

Time's Up

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“IF YOU BLEACH THOSE TEETH any whiter,” I tell her, “we can read by them. That’s a 15-watt bulb in the lamp — hey, smile at my magazine?”

She grins. Christmas in Mexico was her idea and she will not let me spoil our first night here.

She opens her Margaret Atwood, arranges her pillows, and reaches up to switch off the light. Which means: *Planning to read tonight, Buster? Prepare to consume some crow.*

If I know her as well as I think I do, she is still grinning enormously beside me. When my eyes adjust to the pale light from the colonnade outside our room, I will see that she has her book propped open and is “reading” by the luminosity of her teeth, as I suggested.

What I don’t know, because at forty-whatever I still haven’t figured out some of the simplest things, is that every day with Dixie will become a story, a story I will tell not only to tease, but to remember.

JUST AFTER WE ARRIVED from the airport this afternoon, while she examined each hand-beaded jaguar head on a street-vendor’s cart, I surrendered to the blazing smile of a young man. Tooth-bleaching systems, I saw, had migrated south of the border. In white jeans that left little to my imagination, and a bright, short-sleeved Oaxacan shirt, Miguel

effortlessly signed me up to take a free “seminar cruise.” Even in the clutches of his smile I realized the cruise would be a timeshare pitch. *iNo obligación, amigo!*

And so, tomorrow morning Dixie and I will travel down the coast to mystical Yelapa. No road penetrates the jungle cliffs that protect the village. Yelapa is primitive Mexico barely an hour by boat from the movie stars’ homes of Puerto Vallarta — “By *fiesta* boat,” Miguel had me understand. “Margaritas free. Entertainment, amigo.”

Dixie approached carrying a crumpled bag that contained the fiery-colored jaguar head I would admire, forget about, and receive in April for my birthday. Miguel read the look that passed between us. “Your wife,” he said, “will love the trip.”

“Will I?” she asked. Their fluorescent teeth flashed brighter than the tropical sun and she took my arm. “Whatever my husband wants, he can have.”

Except, apparently, Miguel.

I didn’t bother glancing back. I knew whose walk Miguel followed with his eyes. She is more beautiful now, with her wavy hair turning silver, than in the frosted-lipstick prom queen pictures, or during her Annie Fannie period, in hot pants and halter tops. She carries her swimmer’s body with mature grace that will never turn matronly. And, although she long ago donated her coin bra to a promising novice in her belly-dancing class, she still can coax exotic charms out of a white cotton shift, employing only a silk scarf and a hip-toss.

I have never confessed how much I enjoy the envy of men who assume we are a couple. But of course she knows.

OUTSIDE OUR HOME in Oakland, one summer morning years ago, while I hosed the dew off Dixie’s car, a woman in a flowered housecoat emerged from the newly purchased house

across the street. She summoned a man from within and spoke to him urgently.

The wife, whom Dixie later nicknamed “Juke” in our private conversations, gestured toward my chivalry. “Juke’s training Bingo to be a better husband,” Dixie told me after her first heart-to-heart with the wife. “You’re his role-model.”

“So whenever she leaves town he’s gonna bring frat boys home for Jacuzzi weekends?”

We laughed, but soon found our fictitious marriage convenient. When I abruptly developed an allergy to almonds and landed in the emergency room, she rushed in and demanded to see her husband’s doctor. Later I phoned her mechanic to find out when I could pick up my wife’s car.

Men who come into my life see her as my sister. Bart, the one who stayed for seven years, adopted her as his own.

SHE NEVER DOES TURN THE LAMP BACK ON, so we get an unexpected good night’s sleep and enjoy a leisurely breakfast. The meal passes pleasantly until she announces, “The waitress’s perfume smells like roach spray.” She says it loudly, and I can see that the waitress, who tolerates my desire to practice Spanish but has been speaking English with other patrons, hears her. On our way out of the restaurant Dixie hooks up with a transplanted throwback Ann Arbor hippie, and I return to the table to add fifty pesos to the tip.

We return to the room and get loaded on some seedy, stemmy pot she’s bought from the hippie. “Not exactly Acapulco Gold,” she concedes. “More like Vallarta Crushed Brown.” But the stuff serves its purpose, and we stroll to the dock nicely toasted. The fiesta boat resembles many aging, medium-sized fishing vessels that put-put around the bay, except that it is painted toucan colors. *El Espíritu de Yelapa* is

emblazoned in white on the bow. We walk up a ramp and head for folding chairs on the deck, near the stern.

“The free margaritas are certainly plentiful,” Dixie points out. Tourists in shorts and tee-shirts have lined up at a long folding table. They finger plastic cups and wait their turns at two insulated coolers of the size used at construction sites to keep laborers from dying of dehydration. In a nod toward the holiday, one cooler dispenses red margaritas, the other green.

The entertainment begins, a recording of the Mexican Hat Dance played over loudspeakers at a volume engineered to drown out the diesel engines, which suddenly roar and belch black smoke at us. She sighs, I grimace. We stand together and move toward the bow, stopping to obtain and fill plastic cups.

We will laugh about this tomorrow. And I know that later, at home, my powerlessness over the smiling Miguel, and the expedition he talked me into, will regularly appear in her conversation at dinner parties. She turns toward the coastline and leans her elbows on the wooden rail while the *Espíritu* gains speed. The hotels recede, and jungle growth reaches across pearlescent sand toward the surf. She studies me.

“Paradise.” I nod and she adds, “Go ahead and whip it out.”

She means my manuscript. “You scribble on it every day at home. We might be on vacation, but you’ve still gotta work on those coattails.”

No one else supports me like this. The chapter I remove from my pack and begin to scribble on, a slice of the manuscript on which I have been working for ten years, concerning the wilderness therapy cult where we met — well, my other friends will believe it when they receive invitations to a book party. But Dixie haunts vintage-clothing shops on a quest for the gown she will wear to the Oscars, on the night the film made from my book wins for Best Picture. She often

reminds me that she intends to ride to Hollywood on my coattails.

WE ARE HERDED into folding chairs in a dark space, with blinds pulled tight, to view a video that features superb production values. On the wall-sized screen, nut-brown blondes sip margaritas around a timeshare swimming pool, toast with champagne in evening clothes on timeshare terraces, embrace by candlelight in timeshare bedchambers. The music that accompanies their rapture is less Hat Dance than Bossa Nova.

“I get it,” Dixie announces, five minutes into the video. The tourists near us turn to learn what she’s gotten, and she broadcasts her revelation: “They think we’re so grateful they turned off that damn music, we’ll actually pay attention to this commercial.”

Several people nod agreeably, but a few appear truly annoyed by her disruption.

Eventually the video fades out on a spectacular timeshare sunset, and someone opens the blinds. Young men, wearing smiles as bright and trousers as tight as Miguel’s, circulate through the improvised theater. They carry clipboards. A leathery, flame-haired gringa picks up a microphone and speaks in a voice redolent of Jersey City: “Imagine a home of your own right here in paradise. You deserve it and you can *afford* it, people . . .”

Dixie makes for the restroom.

Soon Ms. New Jersey has engaged me in a discussion of credit limits. In a tone that suggests I have won the Mexican equivalent of the Irish Sweepstakes, she proclaims that if I use my gold card, I can make the entire down payment on a condo right now, because “That card has *no limit!*”

The saleswoman knows many tricks, but she doesn't know Dixie, who now materializes at my side to say, "Honey, we need to talk." My wife strong-arms me out to the deck, where we do not talk. We face the ocean and turn to watch other couples accept clipboards and sign papers. Each time this happens, several of Miguel's brothers tuck their own clipboards under their arms and gather around to cheer and whistle and clap.

The margaritas continue to flow but no food is in sight. One by one, people lurch to the rail on the coast side of the boat to spew Christmas-colored vomit into the bay. Plastic buckets, again of construction-site proportions, have been placed around the deck for those who don't reach the railing. If such a thing is possible, the Mexican Hat Dance is even louder than it was before the video.

"This is just the beginning," Dixie says. "We'll buy our own lunch in Yelapa. They could leave us down there to have our entrails gnawed out by iguanas. If we ever want to see our hotel again, we'll have to hand over your credit card. What's the down payment on one of those time's-up condos?"

"Two grand."

"A bargain if it means we don't have to swim back to town."

"STEVE, PLEASE," HER MOTHER ONCE SAID TO ME, "never abandon Dixie. You're the only person who understands her."

Some people would take this as a heavy trip, but from Mabel I heard it as a reasonable request. She was talking about my ability to go back into a restaurant with an auxiliary tip, rather than criticize what some people would perceive as Dixie's rudeness toward a waitress. I am this way because of

my upbringing, and Dixie is that way because of hers. She and I are both what the world calls “only children,” foundlings from alcoholic homes, and we found each other in a cult. There, no matter how crazy things got — compulsory orgies, disciplining of children in the compost pit, years of harboring our mentor, his wife and their houseboy as fugitives — we were able to make each other laugh. And still, on the frequent occasions when she cracks me up, she says, “Stevereno, you’re the only person who gets me,” in a feathery rendering of her mother’s entreaty.

Dixie has a number of ex-best friends — women who, at various stages of her life, revealed that they didn’t understand her. Doe. Joannah. Linda. Hester. I know them all, because they were all at the ranch I call the cult. Some came there only because she was there. Sally, Cherie. She doesn’t return their calls and she rips their unopened letters in half and throws them into the fireplace.

Am I afraid she will do this to me some day? Dan, whom she invited to live with her after his cancer surgery, is devoted to her but manages to keep his distance. He says I’m immune. He can’t explain why.

WHEN MY OWN MOTHER DIED, Dixie and I held a private wake at the San Diego County morgue. “We need some time, if that’s all right,” she told the coroner’s assistant, and to my amazement he left us alone in that cold room.

“You should be the lawyer,” I told her after the door clicked shut. “You always manage to get what you want.”

“Girlfriend,” she said to the tiny corpse on the slab, “you’re the one who taught me — a woman learns to get what she wants from men during the second trimester in her mother’s womb.” She looked at me and spoke confidentially:

“The training takes place *in utero*, where no men can eavesdrop.”

Before I could thank her for appreciating my mother’s odd humor, she took Susi’s wizened hand: “You told me Reno was meant to be a poet. You cried when he applied to law school because you thought he was doing it just to hurt you. Maybe he’s pretending to be gay for the same reason. Now that you’re dead, do you suppose he’ll get the hell over it and marry me?”

She kissed my mother’s waxen cheek, and we anointed Susi’s body with Dixie’s Goddess Oil, whose most sacred ingredient, menstrual blood, was known to no one else but me.

That night, following Susi’s instructions, I gave Dixie a little box containing the ring she had once dubbed the “headlights”: outsized, double-header diamonds set in platinum, relic of ancient matrilineal glory. The only items Dixie ever expressed an interest in, a collection of thrift-store cashmere sweaters, Susi had already given her, one or two at a time over the years.

THE HEADLIGHTS GLEAM on the Yelapa beach, where we sit at a card table in the sand and eat grilled *buachinanga* from platters.

It’s the ring, I comprehend for the first time, more than anything we say or do, that promotes the illusion of our marital status. When did she start wearing it on her left hand?

The pot we smoked wore off hours ago, and I haven’t enjoyed enough free margaritas to stage a mawkish performance. But I want to tell her how gratified I am that she knew my mother. Most of my friends encountered Susi after alcohol and widowhood had turned her into a cartoon character. Dixie, though she met her when the dissipation was

well underway, brought out the Susi I want to remember, a woman capable of discussing politics or art, baseball or the management of men, without reciting the same tired stories.

A cloud blocks the sun and a chill breeze stirs our hair. For a moment I think it might rain. From her bag Dixie removes a pink, beaded sweater, one of Susi's cashmeres, and drapes it over her shoulders, Junior League-style.

A gang of scrawny, stray dogs has been circling the tables, shooed away half-heartedly by the waiters. I hear a low growl and turn to see a bristly-brown mongrel about a foot tall charging toward us. He lunges at the back of Dixie's chair and dashes toward the surf trailing a puff of pink.

Dixie's look says, *Don't touch my food*. She closes her hand over a chunk of fish and follows the dog, who has stopped at the water's edge. When she approaches, he warily backs away, dragging the sweater across the sand between them. Dixie kneels and cocks her head, doglike. She is talking and I wish I could hear. Is she trying out her broken Spanish on the little guy?

He darts past her, drops the sweater long enough to bark, then circles, hauling it through the foam. She remains kneeling and opens her hand. The dog's ears perk, then fall, perk and fall. He trots past and she snatches a sleeve. She is on her feet now, engaged with him in a tug-of-war, and her laughter soars above the noise of the Hat Dance and the surf. Finally she falls over and plays dead, and the dog releases the sweater to devour the morsel of fish from her hand.

Soon she has named him *Victorio* and he sits in her lap on the mangled, matted cashmere, eating one chunk of snapper at a time from her hand, waiting rather politely between bites for a dog who appears to have gone a long time without food.

“*Tienes hombre,*” she tells him, and he licks fishy residue from her fingers.

Once I would have pointed out the difference between what she said and what she meant to say. Instead I understand that it doesn’t matter what she tells the dog, and am grateful for such signs that I have grown. When she gestures with a nod, I pour water into her cupped hands so Victorio can drink.

A waiter appears with a bottle of brandy, good brandy, and places it on our table. “When did you order that?” she asks me, and I smile at the waiter. He has also brought crystal glasses, and he pulls the cork and pours us each two fingers. We toast, and sip, and Victorio sniffs Dixie’s glass. She allows him to stick in his whiskered muzzle, and gently scratches his ears when he recoils from the fumes.

Obviously this is someone else’s brandy, but I will gladly pay for it. Its mistaken delivery to our table is a good omen. In a half hour we must re-board *El Espíritu* for the vomitous trip back to town. There isn’t enough brandy in Mexico to make that journey tolerable, and I am beginning to steel myself for the next assault from the leathery saleswoman. I see her now in the shadows at the edge of the restaurant, upbraiding a young man whose hairless, caramel chest threatens to burst the buttons off his shirt.

Near us a woman says, “Pardon me,” and I pretend not to hear. I would prefer to wait until we’re back on the *Espíritu* to weather the next sales pitch.

“*Con permiso,*” the woman says, and I look up. She’s not from the boat, is far better dressed than any of our shipmates, in a voile dress with an expensive-looking purse and flat shoes of soft leather. Her medium-length hair is dark with subtle highlights, and from her ears dangle gold filigree earrings that my mother would have killed for.

“*Sí, señora,*” I say. Remembering my mother, I stand and ask in my best Spanish how we may help her.

“*Hola,*” says Dixie, and offers her hand. The woman takes it and smiles, then speaks directly to her in softly accented English: “My husband and I — actually our daughter, at first, but then all of us — were so touched by your gentle way with this little sad dog. Perhaps the brandy is an appropriate symbol of our respect.”

“*Mucho* appropriate,” Dixie says, and now Victorio is sniffing my plate, where nothing remains but a Pleistocene-looking skeleton. I reach over to pet him, and encounter a crust of scabs in the area Dixie has been scratching. Because she did not flinch from his diseased skin, I don’t, and while the woman’s daughter runs toward us, I try to scratch him as tenderly as she did.

We will spend the rest of the trip wondering if we should have tried to take Victorio home with us. But because the family has offered us a ride to Vallarta in their catamaran, we don’t suggest bringing him.

“RENO, WAKE UP! There’s a goat on the plane.”

I yawn and turn my head toward her, with my eyes still closed. “You were a baby once too, you know.”

“Of course, but my parents had the decency to keep me locked in a closet until I was old enough not to humiliate them in public.”

We saw this coming, during boarding, when we passed the couple settling in with their fussy baby, turbo-yuppies dressed for safari but flying coach. She said, a bit too loudly, “It’s gonna be a long flight” and I elbowed her.

Twenty-two years have made me reasonably sure of some things. I knew she’d eat whatever was left of the pot before we

left for the airport, rather than throw any away. And I know she won't die, even when she says, "Reno, I'm dying," which I take to mean, *Reno, will you find the only empty seat on the plane so I can raise the armrest and lie down and pass out so I won't feel like I'm dying?*

This is funny, and it's a pain in the ass. I resolve to dwell only on the funny part. I will not criticize her later, and I'll admit, when we laugh about this with friends back home, that I also ate some of the pot.

A FEW YEARS PASS. I move to Utah and move back. We no longer live together, but we usually spend Saturday night at her place, cuddling, after dinner and a movie. On her birthday she does something that bothers me. After two martinis, she makes arch comments about the couple at a nearby table. "What's that classy dame doing with *him*? He looks like a toothbrush salesman."

I wait a few days. Is it the \$160 I spent on the meal and drinks that makes me think I have the right to criticize her? I believe I am doing it gently. I say I didn't want to talk about strangers on her birthday. I think she takes it well. She says, "Yeah, we didn't even know those people."

But a few more days later, she calls. "You didn't use any 'I' statements. It was all about me."

"You've been to therapy, processing this," I say.

"I feel like saying 'Fuck you.'"

"Say it."

She does. And a bit later, after we've both raised our voices, she says, "I feel like hanging up on you."

"Go ahead."

Am I really so cool, after what, twenty-eight years, when the phone goes dead? I would like her to know I'm relieved to

have stomped the eggshells at last instead of tippie-toeing over them.

She doesn't return my calls. I write a letter and suggest we have a session together. I know her therapist, who used to be my therapist. Isn't this a simple matter, a misunderstanding, easily cleared up?

If she rips up the letter she at least reads it first, and writes back: "We were joined at the hip. I think this needed to happen. There's no point in going to therapy together. These are your issues."

I steam a while. Bart is eager to mediate, and I tell him, "After all these years, aren't they *our* issues?" Soon *he* stops returning my calls.

Enough time passes that I start to enjoy my newly free Saturday nights. Then Bart calls to tell me Dixie has breast cancer.

She doesn't answer my letters. She has surgery and chemo and radiation and she's in remission. She calls when she knows I won't be home, and leaves a message letting me know she's okay.

But her HMO is notorious for lackadaisical follow-up, and two years later Bart comes over and starts crying. "It's all through her body," he says, and I start crying too.

AT HER MEMORIAL SERVICE I decide I will be the first to share a story. I presume this privilege as the only person who understood her, though we barely spoke during her last two years, and it was Bart who held her hand until the morphine finally transported her beyond the ravages of cancer and pain. But he is weeping beside me, unready to speak, and grips my hand when Sister Pascal stands in the center of the circle to welcome everyone.

Some of these people have heard Dixie's side of the story of our long estrangement. A few know that I lay across chairs in the hospital waiting room, hoping she would ask for me, until my dream of a Hollywood ending passed and it was time for her, and then me, to let go.

