

ASPECTS OF NATURE

Dinner's a formal affair. Roger and Carrie have always insisted on this propriety, city or country. Surrounded by water, woods, scrub-grass and wildflowers, a path and massive boulders leading down to the lake, it's an imposing frame-and-stone two-story number. They call it a cottage, it's a Canadian thing.

Except for our hosts, everyone's here for the weekend as singles: David, a Trinidadian, mid-twenties, wonderfully good-looking with smooth mocha skin, curly black hair and a gold-loop in each ear, apprentice with Ernst and Young, accountants, Roger's training him; platinum-blond Elana, real-estate agent, in her fifties but a knock-out; Peter, divorced, a tough-talking, macho, Elmore Leonard *Glitz*-type, marshmallow underneath I suspect; and Jan, divorced, early forties pushing mid, teacher turned student-lawyer. Wants her life neatly arranged in a slender leather briefcase, she's tired of chaotic and messy carried in large totes the way educators do. Sparring friends, she and Pete are forever going at each other. But for David, we've all known each other for years.

"Has anyone asked Rog why he has only half a beard?" I whisper to platinum Elana, seated to my right.

"We're not noticing," Elana whispers back.

I ask the same question of David to my left. David smiles and shrugs. This question's been plaguing me since Roger picked me up earlier this afternoon in his speedboat at the dock on Resolution Bay. As he approached, I sensed something off-kilter, out-of-whack. He was shockingly gaunt, wrists gangly, khakis slipped down around his hips, turkey-neck rising out of his cotton crew,

but no, something else was off-center.

A deep tan from the past summer (the only healthy aspect about him) gave his face a smooth modelled look, his hair extraordinarily black. (Is he dyeing it?) As he took my duffel and planted a peck on my lips, I felt stubble scratch against my jaw and noticed dark porcupiney hairs covering only half the beard area, right side of his face to mid-chin.

I pretended not to notice.

“Has anyone asked why Roger has only half a beard?” I ask Janet and Peter across the table from me (Carrie and Roger have gone into the kitchen; still, I keep my voice low).

“Who the hell knows with Roger?” Peter, mister macho, answers in his baritone-twang. “He’s got his reasons I guess.” I wasn’t going to get a sensible answer from Peter, I should have known that. I ask anyway. I guess it’s the writer in me.

“What? What reasons?”

Outside, the water whips under the moon’s light, evergreens bend beneath singing winds, and rain, beating maracas, hits against the windows. Distant thunder groans, swells, an organ, lightning slashes. Inside, sitting primly in dress clothes under candle-glow around a fastidiously set table, we’re at odds with the storm, lake, dark woods, moonlight.

“Natural’s overrated *I* say,” Jan’s remarking to Elana, nodding approval of her bleached coiffure.

“Me too,” Roger cuts in, smiling. (He and Carrie have returned.) He’s regained his health, dressed in a navy double-breasted blazer, his half-beard like a mustard spot on his freshly laundered shirt, robin-egg blue. He sits down at the head of the table — close by Elana — Carrie at the opposite end. Everyone’s eyes are focussed on his chin.

Perhaps he’s posing some philosophic question: *If a tree falls in a forest . . .? Is the glass half full or half empty?* Is Roger’s beard half grown in or half shaved off?

“*Highly* overrated,” Jan carries on. “Why would I want to look my age?” (pointedly) to me. *Her* hair is vibrant aubergine.

“Just tell everyone you’re ten years *older*, they say ‘*Really?*’

You look great!” I answer.

“This is a dumb conversation,” Peter interjects (that private eye twang again).

“What do *you* know, Pete?” Jan shoots at him.

“Harvey never liked it if I didn’t look just so,” Elana says. Her gaze embraces Roger. “Neither did Matthew. Sam wasn’t so fussy.

My husbands,” she informs young David. “Harvey committed suicide, Matthew I divorced, and Sam . . . I adored Sam and he adored me. Our marriage was a love affair, a long magnificent affair. Ask Roger. You knew the way we were, didn’t you, Rog?” She leans in, touches his hand lightly, momentarily; innocently, that’s its wallop.

“Ta, sweetheart,” Roger answers as innocently.

“Is nobody gonna ask Roger why he’s shaved only half his face?” Peter asks.

The question asserts itself like the bite of an oboe; our voices drop *sotto voce* and I catch a few sidewise peeks in Roger’s direction. If he’s heard, he doesn’t let on (except for a little smile that plays around his lips).

“Roger’s the only one; he’s been such a dear,” Elana tells me in her mauve-velvet voice.

This last bit of conversation floats above the table, hangs there, capturing Roger’s wife Carrie’s ear. The others tune in. She turns from Peter, levels her gaze on Elana, her platinum-blond by the candles’ flames *crème caramel*.

“Buying a hard-leather, slim — read *power* — briefcase, making changes,” Jan, says, trying to pull the conversation back. Her green eyes shine uncommonly bright; her skin appears recently facialed; her brows have been precisely arched. Flat chested as a ballerina, no bum, no hips; sharp-edged, gutsy, with-it.

“I’m thinking of getting an earring,” Roger tells me, smiling, his eyes on David. They drink in David’s milk-chocolate complexion, delicious black curls. “To go with my gold chain.” (Is he putting me on?)

David’s very quiet, very shy. Candlelight glances off the gold loops; they glint. I admire his daring, not one loop, *two*, one in each ear. Catching David’s eye and still smiling, Rog gives him a

long slow wink. (Is he putting us *all* on?) He's become very natty lately, on the style-edge, taken to wearing a black fedora, raked; locked the Corporate Accountant away in a closet.

"Wha'ja shave half your face for, Rog?" Pete insists, hardly above a whisper, but we all hear him. "You gonna let us in?"

Not by the hair of his chinny-chin-chin!

"No reason." Roger laughs. "None."

"Bullshit!" Pete throws at him, raising his voice. The wine's gotten to Pete; its heat and the red of his sweater—he's dressed more casually than the rest of us tonight—have given his cheeks a cherubic glow.

(Has he? Roger, shaved half his face, that is. Maybe he has follicle disease and only one side grew in, how do we know?)

"When there's been nobody, I could always count on Roger," Elana says, ignoring Peter. "So unusual for a man. We've known each other since we were children. Be a darling, Roger, and pour me some wine?"

Carrie's been talking to David, nose to nose, but I catch her shooting quick surreptitious glances down the table's length at her half-bearded husband. She's a pet white mouse: tiny pale face; poodly mess of mousey ash-blonde; thin lips, teeth even and slightly forward, narrow chin, pointed, receding; small nose, warm brown eyes.

Now she gets up, walks purposefully into the kitchen, and moments later returns with a large bowl of soup, cold carrot. (I think she chose it as color contrast to her black hostess gown.) Pet mouse or no, Carrie is long and flat-chested like Jan with no excess of curve or flesh, has a flair for the dramatic, looks smashing, sexy in asexual mode.

"Sam died suddenly . . . when . . . when . . .," Elana demurely lowers her eyes, lightly touches her hand to the platinum wave at her temple.

"Soup, Elana dear?" Carrie asks, standing beside her.

As she moves in to the table, Carrie catches her foot on the hem of her gown, is momentarily jolted, and as she looks down, her soup spoon arm bends with the rest of her body, tipping the

ladle.

“Carrie!” Roger shouts, “Watch what you’re doing; you almost got Elana!”

“Yes, so I did,” slight nervous giggle, “Oh, dear!”

Elana smiles good-humoredly. “You would!” she kids, fingering the gold Peretti heart on the velvet band at her neck. “You’ve always envied me in my white chiffon!”

Carrie’s eyes take in dress, hair, back to dress. Elana’s roots show a quarter-inch of dark against Madonna-blonde, other than that she’s perfection. I’ve never seen her caught exposed before. It jars like Roger’s half-beard, forces you to view reality from a new perspective, a Picasso.

Carrie dips the ladle, her arm trembles, moves toward Elana’s shoulder, balancing. We all watch. The room shines like sunrise — crystal, candles, nubbly silverware, fire; outside, lightning — the ladle nears the plate and suddenly Elana’s white chiffon has great orange flowers decorating its front. No sound comes from her, she only stares straight ahead, her eyes very wide. Drumroll of thunder. Serving wine, Roger’s arm freezes midair; Carrie’s little mouse-face twitches and a weak squeal escapes. We all stare at the orange blobs.

Very slowly Elana turns to Carrie.

“You always disliked me,” Elana whispers.

“Roger, get Elana a towel, don’t just sit there,” Carrie, sharply to her husband. “Do something, move your beard . . . *body!*” correcting herself.

“You were jealous,” Elana says matter-of-factly. “Jealous of me and Sam.”

“Elana, you’re crazy,” Carrie says.

“Of what we had,” Elana persists.

“You must get those roots touched,” aubergine-haired Janet puts in.

“Try a different color,” Pete mumbles; he’s glazed now. “What ya got doesn’t go with orange.”

Roger’s returned and toweling Elana’s front.

“Oh stop, Roger!” she shouts, getting up, and reaching back,

yanks down her zipper, gives a little shake, a wiggle, and the dress slips to her ankles.

Elana stands regally before us in oyster satin panties and bustier, garters holding up shimmery stockings. The aslant Peretti dangles from its white velvet band, teases.

Ever the polite Trinidadian, David, without a word, helps Elana step over the dress and picks it up off the floor. He offers Elana his arm to leave the room, but turning from him, she plunks back down in her chair.

“Wine?” Roger asks.

“I’ll take my soup in a plate, please,” Elana counters, ice.

Wind rattles the panes and whistles down the chimney, lightning forks, rends the sky, pulses one two, a strobe; cymbals clash, drums rumble, candle-glow quivers in a flame-dance. Except for Elana, we shudder and look out at the rain still thrumming against the windows. It fills the silence.

Elana wears a size 38D.

Out of the corners of my eyes I see everyone lost deep in Elana’s crevice, the bustier cupping, making molehills into mountains.

“So where were we?” Roger asks.

Carrie’s taken her place at the table and keeps her eyes on Roger. I’m not certain whether to stare at beard or boobs.

“How’s the stock market doin’, Pete?” Roger asks.

“Up and down, hot right now,” Pete answers; he seems to have backed off his needling. “Bullish.”

“I asked you about the *stock market*,” Roger quips.

“I ask you again, Why would I — why would *anyone* want to look their age?” Jan’s green eyes challenge me. “Listen, I meet my own girls at the University. Melanie’s nineteen you know, and Barbie’s twenty-one. I even bump into Pete’s two. You don’t know what it’s like keeping up with the young kids. All *you* worry about is your computer.”

“The ultimate in control, working alone,” I grant.

“You did this on purpose, Carrie,” a small voice from Elana.

“Try getting a job with gray,” Jan continues, “Try getting a

decent guy. Life's competitive out there."

"Don't worry, Jan, in the dark, gray goes to black with everything else," Pete jumps in; his acerbic edge says he's had it with Jan's talk.

"Look, I'm not *searching* for anyone, once was enough," Jan, to Peter.

"Did you know our Ashley's going to France next year? The Sorbonne," Carrie, returned to playing hostess, is saying to anyone who'll listen, "And Fred's entering M.I.T. . . ."

"We don't want them setting their sights too high," Roger grins.

"Did you buy the Cineplex stock I told you about?" Peter asks.

"Couldn't decide," Roger answers.

"He never can," his wife adds dryly.

"Your tits're showin' don't ya know," Pete throws at Elana.

"A judge in Guelph found it perfectly acceptable to bare breasts in public," Elana throws back.

"Yeah, if you're built like a shit brickhouse," Pete mumbles, his eyes fixed on her.

"Chicken *Casserole*?" Elana drips disdain at Carrie, "I'm surprised you didn't make it tuna with potato chip topping. Jello mold with canned fruit. Canned peach halves in slimy liquid. Fifties food," she tells David.

"I wouldn't remember," Carrie answers.

"Maybe we should sing something," David says softly.

"Something from *Oklahoma*?" Roger asks.

"It's not what other people think about gray; it's the way *I* feel," Jan persists. "You should try a coloring," looking at the top of my head. "It would do wonders."

"How long you gonna sit there before you cover yourself up, for Chrissake, Elana?" Pete asks.

"It was fortuitous I wore underpants tonight," she remarks.

"Give her your jacket, Roger," Pete demands.

"Look Peter, if Sam were here he'd . . .," Elana begins.

"Sam was an asshole," says Pete.

“Peter!” Carrie cries, “That’s enough. You’ve had too much to drink. Let me get you something to put on, Elana.”

“Men aren’t what they used to be,” Elana says.

“Get her your purple, sweetheart,” Roger says to his wife.

“I don’t look good in purple,” from Elana.

David’s singing quietly, *Oh what a beautiful morning . . .*”

“I met this guy at the University, this little short guy with a paunch and . . .” Jan begins telling me.

“Watch it, Jan, she’s takin’ all this down in her head,” Peter says and gives a nod in my direction. “You’ll find yourself in a story. She’ll snatch your words and prick your brain and make up her own ending.”

“The Pink Panther, always sniffing around the rim of conversation,” Jan agrees.

“Social Intercourse,” Roger, smiling, picks up on Jan.

“*What about the beard, Roger?*” Pete asks.

“Here, try this,” Carrie hands Elana a hostess gown she’s brought down from her bedroom. “It suits you.”

“Brown suits me?” Elana, offended.

“It goes with your hair,” Jan smiles.

“The roots,” Peter mutters.

Elana’s dropped crumbs on the crest of her right breast. Pete’s eyes are glued to it.

“Try getting your black and white, Carrie,” Roger instructs his wife.

“This guy with the paunch . . .,” Jan says, turning back to me. “He had these long strands brushed over his bald top, trying to cover up I don’t know what, he wasn’t fooling anyone.” She stops. “Oh for God’s sake, Elana, take the fucking dress and be done with it!”

“Probably the same idiot bald guy Gloria ran off with,” from Peter. “What the hell does she see in the twerp? I dunno, twenty years and two kids . . .”

“It does make you feel like shit,” Jan commiserates. Her eyes do a quick survey of Pete, up down, taking him all in. He’s pushing forty-eight, a gentle pot straining against his red cable knit, still,

attractive in a cigarette-dangling, trenchcoat, sort of way.

“What about *Pack up your troubles in your old kit bag and smile, smile, smile?*” Roger asks David.

“David’s too young for that one,” Carrie tells her husband.

“What about the beard, Rog, what about your stupid fucking beard?” Pete demands.

“What about it?” Roger answers. “What about rain, what about the stock market, what about gray? Why does it bother you so much? What about *doing* it?”

“What about my ass!” Peter explodes. “This whole world is nuts! What do you see in this guy, Carrie?”

Carrie looks warmly over at Roger and smiles. “Oh, he has his appeal,” she answers. He smiles back.

“What about it? Nothing, no reason. Variety, asymmetry, shock value. Duality of Life. Questions without answers. Mid-life rebellion,” Roger, to Pete.

None of us answer.

The storm takes up the earth, rips open the sky, waves slam against boulders; thunder, lightning, slashing rain, whooshing wind, *I’ll buff and I’ll puff till I blow your house in*; windows quake and clatter; something outside has been blown over, falls onto the porch or against a rock, a crashing bouncing metal sound.

The candle flickers; David’s loops, Rog’s gold chain, Elana’s Peretti heart, glisten. She’s in the black and white print, finishing dessert (Apple Brown Betty), covertly watching Carrie watch Roger. Jan’s sipping wine, tucks her hair behind one ear, pretending to be unaware of Peter sizing her up. David’s singing to himself, *There’s a Brown Girl in the Ring, Tra-la-lalala*; Carrie keeps a level gaze on her husband.

“What about it?” Roger, no longer laughing, repeats; raises serious eyes to meet ours, very quietly offers his words up to the elements: “Aspects of nature unresolved?”

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