

Thaw

Andrew and Lydia are having a party. The invitation is written in jive slang: a 1920s theme, Gatsby and all that. Andrew and Lydia are friends of Leonard's from school, fellow doctoral candidates. They've been for dinner before, back in the fall. I cooked Indian, unaware that Andrew's stomach issues did not allow for spicy foods, as Lydia told me in a hush while she helped me dish up the food. I spent the meal shrugging apologetically at Andrew and his plate of rice and naan bread.

I tried to keep a neutral expression on my face when Leonard brought home the invitation. It's not so much the party itself I mind. It's more the way I will find myself behaving in reaction to the party. The self-deprecating toss of the head I will adopt. The too loud laughter that always seems to hit a false note.

But the weekend arrives and I don a string of pearls, black gloves, and Leonard wears an ascot and we set off for Andrew and Lydia's row house on Gower. Despite its close proximity to downtown, the street is quiet on a Friday night. It is March, St. John's still in deep in winter, Sheilagh's Brush arriving last weekend just in time for Paddy's Day.

Leonard is quiet as we walk. I peek at him, sneaking sidelong glances that he doesn't notice. He tends to look straight ahead as he walks, purposeful, as if with horse's blinders. A benign look lives almost permanently on his face. The most blithely contented man on the planet, Kay joked after she met him. She's not far off. I do try to get a rise out of him sometimes, tease and provoke him. In the beginning I'd be rewarded with laughter, his eyes creasing into a smile. Later I would get only a quietly pained look, a minor irritation at this interruption to his study, his writing, the radio program he's

listening to while he dices onions. Leonard wears an apron when he cooks. He has nice cast-iron frying pans, a beautiful house.

The first time he cooked dinner for me, I saw the apron and the cast-iron pans and sat with a glass of wine in his beautiful kitchen thinking already that I could like it here; I could have morning coffee in here. Wondered how the early light would come through the big window over the table.

“Can I help at all,” I asked.

“Maybe some music?”

I slipped off the kitchen stool and went into the next room. Ignoring the vinyl arranged neatly in a tall bookcase, I flipped through the CDs left atop the stereo. I was relieved not to find any jazz or world music, chose something at random and left the volume down low. Leonard smiled as I walked back into the kitchen, handed me a lighter.

“For the candles, there in the dining room.”

He’d even set the table. His dishes were beautiful, the placemats obviously hand woven. There was a kind of serenity in everything in this house, down to the colour of the paint on the walls, which I could never manage to pull off in the haphazard apartments I moved in and out of with regularity. I could be a different kind of person, I thought, were this my kitchen. I would be less frenetic, would take a multi-vitamin every morning; I would keep the fridge stocked and never miss garbage day.

We’d met at the Ship, a lecture given by the philosophy department at the university. I could tell he was assuming I was a grad student of some kind when he struck up a conversation at the bar, but he didn’t bat an eyelash when I told him I’d just tagged along with a friend.

“I might go back someday though. To school, I mean.”

Leonard had nodded, said something about the importance of living in the real world before going into graduate studies anyway, and bought me a beer.

I was drawn that night to his soft voice and quiet way, liked the image of him at his books, the little round glasses slipping down his nose that on anyone else might have appeared pretentious. I was soothed by the very idea of Leonard. He touched my shoulder lightly when I was leaving, maybe he could cook us dinner sometime?

Andrew and Lydia's house feels hot and congested after the fresh chill of outside. The entrance and hallway are painted a deep, warm red. There is the spicy scent of mulled wine, the drying damp of winter coats hung too close to the radiator. I take off my heels at the door automatically, realizing halfway down the hall that everyone else has their shoes on still. That extra inch or two will be important. I go back to the door to slip them on again.

Leonard has not waited, has disappeared into the crowded living room. I can hear him being greeted roundly. I lean awkwardly in the doorway a minute or so and then I go in search of a corkscrew, a glass, and find Lydia in the kitchen. She has gone all out. A flapper dress, a bobbed black wig pulled over blonde hair that is escaping down her neck. Lydia is the kind of woman who wears a delicate gold chain every day, some of those blonde strands usually entangled with it at the nape of her neck. As a hostess she has a sort of practiced graciousness; she has a glass in my hand and a comment about my dress out in under a minute.

"Pat, do you know everyone? This is Carol, just came from Toronto, and Jocelyn, I was telling you about her book the last time. Oh and you remember Joanna?"

I smile, stretch out my hand. I do not in fact remember Joanna, though I do recognize Jocelyn from the jacket of her book, a thin volume on girls and media literacy. She is wearing a shawl, faded black jeans. I wait for it. It's Jocelyn who turns to me.

"So Pat, tell me, what is your field?"

I had never been to a party like this until I met Leonard and was introduced to the kind of academic social circles that have parties based around specific, often esoteric themes. He's a good sport about it all usually, will catch my eye across the room and raise an eyebrow and go right on nodding at whoever is gripping his shoulder and making some emphatic point.

"Well, ah, I actually work at a little restaurant downtown right now."

Lydia pipes in, for some reason eager to have Jocelyn approve of me, eager to smooth the brows that sometimes crinkle upon realization that Leonard's partner is a waitress.

"Pat spent some time overseas before she met Leonard, right Pat? Where were you again? France, was it?"

I nod, top up my glass and mumble quickly about teaching English, ask Lydia if she'd like me to open the red that Leonard brought.

I've been working at the little restaurant, handful of staff like an extended family, on and off for a few years. I shrug it off whenever I'm asked about it but there is something about serving that I do like. Something soothing in the way the kitchen gets absolutely filthy each night with grease, dropped onions and spilled au jus, chits flying over the counters and the floor. And then in the way it is restored each night to gleaming stainless steel, floors mopped clean by boys with full sleeves of tattoos and cultivated facial hair. Every day new stacks of clean and pressed linens. Every day the glassware fully stocked and

polished, every night my head cleared of orders and allergies and last minute requests. Comfort in the ritual of it all, the slang and the shorthand.

“Johnny, may I speak?”

“Shoot.”

“Table five, seat six. She wants an end cut of the prime rib. Possible?”

“For you, anything.”

A wink and a grin and someone else shouting that we’re out of baked potatoes, someone make sure the girls know upstairs.

Jocelyn has moved on to asking Lydia where on earth she found such a perfect dress. She herself simply had no time for digging and gave up on arriving suitably attired. I am wearing a black dress I bought for salsa lessons. It twirls up nicely for dancing and seemed innocuous enough to wear here without making me seem entirely lacking in the right kind of sense of humour. God forbid.

Salsa was Kay’s idea. We’ve started going Friday nights, a hole in the wall bar with two Frenchmen to teach the steps, one very tall and the other very ugly. But even with that there’s a particular thrill to the way they’ll roughly throw you out and pull you back in, the sharp edge of their sweat, the way they talk too close to your ear, muttering steps in French as they press a hand on the small of your back.

I tell the women about the lessons when they ask about my dress, counting on one of two reactions. Lydia laughs, touches my arm.

“Oh Pat, you’re a riot.”

I look for my glass of wine and excuse myself. I am missing salsa class tonight for this party and resenting the loss. By this time usually we'd be back at Kay's place for a drink, a shared cigarette.

Kay works at the bistro up the street and we trade war stories, but her boyfriend is a cook and so she makes no apologies to anyone about her source of income. I envy that in her, see the attraction in being with someone who knows what that lifestyle can be like.

In the fall I sometimes stayed late after work, defiantly, drinking beers at the bar with the kitchen boys. When they closed up the restaurant I'd go back to Johnny's place with them and enjoy it half for the nostalgia of the scene. A kitchen table late at night like so many kitchen tables I'd spent the late nights of my teenage years around. Those boys with their worn ball caps, a case of beer and a few smokes and rolling a joint and they'd be fucked if they'd let anyone look at you sideways. These late nights like a foray back into a world before Leonard.

It was just a work thing, I'd say, claiming innocence. And they were innocent, those nights, chaste but for a long look or two over the table. I picture Johnny always in his uniform; his regular clothes seemed never to hang properly. He always seemed more himself in kitchen blacks, the little black cap over ears that stick out just enough so that you'd notice them, wiping calloused hands on a greasy black apron.

When Leonard and I went to Montreal early in the winter, I gave notice and had no intention of going back to the restaurant. We'd only be gone a month or two, but it felt like time to move on regardless of how soon I'd be back.

I got drunk at the bar after my last shift, everyone I'd never really been friends with buying me shots and drinks and loving my dress, and finally dragging me out to bars I'd never before set foot in. And I had slipped away, gone downstairs to the kitchen where Johnny was mopping up still, ran back on

the line in my little purple dress and jumped up in his arms. He protesting that he was sweaty and would dirty my dress, and I kissed him full on the lips and squeezed hard.

“I’ve been waiting for that for a long time,” he joked, but the grip of his hands tightened and he held my eye that extra second too long.

Those months in Montreal, I worked in a bookshop. Leonard did research, worked on a few articles. I couldn’t have said exactly what he was writing about. I had stopped inquiring after his work, left it be, left him to volunteer information when it was going well, and brood in silence when it wasn’t. It was so cold that sometimes, walking home, I’d be convinced my legs were bleeding underneath my jeans from the chafing of the stiff and frozen fabric.

We got quiet sometime during the first frigid weeks. Retreated. We spent quiet days apart, each in different environments of books, and spent the evenings inside separate books still. I wondered if it had been a mistake to come with him. We both took to sleeping like the dead; I’d find him on his back with his mouth open when I came in from brushing my teeth.

The party seems to keep growing, more and more people arriving, and I have lost Leonard entirely. I keep leaving conversations under the auspice of finding the washroom and then just wandering up and down the stairs. Andrew and Lydia have photos framed on the walls of their stairwell depicting their summer in Thailand. The ubiquitous photos of them smiling in khakis, their arms wrapped around children who stare blankly, coal black hair in their faces.

I stop at the bookcase at the top of the stairs, eavesdropping on the conversation coming from one of the bedrooms. A couple is arguing in the most verbose of ways, lines I know are scripted from time in therapy or too many self-help books - a lot of ‘When you do this, it makes me feel that.’ I am

tired of the well-expressed thought, hope for a stamped foot, a fuck you, for just one thing pure and gutsy.

We came home from Montreal before we froze each other out entirely, a pre-emptive measure that we didn't discuss as such. I had just cried silently over the toaster one morning while listening to the national weather map, a storm moving in from the Maritimes over Newfoundland. Pressing the button to pop out a bagel, I said I thought I might like to be back in St. John's soon. Leonard came and stood behind me, said yes he'd been thinking the same thing. I waited for his hands on my shoulders, on my back, but got only a tentative pat before he was shrugging into his parka and out the door.

The next morning I woke up first and for a few minutes watched him sleeping, on his back, a hand in the waistband of his long johns. How open his face was in sleep. How odd to only notice the absence of guardedness, disguised as it was normally by his pleasantries, his soft ways. I could feel something opening up, cracking like the ice in a spring thaw.

Back at home I almost wanted to point it out, this slow but steady thaw, but felt awkward at the prospect of those adjectives, those nouns and verbs hanging in the air between us. Weeks later I keep quiet still, cupping the idea, the hope, gently in my palms and peeking at it here and there. I started to leave the radio on all the time, a reminder for conversation. I try not to make faces at party invitations. I went back to the restaurant but I don't bring a change of clothes; I come home early.

Last week Kay and I walked home from salsa dancing, strappy heels slinging from our hands and picking our way through the slush in soaking winter boots. I said about these tentative ideas, this tentative hope, but that I still wasn't sure. And then that I'm back at the restaurant and there he is in the kitchen still and Kay said you know it's all about what you keep choosing. She said there's always a cook

or an old friend or the guy who's painting the house next door for Christ's sake, and if one day you don't choose Leonard, well, you won't have chosen him. But till then.

Leonard finds me still eavesdropping at the bookcase, surprises me with a hand on my waist. His face is a little flushed, his ascot missing. He is looser than I've seen him in months. I tug at his open collar, jerk my head at the bedroom door.

"Will you listen to this shit? I'm getting an earful here."

His face crinkles into a grin and he moves to set his glass of whiskey on the bookcase, misses and watches it shatter on the floor. The arguing couple don't seem to notice the noise, don't even pause for breath, and Leonard looks at me, eyes wide and the grin growing sillier.

"Let's just get the fuck out of here," I whisper, and he doesn't miss a beat but takes my hand and we run.