

A Quiet Dinner

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Brian walked through the dark house on the balls of his feet. He thought himself stealthy, but there was no one to disturb, except his wife and she was already awake. Rachel didn't sleep so well anymore.

In the kitchen, the tile floor stretched still and glacial toward the moonlight. Brian padded to the window. He stood with his feet on the metal register. Warm air rose over his body.

Six hours earlier, he was washing dishes in the sink. The water was scalding, but he kept feeling for two knives left lurking on the bottom.

The house was small. When the boys ran, they made the hardwood floors rumble. They were always running, making laps around the kitchen table. They screamed. They wailed down the hall. It was a small house.

Brian found the knives just as Rachel came through the door. She entered cautiously. She surveyed.

"Pancakes?" she asked.

"They're already done eating," Brian said. "I did the laundry, but I haven't packed their bags yet."

The boys flew to Rachel. They hugged her. They jumped around her and pawed at her. Then suddenly they went off again, screaming.

"How did you do today?" she asked.

"Oh, alright, I guess. I haven't folded the clothes yet, but everything is downstairs. How about you?"

"I felt bad about leaving you here all day."

"It's fine," Brian said. "Really, I got a lot of things done."

She kissed him, but it was brief. His hands were coated with suds.

"The reservation's at eight," he said. "I couldn't get in any earlier."

Rachel left him. She picked up the toys in the living room, something Brian had just done fifteen minutes before.

He put the long griddle into the sink. The teflon surface came clean, but there was thick grease in the gutter. He worked a washcloth carefully along the edge until it was smooth. With his fingernail, he scratched off a clump of burned batter.

Over his shoulder, Brian asked Rachel what she was planning to wear. She'd moved on to the bedroom and didn't hear him. Brian asked again. The third time he shouted.

Rachel's voice stretched as if reaching for something on a high shelf.

"Black!"

That was obvious. But what? He wanted to know specifically what she planned to wear.

Rachel drifted from one room to another. Brian heard the boys following her.

"I'm not wearing jeans if that's what you're asking!"

Brian ran the disposal. He wagged the sprayer to keep down the foam. He rinsed off the dishes, and put the glasses he didn't wash into their slick dishwasher.

They didn't have a dishwasher in their first apartment. They washed dishes by hand with music playing softly and the windows thrown open to the End of Summer. The wine glasses were always last, after everything else was dried and put away.

"Are you going to take a shower?" Brian asked.

Rachel was standing behind him, and it startled him to hear her so close.

"I'm not taking a shower," she said. "I'll just put my clothes on and we can leave."

She went down the basement stairs, and Brian called after her, "I'd like to take a shower. Maybe you can take the boys to your mother's and come back for me?"

"That's fine!"

Brian went back to the bathroom, but he didn't see the point of a shower. The boys marched past the door, trailing their suitcase and a pillow stuffed with toys. A few minutes later, Rachel came in dressed in her evening clothes.

"How does this look?" she asked.

"It looks good, maybe a little big even."

With one hand, Rachel lifted her shirt then used the other to pull the waistband of her slacks away from her body.

"It's impressive. You should be proud."

Their eldest looked in and Rachel rearranged herself.

"I'm going to wear my pearls tonight," she said to the boy. "The pearls you got me for Christmas."

Brian moved past them and went into the bedroom. He slid open the doors to his closet. He looked over the rack, then snatched a pair of black trousers from the center. He slipped out his jeans and then tried on the trousers. Before he tried to inhale, Brian's thighs suggested otherwise. There was another pair of trousers, on the far left end of the rack, last worn two years ago. Brian hoped were clean.

From the bathroom, Rachel watched Brian laying out socks. He was half dressed.

"I thought you said you wanted to take a shower?"

The boys raced past again with the suitcase, the pillow conspicuous in its absence.

"I changed my mind," Brian said. "Why don't you put their shoes on and get them in the car."

One of the boys appeared at Brian's side and tugged on his trousers. He ran away just as quick.

Brian pulled a shirt out his dresser, placed it against his chest, and put it back. He tried another, but he knew there was only one shirt that would do. He consoled himself with the thought that they would be sitting most of the time and when that wasn't the case he'd have on his coat.

Everyone was silent in the car. They backed away from the house slowly. From the street the house looked quiet and warm. It was a comfortable house from the outside.

There was still something left of the day. Though the trees were bare, bright sunlight held out a reprieve from the harsh winter. They drove past the half-lit homes of their neighbors. The crocus were stirring, but the forsythia had not yet bloomed.

After a block, the boys cried for music. Brian gripped the steering wheel with both hands as Rachel sorted through the CDs.

Rachel knew what Brian was doing. He was standing in front of the kitchen window, thinking about the evening but mostly about himself. A moody thing, and stark naked too.

She lay in the dark, still as a body in a cooling bath. She listened for the sounds she knew she would not hear, breathing and murmuring, coughing and restless shifting. Brian used to travel so Rachel knew what it meant to be alone, but this was different. She felt empty.

Earlier, after dropping off the children, they slipped into a familiar conversation. Words escalated along their normal trajectory, triggering old frustrations intertwined with false comparisons to the present. He wanted to be different and she assured him that he was.

Rachel had a little story. She'd saved it all week just for this transition, a story about the other mothers talking about their husbands. It was a simple story, but when she tried to tell it, he cut in asking what she said about him.

"I just listen to them, Brian. I don't tell them who are or anything about what you do."

"Are you embarrassed?"

"No, it's just..."

"It pays the bills, you know. It's what keeps you at home."

Of course she knew. Was she supposed to bow down to him? Be humble? Confess to an immeasurable depth gratitude? That was something neither of them wanted.

"I'm sorry," Brian said. "What did they say?"

Rachel drew a breath. She started over.

"Carly's husband got a raise but it really wasn't enough. He raged about it at home, but at work he kept laughing at his boss' jokes, hanging around his office."

"Did he ever ask for more money?"

"Not yet."

"I don't understand that," Brian said.

They took a long flyover off the interstate and crossed over a river. Rachel looked down at the brown water. It was sluggish and cold, still thick with winter.

"Carly said he's softening him up."

"Pissing him off is what he's doing," Brian said. "There's no time for that kind of crap. Just get it over with... I have the same problem with Josh. I'll tell you, if given the change, he'd be the first one I'd axe."

"There's another story about Sheila and What's-His-Name," Rachel said.

"Chuck?"

"Yes, Sheila and Chuck."

"How old do you think they are?" Brian asked.

"I don't know. They're older than us."

"God, I hope so."

"I know they tried for a long time to have Benny," Rachel said.

"Please don't make me imagine that."

"Sorry," Rachel said. "Anyway, once a month, Chuck takes in a candy bar to his Vice President. Sheila can't believe it, but Chuck just says, 'Why not? I know it's his favorite, and by going up there he kinda gets to know who I am.'"

"It sounds just like Tom and those god-awful pies he brings in. I'd never do any of that shit."

"That's what I'm trying to say, Brian. You're not like those other men."

"Not really," he said.

His voice was softer than she expected.

"I get away with what I do because they're afraid, but I don't care anymore. I don't belong there."

"And that works for you," she said.

"It's killing me is what it's doing," Brian said. "There's nothing else to do though. Going out on my own? That's so much bullshit. You have to kiss up, play nice to assholes you'd rather kick in the teeth. It's too much work."

Brian sped up to make a light. The car bounced over railroad tracks.

"It's almost eight," he said. "I hope they hold the table."

They parked, and by accident, Rachel started off in the wrong direction. Only a few paces, then she turned back and saw Brian waiting. He said nothing, just smiled and glanced away into the window of an antiques shop.

Amid the tables and buffets jammed close to the window, Brian saw a painting of a dark-haired woman. She had a broad, plain face. Her shoulders were bare and white. The subject had such a high degree of contrast with the background that she appeared to float above the rest of her body which was wrapped in folds of pink silk.

Rachel came to stand beside Brian. She commented on the painting, and Brian nodded. They turned and walked lockstep toward the restaurant.

It was warm inside Cucina Roma, and crowded. The hostess was a slim girl. She stood behind a podium, a small conductor's lamp lit up her face. There was an awkward pause before she greeted them, and Rachel had pleasant thoughts of all the girls who live in ignorance of their unkind futures. Another couple entered, bringing along a chill.

Brian did not linger over the girl. Instead, his eyes darted to the few open tables. Rachel knew that the table next to the door would present a problem. Brian liked to sit in the center of the restaurant where he could watch everything, and though he wouldn't admit it, where he too would be noticed by others.

The hostess led them to a table deep in the restaurant. As they sat down, the tension fell from Brian's shoulders. He shifted diagonally in his chair, then took up the wine list.

While Rachel watched discretely over the top of her menu, Brian began a slow, deliberate scan of the room.

The simplicity of white tablecloths and black chairs was no match for the burgundy walls of Cucina Roma. Such intense color drained the light from the room. It made people speak in hushed tones. Only a line of framed pen and ink drawings softened the atmosphere. Within the abstract curves, trees swayed and distant hills gave way to cities revealed by cupolas topped with waving flags. Ships in the harbor left under sail. The promise of escape turned oppression into intimacy.

"I must say this every time we come here," Brian said, "but these drawings remind me of my old sketchbooks."

Rachel smiled at the pictures and then at Brian.

"You're right. They do."

The moment was ripe for a grand statement about Art, but Brian remained still. How he used to go on! He could fill hours with talk that ranged across themes and entire schools of thought. For the few artists he admired, Brian displayed a grudging sort of reverence but for the rest he had nothing, only foul contempt. Such rage! How he used to go on! He left Rachel exhausted.

The waitress arrived. She was young, but she tried to compensate with detachment and formality. She stood close to Brian and asked about the wine.

"Well, you see, this is where we have a problem," Brian said. "She prefers white, while for me there is only red."

"I know what you mean," the girl said. "I like dry reds, but my boyfriend, he'll only drink red if it's really sweet. But there is a solution."

She stepped closer. Her open palm drifted over the wine menu, and Brian's eyes followed her gesture to the bottom of the list.

"Half bottles."

Brian looked at Rachel.

"Could you drink a half bottle?" he asked.

"We can have red."

"Really?"

"It's fine."

Brian preferred Cabernet, but asked the waitress about the Merlot and the Pinot Noir.

"I'm a Pinot girl myself, but people like the Merlot."

Brian ordered the Pinot, and after the waitress left, he faced Rachel.

"I really like this place," he said.

"I can tell."

"It reminds of a place in Zürich I think you would like."

"Which one?"

"Bodega Espania."

Rachel nodded, and a smile began to take root at the corner of her mouth.

"I haven't told you about that place before?"

"Oh, no."

Brian moved closer. He gathered up his body, almost as if he was preparing to thrust himself at her. Rachel let herself be held by his eyes, perhaps as she might have done years ago.

"It's a little place," Brian said. "Not even as big as this, but you don't feel crowded because the ceilings are high. Heavy curtains over the windows, the same color as the walls in here. I guess that's why I thought of it."

"Four brothers run the place. They emigrated from Spain years before. One works the kitchen. One works the door. The other two are waiters. There are others too, and they move quickly through the maze of tables, but it's the brothers you notice. They have a paella that is just huge. It comes in an enormous blackened steel bowl."

He held his hands out to demonstrate.

"You can hear them mixing it up in the kitchen. The pasta and the seafood. Scallops, shrimp, and these tiny muscles still in the shell. It smells wonderful and spicy."

"I can imagine."

"And one brother plays the guitar and another one sings..."

Rachel listened to Brian. The wine came and then dinner. He talked about Europe and the places he'd been, places she'd heard about before, but she listened all the same. She liked the way he talked, as if he were trying to convince himself the places he remembered still existed. He talked until he came around to Italy and then he stopped and looked at the drawings on the wall.

"That's the one thing I really regret. Not going to Italy. A whole year back and forth, and I never made it down to Italy."

"The other day I read an article, a memoir about this writer who went to Sicily to visit a vineyard on Mt. Etna. It's an active volcano. I could have gone down myself to watch it erupt, but I went to Paris instead. Anyway, the writer and the owner of the vineyard go up the slope of the mountain, driving on narrow, dirt roads, up to the highest point. Lava is flowing down the other side."

"Don't tell me," Rachel said.

"Oh, no. Nothing bad happens," he said. "This is about wine and life."

"They go up. They have a look at the vines, the black soil, and then they go down to a little village to have a bottle of wine the old man brought along."

Brian held his glass of wine. Rachel assumed he was imagining himself in mountainside village. It would be Sunday. All the restaurants would be closed, so he would sit under a tree with an old man and together they would share a bottle of wine.

"You know," he said, "after five years of not drinking, I didn't recognize a single name on the wine list."

When the furnace clicked off, Brian felt a draft from the window.

He looked into the yard. Balls and toys scattered across the lawn glistened in the moonlight. The hulking shadow of the playhouse disappeared under the fence. Where had his eyes been before?

Brian checked in on the boys empty beds. He moved to the front of the house and peered out into the street. He saw nothing but the stillness of the neighborhood. The street turned white without snow.

Both Brian and Rachel thought of the moment on the sidewalk, just a few steps from the restaurant, when they slowed their steps and Brian drew Rachel into his arms. She tilted her head back and they kissed very slowly. A silence fell over their embrace, separating them from the passing traffic. He touched her cheek. His hand moved down her smooth, white neck.

They moved on. First walking side by side, and then each taking turns at being one step ahead of the other. They talked about the boys, and laughed about the things that only one or the other had experienced but that both knew to be true. When they passed a new hi-rise building, Brian commented on the fact that if they lived there they would already be home.

"The boys need a place to run," Rachel said.

Brian could have mentioned the park, their house, or any one of the inescapable facts of the evening, but he said nothing.

They passed under the tired limbs of an old dogwood. The branches extended so far that they owed their existence to the stout cables that anchored them to the trunk. In just a few of weeks, the tree would burst into life along with the thin Bradford pears across the street. White and pink blossoms, sweet and precious, would mingle together at the curb and drift on the sidewalk.

For awhile, Rachel thought of the boys and Brian of the flowers. They twined together, easing in and out of their separate dreams, caressing certain moments as they passed. The way she kissed him before had caught Brian off guard, and in front of another restaurant he had the sudden desire to kiss her again, but the faces inside, either much younger or much older than their own, betrayed an unsettling detachment from one another.

"The look like they've lost something," Brian said. "Do you think we look like that?"

Rachel glanced into the restaurant, but she too had thought of their kiss and was far more interested in Brian than in people who appeared to be playing at happiness. She was happy. She felt a sense of love about her life, her children, her husband, and also in herself. When she saw that he was serious, it perturbed her. Why did he care?

"What's gone probably never was in the first place," she said.

Again, Brian wanted to kiss her but she walked on.

They went for ice cream, eating in silence. Two couples came into the shop. Rachel watched the men. One circled his girlfriend, pretending to touch her, but it seemed he was herding her more than anything else. The other ignored his companion, focusing his attention on the ice cream. Like Rachel, Brian could see the women were bored.

"That waitress had a thing for you," Rachel said. She licked her cone and watched to see if Brian blushed.

"How could you tell?" he asked.

"I just know," she said. "She made a point of maintaining eye contact with you. I don't think she looked at me once, not even to take my order."

"There was the wine list too," Brian said, "and the comment about the boyfriend."

"She certainly dismissed him, didn't she?"

Brian repeated the waitress's comments about wine and the tastes of her boyfriend.

Rachel laughed when Brian expanded the monologue. With his hand, he made an exaggerated sweep across a phantom menu.

"A solution," he said and then raised an eyebrow.

"Stop it," Rachel said, but she didn't mean it.

She wanted her husband to continue his act. He was so animated, alive. When he gestured towards the couples waiting for their ice cream, she knew exactly what was coming and shushed him. He leaned towards her and put his hand on her thigh.

"We're not like them," he said.

"No, we're not."

Brian squeezed her thigh and she felt like screaming, taking his hand, and running from the shop. She wanted to be home with him, or not even that. She wanted to be in their car, or in an alley if need be. She wanted him close to her, on top of her. If he squeezed her thigh again, she wouldn't be able to take it. She'd do anything he wanted as long as he came with her.

The girl behind the counter asked Brian if his ice cream was good. He'd ordered a strange flavor, chocolate with cayenne pepper. Rachel tasted it too. It was incredibly hot.

"It's fantastic," he said.

Another couple sat nearby. They were older and dressed for a casual stroll. Occasionally, they looked at Brian and Rachel. Rachel assumed they saw Brian's hand on her thigh. She wondered what they thought of that. When she turned her eyes in their direction, they studied the decor.

On the way back to the car, they laughed about the evening. They laughed about their boys. One son so wild, to whom the world was eager to yield, and the other who was gifted yet could barely tie his shoes. They laughed, but the thought of the older child triggered a resentful story of a mother Rachel knew who expressed surprise that the boy could tie his shoes.

"She said to me, 'Who has the time?' I'm thinking, that I certainly don't, but I sat down at the end of the day, when I was exhausted, and worked with my son."

"It sounds like she was embarrassed," Brian said.

"And then, she sort of waved her hands dismissively. 'Screw it. I went out and bought the one's with the velcro straps.'"

They had hours left and did not want to venture into the minefield of glaring inequities that would eventually lead them back to each other. So, they were quiet for awhile. They wanted only to be lovers, and without saying so they did their best to remember it.

When Brian came back to bed, Rachel turned to him. She asked him if everything was alright. Brian said he heard a noise, but it was nothing. But if it was a noise, a burglar, what then? What could he have done against another man in the dark, naked? Would they, by some silent agreement forget the encounter?

Brian could only remember how stealthily he moved through the house.

"The floorboards creak loudest at midnight," he said.

He felt foolish. They both knew that the children would sleep through anything in the middle of the night. It was at dawn, when they searched for each other under the covers, that the floorboards were most dangerous.

The bed was a wreck, but they slid under the blankets. Brian fell asleep in an instant. But Rachel listened and what she heard was hers alone.