

A TASTE FOR TURKISH COFFEE

by
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[A MAN alone on stage.

HE looks directly at the audience.

After a long moment he speaks.]

Okay, so look. Here's the thing.
I work in a restaurant. I own,
co-own,
I have a partner.
Joe and I are fifty-fifty with this restaurant
and I work there. It's a little place.
Eleven tables; white table cloths; real silver. It's nice.
He's kitchen, I'm front-of-house.
I'm not a silent-partner. I'm actually there. Fifty, sixty--
some weeks I put in close to eighty hours.
Not because I have to but because it's what I like.
I find the human contact
satisfying.
I host. I pour drinks. The place gets in the weeds I bus
tables because that's what has to happen to make the place
work.
I'm not some kid working in restaurants 'til something better
comes along. This is my life's work.
Making sure people get a good meal.
Seeing that they're comfortable.
Bending over backwards so that everybody gets exactly what it
is they want. This is my contribution to the world.
Ensuring hospitality.

[Silence.]

So.
A couple of nights ago this older woman, a kind of semi-
regular;
Miriam
I'll call her,
Miriam comes in. She says she doesn't want a table; she just
wants to sit at the bar.
We see this all the time.
An older women with time on her hands.
They come in, nurse a drink, smoke some cigarettes.
You make polite conversation. Some idle innuendo. You keep
an eye out; making sure no one bothers her. You see she
doesn't get too drunk. You buy her a cheap desert and
before you know it it's time to close.
You see her into a cab and she's on her way home.
You help her pass some time without feeling too alone.
So.
I'm about to tell Miriam I'll call her a cab when she reaches
out and grabs my arm.
He's dating a freak, she says. Roger is.

My Roger is dating a freak.
 He warned me. He made it very clear; her condition. First
 in a letter, then on the phone.
 I told him I understood.
 I said it was nothing.
 By the time you're my age--
 this things I've seen--
 live and let live--
 some of my best friends and I don't even notice--
 Good, he said. Because she means the world to me.

[Silence.]

He brought her for dinner..
 Last week,
 out of the blue,
 he called to say he was bringing her over for dinner.
 I'd never met the girl. Claire,
 she's called.
 I wanted to go out someplace. We'll go to a restaurant, I
 told him.
 Someplace nice.
 I told him he didn't need to worry about the expense. It
 would be my treat.
 She laid both of her hands on the bar, palms up. She looked
 me straight in the eye.
 We could have come here, she said. This is a nice place.
 You make it so a person feels at home here.
 Meeting the boy's mother is hard enough; why make it more
 difficult than necessary? A nice
 neutral
 location.
 That's what you want.
 Someplace where everyone can be their best.
 The mother as well as the girlfriend.
 Everyone always thinks it's hardest on the girl, but it's
 hard on the mother as well. Meeting is no piece of cake
 for the mother.
 Coming here would have been so much better.
 But, no.
 Roger insisted.
 Remember her condition, that's what he said.
 It will be easier for her, he said. She always feels like
 she causes a spectacle in public.
 Roger.
 So
 thoughtful. So
 willing to think of the other person.
 You'd think a woman with my experience; that I'd have been
 better able to. . .
 She's a uh. . .
 an. . .
 Claire. My Roger's girlfriend. . .

She's not like that man in the movies. The famous one.
 The Victorian. . . The movie with Anne Bancroft.
 He was unfortunate.
 But he, at least, had the satisfaction of knowing he suffered
 from a legitimate medical condition.
 Claire,
 my Roger's--
 She falls outside traditional categories. Hers is more--
 Claire's ears are. . .
 Ben, my husband, Ben had large ears. I've seen large ears.
 I know what it means to live with someone who has large ears.
 It can be done.
 Her ears are more. . .
 They are I guess--
 the only appropriate word, I would say her ears are. . .
 When she walks. . .
 They came in the door, I took her coat, she walked on into
 the living room and her ears--
 When she walks her ears, they--

[SHE holds her hands to the sides of her head and makes
 a flapping motion.]

She has beautiful arms. Delicate,
 porcelain-doll shoulders. Her décolletage--
 her neck is almost patrician. Then. . . uh. . .

[SHE holds her hand in front of her face, covering the
 area between her nose and her mouth. SHE makes a vague,
 flapping gesture.]

She finishes the gesture, lowers her hand, and is still.

There is a silence.]

I should have said something, right?
 Miriam sitting there. Obviously upset. The host in me
 should have risen to the occasion.
 I have seen lousy things happen in a restaurant.
 People get sick.
 Husbands tell their wives they want a divorce.
 Once, I had a guy throw up all over the table and the windows
 then he stood up and died.
 I know what to do.
 You say something nice. You buy a round of drinks. You
 comp. the meal. It doesn't solve the problem. But people
 know you care.
 They think back on what happened and no mater what horrible
 things come to their mind they know
 I am a man who cares. I am a man
 who did everything he could

to make them feel better.
With Miriam. . .

[HE shakes his head; shrugs his shoulders.]

Mrs. Richards, Claire says to me, it's so nice to finally
meet you. Roger has told me so much about you.
All good I hope.
Of course, she says. I can't believe it's been all this time
and we've never met. I don't suppose you have a rest room
I could use?
I point her down the hall.
I go into the kitchen to start heating up the dinner I'd had
sent in.
Well,
my Roger says to me,
That went just about as poorly as could be expected, don't
you think?
She's here two minutes and already she's hiding in the
bathroom.
Two
minutes.
I told you what to expect. There was no surprise here. But
what do you do?
You stand there; staring at her
folding and unfolding your hands. . . Jesus!
Could you look at something other than her ears, for God's
sake?
Her ears, Miriam says to me,
he's worried about her ears.
Her ears are nothing. There are things a person can do
to get around big ears. It's that other thing; the
fleshy
protuberance. . .

[SHE repeats the hand gesture in front of her nose and
mouth.]

How do they kiss?
I know I'm his mother, she says, whispering into my ear. I'm
not supposed to think about these sorts of things. But I
do.
How
do
they
kiss?

[THE MAN shrugs his shoulders.]

With their mouths, I said.
This was not the answer she was looking for.

I knew that.
 My thoughts were biological.
 Hers were more, I suppose she would say,
 aesthetic.
 Roger, dearest. . .
 Don't Roger dearest me, he says to her. How dare you take
 that tone.
 Where do you find the balls to speak to me like that?
 To call
 me
 dearest
 after what you've done to her?
 I know what you're up to. You think we'll leave.
 I'll make an excuse; tell her I got a page
 about a change in my morning schedule or
 I'll say I've got a headache and ask if we could take a rain
 check.
 Then we execute an elaborate song and dance
 the three of us,
 during which you cuddle and coo;
 packing food in plastic boxes you
 insist
 we take with us. Saying how pleasant it would have been;
 getting to know each other over dinner,
 how you'd looked forward to this evening for
 so long.
 All the while you're ecstatic to see us go.
 Your vain administrations satisfying your need
 to maintain the guise of hospitality.
 We walk out the door,
 Claire and I, and,
 what with one thing and another,
 we're never seen again.
 That make you happy?
 I told him, No, she says to me. That wasn't it at all.
 If you'll only listen--
 Listen, my Roger screams,
 You want me
 to listen
 to you--
 Roger.

[EVERYONE is silent.]

That was Claire.
 Standing near the refrigerator:
 her lipstick freshened,
 pressing at the pleats of her skirt.
 Roger. Please.

[Silence.]

Mrs. Richards

I appreciate you inviting me into your home.
 I know how hard this must be for you.
 A woman with your responsibilities
 entertaining a person in my situation.
 People see things; who knows what they'll say?
 Doormen are not the friends they used to be, are they?
 I'm not what you had hoped for. I know this.
 I'm sorry.
 I'm not what I had hoped for.

[Silence.]

Sunday afternoons

if I'd been real good all week
 and my room was clean and my homework was done and I'd
 already said my Rosary
 my Momma used to tell me the story of how she met my father.
 I was the only girl in a family of men.
 That's the way the story started. Every time.
 I was the only girl in a family of men, Momma would say to
 me.
 Your Granny died not too long after I was born.
 I had nothing to do with her passing;
 still
 it was a heavy thing on my conscience. My coming in
 so close to the time of her going out.
 I lived with my Daddy and my five brothers--
 and here I'd say the names with her;
 Clarence, Buster, Tommy, Virgil, and Ted--
 on the outskirts of town.
 Your grandpa was a teacher, you know,
 and light skinned.
 The combination of a steady paycheck and his nearly green
 eyes
 meant he could buy a real house and get us off the
 reservation.

[Silence.]

I met your father at the fair.
 My Daddy didn't trust the fair.
 Nothing good comes from it, he'd say. You spend your money
 and what do you get? Dizzy from the rides and sick from
 the food.
 More than that
 I think he was afraid of the place. The carnival's emphasis
 on
 desire
 and
 pleasures of the flesh

reminded him of a wantonness he'd spent his whole life trying
to suppress.
My brothers went.
Every year.
And as much as he hated it Daddy didn't stop them.
They're boys, he'd say,
they can take care of themselves. And if they can't;
if they go and get themselves in a mess they can find no way
out of;
well then that serves them right.
That's what they get for sticking their nose in where it's
got no right to be.
The first time I went to the fair,
my Momma would say to me,
was the time I met your father.
I was fourteen.
I had on a pair of hand-me-down pants
and an old sweater I'd been given from the woman
who handed out relief at Christmas.
I'm going over to Charlene's, I told my daddy,
we're gonna baby sit for her brother.
I kicked at the ground,
hoping the dark brown of my eyes would cover over
any signs of my deception.
He was a smart one, your grandpa. He knew the look of a lie.
Your father was a carney.
Three balls for a nickel, he'd say. Knock down the clown
and take home a prize.
I watched just long enough to understand
the reason the big guys missed was their faith in strength.
They over threw the target.
I gave him my nickel. He handed me the balls.
I used skill,
not power,
and I knocked the clown over.
He was a dazzler; your father.
He was skinny,
I'd say, with red hair.
And my Momma would nod her head.
He was a slim-hipped, red-haired boy with skin so alabaster-
fine the sun's reflection nearly blinded you when you took
him in.
And you never married.
And we never married.
But you have me, I'd say,
bringing us to the part of the story I liked the best.
But I have you, she'd say.
And then she'd pull me to her face
and wrap me in her arms and kiss me hard
on the forehead.
I have you;
she'd say,
The cherished consummation
of my love initiation.

[Silence.]

Miriam stopped.

The cherished consummation of my love initiation? Who speaks
like that?

What kind of woman tells that sort of story to her daughter?

I take it they didn't stay for dinner, I said.

No, she said.

Have you spoken to your son since?

[MIRIAM shakes her head, No.]

I called.

The next day. And the next.

At first there was no answer. The phone just rang and rang.
Then yesterday I started getting that recording that says the
number's been changed and there's no more information.

I went over this morning and the apartment's empty.

They've probably run off to join the circus,
don't you think.

Every little boy's fantasy.

Let me call you a cab.

No. I'm just down at the end of the hill.

It's not that late.

The walk will do me good.

She took some bills from her purse and set them under her
glass.

My restaurateur's instinct told me to tell her it was on the
house

but

I kept silent.

I walked with her to the front of the restaurant.

At the door she stopped; turned around.

I know what you're thinking,
she said to me.

You're thinking I'm a bitch.

You're thinking I'm a widow with a fat bank account
and a narrow mind

and bourgeois expectations

that make it impossible for me to accept the fact
that the woman my son

loves

is more elephantine than human.

Let me tell you something.

The aversion I felt looking at her disfiguration
was natural. My disgust was good.

It's like the smell of rotting meat
or the memory of bad oysters.

Repulsion is what nature intends.

I'm not saying that people
like that

should be killed or shunned. Not at all.
 They should live their life.
 What I am saying
 is that there are instances in which nature makes a mistake.
 When that happens
 it's nature's desire that the mistake not continue on.
 What about her good heart? Her quick wit?
 All the sympathetic qualities these people
 invariably possess?
 How do you get to those?
 One's primary attraction is physical. It always is.
 Something about the way the other person looks
 pulls us to them. It's only after
 we exhaust the sins of the flesh
 that we come to know our beloved's
 inner qualities.
 What, in heaven's name,
 is there about this girl that captured Roger's affection?
 What perverse attraction drew him to her?
 It's like drinking Turkish coffee. The first taste is so
 bitter
 that one must overcome an aversion
 to take a second.
 Why go through the trouble? Why work
 to learn to like
 something that is initially
 so unpleasant?
 And then she left.
 Not with a smile--
 which would have been good,
 because then I would have felt free to hate her,
 or with tears--
 which would have strained my capacity for sympathy.
 But with a puzzled, slightly worried expression.
 I hope she doesn't come back.
 She was only a sometimes
 kind of regular. Not the kind whose loyalty makes
 or breaks
 a business.
 She comes back I'm sure I'll go out of my way
 to see she's getting
 exactly
 what she wants.
 Two-to-one I'll comp. her entire table.
 That's my way.
 To overcompensate like that.

END OF PLAY