

A Perfect Night

Does it matter which of them first suggested it?

The point is that neither one dismissed the idea. Neither Alex nor Leigh said, "Of course not, we cannot, we would never." Neither one thought it was impossible, or at least neither one said so.

The point is, by some kind of consensus, they went inside, got the car keys, and drove away, leaving their sleeping children in the empty house.

The morning after Simon and Dara came for dinner, Alex and Leigh woke to heavy skies. Dry mouths and aching heads. They dragged through the usual Saturday routine of soccer games and pointless errands, but the weather and their hangovers turned everything sour. Driving from one mall to another under the sweaty grey sky made Leigh want to rip her eyes out.

"We always have to shop for blinds," the kids whined, and Leigh couldn't contradict them. We always do, she thought as she waited to make a left turn into the super-store parking lot.

Alex answered carefully, as if expressing his irritation might make his hangover worse.

"We have to buy the blinds today or we won't be able to get them up before—" but the kids were fighting over something and had stopped listening. Before whatever, it didn't matter. Leigh glanced over at the passenger seat and saw that Alex was leaning back against the headrest, eyes closed.

After the blinds, they had to buy new sneakers, and exchange the tank for the barbecue, but when they were done they decided to take the kids to a see a movie in the multiplex, and there Alex and Leigh sipped tall icy drinks and dozed in the air conditioning, while singing hamsters danced on the screen.

When they came out into the parking lot at four o'clock, the weather had changed. The ground was dark and the cars sparkled with tiny drops of water, as if glass had shattered everywhere. They hadn't heard the rain inside the mall, but the air was completely different now, the sky deep blue, clouds racing on a crisp wind. They drove home, stopping at the supermarket, where Leigh ran inside to pick up burgers and buns and a bag of chips, and they even found a stand selling corn at the gas station. "God knows where it's from, though," said Alex. "It's probably from the supermarket." By the time they got home it was finally time for dinner, and Alex burned the burgers a bit, but no one said anything, and then the kids jumped up and down, up and down on the trampoline, and then they finally went to bed, and he made her a gin and tonic and brought it out to her where she sat on the deck, watching the dark.

"Are they asleep?"

He didn't answer right away, but came and sat next to her on the porch swing. The swing lurched with his weight, and she felt irritation bubble up.

"That was fun last night," he said.

"It was. I'm really glad we finally got together with them."

"It's been a long time since we've had a night like that," he said.

"Mmm. I can't believe how crappy I still feel!"

He chuckled, which made her feel worse. She took a sip of the gin and tonic.

"Are they asleep?"

"Oh. Yeah. I thought I said."

Something inside her felt terribly tired. Why bother? Her shoulders drooped and she leaned her head back against the swing. He reached for his beer and the swing lurched again.

Alex and Leigh had known Simon for years, but Dara was new. Alex had run into them at Future Shop one Saturday morning in the

winter; Alex was replacing a computer cable, but Simon and Dara were shopping for a new TV “because neither one of ours fits in the new place.” Their fingers touched, tip to tip, just behind their hips, as if they thought Alex wouldn’t notice. Simon grinned at Alex.

Simon was already divorced, which was unusual in their circle. Ten years ago, he had been married to Holly. Back then, Simon had seemed elegant and sophisticated, like a man from another era, because he had a wife, even if she was kind of mean. But then, just as everyone else was starting to buy houses and have babies, or at least dogs, Simon and Holly split up, and the aura of sophistication dissolved. Now he seemed childlike, or selfish, like he had less to put up with than they did. Like he didn’t even know how to be married.

The rest of them had waited so long—through law school, and trips to Thailand, and futureless relationships—that surely they knew what they were doing, and these last-minute marriages, just under the ribbon before middle age, must be stronger than the romantic twenty-something ones, they all agreed. Divorce seemed incomprehensibly self-indulgent, like sleeping in on the weekend, or buying an exotic snake. “We’re too busy to split up!” Leigh and her friends cackled. “Have an affair? When? I don’t get enough sleep as it is!”

(And Leigh also felt, but wouldn’t say, why court trouble? And so she tended not to keep up with her divorced friends, her single friends. Shut the doors, close your ears. This is life. Leigh honestly didn’t feel like dealing with how someone wasn’t fulfilled, or how someone needed to live a more complete life. Because, really.)

So when Alex said “We’ll have to have you guys over soon!” he knew that he was speaking from the other side of a canyon. He knew that Simon and Dara probably knew this too, and that after he left Simon might roll his eyes, and Dara might say, “Do we have to?” He knew that Leigh would get annoyed when it seemed like they were dragging their heels about making plans. He knew they would drag their heels.

Leigh was annoyed. The Friday plans were her third effort to find a date that would work for Simon and Dara, and Simon only got back to her on the Thursday morning. Leigh ran the vacuum around the main floor Thursday night after work while Alex ran out to buy

brochettes and arugula and wine. "It won't be anything fancy, at the last minute," she warned.

While she vacuumed, she tried to picture Simon's new girlfriend. Younger, she guessed. Sweet, pretty. She would bring preposterous flowers, and play with the kids all night, keeping them up past their bedtime with babyish games to prove how great she was with kids. Leigh put the vacuum away without doing the stairs.

But Dara was not that at all. She was probably as old as Leigh. She was tall and strong, with a hard, beautiful face. Short, dark hair and a silvery dress over tanned, muscular arms and legs. When Alex introduced the kids she said "Hello" as if she couldn't care less, but held her hand out to Leigh who had just come into the family room and said, "I love your earrings."

They ate outside, and drank too much sangria, and let the kids watch a DVD while they kept talking, keeping the mosquitoes away with their cigarette smoke. Dara talked a lot, but you wanted her to: she told hilarious stories about her clients (she was a lawyer, too) and the things they had done, gruesome stories of perversion, transformed into jokes you felt terrible laughing at. Long after it was dark, Alex went inside to put the kids to bed, and Leigh said "Let me steal one of those" to Simon, and smoked her first cigarette in seven years, leaning her head back against the deck chair to catch the spinning.

Later, Dara helped Leigh clear the dishes, but she did it as if she were performing a role, as if they were "the wives clearing the dishes." Leigh was not sure how this was different from being the wives clearing the dishes, but it was different, palpably. Perhaps because Dara didn't go ahead and load them into the dishwasher like Leigh's friends would have done: instead, she balanced the plates, treacherously interwoven with the knives and forks, on the counter, and just left them there. She did not scrape. She did not rinse. She didn't bustle, looking for Tupperware for the leftover rice. Dara just leaned against the counter and watched Leigh while she tidied up.

But Leigh felt none of the disapproval she should feel forming in her mind. Instead, she felt exhilarated and breathless on the tide of Dara's personality. Dara was not polite, or well behaved, or appropri-

ate—and yet, here she was in the kitchen with Leigh, when she didn't have to be. Leigh felt, tentatively, that maybe Dara actually liked her.

Leigh wasn't used to interesting people liking her. She was too busy, and too harried, to be interesting herself. She knew she was boring: she and her girlfriends got together on Tuesday nights to drink Chardonnay and complain about how boring they had become. But the boring things—the trips to Costco, the PTA meetings, the weekends spent washing the deck—kept on, and there was a tacit agreement in their Tuesday sessions that they could let it go, an agreement to tolerate in each other the traits they so hated in themselves: resignation, smugness, tedium.

"Oh, to be young," said Leigh, on the swing.

Alex looked at her. "You know Simon is older than me."

"Hunh."

"And Dara, too, Dara turned forty last year."

"Hunh. Do you think they'll get married?" Leigh ran through the math. Did they want kids? When were they going to do that, exactly? What were they thinking? But she only thought it. Instead she said "Oh well".

"It's a perfect night," he said, and she had to agree. It was finally cooling down a bit, and there was a breeze. But she said nothing.

"They feel like our old friends, you know?" Alex said.

"Like who?"

"Well, like, I don't know, Dave and Kate. Or Sonia. Back in the day."

Leigh hooted. "They would kill you if they heard that." She was not sure which couple she was referring to, exactly.

"No, but, they used to be like that. Remember?"

"We used to be like that," Leigh said.

"What's that gorgeous smell?" Dara breathed in deeply, ostentatiously. They were back outside; it was long past eleven.

Alex watched Dara. She had moved to a chaise and was stretched out, arms crossed at the wrist above her head, long, sculpted legs crossed at the ankle.

She is so thin, thought Alex. She looks like a teenaged boy. Dara breathed out and dropped one arm down to where Simon lay on the deck, looking up at where the stars must be. Only Alex saw him kiss the inside of her wrist.

"It's jasmine," Leigh began, and she set off on a long story about how there is no one plant called jasmine, but actually several different plants from different families altogether that have the scent of jasmine. You can't just go to a nursery and ask for jasmine, Leigh explained. She'd spent weeks researching this, and had had to order the plants especially from a greenhouse in North Carolina, and they'd arrived as bare roots, but then they grew.

Please, thought Alex, don't tell that story. Don't. He looked back at Dara, who was looking at Simon.

"It's called *Jasmine nudiflorum*, actually," said Leigh, and wished she hadn't.

"Sounds like a stripper," said Simon, and Dara laughed, a deep and low sound that Alex thought he was not meant to hear. Leigh was silent, and Alex turned to look at her. He was expecting irritation, her lips tight and that look of scorn in her eyes. But her face looked naked, innocent of all annoyance. She was looking at Simon and Dara, and she looked younger, really young, as if she were a child watching the adults, her lips moving silently as if she was practicing what she would say to them, practicing being them. She looked at them with something like hunger.

These are dangerous friends, thought Alex.

They could smell the jasmine again tonight, its scent released by the rain earlier in the day. Alex tipped the swing very gently back and forth with the balls of his feet, and Leigh pulled her legs up beside her and leaned into him. The night air was intoxicating, full

of the memory of other summer nights when they were still young, full of hope.

And then one of them said:

"Wanna go for a drive?"

Simon changed the subject, and in the darkness, Leigh blushed; why had she told such a boring story? The conversation was moving faster now, and Leigh fell into silence, unable to get back in. Simon and Dara talked about movies Leigh and Alex hadn't seen, music they hadn't heard of. They talked about drugs, as if this was still something they knew about, so maybe it was.

They talked about sex, about the actual act itself. Not about all the stuff Leigh and her friends usually talked about, the silly evasive jokes and innuendos. Dara talked about positions, and fluids, and mechanics. And Leigh felt she should jump in—in fact she could jump in, because despite all the flummery of adulthood, she had sex, she had had sex many times. And it wasn't all just for having babies, and it wasn't all in bed, as hard as that may be to believe now. There was a time—

But the conversation had already spun away from her, and Dara and Simon and Alex were laughing about something, and she was embarrassed to say that actually, she didn't know exactly what they meant, and wondered, really, if Alex did either.

Some of the things they didn't say:

We can't.

The kids are asleep.

We could just go.

It's a beautiful night.

What if . . .

We're not allowed to. It's against the law.

We're not allowed.

We can't.

Let's go.

Then Simon, lying in the hammock, told a joke that took Leigh's breath away, it was so funny and also so forbidden. Alex and Dara laughed, so Leigh laughed too, but then she got up and asked, "Who wants another?" and went inside.

She was drunk, and disoriented. She knew this was her house, but she felt like an intruder. In the hot kitchen, still full of the day's humidity, she forgot that she could be seen through the back window, and she stood too long in front of the open fridge, then turned to go back outside, empty-handed. Simon, passing her by the back door as he went in to use the bathroom, bent close to her and whispered:

"It was only a joke."

They did it. They crept into the house quietly, without turning on the lights, and grabbed car keys and wallets. They didn't bother with shoes. She locked the door, though, she did do that much.

He drove. They pulled out of the driveway slowly. He would have turned off the lights if he could, but he knew that would be a bad idea. The minivan crept along the long curve of the crescent, and came to a full stop at the corner.

"Which way?" he asked, and she said "That way." He turned left, towards the main road.

If she had ever imagined doing something like this (and maybe she had), she had pictured them with the windows open, the radio on, the wind in their hair – but Alex drove slowly, like in a funeral procession, and they did not speak. She sat with her hands folded in her lap. With her bare feet she could feel the grit on the floor mats, grains of sand from their trip to the beach.

At the main road he turned right. There were no other cars. They

continued down towards the highway. Past the gas station, past the turn for the kids' school. There was more traffic now, and she felt anxious as they sat waiting for a light to turn. What if she looked over and in the next car—

But the light turned green, and he drove on. A bit faster, now. Past the mall, which was closed, the only cars clumped over at the end of the parking lot near the movie theatre and the Swiss Chalet. The next light was green, and so was the next, and he moved over into the right lane before she realised what he was doing, and then they were on the ramp for the highway into the city.

It was dark, and it was silent, and all they saw as they drove was the gleam of the moon on black and silver and red cars. Cars and minivans, all swimming down the highway into the city, all moving through the night.

Leigh was torn. Something had ripped her open, and she was unprotected. She had been covered, before, held together by the interweaving of their marriage, their friends' marriages, their kids, their friends' kids. All these obligations, all these connections, this unspoken pact to protect each other with their own good behaviour. If we all behave well, then we'll all behave well. Now she saw what a stupid, fragile plan that had been.

When had she become a prude? When had she become so shockable? Her reaction to the joke was the reaction of a little old lady, or a child, and she was neither, she was an adult. She felt cheated, now, among adults: cheated of the permission to behave badly, and she was furious with these new friends, furious with herself.

The thing was, they almost ran out of gas. He noticed the yellow light begin to flash, and without discussion pulled off at the next exit. Right turn onto the big road, over the highway, left turn into the gas

station, a figure eight around to the pump. She sat and watched the cars on the big road while he paid.

Then, again without discussion, a right turn, and the first right onto the ramp, going back north, back where they came from. We literally ran out of gas, she thought, and wanted to cry.

Alex knew; he had always known, deep down. The next would be chaos, and disorder, and harm. None of this, none of the renovations, or the furniture, or the landscaping, or the barbecues and play-dates, or the warm asexual friendships, or the exercise regime, or the children, was going to last. They had worked towards all this, they had studied and saved, and learned lessons, and made wise choices, and they had landed up on this plateau, in the middle of their life. But they couldn't stay here. They would be pulled along, they would be pulled out of their middle age into whatever was on the other side.

People would get older. Everyone would get sick. The children would become less sweet, less happy. They would become teenagers, and have problems, or do drugs, or get into accidents, or meet bad friends. People would have affairs, they would get fired, they would get cancer. They would all hurt one another, all of them. Bit by bit all of this would crumble, would shatter and fall apart and in its wake they would be left with ashes, and pain. This was all bullshit, all this happiness, all this safety. It couldn't last.

And they turned the corner onto their street, and nothing happened—

Or they turned the corner onto their street, and saw the flames dancing at the bedroom windows—