

CERTAIN WORDS

There is something plain wrong about a man using “divine” (c.1300 from L. *divinus* "of a god") as an adjective, with the possible exception of a priest. Divine mercy, divine revelation—perfectly acceptable in that context. Divine right—smacks of historian in a sweater vest but possibly intriguing coming from a 220-pound contractor with drywall dust in his fingernails. And maybe it’s unfair of me to fault a man for his adjectives, but to me, “divine” simply has no business prefacing stemware or any other Macy’s wedding registry item. Not from a man’s lips.

So something shifts inside me when Steve turns to me with the Riedel Vinum Cabernet/Bordeaux wine glasses box (set of eight, on sale for \$149.95) held up in his fist like a six-pack of Pabst and says, “Divine glasses, don’t you think, babe?”

He does not smirk. He does not elbow my ribs. He is serious. His eyes are open wide, and he is nodding. This frightens me, and at the moment, I’m not sure why, exactly.

“Divine—right—for a cabernet, yes,” I say. “But the pinot noir set is the one on the registry.” Not that I’m enamored of registries and feel compelled to buy a gift that fits the specs down to the serial number. In fact, something inside me rebels at registries. I pick up a goblet, away from the boxed sets, that appears to be one of a kind. I love it. In all likelihood, it has a mate, but I don’t see it in the artfully displayed glasses among beribboned satin gift boxes. It’s the kind of goblet, big, with a crystal band like a studded dog collar, that I can see Marie drinking gin and tonics from after Lewis leaves her. I bite my lip, hard. Of course, he will never leave her. Perish the thought. Still, registries are too much like shopping lists. Milk, bread, toilet paper. Check. Cuisinart, Waterford crystal decanter, Martha Stewart bedding set. Check.

And does anyone even use decanters anymore, anyway?

“Got it.” Steve plunks down the eight-glass Riedel box and picks up the smaller, two-glass Pinot Noir set. With the thumb and index finger of his other hand, he daintily pinches the stem of a nearby Ralph Lauren champagne flute and raises it in an empty toast. “To us, ma chérie.” He grins, and his smile is, well, beatific. There is no other way to put it. This, from a man who opens beer bottles with his teeth. I realize—this is an epiphany, really—that I actually date a man who can open a beer bottle with his teeth. Beatitude doesn’t become him.

I stare out into the mall entrance to the land of Nine Wests and Banana Republics, where I would much rather be right now. But something is going on, and I want to tease it out into the open. Before that “divine,” I would have put a large, heavy lid on it.

“You know, Steve, you really don’t have to go to this wedding if you don’t want to. You hate lawyers, especially lawyers with French cuffs and Brooks Brothers handkerchiefs. I mean, who blows their nose on Irish linen?”

Steve shrugs. “Lewis is all right.” He peers into a Mikasa martini pitcher and dings the stirrer against the side. “How about we get one of these for us?”

“You don’t drink martinis.”

Steve narrows his eyes into slits and says with his version of a British accent, “Bond, James Bond. Make that shaken, not stirred.” Imagine Sean Connery. Imagine the opposite of Sean Connery. That is Steve. James Bond with a paunch, paint-spattered jeans, and a chipped tooth from opening the aforementioned beer bottles.

“You don’t like Marie much, either. Your eyes glaze over when she talks about muni bonds and variable annuities.”

To be honest, my own eyes glaze over when Marie talks about muni bonds and variable annuities, especially call options and hedge ratios, and I worked for a brokerage, once.

Anyway, I am trying very hard to remember if I did indeed include Steve on the RSVP and, if so, what etiquette rule I'd be breaking if I were to go alone. I'm also trying to remember why I like men who open beer bottles with their teeth, at least men who chip a tooth when they do this.

"I was tired that night." He looks at me, and there is this puppy dog look on his face. "I want to go to Lewis and Marie's wedding. I want to go with you."

This adoration thing isn't working for me. I'm trying very hard to remember if it ever did. "I'm just saying, you don't have to if you don't want to."

"Muni bonds are good. French cuffs are good. I want to go to the wedding."

"You don't like these people."

The martini pitcher and stirrer dangle at the sides of paint-spattered jeans. Then he takes a deep breath and draws himself up to his full six feet, three inches. "But I love you."

The dog collar goblet falls from my hand onto the Macy's floor and breaks. Whatever had shifted inside me is now sinking into the pit of my stomach. Steve puts down the martini pitcher, gets down on his hands and knees, and gathers up the broken crystal with his calloused fingers. The sight of him on his knees with something sparkly in his hand terrifies me.

I have to know.

"Steve, you've never referred to anything as divine before. What made you say the wine glasses were divine?"

He is still on his knees. "I heard Hugh Sisson say it on NPR. Cellar Notes. He was talking about a viognier. Or maybe it was a torrantes."

Whatever it was that was sinking in my stomach has now sunk. I do not know this man.

Somewhere along the line, I became “baby.” While it is true that next to a six foot, three inch, 220-lb man, I may look petite, younger than my real age even, I do not look or act in any way infantile. Petulant at times, maybe tantrum prone, but never infantile. “Baby” from a man’s lips—it diminishes me. That’s just the way I feel. Of course, I understand that the word “baby” has been used as a term of endearment for well over 100 years, first in 1839 according to many sources, so the association with actual babies or baby dolls should be worn thin if not forgotten by now—and granted there is something a little kinkily erotic about “baby” spoken in a particular tone of voice, as long as it doesn’t border on bébé, queasily close to a Pepe Le Pew pick up line—but when it comes from Steve’s lips, I can’t help thinking of words like din-din and drinky and potty. The thought of either of us in a onesie is too much to bear.

“Baby.” He cups the broken bits of crystal goblet in his hands and looks down at my open-toed Mary Jane platforms. “Baby, be careful not to cut your toesies.”

I look down at my red toenail polish, which matches my red tartan Mary Janes, which are suddenly looking Lolita-ish, except for the three-inch heels. “Tell me you didn’t say ‘toesies.’”

“Toes, baby. I tried to get all the pieces, but you never know. Some are kind of little.” Steve gingerly pokes his size-twelve work boots over the housewares department floor.

Between the “baby” and the threat of glass slivers in my soles, I am about ready to ditch Macy’s and the registry and buy something useful and unbreakable for Marie—forget Lewis—something like a Kate Spade bridal clutch from Nordstrom’s stuffed with mad money. Mama said you better shop around; Mama also said you better carry mad money in case things don’t work out. Marie may know muni bonds, but as long as I’ve known her, her cash flow has always been more of a cash ebb.

Forget Marie. With the pieces of a \$64.99 Waterford goblet now cupped in Steve's hands, and a cashier bearing down on us with horn rimmed glasses swinging wildly from her neck chain, I sense that my own cash flow is about to ebb.

Nancy—I see by the brass nameplate on her bosom—looks at Steve's hands, tilts her head back to look up at his face, and asks, "Did we have a mishap in stemware, sir?"

I can't help looking for the ruler that she will rap our knuckles with. I mumble, "I'm sorry. You see—" and Steve looks at me with that big open face. "I didn't mean—" and he looks at me expectantly. "Such a beautiful glass—" and he pours the broken bits of the goblet I loved, the goblet without a mate, onto its display stand and mounds them on the cloth so that they don't spill. I look down at my toes. My toesies. "It was slippery."

"It's OK, baby." He shakes his hands, rubs them on the sides of his jeans, and pats my head. "You didn't mean it." He looks down at Nancy of the brass nameplate and smiles his beatific smile. "She didn't mean it." I am now officially six, in Fruit of the Loom instead of Victoria's Secret, and wobbling on my dress-up shoes.

Nancy deflates, and the brass nameplate sinks about three inches down her chest. A smile twitches on her face.

Steve pulls his wallet out of his back pocket and takes out four twenty-dollar bills. They are white with drywall dust. Right now, I'm thinking that those are good, honest bills. Nothing subprime or derivative. Dusty maybe, but backed by the full faith and credit of the U.S. Government.

Nancy flutters around him like a fat dove, a little dove in love. "Oh, accidents happen." She winks at me and blows a puff of drywall dust off the bills. "Such a nice man."

Of the three of us, I see that I am the shortest, the baby. Nancy flits away to make change, but he stops her with his James Bond voice. “Ma’am, we would also like this martini pitcher and this pinot noir set.” He says pee not noir set, and no one would know his James Bond voice but me, but all in all, he can’t be faulted. His “viognier” had been executed flawlessly, and that word takes a little practice, n’est-ce pas?

Steve gives her his puppy dog smile. “Gift wrapped.”

Nancy flutters her little dovey eyes at him.

“And another one of those big cups with the spikey things for the lady.” He leans down and whispers something in her ear.

I am suddenly adult size again. “Here, let me—” and I dig into my purse. “I know that my card is—” and I stomp my foot and launch a lipstick into the air, which Steve catches without moving an inch.

“It’s OK, baby. I got it.”

I snap my purse shut, which seems much larger and very grown up.

“Let’s get a bite to eat when Miss Nancy here gets us all taken care of. Some place kind of nice. Some place fancy. What say, baby?”

I nod, but if he tries to cut up my food into bite-size pieces, that’s it.

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Is “OK” even a word? If it’s not, what is OK an abbreviation for? So I look up OK, trying to make sense of how I feel when it comes through Steve’s lips. I don’t feel OK. OK—an abbreviation for “oll korrekt”—came about as part of an abbreviation fad in the 1830s (why these grown men could not spell remains unanswered) and first appeared in print in a Boston newspaper in 1839. Interestingly, this is the same year that “baby” began to be used as a term of

endearment. Coincidence? I don't think so. And note that, not long after, OK was a war cry used by Tammany hooligans to beat up their Whig opponents. I am not quite sure what to make of this fact but admit to frequently feeling pummeled.

“So whaddaya say, baby? OK?”

“OK.”

So I follow Steve with his large Macy's bag with martini and pee not noir sets elaborately tissue wrapped and boxed by Nancy, carrying my “big cup with the spikey things” in both hands, and we leave the mall for a bistro about half a block away. This is my idea. Steve's paint-spattered jeans and work boots do not lend themselves to “fancy.” However, bistro has a sophisticated ring to it. When I mention the name, Steve kisses the fingertips of his right hand, flings them away, and shouts “perfecto.” Which is actually Spanish for perfect, or a cigar that is tapered at both ends, but this is OK. His heart is in the right place.

Have I mentioned how we met?

When my former boyfriend, a lawyer, like Lewis—who also blew his nose on Irish linen—pulled me into my bedroom while murmuring (from Pepe Le Pew, Looney Tunes, c. 1950) “Hello, chérie” and “I am the daring young flea on a manly trapeze, no?” and “Come to me, my melon baby collie!” and “I am the peanut butter. You are the jelly. Come, let us make a sandwich of love” (I am embarrassed to admit that I once found this charming), he left a cigar burning in my kitchen. While we smoldered in looney love, my kitchen cabinets burned. After that, Warner Brothers cartoons left an ashy taste in my mouth.

So I called OK Contracting. Steve ripped out the cabinets, the countertops, the floor tile, and the lawyer boyfriend. He installed oak cabinets, granite countertops, stone floor tile, and himself. My new kitchen is amazing. Steve? Well, Steve is a work in progress.

In the bistro, we open our menus. Wonderful salads are on the menu: organic lettuces with goat cheese and champagne vinaigrette, mixed greens with matchstick apples and shaved fennel. Steve slouches down in the banquette. Fancy does not equal filling.

I reach over his menu and point to the New York Steak with Smashed Potatoes—“You might like—“ and then the BBQ Pork Shoulder with Mac & Cheese—“or this.”

He takes my finger and kisses it, gazing at me with that beatific look on his face. “Baby, you know what I like.”

“About the ‘baby,’ Steve—“

He reaches under the table, pulls my crystal goblet from the box and tissue in the Macy’s bag, and sets it next to my water glass. Then he ducks under the table again, for a minute more this time, and puts another box on the table. He smiles, and I hold my breath. Please, nothing flammable, nothing breakable, nothing shiny. He opens it and lifts out a Waterford goblet, my goblet’s mate, with the same crystal studs. It’s big, but so is mine. We clink.

“—it’s OK.”