

Game Night

All winter we watch football, cheer on the teams our parents taught us to root for when we were young.

For a while we feigned an interest in baseball after the NFL season was over, but eventually we acknowledged that watching America's favorite pastime played out on a 60" flat-screen TV is one hell of a bore. So a few years back, Linnie suggested we think of another thing to do Sunday nights, something that could carry us on a carbohydrate hangover into the manic pressures of Monday morning business meetings. It was Ethan who had the bright idea for Couples' Game Night. All of us thought it was the best idea anyone of us had ever had. We were buzzed on the fat, juicy promise of what it meant to be twenty-somethings living in an up-and-coming city in a country where we could buy an entire meal for five bucks at the drive-thru of our choosing.

The first game we played was Monopoly. Jason cleaned house.

These days, Jason's the marketing director for a local winery. When he first got the job, he pushed aside his Scrabble tiles and drew us a flowchart of exactly how his company would rise above the rest to become the finest in the tristate area.

"Craft brews might be all the rage now," he said, rolling his eyes at Ethan's oatmeal stout, "but mark my words, my friends. In five years, consumers are going to want something different."

He brings a new wine to each Game Night, talks about tannins, bouquets, dry finishes. To amuse myself, I substitute the real names for my own as he pulls the corks out of the bottles with a flourish. "Here's a 1993 Reese Witherspoon. Try this Petite Sara with your steak. Ah, my favorite – a proper Blonde Frankenstein."

As I listen to him go on about an upcoming business trip to the French vineyards, lamenting that he will have to share a room with his dyspeptic colleague, I remind myself that this is the same guy who sold pot out of his dorm room back in college. Back when we drank piss beer from the gas station and thought we were invincible. Back when I was with him, and not with Ethan. Sometimes I

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can't help but wonder if I would have become a wine girl had I stayed with Jason. Amber has adapted well; she buys him decanters for their anniversary, wine chillers for Christmas.

Tonight it's our turn to host. Ethan bustles around the kitchen in his *Kiss the Cook* apron while I attempt, once more, to attack an artichoke.

"Not the stem, Kate."

"Right, right."

Pots and pans steam and sizzle on the oven, clean plates are laid out on the breakfast bar; there are six individualized mini-cheesecakes arranged on a glass platter in our refrigerator.

"You've really gone all out tonight."

He sucks béchamel sauce off his thumb, winks at me. "It's a special night," he says. "We finally get to spill the big news. Remember to brush it with lemon juice, babe. Keep it from turning brown."

"Presentation's everything, right?"

He laughs as he throws a handful of pasta into a pot of boiling water. "You're learning, babe."

In college and for a couple years after, it was just the four of us, by then secure in the couples' arrangement still in place today. Then Ethan met Ty at work; Ty and Linnie came as a package deal. The boys went to sports games and beer tastings together; we girls indulged in pedicures and karaoke nights.

We all got married. Ty and Linnie had two kids; Amber and Jason had three miscarriages and are now on their second trial of IVF. Ethan and I held off. "We'll wait a few more months, see what happens," we got in the habit of saying, and after a while we stopped asking the other what exactly we were waiting for. We adopted a puppy, a Great Dane we named Gandalf.

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If asked, I'm certain all six of us would tell you that yes, in the grand scheme of things, despite the occasional bump in the proverbial road, we are very happy with the direction our lives are taking.

They arrive at 6:00 on the dot. Lynn timer makes a show of turning off her iPhone, stowing it away in her purse before giving me a peck on each cheek. Ty's booming laughter and Old Spice cologne fills our tiny kitchen. Amber slips out of her new jacket, and Jason presents a bottle of Spanish Albino #39. We all proclaim how nice it is to be able to spend this time together, a night away from kids, away from the stresses of our jobs. Ethan announces dinner will be ready in twenty minutes; "In the meantime," he says, "Kate's made a fantastic spinach-artichoke dip." And we fill our plates, chatting in that white-noise way of suburbia, before congregating in the living room, each of us settling into our accustomed seating arrangement.

Jason offers me a glass of wine, but I decline. From the kitchen, Ethan can be heard humming and rustling silverware. Amber exclaims over the Roman shades I have sewn for the living room, saying she loves the color, the simplicity of the design. And then Ty begins complaining about work while Lynn timer rolls her eyes as he spills food on his freshly cleaned shirt, and Game Night has officially begun.

Lynn timer organizes fundraisers for a company that has more money than God. In a span of two years, she has gone from wearing thrift shop skirts to having her pantsuits tailored to her specificity. She carries a date book with her and refers to it when making plans with me and Amber to meet up for lunch on a weekday, saying things like, "Oh, Tuesday's no good, I'm meeting with the CEO to discuss long-term donor projections," or, "I can't do Thursday, I have an interview on WXVZ about next month's 5K." And Amber and I nod along, lauding Lynn timer's efforts to make a real difference in the global community.

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But sometimes I want to grab her by her professionally colored hair and ask her what's happened to her. "When we first met," I want to say, "you made fun of people like this. You talked about the corruption of companies like the one you work for. You listened to Phish, for God's sake." But it would be pointless. Once a person changes, it's hard to change them back into who they were. You adapt to the person they have become. You give them tax-deductible donations twice a year and pretend you believe it's going toward a good cause.

"It feels *so good* to be out of the house," Lynnie says. "Max and Penny won't stop bickering over which cartoon to watch. Have I mentioned how boring parenting can be?"

"Did Amber tell you we have a date for insemination?" asks Jason, unflinching, as though this is a normal thing to throw around in casual conversation. "One week from tomorrow. It's going to work this time, sweetheart, I can just feel it."

"Let's just say I'm cautiously optimistic."

"Gandalf peed in his food bowl again," I offer.

"Ethan, remind me at work tomorrow to get that paperwork signed for Higgins. Wouldn't want him up our asses all week, am I right?"

"Isn't Kate's artichoke dip *amazing*?"

"Did I tell you what Max did the other day? Stuck gum in Penny's hair. Those gorgeous blonde curls. I had to cut off two inches just to make it look halfway decent again."

And around and around, until the main course is served and the conversation turns to other things. Like wine, we have learned to pair the dialogue to the meal. Pasta is served with a light discussion of last night's SNL skit. Grilled salmon can be dished up with something heavier, a good-natured argument about politics, perhaps. Nostalgic remembrances about our younger years pair best with take-away pizza and jalapeno poppers.

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Ty is one rung above Ethan at the international shipping company where they work. Though a supervisor, it is safe to presume no one has ever looked to Ty as an example of managerial professionalism. He's too playful, too inclined toward knocking off early to play a round of golf – which is exactly why his coworkers like him and pray to be put under his supervision.

As a father, he is always the good cop, the one telling Linnie they should use their savings for a trip to Disney World. He wears cargo shorts and shows up at BBQs bearing Nerf water guns. He is sweet and kind, and he worships Linnie, even when she is in one of her anal-retentive moods. She might have adopted all the ambition in their relationship, but Ty is the loyal companion, the cheerleader, the happy-go-lucky husband and father.

A couple years ago, he picked up the habit of calling sandwiches *sammies* to make fun of people who actually called them that. Then somewhere along the way, he, too, forgot their proper name. He shows up to our Super Bowl parties bearing dozens of Subway foot-longs. "I brought the sammies!" he exclaims, beaming. That's the thing about Ty – he doesn't know when he's the one making the joke and when he is the joke himself.

Halfway through the entrée, Ethan shoots me a conspiratorial glance, and I nod. The silent language of a marriage.

"So, Kate and I have some news," he says, and the four of them perk up, forks frozen in midair between plates and mouths.

"Oh my god, you're buying that house, aren't you?" Amber asks. "The one on Lupine Circle." She has been pulling for us to move to her and Jason's new neighborhood for months, insisting that if she and I do not design our kitchens together, we will be missing out on something essential to adulthood.

"We can't afford that place," I reply.

"So I take it you didn't get that promotion at work, Kate?" asks Ty.

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“It was offered to me,” I say, “but I turned it down.”

“Why would you do that? Weren’t they going to give you, like, crazy money?”

“I told you, Linnie, I’d rather not spend all my time at a job I don’t care about. I’m taking that watercolor class, remember? Trying to get back into my artwork.”

They nod indulgently, like parents who tell their children that yes, of course they can grow up to be astronauts and brain surgeons.

“So what’s the news?” asks Jason.

I can feel them all tensed, each of them sure they know the answer, too cautious to say it. For years, Ethan and I have evaded the topic, skirting the issue and making a joke of our indecision. But I know what they’re thinking. If isn’t a new house or a new job, and we already have a dog and two dependable, paid-off vehicles, it could only be one thing, one other milestone worth making a big deal about.

Sure enough, the words come tumbling out of Ethan’s mouth. I know he’s been rehearsing this all week, imagining just how he will deliver the news. “We’re pregnant,” he says.

And I hope they are so distracted by their congratulating that they don’t notice how I flinch when he says it.

After her first miscarriage, Amber quit her job as a paralegal and spent her days online shopping. Jason suffered a mini panic attack with each new credit card statement, but said nothing, knowing she needed a way to cope with the loss.

By the time she had her second miscarriage, Jason had started at the winery, and money was no longer an issue. Amber began haunting antiques shops, bringing home turquoise Pyrex casserole dishes and knockoff Tiffany lamps in need of repair.

After they lost their third pregnancy, Amber spent her days driving from town to town, store to store. They had just closed on their new house, and she finally had an excuse to purchase

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wingback chairs and mosaic backsplashes.

Eventually Jason got a little overwhelmed with the amount of Pyrex she had accumulated, and so he suggested they funnel their money elsewhere. He knew that for Amber, to adopt or to hire a surrogate was to concede defeat. But IVF might give her the false hope she needed.

“She’s committed to this,” Jason once confided to me. He admitted what Amber had never told me and Linnie, that she had several different conditions that made it nearly impossible for her to stay pregnant. “But if she wants to keep praying for a miracle, if that helps her sleep better at night, then so be it.”

So every once in a while, Amber and Jason get poked and prodded in the cold sterility of doctors’ offices, and every day, she buys more stuff to make up for what she will never have. And Jason brings home a 1967 Carmen Diego, preserved for decades in some other rich guy’s wine cellar, collecting dust all these long years.

After all the congratulating, the hugs and tears and “I knew you guys would want kids eventually” comments, Jason suggests we get back down to business. He glances at Amber, then at me and Ethan, and we know it’s time to change the subject.

“Charades tonight?” Ethan asks, and begins to clear away our plates.

Ethan is my husband. Ethan is my emergency contact, my partner in petty crimes and misdemeanors – not often perpetrated anymore, now that we are no longer as young and stupid as we once were.

He married me in a glammed out barn full of our friends and family. He danced with me under white twinkle lights and didn’t think it was stupid. He returned two wedding gift toasters with me to Bed, Bath & Beyond, exchanged them for the silicone ice cube trays and soy candles I just had to have, and he never complained.

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He's done what is expected of him all his life. College for four years to obtain a degree in history that he never uses except to crush the rest of us in Trivial Pursuit. A blue-collar job at the shipping company that turned white-collar when Ty recommended him for a mid-manager position. A growing 401k, finances filed away each year, neat and tidy. A modest starter house in a family-friendly neighborhood. A wife who makes up for her lack of cooking skills with other things, like a talent for sewing homemade curtains and the ability to change a flat tire in under fifteen minutes. Ethan votes, Ethan collects bottles for the local Boy Scout troop, Ethan never forgets to take the trash out to the curb on Thursday mornings.

Ethan is my husband, and all the things I once loved about him now bore me to tears.

We rarely play Charades because it reminds us too much of our parents, who sat around three decades ago drinking cocktails in their sunken living rooms acting out things like *Shoulder Pads*, *Dutch Elm Disease*, *Knight Rider*. But sometimes we get in a mood where it's the only game that will do.

We like to switch things up, pairing off with someone other than our spouse. Tonight it is Amber and Ty, Lynn timer and Ethan, Jason and me.

Ty and Amber fail to get anyone to guess *Bieber Fever*. Ethan, receiving no help from Lynn timer, who is deep into her fourth glass of wine, impresses us with his haunting impersonation of Donald Trump's toupee. When I pull up the card to reveal the clue to Jason, I feel a lurch in my stomach.

Stork, the card says.

"We're going to pass on this one," says Jason.

"It's not me," Jason told me that night in his and Amber's new kitchen. Everyone else was in the living room, entrenched in an endless round of Cards Against Humanity. "Amber's the one who can't have a baby. Not me."

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The guacamole I'd brought was turning brown, the chips beside it growing stale. I declined his offer for a glass of 2004 Columbo. I accepted his offer to meet him for lunch the next afternoon.

It was something to marvel at, I thought in the hotel room afterward, how you can kiss someone and remember how it is to be yourself once again. How you can let go for just a moment and fall back into the person you really are. How freeing it is, how terrible, how unimaginably intoxicating.

Jason and I win at Charades tonight, but the others are nonplussed, too full from good food, good wine, good news. Lynn timer tells me that she knows she bitches a lot about cartoons and endless loads of laundry, but there's really nothing that compares to motherhood. Nothing better or more fulfilling. Ethan winks at me, grinning as Ty shakes his hand once again, and Jason helps Amber slip into her jacket.

"Well, we're the hosts next week," Amber says as we huddle together at the door. "Any requests?"

"We haven't had fish in a while," Ty suggests.

"You know, I have a great 1982 Sophia Bush that will pair perfectly with roasted sea bass," says Jason.

"Shall Kate and I bring Apples to Apples?"

"My favorite," Lynn timer exclaims, downing her last glass of wine for the ride home.

"I'll bring an appetizer," I offer. "There's a recipe for roasted red-pepper hummus I'd like to try out."

"Really," Amber says, and we all pretend we can't hear the tremble in her voice. "I'm so happy for you guys. You'll be great parents."

All winter we watch football, cheer on the teams our parents taught us to root for when we

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were young.

We drink wine, eat food we have prepared ourselves with careful consideration. We compare purchases from department store BOGO sales. We tell ourselves this is the good life, the meaningful life. A couple of us sneak into the kitchen with the excuse of doing dishes and kiss each other senseless as guacamole pools into a puddle of toxic green nothingness on the table. (Infidelity tastes like stale, bitter wine, and something sweeter – lemon curd on a summer’s night, the memory of days we will never get back.) We talk about work and kids and property values and melting ice caps. And then, when there is nothing left to say, we play Boggle.