

Three Tables

Table 54

“You said you turned that off.”

JJ fumbles for the vibrating iPhone in his left breast pocket and looks at the number. He stands, bumping the table. “I have to take this.”

Ali grabs her teetering goblet before stray drops of Cabernet can escape to the white tablecloth.

She watches her husband navigate the narrow path between tables, a pinball racking up points. He cuts off a high-heeled, short-skirted hostess, sneaks a backward glance, and sideswipes the elderly man behind her. Old gray-hair steadies himself while JJ disappears into the lobby, phone never leaving his ear.

Ali swirls her half-empty wine glass, concentrating on the vortex. *Hurricane JJ*. She chugs what’s left. *Couldn’t even push in his chair*. She scans the room for the waiter.

Absent her husband’s big head, she has a front row seat to young love. A redhead at the table in front of her spools a strand of hair around her finger. The girl nods and smiles at the boy across from her like an eager puppy. Ali can’t help roll her eyes. Fifty years of women’s lib, and they’re still twirling their hair and batting their eyelashes.

The boy twists his face into a kaleidoscope of expressions as he talks. He’s handsome in a goofy kind of way. With a prominent jaw and disobedient dark hair, he almost resembles her son. Evan. Little Evan, about to turn thirty. She should call him.

Behind them, the hostess seats the elderly man at a booth. It’s a big table for one and an odd choice for a man who’s not so mobile. The old guy rests his cane against the table, shakily lowers himself and collapses onto the seat. Then he inches to the center of the booth.

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Where is the fucking waiter?

Their crab cake appetizers have gone cold. She pushes one with her fork, a little fried lump coasting on a remoulade river. A little lump, like the one in her breast. Probably nothing, they said. Fibrous tissue. Hormonal changes. She smashes the crab cake with her fork. If only she could obliterate the lump inside her.

She hasn't told JJ. Or Evan. She hasn't told anyone. The cancer belongs to her. She won't give it away like every other piece of herself she's given away for the past thirty years. She'll keep this secret until her body betrays her.

"Excuse me ma'am." The voice comes from behind; she starts. "May I get you another?"

"Finally." She closes her eyes, exhales. "Yes please. Cabernet."

"May I take that, too?" Before she can protest, he snatches the appetizer platter, grabs her empty glass and floats to the bar.

She smooths the tablecloth. On closer inspection, it's dingy, stained. Why do they keep coming here, this neighborhood Italian dive? It used to be special. The place where JJ proposed. Where they celebrated birthdays. Their place. And then, when Evan was born, their family's place.

She sips water to ease the discomfort of being alone.

Now it felt foreign. Ownership had changed. Red carpeting faded to brown. It was like the favorite sweater she wore for decades, not realizing how shabby it had become until it fell apart on her. She and JJ came here out of habit, the same reason they're still together she supposes.

Movement at the Table of Love distracts her. The Evan look-alike is getting down on one knee. The redhead is blushing, smiling, her eyes misty. Ali wants to warn them, don't do it!

"Look at that dumb fuck." JJ is back.

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“I thought you were out chasing ambulances.”

“And leave you here all alone on our anniversary?”

She chokes on a smile.

“I sent my assistant. He needs the exercise.” JJ sits, pulls his chair in. “Remember when I proposed to you?”

“I’ve tried to forget.”

“But it was romantic.”

“It was impulsive. We had no idea what we were getting into.”

“I did. I was getting into your pants.” He laughs at his own joke.

She is so tired of this banter. Of this big shot. “Were we ever that happy?”

He opens his mouth, probably to make some wisecrack, she thinks, but his eyes are sincere.

“Does it matter now?”

Then the waiter is there, fiddling with his tray stand.

“Salmon for the lady.” He lowers the dish in front of her and then reaches for JJ’s plate. “And for you sir, Delmonico, medium rare.”

She sighs. “What’s happening at the office?”

“Nothing the boys can’t handle.”

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“That took half an hour?”

“*That* took five minutes. You’re so dramatic.”

“It’s a lifetime of five minutes. You’re always ducking in and out of our lives. Marriage. When it’s convenient.”

“You’re feisty today.”

“I express an opinion and that makes me feisty?”

“Bitchy. Bitchy is what I was really thinking.”

It was like they were in this loop, the same arguments repeated over and over. She should record them so they could hit Play each time. It would save her some strength.

Soon she would bring up the times he cheated on her. And he would say she drove him to it — smothering her son and neglecting their marriage. It was her fault he’d strayed.

“What, no energy?” He spears a piece of steak and practically swallows it whole. “Oh yeah, they get it right here every time.”

She takes her fork to the salmon but her appetite is gone.

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Table 25

“Just water, please,” Alice tells the waiter. The waiter looks to John.

“A bottle of your best champagne.”

Alice eyes John, questioning.

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“Yes, sir.” The waiter turns and leaves.

“John, what are you doing?”

“Celebrating.”

“Celebrating what?”

He reaches for her hands across the table and clasps them in his. “A new chapter.”

She raises her eyebrows. “A new chapter of what?”

“You’re enjoying the suspense, aren’t you?”

He has such a goofy wide grin she can’t help but giggle. “Yes.”

“Well...” He leans in, his nose inches from hers. “...I’ll tell you...” He kisses her softly, gently, then pulls away and smirks. “...when the champagne gets here.”

“That’s not fair!” Alice fakes a pout.

“No pouting.” He playfully wags a finger. “Tell me about your day.”

She sighs. “My day can be summed up in one word: morphine.”

“And how did your patients feel about their favorite nurse getting high all day?” He cocks his head as if it’s a serious question.

“Not for me, smarty.” She pats his arm playfully. “And I doubt I’m their favorite nurse.”

He grabs her hand and captures her gaze. “You’d be my favorite nurse.”

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She blushes.

“Pardon me. Your champagne.” The waiter presents the bottle to John. “It’s one of our best.”

The waiter slowly untwists the cage, carefully pops the cork, and pours the bubbly with a professional twist of his wrist.

John takes a sip and smiles. “Perfect.”

The waiter fills Alice’s flute. “May I take your order now?”

“Could you give us a few minutes?” John says as he winks at Alice.

Her eyes widen. “Well?”

“You’re looking at the newest associate of Barnes, Duff and Watson.”

“Oh! Oh. Congratulations.” Her smile is bright, but the twinkle in her eyes has dimmed.

She raises her flute. He follows suit.

“To your new chapter,” she toasts.

“Our new chapter.”

Alice takes a polite sip to John’s hearty chug.

“You’re not excited for me?”

“I am. It’s just that, when we’ve talked about the future . . . this wasn’t . . . I thought . . . I thought you wanted do a different kind of law—and help people.”

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He laughs as if she's told an excellent joke. "No Nurse Alice. You want to help people. I want to make money."

"John!"

"And I have a plan." He leans in and lowers his voice. "People come to you. They're sick. They're hurt. You nurse them back to health. Then, you give them my card and I sue the bastards who made them sick and hurt in the first place."

Alice stares at him, mouth agape.

"What? I'm just kidding."

She squints with skepticism.

"Okay, I'm half kidding." He grabs her hand again. "I worked my tail off all summer for peanuts. I'm drowning in law school debt. Lawyers are a dime a dozen these days. Once I get some experience, I'll start my own practice. And in the meantime . . ." He flashes a grin. "Who knows, I might even help some people."

She softens, "There's a flaw in your plan." Her right index finger finds a strand of hair and twirls, flirting. "I do palliative care, remember? Most of my patients don't get better."

"All the more reason to sue."

John picks up the bottle of champagne and fills his flute to the brim. He slurps the overflowing bubbles. Alice sips demurely.

"You're nursing your champagne, Nurse."

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“It’s very good. I just—” She searches for words in the pristine white tablecloth, lips poised to fib or confess.

His forehead wrinkles. “Alice? His fingers find hers. “Look, all that law talk doesn’t change how I feel.”

“How you feel? It’s not always about you, John.” She studies a tiny snag in the linen. “I’m pregnant. I just took the test today—two tests—and I didn’t want to tell you until I knew what to do.” She bites her bottom lip. “But I don’t know yet.”

The silence between them amplifies the din of the restaurant. A chorus of conversation and clinking silverware swells around them.

“Marry me.”

“What?”

John looks around and stands up, flinging his chair aside. He swipes a cloth napkin from a nearby table, seizes the red wooden napkin ring, and kneels in front of Alice.

“Marry me, Alice.”

Her eyes are misty. The restaurant chorus diminishes, waiting.

“Yes.”

John beams. “I’ll be so good to you . . .” He slides the napkin ring onto her finger. “Always and forever.”

“Always and forever,” she repeats. They kiss to a crescendo of clapping.

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Table 83

Mr. Jones studies the aroma of his Cabernet. The old man smells berries, spice, and times past. He swirls the oversized glass absent-mindedly. Mr. Jones hates dining alone, but today he is compelled to.

He and his wife came here often, until she got too sick to eat anything but toast and jam. He wishes she were here now. They'd be two old farts, wrinkled and happy.

A spring in the seat jabs his thigh. There's not much padding left down there—on the booth or his bottom—so there's no use trying to reposition himself. These days, some part of his body is always screaming anyway. He's gotten used to ignoring the pain.

Despite its discomfort, the booth provides the best view in the restaurant. At first glance, he spies a middle-aged woman. She's sitting by herself, but he can tell by the place settings she has a companion. Maybe it's the jerk with the cell phone — he came from that direction. The woman has the potential to be pretty, auburn hair flecked with gray, a button nose, fit arms, nice tits from what he can see. Except that her shoulders are hunched, mouth downturned, eyes inward, as if she's disappearing into herself.

He sips the wine and lets his vision wander. A young couple sits at an adjacent table. The girl is beautiful, glowing in a light blue dress. Mrs. Jones was a knockout in blue. The girl's companion, some wise guy in a suit, seems to be prattling on. Mr. Jones strains to hear their conversation. But his hearing aid merely boosts the static.

“Your steak, sir.” A freckle-faced waiter breaks his concentration. The kid doesn't look old enough to drive. “I'll get you another glass of wine?”

“Is that a question or a statement, son?” Mr. Jones is not too old to have some fun. Freckle-face squirms. “I'm just messing with you, kid. Get me another.”

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Mr. Jones admires his cut of beef, then stabs it with his fork. The juices overflow into his Brussels sprouts and mashed potatoes. He saws off a large piece and pops it in his mouth. Age has robbed him of his hair, his good looks and some of his hearing and eyesight. Thank God it hasn't stolen his taste buds.

He shoves another piece into his mouth and closes his eyes, savoring the taste.

“How is everything, sir?” It's the waiter, with another Cabernet.

Startled, Mr. Jones' eyes spring open and his head jerks. A piece of steak lodges in his throat. He tries to cough, but there is no air.

The boy stares at him, squinting. “Sir? Are you okay sir?”

Mr. Jones opens his mouth, but his voice doesn't work.

“Uh, are you choking?”

His chest heaves. The lights flicker. His body convulses.

Then the boy's arms are around him, dragging him out of the booth.

“I'm sorry sir. I've only seen this on TV.” The boy gives him a bear hug from behind, his fists pounding Mr. Jones' navel. The old man's body rises with each thrust. There's a shooting pain in his ribs. Even with an oxygen-deprived brain, he finds irony—youth holding on so tight, attempting to squeeze the death out of him.

“Try like this.” It's a small, soft voice.

The fist moves to a different part of his stomach. Another thrust. Then relief. The convulsions stop. His lungs fill with air. He coughs, pants.

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“It’s going to be okay,” says the voice. It’s familiar.

Sensation comes back to his body. He is lying on something hard. The floor. The light is steady now. She’s kneeling over him. *Alice!* He tries to say her name, but wheezes instead.

“Shhh. Just try to breathe. Like this.” She brings her face close to his, inhaling, exhaling. He inhales lilacs and sweat, hair scented with shampoo, the champagne on her breath. His body tingles, remembering.

She lifts her gaze to reveal the familiar creamy white throat. “He needs to go to the hospital.”

Then a man’s voice, “An ambulance is on its way.”

“Alice.” he whispers. “Alice, you came.”

She looks puzzled. “How do you know my name?”

“My dear Ali. I’m so sorry.”

“It wasn’t your fault. You were choking.”

His lips part, longing.

“Don’t try to speak.” Her touch is light on his shoulder. “Let’s focus on breathing.” She looks up again. “Ice water, please.”

He had forgotten how delicate she was. “No. No. For neglecting you . . . For cheating . . .”

“Please sir. You must be confused.”

“I never meant to hurt you.” He grasps her arm. “I didn’t want you to go.”

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“Okay, I won’t go.” She unclenches his hand from her arm and squeezes it tenderly. “I’ll stay here.” She dabs his forehead with something cold and whispers to someone he can’t see.

“Where’s the ambulance? He’s getting worked up.”

How can he make her understand? “My watch! The watch you gave me. Take my watch.”

“I don’t know what you —.”

His body thrashes as he maneuvers his right hand out of hers and over to his left wrist. “I want you to have it.” His fingers shake. He can’t manage the clasp. “Take it! Take it!”

“Shhhh. Okay. I’ll take it.” She removes the wristwatch and sets it on the ground. “There you go. Help is on the way.”

Heavy footsteps approach. A gurney drops down beside him. “Thank you ma’am. We’ll take it from here.” Men swarm around him. He feels fingers on his wrist and something cold on his chest. They lift him on the gurney.

“Ali! Don’t leave me. I love you Ali!” His cheeks are warm and wet. He misses her. He needs her. Strong hands restrain him. Something sharp pricks his arm. “Don’t leave me! Please forgive me. Please...” His limbs become heavy. Warmth spreads through his body. He is so drowsy...

* * *

As the paramedics roll the old man away, Alice feels the adrenaline drain from her body, leaving only fatigue. She is still kneeling on the cropped red carpet.

“You were great!” the manager stoops down beside her. “Are you okay?”

Alice musters a smile. “I’m fine, just a little shaken up.”

“Did you know him?”

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Does she? There was something familiar about him. And he knew her name. She scans a mental album of patients, but doesn't see his face. A wave of nausea distracts her. "Could you give me a minute?"

When the manager stands, Alice spies the old man's watch on the carpet. It looks expensive, or maybe it was once, but now it's old and scratched. She can take it to the hospital in the morning. He'll be more lucid then.

"Nice watch. I have one just like it, but in better shape."

"Excuse me?" Alice looks up to see a handsome middle-aged man hovering over her, extending a business card.

"I'm John Jones, from Barnes, Duff, Jones, and Watson. He could have died. The restaurant needs to be held responsible. You were brilliant, by the way. Give me a call, baby."

He winks at her and leaves.

She looks down at the watch and runs a finger over the face. It's cracked. Time has not been kind. She turns it over and reads the inscription.

To John, Always and forever, Alice