

Girls' Luncheon

Brian Allan Skinner

Ginnie was always late, but not this time. She was sitting at our table in the window of *The Two Maggots* when I arrived. She was on her nano and so I thought I'd call Juan. No sooner had I touched my ear than the phone rang. It was Ginnie. The waiter was just showing me to the table, not that I was likely to get lost. Ginnie saw my reflection in the window.

"How droll," she told it, laughing insincerely.

"What's the occasion?" I asked her in the window. "Is your watch broken?"

"How droll," she repeated, turning her head finally to face me. She stayed on her nano.

Monsieur Godiche pushed in my chair and stood at attention. Ginnie waved him off.

I did not disconnect my device, either. I asked her why she'd called me since I was not late, and was practically never late.

"I wanted to be sure you were coming, that's all. What I have to share is just too delicious."

We picked up our menus at the same time. I studied it even though French was Greek to me. Ginnie always ordered and always paid when we had lunch at *The Two Maggots*, an arrangement I rather liked. We continued to speak over our phones from behind our menus.

Ginnie made a whirlybird in the air with her finger, and Monsieur Godiche appeared at our table as close to instantaneously as possible without getting there a moment too soon. No doubt Ginnie's outrageously generous gratuities kept the fellow on his toes. He bowed, holding his plain, old paper tablet and pen at the ready.

"You may start us off with 'L'escargots à la Grand Marnier,'¹ Louis, and whatever wine the little fellows might enjoy swimming in."

"Oui, madame," he said, bowing.

"Pas trop cher,² Louis."

¹ Snails in cognac.

² "Not too expensive."

The waiter clicked his heels and turned away. I admit Ginnie's command of French impressed me. For all I knew, she was telling him to bring us a cheap wine. Lunch was invariably delicious and we invariably drank too much. Then she poured me into a cab and sent me home. I always cleared my calendar for Ginnie.

"So what is this fabulous news?" I asked her.

The wine arrived and the menus departed. I heard her order in stereo, in person as well as over the phone.

"Des aubergines à la poêle, deux fois."³

To me she whispered, "English requires fewer syllables and is therefore more masculine than French, more in a hurry."

I resisted the inclination to lean forward to hear her since we continued speaking on our phones.

"The news," I reminded her. I tugged my earlobe twice to lower the volume. Ginnie gets a little loud after a drinkie or two. She also gets pedantic, like my ex-husband.

"Guess who I saw?"

There was no need to guess. It was always Charles she meant—my ex-husband. So I asked the next question.

"Where?"

"An antique book and print dealer down on Maiden Lane. Charles was walking out with a large portfolio under his arm. He looked very satisfied with himself. Smug."

I might have asked Ginnie what she was doing there, but had no desire to drag the conversation out by her avoidances and obfuscation—a word Charles taught me. I asked whether he looked prosperous.

"Hardly," my friend responded. "In a word, he looked seedy: rumped and disheveled. I was in a cab, but he looked like he smelled bad too."

"I'm sorry to hear it," I said. I very nearly was.

³ "Fried eggplant, twice."

“Don’t feel too bad, Helen. One doesn’t walk out of *The Prints and the Popper* with a large parcel if he’s hurting.”

“What an odd name,” I remarked.

“‘Popper’ is the proprietress’ name. Zelda Popper. It’s very high end, attracting all the biggest names in the design world.”

“I see. Perhaps Charles was merely running an errand for someone.”

“Perhaps.”

We pulled the snails from their shells with the tiny forks. The shells were still quite hot. We held them in place with a small pair of curved tongs while digging out the meat. It helped to talk on our phones. I could concentrate on getting the little critters into my mouth when I did not have to keep looking up at my companion. After refilling our empty glasses, the waiter placed a second bottle of wine on the table.

“It would certainly bother me if one of *my* exes was doing well. You have a far too forgiving nature, my dear. It is not enough that I have succeeded; my former husbands needed to fail.”

We chuckled over that. A commotion of waiters and servers appeared at our table. They removed the silver covers and placed portions of the main course and its accompaniments on our china plates. Monsieur Godiche raised his eyebrows like a pair of question marks.

“We are fine for now, Louis. I’ll let you know if we need something.”

The wait staff disappeared like jackrabbits into a burrow. No doubt Ginnie would have referred to them as Jacques-rabbits. She was the cleverest woman I knew.

The main course was a sort of round, fleshy patty floating in a mushroom sauce. I suspected it might have been veal, but was too hungry to merely pick around it on vague principles. I intended to look up *aubergines* when I got home. Or maybe I wouldn’t. It might be better not to know.

The third or fourth bottle of “van,” as Ginnie called it, appeared along with the dessert platters. It all looked luscious and extremely rich. I pointed out three of the tiny pastries, each on a lacy paper doily and drowned in dark chocolate.

We continued our conversation electronically. It had begun to seem natural by then. We could concentrate easily on the tasks at hand. Had I looked up sooner I would have seen a smear of chocolate on Ginnie’s cheek—as though she’d been applying lipstick while riding the subway.

I tried drawing her attention to it without saying anything, but she was not looking at me. So I told her over the phone.

“Please, dear. It is gauche to say something like that aloud. A gesture would have sufficed.”

“I tried. I think you mean ‘sufficed.’ You were looking out the window.”

“Have you never heard of periphonal vision?”

“Of course I have. Charles chattered about polyphonal vision incessantly. I think he liked the sound of it, plus, he said it was one of those words no one could say if he was drunk.”

“Are you calling me a lush? Because if you are...”

“Nothing of the sort, dear. I meant only that it is getting late.”

Ginnie glanced down at her phone. “Indeed it is. Louis!”

“Your coach awaits, mesdames,” the waiter said, already standing beside our table.

Perhaps Monsieur Godiche had been standing at attention for some minutes already. I’d been looking at messages on my phone. But his sudden appearances and disappearances unnerved me. I wondered how he always knew precisely when to call a cab for us. Had he been eavesdropping? Was our table bugged? Had *The Two Maggots* figured out some high-tech way to worm into our conversations without raising suspicion?

I, for one, was suspicious. I thought about it all the way home, after Ginnie got out at her building on Park Avenue. Maybe I’d suggest some other place for our next “girls’ luncheon,” though I wasn’t sure Ginnie would cotton to the idea.

* * *

Though I’d practiced what I would say on the long cab ride down to *The Prints and the Popper*, when I got there, all of it disappeared, as though I’d left it in the taxi. Lance Parker, the thirty-eight-year-old skateboarding champion, was leaving the establishment just as I’d arrived. Seeing him in person nearly took my breath away. So lean and handsome—and young.

Zelda Popper had silver-white hair she wore in a sort of flip, very like a 1920s flapper, complete with a beaded headband. She had on a brightly-patterned silk jacket—tropical birds. Her wrists jangled with several metal bracelets—gold, no doubt. She’d applied a bit too much makeup and lipstick, though. It probably took quite a bit of money to look that cheap.

“That was Lance Parker,” I remarked, still a little out of breath.

“How do you know Mr. Parker?” Zelda asked.

“How? He’s on every nano and phone on the planet. And magazines. He’s the World Skateboarding Champion, two years in a row, I think.”

“Seems a bit old for that sort of thing, but what does Zelda know. She thought the Internet was a fad. How can she help you?”

“I was wondering about someone else you may know,” I told her. I was grateful for the new impromptu lead-in and jumped at it. “Charles van Buren.”

“How do you know Mr. van Buren?”

“I am Mrs. van Buren,” I replied, putting on a smile.

“I see,” Zelda said. “Currently or historically speaking?”

She was very good at letting the air out of balloons.

“Well.. I’m just a bit curious. A friend saw him leaving here with a.... a portfolio. Charles never knew a thing about art when we were together.”

“He still doesn’t,” Zelda said, releasing the faintest of giggles.

“I’m just curious to know the *type* of work he purchased, Ms. Popper.”

“It was not a purchase at all, Mrs. Van Buren. Your former husband has an extensive collection of drawings we are planning to bring to the collector’s market.”

“How extensive?”

“I believe I have satisfied your wifely curiosity, whether past or present.”

“Well, just a rough figure... an approximation of the value, Ms. Popper. I’m curious, not nosy.”

“All right. As one former wife to another. I believe a little snooping is healthy. I’ll tell you that much. But you will not pry another shred of information out of me. My clients trust me. My reputation rests on that.”

“I understand,” I told her.

“The nuns used to tell us that our reputations are like our souls: we get only one of them and it is our duty to take care of them. There are no replacements, the fawning media notwithstanding.”

“Yes, I understand. And how much do you figure Charles’ little collection might be worth...approximately. You may speak euphemistically.”

“Euphemistically? Your husband is living on the upper eighth or lower ninth floor, Ms. van Buren, more likely the latter. Ms. van Buren?”

That was the last thing I heard Zelda Popper say, if I heard her correctly at all.

* * *

They released me from New York Presbyterian the next morning without finding a cause for my fainting episode. I could have told them why if anyone had asked. Charles with an art collection worth hundreds of millions? Were we speaking of the same Charles Walter van Buren I was married to?

God knows Charlie deserved to succeed, but no one deserved to succeed that much, least of all Charlie. Charlie is the smartest person I know, Zelda Popper’s remarks aside. No one works harder and no one fails more often. He has the rottenest luck of anybody I know, and I ought to know. I’ve been hoping he’d succeed, only not quite that much.

What was I going to tell Ginnie? She’d be sure to find out somehow, probably from my own mouth. She had a smooth way of getting it out of me so that I barely noticed, like I’d been given Novocain. She’d drill into me about how important prenuptial agreements are, especially now that Charles had come into some money. I wouldn’t be able to explain to her that you couldn’t enter into a marriage agreement after the divorce. I knew exactly what she’d tell me.

* * *

“That’s a matter for a jury to decide,” Ginnie advised at our next little luncheon. “And there’s not a jury in this city that wouldn’t convict that greedy bastard. My poor, poor Helene.”

I hated it when she called me that. I decided to set the record straight.

“Charles is the most generous person I know—aside from you, Ginnie, dear. I know he hasn’t forgotten me.” I set aside my menu.

“You’d be surprised what money can do to a person’s memory. You’d be surprised at what I found out about Charles’ collection, too.”

“I wish you hadn’t, Ginnie. You didn’t mention me, did you?”

She shook her head and motioned for Louis at the same time. Fortunately, the waiter understood the signal.

“We’ll start with the ‘Salade niçoise’⁴ and the ‘Merde sur un Bardeau,’⁵ avec Bordeaux, for our entrée.”

Louis bowed and vanished. I wasn’t sure when the wine was placed on the table nor how it poured itself into our glasses. I was distracted by Ginnie’s callousness.

“I simply told Ms. Popper I’d heard an important collection was coming up for private bid and I wanted to know a little bit more about the offering. You’re going to love this: Charles’ entire collection is nothing but clouds, clouds, clouds—new, old, light, dark, you name it. I never heard of anything so ridiculous. Then she told me that the collection could not be split up, that it was all or nothing. She asked for my contact information in case those terms changed. I made it up on the spot. Nothing will ever come back to you, dear Helene.”

I breathed a sigh of relief, but did not feel relieved. The wine seemed to be evaporating before my eyes.

“Oh, that is just the sort of situation Charles finds himself in all the time: he has something very valuable that maybe only one or two people in the whole world can afford. What if neither of them wants it? I feel so sorry for him. I wish I hadn’t known.”

By the time the main course arrived, I was barely hungry. It looked expensive, but reminded me of something from my childhood, something my father, of all people, used to make.

“Well, perhaps one of those Russian patriarchs might be interested. They’ve got the dough, that’s for sure. Or that cut-throat American businessman, that fellow Biggs. I wouldn’t be feeling sorry for Charles, dear. If I were you, I’d be worried about poor little Helene and how she was going to get her mitts on some of it.”

I wanted to change the subject, and tell her she meant “oligarch.” But when Ginnie was buying lunch, I tolerated her advice and her malapropisms. Yes, Charles again.

“Guess who *I* saw coming out of Zelda Popper’s gallery?” I asked her.

“Haven’t a clue, my dear.”

“Lance Parker.”

⁴ A fancy French tuna salad.

⁵ Literally, “Shit on a Shingle” (chipped beef on toast with a white gravy), with Bordeaux wine.

“Oh, my God. He’s a celebrity, right? Does he do anything?”

“Skateboarding. A champion.”

“He looks older than that.”

“I believe he is, actually.”

And there our conversation sat, like a stain on the linen tablecloth. Our silence seemed permanent. I could think of no way out that did not lead back to Charles and his millions. When the dessert trays arrived, I took a pass on the little pastries. I thought of asking for a “petit sac,” but thought it might seem gauche. Ginnie, of course, noticed it was the first time I had declined dessert, and made much of it.

“Before we bid *au revoir*, my dear, you need to promise me you’re going to speak to your new lawyer boyfriend about this situation. Julio, is it?”

“Juan,” I corrected her.

“As soon as you get home. The longer you wait, the longer it will be before you get the money.”

“I meant that his name is Juan, not Julio.”

“Same difference, dear.”

The cab ride seemed longer than usual. We stared out the windows, but had nothing to say that was not small talk. As she got out of the taxi, Ginnie gave me a peck on each cheek in the French fashion, and sent me home with the cab after paying the driver. I was exhausted.

* * *

Naturally, I said not a word to Juan about Charles and his collection. No doubt Charles’ head was spinning with indecision, and I did not want to apply any more influence or pressure. Juan was not always very tactful where love or money was involved, either—a bit like Ginnie in that regard.

I had not succeeded in prevailing upon Ginnie to change the venue for our girls’ luncheon. I’d heard about a place in the East Village that sounded intriguing, but Ginnie could not be enticed. She wanted to know whether I recommended the restaurant based upon first-hand knowledge or hearsay. She sounded more like Juan every day. Perhaps she had a point. I’d be extremely embarrassed if the five-star review provided only a one-star dining experience. I would check it out first.

There was very little traffic, on either the street or the sidewalk, but the Village made me uncomfortable nonetheless. No doubt the bohemians and artists were still lolling about in their rat-infested opium dens, having all manner of unconventional sex and off-beat political discussions until hunger made them bestir themselves. Unlike the Upper East Side's utter predictability, one never knew what was around the next corner in Alphabet City.

Café Kundalini seemed cheerful: a clean, well-lighted place. It was not clear to me what sort of cuisine they offered, but the décor suggested it was at least not American. Ginnie would never eat American food.

A tall slim fellow in a sort of long black Nehru jacket with red buttons and piping bowed and introduced himself to me. I was too busy taking it all in to have remembered a word he said. He escorted me to a table for two in the window, rather like the perch Ginnie and I enjoyed at *The Two Maggots*. It struck me as seriously coincidental that the artwork on the walls and in the nooks were all prints and paintings of clouds. The longer I stared at them the more convinced I became that the clouds moved and changed shape.

It took me a while to unfold the origami-like menu. I might have saved myself the effort since not a word of it was comprehensible to me. It may as well have been a French translation of the original Greek.

"I wonder whether you might recommend something to me... uh..."

"I am Shakti Pat," the fellow said. "I shall be very pleased."

He spun around on his heels and spun again a half turn, now holding a second place setting which he laid out across from me. Another half spin and Mr. Pat was holding two steaming bowls and what looked like a relish tray. The items on the tray were oddly-shaped and bizarrely-colored. They suggested pre-school toys designed by Salvador Dali.

The waiter stood at the table a moment, jotting on his tablet, and then he seated himself at my table. My expression must have betrayed my astonishment at this effrontery.

"What is the meaning of this, Mr. Pat?"

"Shakti Pat, if you please. There is no meaning; it is policy. We do not permit our guests to dine alone. Conversation makes food taste better, and scientific research shows food is digested more efficiently in the company of others."

"That may be, but..."

"You are used to dining with someone, a woman. That is clear. A woman does not dress as well as you do for a man. A man is not impressed with what a woman wears. He is interested only in what lies beneath the dress. I appreciate both."

Shakti Pat lifted his strange sort of fork-spoon and motioned for me to begin eating. I couldn't be certain he wasn't making a pass at me. His smile was mischievous, but it also put me at my ease. I decided I would trust him.

The bowl contained long noodles in a jumble of the various bright colors of the appetizer tray. The broth they swam in was perfectly clear. I had no expectation of the taste except that it would be exotic and spicy.

I was correct on both counts, but the part I'd failed to expect was how delicious it was—absolutely better than anything I'd eaten at *The Two Maggots*—ever. I would not be ashamed to bring Ginnie here. As I dug deeper into the bowl, the flavor and texture of the noodles changed. I felt I'd embarked on a culinary tour of the United Nations—at least all those places east of FDR Drive.

“What would you like to discuss today?” the waiter asked, with the solicitude of my therapist when my account is up-to-date.

“I don't know,” I admitted. “My husband—my ex-husband—has been on my mind a lot these days.”

“Then the chapter is not finished. How would you like it to turn out?”

“Me? How I'd like it to turn out?”

“You are one of the parties, are you not?”

“Yes, I suppose so. I'd like to see Charles happy.”

“That is generous, more than most would wish for their ex-spouses. What might you give him that would make him happy? Please, keep eating. Dessert is at the bottom.”

I gave a little laugh, both at the thought that I could give something to a man with hundreds of millions of dollars and at the feeling that I was at a child's birthday party, and I was the child. The dessert noodles looked no different than any of the other particolored pasta, but their tastes ranged from chocolate to luscious berries to oranges with ginger. And the sauce in which they luxuriated went from chocolate to mocha to coffee, before settling down as a ginger tea with slices of orange. I did not look for the bottom of the bowl. I was content, pleasantly satisfied—full.

“I think it would make Charles happy if I finally forgave him.”

“Once you forgive yourself, you'll have plenty to go around.”

My therapist would have taken a month of fifty-minute hours to say that. And I'm not sure I would have heard him or known what he meant.

Mr. Shakti Pat took the pair of tongs on the relish tray and placed one of the strange comestibles—Charles again—into his bowl. He replaced the tongs and motioned for me to do the same. There were only two of the red ones, so I figured I'd better take one of those. On my next pass, I took the other red one. I had no idea what the game was, but it was fun. I had no idea of a strategy, either, which is why it remained fun until the last morsels were placed in our bowls.

Then Shakti Pat arose from the table, picked up the bowls, and spun towards the kitchen.

“Aren't we going to eat them?” I asked.

He laughed at me the way one might briefly find a child's impertinence amusing. “They are not edible. In fact, they are quite poisonous. That is why we use the tongs.”

“But then why are they even on the table?”

“Merely for decoration, dear Helen,” the waiter replied. He disappeared into the kitchen.

I don't remember telling Shakti Pat my name, though I talked more freely with him than I ever had with Dr. Mallow—or even my dear friend Ginnie. Perhaps I had told him my name—I must have. I no longer felt out of place in this den of Village denizens. Was there something in the food? I felt strange, but I did not feel drugged. In fact, I hadn't had single drinkie at lunch except for the tea. I felt very good.

The check was a ridiculously small amount, even including the waiter's meal. My tummy was happy, my spirits light, but not my pocketbook. I did not think this was the sort of place I could ever invite Ginnie to. It was not expensive enough. *There. I said it.* That was a frequent expression of Charles' that used to annoy me. But today it seemed appropriate.

Shakti Pat helped me on with my wrap, turned to face me, and bowed.

“Forgiveness is a dish best served warm—while it is still in the heart.”

I understood what he meant. I touched his folded hands and said, “Good bye.”

* * *

I took out one of my little note cards and envelope from my purse. I hoped the cab ride would not be too lurching, too stop-and-go. I didn't want Charles to think I was in my cups when I wrote it.

There was nothing much—now from the perspective of a dozen years—for which I needed to forgive Charles. I never appreciated him until after the divorce. He was intelligent and a good man, a loving man. But I wanted more. I wanted a man like one of Ginnie’s husbands: successful in the eyes of the world. It was nothing that Charles lacked. It was the world that had failed him, had failed to find the proper place for him. And I, always measuring him up and finding him wanting, only added to his sense of failure. It is I who had let *him* down, by measuring him against a standard that did not matter or, at least, that did not matter to me. *There. I said it.*

I wrote what I had just been thinking about, before I had a chance to polish the life out of it. I directed the driver to Riverside Drive—somewhere near Grant’s Tomb was all I remembered. I realized I did not recall the address. But I spotted the graceful, curved building where Charlie’s friend Bill Norville lived. I asked the cabbie to wait.

I knew if I delayed getting the note into Charlie’s hands, he would never get it. I’d leave it with his friend.

The security guard informed me that Bill Norville had passed away. But he further stated that a Mr. Charles van Buren had taken over the lease.

“Well, in fact, the letter is *for* Mr. van Buren,” I told him, showing him the name on the envelope. The guard looked at me sideways, but assured me he would slip the note under the door on his break. I thanked him with a small gratuity to make certain he did not forget.

It was a beautiful evening. A full moon had just risen above the almost bare trees. The silver light sparkled on the Hudson. The clouds sailed past at a graceful, unhurried pace. It was hard to look away from them. But I was certain the cabdriver was growing impatient.

I stole a look across to Riverside Park and the memorial to General Grant, so white and brilliant in the moonlight. I’d always found it touching that the General’s wife, Julia, was also entombed there beside him. I hadn’t known that, nor did anyone I knew, until Charles told me on our wedding night, though I haven’t a clue what brought up the subject. Leave it to Charles.

Epilogue

“Forgiveness is not always easy. At times, it feels more painful than the wound we suffered, to forgive the one that inflicted it. And yet, there is no peace without forgiveness.”

— Marianne Williamson