

THE FRIENDS OF ROGER

The weekend after I was jailed as a terrorist Roger got up a small dinner party to celebrate my release. We were six. Besides Roger and myself there were the Jakobys — Sofka and her husband James — and Bill. Bill's companion had moved out a year before, transferred by the government to the Middle East where his proclivities were a daily threat to his life, so Bill had brought along a friend whom no one knew, perhaps not even Bill. Somehow this fellow, a lanky shy man, never got introduced, so that as the evening went on and it became more and more awkward to find out what his name was, various subterfuges had to be adopted and he began to be addressed mostly in the third person as "B.F." for Bill's Friend, or not addressed at all.

James had recently married, and Sofka had brought with her a child, an ungendered infant which tonight they left with a sitter. Because of this baby, we had seen very little of James in recent months. Roger and James secured a corner on the sofa by the open window where, barricaded by pillows, they could talk about the continuing failure of James's film scripts to get noticed, a subject now thoroughly entangled with James's reluctant fatherhood.

I was left to set the table. There was very little to do, actually. Pour wine. A lasagna was finishing in the oven, there was a salad waiting to be dressed at table, garlic bread to be toasted. Soft evening air fragrant with blue gum breathed in, an odor which would always evoke California for me since so many of the highway rest stops on the border are planted with gum trees. Outside I heard the occasional clicking of heels on the sidewalk, shoes belonging to one or another of the sleek professional women who were most of the resi-

dents here.

Sofka was talking to Bill, leaving to me the lugubrious BF. We were of a height, BF the pudgier by twenty pounds or so. His skin had the sheen and color of an unbaked pie shell. We had made small talk for some minutes when I noticed BF's empty wine glass — in fact, it seemed never to have been filled. I found a bottle of red for him. This loosened tongues and BF, who was mysteriously well-informed about everyone, asked after my being clapped into jail.

Nothing will come of it, I suppose? Quietly forgotten. Unless you want to sue?

God no, I said. You might as well have some incurable disease. You'd never be done with that.

Mm. BF swirled the wine around his glass, tipped it to one side and the other, gestures reminiscent of Roger's muttering with his hands. I glanced across the room. James was being intense, twisting up a corner of the orange pillow.

You aren't aggrieved? BF asked. His manner was a bit antique, as if he had learned English from a book.

Damned angry, yes, I acknowledged. But I'll soon swallow that. It's their karma.

Mm. Not as if you were wearing a turban or something. A caftan. You don't even look Arabic.

BF made a gesture about his face, perhaps indicating a beard or something else shiekly, difficult to imagine on his Mandarin features.

Pakistani, I said. Third generation. Fresno.

I turned to fetch the lasagna.

Can I help? BF offered.

Just pop that garlic bread into the broiler, will you, after I get this out?

I glanced again, resentfully, at Roger and concluded he needed to be rescued. Do you want to do the salad? I called, and yes, Roger hastened to do it. We all found chairs, sorting ourselves back into couples, with Roger and I at the head and

foot. James had contrived to get the corner on Roger's left, which put me between Sofka and Bill.

Bill and Sofka were not well matched, Bill being mournful and cynical while she was always bright and full of unwanted advice. Against Bill her coloring looked fluorescent. I had as yet discovered little about her, enough only to doubt her public effervescence. She claimed to be a student of Heidegger.

The conversation at dinner was nothing much. There was an undertext of complaint. At Roger's end James was starting in again to whine about recent movies, while BF, opposite him on Roger's right, ate in silence, taking small fastidious bites between sips of wine, dabbing at his mouth and fingers with the napkin. Everyone was more or less aggrieved by some deprivation or other. Working that into the conversation was like putting english on a bowling ball after you've thrown it. Still, we were becoming merry. James brought out a bottle of sherry as companion to his earlier house gift, and Roger presented a dessert of cannoli from the Italian pastry shop downtown. There was an exchange of funny stories on the theme of disastrous misunderstanding. But the evening was ruined by someone's turning on the television to find out the weather forecast.

On the news was a story about another hostage in Iraq threatened with beheading by a group of masked bandits. A picture came on, showing the shackled and sweating miscreant kneeling between four men with covered faces wearing bandoliers and carrying automatic rifles. Everyone stared.

My god! Bill screamed. It's Harris!

Bill's chair fell over backward, knocking down a lamp, and Bill himself, feet entangled, smashed onto the table, dragging half its materiel with him to the floor. Thrashing about there among the food and broken glass, trying to get up but knotted into the tablecloth and hindered by the others' useless help, shouting out the name of Harris all the while, Bill

was gradually calmed and laid out on the sofa. It didn't help that he had drunk quite a lot of wine. His skin was flushed, bringing out the freckles and making his reddish hair darker. Harris, it came out after a few days, was a person known to Bill through his meditation group. *Known to* was however regarded as inadequate. Harris had disappeared one day with no explanation. Bill had asked around, but no one was forthcoming. Now it seemed that Harris had been intending to help out with the reconstruction of Iraq somehow, a rather feckless desire since he had no useful skills for the purpose. In days to come Bill would email friends in various embassies who he knew through his companion, but there was little to be done. The friends were sympathetic in an emoticon way. All were powerless. The bandits wanted some vague, impossible thing, and when it was not forthcoming they made no further demands and poor Harris faded out of memory, neither dead nor still alive.