

Dinner with Joanna

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She's at least an hour late. I'd call it fashionably so if I was feeling generous, but tonight London's smokers have left the air around me acrid and biting, and it is *hot*, the kind of hot where if you lifted a hand to your ear and found it covered with melted pink brain matter, you'd do nothing but shrug and smirk. So I call her lateness selfish, rude, unladylike (each word muttered under my breath with increasing irritation) and therefore am suitably unpleasant when she finally swans in.

She's dressed in about seven different fabrics, a mish mash blur of red, yellow, green, glittering gold. Her makeup is gaudy - black knife-slashes across a pale moon face. She's finished the outfit off with a loose belt that could either be the height of fashion or pulled from a nearby gutter. I sink down into my seat.

"Darling!" She says, "Darling! How long has it *been*?" As if I didn't call. As if I didn't write. Naive of me, of course - *as if* I didn't know how this all turns out. Still, I hope she can feel my sigh.

"Can we order?" I ask, signalling a waiter.

"I can't stay long," She says, unnecessarily. "Apologies! I'd absolutely love to, but Paul agreed we'd go to the theatre later. We -" She sees my face, and exhales a laugh. "Darling! You'll understand it when you're older."

"I'm seventeen." I reply, and feel younger for having said it.

Joanna blinks. "Gosh! You're not."

There's no need for me to respond. I let the silence fester. She breaks first.

"How *is* being seventeen, anyhow? What a strange age it must be for you!"

This gives me pause - again.

"Being seventeen", I begin haltingly, "has been, I suppose, not unlike how it was for my mother, and her mother, and her mother before her. And then, of course, you. You must know this. It's *your* domino effect."

Joanna purses her lips. "How is Alison?" She asks, her tone airy and uninterested. My grandmother is well. She has been well for the last 50 years. If she's lucky she'll be well for the 50 after that. Joanna is *missing the point*.

I wait, but am met with nothing but a blank stare. My frustration grows.

"It's not like you were seventeen that long ago, is it?" I ask with faux sincerity. "1905, was it?" This earns me a cocked eyebrow and jutted jaw. Of course *that's* what hurts. "No. Not that long ago." She responds slowly. "But. I do not remember the opportunity to be so angry. I think I might have enjoyed it."

Heat collects in my chest. I look steadily forwards, am reminded that Joanna's nails are chewed to the quick. This was very funny to me about half an hour ago. We are both unmoving for a minute (what else do we know how to do?), and then she leans across the

table to point at something behind me.

Someone's set up an amateurish sort of craps table in the corner booth. One man is finishing drawing a chalk board on the table mat, whilst the others count chips and test roll dice. When I turn my gaze back to my own table, I am met with a pair of pale eager eyes. She opens her mouth, fish-like, to say something, but pauses. Then –

"I'm awfully good at craps, you know."

I run my tongue over the ridges of my teeth. Perfectly even - the gift of modern dental care. Eventually, I nod. "Mm, makes sense. I did hear it was popular here. Interesting to see it all set up like that, yeah?"

She rolls her eyes at me. "I'd like to *join*, if you don't mind terribly. Come with me. I know Marty - see, with that funny little black moustache - and he'd think it the most darling thing if you gave it a try."

My head begins to ache. I am suddenly, painfully tired. My bed seems like the height of luxury. I cannot imagine sitting there, surrounded by men who want nothing more to steal my money from me - but I've never seen Joanna look so flushed, so excited. "You go," I finally say. "I'll watch you have fun."

Joanna makes a disapproving clucking sound at the back of her throat, but stands up anyhow. My eyes are transfixed on the hemline of her dress, the way that it climbs and dips with an unevenness that only the clumsy fingers of an amateur could achieve. My thoughts flutter to Joanna, at home with the baby, her brown curls falling over her face as she slowly sows. Threading, rethreading, unthreading. I swallow. When she covers my hand with hers for a brief moment, I do not protest. She stares at me as if I am about to say something cutting. I could; I don't. Instead, I think of kindness.

Kindness would not be my soft tongue curling around the tendrils of Joanna's life and ripping it into pieces.

Kindness is the battered shillings she dropped onto the table to pay for the meal that I hardly tasted before I could protest.

Kindness is the silence in which I watch her walk off, sleek and silver and swaying as she steps, and how I offer nothing but a smile when she turns back to look.

Kindness is the way that I wait for my grandmother's grandmother to settle into the hasty club-room craps game and don't ask how hard she reckons those dice she's hurling across the table will hit me once I've returned back home.