

## *Natural History*

A friend is coming to dinner. A friend is coming to dinner and a friend is coming to dinner. And because this is a story (I assure you this is a story) you will ask me, whose friend? Her friend. For a while he will call himself my friend, and for a while I will think of him as my friend (though I never say it out loud, *my friend*) but that thought will prove to be wrong. I will be proved wrong.

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A friend is coming to dinner and I am supposed to cook but I am walking the dog. I care for the dog, I live with the dog, at least twice a day I go out with the dog to the sandy hill behind our little in-law apartment. I am walking the dog and I am walking the dog, I am hiking with the dog. He is her dog, she got him from the pound before we met, but now he is my dog, our dog. The dog is black and the dog is lean and the dog is full of life and the dog runs back and forth whipping his long tail, his lips stretched back in a grin. I chase him, I chase the lean, black dog back and forth on the sandy hill behind my little in-law apartment where the short scrubby pines have dropped their bed of needles. I chase the dog round and round with a stick in his mouth and I would never take being called a dog as an insult, and I would never resent the notion that men are dogs. Men are not dogs. This dog is better than all men. This dog is better than all women. This dog chews himself to bleeding and this dog runs in pure explosive energy and this dog lays back his ears and arches his eyebrows at me when I admonish him. This dog licks people in the face and this dog is magnanimous to all people with whom he comes into contact and this dog would never betray me. This dog will howl long and mournful when I leave the house with the last of my things.

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A friend is coming to dinner and he is an actor, and she is an actor, they have been acting together. They have been acting and she has been directing also, she has been his director, she has been directing him. Together, they are coming to dinner, after they are done rehearsing, together. They have been rehearsing a play, a play wherein the protagonist is portrayed by a different actor in each scene. She is bringing her friend to dinner and he is an actor and he plays a main role in the play she directs, the play my wife directs.

To be an actor is to perform convincingly, is to lie so convincingly that you fool yourself and fool yourself so much that you fool your audience into feeling. You have to fool your audience into feeling and feeling until he laughs or he cries. I am not an actor, I am a writer, I write stories. I write and I write and I write, but I don't act, I write and I lie. I write and I compose, I compose these stories out of lies and truth, I mash them together like meatloaf, I bake them until I can't tell one from the other. My stories are composed of things that happened and things that didn't happen, things that might have happened, things that could have happened if the other things had happened first. I lie and lie on the page, all my writing is clever lies, white lies, lies to make the reader feel, I lie to make the reader happy he has read my lies. But I do not lie to the reader's face, I am not an actor, I wear my heart on my sleeve, I show the truth on my face, the story I tell is on my face. I am not comfortable on stage, I am not comfortable lying convincingly to the face of an audience.

They are actors, he and she, and they have been acting together, that is how they met, acting, acting for each other, acting for audiences, acting for me, acting before me. I

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have gone to many performances, many times they have performed for me, she has performed before me many times. Him not so many, but I remember the first time I saw him perform. His hair white in the stage light, his tensed hand reaching towards me from the black hole of the sleeve of a black and glossy trench coat. He did not know me then, and he would not have been the friend she would have brought to dinner if at that time she were to bring a friend. But he is the friend she is bringing now.

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A friend is coming to dinner, and he is a man, and he has thin yellow hair and he has broad shoulders and big hands, and he has lines beside his mouth, beside the developed muscles of his embouchure. Her friend is coming and the bridge of his nose is as hard as a wooden cross and his eyes are the blue of a falcon's and he smells like whiskey and tobacco, he smells like sweat, he smells like a train station. But until now I have only smelled him briefly while embracing, while hugging we have only touched briefly.

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She is bringing her friend here, to our house. This little in-law, high up on the hill with a wide view of the city and out to the grey ocean and the bridges over the bay, this is my house, and it is the dog's house, and it is her house, and it is our house. Our names are both on the lease, though not the dog's. Our names are together on many pieces of paper, many documents, most of them filed in my house, in her house. But when a friend is coming to dinner you don't think that, you don't think about all the papers you have signed, of how many documents pair your name with hers. You don't think about your names side-by-side, because it doesn't matter so much, not that way.

Another way your names are paired is when friends say your two names together.

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Friends and family say your names knitted with an ampersand, hyphenated, runtogether. Friends introduce you as your runtogether names soandso, youandyou, so even from the beginning sometimes friends know you as soandso, youandyou. That matters more than signs, more than names one above the other on checks.

Her friend is coming to dinner, she is bringing her friend, her. She has short straight hair like muddy grass and she is thin and reedy and her skin is pale and I can see the purple veins under the translucent skin of her stomach, above her murky fen of hair. I can roll over in bed and see her as she rises from our bed. I have seen her rising naked from bed or getting naked into bed almost every day, nearly every day since we were married, and before that too, before we went to the courthouse and signed our names.

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A friend is coming to dinner and I am cooking.

I am cooking and I am cooking and I am cooking. I am cooking things such as swiss chard, I am steaming the chard, lightly I steam it, not too much, turning the leaves by hand in the steam, just until they are warmed, just until the leaves are warmed but have not lost their shape, just their taste of earth. I am cooking rice and I am roasting the rice in oil with diced onion and crushed garlic and I roast the rice until it starts to brown and the scent of roasted rice rises to me like steam. I am cooking and the stove is covered with steaming pots and the oven is baking and the refrigerator is running and the cell phone is sizzling in the coins in the dish and the little apartment is full of cooking and heating and working and steam is dripping down the windows that face the night, the sulfur street lights in the condensation like moldering stars.

A friend is coming to dinner and I am cooking for him, for this friend, her friend,

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and for her. And myself. I am also cooking for myself. I always forget that part.

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We are eating. I am eating and she is eating and he is eating. The dog is not eating, he is sleeping and groaning, but we are eating. Plates full of chard, broad green leaves and blood-red stalks, mounds of golden rice, chicken soaked in sweet teriyaki. But, the chard, oh the chard!

She brought him here to eat. She drove him here in my car her car our car, and now he is eating and she is eating in my house, in her house. I have cooked for them and me, I have cooked for us. Now I am eating and they are eating. He's eating with a fork deliberately and she is eating without looking at her plate.

"I love chard!" I say, taking the long red stem in my fingers, folding the entire leaf into my mouth, crunching crunching until it's all gone, stem, everything.

"I haven't ever tried it," he says, looking dubiously at his plate, looking at his plate and looking at her. He is wearing his faded jeans and his old tennis shoes and his plain white t-shirt, by way of saying he doesn't care about appearances, by way of appearing he doesn't care.

We are talking and eating. He is asking me absently what I am writing. I am saying something about plots, I am describing convoluted plots. I am trying to tell him how I tell a story, how I shape it. I am trying to tell him how I try to manipulate the reader, how I lie to the reader, how I tell him white lies. I am eating the food I cooked for the three of us, and I am trying to tell him about lying, and I am enjoying it. I am enjoying it quite a lot. I am thinking and thinking, I am enjoying this. The dog is whimpering in his sleep, his paws twitching, his pointed ears askew. She leans and touches his head and he stirs and quiets

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and rolls his brown-shot eyes up to look at her, his eyebrows lifting.

It is dark in the house, my house, her house. It is dark in her house, dim, she's turned down the lights. And we are eating in the dim, and we are eating and we are eating and we are drinking in the dim. In the dim we are drinking wine and drinking wine and drinking wine. We are drinking wine and eating the food I prepared and drinking liquor. We are drinking whiskey and whiskey and whiskey. We are drinking in the dim, and her eyes are growing big and black in the dim and she is not looking at me but she says:

"It's really good. You always make such good food," she says without looking, as if her eyes are glass, black glass, taxidermy button eyes with the candle flame on the table in them like the pupil of a cat, a predatory cat, a panther poised on a branch at the natural history museum, muscles strung under dusty skin, but something not quite right, something not quite natural in the way the limbs were placed, the tilt of the head, the glass of the eyes, the gaping mouth, the pink tongue dry as old bubble gum, something missing. Her sign is Leo.

His sign is whatever. He is sitting and sitting and not eating and drinking and waiting and waiting. He is waiting for the next line, the next beat, he is watching the moments progress towards something inevitable, something totally unexpected.

I drank but I am not drunk. I am finishing what is on my plate, chewing and chewing and my gut is tensing while I chew the stringy chard stalks. I am feeling full, too full, this house is full, our house is full up with the dim, with the fluid dark, the loose and fluid shadows where she floats, where he floats. Where I float, there is a current passing through the darkness, a sick buzzing. She is floating in it, she is appearing at ease, she is affecting the loosening of drink. Her pupils are wide and dark in the dim. She is drunk as a

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skunk, she is drunk as a drunkard, she is drunk as she drinks to be.

I am not drunk but everything is hard to hear, what she is saying is hard to hear, as though we are under water, as though her mouth is muffled by the dark. She is asking something, she is asking something in a muffled husky voice, and in what she is asking are the words *make love*. She asks not looking at me, still not looking at me, looking at him with her glass eyes black with flame, and she is asking and she is asking but who is she asking? I think she should be asking me, I think I am the one one should ask, but she is not looking at me, she is looking at him, and looking at him and looking at him.

I start to stand up, and I stand up and I stand up, trying to get my bearings, trying to feel the floor, and I need something to do so I start to clear the plates. I stack the plates, the ceramic tapping of the plates, and I lift the plates and I start to carry them to the kitchen. And now I am out from between them, I am no longer something between them. I am on the other side of the table, our little round table, the first furniture we bought, my table, her table. I am on the other side of the table and I look at her and she starts to move. She starts to move and she starts to move closer like a zombie taxidermy panther on the prowl, nostrils flaring out and in. She is moving towards him with her glass eyes always on him as though to pounce, as though he will try to get away. I am standing on the other side of the table and I am holding the plates and I have said nothing, nothing definitive at all, but was she asking me, all the time she was asking, was she?

And I'm thinking and thinking and thinking of the day at the courthouse, the two of us at the courthouse under the plastic arbor beside the cubicle wall, she and I facing each other, the clerk reading the vows we selected from the laminated binder and our family members sitting in office chairs and leaning against desks, trying not to disturb the mugs

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bristling with pencils, the dinosaur toys strategically balanced on computer monitors. Our family is there watching quietly in the back of the court clerk's office while she and I repeat what the clerk reads, while we are looking into each other's eyes, while we are looking and looking at each other even as we say the words and put the rings on our ring fingers, and then we pull close, we draw close to each other and our bodies touch, there in front of this clerk and our family, the feeling of our bodies touching though there is my suit coat and her satin dress between our skins, and we close our eyes as we kiss. The feeling of touching, our lips pressing together hard, me holding her and she holding me, as though we can say how much we love by how hard we hold. We close our eyes and we hold each other and kiss and there is the sound of applause, our family clapping.

I can't stop thinking and thinking because of how she is looking. She is looking, not at me, at him, she won't stop looking while she is stalking. She is stalking and stalking towards him and she is kneeling and stalking, so slowly, until suddenly she leaps. Like that she leaps and clamps her mouth onto his mouth and each puts his or her arms around the other, and they close their eyes.

I put down the plates.

There's the single clap of the plates tapping as I put them down and the dog is whimpering in his sleep and I'm saying to myself and saying to myself not in so many words that this is what a modern uncontrolling open unthreatened unashamed unafraid secure self-reliant unconditionally-loving (not a male chauvinist) husband would do.

So I put my hands on his shoulders.

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We are fucking. We are fucking and we are fucking and we are fucking in the



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bedroom, him, her, me. She has dragged the heavy organic-cotton-and-cedar dog bed out of here and now the dog lies whining and whining and whining in the other room. Big black dog alone in the other room while we are fucking. We are fucking and we are fucking. Him in me and me in her and her on him and him behind her and him in her and me over her and her against me and him against me. We are fucking, I know we're fucking, because she doesn't use the words *make love* anymore, just the one time as she stalked across the table, across the floor. I know we're fucking because now she says:

*"Fuck me, fuck me,"* breathlessly,

while I'm plunging into her, plunging and plunging, like I'm trying to unplug something, like I'm trying to suck something out of her, not feeling pleased, not pleasure, like I'm punching down into her but never hitting, never hitting anything, always missing, while she says *fuck me fuck me*.

Her eyes are the same glass and her stomach is folded where she's turned up her hips and her mouth is open and empty except for the words *fuck me*. He is hovering around like a bad dream after waking, like a twitching muscle after running, like the quiet after the dog stops whining. The dog is whining in the other room. Pounding and pounding, me and her, her flesh slapping my flesh slapping, in my house, her house, my room, her room, and he is there watching in my house and I pull out and sperm thick and white on her stomach, like I was marking her, like marking territory, the same black glass and indefinable territory, like the steamed window glass where the street lights flower.

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She leaves the room to wash herself. He lies back. The heat in the room is of a fire at coals, no flame. I push down what is circling never resting in my stomach and lie down

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beside him with my head on his chest as if he were my father, his hairy chest like my father, curling pale hairs. She comes back into the gloom of the humid room.

“I love women,” he says through his chest buzzing in my ear, “I love men.”

But his act is no longer lying convincingly, he does not convince me. Because later I will be lying here in this bed and I will know where she is and who she is with, I will know even if I don't want to know, and I will be saying *I love you* over the phone, late in the night when she is not home, when I am alone in this bed at home, and she will not reply, she will not answer with words. So I have begun to stop believing now, I have begun to stop believing in this story, this story of love in this room where we were fucking.

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She comes back to bed and we are fucking again, fucking fucking fucking. He is behind her and she is backing towards him in some dance of estrus, of heat, and I am in front of her and I am against her but she is not touching me, I want her to put her mouth all over me, I want her to slaver all over me but she is not touching me. He is behind her and he is not looking at her or me, he is looking at where he is going in her. And she is saying something, she is moving her lips as though she is saying something, but something I can't understand, except the words *my dream*. I think she is saying *my dream*, her eyes rolling under her lids. She is not touching me, and I know what she means to mean which is him and me and her together is her dream, and I know what she really means because she is not touching me and the dog is whining whining whining out a warning. Then he sits back on his haunches and jets white all over my bedspread, her bedspread, a red bedspread, a wedding gift, holding himself, holding himself apart.

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We are lying together, she on one side of me, he on the other side of me, me the body between them. I am lying there inert between them, my arm under her neck, his head on my shoulder. I am lying there face up to the ceiling, I am naked lying there face up. We are quiet now and we are not fucking, no more fucking, so on our skin there is a distance. There is a distance on our skin, the electricity that drew us together, the force like magnetism that has brought her and me and him together in my house, in her house, in my bed, in her bed, now it is there on our skin, a repellent force like magnets of similar poles, held close but still apart. There is a tiny but perceptible distance between our separate skins.

“I had a dream about a woman we know,” I say. This by way of revenge. This by way of saying to her that I let you bring him in, into our house, our bed, I let it happen, I gave permission, I’m in control, there are others to whom I can go, for satisfaction, you’re not the only one who could have lovers.

“I don’t dream of her, or her,” he says to me, “I dream of you.” He looks at me in the low light and crawls over me while I look at him, stoic behind my passive face, while thinking, *You are lying. You are lying* I think at him, he leaning over me, his eyes half-lidded, the dog groaning in quiet perpetual torpor, he leans down and puts his rubbery lips to mine, and I leave my eyes open looking at his creased forehead in the low light while he kisses me but I say nothing, just lie there unmoving, the two of them on either side of me, the body between them, the two of them lying against me, both of them, both against me, lying.

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I am rising early. I am rising early from her bed. From my bed. There is a fog in at

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my house, her house, our little rooms on the hill above the sea. A dense fog is in and it is up against the windows, pressed as if packed into all available space. The world is full of things, things pressing, things taking space, what little space I occupy, pressing me like toothpaste from the tube.

I am rising early and she is sleeping. She is still sleeping while I am rising, she is a lump under the blankets, under the red bedspread, not stirring, not stirring while I rise and dress in the fog, her short hair like a tuft of broken hay. I am rising and she lies undisturbed. Her sleep is what she loves and her sleep is undisturbed as she lies alone in our bed, our wide hard futon bed, wide enough to hold five, six people, who knows? We are just beginning to learn how many our bed will hold.

I rise and dress and leave the room for work. He is in the living room and he is reading, reading my book, not her book, not his book, mine. He is reading my book and sitting on the couch, sitting bent over, sitting as though he might simply lean and then begin to sprint.

I am leaving for work and heading for the door and I say, "That's a good book," as I pass, "You should read it." By way of saying that's the only way you'll know me.

"Give me a hug," he says, and I won't refuse because I still believe something about her, I still believe that only sometimes, only occasionally, only once in a while does she look that way at him. So I hug him shortly and he puts down the book and he will leave it there and never read it, and likewise he will offer me a book to read but I too will refuse it, saying, "I can't, really, too much to read for school already," by way of saying I have no time to read into you further, I've already begun to see the way the chips are falling. And she doesn't read at all. She doesn't read what I write or what I read, or what he reads. She

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only reads what she writes, she only reads as she writes in her private hidden journals.

And I don't want to think it, I don't want to think it at all, but in three months I'm leaving, I'm telling him what I think of him over the phone, and he's saying *you have no fucking idea what I'm about*, and by now I don't want to know. He has his story, and she has her story, and I have my story. I've begun to compose this story about leaving, leaving behind my house, my dog. I'm composing while I'm leaving and taking a few things, my books and clothes, and she is keeping, she is keeping her bed and her table and chairs and her little in-law rooms and her dog, oh our dog, my dog, oh the dog howling and howling and howling as I leave, as I'm leaving the little house on the hill looking out into the fog over the sea.