

FICTION | AUGUST 11, 2008 ISSUE

THE DINNER PARTY

BY JOSHUA FERRIS

On occasion, the two women went to lunch and she came home offended by some pettiness. And he would say, “Why do this to yourself?” He wanted to keep her from being hurt. He also wanted his wife and her friend to drift apart so that he never had to sit through another dinner party with the friend and her husband. But after a few months the rift would inevitably heal and the friendship return to good standing. He couldn’t blame her. They went back a long way and you get only so many old friends.

He leaped four hours ahead of himself. He ruminated on the evening in future retrospect and recalled every gesture, every word. He walked back to the kitchen and stood with a new drink in front of the fridge, out of the way. “I can’t do it,” he said.

“Can’t do what?”

The balls were up in the air: water slowly coming to a boil on the stove, meat seasoned on a plate sitting on the butcher block. She stood beside the sink dicing an onion. Other vegetables waited their turn on the counter, bright and doomed. She stopped cutting long enough to lift her arm to her eyes in a tragic pose. Then she resumed, more tearfully. She wasn’t drinking much of her wine.

“I can predict everything that will happen from the moment they arrive to the little kiss on the cheek goodbye and I just can’t goddam do it.”

GILBERT & GEORGE, “THE SHADOW OF THE GLASS” (1972)/COURTESY LEHMANN MAUPIN GALLERY AND SONNABEND GALLERY



“You could stick your tongue down her throat instead of the kiss goodbye,” she offered casually as she continued to dice. She was game, his wife. She spoke to him in bad taste freely and he considered it one of her best qualities. “But then that would surprise her, I guess, not you.”

“They come in,” he said, “we take their coats. Everyone talks in a big hurry as if we didn’t have four long hours ahead of us. We self-medicate with alcohol. A lot of things are discussed, different issues. Everyone laughs a lot, but later no one can say what exactly was so witty. Compliments on the food. A couple of monologues. Then they start to yawn, we start to yawn. They say, ‘We should think about leaving, huh?’ and we politely look away, like they’ve just decided to take a crap on the dinner table. Everyone stands, one of us gets their coats, peppy goodbyes. We all say what a lovely evening, do it again soon, blah-blah-blah. And then they leave and we talk about them and they hit the streets and talk about us.”

“What would make you happy?” she asked.

“A blow job.”

“Let’s wait until they get here for that,” she said.

She slid her finger along the blade to free the clinging onion. He handed her her glass. “Drink your wine,” he said. She took a sip. He left the kitchen.

He sat on the sofa and resumed reading an article. Then he got up and returned to the kitchen and poured himself a new drink.

“That’s another thing,” he said. “Their big surprise. Even their goddam surprises are predictable.”

“You need to act surprised for their sake,” she said.

“Wait for a little opening,” he said, “a little silence, and then he’ll say, he’ll be very coy, he’ll say, ‘Why don’t you tell them?’ And she’ll say, ‘No, *you*,’ and he’ll say, ‘No, *you*,’ and then she’ll say, ‘O.K., O.K., I’ll tell them.’ And we’ll take in the news like we’re genuinely surprised—like, holy shit, can you believe she’s knocked up, someone run down for a Lotto ticket, someone tell *Veuve Clicquot*, that bastard will want to know! And that’s just the worst, how predictable our response to their so-called news will be.”

“Well, O.K.,” she said. “When that happens, why don’t you suggest they have an abortion?”

He chewed his ice and nodded. “That would shake things up,” he said, “wouldn’t it?”

“Tell them we can do it right here with a little Veuve Clicquot and one of the bedroom hangers.”

“Delightful,” he said. “I’m in.”

The kitchen was small. He would have done better to remain in one of the other rooms, but he wanted to be with her. She was sautéing the garlic and the onion.

“He’s O.K.,” he said. “They’re both O.K. I’m just being a dick.”

“We do this, what—at most, once or twice a year. I think you can handle it. And when they have the baby —”

“Oh, Christ.”

“When they have the baby, we’ll see even less of them.”

“Holiday cards. Here’s our little sun-chine. See our little sun-chine? Christ.”

“You aren’t the one who’s going to have to go to the baby shower,” she said.

“How much you wanna bet they buy a stroller?”

“A stroller?”

“A stroller.”

“A stroller,” she said. “To cart the baby around.”

He put cheese on a cracker. “For to cart the baby around in, yes,” he said.

“And you, if you had a baby, there’d be no stroller, right, because it would be oh so predictable? Absolutely no stroller?”

“I was thinking we could duct-tape the child,” he said. “It would be cheaper.”

“Like a BabyBjörn, but duct tape.”

“Exactly.”

“Would the baby face in or out?”

“If it was sleeping, in. Not sleeping, kind of kicking its feet, wanting to see the world, duct-tape it out, so it has a view.”

“Allowing the child to be curious,” she said. “Feeding its desire to marvel at this new experience called life.”

“Something like that.”

“The child must be so relieved that I’m barren,” she said.

He left the kitchen. He stood in the living room with his drink, listening to the sounds of her cooking.

They should have invited Ben and Lauren, too, like last time. Ben and Lauren were more his friends. With Ben and Lauren there, time didn’t move as it moved in hospital waiting rooms and the Midwestern churches of his youth. But she had wanted it just the four of them this time, probably so that they could more freely revel in their big news, and there was a limit to how many times he could say, unprompted, “Hey, should we invite Ben and Lauren?” At least he was doing Ben and Lauren a favor.

He returned to the kitchen. “When they come in,” he said, “let’s make them do a shot, both of them.”

“A shot?”

“Of tequila.”

“Her, too?”

“Both of them.”

“To sort of . . . fortify the baby.”

“We’ll force them somehow,” he said. “I’ll figure it out.”

“Better hurry,” she said.

“All this talk of folic acid and prenatal vitamins. Give me a break. Do they think Attila the Hun got his daily dose of folic acid when he was in the womb? Napoleon?” She was going back and forth across the kitchen while he kept his drink close. “I could go on.”

“George Washington,” she said, “a Founding Father.”

“See? I could go on. Moses.”

“I don’t think she’s going to be willing to do a shot,” she said.

“We trick her somehow. Tell her it’s full of prenatal vitamins, and she shoots it down.”

“Because she just graduated from the third grade,” she said, “and she’s blind and retarded.”

“I’ll think of something,” he said.

He left the kitchen again. On his way back in, he said, “O.K., I’ve got it.”

He found the room empty. Her wedding ring and the one with the diamond were on the counter, where she always put them before starting to cook anything. The sink had filled with dishes. On the stove, a big pot and a smaller one with a handle unfurled steam into the beige hood where the vent rattled. The door of the cabinet under the sink hung open. He checked the bathroom off the kitchen. He returned the way

he'd come, through the apartment, in the unlikely event she had passed by without his noticing as he was sitting on the sofa. He returned to the kitchen, to the animated appliances and stewing ingredients. She came in through the front door.

"Where'd you go?"

"Took the garbage down," she said.

"I would have done that."

He had come up with a good approach to the evening, but he was no longer in the mood to present it. Instead, he went over to her at the stove. He threaded his arms around her waist as she stirred one of the pots. Years earlier, they'd had a name for this hug. He couldn't remember what it was. He kissed her neck, then the back of her hair. Her hair smelled of steam and shampoo and silk and wildflowers. "What can I do?" he said.

"You can set the table," she said.

He set the table. He stood in front of the refrigerator with a new drink. "So I've figured it out," he resumed. "They bring the bottle of wine, right? We thank them, we tuck it away in the kitchen. They never see it again. We start the evening. We don't ask them what they want to drink. Like it's just an oversight on our part. Because I know him. Even if she's not drinking because of the big news, he'll want a drink. I tell him we ran out. I tell him we'll open their wine at dinner. But then we don't. We just have water for the table. Then, in the middle of the meal—"

"You know, you should work for Al Qaeda," she said.

"—in the middle of the meal, I get up and go to the kitchen and I bring back a beer for myself. I open it at the table and take a long drink. What do you think?"

"Sounds promising."

"He says, 'Hey, got another one of those?,' and I'm, like, 'Oh, actually, this is the last one.' And then I kill it. Do you think they would leave?"

“Leave? No.”

“Really? They wouldn’t leave after that? Where the hell are they, anyway?”

“They might never come back, but no. They would not leave.”

“You know, they’re good people,” he said. “Ultimately.”

“She’s my oldest friend,” she said. “And he can be very funny.”

“You’re right, he can be very funny,” he agreed.

Later, he came out of the bathroom just as the toilet was completing its roar. She was no longer in the kitchen. He took another cheese and cracker. He walked past the dressed table to the living room. She sat on the sofa reading the same magazine he had been reading. He stood in the middle of the room and raised his hands. “Where are they?”

“If there’s one thing that’s predictable,” she said.

“But it’s almost forty-five minutes.”

“They’ll be eating some very cold appetizers.”

“Have you cooked the meat?”

“Everything but.”

She casually flipped through the magazine. There was no outrage or impatience. She seemed resigned to waiting as long as it took.

“You should maybe call her,” he said.

“Isn't this what you wanted?” she asked. “Something unpredictable?”

She was on the phone, calling hospitals. It was ten o'clock, and then it was ten-thirty. She had tried to reach them a dozen times. She'd sent texts and e-mails. They hadn't picked up and they hadn't replied.

“Not if it interfered with dinner,” he said.

“Nice,” she said. “Magnanimous and humane.”

“Those fucking drips,” he said, “have probably fallen asleep watching ‘Friends’ on DVD, for which they silence their phones and disable their BlackBerrys.”

“Yes?” she said. She was speaking into the phone now. “O.K., thank you. Can you take my number just in case one of them comes in? Thank you.” She left her name and number and hung up.

“Is it really possible,” she said. She was dialling the next number. “Is it really possible that you care about no one but yourself?”

“I'm trying to be helpful.”

“Your help isn't worth a good God damn anymore,” she said.

He didn't like to be reminded. He left the room. “Sure,” she said to the phone. “I love to hold.”

“Is this meat going bad?” he called out. He was in the kitchen. He had finished the cheese and crackers, the mini Caprese salad she'd made with grape tomatoes, and the figs wrapped in bacon caramelized with a homemade glaze. Now he was sitting on a barstool eating a saucer of the mushroom risotto that was meant to go with the lamb, while staring at the meat on the butcher block. He had opened another bottle of wine. “Hey, babe, this meat? Should we do something with this meat?”

“Stick it up your ass,” she said.

He stopped chewing. He looked with raised eyebrows at the two mustard-seasoned racks of lamb and thought how unpleasant it would be to insert one of their bony ribs into his buttock, but how much fun to walk out into the next room and moon her with a rack of lamb between his cheeks. “Stick it up my ass, huh,” he said. “You know who should stick it up . . . whose asses . . . up whose asses it should be stuck up is, are your two friends of yours, their asses. They should stick it up their asses,” he said.

Another hospital had no record, either, and again she left her name and number. She walked into the kitchen. “What are you muttering?”

“There are two racks there, one for each of their asses.”

She put her fingertip on his forehead. “This isn’t like them,” she said, pushing his head back, “and you know it’s not like them, and you’re not being helpful.” She released him, and he sprang back on the stool to an upright position.

“I’m sorry, am I supposed to be helpful?” he said. “Because I thought my help was no longer worth a good God damn.”

She left the room.

“Wait,” he said. He dropped the saucer to the counter and got off the stool. “Hold on.” He followed her through the dining room. “Obviously, I’m not saying—will you listen to me please?—that I don’t want to be helpful. Will you please turn around and listen?” She stopped and turned. “They just got their dates wrong, is all,” he said, “and tomorrow, when they call, they’ll tell you how sorry they are. They had to turn their phones off during the late showing of ‘Kung Fu Panda’ or something.”

“So they went to see ‘Kung Fu Panda’ tonight,” she said.

“Or something like it.”

“And they turned their phones off so they wouldn’t ring during ‘Kung Fu Panda.’”

“Or,” he said. “Or.” He put his finger up. They were standing near the bedroom doorway. There was dim light coming from the dark room and he was suddenly irrationally afraid, as he had been as a child, that if anyone stepped inside, if she stepped inside, she would plummet to the center of the earth. He lowered his finger. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I don’t think they went to see ‘Kung Fu Panda.’”

“You do not think, period,” she said.

She stepped inside the bedroom. She did not plummet down but floated across the murk into the bathroom. She waited until the door was shut before switching on the light.

He sat on the kitchen floor for thirty minutes. Then he said, “Hey!” He got no response. He stood and went into the bedroom.

He found her in bed. She was in her pajamas. She was propped up against the headboard, flipping through another magazine in the light coming from the lamp on the nightstand. “What are you doing?”

“Going to bed.”

“The meat is still on the counter,” he said. “There’s food everywhere. Are we just going to let it go to waste? And aren’t you worried about your friends?” he asked.

“I’m not hungry,” she said.

“Should you really be paging through a magazine right now?”

“What else would you suggest I do?”

“I don’t know. Go over to their apartment? See if they’re there?”

“I need to wait here in case I get a call from a hospital, or in case they show up.”

He sat down on the bed. He put his head in his hands. He heard the glossy toss of one magazine page after another, and then, deeper in the ears, the squishy beat of his sobering heart.

“Well,” he said, looking up. “Would you like me to go over there?”

“What are you going to do about it, big man? Man of steel? Gonna get inside the Absolutmobile and go find the big danger?”

He stared at her.

“It’s too bad we can’t have one,” she said. “If it was ever abducted, what better daddy to save her?”

“Her? Is that right? Her?”

“I guess it would be important for you to have a boy, wouldn’t it? So you could pass along all these accumulated masculinity skills. All your big-man powers.”

He stood up from the bed.

“Do you want me to go over there or not?” he asked.

He had been to their apartment a handful of times, but tonight the lighting was much lower. It was a sizable apartment with a quirky floor plan and a proliferation of rooms that seemed to spool out one after another. He stepped inside the foyer and saw the first of the bedrooms pulsing with candlelight just beyond the entrance to the kitchen. He saw silhouettes of people there and more in the room to his right. People were coming and going from the kitchen, some louder than others. He did not recognize the man who had opened the door.

“Is there a party going on?” he asked.

“Are you a neighbor?”

“No. An old friend.”

“There’s beer in the fridge,” the man said. He closed the door and introduced himself. They shook hands and the man disappeared.

The noisy talk was crisper than it had been in the hall outside, where he had first noticed its underwater strains and thought it must be coming from some other apartment. He stayed in the foyer for a minute and then drifted down the small corridor to the kitchen. Here, too, the light was dim. Votives cast shadows against the chrome appliances and ceiling-mounted pots and pans and the people standing in twos and threes against the black marble counter. Someone reached into the fridge. The bright telescoping light broke the ambience and the door falling shut just as quickly restored it. "The last one of those, you bastard?" someone said. The one addressed mimicked smashing the bottle on the speaker's head. There was more mimicry of hand-to-hand combat as he drifted out of the kitchen.

He made his way through the rooms. He saw no one he recognized. It was hard to see in the low light, and some people, in the middle of conversations, had their backs to him. He did not want to go around tapping on shoulders or craning his neck conspicuously. He felt self-conscious despite the anonymity afforded by the darkness. He regretted not getting a drink while he was in the kitchen, not only because it had been a while since his last drink, and drinking was helpful in these situations, but because without a drink in hand he felt that much more out of place.

He ended up by the gas fireplace below the mantel and mirror. Solid blue flames licked over fake logs with bulky knots, radiating a dry and passionless heat. No smoke, no ash. Just a steady dull and decorous burn. He stared at it until his eyes began to hurt, letting the competing voices behind him blend into one festive gibbering blur. When he looked up again, his eyes had hung a scrim of fire between him and the world. He could see only the vaguest shapes, the crudest outlines of people and walls, and then only at his periphery. He waited for the image to dissolve, but before it did completely a familiar voice said, "Well, look who it is."

He blinked to quicken his vision, which helped, but he didn't think it could be possible. "Ben?" he said.

"Lauren and I were just wondering where you could be," Ben said.

"We had plans," he found himself saying, "earlier in the evening."

"Where's Amy?"

"She's home," he said. He added, "Not feeling well."

“Oh, no,” Ben said. “The flu?”

“Flulike,” he said. “Where’s Lauren?”

Ben turned around as if to locate Lauren. When he turned back, he spoke at a much lower register.

“Listen, buddy, to your left, at ten o’clock? I’m going to pivot you, O.K.?” Ben reached out with his beer in hand and turned him a fraction. “Now she’s at noon, right over my shoulder. See her? Do you know who that is?”

“She’s beautiful.”

“Beautiful? Buddy,” he said, “do you have any idea who that woman is?”

“I don’t know who any of these people are,” he said.

Before he could study the woman any closer, he felt a hand on his arm. From the thinness of the grip he knew it to be a woman’s hand, and when he turned he was not surprised. “Hey,” he said. “You know we’ve been looking for you?”

“Stay right where you are, Ben,” she said. “I’ll get you another drink.” She turned from Ben and addressed him. “Will you walk with me?”

With her hand now on the small of his back, she led him through the rooms faster than he had meandered through them on his own.

“What the hell’s going on?” he asked her. “We’ve been looking for you all night and you’re having a goddam party?”

“Hey, you promised to wait for me, now,” she said to a group of people who turned to her all at once.

“Oh, I won’t tell it without you,” a man said, and someone laughed.

She turned back with a smile that quickly disappeared.

“Hey,” he said. “Are you listening to me?”

“Can you please wait?” she asked, without looking at him.

“Where are we going?”

She returned him to the foyer. She finished what was left in her glass and placed it on the floor.

“Should you be drinking?”

“It’s cranberry juice,” she said. Then she opened the door and they stepped out into the hallway. She waited for the door to close behind her. “Who invited you to this party?” she asked.

“Who invited me?” he said. “No one invited me. We had dinner plans tonight, the four of us, and you stood us up.”

“I’m sorry,” she said. “We did not have dinner plans.”

“I’m afraid, yes, we did,” he said. “We made a huge spread for you guys and bought some very expensive meat and then I come here and find out you’re having a big party.”

“Now, why would we throw a big party if we had plans with you?”

“Why wouldn’t we get an invitation if you were throwing a big party?” he asked.

She didn’t have an answer. People considered her pretty, but she had puffy cheeks and a pouty mouth that had annoyed him from the beginning, almost against his will. He had wanted to like her at first, but her kind of mouth he associated with spoiled brats and her voice didn’t help, nor the words she spoke. He felt sorry for that baby.

“Can’t answer that, can you?” he said.

“Let me ask you something,” she said. Her mouth, trembling a little, had never looked more punitive or ugly. “Why do you pretend to like us? Why do you invite us to dinner parties when everyone knows you don’t like us, that you’ve been full of contempt for us from the very beginning?”

He was surprised by the forwardness of the question. He was tempted to argue the point. How could she know for certain that he didn’t like them?

Instead, he said, “For Amy.” She was silent. “Well, you asked,” he said.

“This party is by invitation only,” she said, “and we specifically did not invite you.”

“So you don’t invite me or Amy, your oldest friend Amy, but you invite my friend Ben?”

“We met Ben at one of your dinner parties.”

“I know how you met him.”

“And he and Lauren have since become friends.”

“Who was that woman?” he asked.

“What woman?”

“The woman standing in front of me when I was talking to Ben.”

“I must not be making myself very clear,” she said.

“O.K., forget it,” he said, “forget it. You don’t want me here. That’s fine. But I came because Amy was worried about you when you didn’t show up for dinner. So what am I supposed to say to her when I go home knowing that you couldn’t come to our dinner party because you have a big party going on yourself, and that you specifically didn’t invite her?”

She stared at him. Her arms were folded and her head was a little cocked, as if they were having a lovers’ quarrel, but her face was suddenly calm and expressionless.

“You want to know what I think of you?” she asked.

He was having a hard time reading her face. It was now so blank and flat and calm. He had no idea what she was thinking. It was as if she were a different person.

“I think Amy made a terrible mistake marrying you,” she said. “I tried to tell her that, but I couldn’t do it the way I should have. Amy and I have nothing, absolutely nothing in common anymore, and I’m sorry but I blame you for that, because it’s so awful to have to see you and talk about you, and to think that she’s going to be alone with you for the rest of her life just breaks my heart.”

He began to walk away. He stopped and turned back. “You’re barbarians,” he said. “You and Scott both.” He resumed walking.

“Don’t come here again,” she cried after him. “Don’t call, either. Not tonight, and not tomorrow.”

“I can’t wait to go home and tell Amy. She’s going to love this.”

“I wish I could say I cared,” she said.

He took a taxi home. In the back seat, he replayed the conversation again and again with such intensity that he began to shake his head and grit his teeth. He couldn’t believe the things she had said to him. They were outrageous, offensive, and final. He hardly saw anything out the car window, but he could vividly picture her mouth and then the blank expression that had preceded her outburst, which worked him up even more.

When he stepped out of the cab, his anger had lessened through too much concentration on it. He wanted it to take hold of him again with its strangling grip, so he thought of the kitchen: every dish in the sink, the meat aging ruinously on the butcher block. He couldn’t wait to see it again.

He walked through the front door and called out to her. He went through the apartment to the bedroom. The bed was unmade in that corner where she had lain flipping through her magazine, and the magazine itself was on the duvet. He looked in the bathroom before leaving the bedroom and walking back through the apartment, this time turning on all the overhead lights. On his way to the kitchen, he stopped at the closet and took an accounting of the coats, then he hurried on to the kitchen, where everything was as it

had been a few hours earlier. He was that future self he had many times foretold but always dismissed as an impossibility. It was dizzying. He had to steady himself on the counter. He wanted nothing more than to tell her everything about the evening now. What cruel fun. What meagre compensation. Her wedding ring and the one with the diamond remained on the counter, where she had left them before she started cooking.

When he returned to the bedroom he found her on the far side of the bed with her back to him. His relief was immense. He crossed the room and saw in the light coming in through the blinds that her eyes were open. She didn't look at him, though she must have known he was there. He leaned against the wall. She continued to blink in a distant and lonely way.

"They were home," he said. He let that sink in. "They were home that whole time."

She closed her eyes. He prepared what he was going to say next. He wanted to go back now and start at the beginning, at the first sounds of the party he had picked up on in the hallway. With an economical and unsentimental gesture, she wiped a tear away before resettling her hand on her leg. He wasn't expecting her to cry.

He thought about how worried she had been. He thought about how much pride she took in her cooking and how much effort she had made for them.

He lay down beside her on the bed. "They were sleeping," he said. "I had to buzz them so many times just to wake them up. And she was so sorry. She said to me so many times how sorry she was."

She got out of bed and went into the other room. He was holding her one minute and the next he felt the enormity of the empty bed. He called out to her. She didn't respond. He called out to her a second time. He thought about getting up and going to her, but that was usually no longer helpful. He heard her rummaging through the closet. When she came back in, she switched on the overhead light just as he happened to be staring at it. His eyes burned and he turned away. The next thing he knew, she had placed a roller bag on the bed and was unzipping it.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

He couldn't believe what he was seeing. It was a totally predictable thing to do, to pack a bag, and yet completely outrageous. It was both dramatic and futile. Where did she plan to go?

"You're being ridiculous," he said. "Please stop. What does this have to do with me?"

She slowed down. She moved a few more things into the bag and then, with a gesture that was full of rage and yet halfhearted, she threw in a pair of socks. She seemed to recognize that what she was doing was preposterous, though nothing else appropriate or imaginable had come to her. She stood still in front of the bag. He got off the bed and took her in his arms.

"She just forgot," he said. "That's all. You know her."

She began to sob. She heaved into his shoulder as he held her. Hot tears came through his shirt.

"Why do I have this life?" she asked.

Her arms dropped to her side and she went limp. She cried as if he were not holding her, as if he were not in the room with her, as if he were not in the world at all. ♦

JOSHUA FERRIS
