say, “I’ll take it to him.”

Poppi, my father, sits in the same place every time we bring him over. I always ask him if he wants to move, or sit in a more comfortable chair, but he is just as stubborn as he was before the

dementia. He's been forgetting names lately, our names, and the names of things slip his mind, though sometimes he remembers the most amazing details. On Thursdays I have dinner with him at Riverside, and every Thursday he orders the same dinner. Only last Thursday he stared at the menu too long and so I said, *Poppi, do you want the linguini again?* And he said, *What's linguini?* I just took a big sip of my chardonnay and ordered for him. And then he said, "Remember when you fell asleep in my arms at your own birthday party. Your mother asked if she should put you to bed, and I said no, let her sleep, she's exhausted, poor thing." Then he asked what was for dinner.

On the porch, I hand him his drink. "Here you go, Poppi. How are you feeling today?"

"Great!" he says, looking out at the yard. "Danny's getting married!" He takes a drink.

"David, Dad. It's David getting married. Danny is Betsy's son. He's already married. And has two kids. Remember? Your great-grand kids." But Poppi is now trying to fish a black fly out of his drink, and then I smell something burning in the kitchen, which just reminds me never to put George in charge of anything but the grill.

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Our neighbors all arrive late, even though they're neighbors. I stand at the door and greet everyone, six couples, eleven kids, and Melanie from around the corner, and then I move into the kitchen to check on the food before going outside. Within five minutes Sue has shown me a picture of her new granddaughter. She has three grandkids now. This one looks like every other baby, which is what George always says. Except when David was born, George held him for the first time and cried. I see David through the window. He is setting up the croquet set, talking to Don as he puts the wickets in the grass. Don smokes a cigar, one hand on his belly. He grins, and with the cigar hand pats David on the back. David must have told him. Which means I should say something, because if David were marrying a woman I would break out the champagne and we'd have a toast.

George comes in the kitchen to get some matches and I say, “We need champagne, George. I’m going to run out to Benny’s. I’ll be back in five minutes.” I shouldn’t leave, but it’ll just take me a few minutes, and people are just settling in so no one will even know I was gone.

“What do we need champagne for?” asks George, looking right at me for the first time in hours, and I can tell he’s about ready to start something.

“Because he’s our son, George,” and I take the keys and walk out the door, knowing that reason should be enough.

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There are cars backed up over the small bridge leading towards Benny’s. Must be an accident, but the next closest store is fifteen minutes in the other direction, and I’m already feeling guilty for leaving the party. Cars ahead of me are honking. Nobody has any patience any more. People used to have more patience. When we moved here there was never any traffic. It only took a few minutes to drive David to school, or practice, or karate. Now everything is different. Everything is so much more complicated. Now I’m going to be late and George is alone at the party and there are still things that need to be done.

All the cars are completely stopped now, and people are getting out to see what’s happening. I’ll never make it to Benny’s and back in time if the accident is bad, so I get out of the car to see if I can find out how long it’ll be.

“It’s a goose,” says the man in the mini-van in front of me, who is walking back from the bridge.

“A goose?” I say, not sure what he means.

“Someone just hit a goose.”

“A goose?” I say again, because why would a goose be on the bridge, and then, “Is it alive?”

“I guess so,” says the man. “They’re trying to help it, but,” and he laughs, “geese are nasty. And

the other goose is throwing a fit.” The man laughs again and opens the mini-van door. “Someone should just shoot the poor thing,” he says, and gets in his car.

I leave my car door open and walk up to where people are starting to gather. If this isn't cleared up soon I'll have to go back home without the champagne. I can't be away from my own party this long.

I can see a few people crouched around something in the middle of the bridge. I see Mrs. Kline, David's old teacher standing off to the side holding her grandson's hand. He's trying to see something behind him, but she pulls him and starts walking away.

And then I see what he's looking at. It's the other goose, standing a few yards away from the injured one. It's frozen almost, neck stretched straight, beak angled just slightly towards the sky, one round eye turned towards the middle of the bridge, making a terrible noise, a deep rattling sound between a honk and a scream. I can feel the sound in my chest, can hear it in my own throat, and I clap my hand over my mouth.

“Must be its mate,” says a man next to me, who is out of his car and walking towards the geese as well.

“How long is this going to take?” asks another man. “I'm already late.”

“Me too,” I say through my fingers, my throat constricting, and then, before I can stop myself, before I can think about it, I drop my hand and say, “My son's getting married.”

“Right now?” says the man.

And I burst into tears, standing there on the bridge amidst strangers.

“It's just a goose,” says a woman who has arrived, and then the man says, “No, she's late for her son's wedding,” and now it's too late to correct them, and I'm crying too hard to say anything even if I wanted to and the goddamn goose just keeps screaming and screaming and if I could I would snap its neck and I have to get home, back to my party.

“This will be cleared up in few minutes,” says the man, meaning the goose problem. “Your son will wait for you.”

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I get back to the house twenty minutes later and Poppi is standing in the driveway with a rake in one hand. I honk once, lightly, just to get him to move out of the way, but he just smiles and waves at me with his other hand. I roll down my window and take a deep breath.

“Poppi, what are you doing?” I ask. “Why aren’t you out back with everyone else?”

“They needed me up here,” he says, as if I should know that, and then, “Be careful!” He turns and walks to the middle of the yard and takes up his post again. I know I should bring him back inside, but I’m already so late and the champagne needs to be put on ice, and I’m sure everyone is wondering where I am, and George must be in a panic about the food by now, so I just say, “Thanks, Poppi, I will.” I pull the car up and check my eyes once more. No one will be able to tell, I’m sure.

David meets me at the door, which is good because my arms are full and there’s no way I could open it myself without dropping a bottle.

“What’s all this?” he asks, taking two of the bottles from my arms. And then he sees Poppi. “Oh, there he is. I’ll get him. You better go back there—Dad’s on his third beer since you’ve been gone and he’s talking about buying that boat again.

“Hey Poppi! Come on out back with me. We’ll get a game of cribbage going,” he says, and I’m so proud of him. He’s still holding the champagne and he shifts both bottles to one hand and with the other takes Poppi’s arm. “Last time I let you win,” he says to his grandfather.

“I’ll kick your ass, Danny,” Poppi says, and David smiles.

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George is in the kitchen getting another beer out of the refrigerator when I come in with the

bottles.

“Where have you been?” he asks, not offering to help me.

“There was an accident on the bridge,” I say, and then, knowing that it will upset him, I add, “Why don’t you slow down a little, George,” meaning on the drinking. He ignores me and opens the bottle.

“Don and I are going to buy a boat,” he says. We have talked about the boat and he knows we can’t afford it right now, not with the recession and the mortgage on the condo in Arizona. And now the wedding. He is doing this to start a fight, but I will not do that to our guests.

“We’ll talk about it later,” I say, and when I turn around I see David settling Poppi into a porch chair and then he starts towards the kitchen door, so I say to George, quickly and quietly, “I’m going to announce it, George,” and he says, “Announce what?” and passes David in the doorway.

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When we are all seated and eating, I look at David. He looks just like George used to. I used to imagine what he’d look like when he grew up. When I watched him as a little boy I could tell he was going to be handsome. I knew he was going to be smart. And funny. He loved sports, and getting dirty, and we were tough with him, but not too tough. But we set limits, and raised him to be respectful and polite. Sure, we made some mistakes, but honestly, not many. We were good parents.

Don is sitting to my right, and because he has just finished his plate, I ask him if he’ll help me with something in the kitchen. George doesn’t look up from his conversation with Melanie. The kids have already finished eating and they are playing croquet, making up their own rules. The balls crack as they hit each other.

“Sure,” says Don, getting up and then helping me to my feet.

When we’re in the kitchen, I tell him that I’m going to make an announcement about David



getting married.

“You and George are great,” he says. “David is such a great kid and it’s so great how you’re all so supportive.” He has said great too many times and we both know it.

“Thanks,” I say. I am gathering together the plastic flutes I bought at Benny’s, and Don is opening the bottles.

“I mean,” he goes on, “everyone admires you guys. The whole neighborhood.” And he pats me awkwardly on the arm.

“Thanks,” I say again, and look out the window at my backyard.

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Once everyone has champagne, I ask for attention.

George pushes back from the table and I think that he’s going to get up and walk away. But he stands and stops.

“I have something to say,” he says.

“George,” I say.

“Dad,” David says.

Everyone around the table is smiling.

“My son,” he continues, “is getting married.” Then he raises his glass.

Melanie is the next to raise her glass and then everyone at the table is saying “Congratulations!” and, “We knew it was only a matter of time,” and, “Where’s the lucky man?” and, “Way to go, David!” and everyone is drinking and smiling and laughing, and George is right in there, drinking and smiling and laughing, and I should be rushing forward to join in with them.

But I’m exhausted, can barely stand up I’m so tired.

Poppi is holding his scotch and looking at me from his end of the table. His eyes are hard and

clear.

“Laura,” he says, and the only reason I hear him is because I’m looking right at him. Everyone is up and gathered around David now. George is pouring more champagne, Melanie is asking about the date, Don and Ann are holding hands. I smell charcoal and bug spray and feel the first chill of the evening. Above the noise of the yard I hear a truck backing up somewhere.

“Laura,” he says again, or I think he says, the noise is too much now to be sure. And I think of salads, how everyone loved them, particularly the black bean salad, my mother’s old recipe with roasted corn and fresh cilantro; and the chicken was perfectly cooked, still tender; and amazing, really, how great the weather is despite the forecast, no clouds at all, no humidity—and the yard, my God, the yard looks amazing today, my lilies in bloom and all the weeds gone—and I know that everyone will see the tears in my eyes, and they will think, “How great for her, for them. And what a great day.”