

Candles

The wine is poured, the candles are lit, and a golden casserole glows like a full moon in the center of the table. It's sure to have a serious tofu base, this being Matthew and Jeanine's. It's their turn to do dinner this month. When everyone can make it, and usually everyone can, there are seven of us: Matthew and Jeanine, married so long they look like brother and sister—tall, blond, toned, and then the unattached: Susan, Robert, Joani, Kyle, and me. Tonight, though, there are eight, because Kyle's brought a woman none of us have met before. Her name is Nancy. She wears her hair in an asymmetrical wedge and looks like she does cross fit. Naturally we're curious about her, but so far she's offered nothing of herself but polite, condescending smiles.

After the casserole has cooled and solidified, Matthew will serve. In the meantime, we're discussing how to get wax out of fabric. One of the white candles dripped onto the midnight blue tablecloth.

"I don't think it's possible," Robert says sadly. It was Robert who jostled the candle. Picture an uptight insurance claims adjuster. That's Robert.

"That can't be true," says Susan. "We'll Google it as soon as we're allowed to look at our phones again." That's the rule at Matthew and Jeannine's. No phones during dinner.

Even though Susan's in her forties like the rest of us, she's like everyone's favorite aunt, the one who's always on your side. Her hair is pure white--I'd like to say prematurely, but to be honest, mine would be mostly gray if I didn't keep after it. Susan

doesn't wear makeup, either, not even a dash of lipstick. At first glance she seems pale and plain, but when you really look, you notice that she's actually very beautiful, but in such a subtle, unflashy way you feel proud of yourself for making the discovery.

"I remember hearing something about peanut butter," I say.

"That's for getting gum out of hair," says Nancy. It's the first time she's spoken. Suddenly she's the center of attention.

"Where were you when my children were little?" exclaims Susan.

"Do you think the same principle could apply to wax?" asks Robert.

"Doubt it," says Nancy. "Never worked on gum." Everyone laughs.

"Please let me buy you a new tablecloth," says Robert miserably.

"We already have too much stuff," says Jeanine with a dismissive wave.

"And besides, you couldn't replace this one," says Matthew. "Jeanine's great-grandmother brought it with her from Poland. Used it to hold their belongings the night they fled the pogroms. Isn't that the story, Jeanine?"

"It's a miracle it's survived this long," Jeanine sighs. "Robert, we're kidding. It's just some old thing I got on sale at Target years ago. I'm not even Polish."

"Anyway," says Matthew, "if we wanted to go to the trouble, a simple ice cube would do the trick." He fishes one out of his wine glass and holds it up like a game show host indicating a valuable prize. "You simply rub this on the surface, and, *voila!* the wax scrapes off like magic. I can't believe none of you knows that."

"No!" says Jeanine. "Just the opposite. You use heat. You iron the fabric between newspapers. I know that from my retro new age batik days."

“Your batiks were always as stiff as cardboard,” says Matthew. “Remember that vest you made me? Worse than starch in your shorts--although it did improve my posture. Ice for wax, definitely.” He reaches for the casserole and divides it into wedges. “This turned out rather well,” he says to Jeanine. “It almost seems a shame to cut it.”

“Jeanine says heat, Matthew says ice,” says Joani. “There’s an interesting subcontext here.”

“Fire and ice. That *is* interesting,” I agree. “So yin and yang-ish.”

“Ice, connoting frigidity,” Joani goes on. “Scraping things off the top. Failing to acknowledge anything below the surface. Avoiding penetration. This is very revealing, Matthew.”

Joani has some issues with men, traceable to the five years she wasted on--what was his name?--planning his parents’ anniversary parties, managing his mail-order natural vitamin business, all the while swallowing Xanax to quiet the voices in her head that screamed, “I’m not getting any younger! We need to have a baby, *now!*” But Ryan--that was his name--suddenly up and left her for a woman who, it turned out, was pregnant with his child. Predictably, Joani is bitter, but at least she’s off tranquilizers.

“I’m sure a psychologist would find it absolutely fascinating,” says Kyle. He sends Nancy a stealthy glance.

“And fire?” says Jeanine, “suggesting just the opposite? Tell the truth, Matthew. Am I not still one hot babe?”

“Fire is conspicuous destruction,” says Robert seriously. “But ice can be even more destructive, in its own insidious way.” An undercurrent of understanding pulses around the table. It’s like the Squeeze Game in Girl Scouts where you stood in a circle

holding hands. When the person on your left squeezed your hand, you silently passed the squeeze to the person on your right. I'm not sure what the point was, but in this case the squeeze we're passing around is what Robert is really referring to. After fifteen years of what Robert considered a relatively decent marriage, he came home after a long day of quantifying other people's losses to find his house cleared out and a goodbye note stuck with a pineapple fruit magnet to the refrigerator door, which stood open. His wife had taken all the food, too, and pulled the plug on the fridge, which had leaked all over the floor and warped the parquet tiles Robert laid down when they first moved in.

"Of course none of us are psychologists," says Kyle. There it is again--that sly look to Nancy.

This time, she rewards him with a quick, intimate smile that's so easy to interpret it might have come with subtitles. *I get it, she's saying. None of us are psychologists; ergo, this isn't the least bit fascinating.*

If Nancy weren't here, I'd send Kyle an intimate look of my own, but mine would say *that's what friends are for*. To see each another as endlessly fascinating, I'd mean. The truth is, I'm attracted to Kyle, and what better way to form a bond than to pull back from a group and inspect them as a team? But unlike Nancy I wouldn't be trying to forge an alliance at our friends' expense. I enjoy analyzing our friends, we all do, Kyle included, because what are friends for if not to find you worthy of dissection?

"Psychology," says Joani. "Now there's a racket. You don't even want to know what psychologists charge for fifty minutes of their precious time."

"And here we are giving away it away for free," I say.

"You know what they say," says Nancy, "about only getting what you pay for." Again, everyone laughs.

Nancy's not unattractive, despite the haircut, but she's no better looking than Joani and I, and nowhere near as beautiful as Susan, and the three of us are more or less available. Sometimes we bring dates to show off, but our real status remains more or less available. There's no rule against inter-group dating, but in the eight years we've been getting together, it hasn't happened. Kyle and I talked about it once.

"Isn't it funny how none of us has ever hooked up?" he said when we were alone in my kitchen when it was my turn to have everyone over. "We've got two single men-- Robert and me, and three single women--Susan, Joani, and you--in the same room once a month, yet none of us has made a couple. I'm not counting Matthew and Jeanine because they're married." Kyle was married once himself. His divorce was the semi-amicable *this was a mistake let's cut our losses and move on* type, like mine.

"Why not consider Matthew and Jeanine?" I asked. The boneless teriyaki chicken breasts were ready and I was at that frantic stage before everything goes on the table. Still, I stopped what I was doing to give Kyle my full attention. "Why rule out the possibility of affairs?"

Kyle brightened, considering. "Let's say eight people, then, to make the math easier," he said. "Half male, half female. What's the total number of combinations that could make?"

"If we were all half male and half female," I said, "we could date ourselves. Factor that in, too."

Actually, we were eight people once. Brian, a career post-doc in something or other, used to be a regular. But there was some sort of unpleasantness between him and . . . Joani, was it? Or maybe Susan? In any case, Brian hasn't been with us for years.

"Okay," Kyle had said. "The answer is . . . a lot. And we like each other, I think, so why haven't we ever gone out?"

My heart gave a girlish little flutter. I thought he was suggesting that we go out. I'd wanted to be more than friends with Kyle for a long time—something I hadn't confessed to anyone except Susan. We all trust Susan with our secrets—she's like our collective unconscious.

But then I thought, what if it didn't work out? What if Kyle and I got to know each other intimately and then discovered we liked each other better when we didn't? It wouldn't be the end of the world, but it would be the end of an easy, effortless flirtation. It would also be the end of our easy, effortless dinners. Everyone would notice the awkwardness between us, and then one of us would have to pretend we had something better to do on the third Sunday of each month. I came to these conclusions in a split-second. In the same split-second, I realized Kyle wasn't asking me out.

"A bird in the bush," I'd said, "is apparently better than one in the hand. And way less messy."

But Kyle already knew that. His question had been rhetorical. Still, rhetorical, by definition, is something put forth for the sake of argument. What if I'd argued? Would Nancy still be here tonight?

Matthew won't let anyone help him clear the plates after dinner. He stays in the kitchen a long time rattling dishes and opening and closing the refrigerator while the microwave hums and beeps.

"Matthew!" Jeanine calls. "The dessert's on the top shelf in the fridge. Just bring it out!" To us she confides, "It's a wheat germ and cream dish. Now don't groan--it's full of fat *and* complex carbohydrates."

Matthew returns with a hubcap-shaped platter identical to the one holding the remains of the tofu quiche. He sets it spinning on the table with a flick of his wrist.

"But this isn't . . ." says Jeanine, steadying the hubcap. "Are these *peaches*? Are these the peaches I froze from the tree last summer?"

"Brandied peaches now," says Matthew. "Brandied peaches flambé! Stand back!"

He pulls a long-handled grill lighter from his sleeve and touches the flame to the dish, which is suddenly, spectacularly on fire. Matthew jumps back and collides with the mantle, his glasses dangling comically from one ear. Robert pushes away from the table with such force that his chair overturns and he lands on the floor. Joani grabs two glasses of water, Robert's and her own, and dumps them on the flames. A mushroom cloud rises from the dish. A second later the smoke alarm begins to shriek. Everyone is helpless with laughter.

Jeanine steps over Robert and goes to disconnect the smoke detector's battery. "Matthew, you idiot!" she cries with delight, throwing her arms around him on her way back to the table. "I forgive you for saying mean things about my batiks. I apologize for

laughing when Joani suggested you were frigid. You *are* hot, baby. But you're going to repaint the ceiling by yourself."

Kyle and Nancy leave soon afterward. Later, after we've finished cleaning up and are hanging out in the kitchen nursing a final glass of wine, Kyle returns. He gets himself a Heineken from the fridge and sits next to Robert who is scraping the tablecover with a fork. The wax is flaking off in colorless shards, but a chalky stain remains in the fabric.

"So," says Kyle casually, "what did you think of Nancy?"

"What're you doing back here with the likes of us?" asks Robert. "Didn't she invite you in? How long have you been seeing her anyway?"

"And what did you say she does?" asks Matthew.

"She's a professional dog trainer," says Kyle. "That's how we met. Ranger and I enrolled in her obedience class."

"How *is* Ranger?" asks Joani. "Still escaping from the yard and humping the neighbor's cat?"

"Turns out I didn't understand him," says Kyle. "Dogs are a lot like people, minus the affectations and hidden agendas. According to Nancy, they misbehave for attention. It's their owners who need to be trained to reinforce appropriate behavior."

"Talk about interesting subcontexts," says Joani.

Kyle picks at the label on his Heineken bottle, peeling it away in precise little stripes. "So?" he says. "What did you think?"

"I think she seemed *very* nice," says Susan warmly. "And she seemed *very* taken with you."

I send Susan a look. Has she forgotten about my interest in Kyle? But Susan won't look at me--no one will. And then I feel it--that unmistakable ripple pulsing through the group, but the squeeze never reaches me.

Jeanine says, "I agree. She did seem very nice—though I'm not sure how nice we seemed to her. Tell Nancy we'll be much better behaved next time."

"Speaking of which," says Robert, "I think it's my turn to do dinner next. Does the third Sunday still work for everyone?"