

A Late Summer Comedy

It's Sunday morning and we're in the kitchen and we're both dressed for church. I am at the table, eating my corn flakes, drinking orange juice and coffee, reading the sports section. I've put a little vodka in my orange juice, but Tom doesn't know that.

He has the refrigerator door open. Did you drink my milk?

No, I didn't drink your milk.

The Cubs lost in extra innings last night on a walk-off home run. Now they're only fourteen games out of first place. They have a doubleheader in New York today. Gardner pitches the opener and his ERA is over six runs a game. That's not good.

Somebody drank my milk.

No, nobody drank your milk.

The Bears are in training camp and there's already an injury bug. Half the starting defensive line is down with knee and ankle sprains, our slot receiver has

a tender hamstring, and both cornerbacks are nursing hip problems. Plus Bertram Ahmad is still holding out for a better contract. But Coach Bower says we have a good chance at the playoffs this year. I wish I had what he is smoking. Instead I have a splash of vodka in my orange juice.

Tom shows me his milk bottle.

Somebody did.

No, they didn't.

Look, he says. I made a mark, right here. I made it yesterday, and look, see the difference? Right there. Somebody drank my milk.

There is a mark, a black ballpoint dash about a centimeter long, but the milk looks level. Tom stands over me, his finger tapping the mark. He smells of soap and shampoo. I say, Maybe it evaporated.

It didn't evaporate. Milk doesn't evaporate.

My corn flakes are getting soggy in my bowl. My toast is growing hard. The air conditioning kicks on and makes the rattle and then the hum and then the silence. I feel the air from the vent on my neck and it feels like something foreign and mechanical.

Everything evaporates.

Tom has his milk and I have my milk. It's been like this for a month now. One day he came home from the grocery store and said this is your milk and this is my milk. The same with cheese and yogurt. And grapes and strawberries. So it isn't just a dairy thing.

Everything is separated in the refrigerator, his side and my side, just another of his strange weird quirks, one among many, though he has gotten really very bizarre lately.

This is the third day in a row that Tom has been talking about somebody drinking his milk and he holds the bottle up and stares at it a long time. I tell him he needs to go ahead and eat, we have church and then brunch with Carl and Hanna, maybe a movie after or going swimming in their pool.

There's somebody else, he says. I know there's somebody else.

There's nobody else.

Yes. Yes, there is.

He puts the milk back on the shelf and closes the refrigerator door.

I wait for him to go upstairs to get his tie and cufflinks before I add a little more vodka to my orange juice. The morning sun outside is white and pale. You can already feel the heat coming up off the sidewalk.

This is something new, the last day or so, him thinking I have a lover, starting Friday night when I came home late from work. He was out on the back patio, nursing a drink, and he said, I do know, I know what you're doing, just tell me who it is.

He said he could smell it. He said it smelled like a dish rag. A wet sock. He wanted me to stand there on the back patio so he could take his time and sniff me all over like I was some dog in heat. That isn't going to happen. He asked

where I was going and followed me upstairs and watched me change out of my work clothes. Is it Frank? Is it Bill?

In the car he fiddles with the stereo, turning the dial, settling for a Christ station. They're playing a rock song about Jesus casting the demons into the pigs and the pigs running off the cliff. It's an up-beat thing with a catchy chorus that sounds a lot like She's Got a Ticket to Ride. Tom sings along, tapping his fingers on the steering wheel.

He's wearing an old pair of slacks from before he lost some weight. They look huge on him. The way he sits in the car it makes his crotch bunch up like he has a hard-on. I wish it was a hard-on. I haven't seen an erection for quite a while now. He's been sleeping and dressing in the spare bedroom for the last week or so. And I have no idea why.

I'm wearing a short skirt, too short for church, but all my good clothes are at the cleaners. It's this or jeans, and girls don't wear jeans to First Baptist.

Tell me who he is, he says. Just tell me who he is.

There's nobody.

Is it James? He says. I bet its James.

One day I come home from work and he's home before me and he's taken half his stuff out of our bedroom and put it in the spare bedroom. I ask why. He says I know why. I don't know why.

Last night I hear him talking behind the bedroom door and I wonder if he's on the phone with a lover. It is quite a conversation, almost like an

argument. I put my ear against the door and listen and he's saying Yes and No a lot. It would maybe almost be okay if it is a lover, explaining why he's been so odd. Maybe she could teach him some new tricks, stuff he could try out on me. But when I go downstairs for a nightcap I find his phone on the kitchen counter, which means he has been talking to himself, and that isn't good.

This has been a dry summer and most of the yards we pass are turning brown. Some are green green. We are under a water-rationing alert. It is easy to tell who is breaking the rules.

We go by a park and there are hundreds out on the jogging trail, running in the morning sun, the rays causing long shadows. None of them are going to church. We're going to church.

We're going to church because God talked to Tom last year while he was reading the Bible, Ezekiel's rant, and God told him that this was the True Word. Tom has always been religious, but not religious religious, so now we listen to Christian rock, read CS Lewis, and spend our Sunday mornings in church with a bunch of other people giving thanks for being alive and breathing. It means a lot to him.

I'm neither here nor there on the subject, though this morning I'm definitely not there. I'd much rather be reading the paper and drinking vodka and orange juice and later watching the Cubs on TV, lay on the couch with the air conditioning full blast and take my day of rest. Maybe we could have sex. We could have sex on the couch, in the bed, on the kitchen counter. I don't care

where, as long as we have sex. I make a mental note to stop by Walgreens on the way back from church to pick up new batteries for my vibrator. The poor thing is beginning to wear itself out.

But I blame myself. I was the one who told Tom to read Ezekiel, my favorite Bible book, where the deity gets all jealous and schizophrenic and kills everybody on earth, cutting off heads for minor slights and destroying entire cities at the drop of a hat. God at His Old Testament best, petty and volatile, mean and capricious. I thought Tom would get a good laugh out of it. I know I do. But no, God decided to talk to Tom, or Tom decided to talk to God. I'm pretty sure it must be the latter. Otherwise it would mean that God is a devious son of a bitch.

I mean, if God is going to talk to Tom why does it have to be about rules and regulations and going to church and worshiping and ruining my Sundays? I don't mind the odd service now and then, on religious holidays and the bored once a month kind of thing, but every week? And why can't God tell Tom to be nicer, a better husband, a better lover? That would be a good God to me, one I could worship more.

Today's sermon is about the gift of giving, that giving is better than receiving. As if that is news. Reverend Jones stands at the lectern and tells us about her grandmother and how her grandmother did volunteer work with the Girl Scouts. They sold a gazillion cookies. They made stuffed dolls for a women's shelter at Christmas. Something is wrong with her microphone and there is a

slight hiss coming through the speakers. It makes everybody uncomfortable. They shift in their pews as if by moving around they will be able to get rid of the hiss.

Giving is better than receiving. Tom has been giving me shit and I have been taking his shit. This is getting old.

We sit next to Carl and Hanna. Carl and Tom work together and Hanna and I are best friends. We church together, we party together, we travel together. I'm not sure I like Carl. He has a roving eye, always looking at my tits and legs, though you can hardly blame him. I do keep fit. Right now Carl is edging his eyes down to see if he can catch a glimpse of my panties. My skirt really is that short. He doesn't know I'm not wearing any panties. All my panties are in the clothes hamper at home. That's my job tonight, doing the laundry. I cross my legs. I don't want to pull a Sharon Stone kind of thing.

Sam, Tom whispers. Is it Sam?

No, I whisper back.

Who then?

Nobody.

Somebody.

I only have a twenty and I'm not going to make change out of the collection plate. I ask Tom if he has any ones. He opens his wallet and stares at his bills.

Somebody, he says, has been at my money.

No, they haven't.

I had seven ones and two tens. Look. Six ones and a five.

I tell him to just put a five in the plate and we'll talk about it later.

Did you steal my money?

No, I didn't steal your money.

Somebody stole my money.

Sometimes I wish we belonged to one of those churches where they talk gibberish and dance around with snakes. I'd like to see our congregation rolling on the floor and speaking in tongues. Tearing their hair, rending their clothes, ripping their bodices. Instead we stand and sing What a Friend We Have in Jesus. It gets a little rough by the middle of the second verse, everyone faltering and going off-key, ending in a long drawn-out mumble.

I catch Tom staring at me like I have farted or something. It's not a good look.

Just tell me, he says.

Tell you what?

I want to forgive you, he says. You need to be forgiven.

He has this judgmental smirk on his face.

So I say, Fuck you.

And of course this happens during the lull between song and prayer, my fuck like a sharp bell echoing up to the cavernous church rafters, followed by the you. Fuck-fuck-fuck you-you-you.

No one handles this well. There are gasps, titters, harrumphs, little kids asking parents what fuck means. Tom glares. The reverend coughs into her hissing microphone.

Except Hanna, my best friend Hanna, she laughs, does the old, You go, girl.

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We decide on Jackson's and the restaurant is crowded for Sunday brunch. You have the Baptists here, the Catholics there, the Methodists over in the corner. They sit us in a booth by the window. Children run around. Parents shout at children running around. Sunlight comes through the window, so bright we should probably be wearing sunglasses. I use a menu to shade my eyes. Hanna laughs, doing the same. We all order Bloody Marys.

Carl has on his church blazer and church slacks. Hanna wears her partial schoolmarm outfit. They might as well be in Halloween costumes, considering how they act in real life.

Hanna says, Fuck you, and we all start giggling bad, except Tom.

Tom says God moves in mysterious ways.

Hanna stifles her laughter and asks, Does He?

Time, Tom says, has come to this point.

Has it?

Tom says God has built the universe to reach this moment in time. This is what He planned. We are what He had in mind all along. Tom raises his arm to

bring in the restaurant and its customers. We have reached the apex, the culmination, the final chapter.

I can't answer. Hanna rolls her eyes. Carl is Carl.

There is a car wash across the street and there is a line of cars and trucks and SUVs waiting to be washed. The people stay in their vehicles, rolling up their windows and blasting air conditioning to beat the heat.

On the drive from the church the car was like a tomb. Tom had the radio off. He drove like he was in a hurry to get somewhere. I thought a couple of times we were going to get in a wreck.

You said fuck. You said fuck in church.

I'm sorry.

Don't apologize to me. Apologize to God.

Sorry, God.

Say it like you mean it.

Oh, I mean it.

Hey! He reached over and raised up my skirt. You're not wearing any underwear.

Then I got grief for going bare bottomed at church. He thought a dirty pair of panties was better than no panties at all.

I said I didn't think it mattered.

He said of course it mattered. We were in church.

I said I thought we are all naked under the eyes of God.

Not in church.

I think I heard him whisper Bitch under his breath.

The Cubs are on the TV behind the bar. Hernandez takes a third strike on a hanging slider. We're playing in New York and the Mets are already up by half a dozen and it's only the fourth inning. Gardner didn't make it past the second. The Mets. Even the Mets are beating our ass.

We ask for more Bloody Marys when we order our brunch. Hannah and Carl get omelets and I have my sausage and Belgian waffles. Tom orders the steak and eggs plate. Rare, he says. Not medium-rare. Rare. He wants to see blood.

I had my period last week. Not that it mattered. Tom was sleeping in the other bedroom. Thank God I had my period. It was late.

My Bloody Mary needs more vodka. I drink it like it is weak tomato juice, gone in six swallows. Hanna talks about last night, being with James and Mary, having dinner at the new Spanish place downtown on Michigan. She says they went to a bar after and stayed out late. It was so much fun. She says they were sorry we couldn't make it. I say I didn't know. Hanna says she called and Tom said we had plans. We had plans? We sat at home. We ate dinner, a delivered pizza, half pepperoni and half sausage and mushroom, and Tom pushed my hand away when I tried to take a slice from his side. We watched a movie about an outlaw sheriff saving his reputation. Tom went up to the spare bedroom while I went through two more movies. I remember using my vibrator, and I remember

opening the second bottle of wine, but I don't remember Tom telling me that Hanna called to invite us out.

Tom watches me. He tells them I'm not wearing any underwear.

Carl smiles. It's both childish and lecherous.

Let me see, Hanna says. Let me see.

She bends her head under the table and I briefly lift my skirt.

She laughs. You've stopped waxing.

I say I've told her that.

I love it, she says. She says she's thinking about going hairy too, maybe a baby stache, a little Hitler.

Sieg heil, I laugh.

Carl says we should lower our voices. Though I can tell he would love to look under the table too. And I would show him, just for the fun of it, to see the look on his face. Carl's never seen me down below before. I doubt if he'd be disappointed.

Tom's steak is rare enough it could moo. Blood pours out and gets in his toast and scrambled eggs. He tears a biscuit in half and uses it to sop up the stuff.

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It's Carl. I know it's Carl. It's been Carl the whole time. I should have known, I should have known.

It. Is. Not. Carl. There. Is. No. One.

I am on my third vodka and tonic and the Mets have walked in a run in the first inning of the second half of the double header. Tom opens the refrigerator and stares inside. He moves things around on the door so the salsa and ketchup and strawberry jam are on one shelf and the mustard and mayonnaise and horseradish are on another. He asks why my cheese is on his side of the refrigerator and his cheese is on my side of the refrigerator. I say I didn't do it. He says somebody did it.

I say he must be crazy if he thinks somebody came in our house just to move cheese around inside our refrigerator. He says his milk too. He's not sure about his grapes, they don't look the same either. He says his boots upstairs in his closet. The left boot is on the right side of the right boot instead of the normal way around.

His boots in his closet in the spare bedroom.

We've changed into our home clothes, both of us in shorts and t-shirts. I wear my Cubs cap. I reach across him to open the freezer for more ice for my drink. He says I've had sex. I say I haven't had sex. He says he can smell it on me. I say no he doesn't. Not that I didn't think about sex while I was changing my clothes. I got my vibrator out of my bedside table drawer but the poor thing just fumbled around and went rr-rr-rr instead of its steady thump and rrrrrrr. I'd forgotten to stop for batteries.

Are you drinking? Yes, I'm drinking. Why are you drinking?

The Mets bat around in the fifth inning and we're down a dozen. Lopez is still on the mound because we used six pitchers in the first game and there's only two guys left in the bullpen. The announcers start telling old stories about traveling to other cities, anything to fill the time.

You had sex with Carl. When did I have sex with Carl? When you went to the bathroom together. At brunch we did go to the bathroom together. Carl wanted to know what was wrong with Tom. He said people at work were worried about him. He said he and Hanna were worried about him.

I turn off the TV and refresh my drink and grab a towel from the clothes hamper and go outside to the back patio. There is a spot on the patio where I can lie down and none of our neighbors can see me. I take off my shorts and t-shirt and try to position my body so the sun can catch every inch.

Tom watches me from inside. He stands at the sliding glass door like an overweight mannequin in a department store window. Hanna calls and says Tom called her and said Carl and I were sleeping together and she knows we're not sleeping together and she's calling because she's calling and I tell her no we're not sleeping together and she says she knows that.

We have a laugh about the phrase 'sleeping together', as if couples meet for an afternoon nap. Let's meet at the hotel for a quick snooze. I can't wait to spoon with you. Hanna asks if I have and I say No, not yet, but I probably will, though there are no prospects on the horizon, and I ask if she has and she says she has and she is and I tell her to tell me more and she says there's nothing

really to tell, that the guy is better than Carl in the sack and that is all that matters.

The air is so still I can hear the family two doors down. The mother is yelling at the father about something and the kids are screaming for her to stop. On the other side of our back fence Mr. Douglas has his gardening shears out and he's busy trimming his rose bushes. The sun is hot. It's like fire ants on my skin. Maybe I should trim my bush. But not yet. The hair in the middle above the crease has grown into a tiny question mark. I like that. I doubt if Sharon Stone has a question mark. It's probably more of an exclamation point. Hanna wants a little Hitler. Oh, Sieg Heil.

I call my vibrator Misha, because it reminds me of Baryshnikov when it dances. The sun is like fire. I'm about to burst into flames.

Tom comes out, carrying a Bible in his hand, and he sits in the plastic patio chair and leans over me as if he is surveying an ancient map. I ask him if he likes what he sees.

Why are you naked?

Because I want to be. Nobody can see me.

I can see you.

He opens the Bible. He says, The Gospel according to Mark. Mark eleven-twelve. And he begins reading, his voice stilted and pondering, and he pauses now and then to let the words sink in. I don't listen much.

Jesus and his disciples are wondering around and Jesus is hungry and they see a fig tree in the distance and when they get there they see it is all leaves and no fruit.

A fig is a fruit?

That's not important. Listen.

Jesus isn't happy. He's hungry. He curses the tree, saying, May no one ever eat fruit from you again.

That's just mean.

Shut up.

Then Jesus and his disciples head into Jerusalem and go to the temple, where he gets all mad and starts turning over tables and attacking doves and rabbits and other animals.

Just because he's hungry?

Shut up.

Later they are on the road and come across the fig tree again. It has withered. It is dying. Jesus says we must throw ourselves off the cliff and into the ocean.

I say I don't like Fig Newtons. Never have.

Tom says he prays for me not to be damned to hell.

I say maybe the fig tree refers to the tree in the Garden and the Joshua tree and the crucifixion cross and Moses' burning bush. Buddha's tree, Godot's tree.

Tom, I say, Tom, my bush is burning.

He stands up from his chair, his shadow coming over me.

I say I remember how my mother one day was reading Genesis out loud to me and my brother and she said it was a good thing that Adam and Eve never ate from the Tree of Life, because, to paraphrase, unending consumption without adoration is more or less the definition of hell.

That's stuck with me my whole life. Consumption without adoration is hell. It sort of makes me sick to my stomach, even though I'm not sure exactly what it means.

Really. What the fuck does that mean?

I ask about the chair, why he has it in his hands over his head.

