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## A Happy Occasion

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## A HAPPY OCCASION

*Katherine Finstuen*

It was due to Sarah I sat admiring the rainbows at all. Certainly I could not afford the trip without the generous check she sent some weeks ago, accompanied by a note, “Don’t thank me. Thank Mr. Knappe.” Yes, she had married well, but divorced rather better, and as her closest sibling, I frequently enjoyed the benefits of the mismatch. Sarah captured the attention of the then happily single Mr. Charles Knappe over the shrimp platter at a party hosted by his magazine. As a frequent contributor, Sarah attended the soiree, not intending to seduce the editor or to consume more hors d’oeuvres than were good for her, but ended up doing both.

“Do you know,” she said, plucking up a cocktail napkin, “that fifty percent of the letters in your last name are unnecessary?”

Now Sarah was and is a lovely woman, rather rounder than Hollywood deems acceptable, accounting somewhat for her career change from actress to writer, but Knappe caught himself charmed by this honey-haired vision in black with a spot of cocktail sauce on her sweetly rounded chin. He had read her columns enthusiastically and told her as much.

Writing, and writing specifically for Knappe, beckoned when her acting career failed. The conversion from portrayal on stage to page occurred when the scene of her “big break” (as the ineffectual secretary to the mayor on a popular crime drama) failed to make the cut. “I delivered the hell out of those lines,” she called and told me one night, her voice boozy and depressed. As if to prove herself, she recited into the mouthpiece, “Wait a minute! *You can’t go in there,*” followed by a pause and, “I’m sorry Mr. Warburton, I tried to stop him.”

I suggested to Sarah she blame her tremendous acting ability if anything. “You nailed

ineffectiveness so hard, they just didn't need you anymore. Besides, Warburton's a stupid name." I believe this helped.

At any rate, she switched careers, found a husband, divorced that husband after catching him with his own, quite effectual, secretary atop his office desk, and now lived life as an "Itinerant Columnist" and rarely gay divorcee.

Her tendency to turn toward the melancholic left her seeking my companionship more frequently and more genuinely than ever before. Now I'm no cup of sunshine myself, but for some reason (our sisterly bond perhaps), she seems to take comfort in my presence. I'm not certain what I take from her presence—I'd like to think I reap positive benefits from our encounters, but when I wish to be truthful with myself (not very often) my suspicions sneak about, blaming Sarah for any increased cynicism or misanthropy intruding into my psyche. But when I'm being more honest with myself than simply truthful (almost never), I know these feelings spring naturally from within and require no sorority of negativity to bring them out in the open.

Still, our parting saddened me. Not even the nice-looking young man arranging a large carry-on bag into the overhead compartment above my seat raised my mood, although I was pleased that the woman waiting behind him in the aisle, a fat lady intent on revisiting her youth via Winnie-the-Pooh apparel, would not be my neighbour. Was he the sort, I wondered, who would appreciate being notified of the presence of rainbows? I opened my mouth but almost immediately closed it, turning my face again toward the window and its view of tumultuous late summer sky with its twin arcs of colour straddling the field opposite the runway, contemplating both the scene and the wedding I'd attended only the day before.



The ceremony had gone well. We sat outdoors and Wumpt (the family dog) roamed free throughout the entire production. When sniffing strange shoes and foreign asses grew tiresome, he chose my lap to lay his giant, gentle head in. Yes, his attentions flattered me even as the happy couple exchanged vows in the raspberry light of near sunset and my skirt slowly filled with dog slobber.

To be honest, we didn't expect it to last. Sarah's comment upon learning that our cousin Ashley Anderson had met a man named Jeffrey Joseph remained my favourite: "There's way too much alliteration going on in that relationship." But here they were, the deal sealed, with only cake and champagne separating them from their new life of wedded bliss. Afterwards Sarah and I stood apart, surveying the guests. A couple passed by, not so much of the May/December variety, but the January/December type. She, with her perfect body and long swath of glittering golden hair, and he (a monied look about him), paunchy, gray, and no doubt with balls shriveled and old like balloons three days after

the party. We deplored the sight, though I suspect for different reasons. Sarah could not abide the living, breathing cliché and I felt something resembling the stomach flu when faced with the decisions so many of my fellows make. Perhaps this is why Sarah drinks and I prefer dogs to people.

“I’m not saying I’ve made only stellar choices myself—look at my own marriage for instance—but that’s just gross.”

“Yes it is.” I thought about what she’d said for a moment before adding, “One’s own grossness is easier to bear.”

A low groan erupted from Sarah’s throat. “Christ, here comes Angela. I hate talking to her.”

“Well don’t leave me.”

“She’s one of those ladies who can never stop talking about their period. I mean, get over it already. We *all* have them.” She swirled the ruby gold liquid in her glass and sipped.

“Minus men and old women, you mean.”

“Not to mention children and anorexics.”

“Right. Just don’t leave.”

“Well don’t ask how she’s doing.”

“Angela!” she smiled broadly as the woman in question, some sort of relation of ours, approached. Her pastel dress matched her handbag and shoes perfectly, causing her overripe body to resemble a peach injected with growth hormones. “It’s *really* good to see you,” my sister cried in enviable mock exuberance. Just how had she failed as an actress?

“Likewise. I saw you two standing over here and just *had* to say hello. That was a beautiful service, wasn’t it?”

I felt the warm spread of irritation begin. I dislike questions posed with no room for dissent.

“Oh lovely,” Sarah replied.

“Mmmm.” Angela eyed us. She indicated Sarah’s glass and asked, “What’s that you’re drinking?”

“White wine. I’m not sure what kind. I didn’t switch glasses after the red. Frankly I’m surprised Ashley allowed it, she’s been such a tyrant about this wedding. But I like it,” she examined the liquid. “It’s like a sunset.” It was true: the lovely-hued liquid resembled the sky beneath which we chatted. It was also true Ashley had transformed from docile cousin to tyrannical bride-to-be once that sizeable rock landed on her left ring finger. “Not at my wedding,” had become the occasion’s catch phrase and Sarah and I enjoyed great fun employing it in conversation.

Angela turned toward me and smiled in the very narrowest sense of the word. “You’re looking well,” she finally ventured. I became acutely aware of my dampened skirt.

“Oh. Thank you.” An uncomfortably quiet moment quivered between us until I added, “You too.” I felt a sharp jab in my side from Sarah’s lethal left elbow.

Angela tossed her head. “Appearances can be deceiving, Jill. These cramps are *killing* me.”

Sarah quickly announced her need for another drink, leaving me to deal with our bloated, crampy relation. While chronicling an epic-sized list of bodily complaints, day slipped into something more comfortable and stars began glimmering softly in the darkened sky. Aunt Flavia arrived, effectively burying the talk under the weight of her newly enhanced and tightly clad bosom. Not staring at this new union proved impossible, but she appeared nothing but grateful for the attention.

“I am so pleased with them,” she said as if speaking of unusually well behaved children or newly trained puppies. “I just don’t know why I didn’t do it sooner.”

The conversation shifted toward Angela’s impending trip to Las Vegas and the women began enthusiastically sharing favourite gambling spots as my mind wandered. I have a hard time listening to other people’s plans; mostly I think what they’re all excited about is fairly lame. I pretended to be interested in the cake cutting and in this way, maneuvered my way out of the situation.



The plane lifted easily into the air while my stomach followed suit. I kept my face to the window, enjoying the sudden change in perspective. Remembering myself, I reached for the book stowed in my seat pocket and began reading, ardently wishing to be tucked up in its pages before the flight attendant could begin her spiel. I suppose it’s a sign of mental illness that the phrase, “Sit back, relax, and enjoy the flight” irritates me so. Unfortunately this particular flight attendant possessed a voice you could grate stale cheddar on and I was forced into submission, waiting with clenched teeth for the announcement to end. The man next to me (I’d begun thinking of him as “Anthony”) did not appear bothered. He sat with long-fingered hands balanced delicately atop each knee. What could he be thinking? Wasn’t he annoyed? And more importantly, did he have a nickname yet for me?



Sarah approached cautiously. “Is the coast clear?”

“Do you mean Angela? I made my escape after Flavia arrived.”

“What a pair.”

“The two of them or Flavia’s new addition?”

“Oh the boobs, of course. When she arrived I felt so dirty. I couldn’t stop ogling.” Sarah tapped my foot lightly with her own. “But listen, I’m hoping you’ll do me a favour. I’d really appreciate it if you could, sort of, keep a check on my flirting.”

“And why might this be necessary?”

“By my calculations,” she appraised her glass of wine, and then glanced at my wrist-watch, “I will be donning the wine pince-nez in roughly an hour and who knows what I’ll find appealing then.” She scanned the crowd for potential candidates. “Mainly, if I start going for anyone less than Mark or that one over there,” she nodded toward a tall blonde man in steel rimmed glasses, “just try to intercede.”

“Okay. And what if someone unsavoury approaches you?”

“In that case, I should be able to handle the situation. I’ll simply say I’m afflicted by a sexually transmitted disease. I call it my ‘myth of syphilis’ tactic and it generally works. When it doesn’t, I definitely steer clear of the guy.”

“The Burning Bush?”

“Another way to put it, yes. Though rather more crass than I would have expected of you.”

“I’m just trying to keep pace with present company.”

“Oh! I don’t know whether to be ashamed or flattered.”

“I’m sure you’ll figure it out.”

We smiled at each other for a moment before Sarah asked, “Did I tell you I spoke with Mom and Dad? They called about an hour ago.”

“How are they?”

“Fine. They just wanted to know how it went. They’d just come back from window shopping.”

“What for?”

“Windows. For the remodel. They’d also read my new article and, I know it’s Mom and Dad and they basically think anything I do is pretty nifty, except that dress I wore to Grandma’s funeral of course...but they really liked it.” Whether from alcohol, pleasure, or some specialty mixed drink of both, her cheeks flushed a tender pink.

“I don’t know if I’m a tougher or an easier audience, but I liked it too. Honestly though, I didn’t think you cared about such things.”

“Sure I do. As you know, I’m not overwhelmingly fond of myself but it does help when people I admire see something worthwhile in what I do or who I am. Sometimes it may mean nothing more than I’ve got you all deluded, but once in a while I find myself thinking that there might be an inkling of truth in it, and *that* my dear, can go a long way on a rainy day.”



Sarah used her time wisely and within an hour I sat alone at my table (save for an abandoned cigarette slowly smoking itself in a heart-shaped ashtray) watching while she talked and laughed with the Ken look-alike. No intercession would be necessary. Sarah caught my eye, excused herself, and walked over.

“Hey!” She sat heavily across from me. “You know what’s incredibly difficult to say?  
*Calvary’s Cavalry.*”

I tried it. She was right.

“What are you doing?”

Nothing good came to mind. “I don’t really know.”

“Can’t you...have some fun?”

“Ummm...probably not.”

Sarah stared at me for several seconds before picking up the ashtray and setting it to the side. “Jill. It’s not time to give up yet, you know. What are you? You’re not even thirty, not even *twenty-nine* for that matter. The fat lady hasn’t even begun her warm-up exercises for Christ’s sake.”

My discomfort mounted. “You should really get back to Ken over there. He’s beginning to look restless.”

“I will. And his name’s Lloyd. I didn’t think people were named Lloyd anymore.”

“Lloyd Bridges?”

“He’s dead.”

“That’s right.” I’d forgotten.

“But I’m going to bring him over, introduce you. He’s really quite amusing and, I’ve not figured out how yet, but apparently he’s Jeff’s uncle.”

“You don’t have to do that, you know.”

“I know I don’t have to.” She stood and rested her hands on the back of a chair as if waiting for something.

“I don’t know Sarah. Sometimes I think I’m just destined to ride the pine in this life.”

“No you’re not.” She said it with more force than I thought her capable of at this point in the evening. “And Jill, these chairs? They’re *plastic.*”



The plane sliced smoothly through the clouds before beginning its initial descent. I congratulated myself on having the wherewithal to purchase some overpriced gum at an airport newsstand. I glanced cautiously at my seatmate and forced myself to speak. “Would you...would you like a piece?” I held up the packet. “It’s wintergreen.”

The breach in our companionable silence surprised him, but he accepted my offer. “Yes I would. Thank you so much.” ☺