

Robert Harris

offence, and unless and until that happens, Mr. A has a right to anonymity. Miss B's published account is, frankly, incoherent. What is not in dispute is that witnesses heard voices raised, and that at some point Mr. A and myself both fell, entwined, down the stairs, landing in the hall at exactly the moment when, as luck would have it, the front door opened to admit the first of Mr. A's dinner guests, my right honourable friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

Conclusion

Mr. Speaker, I have tried to set out the facts as clearly and unemotionally as possible. Someone—I think it may have been Abraham Lincoln, or possibly it was Winston Churchill—once wrote that a night in a police cell is good for any man, and I feel that I have personally benefited from this experience. I have been treated as any other citizen would have been under the circumstances, and that is all I have ever sought.

To have been allowed to serve this country has been a great privilege. Over the course of the next few hours, I shall be having further discussions with my ministerial colleagues and others, and later this evening I hope to have an audience of Her Majesty the Queen. After that my own personal position will be clearer.

No doubt much more will be said on these matters in the days and weeks to come. In the meantime, it only remains for me to thank you, Mr. Speaker, and through you the House, for the courtesy you have shown in listening to my personal statement.

The Wonder Spot

} MELISSA BANK

Seth talks me into going to a party in Brooklyn. He says that we can just drop by. I tell him that a party in Brooklyn is a commitment. It takes effort. It's like a wedding: You can't just drop by.

"We can just drop by," he says again, in a tone that says, *We can do anything we want.*

This will be our first party as a couple.

He says, "It'll be fun."

My boyfriend is a decade younger than I am; he is full of hope.

We drive to Brooklyn in his old Mustang convertible, with the top down. Because of the wind and because I'm on the side of Seth's bad ear, we can't really talk—or I can't. But he tells me that we're going to Williamsburg, the section of Brooklyn that's been

called the New Downtown. After the party we can walk around and have dinner at a restaurant his friend Bob is about to open there. Bob has offered to let us try everything on the menu-to-be if we'll help him name the restaurant; the finalists are The Shiny Diner, Bob's, and The Wonder Spot. "Start thinking," Seth says, and I do.

Across the bridge and into the land of Brooklyn, we go under overpasses and down streets so dark and deserted you know they're used only to get lost on. I get this pang for Manhattan, where I am never farther than a block from a bodega, never more than a raised arm from a cab. But then we turn a corner and—lights! people! action!—we park.

Walking to the party, I tell Seth about the Williamsburg I've already been to, the one in Virginia. I expect him to have heard of it—he's from Canada and knows more about the U.S. than I do—but he hasn't. I tell him that I was five or six at the time, and I didn't understand the concept of historical re-enactment. I thought that we'd just found a place where women in bonnets churned butter and men in breeches shoed horses. I tell him the real drama of the trip: I lost the dollar my father had given me for the gift shop.

"What period do they re-enact?" Seth says, teasing.

"You know," I say, "colonial times."

"When was that exactly?"

"Sometime before 1910," I say.

I'm having such a good time that I forget about the party until we're on the elevator up. I say, "Maybe we should have a code for 'I want to go.'"

He starts to make a joke but sees that I'm serious and squeezes my hand three times. I okay the code.

The elevator door opens right into the loft. I was counting on those extra few seconds of hallway before facing the party, the party we are now part of and in, a party with people talking and laughing and having a party time. I think, *I am a solid, trying to do a liquid's job.*

I am only a third joking when I squeeze Seth's hand three times. He squeezes back four, and before I can ask what four means, our hostess is upon us. She is tall and slinky, with ultra-short hair and a gold dot in one of her perfect nostrils; I feel every pound of my weight, every year of my age, until Seth tells her, "This is my girlfriend, Meg."

I'm not sure I've ever had a boyfriend who introduced me as his girlfriend. I smile up at this ghostly-pale sweetie-pie man o' mine.

As soon as our hostess slinks off to greet her next arrivals, I say, "What does four mean?"

"It means, 'I love you, too,'" he says.

I want to be happy to hear these words—it's the first time we've squeezed them—but I feel so close to him at this moment, I say the truth, which is, "I feel old."

He puts his coat around my shoulders and says, "Is that better?" and I realize that I've spoken into his bad ear.

I nod, and we move deeper into the party. He introduces me as his girlfriend to each of the friends we pass, all of whom seem happy to meet me, and I think, *I am his girlfriend, Meg; I am girlfriend; I am Meg, girlfriend of Seth.*

I'm fine, even super-fine, until he goes to get a glass of wine for me. Now I look around, trying to pretend, as I always do at parties, that I could be talking to a fellow party-goer if I wanted to, but at the moment I am just too captivated by my own fascinating observations of the crowd.

The women are young, young, young, liquidy and sweet-looking; they are batter, and I am the sponge cake they don't know they'll become. I stand here, a lone loaf, stuck to the pan.

It is at this moment that I see Vincent—only from behind, but I know it's him. Vincent is my ex-boyfriend, or X⁷, if you count all the times we broke up and got back together.

I've told Seth almost nothing about my ex-boyfriends. Now he'll meet the one who told me my head was too big for my body.

When Seth returns with my wine, he says, "Still cold?" and he rubs my shoulders and arms and back warm. "Better?" he says.

I do feel better, and I say so.

A small crowd gathers around us—the drummer in Seth's band, and his entourage—girlfriend, brother, and girlfriend of brother. They try to talk to me, and I try to talk back. One of the girlfriends, I'm not sure whose, works in public radio. Since I'm a public-radio lover, I can keep this conversation going, program to program, until she asks me what I do.

I say, "I'm a weaver," and both girlfriends look at me like they're not sure they've heard correctly.

"I weave," I say, and this leads to an almost post-nuclear silence, the usual effect.

But the one who works in public radio says, "Do you like weaving?"

"Except for the stress," I say. She laughs, and we are instant friends.

Then we girlfriends return to them boyfriends. I plant myself beside Seth like a fire hydrant, my back to where I imagine Vincent to be.

But he's not; he's right across the room, his arm slung like a belt around the hips of a girl who I can tell right away is a model. She has the long, straight hair I used to wish for and sky-high thighs you can see through her mesh stockings.

Just like the bad old days, Vincent doesn't seem to recognize me. Then he gives me a look of mock shock.

I inadvertently squeeze Seth's hand, and he smiles without looking at me, like we have a secret language, and I wish we did.

I watch Vincent steer his girlfriend toward us.

He's grown his hair long and now sports a weird beard and mustache, Lucifer-style. Plus, he's wearing a shirt with huge pointy collars jutting out like fangs over his jacket.

When he reaches us, I say, "Happy Halloween."

"Hello, Meg," he says, Dr. Droll.

I say, "Seth, this is—"

Vincent interrupts and introduces himself as "Enzo."

"Enzo?" I say.

He doesn't answer, and I remember his New Jersey friends calling him Vinnie, and his firm correction: "Vincent."

He pulls his model front and center and says, "This is Amanda."

"I'm Meg," I say to her. Then I get to say, "This is my boyfriend, Seth."

"Hi." She is both chirpy and cool, an ice chick. "We know each

other," she says about the man I've just introduced as my boyfriend, and she kisses him—just his cheek, but so far back that her pouty mouth appears to be traveling neck- or ear-ward.

I stare at her, even while I am telling myself not to. I fall under the spell not of her eyes but her eyebrows, which are perfectly arched and skinny and make me aware of my own thick and feral pair; mine are a forest and hers are a trail.

When I blink myself out of my trance, Vincent is saying, "Whenever anyone would say, 'Small world,' Meg used to say, 'Actually, it's medium-sized.'"

I say, "I was about eleven when I knew Vincent."

Then, like the hostess my mother taught me to be, I say, "Vincent is a musician, too."

"I used to be," he says and names the best-known of the bands he played in, though I happen to know it was only for about fifteen minutes. Then he asks Seth, "Who do you play with?"

I can tell Vincent's impressed by Seth's band and doesn't want to be; he fast talks about starting up a start-up—an on-line recording studio, a real-time distribution outlet, a virtual record label—he goes on and on, Vincent style, grandiose and impossible to understand.

I say, "Basically, you do everything but teach kindergarten?"

Vincent says, "There is an educational component."

Seth comes off as gentle, even meek, but I know he's intolerant of talk like this. He squeezes my hand three times.

"Oh, shoot," I say, looking at my wrist for a watch I'm not wearing, "we have to go," and I love the sound of *we*, and I love that it's Seth who wants to go and I love that we are going.

Vincent says they're headed to another party themselves. He kisses both my cheeks—what now must be the signature Enzo kiss—and he looks at me as though he cares deeply for me, a look I never got when we were together, a look that Seth notices, and I think, *Phew*: Seth will think another man loved me; he will think I am the lovable kind of woman, the kind a man better love right or somebody else will.

Vincent says, "You look great, Meg," and I think of saying, *Whereas you look a little strange*, but I just say, "See you, Vinnie."

A few more pleasantries and we're in the elevator.

As soon as the elevator doors close, I say, "Good thing she was just a model." I am giddy just to be out. "I think that would've been really hard if she were a supermodel."

Seth looks at me, not sure what I mean.

Out on the street, I say, "How do you know her, by the way?" and instantly regret how deliberately offhanded I sound.

"I don't really know her," he says. "She came up to me after a show a few weeks ago."

I think, *Came up to you or on to you?* but I give myself the open, amused look of a bystander eager to hear more about one of life's funny little coincidences.

"She asked me if I would help her celebrate her half-birthday," he says, and his tone tells me I would be crazy to think he'd ever be attracted to her.

Unfortunately, now I am crazy, and I have to stop myself from saying a tone-deaf and tone-dumb, *So you're saying you didn't eat her half-birthday cake?*

Suddenly I feel like I'm Mary Poppins floating with an umbrella

and a spoonful of sugar into the city of sexual menace, population a million Amandas with ultra-short and long straight hair and pouty mouths and thighs you can see through mesh stockings.

From there I go straight to *This will never work. He has models coming on to him after his show. He'll be forty-nine when you're turning sixty. He is young and hip and you don't even know the hip word for hip anymore. You belong at home in bed with a book.*

I remind myself that this is what I always say and what I always do. As soon as I'm in a relationship, I promote fear from clerk to president, even though all it can do is sweep up, turn off the lights and lock the door.

I am so deep in my own argument that I almost don't hear Seth say, "Meg."

He stops me on the pavement, and turns me toward him. His face practically glows white; he is a ghost of the ghost he usually looks like.

He says, "When did you go out with him?"

"So long ago," I say, "he had a different name."

"Beelzebub?" he says. Then: "Sorry."

I tell him that I hadn't seen Vincent for ten-plus years—he was still in purgatory when I knew him.

"But it was hard for you to see him with somebody else, tonight?"

"No," I say, a little surprised.

He nods, not quite believing. "But the thing you said about her being a model?"

"Models are always hard," I say. "And it was hard to see her necking with your cheek."

After I've said this, I want to say that I don't usually use the word "neck" as a verb, it's a fifties word, my mother's word, but he is shaking his head and I can see he is not thinking about how old I sound or look or am.

"Obviously he still has a thing for you," Seth says, and shakes his head again and swallows a couple of times, like he's trying to get rid of a bad taste in his mouth. "The way he looked at you."

My *phew* gives me an Indian burn of shame. "That look was for Amanda's benefit," I say, and I know it's true. For a second, I am an older sister to my younger self. "And if she brings it up later," I say, "he'll tell her she's crazy."

"Very nice," Seth says, and his voice tells me that he doesn't want to hear any more about Vincent and Amanda, he doesn't care about them, and that he's wishing he didn't care so much about me.

It scares me. But then I get this big feeling, simple but exalted: *He's like me, just with different details.*

His eyes are closed, and I think maybe he's picturing me with Vincent or other men he assumes I've slept with or loved. Maybe he's telling himself that he's too tall or doesn't hear well enough. Usually, he pulls me in for the hug, but now I do it. I pull him in and we stay like this, his chin on my head, my face on his chest.

I find myself thinking of Amanda at another party with Vincent, and feeling sorry for her. It occurs to me that if I were as beautiful as she is, every passing half-birthday would be harder to celebrate. But mostly I am just glad I am not her and glad we are not them, and glad just to be out here on the curb, breathing the sweet air of Williamsburg and post-colonial freedom.

We are quiet for a while, walking. I begin to see where we are now. We pass the Miss Williamsburg Diner. Little bookstores I could spend my life in. We pass a gallery with black-light art hung above a reflecting pool.

Then we're standing in a parking lot, outside of what Seth tells me is Bob's restaurant. I'm saying that living in Manhattan gives you a real appreciation of parking lots, when Seth takes something out of his pocket and puts it in my hand. It's a dollar. "For the gift shop," he says. "Don't lose it now."

With my dollar hand, I squeeze Seth's about thirty-seven times, telling him everything I feel.

He says, "What does that mean?"

I say, "I'm hungry."

What I feel is, *Right now I am having the life I want, here outside The Shiny Diner, Bob's, or The Wonder Spot, with my dollar to spend and dinner to come.* We will try everything on the menu. Then we will drive through Brooklyn and cross the bridge with the Manhattan skyline in front of us, which looks new to me every time I see it, and we will drive right into it. We'll find a parking space a few blocks from my apartment on Tenth Street, and we'll pick up milk and tomorrow's paper. We will undress and get into bed.

Last Requests

} GILES SMITH

Pork chop—nice and thick, kidney still in—with sprouts, a carrot-and-swede mix, mashed potatoes and gravy. Now, that's a proper meal. And after, fruit pie and custard or cream. A proper, home-baked pie, mind you—none of your tins and packets. Proper, wholesome, homely food—what my husband Derek used to call "a bit of all right." The way to a man's heart is through his stomach and that was certainly true with Derek.

But a lot of them, these days, they don't want that. It's all burgers and fries. Milkshakes, some of them. Well, that's not a proper meal, is it? Not what I call a proper, sit-down meal. With my three, every night, there was meat and vegetables and a pie afterwards, never fail. Or sometimes a crumble, or a jam tart, or a trifle, but always a pud-