

Eight⁸⁸ Guys for Coffee



Diane Solomon

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by
Diane Solomon

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Prologue

*I was born when you kissed me. I died when you left me.
I lived a few weeks while you loved me.*

~ Humphrey Bogart

“Somewhere after my third marriage, I sobered up... and realized I was gay.”

Excuse me?

On an unusually hot, even sweltering day in May, I was propped up against the deli counter of my local Stop and Shop. It felt good to bask in the cool air.

Stifling a grin, I glanced around and identified the source of this exceptional remark. An elderly, artistic-looking gentleman was squeezing a rather firm ball of Mozzarella cheese, sniffing it. He was with a friend, and yes, he too was male. His younger companion smiled at him and gave his older "friend's" arm a little chug. What is a chug? A sort of squeezy, comforting shake... a chug. As I headed home, air conditioner and Keith Urban blasting, I grinned. I was happy for them. Not so happy for the three women who had not been privy to their husband's predilections. Still, I know he meant well.

Tapping the remote on the car visor, I pulled into my garage and hopped out. Grabbing the groceries, I could hear the phone ringing inside the townhouse, but I knew in this heat I couldn't (or just damn well wouldn't) hurtle up the stairs to get it before the machine clicked on. Besides, anyone I wanted to talk to had my cell phone number.

Climbing up the stairs with more bags than I could easily carry (and hoping that bang against the stair rail was not bad news for the eggs), I heard a voice leaving a message. It was a woman, so it wasn't Kurt. Due home from Maryland in a couple of hours, I thought he might be letting me know where he was. He loathed the infamous New Jersey turnpike, but I'd given him the incentive to endure it: his favorite mushroom omelet with feta cheese for lunch.

I carefully put the bags down on the kitchen counter, peeked to see the eggs were still intact, and punched the voice message playback.

"Hi, Mr. Phillips, this is Stacey from Mahoney Movers. I sure hope the move went well for you. Uh, we have a little problem here, though. Could you give me a call as soon as possible, please? The credit card we have had on file for you for your storage costs is now not clearing for the move. It has expired and I need your new info. Please give me a call. Thanks. Bye now."

You know how when you hear something shocking, there can be a sort of time delay, where your brain rushes through all the denial statements, the "there must be some mistake" and the "what the hell is she talking about" responses, while the whole time there is a rush of knowing, of understanding, because you suddenly get it. You *get it*. It all suddenly comes

together. How distant he had been on the phone for each of the four days he had been down in Maryland seeing his folks and his grown kids. How he'd stayed two days longer than he originally told you he'd planned to stay. The fact that you'd seen a couple of his emails several months ago from a rental agency about a townhouse near his family in Fulton. But, when you asked him about it, he said he was looking for his son, who was too busy to look for himself. You had bought it. Hook, line, and stinker. Trusted that what he said was the truth. Why wouldn't it be? His son had been looking for a new place.

I grabbed the phone and redialed the last number.

"Stacey, please." This was in my best chirpy fashion, still praying there was some dreadful mistake. As I waited for her to pick up her extension, I felt the cold goose bumps come up on my arms. I don't keep the house that cool; it wasn't the AC. I nearly slammed down the phone, suddenly not wanting to know.

Absolutely... not wanting to know.

"Stacey Mahoney."

"Hi Stacey, Laura Phillips, here, do you remember me? You guys moved Kurt and me to Connecticut last year?"

"Hey, Laura, sure, nice to hear from you, how are you?"

"Great, thanks. I just got your message. Kurt won't be back for a couple of hours, can I help?"

She explained the problem, but asked very kindly again whether the move had gone well. I said that it had, and asked if she had the correct address there in front of her, for future correspondence with us.

I couldn't believe how clearly I was thinking, how friendly and efficient I was on the phone with this woman, who was the harbinger of complete disaster, of complete heartbreak. Who was about to give me information that would either settle my heart. Or break it.

I quickly scribbled down the address in Fulton, near Baltimore, that she gave me, and responded. Yes, of course, that was right. I couldn't let her know this was the first time I'd ever heard of it. Couldn't have dealt with questions.

Oh yes, we are settling in fine. What? No, doesn't look like any damage, thanks. Still smiling and operating in autopilot stupor, I managed to tell her I didn't have the updated credit card info on me, but Kurt would call her in a couple of hours.

With a thundering in my ears, I somehow got through the nice parting noises you are supposed to make, and hung up the phone.

Then slithered down to the floor, in a pile, right there on the kitchen floor.

I couldn't breathe.

He'd moved. We'd been married for seven years, and half our stuff had been in storage. We'd moved to Connecticut 18 months ago and had decided to rent while we looked for the right house to buy. But, he'd decided to move back to the Baltimore area, where he grew up, without talking it over with me. He'd looked for a house, signed a lease, and had all our stored furniture moved there. And hid it from me. Only a week ago, we'd driven all over Fairfield County looking at houses for sale. He was looking at houses with me in

Connecticut, while he had already signed a lease on a house for himself in Maryland.

I just sat there. I don't know how long. My handbag had spilled out all over the kitchen floor, and I stared at the little roll of Lifesavers, now lodged under the fridge. All I could get my brain to think was that I must collect those mints. They were Lifesavers, after all. Appropriate. The only other thing that registered was that the porcelain tile beneath my bare legs felt nice and cool. So nice and cool.

I sat there. Time didn't hold any meaning. Suddenly, something cold and wet hit my shoulder, and I jumped. I looked up to see that the frozen yogurt from a shopping bag had rolled out, fallen on its side, and the lid had come off. Now it was melting away sadly and dripping down on me. Organic vanilla frozen yogurt. Blop. Blop.

I heaved myself off the floor, suddenly an aged person, and stumbled into the living room, one leg completely asleep. Feeling as if I were peering at my surroundings through the wrong end of a telescope, I felt removed from everything, nothing looked right. I shivered and sank into the couch at the far end of the room and waited. I didn't think. I just waited.

The front door jiggled, keys turned, the door burst open, and I heard his voice.

"Hey beautiful, I'm home!"

"Hello..." I called out weakly, my heart pounding so hard I thought he'd hear it over my greeting.

"Hey, where are you?" He headed towards me, but stopped short. He must have seen my face.

Much later, when I looked in a mirror, I saw the different woman I had become in that horrid couple of hours. Haggard,

face streaked with tears and eye makeup, pale, eyes wide and shocked. A different face.

“Oh my God, are you OK?” He hurried towards me. I held up my hand to stop him, to keep him at a distance. I couldn’t bear for him to get near me.

“The movers called, Kurt. They need your new credit card info.”

He stared at me. There was a long, sickening silence. I felt as though I were viewing this sorry situation from outside of my own body. My spirit remained detached, protecting itself, disassociated from the pain of the woman in denial on that couch.

“Tell me the truth, Kurt, for God’s sake. Just tell me the truth.” I was cold. And still.

“How much do you know?”

This was his response?

"How much do I know? Seriously, Kurt, how much do I *know*?"

The moment snapped. I was thrust painfully and furiously to life. I dragged it out of him.

I’m not going to share all the gory details. He had moved out, in effect he had left me. Just like that. He was just back to try to figure out how to tell me. I cried, I wailed, and I screamed. The next three hours were full of “how dare you,” “how could you,” and “but we looked at all those houses last weekend...”

He said, at one point in this hell, "I'm so sorry, Laura, but I stayed two years longer than I wanted to..."

"Big of you. Get out."

He did.

I had to climb straight back into my car and drive to Massachusetts to take my mom to get her passport renewed, for her upcoming trip to see her sister in England. Because when the sky has fallen, your house burns down, or your heart is broken, you still have to go pick up your 76-year-old mother and take her to Boston to get her passport renewed.

Like nothing on earth had happened.

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Chapter 1

Back In the Saddle Again 🎵

or

The Man with the Minus Touch

*"If you kiss on the first date and it's not right,
then there will be no second date."*

~ Jennifer Lopez

Meeting a guy for coffee. Ok, here I go, I thought. I can do this. Having decided to dip my toe back into the endless pool of available men on online dating sites, I was therefore Back In The Game. Does it have to be a game?

It was warm, still summer-muggy, and good old I-95 was jammed, as usual. I guess you could say it was a parking lot more often than a freeway. Now mid-afternoon, I realized getting back to my place, north of Fairfield, at five or six o'clock would be a pig. The Merritt Parkway would be even worse; Kurt used to say he didn't know what Connecticut had done to God, but the Merritt Parkway was His retribution. I

hadn't thought about that when I suggested four o'clock at a coffee place in Stamford. Ah well, too late, now.

I was driving carefully, so as not to mess up my newly painted fingernails. I had taken pains to look great for this first trek out into the world again, and that certainly included drop-dead red fingernails. I'd curled my long dark hair just enough to give it that soft wave that looked natural. Like you woke up like that. Yeah, right. There was no way I'd open the window; even a little breeze would mess with the effort I'd made to look like I'd done nothing.

I was wearing my favorite pair of stretchy jeans with blingy sandals, a red knit tank top that was just snug enough, if you know what I mean. Casual, with just a soupçon of glamour and sexiness. (Bigger than a smidge and smaller than a bucket load. I had to look it up). You go for it, babe.

It had been a terrible few months. I could relate to that scene in *Something's Gotta Give* where Diane Keaton weeps and wails her heart out over Jack Nicolson. That was me. It just didn't seem as funny as it had in the movie. Not funny at all.

There were times when I just had to creep into the closet, sit under his remaining jackets and shirts, and hide, feeling like a little wounded animal. There were times when I woke in the middle of the night and wondered, for a very brief moment, what the grim feeling circling my solar plexus was. That strange there's-a-vulture-somewhere feeling. Then reality would hit. A physical punch in the stomach that literally knocked the breath out of me and left me doubled over and gasping.

And, the worst moment, I think, was when I had a dream about Kurt, where I was begging him, with all the strength of my being, not to leave me. Things you'd never do in your waking life are acted out in all their ferocious intensity in your dreams. You feel it, smell it, and visualize it in glorious Technicolor, with all sensation turned up to maximum power.

I managed to keep body and soul relatively together during this time. I worked at the clinic – I'm a naturopath – and fed my little velvety black cat, Pusskin. Most days, I even managed to keep one foot plodding in front of the other on my nightly walk/jog around my townhouse complex. I felt hollowed out inside. I was surprised that with the lightest breeze, I didn't just blow away.

It's funny, though, how the habits and routine of existence kick in to make the hours go by, food go down, smiles at strangers happen, just like you were fine, normal, part of the human family. But, I was removed. Part of me had died.

I spent three or four dreadful months crying, writing poetry or song lyrics, and trying to overcome denial, shock, and grief. Then, I hesitantly crept onto Match.com, some weird site called "Plenty of Fish," and a couple of other online dating sites.

My friend, Francesca, had been nudging me for several weeks to "get back on the horse," which felt to me more like an ass, and try it again. She wanted me to "be in the company of a nice man," as she put it. She wanted me to find someone who would be very, very good to me. Yeah, right. The problem with that notion? I couldn't believe there was any

male left on earth who would be good to me. I felt that all men were hateful, lying scumbags.

That having been said, there I was on my way to meet someone (poor guy) for a first cup of coffee. Was I ready for this? Well, hell, I figured you have to start somewhere. Some poor man had to be my first foray into the world of being “out there,” as it was so succinctly put in *When Harry Met Sally*.

The first man I was meeting was a gem distributor, Jim, was his name. (I kept thinking of him as Jim-Gem, to help me remember his name...). Attractive, if not handsome, we exchanged a couple of emails before he did the gentlemanly thing and gave me a phone number. We had a short chat on the phone, then picked a time to meet, and there I was, headed to meet him in a cute little coffee shop I knew of in Stamford.

I arrived before he did, and found a table next to the window. Checking my hair and lipstick in my compact, then playing with my phone to look busy, I glanced up surreptitiously from time to time to check who was coming through the door. I only waited a minute or two, then saw a man at the door who might be him. He was gazing around, for me, obviously. I raised my hand and he spotted me.

My first impression of Jim-Gem didn't knock my socks off, but something inside told me that after the hurt Kurt had caused, my socks were firmly and permanently glued to my feet.

My date turned out to be an average guy: average looks, average height, average weight, and rather average (read boring) personality. In fact, everything about him was average, except his ego, which was enormous. Especially

about his business. The man bought and sold jewels for crying out loud. Diamonds, rubies, emeralds... What's not to like about that? Bringing your work home, dear? Sure, hang it around my neck! I could feel my socks loosening a tiny bit... until he started to talk. And talk. And talk. Gems, facets, carets, blah blah blah. Zzzzzzz. If I wanted to yawn, I could have stayed home.

He could grind the Crown Jewels into a bag of dust with his voice alone.

I sat there. I realized this was not going to work. There was no “meeting of the minds.” No spark. In fact, I feared I was losing consciousness.

Oh, for a roll of duct tape.

Just in time, he altered the course of the conversation. What did he alter it to? A rigorous grilling, by him of me: what did I want, did I have kids, did I like kids, was I happy in this area, would I consider moving (he lived an hour away), was I a morning person? Was I night person? Did I have any moles that might be cancerous?

Did I say it was a conversation? For him, maybe. But, for me it felt a little like an interview. A *lot* like an interview. I guess it was, in some ways. He was looking for someone to fill the position of pandering to his ego.

I should have gone to the ladies room and climbed out the window.

I didn't.

Instead, I hung in there, thinking I must *not* judge so quickly or so harshly, and must give people a chance. After all, I was a sophisticated grown up. I even justified it to

myself that it was good to have an airing of desires, wishes, lifestyle comparisons, and such, so as not to waste time.

Nope. Sorry. This Jim could have been Diamond Jim Brady for all I cared. I wanted to go home, gather Pusskin onto my lap, get my feet up in my big leather chair, and stare at the tube.

I stole a glance at my watch. If I could wind this down, see this bozo in my rear view mirror, I could get home in time for *Grey's Anatomy* or curl up with a Nora Roberts novel. If I couldn't find any passion or romance in my own life, I'd damn well get some vicarious thrills there.

Just as I was preparing my leaving excuses, his son joined us, who had just completed some errands in town. Nice enough kid, about 17, who was polite but clearly not interested. He'd seen it all before. Dad doing his thing.

Jim-Gem helped me on with my jacket.

"So, Laura, where did you park, can we drive you to your car?"

"I'm a couple of blocks down, on a meter – that would be great, thanks."

He told me his car was right outside. It was raining lightly, and since I didn't think he and his son were the rapist-team type, I felt OK about accepting the short lift.

He helped me into his brand new, blue, late-model Mercedes sedan. Leather seats and a spacecraft dashboard. And ah, that new car smell. Comes in a can for the rest of us poor shmucks.

"Gorgeous," I said with enthusiasm.

"Just picked it up today," he replied. So proud he was, like a new dad.

He drove me to my little eight-year-old Honda CRV, where his son hopped out, having spied some friends of his on the sidewalk.

As I turned back towards him to say my thanks and good-byes, he suddenly grabbed me, and kissed me. Hard. He pushed his tongue into my mouth, which had only opened in complete shock. I didn't fight back; it all happened too quickly, and afterwards I remembered I didn't want to offend him by pulling away. What? Who the hell was offensive here? After his quick, hard, dipstick "kiss," he pulled back, and nodded briefly. For a second, I thought he was going to offer to check my tires and clean my windshield.

"Good," he said. "That works." Gee, I guess I passed inspection. Oh, yay me.

I politely (yes, I was still polite) said my good-byes, jumped out, hopped in my car and tore away as quickly as possible.

Future messages remained unanswered. I didn't feel I owed him anything at all.

Let him interview and tongue-check some other poor fool.

Gem distributor... oh well.

He turned out to be the man with the minus touch.

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Chapter 2

Back in the Cave

*"Think you're escaping and run into yourself.
Longest way round is the shortest way home."*

~ James Joyce

"Ok, that's me done, I'm not ready for this. Cave, here I come. I'm sure glad I didn't give that whack-doodle my phone number."

I asked Siri to phone Francesca, the very minute my car was headed away from the little coffee house. I just needed to talk with a sane person. And Francesca is extremely sane, very wise, and very loving. Lucky me.

Ever positive, she was encouraging.

"Ah, well, honey, there's always an idiot to get through – just bad luck you started with him. At least he was just boring, not scary, somehow... The tongue thing is a bit weird. Ewwww. But never mind. Don't let this discourage you. . Just make a date with someone else. Quickly – don't think about it too much, or else this will freak you out. I know you must have dozens of other men in your inbox."

"Oh, I don't know about that. I'm not feeling very confident... The whole dating thing – it seems so foreign. And I'm 45, now, not the young 29-year-old every guy seems to want to meet."

Her reply was emphatic. "Are you kidding me? Any man who sees your picture will fall all over himself to get to you. You're drop-dead gorgeous. Your problem is going to be beating them off."

"Oh, sweetie, you're so kind... But I really have to double up on the Pilates sessions. Oh, for the days when I was so young and in shape that I couldn't store a pencil under my butt cheek... It would fall right down. Ever tried that?"

"Uh, not lately," said Francesca, through her laughter.

"Well, somewhere around 35 or 40 that damned pencil began to just stay there," I said. "Held by the descending cheek. I don't want to be able to tuck one in there and have it still be there in a decade. Anyway, I guess I'll be content, as long as I don't get so fat that I can store a subway sandwich in there."

I realized I'd been distracted by our chit-chat, and had driven mindlessly off down a road I'd never been on before. I saw a bit late that I was facing away from I-95, and was heading north through the beautiful northern wilds of Stamford. A U-turn was not an easy option on this cramped back road. If I was in my VW beetle from years ago, I could have managed it. That little car turned on a dime. Geez, my CRV won't even turn on a buck and a quarter.

Ah well, I'll take the Merritt Parkway, I like it better anyway. To hell with what Kurt used to say about it...

Kurt... Come on, Laura, don't go there. Stop looking back. Just think of the lovely parkway. Even with rush hour traffic on it, the winding highway through the trees of Connecticut sure beat the truck-laden I-95 any day.

I set the GPS for home. To the cave.

"I just don't think I am ready for dating yet, Francesca."

"You'll never feel ready, you know. So, you may as well just keep going. And I can't stand to see you sit around and pine for Kurt. Damn it, he is not worth another second of your time or heart."

Her outrage brought a tremble to her voice when she mentioned Kurt. When I had told her that he wanted to come up to collect the rest of his stuff, she had seethed with rage.

"If it were me, I'd throw it all out on the front lawn and set fire to it, just in time for him to pull up and see the mighty blaze," she said. "I'll help you."

Francesca is Italian, feisty, not a self-worth issue in sight, and I love her dearly. We had met by accident, one of pure providence, as it happened. She lives near me, and on my walks, I was in awe of her gorgeous garden and conservatory full of plants, and I knew there was the possibility of a kindred spirit.

When we met, over the pruning of roses, I couldn't believe a woman could look that beautiful in old jeans, sweatshirt and pruning gloves. She looked like Natalie Wood; how great would that be? She exists in this life in a

perpetual state of glamour, style, and confidence. When I garden, I look like an old farmer.

We had lunch for six hours. We can talk forever and never run out of conversation. Both single, we had a great deal in common: we both loved plants, gardening, theater, and music. Also, neither of us had been fortunate enough to have children, this lifetime. In my case, this may have been just as well, as parenting is not for the meek. Watching my friends and family bring up kids, I wonder how on earth they do it. I admire and respect their courage.

Francesca and I became the kind of deep friends only women can achieve, connecting on so many levels: from Russian Sage in our gardens to the brand of tampons in our bathrooms, from our philosophy of cats to our yearning for God. We supported each other's decisions, no matter what.

We are both passionate, sensitive women, although I envy Francesca's practicality. I need to work on that.

We held onto each other and it helped. It really, really helped.

"Are you coming over tonight?" I asked. "My turn to cook."

"Looking forward to it – see you later, honey."

45 years old and I had to start over. I knew that one third of people over 40 are single, but that certainly didn't make it any easier for me. Just because there were plenty of other people in the same boat, this didn't make me feel any better about it. I get seasick terribly easily, like in a Jacuzzi tub – spare me from any kind of boat!

Being on my own was the last thing in the world I wanted – I didn't choose it. I thought I had found my place

at last, thought I'd found home. But, then, we had survived some trouble a couple of years earlier, when, after a nonsense fight of some sort, he had withdrawn his love, his affection, his touch. For months. I was terrified and lonely. But I thought we were past all that – it was at least two years ago! We had just been looking at houses, this past weekend, for goodness sake.

What an adept and callous liar. And a coward. He couldn't bring himself to talk to me about what he'd decided to do. About the unilateral decision, he'd made about *our* lives. No, he just spent six months looking for another place to live, sorted out with his firm to return to the home office, and slithered away without telling me.

I sighed, as I pulled into my garage. My coffee date had certainly been less than stellar. I was glad I had the evening with Francesca to look forward to.

She and I cooked for each other one night a week, so at least we would eat well that one evening. Health nut though I am, (uh, I mean, I am a naturopath, after all), I confess to eating a bowl of breakfast cereal some nights, or just a piece of toast and some yogurt. Or, occasionally I'd just boil up frozen peas. All by themselves. Just a big ole' bowl o' peas. Don't tell anyone – I loved it.

Mild, for an evening in September, we were out on the small wooden deck behind my townhouse. We were sucking up the last of the sensation of warm night air on our bare arms and legs before it became just a memory with the onslaught of the New England winter. Garlic grilled asparagus and roasted herb chicken, one of our standard dinners, was nothing but a spot of grease on each plate, and

she reached for her cigarettes. Although I worry about her smoking, I love her enough not to bug her about it. I'd delivered my spiel, once, months ago, and that was it. I would not nag.

"How goes it with Keith?" I asked. Having shared the story of my first dating encounter with Jim-Gem-Man, I'd bored myself all over again just telling the tale. Now, I was more than eager to change the subject.

Francesca was full to bursting about her new man. "It just gets better and better. I lived with William for all those years and loved him with all my heart. Now I just can't believe I could be this lucky to find love twice."

She had married young, to her dear William, and reveled in a wonderful marriage for 25 years. She devotedly cared for him the last three years of his life, as he died from a rare and devastating neurological disease. Now, at 49, she had been alone for a year and a half, and was deep into wondering what the hell the rest of her life was for. What it would bring. What she wanted. She didn't know, and it mortified her. Newly into a relationship with an incredibly interesting, vital, charismatic man, she didn't know where it fit in the scheme of things.

She didn't even have to battle the weird online dating scene. She met him through her work, and they "knew" the moment they laid eyes on each other. It gives me hope, although I only met sick people, as a naturopath, and 80% of them were women, at that. And, since practitioner/patient conversations often involved constipation or acne (throw in a little phlegm), you can see

that my work abides in the realm of the Non-Romantic. There's not a lot of room for, "Hey, ya wanna have dinner?"

However, the old-school way of meeting a man had worked out well for Francesca. She had created her own successful home-staging business, and a realtor colleague of hers had referred her to a homeowner who needed her services. The homeowner? It was Keith. A successful attorney in the area, and newly divorced, he was trying to sell his house in the terrible recession following the 2008 mess. He wanted someone to give it every advantage in the marketplace, and knew that a good home-stager does this.

Francesca and Keith took one look at each other and went to have dinner, ostensibly to talk about the way the house could best be presented. But, in actual fact, to learn all they could about each other and fall wildly in love. Amazing. He later told me he watched her walk up the driveway and he was "toast." That's the term he used. Toast! Totally done for. I love that an attorney considering a run for Congress could use the word "toast" where a woman is concerned.

"Is it as good as it was with William?" I enquired.

In the fading light, the tip of her cigarette glowed and crackled as she pulled in on it. I listened to the Peepers hollering away out in the woods, as if their lives depended on it. Maybe they did. Or, maybe they were just happily doing what Peepers do.

"It's different," she said after a few moments thought. "You know, I think every relationship is different because it is a different pairing. Two people bring such unique

qualities to a relationship, how could it be the same as any other?"

With that thought, she stubbed out her cigarette in the old planter full of sand she used as an ashtray when she was at my place, and headed off to the powder room.

I slapped a late season mosquito off my leg, and thought about what she said. I knew deep in my bones I could never love again...

But, I guess one of my flaws is that I tend to be an all-or-nothing person, kind of black or white. I keep reminding myself not to be this way, but have you noticed that reminding yourself doesn't change anything much?

I was suddenly a bit chilled, out there on the deck in the night air. I shivered.

Francesca returned at last. She'd been gone awhile and I was starting to wonder, when she appeared, pulling the patio slider door closed behind her. She was carrying a cup of English Breakfast tea for me (oh, bless her, I was just thinking how nice that would be) and the bottle of wine from the kitchen to top off her own glass.

"This wine is lovely. Oh, wait, it's too dark to read the label out here... What is it?" She savored a sip.

"Hmmm. Which one did I open? Was it the Chateau Wednesday?"

She did a mini double take, grinned and held the glass up in a toast to me. Then, she settled back in her chair and gazed away across the grounds, dimly lit now by the solar lamps scattered along the paths and driveways.

We were silent for a few moments, then she glanced at her watch.

"I should go home in a bit. The kitchen is a mess, can I help you clean up?"

"Not in a million years. And ruin this night? It's the vegetable roasting pan, it has to be soaked. What a mess that makes. Maybe we should be like the Russians. They don't eat vegetables... they just soak a cow in vodka."

Francesca chuckled.

She drained her glass and said, "I was thinking... Men just take so damn much looking after. You know, the other night, when Keith was there, he went to the fridge, stood there for five minutes, then called over his shoulder to me in the other room, 'Hey Fran, do we have any half-and-half?' (You know how I hate being called Fran. Why do I let him call me Fran?)" She shrugged. "Anyway," she continued, "I had to get up, come into the kitchen, look around him into the fridge, and there, right in front, was the half-and-half. 'Hey thanks, babe,' was his reply. Embarrassed he hadn't seen it? Apologetic I had gotten up and left what I was doing? Nah." She shook her head.

I chuckled. I couldn't believe it – I thought I was the only one who had experienced this.

"Oh my God, you too?" I asked. "With Kurt it was the mayonnaise. He'd asked me if there was any mayonnaise. Same story, it was always there, in the fridge, right in the front row. If it'd been a mountain lion, I'd be a widow, instead of a soon-to-be divorcee."

Francesca laughed, then I laughed, then she laughed at my laugh, and then I breathed in wrong and nearly choked. But we couldn't stop. Once you start laughing, even mildly

amusing things seem hilarious. Which is the seed from which "You had to be there" stems.

We wiped our eyes and recovered ourselves. The night was just so special, and warm, and I could hear the little stream behind the deck burbling away, merrily. The last of the crickets and those Peepers, again, noisy in the night, were desperately hoping to extend the warm weather, just a little longer. Weren't we all?

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