

Dinner with Friends

Dinner with Mallory and Rachel lasts an excruciating two hours and 27 minutes. We stand outside the restaurant in the cool, brisk evening air. I insist I am fine to walk home. It isn't far. I wave goodbye and watch them walk together to the parking garage. My shoulders hunch up to my ears. I tighten my scarf. I stuff my fists in my jacket pockets and start walking. The whole way home, including the elevator ride up to my condo, I can't stop thinking about the real reason why they asked me to dinner. "How dare they?" I wondered.

Did you get a chance to ask her yet?

Ask me what?

It's about our daughters. How I was telling you, Eileen. How close they've become.

10 *They're doing their own makeup tutorials now and we were wondering if you would let them follow you? And if you could follow them? Like their stuff and maybe do a comment or a link to them once in a while?*

Nothing crazy.

It wouldn't take long at all. We could do it on your phone right now. It would take less than five minutes.

That's not really the kind of thing I do on social media.

15 *Do you know how much money these kids can make if they can get the right audience? They're, literally, set for life.*

You don't have kids. So, it's hard for you to understand.

It would really help. They could get a lot of exposure through you.

I'm not sure. But I'll think about it.

20 I plop on the couch and I kick off my shoes. I listen to a voicemail from my mother. I decide to throw in some laundry. I'll be leaving for New York again in a couple days. The last shoot I did there, I remember one of the models was Chinese. I tried to make sure I didn't favour her over the other models. But then, I worried it looked like I was ignoring her. It's too late now to call my mother back. I know what she would say anyway. "Work, work, work. It's all you ever think about." I have to admit, what bothers me the most
25 about the whole request is Mallory's part in it.

*

On the last day of Grade 3, Mallory walked home with me. Coming up behind us was Mary Lafferty who chanted her usual insults at me and pulled her eyelids to slits with her short sausage fingers.

Mallory stopped, turned around, and stood in front of Mary. She lifted her right arm and punched her in the nose. Mary's little maw of a mouth emitted a long, enraged howl that slowly receded as Mallory and I
30 ran away.

We were howling too. But ours originated from laughter. The kind that made our chests heave, the kind that forced our bodies to involuntarily bend at the waist as we tried to catch our breath. The kind that made us think we would be friends for life.

*

35 I'm the last to arrive to dinner. Mallory and Rachel choose a new restaurant called Salute. I walk across a shiny brown wood floor, passing by other diners in moss green velvet chairs. Lo-fi chillhop tunes¹ float through the cool air mingling with murmuring voices and a woman's shrieking laugh. I see them first. Mallory's sandy blond hair is pulled back in a low ponytail and Rachel's thick, dark, glossy curls fall over her shoulders. Their faces are turned toward each other. I put a smile on my face and that's what they see as they turn to look up. They stand to greet me.

40 Rachel's hands are on my shoulders. She says, "Let me look at you. Still thin as a rail. God, I wish I had your genes. Must be nice to not have to do a damned thing to earn it either."

Then, Mallory's smooth cheek is next to mine. "I've missed you. I'm so happy we're all together again like this," she whispers in my ear.

45 I say, "Me too." And then I am unable to stop the next words that come out of my mouth. "So, what were you two whispering about? Do I get to know too?"

"It's nothing," says Mallory.

"We'll fill you in later," says Rachel. "Let's catch up first."

*

50 Moments before Mallory punched Mary, I also did something that caused Mary to cry. I couldn't help myself because a power surge of rage cracked apart a container inside of me. A container I had carefully constructed called, "Pretending To Not Care."

I didn't care Mary refused to be my reading partner. I didn't care Mary pushed me against the bathroom stall door so hard that it opened to a classmate sitting, peeing, and then me getting in trouble for it. I didn't care Mary knocked my pencil case to the ground every time she walked by my desk.

55 Nobody saw. Nobody except Mallory. And that day she saw me do this. She saw me put my hands around Mary's neck as I said to her with gritted teeth, "Don't do that anymore. Ever." Mary's head flew back and forth as I shook her. Mallory yelled at me to stop. And so, I did.

*

60 At dinner, Mallory wears a white jumpsuit that would make the rest of us feel awkward and uncomfortable. But on her, it looks chic and effortless. She's the type of person who turns heads but carries herself without care or affectation. Rachel wears a deep v-neck floral silk dress that stops just above her knees with a wide leather belt that tightly cinches her waist. Large gold hoop earrings dangle on either side of her long, pale face. Stiletto heels with leather strings wrap around her slim calves. Her

¹ *Lo-fi chillhop tunes*: (here) mellow background music

best feature. She's the type who hopes to turn heads but doesn't. If I were still taking photos of people on the street, hands down², I would pick Mallory.

65 Rachel orders us pre-dinner cocktails. A little paper parasol sticks out of each of our tall, slim glasses. I pluck mine out as soon as the glasses are placed on the table. Parasols are for little girls and their Shirley Temple drinks³.

*

70 When we were 26, Mallory got married and I was her maid of honour. Two years later, she had a daughter. Meghan. She asked me to be the godmother. My answer was no. I said, "Mall, please ask someone else." Her green eyes stared back at me, hurt. I said, "I don't go to church anymore. It doesn't feel right to say yes."

She said, "It has to be you. You're my oldest friend and I don't know anyone with more integrity."

So, I stood next to her in church and I watched her rock her body, cradling Meghan in her arms. The same way all human bodies instinctively do when they hold a new and precious life. And I remembered thinking, "Will I ever do that?"

*

75 After we settle into our seats, we look at our menus. Then, Rachel, with a flurry of hand motions, summons our server Sebastian to our table and asks him to take a picture of us.

Without thinking, we fall into our customary grouping. Mallory in the middle, Rachel on her left to show off her good side and me on the right.

80 As Sebastian holds the phone up to his face to frame the picture, Rachel says in a loud whisper, "It's okay if you're nervous. You know who we're with, right? Eileen Sze! But she's our oldest, dearest friend. So, no pressure!"

After, he asks us if we're ready to order. Rachel orders the fish because "trust me, they know their fish here." I love fish but as soon as I hear her say that, I order the rack of lamb. Mallory orders the mushroom pasta.

*

85 When Mallory and Rachel started university, that's when I started working as a photographer's assistant. My mother described it to her friends as my "little hobby" until I found out what I really wanted to do. She meant get married and have children.

Mallory and Rachel felt sorry for me. That I wasn't with them, strolling on campus with a vanilla latte in my hand.

90 The truth was, I was happy. I was good at this. I started to take it seriously. I took photos of people on the

² *hands down*: (here) without any doubt

³ *Shirley Temple drinks*: non-alcoholic drinks

street, learned to trust what caught my eye. I learned how to make myself invisible. I liked not knowing what I might find. I liked trying to get people to trust me, to let me, a stranger, take their picture.

95 Later, when I became successful, I overheard my mother brag to her friends that I shot the latest campaign for the company that makes the gold and diamond watches they all wore. The truth I don't want to admit is that it pleased me to hear her say that.

*

Rachel's hand is never far from her phone. Mine is in my purse and I assume it's the same for Mallory. Rachel's phone vibrates often. At one point, after it has shaken itself for her attention, she looks at it, lets out a little gasp, gets up, and says, "I'm so sorry but I have to take this."

100 Mallory and I watch her walk away toward the lobby, her phone pressed to her ear like it's a furry newborn kitten.

My eyes meet Mallory's with a look that says, "This happens often?"

Mallory tears off a piece of her bread and pops it into her mouth. Then, she shrugs her shoulders in a way that says, "Yeah, but I'm used to it."

I wonder aloud how often they see each other.

105 "Mostly at school," says Mallory. "You know, because of our girls."

"Yes," I say. "I remember. Of course. Same age."

And then Mallory says this, "But the really cool thing is our daughters have become such close friends. Sometimes, Eileen, they remind me of us when we were young."

110 And for the rest of the dinner, my mind keeps circling back to that comment. Because, nothing about their daughters reminds me of us, at all.

*

One of the last times I saw Mallory was at her house, a Tudor-inspired mansion and we sat in her French Country themed kitchen. Rachel was there too, her friend from summer camp days. Mallory liked getting the three of us together and always had. It happened so often, I forgot that I didn't choose to be friends with Rachel. That, really, it had been chosen for me.

115 That last time, Rachel insisted I take a photo of her using her iPhone. There had been an elaborate spread of food on the butcher block counter. Mallory always included a small bowl of pickled beets and a plate of her mother's pierogies⁴ along with a homemade chocolate strudel, her grandmother's recipe. My contribution was always a bottle of champagne. After that night, I discovered Rachel had used the photo I took of her as her profile pic, bragging it was an "Eileen Sze" original. I tried to not let it bother me. The

⁴ a type of food

120 same way I tried to forget when she teased me that I was their “own little Yoko Ono⁵.”

*

On my way home from dinner, I already knew the answer was no. [...] I sit on the couch, stare at my phone, try to think of the words I can say that will soften the blow. All I can come up with is, “Sorry, but no. It just doesn’t feel right.” I press the send button.

A couple minutes later, my phone rings. It’s Rachel. Two rings. Three rings, four, five.

125 “Hello,” I say.

“What the fuck?” Rachel says. “You’re not going to do it? This one little thing? You know you’re not as great as you think you are.”

“I don’t think I’m great, Rachel. My saying no doesn’t mean that.”

“Whatever. I’m glad this happened. Now, we know what kind of friend you really are.”

130 Pause.

“Well, aren’t you going to say anything?” she says.

I wonder if this is her way of giving me a chance to keep the friendship going, to keep the tie with Mallory intact.

135 “I don’t have anything left to say about it,” I say. And I hang up. A knot inside of me unravels then, the way a knot does after it’s been tugged on and pulled and turned and pried and suddenly, just seems to come loose all on its own.

*

The morning after the dinner, I call my mother back. She asks how the dinner went. I tell her about the food (quite good overall but she wouldn’t like it) and the decor and the atmosphere (very tasteful, and she would probably love it). [...]

140 “It’s nice to have old friends like that isn’t it?” my mother says.

“Yes,” I say. “I suppose it is.”

*

A couple weeks before the last day of Grade 3, Mallory was home sick. So, during recess, I sat reading and watching the other children on the playground. [...]

Shrieks and shouts as kids called out to each other. After the recess bell, in the hallway, I stood at my coat

⁵ *Yoko Ono*: (b. 1933) famous Japanese artist

145 hook, to put away the book I was reading. Mary Lafferty came over to stand in front of me.

She silently mouthed the words at me, “Slanty eyes, chink⁶ eyes.”

I ignored her. I stared at a point in the distance over her shoulder, down the hall. I chose Mrs. Lojewski’s door which was covered with bright orange construction paper. I pretended it was the most interesting thing I had ever seen.

150 A few days after that, I won the class spelling bee which also happened to be the day my parents and I picked up our new puppy. I named her Poppy. Her fur was soft and slippery under my hands. She had melty brown eyes.

We both lay on our stomachs on my bedroom floor, staring at each other. And I said to her, “One day, when I’m grown up, I’ll move far away from here. And we’ll never have to worry about what people think
155 of us.”

(2022)

⁶ ethnic slur usually directed at people of Asian origin