

CRITICISE AFTER DINNER

“I must say Kate, those vegetables, with the lemon zest on top – they’re so aesthetically pleasing in that dish.”

Kate turned to look at it with a fixed smile, avoiding Edith’s eye.

“Almost too good to disturb—”

“No, no, please do. Norrie would you dish Edith out some broccoli?” She gestured towards his end of the table. Edith one side of him, Mike on the other.

“Of course.”

Once he had picked up the dish and thoroughly disturbed the thin yellow shavings she was able to turn back to Edith, though still unsure why the comment had annoyed her so much. She herself had chosen the dish for that same reason. It had a deep and creamy blue glaze that always made her think of Greece, or Morocco, or some other sunny place they had never been. Yet now Edith had pointed it out it seemed a bit silly – coordinating your food with your crockery. When had she started doing that? Since the house? Earlier maybe. She’d always had an eye for colour and taken pleasure in the little things. Why shouldn’t Edith appreciate them too?

“And is that toasted pine nuts in there?” Mike thrust his nose towards his plate, although Norrie hadn’t yet finished spooning the long stalks onto it. She caught his eye for a moment and noted the amusement.

“Yes it is.”

“Marvellous. I love a pine nut, so I do. In fact, I was just complaining the other day that our supermarket only does the small packets now. They used to do a bigger one – must have been about two hundred and fifty grams?” He looked at Edith. “Something like that.”

“Oh at least...”

“Two fifty – two seven five – now they only have the smaller ones.” He glanced back to Kate and smiled out the side of his mouth. “First world problems eh.”

As she lifted her wine glass to her lips, she noticed Norrie, opposite her, moving in unison. Almost like a drinking game. She had only really taken a sip to fill her mouth up and stop any words from spilling out. Still she found herself saying:

“However will you manage?”

Mike laughed.

“That’s them forced you onto a two-bag habit now,” said Norrie. “Sly dogs.”

Edith smiled at him. She had a nice smile. Nice teeth.

“Of course,” Mike carried on, “it’s not about the money. It’s the packaging that bothers me really. There’s already too much of it.”

Kate wondered if Edith was attracted to Norrie, if she was just that minute thinking about what it was like to live with him – sleep with him; funny how she still thought these things when she watched him in the company of others.

“Kate dumps hers in the supermarket before she leaves,” she heard him say.

“Do you Kate?”

“That’s very bold of you.”

Why had he told them that? She had only done it once, and it wasn’t as if it was just her.

“It was a party—“

“That’s the beauty of the veg box though Mike. Cuts down on a lot of that.”

“Yes, yes,” Edith raised a hand, “but can anyone really get through that much beetroot?”

They all laughed. “Not that there’s anything wrong with beetroot,” she added, noticing it on her plate.

Kate waved the comment away as if it were a fly.

"I wouldn't like not being able to choose what you get," Edith carried on. "I'm not that inventive in the kitchen." She looked to Mike as if for corroboration of this, but he was busy telling Norrie – yes, yes you must give me the details. I'll put an order in this week. He was leaning forward in his seat, hands thrust automatically into his pockets, so he looked like he might tip himself off balance. Ready. How much did you say it was? Ready – however much. Ready to tip nose first into the broccoli.

"It's quite liberating in a way," she heard herself say.

"What, just taking what you're given?" Edith didn't look convinced.

"Yes."

"Like rationing."

"Well not really like rationing." She paused. "But I suppose in a way, in that you don't have to think about all the endless options all of the time. They can get a bit much..."

"Vegetables?"

"Not just vegetables." She looked down at the multi-coloured arrangement on her plate.

"Everything." Nobody was listening to her now. One, two, three, four, five. Five of their five a day on there – and she hadn't even been trying. Must have had a lot of the veg box to use up. Oh well, maybe Edith was right about that too. She let her fork hover noncommittally.

"Not hungry Kate?"

She hadn't noticed Mike watching her.

"It's always the way. The more time I spend cooking something the less inclined I feel to eat it."

"Ah, there's something in that – modern man's alienation from his own productivity."

"Modern woman," Edith pointed her knife at him.

“Much of a muchness.” He leaned back in his chair. “Haven’t you heard? It turns out Arthur *is* Martha. We’re all fluid these days. More fluids, but less sex.” He gave a sudden laugh that shook him so his wine threatened the side of the glass.

Her eyes again met Norrie’s, and she wondered when they had become united more by what they didn’t say than what they did.

It was her who had suggested having them over for dinner. Norrie had said that Mike had been asking for her; so maybe then it had really been Norrie who had suggested it. Or at least planted the seed. Well, if it would help him, if it would be good for his work, then why shouldn’t they invite Mike for dinner. Mike knew people who knew people. And Norrie had assured her she would like Edith – you’ll get on, she’s into the same sort of stuff. Was that what had annoyed her then?

“Can I get anyone another drink?” She cast a hopeful look round.

“I’m forgetting you pair aren’t married.” Mike was pointing a finger at her while Edith raised her eyebrows and oooohed.

“That’s right.” How exactly had they got on to that?

Mike grinned, “I expect living in sin is more exciting.”

She felt herself stiffen. “I don’t know that it makes much difference.”

“Oh I’m not so sure...” Edith looked from her, to Norrie, and back again – and what? Considered their sex life? Probably not. They probably weren’t that interesting. “...though I know marriage isn’t for everyone.”

Edith made it sound like an acquired taste. Select. Like stinky tofu, or grammar school – one of the two. When really any old pair could do it if they felt that way inclined. It was just a matter of choice.

“It’s just a matter of choice,” she heard herself saying. And they looked at her, waiting. Expecting it. She shrugged. “So... fuck the patriarchy and all that.”

Mike and Edith laughed and took a drink.

“I agree of course.” Norrie was leaning both elbows on the table, hands clasped. “We don’t want to own each other,” he tilted his head towards Edith as he spoke. “All property is theft.” And she in turn leaned back with a wry smile.

Kate and Mike sipped their wine simultaneously.

It wasn’t the first time she’d heard Norrie say that. In fact she’d used it herself on several occasions. They were so very clever. Still...

“There’s probably some data available on it somewhere,” Mike said. “Who’s doing it more – I’d put money on the unmarrieds.”

“Really?” She sat herself up straighter. “You really think an essentially administrative process can have that much of an impact?”

“Absolutely.”

“Surely there are other factors, like how long they’ve been together...whether they have kids...”

Mike nodded and closed his eyes in a slow blink of agreement. “But those factors aside, a married couple that’s been together for the same amount of time as an unmarried couple is probably having less sex.” He paused. “We’ve been married for three years now, but we’ve been together for six.” He paused again.

Six years – same as her and Norrie. She tried not to look over at him because bugger that for a bloody competition. Then she heard him say:

“Same as us.”

And they were all quiet for a moment. Then she did look at Norrie and could see that the bastard was quietly laughing. She tried not to smile.

“What about that top up?” She poured without waiting for a response. Although maybe that was the last thing they needed. Had that been Mike having a go at Edith? She had been looking at Edith when he’d said it, but only because she hadn’t wanted to look at either of the men. It wasn’t that she’d particularly had Edith’s back. Should she have though? How *was* Edith’s back? Fine, apparently. She was smiling and letting her shoulders curve up, which gave everything she said a confidential air – though it might not be anything important at all. Mike probably just didn’t like the idea that he was missing out on something, and he would always have to miss out on being either married or unmarried. She wasn’t quite ready to accept that he might have a point, though thinking about it, any act formally sanctioned with pomp and ceremony, by everyone from your great aunt to the local vicar, well, it was bound to become less exciting. She smiled to herself. She looked at Norrie.

“I’ve got a low risk and a high risk,” Mike was saying.

“Is there such a thing as low risk these days?” Nobody answered Edith. Kate had been wondering the exact opposite.

Mike carried on talking to Norrie.

“I’m sure your company is probably using the same type of thing for pensions.”

“Christ, don’t tell Kate. It’s bad enough we’ve got the mortgage now – she’s not entirely convinced we shouldn’t be taken out and shot.”

They laughed.

“But you know,” Mike glanced in her direction, “even Marx dabbled in the stock market in his later years—“

“Steady now,” Norrie held a hand up. “Less of the ‘later years’ chat please.”

Kate smiled. Edith smiled. He still looked good for his age. He still had fair hair that fell over his eyes, so he had to push it to one side countless times in any given day.

“I’m just saying,” said Mike, “age changes things. I don’t think we need to be too hard on ourselves.”

“But we shouldn’t be too easy on ourselves either.” Kate’s voice sounded louder than she’d intended, but having started she felt compelled to continue likewise. “I mean at least Marx contributed to society in other ways; what are any of us actually doing?”

The raised end of the question reverberated around the table, around the circle of half-empty glasses, and steel utensils they had put down long ago. There was a pause as they all looked at each other and she felt each set of narrow eyes receding, until the table itself grew grotesque and huge, out of all proportion. There was no escaping the fact that each of them was on a different side. Stranded. With just a connecting trail of bloody drips. A series of dark greasy smudges where the fat runneth over. And the silence going on, longer and further, until it collected itself to press down and ring in her ears. A bright red ringing that made her want to close her eyes. And then Mike laughed, then everyone else laughed.

Mike managed to point his finger at them all simultaneously, whilst holding his glass in the same hand, saying, “if we can make it through life without doing too much harm – now that’s the thing.”

Life-denying. Life-denying! She wanted to cry out. But really the more she thought about it the more it appeared to be true – the only thing. And nothing passive about it either. It was a struggle even just to know how far away you were from neutral. So Mike was right about that, Edith was right about the broccoli. Mike was right about sex, Edith was right about beetroot. She may as well accept it all. And drink up. The wine felt thick in her mouth; she wondered if they could see it – her blood stained teeth.

She tried to make herself agreeable for the rest of the evening.

When they'd gone she scraped the plates into the compost bin and Norrie made a great show of rolling up his shirtsleeves.

"Do you think he was having a go at Edith?" she asked him, "all that chat about not getting any."

"Oh, I don't know." He plunged his hands into the frothing sink. "I'm not sure he really meant anything by it."

"Perhaps not – but then why say it."

"Mike's problem is that he can't not."

"Indeed. And just because you say 'first world problems' at the end of everything doesn't mean you're not a twat."

When he didn't say anything she turned to look at him and saw that the corner of his mouth drawing up. He agreed with her, of course. Even if he didn't say so out loud.

"It's like when people say 'I don't mean to be rude...'" she continued. "Or, no offence but..."

"I'm not racist, but..."

"I'm not a twat, but..."

"...but I do have a lot of first world problems."

"Lord it's hard." She stacked the dirty plates on the counter next to him and watched his back as he leaned over the sink. His shoulders moving inside his shirt. She stepped closer and pressed her hand down the middle. More bone than muscle. She felt the long hard line of him, as he carried on washing the dishes.

When they'd finished she'd said they should leave the rest until morning. But he wanted to wipe the table, take out the recycling, maybe check some e-mails – I'll be up in a minute though.

"You're not going to start with work at this time of night surely?"

“The man wants what the man wants.” That was his joke. He was working for the man now.

“Screw the man.”

“Ah, the man wants that too.”

She climbed the stairs without switching the light on, though she had to when she got to the bathroom. That was the cue for the extractor fan to begin its low hum. She was tired. She'd drunk too much wine for a school night and would sleep poorly as a result. It was more annoying because it hadn't essentially felt worth it; the hours spent, but not particularly productive or enjoyable. Maybe Norrie had enjoyed himself. Hopefully he had got something out of it, though she couldn't remember hearing him talk to Mike much about the project. It was odd how his work was creeping further and further into their lives, just when she was beginning to wonder whether he even liked it at all. She wondered what would happen if either of them said that out loud.

She'd definitely drunk too much. She pulled down her clothes and sat lazily on the toilet, closing her eyes for a moment as the trickling sound echoed around the many ceramic surfaces. When she stood up to flush she noticed the bright pinkness in the bowl. Overdoing the beetroot again. She wondered if it was having the same effect on Mike and Edith, if they were discussing it back home – pissing themselves: we dined with our red friends last week – turned our piss totally pink. Piss poor really, all much too watered down. She pushed the button to flush. Just a half; important to conserve you know. She could have let it sit there all night, beetroot or no beetroot, but Norrie might've taken a bad turn.

When she went into the bedroom the moon was high in the sky. She took off all her clothes and lay on the bed without closing the curtains. She'd taken to sleeping with the curtains open. He had complained the first morning that it had woken him up too early. But it had

been so hot they needed every breath of air. That was one of the perks of living in the house, nobody could see into their window. She didn't miss having the flats opposite; rows of people going about their business. Watching telly. Sometimes she'd watched them watching telly, as the light turned their skin blue. An unreal blue hand reaching out for the remote, or the crisps, or down the front of the trousers.

Her bedsheets were glowing in the white night; crisp but not particularly cool. She stretched herself out and looked down, towards long pale thighs; and closer, where the shadows picked out the rise and fall of her ribs and breasts – a lunar looking landscape of monochrome peaks and valleys. She closed her eyes, but could still feel the glare. Perhaps she would need to close the curtains after all. Norrie could do it – if he ever came up. She would like to see him in this light, shining skin stretched over his long wiry body. Why didn't he come? She felt herself beginning to float up, up towards the moon; she knew it was impossible. But if she kept her eyes closed...

When she opened them the moon had gone and she felt cold all over. How long had she been sleeping? The chill shot from her spine up to her neck as she turned on the bed with its stretched out blank spaces – how long? It was unnecessarily big. She had told Norrie that at the time. Now the cold clasped her around the chest. How? A single slow shudder. How long had he not been there.