

NEWTON'S FIRST LAW OF MOTION
By Patrick Tobin
Short Fiction

I was trying to think of something to write in the get-well card for Jackie from Accounts Payable, but I was having trouble due to the delicate nature of her injury—she got stuck in a water park slide. Phrases I normally used in get-well cards seemed grossly insensitive. *Hang In There* told her I knew she spent two hours dangling in her too-small Speedo while they positioned the Jaws of Life. *Watch Lots Of Bad Daytime TV* made it clear that I'd seen the humiliating coverage of her rescue as it was broadcast live on Nancy Grace.

Also, because the card still had to go to several more co-workers, including my boss, I was hesitant to write anything that would remind everyone I'm the only gay guy in the firm. I wanted to be compassionate, but not *too* compassionate—straight male engineers are pretty reserved about personal misfortune. You think you're offering sympathy, but all they see is a guy in a silk caftan with a black dildo up his ass.

The phone interrupted me—an outside call from my friend Buddy, who only tries me at work when he wants something.

“What?”

“All of a sudden Jezebel starts attacking my jacket,” he said.

Jezebel, his red-bellied parrot, was recently put on a mild anti-psychotic because she kept repeating entire episodes of *Oz*, Buddy's favorite non-porn porn. I heard outraged squawks in the background that sounded like a gangbanger threatening someone with a shiv.

"The yellow denim one?" I said.

"Yes."

"Good for her. Everybody hates that jacket."

"Hardy har har."

"Hey, maybe you can help," I said. "I need to write something tactful in a get-well card."

"The lardass who got her fat can stuck at Raging Waters?"

"Goodbye."

"Hang on, kitten, I need you to write me a letter of recommendation."

"For...?"

"The Chinese government. I'm adopting a baby!"

"What?!"

"Did you know they're killing baby girls over there?"

I was still trying to wrap my mind around the idea that he was adopting. "Oh my God—"

"I know, it's terrible. Who knew this was going on, where the hell has Angelina Jolie been?"

"I think you've got the wrong Asian country."

"Maybe she should spend a little less time sucking Brad Pitt's cock and a little more time reading Reader's Digest."

"*Goodbye* Buddy."

"There's one tiny hitch," he said. "Those asshole communists won't let a gay man adopt—which I find ironic since Chinese men are so effeminate—thus I have to take Carol Ann with me."

Carol Ann used to be a model on *The Price Is Right*, until a creepy stalker—who sounded an awful lot like Bob Barker—made her decide to quit the show and change her identity.

“That makes no sense,” I said.

“She has to pretend to be my fiancée. That’s the only way this will work.”

“I thought she was in rehab.”

“She’s out. And drier than a nun’s—”

“This is a *very* bad idea Buddy,” I said.

“Are you going to write a letter saying I’m an outstanding citizen? A simple yes or no.”

“It’s upstanding citizen.”

“As boring as an engineer may be, Louis, your job carries clout in certain circles. And I need clout right now.”

“Have your dad write the letter. I’d think the Circle K fortune carries a little more clout than I do.”

Meaningful pause. “He’s still not talking to me.”

“Good,” I said. “I hope he cuts off your trust fund, it would be the best thing that ever happened to you.”

“Come on,” he whined.

“I won’t be a party to international fraud.”

“I’d do *anything* for you, Louis,” he said.

“Bullshit,” I whispered.

He started to sniffle. “I would too. You’re the brother I never had—”

“Don’t even start with the phony tears.”

He stopped sniffing. “Why are you being so mean? All I’m trying to do is save a little Chinese baby whose only crime is she has a vagina—”

“Enough with the vaginas! I’ll write your god damned letter.”

“Don’t feel pressured.”

“If you don’t hang up right now I won’t write it,” I said.

“My future daughter says ‘God bless you Louis’. Or should I say *Auntie* Louis. Ha, ha, ha.”

“Really, I’m warning you.”

Click.

*

Lei Liu is a very sweet CAD drafter at my firm, but his English isn’t so great—ask him how his weekend was and you’re never sure if someone in his family died or if he went rollerblading at Seal Beach. When I finally got him to understand what I needed he translated my deliberately vague letter of recommendation, which I then faxed to the Chinese consulate.

Afterwards I went to Babies R Us to look up Buddy’s registry. The level of impracticality was nothing less than I expected. Cashmere receiving blankets. Baby’s First Jacuzzi. I settled on an outfit from the Baby Belles of The South line because it was the only thing under a hundred dollars.

I walked to the other end of the mall to pick out a card. Nothing makes me feel worse than a Hallmark store, where almost every aisle is filled with painful reminders. Anniversaries—nope, I won’t be having those any more. Weddings—had David and I really considered getting married in Canada, even with all our problems? Birthdays—David won’t be having any more, and the ones I’m having are adding up fast in the wrong direction.

I tried to restrain myself, but I started looking through the sympathy cards. Sometimes I like to imagine which ones I would have sent myself after David died.

I found one I hadn’t seen before, with thick, mint-green cardstock and an embossed apple tree shedding blossoms. On the inside was written *May new strength come with the quiet comfort memories can impart.*

I would have loved getting that one.

I took it to the register, along with the baby card I’d picked out. The owner, an older woman who wears an expensive, Gabor-style wig, rang up my purchase.

“You come in here a lot,” she said. “Not that I’m complaining.”

“I like your selection of cards.”

She nodded toward the sympathy card I was buying. “You’ve sure had a lot of deaths this

year.”

Her voice said *You Poor Thing*.

“Any chance of a volume discount?” I said.

“Excuse me?”

“Bad joke,” I said.

She shot me a look. “That’ll be six eighty seven.”

*

The day after Buddy left for China I got an urgent email saying to pick him up at LAX that night. I waited at the international terminal, holding a pink gift bag with the little crinoline hoop skirt inside. Buddy emerged from Customs wearing stupid oversized sunglasses.

“Yoko’s going to want those back,” I said.

“The Chinese are awful fucking pricks!” he yelled. “There. I said it.”

Understandably, Chinese people glared at us.

“Where’s the baby?” I said. “Wait a minute, where’s Carol Ann?”

“Does it look like I got the baby?” he said. “Carol Ann’s in custody, and if that bitch thinks I’m paying for lawyers, after I got us first class tickets—”

“She’s in custody here at the airport?”

“No. In Beijing.”

“This is awful!”

“You said it kitten. I wish someone at Cathay Pacific had warned me they were going to show *The Lost Weekend*.”

“You’ve completely lost me.”

Buddy swooped his hand through the air like he was demonstrating a jet for a retarded person.

“We were on our way to a land called *China*,” he said. “On a thing called an *airplane*—”

“Alright already,” I said.

“And somewhere over Kauai—I know this because I was watching the digital map—they start showing *The Lost Weekend*. Black and white classic? Ray Milland? Boozer?”

“I know the movie.”

“By Ray’s second gimlet, it was all over. Carol Ann starts ordering double vodkas like there’s no tomorrow.”

“Why didn’t you stop her?”

Buddy took off his sunglasses with a smug smile. “I was busy.”

My confusion didn’t last very long. “With whom?”

“An adorable flight attendant named Peter Wai. And I had to say to myself, *why not?*”

“Skip the Catskills routine.”

“Next thing I know, a fucking air marshal’s knocking on the restroom door looking for me, because my *fiancée*’s in business class flashing her tits for cocktails. Carol Ann’s not the brightest girl. I mean, last time I checked the drinks were free in first class.”

“Jesus.”

“They just barely got her sobered up by the time the military police escorted her off the plane.”

I could tell he was trying to appear like someone filled with deep concern, but the expression quickly unraveled into a pout.

“There goes my one shot at a little Chinese girl. Thanks a whole fucking lot Carol Ann!”

“You can’t just leave her in Beijing. You’ve got to do something.”

Buddy put his sunglasses back on. “The first thing I’ve got to do is go to Ship’s. I’m starving.”

*

“Look at me!” Buddy said, buttering his toast. “I’m cooking!”

Buddy loves Ship’s because there’s a toaster at every booth. I think he puts on such a big show out of making his own toast because he never had to do anything for himself when he was growing up.

I took a sip of my decaf coffee. “What about Carol Ann?”

Buddy sighed. “God, you’re a broken record tonight.”

“You *have* to do something.”

“It’s under control. My dad knows someone who knows someone who knows the ambassador to China.”

“I thought you two weren’t talking.”

“Who do think paid for the first class tickets? He was so happy I was getting married to a woman. It really warms my heart just thinking about it.”

“But you aren’t getting married to a woman.”

“Can I help it if that’s the impression he’s under?”

I motioned for the waitress to bring our check.

“Yes, you *can* help it,” I said. “You open your mouth and words come out that are actually the truth.”

“I know you regard the whole baby thing as just another madcap scheme of mine.”

“That hardly begins to describe how I regard it.”

“It’s something that’s really important to me. I don’t want to end up one of those old gay guys who die all alone with their terriers and Princess Di commemorative plates.”

“Just pay people to pretend they care about you. I hear they do that in Japan.”

“I’m serious Louis.”

I grimaced. I always get uncomfortable when Buddy sheds his routine for even a second.

“A kid’s a big deal,” I said. “It’s not something you start and then don’t finish.”

Buddy took an angry bite of his toast.

“Gee *there’s* a record,” he said. “We had five whole minutes of conversation before you brought up the showcase again.”

Five years ago, Buddy decided he wanted to become a major singing star, despite the fact that he was nearly forty and musically untalented. He rented out the Kibbitz Room at Canter’s and sent invitations to industry bigwigs, like Guy Oseary and Tommy Mottola. He decided

to sing an entire set of Neil Diamond's later songs, like *Heartlight* and *You Don't Bring Me Flowers*, even though the latter is a duet.

One of his voice coaches—the woman who played the second oldest daughter on *Eight Is Enough*—encouraged him to explore the full range of human emotion, from ecstatic joy to pants-crapping fear. The result was that Buddy came off increasingly unhinged during the showcase. By the time he ended with *America*, batting at the air with really wide eyes, you weren't sure if he was singing about immigrants or invading space aliens.

"I'm not necessarily talking about the showcase," I said.

Buddy waved at me. "You can leave now. You're boring me."

I pretended like I was demonstrating driving for a retarded person.

"I drove us," I said.

"Oh, right."

Before we got into my car Buddy gave me a big hug and a kiss on both cheeks.

"Do you still love me kitten?"

"Of course I love you." I squeezed his cheeks. "I love having a friend who makes my life seem normal."

"That's tragic."

"What is?"

"That you'd want your life to seem normal."

I was caught off guard, because Buddy wasn't being sarcastic.

"Just get in the car asshole," I said.

We drove for a few moments without saying anything, until Buddy started bitching loudly that I was the only gay man in the entire world who didn't have satellite radio.

*

It was a bad mail day: two subscription renewals and an alumni magazine from Michigan State. I can't really blame any of them, there's no way they would know David's dead. At least none of the correspondence required a notarized death certificate, unlike the United Airlines

Mileage Plus statement that came three months ago.

“Why do you need a death certificate?” I asked the woman at the Phone Service Center.

“You were his domestic partner?”

“Right.”

“I’m assuming you want his miles, he has almost a hundred thousand.”

“Oh. I hadn’t thought of that.”

At that precise moment I knew I didn’t want David’s miles: they were tainted. I wanted to explain to this woman that David had been cheating on me and it hadn’t been the first time. That I kicked him out of the house and made him stay at a hotel, where, five days later, he had the heart attack that killed him. I wanted to tell her that David hadn’t told his family or friends the real reason why I kicked him out—he’d only told them I was being unreasonable—so they all thought I was a monster, responsible for the stress that caused his death.

I asked her if it was possible to give David’s miles to charity.

“Of course sir,” she’d said. “Quite a few people donate to Ronald McDonald House or the Special Olympics.”

“You wouldn’t happen to know of an organization that researches the causes of infidelity, would you?”

“Pardon?”

“I’ll give them to Ronald McDonald House.”

“Great! Just send us a letter of authorization and don’t forget a copy of the death certificate.”

“Don’t worry,” I’d said. “I can’t.”

I stared at the pieces of mail for David, as if I were willing them to disappear. I finally decided to send back the Michigan State alumni magazine with HE’S DEAD AND IT’S NOT MY FAULT written across the front.

I took out the sympathy card I’d bought, the one with the apple blossoms. On the inside

I wrote a note full of self-recrimination and regret, as if the words were coming from the guy David had been fucking right before he died. I made the mistake of playing The Smiths while I was doing this—by the time I addressed the envelope to myself I was sobbing.

I dropped the alumni magazine and the sympathy card into the mailbox by my house.

Goodbye again, I thought.

I went to Trader Joe's to pick up something for dinner. Simon, the tall gay guy who started working there recently, was stocking the bread section. I tried to slip by him, but I heard his voice behind me.

"Louis!"

I turned around and tried to act surprised. "Hey, I didn't see you."

"How are you doing?"

I was mortified by the concern in Simon's voice, because it made me think of the night I'd started weeping in the parking lot. Simon had been taking a smoke break when he saw me, hunched over my trunk holding my face, tears dripping through my fingers. He rushed over to me convinced I'd been mugged. After he found out I hadn't been attacked he gave me a hug, and because it felt good to be in someone's arms, I practically vomited out everything that happened with David. Then I really did vomit, all over my favorite pair of Hush Puppies.

"I'm doing great!" I said. "Just great!"

Simon didn't look like he believed me. "That's good to hear."

I motioned toward the deli section. "I'm picking up something for dinner."

"Hey, there's a new roasted red pepper pita wrap that's really good." He seemed disappointed I was rushing off, like he was trying to stall me.

"I'll check it out," I said.

Simon looked around before walking up close to me. "When I said we should get coffee sometime I wasn't saying it to be nice. Well, I *was* saying it to be nice, but I *wanted* to be nice."

"Oh."

Please hug me, I thought. *I promise not to vomit this time.*

“I don’t usually give out my number like this,” he said. He wrote his information on a slip of paper and handed it to me.

One of the managers walked by. Simon stepped away and pretended he was helping me pick out a product.

“Try it, you’ll like it,” he said in a professional voice.

I watched him walk back to the bread section, not sure if he was talking about the pita wrap or himself, or if he was making a cute reference to the 70s TV commercials for Life cereal.

*

“Look at me,” Buddy yelled. “I’m Mannix!”

We were in the shooting range at the Burbank Gun Club. Both of us took up the sport after Matthew Shepherd was killed: Buddy decided it was imperative that every gay man know how to use a firearm.

“If some dumb cracker shows up at my doorstep to kill me, I’ll have two things to say to him,” Buddy tells everyone. “First, say hello to my two friends, Smith and Wesson. Second, say hello to Jesus for me, cause you’re about to go see him.”

“Good job!” I yelled. “You outscored me by fifteen points.”

“Loser has to buy the Orange Juliuses!”

We were sipping our drinks when I asked Buddy what was going on with adopting a baby.

“My lawyer found a teenage girl in Milwaukee who got herself knocked up. Real cute too. Think Claire Danes with a fleshier face and way thicker legs. So my people make an offer—a very generous one, I might add—when all of a sudden we’ve got competition. This Jewish couple in New York with fertility issues and money to burn.”

“Good thing you’ve got your dad’s investment broker riding shotgun.”

“Oh, believe me, I was *ready* for them. But then the girl’s parents tell the lawyers, get this: no Jews and no fags.”

My jaw dropped. “Can they do that?”

“Kitten, it’s a seller’s market.”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“Oh well, it’s probably a blessing in disguise. Bigotry might be genetic. And she did have those dreadful legs. I don’t think you can fix calves with plastic surgery.”

I gave him a hug. “Hang in there.”

“It’s hard, things are tough out there. Suddenly everyone’s over forty and oops, we forgot to have kids.”

“Yeah, well. There you go.”

He squinted at me. “You’ve been awfully inscrutable tonight.”

“I’m not being inscrutable,” I said.

“You’re just not good at it, that’s what you’re really saying.”

“There’s a guy with beautiful eyes who gave me his phone number.”

“If you tell me he’s an engineer I swear to God I will set myself on fire.”

“He works at Trader Joe’s. And he’s very kind.”

“Ooh. A younger man. This is fun news!”

“He’s not young, he’s our age.”

“A manager?”

“No. He just started working there.”

“Jesus, he’s old and he’s bagging groceries. Let me guess. ‘Hi, my names’s Justin and I was a tina whore in Palm Springs, until I got too old for my sugar daddy. This job is part of my probation’.”

“Who knows what his story is. All I have to do is call him to find out. But I don’t. Why can’t I forget about David and move on?”

“I don’t understand why you never used that expensive dating service I bought you, like what, five years ago. It’s probably still good.”

“I *did* use it asshole. That’s how I met David.”

“Oh. Right.”

Buddy offered to clean my gun, his way of saying he was sorry for bringing up a very touchy subject.

*

On my way home I thought about how sexy Simon looked in his Trader Joe's uniform, especially with his shaved head.

I've really hated my hair ever since I turned forty. I started giving myself haircuts because it seemed like a waste of money to have someone professionally style it. The basic problem is the way I'm going gray and the path my thinning hair has taken—no matter what I do it always looks like I'm wearing a really cheap toupee.

When I got home I took out the clippers and shaved my head. After I finished, my scalp was so pale it seemed to glow. I didn't look anything like Simon.

"Oops," I said out loud. "I'm a fucking moron."

The doorbell rang. It was Nancy, David's youngest sister.

"Oh my God Louis," she said.

"What?"

She couldn't stop staring at my head. She looked like she was on the verge of tears.

"If you don't want to talk about your cancer," she said, "I don't blame you."

"I'm not doing chemo! I just shaved my head because I was sick of my hair."

"Oh."

"Can I get you something to drink? Or eat? I was just fixing dinner."

Nancy's mouth went tight and grim.

"No," she said. "I came by to pick up David's cookbooks. The lawyer wrote you, didn't he?"

"Yes, he did. Of course you should have them. You and David loved to cook together."

She didn't say anything and the silence made me want to cry.

"You didn't need to have a lawyer write me," I said. "I would have given them to you if you'd asked."

“It’s better,” she said. “This way.”

I’d already packed up the books so I carried the box to her car, even though she kept saying she didn’t need my help. I thought about how close Nancy and I used to be before David’s death, how she’d become like a sister to me. When I finished loading the car, I put my hand on her shoulder.

“I need to explain something to you,” I said.

She pulled away like I’d hit her. “Don’t!”

While I watched her drive away, a gust of wind blew through the trees and jacaranda blossoms showered down on me. They felt cold and slimy on my bare scalp.

I shook my head and watched the lavender petals fall to the ground. Nancy’s car made a left at the corner and then it was gone—probably forever.

I went inside the house to put the organic vegetarian lasagna back in the freezer.

*

“Look at me!” Buddy yelled. “I’m Dorothy Hamill!”

The two of us were skating in Buddy’s basement. In the early nineties he bought the mansion that used to be the Canadian consulate. There were several odd features that he decided to keep: the built-in maple leaf shaped coffee table that was supposedly used by Margaret Trudeau to do lines; the life-sized statue of Ann Murray holding a snowbird. I’d recommended he turn the regulation skating rink into a pool, but Buddy decided to keep it because, as he liked to say, “one night Wayne Gretzky might want to play hockey in the nude.”

“That’s funny.” I skated over to the bench and grabbed my cup of cocoa. “I thought you looked like Dick Buttons.”

“Hardy har har.”

Buddy started skating with overly stiff movements, like a robot.

“Hello humans, my name is Louis. I like to pretend no one at my engineering firm knows I’m gay. I wear no-press shirts from JC Penny. I’ve started shaving my head because it makes me feel super butch.”

“Hardy har har.”

Buddy skated into my arms to stop himself. “Can we try to be nice to each other the rest of the evening?”

I kissed him on the cheek. “Truce.”

Buddy pressed the intercom. “Rosalba, sweetie, could you bring down some more cocoa, and maybe add *una* little *mas rum por favor*.”

He unlaced his skates. “Okay, kitten, what’s eating you? I can see your worry lines from fifty feet away.”

“Well, Nancy came by yesterday to pick up David’s cookbooks—”

“Oh, before you start, can I just tell you who’s being a big fucking crybaby.”

I sighed. “Carol Ann has every right to be angry with you. You left her in Beijing!”

“The only reason she’s so pissed is she couldn’t drink while she was in jail. I told her to look at it like it was free rehab, but there’s simply no reasoning with Miss Glass Half Empty.”

We sat in the penalty box and watched Thaddeus, Buddy’s butler, drive the Zamboni. I grew increasingly annoyed and frustrated.

“I hope you aren’t looking for a baby anymore,” I said.

“No way.”

“Good! I’m glad to hear that.”

“Big sigh—no baby for Buddy. But I’m not too torn up about it.”

I stared at his face to see if he really meant it. “That’s suspiciously mature of you.”

“I got to thinking. You get a baby, you have to raise the damn thing for ten...twelve—”

“—try eighteen years—”

“Whatever it is, it’s too long. But I still want a kid. And now I want a boy who will carry on the family name. So a little voice in my head—”

“Please don’t tell me what the voices said.”

“—says ‘Buddy, why don’t you just adopt a teenager?’ A couple years of parenting and you get all the glory and none of the diapers.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“So serious, kitten, I’m meeting with an attorney who does fast-track specialty adoptions.”

“I want to be there, so I can tell this lawyer you’re out of your mind.”

“Well I don’t need you there.” He patted himself on the shoulder. “I’m doing this all by myself.”

Thaddeus waved shyly as he passed us. I waved back, but inside I was fuming.

“All by yourself, that’s a joke,” I said. “More like daddy’s doing it for you.”

“Normally Louis I can tolerate your witless teasing, but tonight you’re really getting on my nerves.”

“I’m not teasing, I’m being honest. You would make the world’s worst father because everything you do is half-assed and then you have your dad clean up the mess. And let’s not even bring up the fact that you don’t care about anyone except yourself—”

Buddy stood up. “I don’t have to put up with this shit. I didn’t even ask you to come over tonight.”

“I came over because I needed to talk.”

For a moment all we could hear was the shish-shish-shish of the Zamboni.

“I don’t know why you think you’d be a good dad anyway,” I said. “You can’t even be a good friend.”

Buddy waved over Thaddeus.

“You know the way out, bitch,” he said to me.

I watched Buddy and Thaddeus glide away on the Zamboni. The freshly shaved ice almost looked like water, like they were a slow boat leaving a smooth wake.

When I walked out onto the freshly shaven ice I fell right on my ass. I got back up and pretended I hadn’t heard Buddy cackle.

*

It was time for my annual eye exam and I felt a little sad. Buddy normally would have taken me, because they dilate my eyes and it's impossible to drive, but he and I hadn't talked for almost a week. Seven days without Buddy—it felt like an accomplishment I should be proud about, but I only felt emptier than usual. Like someone other than David had died.

My ophthalmologist is a nice-looking young guy named Sean McAdams. He and his wife aren't even thirty and they already have something like six kids. Because he has so many mouths to feed, Sean started doing cosmetic surgery on the side—a procedure that makes Asians' eyelids less “Asian,” called, I think, a caucasiotomy.

Sean was typically rushed during the exam. Still, I enjoyed having his face so close to mine, the way it felt like we were about to kiss.

“Which one is better,” Sean said, “one or two?”

“They both look the same.”

“How about now. One? Or two?”

I concentrated on the blurry chart during the first setting. When he switched to the second one I saw that three of the letters in the line were B, U, and D.

“Look at that,” I said. “Two.”

Sean put drops in my eyes and told me to sit in the waiting room for fifteen minutes. I was reading an article about Angelina Jolie in *People*—which got me thinking again about Buddy—when I heard urgent whispers between Sean and his receptionist. I looked up just as Sean raced out the door.

“I'll be back as soon as I can Louis,” he said, “The receptionist will give you some money for a coffee.”

I went up to the front desk, my vision now blurry and sparkly.

“There's a Starbuck's across the parking lot,” the receptionist said, getting money out of the register.

“What happened?”

She unplugged her headset and lowered her voice. “One of his clients. That goofy eyelid

procedure.”

She handed me a bill, but I couldn’t see what denomination it was.

“Apparently Mrs. Nguyen’s left eyelid is drooping,” she said.

“That’s not good.”

“Like, down her cheek. Like, have you seen a picture of Billy Joel lately?”

“No!”

“Uh huh. *That* kind of drooping.”

I went outside, but the bright sunlight only made my vision worse—I could barely see anything in front of me. I was about to walk back to the office when I heard a car horn, followed by the screech of brakes.

The next thing I knew I was flat on my back. I heard a car door open and someone run to me.

“Louis, are you all right?”

I could barely make out the man standing over me—a flashing halo surrounded him.

“I think so. Jesus?”

“It’s Thaddeus.”

Buddy’s butler helped me into his car and drove me home.

“Buddy had your appointment in his calendar,” Thaddeus said after I asked him what he was doing in the neighborhood. “I’m glad he had me come check on you.”

“He put my appointment in his calendar? He *has* a calendar?”

“I know how Buddy comes across. He does try, though.”

Thaddeus told me that Buddy was having a party on Saturday for his new son. When I pressed him for details about the boy, he became evasive.

“That was certainly fast,” I said.

“Yes.” Thaddeus looked down at the ground, like he wanted to tell me something, but professional conduct was restraining him. “I do hope you’ll come Louis. You’re like family to him. And he’ll...need you there.”

I was about to tell him I hadn't been invited, but Thaddeus excused himself and left before I could say another word.

When I got home there was another letter from David's family's attorney. They want copies of any photos I have of David, and they want back any photos that were taken of him before we became domestic partners.

I also found the sympathy card I'd addressed to myself. The post office had returned it to me, ADDRESS UNDELIVERABLE stamped on the front, because my tears had washed out the writing.

The last piece of mail was an invitation, the front showing an embossed stork dropping an embossed bundle.

Help me welcome my new son Jarrod the inside said. Come celebrate the miracle of family! No presents, just bring a party attitude!

The words were printed over a photo of Buddy catching a bundle from a stork—overacting, as usual, so that you couldn't tell if he was excited or if he'd just been tagged by a stun gun. I laughed so hard at Buddy's expression that my stomach hurt.

*

While I was emptying my pockets I discovered the receptionist had given me a ten dollar bill for coffee. I also found Simon's phone number, the slip of paper crumpled into a little ball.

"I've got cash burning a hole in my pocket," I said on Simon's answering machine, "so I'd like to treat you to a coffee." Pause. "Or maybe, you know...dinner even."

I was about to hang up when I thought of something else. "Oh, yeah, I tried the roasted red pepper pita wrap and I liked it. A lot. It had a wonderful mélange of flavors."

"Oh my God," I said out loud after I hung up. "What a fucking idiot."

That's when I realized I hadn't actually hung up.

*

I showed up at Buddy's house to find a huge circus tent in the front yard. There was face painting and a petting zoo. I couldn't find Buddy, but one of the caterers told me that Buddy's

son was in the kitchen. I went inside to find a blond, six foot four mountain double fisting tequila shots.

“Are you Jarrod?”

The mountain licked salt from the wrist of a cute redhead with big fake tits.

“Guilty as charged. Who are you?”

“Buddy’s best friend.”

“Whose buddy?”

“Your dad. His name is Buddy.”

“Oh. Right.”

I found out Jarrod was twenty-four and a first year MBA student at University of Phoenix. He was thrilled Buddy was going to pay his tuition.

“And I get a new car!” Jarrod said.

“I don’t really understand how this works. Are you an orphan?”

“Nah. My folks live in Fullerton, but I worked a deal with the lawyers. I have to spend five hours a week with Billy—”

“Buddy—”

“Right, Buddy. And I have to call him dad whenever we’re with his family. As long as I don’t have to fuck the guy, hey, I’ll call him daddy if he wants. How about a shot? The booze is free!”

“I’ll take a rain check.”

“Later dude!”

I went outside and watched the castle jump house deflate because a sorority girl had gone inside with her stiletto heels. A drunk young man, his face painted like a dog, chased a sheep from the petting zoo.

The sheep looked up at me as she ran by.

Help, her face seemed to say.

I shrugged. *Sorry*.

I didn't know anyone and I couldn't find Buddy, so I went downstairs to the ice rink. The stadium lights were on and music was playing on the sound system—Vince Guaraldi's theme when the kids are skating in the Charlie Brown Christmas special. It's such joyful music and yet there's something poignant about it, the way the piano scale tumbles like a fistful of memories that you can't hold onto.

Buddy didn't notice me. He was preoccupied doing wobbly figure eights, his face full of typically exaggerated suffering. I was about to tell him he might want to save the really big theatrics for when he had an actual audience, when suddenly his arms shot above his head, like he was trying to reach for the sky, or the clouds, or the moon, or maybe even the stars.

There was no audience. There was just Buddy on the ice, all by himself, doing imperfect figure eights.

It was so absurdly sad I gasped. That's when Buddy noticed me, right before he fell on his ass and skidded across the ice toward me. I went to help him up, but our grip slipped and we were propelled in opposite directions.

The music faded into silence, until all you could hear was the sound of our bodies gliding across the ice.