Hear Him Roar

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DINNER

One of the many things the Department of Wildlife does for the citizens of California is to stock certain of the state’s lakes with trout. This stocking is a mundane business in the big lakes that are easily accessed by trucks. But there are small mountain lakes that have to be stocked by plane, and that operation is interesting enough that I’ve gone along for the ride a few times just for the experience. Imagine you are a fingerling trout. One day you and a bunch of your contemporaries are scooped up out of the cement pond you’ve lived your whole brief lives in and transferred to a dark, crowded, vibrating tank for a couple of hours. And then with no warning this tank opens, drops you and your brothers and sisters and cousins into an element you can’t swim through. You just flutter. Light is all around you. Strange currents carry you and you can’t breathe. Though you don’t know this, your small fish brain is a blessing to you now, because if you could actually contemplate what is happening to you the fear and the strangeness would probably kill you. At length you splash down into new water. Breath comes back. You can swim.

Looking back on my drive home from Val’s that evening brings those fluttering mid-air fingerlings to mind. I too was out of my element, moved by strange currents, helpless to comprehend what was happening to me. I was all dressed again, I was in Vera and heading down an all-too-familiar road, but part of me hadn’t returned from the place Val had led me into. Although it felt very familiar I couldn’t say where I’d been. And I still wasn’t sure how I’d come out of there, only that my second session with the Bald
One had ended like my first, with me hurriedly dressing and anxious to get away.

So all the way across town I fluttered. And when I pulled into the driveway at home, Kyle was there to help me splash down. He was upon me before I had a chance to open the car door.

“Just wanted to warn you,” he said.

“About?”

“Mom kind of panicked when she came home and you weren’t here. I think it’s my fault. I told her I thought your stomach was acting up. She was sure you were in the emergency ward somewhere. She’s been calling all the hospitals.”

“Great.”

Kyle’s shrug of apology disappeared almost as fast as it formed. “This kind of stuff wouldn’t have to happen if you carried your EnCompass. Remember, you’re on our Clan Plan. Mom could have picked up your signal and she’d have known exactly where you were. Everything would have been cool between you and Mom hours ago.”

With each step I took between the driveway and the house my thirst for bourbon grew. When I walked in Jean was busy disengaging from the emergency room nurse she’d had hunting for me, so she couldn’t wave the lemonade pitcher at me as I fixed my drink. She didn’t acknowledge me even after she hung up. The silent treatment has its advantages.

Leaving her at the stove, I went over to my chair to enjoy my beverage, feeling for all the world like a sea captain granted a brief respite between adventures. There was much in my immediate wake that bore thinking about, and rough seas churned up ahead.

Dinner was a quiet affair. My guts had calmed considerably and I ate my stomach-friendly food without the slightest complaint. Jean applied her treatment continuously until the dishes were cleared away and the chamomile tea served. Then the treatment changed, or entered its second phase.

“So you weren’t in the hospital,” she said, gazing down into her tea. “You going to tell me where you were?”
“I went to see a guy. About my stomach.”
Her eyes rose, touched mine, then darted away. “A guy?”
“Not a doctor, if that’s what you mean.”
She blew at the steam rising from her cup. “I give up. What kind of guy is he?”
“I can’t say for sure.”
“Well, what does he do?”
“Sits, mostly.”
“He sits.”
“He talks, too. Not that much.”
“He sits and he talks.”
“The last time I went there he also checked me over with his hands.”
Jean was quiet a minute. Red flames of agitation licked upward from the base of her neck. “Charlie,” she said, looking at me again, “are you trying to upset me?”
“No, why?”
Her dismissive head-shake was what third-graders saw when they tried to give her the run-around. “This guy of yours, does he have a title?”
“No title that I’m aware of.”
“Are you aware of what I’ve been through this afternoon?”
“I saw Kyle on my way in.”
“Correction, not just this afternoon. This month. This year. Do you realize what you’re putting me through?”
“Dr. Sell-a-book says it’s not honest to blame others for our problems.”
“He also says that by taking responsibility for ourselves, we don’t burden those close to us.”
“Have I asked you to do anything for me?”
“No,” she said, “you’ve forced me to by doing nothing yourself.”
“What I do you consider nothing.”
The flames on her neck grew brighter. “Maybe if you told me about it I could credit it.”
“What do you want me to tell you?”

“You went to see a guy today. What guy? What happened?”

I gave this some thought. “I’m not sure.”

“You’re not.”

“Look, if I could be more specific than that, I would.”

“You are trying to upset me.”

“I know you’d rather see me taking pills or letting them cut me open so they can look around.”

“No, Charlie. I’d rather see you quit screwing around and confront this thing head-on.”

“Right. Be self-enlightened, not frightened. Face fear’s full bluff. It’s that simple.”

“I didn’t say it was simple.”

“Simpleminded, anyway.”

“Charlie, that’s not nice.”

“No,” I said, standing up with my heavy tumbler, “and neither is this.” I threw the glass against the mirror on the opposite wall and it shattered, leaving an ugly diagonal crack that cut my reflection in two.

Again Jean fell back on her classroom experience. For two or three hours she’d been panic-stricken, all because she didn’t know where I was. But when I started to damage property she played it perfectly cool, didn’t even stand up or gasp.

“You know what else isn’t nice?” I said, excited by my violence. “It’s not nice being a Bereaved Bachelor, which is what I was when I stumbled into your life. Now I’m the Menopausal Male, or no, wait, the Aging, Raging Male. It’s not nice having labels stuck on your forehead. I’m sure it was tough for you when Joe disappeared, when your dad dropped dead before you had a chance to tell him what a son of a bitch he was. Those kinds of surprises are the shits. But that’s no reason to try and take away my ability to surprise you, which is what you do with all that freaking research. You’re always a step ahead of me, always ready for the worst I can throw at you. Even this—I throw a fucking glass, break a mirror, and it’s no surprise really. Just acting like
the Aging, Raging Male that I am. Christ, what’s it to you if I do die tomorrow? You’ve been preparing yourself for two years.”

I quit the dining room and stormed down the hall to the bedroom. I stomped around the room for a while like a man in the midst of a desperate search. What I was looking for was a way to surprise her. I felt like breaking a few more things, but that was no good; it would just be acting in character. I wanted so badly to flabberghast her that it seemed my life depended on it. I stalked and swerved, feeling more trapped every time I passed the foot of the bed. Finally I gave it up, went to my closet and pulled down an overnight bag, then to my chest of drawers and started throwing whatever I could get my hands on into the bag.

When it was full (of socks and underwear only, it turned out) I glanced at the door and saw Jean standing in the jamb.

“What are you doing?” she said.

“Why don’t you tell me. You’re the expert on my behavior.”

“Charlie,” she said in a voice her pupils never hear, “I’m not trying to trap you. I wanted you to want to stay.”

“Jesus, not the marriage thing again. I thought we were past that.”

Her look said I knew very well we weren’t.

“Jean, you and me? This was never about marriage.”

“Oh yes it was,” she said through sudden sobs. “It was about your marriage that failed, your son that died, and you would never let it be about me and you and Kyle.”

“Kyle was your idea,” I reminded her. “I told you from the start you didn’t want me getting near him, with my track record. But you were going to make us all whole again, weren’t you? Everybody would get what they were missing.”

“I kept hoping you’d get over it if I helped you, but you haven’t. You’re just as stuck now as you were when we met.”

“In that case,” I said, “you’ll be glad we never got married. That’ll make this easier on both of us.”

I picked up my bag and she took a couple of steps toward me, lifting her wet, streaked face up to mine. “Speak for yourself.”