ELEGANT SHRIMP IN CHAMPAGNE SAUCE

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ELEGANT SHRIMP IN CHAMPAGNE SAUCE

You’re sitting outside the French doors. It’s night and I’m startled to see you sitting there on a stone bench. I see your profile in the dark.

When you want to have friends over, but don’t want to spend all day getting ready, this simple but elegant dinner is perfect.

Your face is sad; you are like a stone statue outside my lighted house.

I think the last place we had our furniture was at the house where you lived as a companion for an elderly woman. We put our things in the garage. We lived among the woman’s objects. I keep wondering if our furniture is still there. You left it there.

Chill the champagne and fix dessert first.

We came back to the house to see if we’d forgotten anything. We left the piano and my dollhouse that time. I’m coming out of a twenty-first-century apartment. There are many apartments like this—low, near the ground, level, with sloping roofs, lanterns set into the stairs.

I woke up screaming for sleeping pills when I was sleeping on a cot in our empty kitchen. I was twelve that summer, the stairwells were filling with huge moths. I could hear them flying through the stairwell.

While cooking liquid for shrimp is reducing, start grilling the vegetables.

The landlady came to talk to you about the back rent. I stayed in the bedroom like you told me to. You and she had coffee and talked quietly. The sheriff came a month later. The next time, there were fists pounding on the heavy door for a while, and they were going to break it down. We had our things put in storage in the night and stayed at a neighbor’s.

They were very gentle women with large, sad eyes and all starving. They had long, bony arms. They shared their breakfast with us.

Reheat shrimp and mushrooms in sauce just before pasta is done.

The sky is empty and colorless. There are lawns, but few trees or shrubs. Lanterns set near the ground along drives and sidewalks are the only beautiful things. We stayed for a while at a relative’s house. They lived in an arboretum. The bay, exotic birds, and trees
surrounded us. I slept on an army cot. Everyone thought I would like sharing my cousin’s room, the lace curtains, frilly girl’s bedding, shells, earrings, closet full of girl’s clothing, dolls, porcelain animals, her white furniture with gold trim “just like” my furniture. When I was in the room by myself, I could almost pretend it was my own room, but when my cousin was there, it became hers again. I spent hours riding my bike along the trails during the warm fall, the trees making a shelter above me with their interwoven boughs.

To make dessert, peel four (preferably seedless) oranges, removing as much of the white pith as possible. Slice oranges into “wheels,” put them in a shallow serving bowl, and toss with a few tablespoons of Grand Marnier and a teaspoon or so of sugar, if needed. They’re great accompanied by really decadent chocolate truffles.

We had our things again in our new apartment. But the eviction notices and bill collectors began coming again. The new place we moved to was rundown, and the neighbors kept a wild dog in a cage near their property line to guard it. They never let the dog out. We went over to introduce ourselves when they were having a yard sale. The mother kept her children near her and had a tight, very polite smile. My room was lavender.

Sometimes the heat shut off in the middle of the night, and my mother would go outside in her nightgown to go down to the basement to switch the furnace back on. And my mother heated water on the stove so that I could wash my hair. There were ants in the kitchen cupboards, and they poured out of a box of cereal when I was pouring out a bowl for breakfast. I threw it on the floor and ran to school.

Sauté mushrooms in a medium saucepan in hot olive oil over medium-high heat. Cook just long enough to release mushroom juices and let them evaporate. I want to stay in the apartment that’s already furnished with white swiss-dotted sheer curtains, afghans, handmade quilts, a brown couch, and bay windows. I don’t want to leave these things. As I live there, I become attached to the apartment, its rooms. The houses along my walk to the bank remind me of the neighborhood where I grew up—low, small ranch houses. I realize
they had looked much bigger when I was a child. Now, they seem very small, like dollhouses, and the neighborhood is empty. All the girls are in their nightgowns wandering through the woods with candles.

The roommate who is incredulous I haven’t contributed an equal number of appliances, cookware, and furniture to the apartment. I want to tell her these were all taken from me and give her an inventory of what I used to have. I am floating past neat, suburban houses, small ones with little flowers planted out front. One of these is our old house. The landscape opens up to fields, green fields.

Remember the small kerosene lamp made of white porcelain with roses on it, the blue china, painted with people gathering hay at harvest time.