

“Please pass the salt.” I gazed into the salt shaker’s glass abyss as I passed it to the end of the table where Dad sat waiting. He was skilled in benign neglect with his dinner plate. I knew he couldn’t eat. The chemo was too much. It was all just a show.

“Bill, I’ve invited your brother to come tonight,” Mom whispered into my ear and it ruptured the boredom. “Don’t make a scene.” She patted me on the shoulder as she walked toward the kitchen.

I often wondered if Mom secretly paid a Hallmark movie screenwriter to craft her conversations. The saccharine dialogue and gestures were too much sometimes.

The knowledge of Gus’s arrival tossed me down the rabbit hole of speculation. He’d likely stride through the door, his bottle of Grey Goose on display like he went to Hezekiah’s tunnel and brought back the Holy Grail. Mom would balk. She’d probably run to the kitchen to hide her face, salt the soup with her tears. But, Gus? He’d ask us to back his latest venture. Likely something in rentals or worse. He’d try to convince us to care. (Privately, I did. I cared if Gus outlived Dad. I struggled to find a time when things felt soft between Gus and me, maybe when we played Uno on the patio over summer break in middle school. Definitely not last year, when he told me to get fucked because I asked him to stop bringing booze to dinner.)

I felt Dad’s eyes on me then, his face holding sympathy but fogged over with pain. He nodded at me. He was waiting for me to kick the engine on small talk, bring up something for us to ping pong back and forth until Mom returned from the kitchen with the rest of the meal.

Dad wouldn’t make it through another year of dinners. We’d lost so much hope after his diagnosis we weren’t even Catholic anymore. No one would say it. That we were afraid. That we were freaking the fuck out. We weren’t so unkind to put a name on our suffering or even agree that we collectively felt sorrow. We had learned to detach from our collective anguish as deftly as sea stars sever their limbs. Dad was dying. Mom was living for her juice cleanses to keep from drinking. That was enough to break us. We watched the pain go, unfelt, like a balloon of our humanity.

I had checked the rearview mirror on my humanity before. Like the time I told Mom about the Mona Lisa and how she had her own mailbox at the Louvre because so many visitors wrote her love letters. Mom smiled at that. I made her smile. I did that. I love you, Mom, I thought. I love you sober. Just please, find something to do with your time instead of those posts on Facebook about the Earth and how it might be flat or when you wrote that the ice ax that murdered Trotsky on display at the Spy Museum in Washington, DC was a fake. Maybe you were smarter (but not kinder) when you were drunk.

My gaze drifted from the dining room and settled on the view outside the bay window. I could see the slats of the wrought iron deck bannister outside and how the snow was jailed in by its shadow. It was then that I heard the bells jingle from around the front door's handle. The green wreath made of small bells had been on the front door for the last 11 years, placed there by Alex on Christmas because Dad said he loved the sound they made. We all groaned at the time but Alex smiled his shit-eating grin and put them on the door handle. Patted Dad on the shoulder. Dad, oddly choked up, saying, "Thanks, kid."

That was the year before Alex died in the car crash. The last time I was near his living body was filled with heroic chaos as the police and EMTs surrounded Mom's red Ford Taurus, flipped like a matchbox car onto its back, dangling off the road. My body had been thrown too far from Alex, landing me in the adjacent field near the bridge where we had wrecked. I brought my college roommate to Christmas a few years after that, and he pulled the bells off the door and played with them. We all stared at him like he had ripped the flowers off Alex's grave.

I dragged my eyes through the light outside and back to the dining room. I looked up to see Gus, his face smiling like a gambler sensing desperation and opportunity, cradling the Grey Goose like he had rescued a baby from drowning in a raging river. And just before my fist connected with his grinning face, his voice rang out:

"I'm here, bitches. Who's ready to party?"



About the Author

Chrissy Stegman is a poet/writer from Baltimore, Maryland. Recent work has appeared or is forthcoming in: Rejection Letters, Gone Lawn, Gargoyle Magazine, Anti-Heroin Chic, Poverty House, Stone Circle Review, Fictive Dream, and The Voidspace. She is a 2023 BOTN nominee.

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