

Between Camelots

WHEN PAUL got to the house, the first thing he did was stand in the driveway to listen to the sounds of the barbecue going on in the backyard. He heard a large number of voices coming from there, more than a couple of conversations, all concentrated off in the near distance, all out of sight. He had passed other such focal points of sound along the way; there were probably many barbecues tonight. He stood still and listened in.

Then Marianna appeared from the back carrying a garbage bag to leave by the garage, and as soon as she saw Paul there, she was already talking, and talking about what he was thinking about. "Wow—hi! You're here! Did you walk the whole way? Well. Julie's not here yet," she said, her long blond hair bobbing like party streamers around her grinning, freckled face, "but I'm pretty sure she's coming. Did you bring veggie burgers? We don't have any. But we've got beer—I'll show you around back." They went around back.

Paul and Marianna both worked downtown at the Governor's Institute for Health Research. She was in public relations, and he was in statistical analysis. He was there to do things like explore

the relationships between life crises, personality traits, poverty, and sick days. They had very different lives, he supposed. Sometimes she stood at the door to his office, between meetings, and told him about the people she'd met over the weekend. They were daunting in their quantity and in their diversity. A married Brazilian couple getting twin doctorates in communicative disorders, a young rabbi with raffle tickets, a little girl with an enormous vocabulary and a broken nose, the firemen sitting around on Palance Street. Paul heard these stories and wanted to love Marianna.

Out back, her husband Ben greeted him warmly. He held a bock beer as though his hand had always been meant to hold a beer, and he clapped Paul on the shoulder. "Good to see you again," he said. His arm swept wide to indicate the small backyard, the people already clustered comfortably within it. "Welcome to the estate."

"It smells like the grill's almost ready," Paul said. Ben told him it would be a while.

Paul took his veggie burgers inside to the freezer and found the beer. Nothing had changed since seventh-grade school dances, he realized—he had to keep his hands busy with refreshments so as not to feel like an idiot.

Their kitchen, a little thing split into pieces by aggressive counters, smelled like dried herbs and spices. He saw all the things they had that only married people have—a four-slot toaster, a waffle iron, glasses that matched plates. In the refrigerator he noticed a whole head of lettuce, too enormous for any one person alone.

Through the door, he again heard the voices of people he didn't know. Familiar people sound unique, distinct, he thought,

because you hear them with more parts of you. Unfamiliar people, though, make noises like foreign languages.

He stepped outside again, expecting Ben to congratulate him on finding the beer, but he and Marianna were holding court by the grill, telling another couple about the tentless camping vacation they'd just taken. Paul looked around for an open conversation. Then he moved toward the food instead. He dug deeply into the jalapeño cheese dip with blue corn chips. Meanwhile, he concentrated until his facial muscles, he hoped, gave off the impression that he was casual and approachable.

Lately he'd been afraid of these kinds of gatherings, but here he was. He was mostly here because of this Julie, a woman Marianna had just met at a wedding in town. The Monday after, Marianna, the only one of Paul's acquaintances who still found something remarkable in his loneliness, described Julie to him from his office door. "She's striking," she said, "absolutely striking. I mean, she's enormously tall. Imposing, you know? She's an imposing presence."

Paul frowned. "She sounds scary," he said.

"No, no. I said she's striking—Julie has a really interesting face."

Paul imagined her lumbering into Marianna's backyard, sweeping aside with leglike arms the high tree branches that blocked her path. But it would have to, at the very least, he hoped, provide a story for his journal later on, when he started his nightly routine over again. Masturbation, sighing journal entries, and then to bed—a bed that had gone unshared so long that he'd developed an elaborate system of arranging his four pillows for maximum comfort, outside of which he could hardly fall asleep.

A young man with a shaved head now walked up to the table with his eyes locked intensely on the chips. As a side gesture, he introduced himself to Paul, extending his right hand across his white Speed Racer T-shirt to be shaken. "Max," he said, articulating the name exaggeratedly, showing a flash of teeth.

Paul introduced himself, looked down at the browning grass, and then, with a conscious effort, asked Max whether he was a friend of Marianna's.

"No. I just snuck in off the street," he smirked.

Paul didn't know what to say. "That dip is homemade, I think," he offered.

Max looked over and ran a hand over his stubbled scalp, pursing his lips. "That's not always a good thing." He seemed hesitant to continue, but then he did, absently. "So. What's your story? Who do you know here?"

"Marianna," Paul said. She was still by the grill, and the rest of the guests, all young professional types with glasses, moved around the little backyard as though affected by her gravity—even people walking at a distance from her took curving paths to acknowledge their hostess. She occasionally poked the coals with a stick, and Ben rubbed the small of her back. Paul wished she'd catch his eye and draw him in.

"It's an interesting crowd of folks," Max said. "You should meet them."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Well, actually in fact I don't have any opinion about them at all. I'm just talking. Maybe you like these kinds of people—I don't keep a lot of friends, myself," he continued.

"What? You don't?" Paul asked, sneaking a chip from the bowl in front of Max.

"I gave up on it. One too many Camelots."

"Camelots?" Paul said, burrowing into the cheese dip again. A couple of new people appeared in the backyard, but none of them looked like they could be this Julie.

"Oh, yes," Max said, thoughtful. "My teen years and my early twenties were all about going from Camelot to Camelot. These large groups of friends get together, and everybody loves everybody, and then somebody sleeps with the wrong somebody or everybody moves somewhere else, and the whole thing collapses again. Up and down, up and down, up and down. Who can put up with that? Do you know what I mean?"

"Why's it so bad?"

"It's unstable," Max said, punctuating his point with his finger in the air. "More instability in an unnecessarily chaotic world. I'm for stability."

Paul tried to decide if he agreed with this conceptualization of things, thinking about his own life. He'd had a circle of friends in high school that did everything together, including a lot of drinking on rocky beaches, which almost killed him one night. He had lost track of them through college. Then he'd had a utopian relationship with a botany major his senior year, until she realized how wrong it had all been from the start. And it's true—he'd slept with the wrong people in graduate school, starting up the newest phase of desertification in his social life. "But maybe you didn't really break the cycle after all," he said. "How do you know you're not just *between* Camelots now?"

Max looked at him as though astounded. "Because of a particular thing called *free will*," he said. "I have *chosen* to be *done* with that kind of life. For example, I'll tell you what—here we are, getting along, but at the end of this conversation, I'm not going to

give you my phone number or my e-mail address, or anything, and I won't take anything from you. Simple."

"Huh," Paul said.

"So—as advertised, I'm going to take off," Max said, grabbing an enormous handful of chips. He winked and wandered off toward another group of people, leaving Paul alone. But Marianna appeared at his side suddenly, tapping him on the back.

"Entertaining yourself?" she asked. "The grill's almost ready, so grab those veggie burgers. You want another beer? How are you doing?"

Paul's energy always flagged around Marianna, as though there was only enough room for a limited amount of enthusiasm in any given place. "Great—thanks for inviting me."

"Ah, ah, I see—well, don't worry. I'm sure Julie will be here soon. She was just going to take a nap before she came over." Julie apparently worked as a legislative editor—long hours—and so apparently took naps.

Marianna ushered him into the house, her arm across his shoulders all the way. At times like this, he really wanted to love her, the way he'd wanted and failed to love everybody since the botany major. When he looked at trees, he imagined the botany major's hair and clothes shifting in unsettled air. But even that felt like nothing.

"You're going to love Julie," Marianna said, sitting on the counter and watching as Paul retrieved his food from the freezer. "That was some wedding, the one where I met her. Massive. Everybody's getting married, huh? I guess you'll be next."

"I haven't even met her yet," he said.

"I mean to whoever. It seems like everybody's almost there, approaching *final destination*."

"Whoa—that sounds kind of like death."

"No, no," she said, shaking her curls. "It's just where you can settle in, you know, and relax."

"Like Camelot," Paul said, testing it.

She jumped off the counter with energy, as though about to tousle his hair. "Camelot was destroyed, wasn't it? And they had to start over?" she said. "I'm talking about the *final* destination."

Outside, he put a couple of patties on the grill, trying to keep them separate from the meat without seeming like he cared. Ben clapped him on the back once, and said he'd never tried those things, but would have to someday.

"I have extras," Paul suggested.

"Not today, buddy," Ben said.

The smell of meat curled up among the charcoal smoke, and Paul had to admit to himself that it made his mouth water a little. He had not given up meat out of disgust or disinterest. So he stepped back a pace or two and ended up among a few people who worked with Ben at the magazine. They discussed intricate recipes for cold soups, thin cream sauces, and homemade polenta, each person looking at one another's hands as they pantomimed mincing, stirring, and the shape of exotic vegetables.

Paul found himself able to maintain his very minor role in the conversation with half his attention, and simultaneously tried to put a face to Julie, one less monstrous and more calm than the one inspired by Marianna's description. He did what he had often done, almost ritually, when he thought about a woman he had just met or was about to meet—he imagined himself ballroom dancing with her, both of them so tall (which made Julie easy to picture already, since supposedly she actually *was* tall), waltzing slowly but dramatically in formal clothes across a finished wooden

floor. As they breathed one another in, their eyes went wide with excitement and recognition.

On the opposite end of things from that scene was his actual life. The night before, Paul had spent hours crawling through the Internet, looking for pornographic stories. Stories, not photos, because photos meant a victim, but stories could exist without real women. He'd started out looking at love stories by little kids at school sites—so innocent!—but then found himself gravitating toward sites by adults instead, and then pornography, collections of tall tales rife with misspellings, distended body parts, and hurried grammar.

Unexpectedly, they came in categories, categories that were fairly consistent across Web sites—fetishes, teenagers' first times, lesbians, and dozens and dozens about cheating wives. Those stories seemed to be in endless supply. Something fascinated people about unfaithful wives, and, in fact, it fascinated Paul, too. Perhaps the narrators, cuckolds masturbating from their hiding places, were impressive because they'd made desperation somehow satisfying. Paul came into a T-shirt, and went to bed with only sorrow left over.

He looked over at Marianna, whom he did not love, in the context of those Web sites. Perhaps Ben imagined her cheating when he fantasized. Maybe they even discussed it. Here, though, Ben's hand never left Marianna's back. Paul shook his head—he had been so long by himself he no longer knew the difference between ballroom dancing, pornography, and marriage. He wondered if that Max wasn't onto something.

He had not yet really met anyone else at the party by the time his dinner was ready—names washed over him, as his presumably

did over others. Paul waited for Julie to show up, as though waiting for a train carrying an old friend, though she wasn't, of course. What else had Marianna told him about her? He got drunk as he thought about it. The mosquitoes found the barbecue and seemed to especially like the people working for the magazine, and Paul managed to feel some jealousy about even that. Twilight began, barely, to settle.

At last he returned to the cheese dip and the chips. The rhythm of it blended well with his mental image of ballroom dancing, and he became lost in reverie. Just then, Max reappeared, rubbing his scalp.

"Oh—I'd lost track of you," Paul said.

"Mm. Yes. I leave no tracks. Have you made any friends yet?"

"Not really," he said. Then he decided to confess something, as though via a sudden intimacy he could trap Max into friendship. "I'm waiting for this woman to show up. Marianna's setting me up."

"Setting you up? Isn't *that* a nice expression?" he said. "What's she supposed to be like?"

"Well, I guess big. Big, I was told, and imposing, and striking."

"Hm." His lips curled out in thought. "It sounds like your hostess is setting you up, all right."

"No, no—she's great, I think. Marianna raves about her. I'm looking forward to it. I haven't had a date in practically a year," he added in another burst.

"Ah ha!" Max shot a finger in the air. "You're doing the same thing you accused *me* of. You're just *between* things, aren't you? Take my advice—break the cycle."

"Huh."

"Anyway, I'm going," Max said. They shook hands again.

Marianna appeared at Paul's side. "Hey, hey," she said.

"Any word from Julie?" he asked. If he didn't meet her tonight, he might just end up at home gorging on unfaithful wives and feeling ashamed about it later. His picture of Julie now was elegant, and he'd had enough to drink that he would be fearless talking to her.

"Well. I'm not really sure," Marianna said, wrinkling her face into an apology. "You know what? She said if her nap went long she might not come, actually. I didn't want to tell you, but I guess she might just stay in bed."

"Oh," Paul said, concentrating on his facial muscles, not wanting to convey anything emotional.

Later, Paul wandered from group to group listlessly. Julie never did show up. Max, too, seemed to have left, and Paul had wanted to catch up with him. He had been thinking about Max, actually, ever since admitting all that stuff to him. On some level, he wanted the friendship he had bought with those words, or, if not, he wanted his words back.

In the end, Marianna walked Paul around front and gave him a hug for reassurance. "You'll meet another time. She's excited about it, I swear."

"Sure. Hey, is that guy Max your friend or Ben's?"

"Who?"

"The bald guy with the Speed Racer T-shirt," he said.

"The bald guy? Oh, you talked to him, too? Yeah, neither of us knows him—nobody does. He talked to a bunch of people, and everybody thought somebody else knew him. He just snuck in off the street and ate some of the food, I guess. Funny, huh?"

"Funny," Paul said, and they hugged again before he left, his face buried in her bouncy hair.

The smell of other grills filled the street, and Paul walked slowly at first to appreciate them.

Halfway down the block he saw a group standing in a driveway, talking loudly and drinking under artificial lights. He stopped completely to watch. They stood together, all turned inward as though the grill radiated a powerful magnetism. The driveway gave them borders, and none looked out toward the street.

And then he saw a bald man move among them, and out toward the edges, where he grabbed a handful of pretzels. Nobody saw him, and Paul started in that direction. But then Max had vanished again, disappearing behind some people, off toward other plumes of charcoal smoke, billowing up into the air.