

After Dinner Conversation

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I n f r a s t r u c t u r e

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It was Friday, overcast and wet, the type of November day most folks found unlovely. But not Judy. For her, sunshine felt stifling, and warm weather made her grumpy. She preferred the cool crispness of the air after storms. “Rainy days match my insides,” she had told her husband Nathan soon after they’d moved to Seattle, where she grew up. He had complained about the rain, wondering if the gloomy skies were giving him a bout of seasonal affective disorder—S.A.D. Judy said she doubted it and told him, “midlife situational depression” was a more apt diagnosis.

Before they moved here for Judy’s new job with D&K Architects, Nathan had been laid off from his job—which he disliked anyway—as a mechanical and electrical engineer at the big San Francisco construction consultancy where both he and Judy had worked, and where they’d met eleven years ago. Now, he does intermittent Amtrak engine repair and servicing jobs—

which he dislikes even more—and the S.A.D. or situational depression, whichever it was, hasn't improved.

Judy had taken the day off work, and this afternoon, she was meeting her friend Vita for lunch at a downtown French bistro called Bastilles. The place was packed, but they managed to get the last available booth seat. Judy and Vita had been friends since high school, and from the way Vita was biting her lower lip, bobbing her knees, and not really focusing on the menu, Judy could tell she needed to get something off her chest.

“Alright, spit it out,” Judy said.

Vita grinned. “Gerd and I are trying for a baby. We’re doing IVF.”

“What? When did you start?” Judy put down her menu.

“About three months ago. We didn’t want to tell anyone, because, well, we didn’t know how it would go. After the first round, the doctor said because I’m already 45, the few eggs they got didn’t work. Gerd and I were both really upset. I mean things got so bad we had to see a marriage counselor. Then the doctor suggested we take another route—get a donor egg, have it fertilized with Gerd’s sperm, then implant the embryo in my uterus. I’ll go through the whole pregnancy, delivery shebang, so no one has to know the egg isn’t mine.”

“Whoa! I didn’t know you wanted to be a mom. You don’t even like hanging out with your nieces and nephews. When did you change your mind?”

“Gerd said he wanted one. Then I started thinking about it and I got, well... curious. It seemed like, like a challenge, and I think Gerd and I are so good together that we can do this. Being

a mother is like the most momentous thing for a woman, right? And I just thought, why shouldn't *I* get the chance to experience it too, you know?"

"Not really," said Judy with a puzzled frown. She stirred her Bloody Mary. She could tell from Vita's raised eyebrows that her approval was being sought. She took a few sips of her cocktail then smiled and replied. "I suppose I can understand. The idea that you can make another human being inside your own body is just mind-blowing. And there's no time in a woman's life when she'll receive as many oohs and aahhs as when she's walking around attached to a giant watermelon."

Vita laughed nervously. "We found our donor last month. Yesterday, the doctor called and said they got eleven excellent quality eggs from her. So now, our chances of getting pregnant are pretty damn good. We're gonna start incubation a week from today."

"Wow," said Judy. "I'm sure it'll all work out. I can just see you as a mom. You'll be great." She reached across the table and clasped Vita's hands in hers.

"I hope so. I was worried you'd tell me I was making a mistake. That I am too old to be a mother."

Judy shook her head and put on her most convincing "why the hell would you think that?" face.

"There was this lady at work," said Vita. "When she knew one of our co-workers in her late thirties was pregnant, she said the woman wouldn't be able to manage, that making babies is for the young, that older women won't have the energy for it."

"Hmmm," Judy cocked an eyebrow and canted her head as if she were assessing the validity of Vita's co-worker's claim.

“And the worst... you know what my sister told me? She said, ‘Imagine you’re at the playground with all these twenty-or thirty-something-year-old moms. After all the kids are done playing, they come over to where the moms are and they point at you and ask your kid, *Is that your grandma?*’”

Judy wanted to laugh, but instead she acted indignant. “Tell them both to go screw themselves! You’re more emotionally mature than all those younger twits, you’ll be a better parent than any of them. If you really want this, *go* for it! Better than living with regret over never having tried.” Judy was surprised by the gusto that accompanied her words.

Their food arrived quicker than expected. Neither of them wanted dessert. Judy was relieved that lunch was over within an hour. Playing cheerleader was giving her indigestion.

After lunch, she said goodbye to Vita, then went into the mall across from Bastilles. She was at the personal development section in the Barnes & Noble when she bumped into Ray, D&K’s newest hire and her fellow senior architect. She had only ever seen Ray in neatly pressed pants and collared shirts at the office, but now, seeing him in jeans and a maroon sweater, he seemed different, sparkier, more interesting. She asked if he’d like to grab a coffee.

When she returned home to the Craftsman in Freemont that she and Nathan rented, her Siamese, Socrates strutted up to the door to greet her.

“Hello, cuddlekins. Missed me?” Judy dropped her shopping bags on the floor, picked Socrates up and planted a succession of kisses along the curve of his spine. She dug into one of the bags and extracted a banana-shaped stuffed toy with

catnip concealed inside it. She dropped it in front of him and he immediately began batting and meowing at the smirking banana.

Nathan was in the kitchen preparing chili con carne for dinner. “Hi,” he called out, standing in front of the stove. “Long lunch, huh?” His voice carried through to the corridor.

Judy made her way into the kitchen. “Yeah, the service at Bastilles is terrible. It took them forever to get us our food. And I did some shopping after.”

He walked towards her, holding a wooden spoon with chili. “Have a taste.”

She ate what was offered. “More salt,” she said.

“Really?” Nathan went back to the Crock-pot and tasted the chili again. “Seems salty enough to me.”

Judy screwed up her face and shook her head. She sat down at the breakfast nook and Socrates jumped onto her lap, rolled onto his back, and began purring and kneading the air with his paws. Judy rubbed his chest and kissed him between the eyes.

At dinner, she sprinkled some salt and pepper on her chili. “Vita and Gerd are doing IVF. But she’s too old and her eggs don’t work, so she and Gerd are gonna use his sperm but a donor egg. She’s basically going to be carrying another woman’s baby. The kid will have *none* of her DNA. Crazy, right?”

“Nuts!” Nathan gaped, saucer-eyed. “I don’t get it. Why do people put themselves through something like that? I’m sure it’s not cheap too,” he said.

Under the table, he shook a tortilla chip in an attempt to

get Socrates's attention. The cat jumped off Judy's lap and towards the wagging triangle.

Judy frowned. "Please don't feed him junk. Obesity is the number one cat killer."

"Yah, yah. Chill out. It's just *one* chip." Socrates sniffed at the chip, then turned away from Nathan and sauntered off to the bedroom.

"Sounds pretty hellish if you ask me, IVF," said Judy. "Like a game of roulette. I was shocked when she told me. I mean, she's 45. Come on! That's just too old to be a mom."

Nathan shrugged his shoulders and raised his palms in an expression of cluelessness.

"For as long as I've known Vita, she's been like us, not interested in kids," said Judy. "Then she married Gerd and all that changed. Now she's like *desperate* or something."

"They met online, right?"

"Yeah, on Coffee Meets Bagel, early last year," said Judy.

Nathan served himself another portion of chili and started to put more into Judy's bowl, but she stopped him. "No more, thanks. We shared a big dessert at lunch. I'm not very hungry."

She gulped her merlot. "I guess that's just what people *do*, right? Vita was single for so long, she probably never really thought about babies. The whole single-parent thing would just be too hard. But now she's checked off the husband box, next is the mom box. She's just following the social script."

"You sound angry," Nathan said, blowing into his bowl of chili to cool it.

Judy watched him, his shoulders raised and tense. She

leaned back in her chair. “I’m not *angry*. I’m just... disappointed. In Vita. She doesn’t *really* want a child; she’s just been conditioned to want one and she can’t fight that. If she really wanted a child, she would have done something about it when she was younger, don’t you think?”

Nathan looked up. “But she couldn’t because she didn’t have a partner and the whole single-parent thing would be too much. Isn’t that what you said?” He adjusted his glasses, then quickly dropped his gaze.

“Yes, but I mean if she *really, really* wanted a kid, then she could have gotten a sperm donor or adopted or something—at a more appropriate age. What I’m saying is, she *only* wants a baby now because she’s got a husband, not because she actually *wants* a kid,” said Judy.

“You’re confusing me,” said Nathan. “I don’t know what you want me to say. Why would anyone want to deal with a screaming baby, the cost of childcare, and all the other headaches that come along with kids, with or without a partner?”

“Because it’s what most people do at some point in their life, especially if they’re married. It’s in the script,” said Judy as if this were obvious. “Also, it’s meant to be life changing. Do you not ever want change?”

“No. I’m happy with my life as is it. Aren’t you?” He asked with a somber face.

Judy sighed. “Sure. Happy enough. As happy as anyone is allowed to be, I guess.” With her elbows on the table, fingers interlaced, she studied Nathan with narrowed eyes, making a mental note of the receding hairline, the raccoon-like rings

under his eyes—a man defeated. “I don’t believe you’re happy.”

Nathan looked up at the ceiling, bracing himself for another one of her pedantic monologues.

Nathan and Vita would have made a good pair, they’re both a little wimpy, Judy thought. “I don’t think Vita is cut out for it, mothering,” said Judy. “She likes the idea of being a mother. I mean I *get* it. It’s like when you’re single and you’re in love with the idea of being in love, or with the person you think you could love. Then you’re in it, the whole couple, marriage thing and you’re like ‘oh, so this is what it’s like’ and you realize that the idea was better.”

He shot her a glance that made her think of a wounded herbivore. “Are you saying you’re not happy with *us*?”

“No, no. Stop being so sensitive. I’m talking about *life*—in general. Whether it’s marriage, a new job, or a baby. It’s all wonderful, pink cloudy in the beginning, and then it’s just your fucking life.” Now she raised her eyes to the ceiling.

He walked over to her, stood behind her and rubbed her shoulders. “Let’s keep things light, OK, honey?” He bent down and kissed her on the cheek.

After dinner, Nathan washed the dishes, then put the food scraps into the composting machine.

Later, in bed, with her back facing her husband, Judy fell asleep. She was awakened by Nathan’s fingers on her nipple. She gently pushed his hands down to her waist then fell back to sleep. In the middle of the night, she heard a violent rustling of sheets and opened her eyes. His back was facing her. Remaining still, she watched him masturbate. There was no pleasure in his effortful jerks; the soft, choked sounds he made struck her as

pitiful. He gave up. She closed her eyes.

The following night, she opened a bottle of one of their better reds at dinner and drank more than half of it. Then she had a long shower and came out to the kitchen wrapped in a towel. He was putting the dishes away. Her plan was to drop the towel and press herself against him, but instead she sat awkwardly at the breakfast nook, hair still wet, petting Socrates who was purring against her ankles. She tightened the towel across her chest and finished up what was left in the bottle.

In the dark quietude of pre-sleep, she stroked Nathan's cock and thought about opening another bottle.

"Your hands are freezing," he said, prying her fingers off him.

On Sunday, the rain stopped, and the sun streamed through wispy clouds. Judy had invited Vita and Gerd over for dinner. She and Nathan had no plans for the day, so he spent the morning in front of the TV—tuned to reruns of *Arrested Development*—and played Tetris on his mobile phone.

Judy did yoga in the garden, played with and fed Socrates, then went upstairs to tidy the bedroom. Nathan had made them both turkey sandwiches on pretzel buns for lunch. Pulling the toasted buns out of the oven, he called out to Judy, "Lunch will be ready soon." She was vacuuming and did not hear him. He ate his sandwich and left her portion out on the kitchen counter.

When she was done with the housework, she ate the sandwich. Then she went into the living room to pick up her book from the coffee table. She grabbed the remote control to lower the volume. "Why's the TV on? You're playing your

game; you're not even watching."

"Please leave that. I'm watching. I can do both." He replied, eyes glued to his phone.

"No you can't. Multi-tasking makes your brainless efficient. Makes you dumb."

"Is that what your book tells you?"

"Yes, but I already know that. You should try reading sometime."

"You should try watching TV, or having fun sometime."

"I don't like passive activities that don't require intellect or imagination. I don't want to turn into a zombie."

"You're already a zombie. All you do is work, read, exercise and clean."

"It's called being productive. You know what *you* are? You're a consumer. Too lazy to invent anything original, so you mope around complaining about your life, expecting the world to keep you entertained."

"I see you're feeling cunty today. Didn't you just consume the sandwich that *I* produced?"

"Look, I appreciate everything you do. It's just—you have so much potential. You're selling yourself short. You fix their engines and electrical systems, you mend their broken things, and you hate doing it. Remember the solar cooker you invented? You can make your *own* things. You *know* how to be creative. You just have to change your mindset, get more excited about life again."

"Oh, shut up already. You're just busy all the time because if you sit still for too long, then you'll have to look at what a mean shit you really are. *You're* a broken thing."

They avoided each other for the rest of the afternoon.

At around a quarter past seven, Vita and Gerd arrived with a bottle of prosecco, a cheese and dried fruit platter, and a bottle of 14-year-old Oban. Dinner was served in the formal dining room, which was separated from the kitchen by a tall, shaker-style buffet hutch cabinet where the dinnerware and cutlery were kept.

Nathan had prepared a Mediterranean shrimp salad, mushroom bisque, ribeye steaks with broccolini and baked potatoes for dinner, and a cherry and almond cake for dessert.

Vita's husband Gerd was a German structural engineer who had become an American citizen about a decade ago. Judy and Nathan had only met him four times. The first time was soon after he'd started dating Vita, and Vita had insisted the four of them double date at a Chinese restaurant.

"All three of you are in the construction industry. I'm sure you'll have plenty to talk about," Vita had said back then.

Judy and Nathan didn't quite know what to make of Gerd after that Chinese meal. They agreed he was brusque and a bit full of himself, but when they learned from Vita that he had voted for Trump, the possibility of them ever becoming real friends was off the table. The man was, however, as Nathan put it "quite the character" and this evening, Judy hoped he would at least provide some entertainment.

The party started off with cheese and prosecco. By the time they got to the main course, the four had worked their way through three and a half bottles of wine. Vita, who drank the most, talked about how she'd better get as much booze in while she still could. "But who knows, it may not even happen," she

whispered wistfully to Judy.

Throughout the meal, Vita would rub Gerd's arm and he would give her cute little pecks on the cheek. Something about their newly married affection irked Judy.

"So, Gerd, I hear you two are planning on becoming parents?" Judy asked.

"Oh yes. We're so excited." He beamed.

"Any anxieties?" she probed, hoping her guests might open up about their unconventional journey to parenthood to spice up the conversation.

"Anxieties?" Gerd did a pantomime of surprise. "Why? Being a parent is the most natural thing."

Judy realized he had missed her point and decided it might be wiser not to bring up the IVF after all. "What I meant was, parenthood will bring big changes to both your lives."

"Yes, it's a big change, for the better of course. For marriage to really work, it's best if there are children, or at least one child."

Vita cleared her throat. "More wine anyone," she asked, aiming the half-empty bottle of Pinot Grigio at the other three like a strafing machine gun.

"Yes, please." All three replied in synchrony.

"Hmmm. Why do you think that?" Judy asked.

"Because children are the keystone of a marriage. The infrastructure, so to speak."

Gerd continued. "When you have a child, there is the father and the mother. There is one person in the role of provider and the other in the role of caregiver. There is yin and yang, harmony. The husband gets to see the wife in dual roles—

first as romantic companion and second as either provider or caregiver to their child. Vice versa with the husband. Both adults become multi-functional, like a Swiss Army knife, and therefore more useful to each other than if they only had one purpose. Being a mother or father lets your partner see you as being more—what’s the word—noble.”

“Oh, Gerd, that’s not true. Couples without kids are very happy, and noble too,” said Vita. She ate a mouthful of her baked potato, but it was too hot and she had to spit it out.

“But happy for how long?” Gerd asked in a manner that reminded Judy of a condescending pastor from her youth with a habit of opening his vitriolic sermons with a question.

Judy sat upright. She now wished she *had* brought up IVF and the fact that Gerd was going to be the biological parent of their hypothetical child, but her friend was not.

Nathan, who could sense Judy was ready to pounce, jumped in to control the damage. “But Gerd, the stats show, marital satisfaction *decreases* with children.”

“Pah! Who is paying for those studies? I don’t believe them.”

Judy guffawed. “It’s not one, but many studies. The research shows, couples become more unhappy with their marriage after children. With kids, you have less time for meaningful work or to take care of yourself. People get stressed out, which means more conflict.”

“Sure, some of that makes sense to me. But when there are children, the incentive to work through the disagreements, to come back to a place of peace, is greater, because you’ll want to set an example for your child, to put the good of the child

before your own good.”

“But people with children divorce all the time,” Nathan said.

“That has nothing to do with having children. That’s just the weak character of the adults. They’re probably already in rocky marriages, or aren’t equipped for parenthood to begin with,” said Gerd.

Vita blushed in embarrassment. She looked down at her lap, twiddling the corner of her napkin into a lance.

“What an interesting way to see it,” said Judy. Her eyes met Nathan’s and she raised an eyebrow, a fleeting, almost undetectable gesture—*can you believe what this pig is saying?*

Nathan smiled at her in tacit accord. “Ready for dessert?” he asked, standing up.

Everyone nodded.

While Nathan was in the kitchen, Gerd prattled on. “Children can be nuisance, I won’t disagree with that. They are like those big, ugly round concrete columns in the apartments we build, the ones near the floor-to-ceiling windows, you know—the ones that spoil the view.”

“Load-bearing columns,” Judy said, blinking hard in an attempt to keep her annoyance in check.

“Oh yes, I forget, *you guys* know what I’m talking about. You’re the architect,” he nodded respectfully towards Judy. “And Nathan’s a...? Mechanic?”

“An engineer. M&E.”

“Ah yes, I had forgot. You build new things. He’s the repair guy,” said Gerd.

Judy was glad Nathan didn’t hear that.

“Anyway,” Gerd continued. “Those columns, they’re so clunky, they take up so much precious floor space, but if they are not included, then there is no structural soundness. The whole building may collapse.”

“So you’re saying a child is like a load-bearing column?” said Nathan who was now walking towards the table with a beautifully frosted cake.

“Exactly,” said Gerd. “They provide structural integrity. You know how, after a long time together, people get bored with each other. Who wants vanilla ice cream every day?” he grinned conciliatorily at Nathan.

Vita stared at Gerd, arms crossed, mouth agape.

“But if you have a child, then you are too busy raising it to plan mischief. And, you have to think how bad you will look to your own child if they found out. So kids, in a way, can prevent extramarital hanky-panky.” He laughed. No one else did.

Gerd seemed oblivious to the effects of his diatribe. He reached for Vita’s hand and continued. “Also, without kids, what joyful things would we have to talk about with our own parents? We’ll just have to listen to them talk about their gardening, bunions, arthritis, dementia. Nothing to take our conversations away from sickness and aging.”

“Seems like you’ve thought a lot about this, Gert,” said Nathan.

Gert nodded sagely.

“So you’re saying having a baby is a distraction from dying?” Judy was smiling, but her eyes were daggers.

“Having a baby is the *only* way to preserve life, to

preserve love.”

Socrates jumped on the table, interrupting Gerd with cries for dinner.

“I’m sure many marriages, like yours, are wonderful even without children. But not for me, not for us. The way I see it, a baby is like the hole in the doughnut—you don’t really need the hole, but then it’s just a piece of sweet bread, nothing special. It’s the hole that makes it a doughnut.”

Judy and Nathan looked at each other surreptitiously, both aware of a shared sense of disgust that their guest had aroused in them.

“You’re a real romantic, aren’t you, Gerd?” Nathan said with a lighthearted chuckle, dissolving some of the tension.

“Hey, I’m just telling it like I see it.”

“Fair enough,” said Nathan, laughing and shaking his head.

Judy looked at her friend who seemed to have shrunk as her opinionated spouse hogged the conversation. “What do *you* think about all this, Vita?”

Vita was scowling, but Judy knew it was a mock scowl. She knew the expression Vita wore when she was *really* angry, and could tell that right now, she was merely displeased. The thrill of being a wife hadn’t worn off yet. Judy knew it was a matter of time before Vita would be scowling for real.

Vita scarfed the cake on her plate, then cut herself another hefty slice. “I think,” she said facetiously, “that Gerd—is—an asshole.” She shoveled a big forkful of cake into her mouth, drained the full glass of wine in front of her, and belched.

They all laughed. “I think we should bust out that Oban,” Nathan said.

Whisky was poured, and they raised their glasses. “To having children!” said Judy.

After their guests left, Nathan filled the sink with water and washed the dishes.

Judy put the leftovers into Ziplock bags and stored them in the fridge. “I still don’t get why you don’t just use the dishwasher?”

“It’s a waste of electricity and water. And we’ll have to listen to that awful noise for the next three hours.”

“But washing up sucks.”

“I kinda enjoy it. It’s meditative.”

She stood next to him with a dishrag and dried the washed plates. “That Gerd’s a real piece of work, isn’t he? Mr. Analogy, we should call him. I don’t know if he realized it, but his doughnut example contradicts his load-bearing column idea. I kept thinking, the column is *added* for support, but the hole is the part of the doughnut that’s *subtracted*. I was like, ‘What is this windbag talking about?’”

They both burst into laughter.

“Germans, right?” Nathan handed her another slippery plate. “Vita’s a saint to put up with him!”

When they were done with the dishes, Judy kissed Nathan on the lips. “Thank you for that lovely meal. And for not being German.” She smacked his bum and walked away.

In December, Judy and Nathan returned home from a matinee and found Socrates’s body near the foot of their bed. He had choked on the stuffing from the toy banana. Judy

screamed. Nathan wrapped the cat's rigid body in a towel, and they brought it to the vet to arrange for a cremation. When they came home, they didn't eat or bathe, but crawled into bed, held each other, sobbed, and remembered all the things they adored about Socrates, as well as some of the things about him that had annoyed them but no longer did.

Weeks passed. Nathan had stopped crying. Judy had not.

"The stuffing should not have come out of that toy. It should *not* have! I'm gonna lodge a complaint against the manufacturers," Judy told Nathan one morning before heading to work.

"I told you he didn't need so many toys."

"Are you blaming *me* for buying it?"

"Of course not. It was an accident."

She burst into tears, again. Since Socrates died, Judy seemed to cry all the time.

"Stop it!" Nathan yelled. "Snap out of it. He's just a cat. We'll go to the shelter this weekend and get a kitten."

Judy was silent. She went to the bathroom, wiped her tears and freshened her makeup, then she grabbed her briefcase and jacket and stormed out the door. He wasn't just a cat, he was Socrates, *her* Socrates, she thought. But it seemed to everyone else, even Nathan, he was *just* a cat, nothing more. Maybe Nathan was right. Maybe Gerd was right.

This morning, she would be meeting Ray for a coffee before going into the office to review the floor plans for the Greenwood Montessori Center. She was glad for this. She imagined Ray was not vanilla, but a more complex flavor. She imagined he was the sort of man who liked rainy days, the sort

of man who understood how sad she really was, the sort of man who could make her whole.

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