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Feast

by Don Cohen

The waiters had been told to pretend she wasn't there (only a glass of water with a straw at her place). He didn't eat either, her John: lovely kindness. Later he would, gobbling bread and meat when she couldn't see, but not to fool her: thoughtfulness, another way to show they still lived the same life. The others—John's sister and Arthur, Michael's parents, the Dunns—spooned up the reddish chilled fruit soup. (Strawberry or raspberry had Ruth decided finally?) Then salad, poking at the jumbles of small damp leaves, lifting their loaded forks.

She was beyond this universal companionship of hand to mouth. And no longer human, if that was part of the definition? At the same time, wasn't she more physical than ever, reduced to her body? Thirst, pain, fatigue, nausea, her bowels sluggish or explosive: death proved the physical, if you needed proof. But the dying animal and the living animal were not the same. So wolves skulked away or were abandoned by the pack. And some people, too: yes, the Eskimos sending their elders off on icebergs and, in Africa, possibly, the dying one left outside the hut. Unclean or the fear of evil spirits, but sensible medically, so as not to contaminate; returned to nature in the most efficient way, wild animals doing the dirty work (in Tibet, left out for birds, hadn't she read somewhere?). Eliminating all that nonsense of caskets and holes in the ground (the excavated dirt at her father's covered with that mat of fake, bright grass). Better to go off, not mix up the living and the dying. But here she was, in the middle of everything!

It was almost too pat, death and marriage, the end and the beginning. They would go to their hotel to make love; she would go home to get on with dying. Except, of course, they had lived together for two years; there was the baby being passed from hand to hand like a doll, sucking his pacifier for all he was worth. You couldn't call this a beginning. In her experience, life was always middle; things happened before you knew it and by the time you marked them with a ceremony or even noticed, they were in full swing and headed somewhere else. The baby taking it all in, but he won't remember a thing. Still affected by it. He'll wake up into the long middle of his life already underway—started without him. So: middle. Or end, of course, but that was only once. The other ends—graduation, divorce, someone else's death—were really middles.

Cousin Phyllis came smiling over her shoulder, said, "You look lovely. Such a lovely dress." More compliments than she got when she deserved them. Lovely dress, lovely dress. How far she's come in the weeks since they bought it. Then she had stood at the mirror in the shop—light sheening off the slateblue satin, shallow scoop neck to hide some of the damage—stood, and wondered if it suited her!

Phyllis smiled, silent sympathy, touched her hand and was gone. A woman at the next table—long black hair—showed her a stricken face, desperate with sorrow, as if it was her death or her one best friend's. But who was she? Caught in the act, she looked away.

After the chicken and steak, John turned the wheelchair to face her to the dance floor. Michael and Ruthie's friends bounced and waved in a mass, everyone with everyone, those group friendships they had now. The baby swung up and down by Laura, the babysitter: lovely young breasts. Untouched. Well, probably not, certainty not, but still fresh with anticipation, hers and theirs: the

boys, the men watching now as she bent to lift him, stealing glances. They can't not look.

Turned toward the room, she was an audience of one at a play everyone else performed. Or that strip of paper from chemistry: a litmus test of their capacity for truth. She found out the ones who could almost admit where she was now, and the others who asked, "How *are* you?" as if it was still a question of that, who talked to her so they could not be ashamed later. The young people who avoided her more afraid of saying the wrong thing than of death, she guessed—impossible to imagine this would happen to them. Awkwardness and humiliation a worse fate at that age.

And here came Natalie, no way to avoid her, her foul-weather friend, long neck leaning over her, pressing and pressing her arm: "... heroic ... in your condition ... so brave" A monster of compassion. A sorrow vulture, feeding, and she was Natalie's banquet. Why not say, I know what you are, instead of letting Natalie eat her fill? When would she have the right, if not now? Instead, closing her eyes to plead: leave me alone. In vain, but rescued finally by John's cousin Owen saying, "Sorry to interrupt." Don't be, Owen. Thank you, she silently said.

But he was ill. It was like second sight, or she was so familiar with the signs she recognized them instantly, like hearing your own name in a babble of voices, attuned to it. And he knew. Yes. Brave man, looking his future in the face. Thank you.

And there was long black hair again, dancing with one of Michael's brothers or cousins, eyes closed, head tossing, flinging her long black mane: ecstatic now. A glutton for feeling—joy, sorrow, anything, and why not?

Then Michael bent over her and said, “It means so much to Ruthie that you’re here. To me too.” Matter-of-fact, not asking for anything. She had been wrong about him: young, yes, but comfortable in his own skin, which makes all the difference. At home in the world. She had warned Ruth: don’t be in such a hurry; learn from my mistakes. Of course, she never listened, not once, and why should she? The truth we all know at that age: your life belongs to no one else. She never had any power over her. (When she was in middle school, the argument about makeup—something she actually knew! But Ruth wouldn’t budge until friends made fun of her. Dark circles of mascara; the year of the raccoon, she and John called it.) Never listened to her and now less than ever. She’s happy today, her dying mother a paragraph in her story; it makes her more interesting. All of them, something to tell their friends: bittersweet, or so they think.

The DJ put on the slow number that brought older couples to the floor, all those pairings, natural and odd, the showoffs, the shuffling husbands, the little truces and rediscoveries. Sorrow shocked her. It wasn’t that they danced before—at other weddings a few times like everyone, nothing really—but this was how loss caught you, coming under the radar. She’d never missed dancing, and here she was, inconsolable.

Until he came back—wonderful man, how could she ever not have known that?—to lean over her, his face against her hair. She put her arms around his neck, lifting her head, cheek against his chin. He swayed slightly to the rhythm, swayed her slightly until the end and past the end, those tender seconds when the music stopped but not the dance. Then clapped like everybody else.

Well, she gave him this opportunity to exercise his gift for devotion, his patience, this extraordinary warmth, attention. Imagine Ronnie in this role, or Tim—impossible! They would be gone—literally, in Ronnie’s case, out the door

at the first unpleasantness, anything that called for humanity, for admitting someone else's. Tim absent in every way but physically, his famous disappearing act, seen but not heard. Instead she had this large gentleness, like a bear wiser and kinder than people, more than ever like a bear in his tuxedo, a fine and delicate bear, all his clumsiness gone. He was born for this. As if, all those years ago, they had known, had chosen each other for this (she supposed) fulfillment of his nature and her need. Or her nature too? As if, behind the blundering ignorance of life (her life, anyway), there was a true thread she had followed so that she would have him now.

Half the women here were eating him up with their eyes. Dreamed of consoling him, probably, but really of what he would give them: sympathy they never got from their husbands, never would. Who can blame them? Women would swarm when she was gone. Would he remarry? Yes, probably. Not like some, clinging like a drowning man to the first one who puts herself in their way. Not helpless to put food on the table or clothes in the washer, not terrified of a night or two alone. Never like that and not that kind of woman. Not soon, she would guess, whatever that means. But sex of course rears its lovely head. More than that, he will need to be good to someone. The other morning—her pain kept them awake all night, it made them both crazy—he said, “We could drive into a bridge together.” But he wouldn't do that to his sister, his mother, to Ruth, the baby. And when he is dying? Not like this. He'll be himself one minute, dead the next—a heart attack probably, one last kindness.

She wouldn't trade an hour of *this*, with all its misery, for years with Ronnie. That much she knew. What had she been looking for, besides a way out? Strength. And mistook selfishness for it. Or selfishness *is* strength, of a kind. Of course dizzy with sex, too, drunk on it; she would have done anything. Yes, and

his success, the things he bought her: really for himself, dressing her, placing her in his settings, furnishing his life with her. But she liked it for a while: being his object. It flattered her; it proved she was desirable, because he insisted on the best, there wasn't an ounce of kindness in him. He was so proud of his honesty, hiding behind the truth. She was thrilled at first by the cruelty, too, the way it made her feel alert, alive. If, then, she had seen someone like John leaning over his poor dying wife's wheelchair, she would have thought, "Sweet man," and put him out of her mind the next second. She wouldn't trade dying for that life. But death itself, if that was the deal? Life at all costs? Yes, probably yes. If I had my life to live over and make the same mistakes, I would. I would, would, would. ...

Pain opened her eyes. Where was she? The wedding ...? It must have, yes, because this was the reception and she remembered, possibly, the long aisle, leaning on their arms (not John, he walked Ruth), leaning on Philip and someone else, one foot in front of the other. And the priest wrapping and wrapping his stole around their hands: bound together. So: yes, at least that was over.

The pain never left, but the morphine put it at a distance for a time—like someone else's, or hers and she was someone else. Then rushed back with a vengeance, and here it was again: her raw bones rubbed the chair; the music hurt her, hammering away. That's all. Go now.

But he had abandoned her. There: surrounded, laughing, flinging his arms around (the time he smashed a shelf-full of glasses making his point in a shop). What a relief for him, to be free of her! He lifted the baby, face to face took the pacifier ring in his mouth, the baby's mouth taking it back—their little game. His audience of women cooed like doves. His life without her. He had been hers these long terrible months. Now she was forgotten, annihilated.

But no, he turned his head, saw her distress, came to her: back in harness, shouldering the burden. He must resent, regret, but she couldn't see the tiniest sign of wanting anything but her, to be with her. He loved her. Understanding instantly, he said, "Time to go," told the others at the table good-bye, unlocked the wheels of the chair. They rolled past the flashing cameras—death on parade—and the hands and voices looming suddenly: good-bye, good-bye.

Then Ruth, kneeling in the white foam of her dress. "You're going?" They stared across the miles. She should say something now. She should say, "Be happy." But the words don't come. In her strength and happiness, Ruth says, "I'll call you tomorrow. Thank you," touches her face. Then rustles up: gone.

At the door, of course Natalie again, wings spread wide, her killing embrace, fingers on her nerves. Taking charge outside while John brings the car, saying, "No one but me knows what it cost you to be here." Willing John to come, looking out at the inn's dark garden where the white flowers burn with their own cool light.

She should die tonight and become one of those stories: how she kept herself alive to see her daughter married. The power of human will. The power of love! It wouldn't happen. She would be about the same tomorrow, her heart stupidly beating. The parts of the body were tied together like bells on a string. Nudge one and the others clatter. No tumor of their own, the kidneys "stressed," the liver in rebellion. All in a panic except the heart, pumping blood to the dying outposts, business as usual. The last to know.

Riding home in a black simmer of pain and exhaustion, lights stabbing from the road, John's warm low voice going on about the wedding. She couldn't take

in the words, wasn't meant to. It was the touch of his voice that mattered, and what he told her was, almost there, almost there.

But it was too much: the huge, ugly weight of her helplessness as he got her in the house, into "her" room (the bedroom upstairs a million miles away), unzipped, tugged off the dress, pulled on the flannel, breathing hard—she couldn't help him. He rattled down the bars of the bed and got her in. She tried to shrug off the IV. Why not fade away, weaker and weaker? Her body craved nothing, feeding on air, and soon not that. Let it go. But he snapped the tube in place, started the flow of nourishment. His fatigue made him brisk—get the job done. She almost hated him. Kiss on the forehead. Lips. The bars clicked in place. Lights out. A minute later, his soft snoring from the sofa, still in his shirt and pants, probably. Dead to the world.

And now her fatigue had almost gone away, pain and morphine canceling each other the way they did sometimes, and the jolt of food in her blood. Back soon, though, and not her enemy. Her last meal would be a feast of exhaustion. At the end, they would swallow each other up. But hiding now, off gathering its infinite strength. So here she was. The IV bag floated in the dark air like a ghost. She listened to the ticking house, to John breathing. The world asleep and she, for the moment, watching over it, still here, stubborn, alive in this darkness.

Something surprising uncurled in her and now, finally, she blessed them: Ruth and Michael, the baby. Everyone. From somewhere within her, a last hidden spring, the blessings flowed. As if she were suddenly someone, a goddess of generosity, the blessings flowed like water, like wine. For all the good it would do them, or all the harm. Still, they came, silent, unstoppable: Be happy; live your lives; from my dying world, I give you my blessing, I bless you all.