

## NIGHT IN THE JUNGLE, 1962

*Jennie Rathbun*

Jerry and I and the children have been living in Chevy Chase for over a year, in a small brick house a few blocks from the District line. In that time we've eaten dinner at the houses of every partner in the law firm of Cunningham, Barton and Fitch where Jerry's a junior associate, but until last month we'd avoided hosting a dinner party. Our dining room table has space for only ten, and the wallpaper is peeling off near the door to the kitchen. We realized that eventually we'd have to reciprocate the hospitality we'd received (one of us usually said this as we lay in bed after a dinner party hosted by another couple from the firm), but the prospect made my head hurt, and we kept putting it off. To compensate for our failure to entertain, Jerry had made himself an expert on the space program, Deke Cunningham's pet subject, while I played dutiful tennis and bridge at the Chevy Chase Club with the wives of Jerry's colleagues, confident and vapid women who compete with each other

through their children on the club swim team. They've intimidated me ever since we moved here for Jerry's job.

Once a month, I go downtown for lunch with Jerry. The air in the revolving door of his building reeks of cigars. I've come to think of this as the smell of money being harvested. I picture it hanging in a barn like tobacco, filling the air with a wet green scent. I envy Jerry. He has an office he can escape to during the week where he deals with other adults, other men. The men in my life these days are Jerry and cab drivers and the golf pro at the Chevy Chase Club, Socks Norquist, a sunbaked little man with red eyes and mats of yellow hair like excelsior on his arms.

Jerry usually takes me to a French bistro in Georgetown where a lot of other lawyers from CBF go, but last month he wanted to try a new place on M Street. I had started eating my turkey club sandwich when he cleared his throat, a thing he does when he's nervous. I noticed his lucky orange and green necktie, the one he was wearing the day he was hired at CBF, and I remembered that his annual performance review had taken place that morning.

I must have looked worried because he said, "Relax, will you? My evaluation went fine."

“That’s great.” I took a second bite of my sandwich, waiting for the bad part, the reason we’d gone to a restaurant where nobody in Jerry’s firm could eavesdrop on us.

“The thing is,” Jerry said, setting his sandwich on his plate, “Deke thinks of the firm as a family. He says it’s time we let people get to know us better, have a couple of parties.”

I bit the inside of my cheek. “God damn it,” I said.

“It would be good if we had a few people over for dinner.”

“Fine,” I said. I gulped iced tea and my cheek stung. “I guess we couldn’t duck it forever.”

“Nah. Guess not.” Jerry reached across the table and squeezed my wrist. “We just have to get it over with.”

He was jollyng me along, and I gave him a wan smile and said, “Right.”

Having resolved to begin entertaining, we finished our sandwiches and ordered cherry pie, ice cream and coffee. After Jerry paid the check, I looked around and said, “I like this place.” I was trying to sound upbeat, even though I was already worried about my untested ability to host a gathering of lawyers and their wives.

“Yes, let’s come here again,” said Jerry. “I was getting sick of the old place.”

We were launching ourselves into a new venture. On our walk back to K Street, we bravely discussed the guest list for our first dinner party.

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I grew up far from here, on a cattle ranch in Carmel, California. When I was twelve my uncle gave me a good buckskin roping mare named Peaches. We took the junior calf-roping prize at the Salinas Rodeo three summers in a row. That horse made me look like I knew what I was doing.

The winter I was fifteen, my uncle came home from a cattle auction with a handsome red Charolais-Angus cow named Dorcas. In April she gave birth to twins, a bull calf and a heifer. She took to the bull calf right away, but anytime the heifer tried to nurse she'd kick it off like it wasn't hers. My uncle smeared Vick's on the cow's nose and on the heifer, but this time his old trick didn't work. I bottle-fed the heifer, but she stayed puny, with a resigned take-me-now-Lord look in her eye that none of us liked. One afternoon when my father and uncle were off buying feed, I had an idea. I penned up Dorcas and her calves in the corral behind the breeding shed. Then I opened the gate and told our border collie to cut out the heifer. When Flora dashed across the corral barking, the heifer bawled and Dorcas decided it was time to get involved. She chased Flora under the fence rail, then licked the trembling calf and let her

suckle for the first time. There was no more trouble between them after that, and my father bought me a Porter roping saddle for my birthday. The heifer grew up to be a champion milker, and my uncle let me keep the ribbons she won at agricultural fairs. I still have a blue one, now faded to purple, hanging off the shoe bag in my closet.

As the ranch became successful, I watched my mother's fitful doomed efforts to be accepted by the ladies in the Carmel Woman's Club. When she dressed up, there was something slapdash and unconvincing in her appearance, a drooping hem or lipstick on her teeth. When you're young it's easy to see exactly what's wrong with your mother. I thought she was a weak-minded fool for bothering with the snooty women at the CWC.

Now I have more sympathy for her. I have no more social poise than she did. On the evenings when we have to go out for cocktails and dinner, I start looking forward to the drive home the minute I finish dressing. The only part of dinner parties I enjoy is their aftermath. I like to lie in bed with Jerry and smoke a last cigarette while we talk about people at the party. I'm not certain I'll ever really fit in here, but I have to do my best.

Every Tuesday morning I have a golf lesson with Socks Norquist at the Chevy Chase Club. I try to knock a little ball into a hole on chemical grass no cow would be caught dead eating. Compared with life on the ranch, the things I do seem trivial. Sinking a five-yard putt is nothing like saving an animal's life or putting out a brush fire on your neighbor's property, both of which I did before I was eighteen. Once in a while, Socks pulls out his bottom eyelid and asks me to fish out a drowned gnat. I've done it more than once, but I won't do it anymore. Can you imagine?

By the time I moved East, I could repair barbed wire and shoe a horse. The summer I left for college, my uncle sold Peaches to a rancher in the next town. I sat in her stall and cried for an hour after we loaded her onto the trailer that took her away. Now I'm corralled off with the women and children, playing bridge in the afternoons at the Chevy Chase Club while my husband works downtown. It isn't that I don't love Jerry and the children, I do. But there has to be another bend in my road someday. I'd like to travel. After the children are grown, I would love to work as a courier for the State Department during the fall and winter. For the rest of the year I'd be doing archaeological work in South America and Africa. I like the thought of finding and pondering evidence of earlier societies. It would give me a better perspective on my own

life. How could it not? Thinking about my future life helps me keep going when I'm bored or discouraged. I'm here now after all, not in Peru, and I am determined to succeed, not just for the sake of Jerry's job, but for my own pride. On the ranch I used to be good at what I did, and I've been missing that feeling lately.

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The day after our lunch on M Street, we picked a date for our party and I began calling people up to invite them. We'd decided on Deke and Evie Cunningham; and three couples from the firm's lower rungs. By a stroke of luck, I secured the services of Corinne Blake to help with the dinner. Among the women at the Chevy Chase Club, Corinne Blake is a legendary servant, a pale wiry colored woman in her sixties, with a scattering of tiny moles. She is what is known as a jewel. I felt greatly encouraged when she said she was available to help with our first dinner party.

I ordered a roast, picked out flowers, and bought dark green candles guaranteed not to drip on my yellow damask tablecloth. I enjoyed these preparations. As the night of our party approached, dread and optimism tumbled around like laundry in my head.

The night before the dinner, Jerry and I were on the porch drinking gin and tonics before supper with the children. We have two; Mattie is nine and Ned is ten. Mattie's a tall red-headed tomboy who bosses Ned around and is fond of ghoulish things. She told me recently that she's looking forward to high school which she imagines and hopes will be one long frog vivisection, an activity that would make Ned throw up. I don't have the heart to tell Mattie what high school is really like. But she'll be all right. Being curious about horrible things is good preparation for adulthood. It's Ned, spindly and squeamish, whom I worry about at three o'clock in the morning. When he gets home from school he goes upstairs and does all of his homework before supper. Mattie is very bright but refuses to exert herself at school. Last year we had to hire a math tutor for her, a nasal woman who carried a stopwatch and wore knit sweaters from oily brown wool.

So we were on the porch before supper talking about the party. Jerry lit a cigarette and told me he'd run into an old friend from Saint Paul's, one Edgar Chalfant, and invited him to the party.

I could have killed him. "You did what?" I said.

“I know, I know, but he’s in a tough spot. He’s all alone in town from Pittsburgh, visiting his father in the hospital. If you’d seen his face, you’d have invited him yourself.”

“I certainly would not have! I’ve been slaving on this dinner for weeks, getting everything just so, and now you go and invite a total stranger? Did it even occur to you to ask me? If you felt sorry for him, why didn’t you just take him to lunch?”

“Because I ran into him at four thirty this afternoon and lunch was over. Look, I could call him and tell him we’ve cancelled the dinner.” Jerry sounded sorry, and the idea of disinviting Edgar seemed too mean.

“No, don’t. Let him come. We’ll muddle through somehow. I’ll put a card table out with a table cloth that matches the other one.”

“You’re the best,” said Jerry. He looked happy and relaxed again, and I wanted to slap him for the idiotic thing he’d done. He started telling me about how much I was going to like Edgar, what a character he was. I learned at Sweetbriar that when somebody is described as a character it means they are missing certain inhibitions required for civilization. We can’t all be characters, can we?

“I suppose by that you mean Edgar drinks,” I said.

Jerry ignored my frosty remark. He stubbed out his cigarette in my mother's abalone shell ashtray. "He was a great guy, a real daredevil. Oh, another thing. This is weird. He has a glass eye."

"Really? What happened? No, don't tell me."

"We were skiing on Christmas break. Edgar was alone on a black diamond trail. He fell and his ski pole--"

"That's enough, Jerry!" I fixed myself another gin and tonic.

"So he poked his own eye out?" said Mattie, coming onto the porch. She flopped down in the wicker armchair across from us, and unclipped the barrette from her hair, which looked stiff with dirt. Her knees had matching scabs the size of playing cards from falling off her bike. I think she's practicing to become a stunt woman. When she was six I made the mistake of telling her about the great Hollywood stunt man Yakima Canutt, who had played poker with my uncle and father at the ranch. He's been stuck like a cocklebur in her head ever since. You can never tell until it's too late what is going to become an obsession for your children.

Jerry told Mattie all about Edgar's accident and how afterward he was fitted with a glass eye that didn't fool anybody.

"And you know what? He could take his eye out whenever he wanted."

Mattie was speechless with joy. She stopped breathing for a full minute and gaped at Jerry, who continued remorselessly, "Yep. Any time Edgar felt like scaring somebody, he'd turn his back and take out his eye. Then he'd turn around with it in his hand!"

I kept my mouth shut in the tight smile I wear when Jerry's getting Mattie all revved up about something horrible. But if I'd known what was going to happen as a result of this conversation, I'd have sent Mattie to spend the night of the party in Bethesda with her cretinous little friend Cheryl Freylinghuysen.

On Friday afternoon Corinne Blake arrived at four thirty on the dot to help with the dinner. She carried her uniform in a blue garment bag from American Airlines and a large alligator pocketbook. I was immediately thrown off balance by her bland impassivity, grimly certain she was totting up my deficiencies as soon as she'd hung her neat tan coat in the hall closet. I had returned to polishing the silver when Corinne came into the kitchen and said, "Now you let me finish all that, Mrs. Vance. What time is the caterer coming?"

I was embarrassed to admit I was cooking the dinner myself. All she needed to do was poach the asparagus and heat up the Lyonnaise potatoes I'd made that morning. The roast could come out around seven and rest for a few

minutes. I rubbed polish on a fork to draw her attention away from my instructions, but I thought I saw fleeting disdain in her eyes. She told me again that she would finish the silver. Taking a spoon from its brown flannel wrapper, she polished it with an astonishing speed and a kind of authority I was dismayed to witness. She gave me a teacherly smile and said, “Now, you just leave everything to me, Mrs. Vance, and enjoy your party. What time are people coming?”

“Oh, around six,” I said, getting up from the table.

Part of me was longing to sit back down and resume polishing the silver, a task I’ve always found soothing, but I saw there would be a troubling note of false egalitarianism if I tried to work alongside Corinne. Plus she was so much better at it that I would only get depressed.

She cleared her throat in a warning rumble, and I fled to the garden, after telling her to come find me if she had any questions. This was hardly likely, I thought, as I stabbed at dandelions with a murderous implement Mattie had given me for my birthday. I didn’t care about getting the taproot, although I knew I ought to. Dandelions fail to offend me. Gouging the earth, I thought of Edgar Chalfant’s ski pole accident, then I didn’t feel like weeding any more. I lay down on a lawn chair and daydreamed that the dinner party was over and

had been a success. I must have dozed off. The late afternoon sun woke me, and I dragged myself inside to get Ned and Mattie cleaned up and dressed. I wished I were back in Carmel, or even at Sweetbriar, doing something I'd done a hundred times before.

Half an hour later I took a deep breath and practiced my welcoming smile as I saw the Cunninghams pull up in their new light blue Cadillac. I might have guessed the scariest couple would be the first to arrive. Deke is nice enough in his pompous way, but Evie acts like a bored empress, and she has always frightened me a little. We could hear Jerry upstairs, singing songs from *The Pajama Game* as he finished dressing. Someday we'll have a bigger house, if Jerry can hang onto his job at Cunningham, Barton and Fitch long enough to be made a partner. Our dinner party was a first step towards that house. I was air-kissing Evie's powdered cheek when Corinne materialized beside us in her uniform, a black shirtwaist with a frilled white cap and apron. My pride at having hired her evaporated when she and Evie greeted each other like old friends before she glided off down the hall to the guest room with Evie's silver fox tippet. I'd forgotten to tell her that was where the coats should go, but she knew anyway.

I got Deke and Evie settled with drinks in the living room and finally Jerry came trotting downstairs, singing “Seven and a Half Cents,” which I didn’t think was very tactful in front of his boss. But nearly everybody who meets him likes my husband. Jerry looks like the actor Kent Smith, or a collie, with the same interested, friendly expression. He was wearing his new green and red madras jacket and a bow tie. I wore my favorite old green Lily Pulitzer shift with seahorses on it because Jerry had once said it brought out the color of my eyes.

The doorbell rang again, and Corinne admitted a tall, gaunt man who stamped his feet on the hall rug as if to loosen snow. Edgar Chalfant. He bent down to kiss me, reeking of Old Spice.

He straightened up and roared a faintly obscene greeting at Jerry who thumped him on the back and led him into the living room where introductions were made. Noticing his glass eye, Evie looked startled as she entrusted her small hand to his large one. She was wearing pearls and a silk dress the exact same color as mine.

As if they had been awaiting a signal, all six remaining guests arrived at once, and soon we were sitting in the living room having drinks and talking. Scottie Chamberlain complimented me on my dress. Of the women I know at

the club, Scottie is by far my favorite. Once I caught her rolling her eyes as Selena Davidge went into mind-numbing detail about a hat she'd bought from some Belgian woman in Georgetown. Scottie winked at me and gave an exaggerated yawn, patting her mouth like a cartoon character. From that moment, I have wanted her to like me.

I put on my new Harry Belafonte record. Jerry and I had been to see him at Carter Barron in Rock Creek Park. I lit a cigarette and sat back on the sofa, feeling my spine loosen as Harry Belafonte sang "Yellow Bird" in his sweet voice. I was telling myself that the evening would be perfectly fine, there wasn't a thing to worry about, when I remembered Corinne Blake. She could hear the music from the kitchen. Would she suspect we'd put the record on to show we weren't prejudiced against Negroes? She might be smiling to herself as she checked on the roast, relishing the bad conscience of her employers. As if summoned by my imagination, she entered the living room and began passing around a silver tray with stuffed mushroom caps.

"And how are you tonight, Corinne dear?" simpered Evie. This was for my benefit, to demonstrate their longstanding rapport.

"Just fine, Mrs. C. Here, take a napkin and mind your dress."

Evie smiled complacently and said, "Whatever would I do without you to look after me?"

I already needed a break, so I said I would just run upstairs and see what was keeping the children, but Jerry clapped his paw on my knee and said no, he'd go get them. I was struggling to think of a topic for general conversation when Deke Cunningham rattled the ice in his glass and asked Edgar Chalfant what line of work he was in.

Edgar said he was a bail bondsman in Pittsburgh.

No one said anything for a minute. You could practically hear people blink. Then Evie said, "How interesting that must be! And what brings you to Washington?"

"My father's in the hospital and I'm down here visiting him."

"Oh!" said Evie. "I hope it's nothing too serious."

"He had a heart attack," said Edgar.

"Oh, dear," said Betty Wilkerson, as if this were somehow in poor taste, like being a bail bondsman.

"He's going to be fine, the doctors say. They're letting him go home next week."

"Oh, good. What hospital did you say he was in?"

“George Washington.”

Evie said she had heard wonderful things about the place. “It’s where I would want to go,” she assured Edgar.

“Well, good,” said Edgar. “That’s good to know.”

The men had lost interest in Edgar and were talking about the Senators.

Edgar seemed pleased to be at our house, away from the hospital. He lit a Camel with a smelly Zippo lighter, crossing his long legs in front of him. They reached halfway across the oriental carpet. I got my first proper look at him then. He had reddish hair, and a widow’s peak. He was well over six feet tall. His gray and white seersucker jacket had grimy cuffs, and I found this strangely touching. There was no doubt which eye was the glass one. His right eye was bloodshot and mobile, while his left cornea was coldly white; the iris and pupil stared straight ahead.

Jerry came downstairs with Ned and Mattie. Ned’s navy blazer was too long in the sleeves, but he looked clean and his shoes were polished. He’d asked for and gotten a shoeshine kit for his birthday. Mattie, in the smocked yellow dress I’d laid out, slouched into the room behind Ned and Jerry. The dress was a Christmas present from Jerry’s mother, and she hated it. She had washed her hair and was almost presentable except for her scraped knees. She searched the

living room until she spotted Edgar Chalfant, the only guest who interested her, and marched straight over to him. I had a vertiginous sense that she was going to ask him to take out his glass eye then and there, so I shouted at her to come and say how do you do to the Cunninghams. This had the sad effect of making it sound as if they were the most important guests, leaving everyone else to ponder their lowly status.

After the children had greeted everyone, I hissed at Mattie to help Corinne pass hors d'oeuvres. She gazed at me with mournful reproach, but she picked up a tray of cheese and crackers and shuffled around the room. Her tray sloped dangerously but nothing actually fell off onto the carpet, and I registered an absurd pride at this, as if Mattie were holding her own in a rigged contest with Corinne Blake.

When Mattie stopped with her tray in front of Edgar, I saw her talking to him. She gestured toward his glass eye, and he shook his head, looking apologetic. She set her tray down on the rug and stomped over to Jerry. "You told me he could take his eye out!"

I jumped up and turned over the record album, turning up the volume to drown out my daughter's tantrum. Harry Belafonte sang, "Tongue Tie Baby."

People tried to be kind, I will say that. Everyone ignored Mattie. Bill Chamberlain said in a loud voice that Chuck Hinton was the best player the Senators had this season, and the other men, including Edgar, rumbled their assent. "Ray Ripplemeyer looks good, too," said Henry Archer, to more rumbling. Mattie was weeping now. Jerry stood up and announced that somebody was ready for bed, and the wives laughed nervously. Jerry yanked Mattie up the stairs while we all went on talking, pretending to notice nothing amiss. The party had gotten off to a terrible start.

"Well!" I said, in a bright hysterical voice. "Who'd like one more drink before dinner? I know I could use one."

No one answered. It was as if I'd lapsed into Aramaic. Finally Betty Wilkinson said, a propos of nothing, "I'm having the hardest time finding a decent riding camp for Melissa! Janet, you know all about horses, don't you? Do you know of any places?"

I told her I would think about it, and gradually the conversation got going again in a rickety provisional way. The howls from upstairs subsided and after a few minutes Jerry came downstairs.

"Everything okay?" I said.

“Oh, sure,” said my husband. “But remind me to get more chloroform, will you? I just used the last of it.”

Scottie and Edgar were the only people who laughed.

“Kids!” I said, with mock despair. “You can’t live with them but you can’t kill them either. Am I right?”

This banter left the room engulfed in a deeper, humming silence. I felt close to tears. To everyone’s amazement, Edgar Chalfant lumbered onto his feet, shouting, “Right you are, Mrs. Vance! Janet Vance for President! Who’s with me?” He raised his glass of Scotch, and spilled some. Evidently he had begun drinking during the afternoon.

The terrible, frightening thing was at that moment I felt so alone that I was grateful for his lunatic show of support.

“Dinner is served,” said Corinne.

A relieved chorus of chattering broke out and everybody got up quickly and filed into the dining room, searching for their place cards. I hastily switched cards so that Edgar would be next to me. I needed to keep an eye on him. The roast beef looked perfectly cooked, at any rate. People began eating and the women rhapsodized over the tenderness of the meat. I allowed myself to imagine we were actors in a play about people on an ocean liner. It was our

first night on board and we were seated at the captain's table. After dinner someone disagreeable would be found murdered in his stateroom.

Corinne deftly orbited the table with dinner rolls in a basket covered with a blue linen towel I'd looked for all morning. Where had she found it? She had set out the good silver salt and pepper shakers without my asking her to. I closed my eyes briefly and the party sounded like all the other dinners we'd been to in Washington, with gusts of laughter over the faint music of silver on china. Edgar leaned over to me and said, "I'm sorry about what happened back there with Mattie."

"Don't give it another thought," I said.

"It's just that I don't like taking my eye out. It's tricky putting it back in sometimes. Otherwise I'd have done it for her, believe me."

"Please forget it, Edgar. Mattie was terribly rude and I'm ashamed of her." I put my hand on his, giving it a little shake. He smiled uncertainly and returned to eating with rumbustious pleasure and efficiency. I couldn't bring myself to dislike him. His father was ill. He knew nobody apart from Jerry at this stuffy party, and Jerry was down at the end of the table next to Deke Cunningham. The two of us ate silently and companionably while Deke maundered on about the space program, ably assisted by Jerry. Betty Wilkinson said

how pretty our house was, and the other wives agreed. Evie Cunningham started talking about a rummage sale benefit she was putting together for the animal shelter. It was to be held after Labor Day, when people would be back in town. “Now then, where should we have it?”

Scottie shot me a merry look of derision. It was clear to us that Evie’s question was strictly pro forma. I winked at Scottie when Evie said in a considering voice, following a pause, “I think my yard might do. What does everybody think?”

Diane Archer proudly informed us that she was going to be away at the Seattle World’s Fair that weekend and would unfortunately miss the rummage sale, and we all said how lucky she was to be going, before Evie yanked us back to the matter at hand, reminding us that she had the biggest yard. However, Betty Wilkinson was the owner of an enormous tent that could be pressed into service in case of rain. Matters deadlocked briefly, and then Scottie said, “To my mind, there is nothing sadder than a rummage sale in the rain. I don’t think we ought to risk it.”

I said, “Scottie’s right. Besides, the crowd will look bigger in Betty’s yard.”

Scottie and Betty nodded vigorously, and I was pleased.

“Oh, fine. If that’s what everybody wants,” said Evie, shaking her head as if we had doomed the rummage sale by our foolishness. “We’ll use Betty’s yard.” She angrily sawed an asparagus spear into quarters and ate them. Corinne refilled wine glasses and passed around the table a second time with the platter of roast beef. Henry Archer launched into a joke that began with a horse walking into a saloon, but I missed the middle because Deke had a coughing fit. The joke ended with the saloonkeeper saying to the horse, “Why the long face?” At the far end of the table Deke was nodding his chin wattles at something my husband was saying about the pre-flight training of astronauts.

I had begun to relax. The party had come out of its earlier nosedive following Mattie’s tantrum, and I could see the end of the evening winking at me like a large emerald. Corinne began clearing the table.

After the perfect interval, she came into the dining room with coffee in my mother’s silver pot and the éclairs I’d picked up that morning at Schupp’s Bakery. They were Jerry’s idea. He said they would give a Continental finish to our dinner. The wives giggled with anticipatory guilt over the éclairs, several asking Corinne for just half of one--they couldn’t possibly eat a whole one, much as they’d love to. Naturally she had foreseen this need and cut some in

half before bringing them out. I noted with satisfaction that Scottie took a whole éclair. She and I were the only two wives who did this. I hoped we would become great friends.

After dessert, we brought our demitasse cups into the living room. Two of the men lit cigars. The house would stink for weeks, but I didn't care. We were going to get to the end of the evening in decent shape. Within an hour, people would put their coats back on, thank us, and go home. Despite its rocky start, the party was a success. Jerry grinned at me. The men sat at one end of the room, smoking and arguing about the Bay of Pigs. Bill Chamberlain was complaining about the embargo on Cuban products. "No more Havanas! I can't believe it was really necessary to go that far."

Henry Archer, a staunch enemy of Communism, set down his demitasse cup and leaned forward, saying, "Now hold on a minute, Chamberlain. Just hold on a goddamned minute." He looked ready to take a swing at Bill.

Scottie saw what was happening and said, "You're not starting that crap about those stupid Cuban cigars again!"

Bill snarled at his wife to shut up and mind her own business. This made everybody laugh, and the tense moment--our very own little Bay of Pigs--passed. I saw that Edgar Chalfant was missing. He had eaten so much and so

fast that I wondered if he might be ill. I tried to put it out of my mind but after ten minutes I excused myself and went to look for him.

I had just checked the downstairs bathroom when the screams erupted overhead. I ran upstairs to find Mattie and Edgar in Ned's room. Edgar was minus his eye, and Mattie was holding it out towards her brother who was sitting up in bed yelling in terror.

Edgar looked sheepish. "I'm sorry, Janet. I never meant to scare him."

Mattie was hysterical with glee. "Yeah, Mom. We never meant to scare him. We thought he'd like it!"

"Give Mr. Chalfant back his eye right this second, Mattie Vance. We'll talk about this later."

I think that if she had obeyed me, the evening might have been salvaged. But that wasn't what happened. Mattie was having too much fun to stop now. Clutching the eye, she ran out of Ned's room and down the stairs with a maniacal laugh. From the landing I watched her race through the living room in her pajamas. I chased her but she reached the bathroom several steps ahead of me and locked herself in. Now Edgar charged down the stairs. Towards the bottom he lost his footing and fell down the last three steps, landing in a heap

at the feet of Evie Cunningham and Betty Wilkinson, who clutched each other, making confused sounds of dismay.

Edgar, now a cyclops on the oriental rug, looked at the terrified women out of his remaining eye. There was a horrifying concavity where his eyelid had collapsed over his empty eye socket. I don't suppose any of our guests will ever forget the sight, much as I might wish them to. The women were screaming. Jerry was hammering on the bathroom door with his loafer. Over the pounding came the sound of the toilet flushing. There was a collective gasp. Had she flushed the eye down the toilet? After five minutes she emerged and walked over to Edgar who was still on the rug. "I believe this is yours," she said, handing him the glass eye as though he'd dropped it by mistake. He disappeared with it into the bathroom and slammed the door. We listened to water running in the sink for a long time. My daughter's performance is another thing nobody is going to forget about that night at our house. Jerry took her arm above the elbow and made her apologize to everyone. She looked straight at Evie Cunningham and said, "I am sincerely tired of my bad manners, and I do apologize."

"We are all sincerely tired of your bad manners, young lady," said Jerry. "Jesus Christ, where does she get this stuff?" Then he yanked her back up the

stairs for the second time that night. We sat in stunned attitudes in the living room, listening to Edgar drunkenly curse in the bathroom as he tried to reinsert his glass eye. Several people lit cigarettes but no one said anything.

It seemed to me that seven lean years passed while the blood sang in my ears like a mosquito. "Well!" said Diane Archer, finally.

Scottie slapped her thighs before launching herself onto her feet. "Well, Janet, I'm afraid Bill and I must be going. We've got a doubles game at nine tomorrow."

"Yes, us, too," said Betty Wilkinson. "Thank you for the lovely dinner."

At this, all four wives fled to the guest room to retrieve their coats. The men stood up and jangled keys in their pockets. Jerry came downstairs, and we said goodnight to our guests. Over the next few minutes the house emptied itself. In my misery, I had forgotten all about Edgar who lurched out of the downstairs bathroom and said, "Where did everybody go? Is the party over already?"

"Pretty much," said Jerry. We trailed into the living room and sat down.

Corinne came in with three glasses of brandy on a tray, then noiselessly retreated into the kitchen. We sipped our brandy and smoked in silence. My

uncle used to tell me before a rodeo that nine times out of ten, things turned out better than you expected them to. This was a classic tenth time.

Edgar said again how sorry he was.

Jerry said, "Skip it. The whole thing was Mattie's fault, not yours. I don't know what got into her tonight. I guess I never should have told her about your eye."

I kept my mouth shut. I was proud of that, and I still am.

Corinne came back in. She had changed out of her uniform, and I followed her into the kitchen to pay her. I didn't know how much of the drama with Edgar's eye she had caught, but whatever she missed, Evie Cunningham would tell her. She said if I didn't need anything else, she'd be going to catch her bus. I said I'd be happy to drive her home but Corinne said there was no need of that: she liked riding the DC Transit bus at night when it wasn't crowded. Then she smiled at me and said, "Besides, white people sometimes wind up getting lost on my side of town."

I looked at her to see how I was meant to understand this, but her face was as unreadable as a cat's. She smiled serenely, as if she and I had just agreed that rain was coming. I had wanted to say something to her about Mattie's bad behavior. Surely she had endured wildness in her own family. But I saw it was

hopeless. She had switched off some receptor now that she was off duty, and I would never have the right to talk to her as one mother to another. My stifled impulse shamed me, and my face felt hot as I counted out her money and put it in an envelope. She took it from me with a magician's adroitness, locking it with a snap in the depths of her pocketbook.

Summoning the last of my courage, I said, "You were perfectly wonderful this evening, Corinne. Could I possibly call you to help me sometime with another dinner?"

She looked at me with a trace of pity. "I'm sorry, but I'm afraid I'm just too busy with all my regular ladies. It was only because Mrs. Carter cancelled her party that I was free for tonight."

"I see!" I said in a bright voice that couldn't have fooled her into supposing I didn't mind. "We were lucky to get you this once, then. Are you sure I can't give you a ride? At least to the bus stop?"

"No, ma'am. If you drove me there, I'd just have longer to wait."

"Well, good night, then. And thank you again for your help." She left by the kitchen door, closing it before I finished speaking.

When I came back into the living room, Edgar Chalfant was standing up, shrugging into his stained raincoat. "Well, I'd better get back to the hotel. My

taxi will be here in a minute. Thanks for a great meal, Janet. It was nice to take a break from hospital food for one night.” He stooped and grazed my cheek before saying goodbye to Jerry. The taxi driver honked his horn and he went out whistling into the spring night.

Upstairs, Jerry unzipped my dress and I collapsed on the bed. He hung his madras jacket in the closet. With his back turned, he said, “Well, except for Mattie, it wasn’t bad for a first try.”

“Are you kidding? That’s all anybody will remember.”

“I guess it was pretty awful.” He threw his shirt into the clothes hamper. “But the food was great. They loved the food. And who was that woman you hired? She was terrific. We should get her again.”

“That was the famous Corinne Blake. She won’t be back, I’m sorry to say.”

“Really? She said that?”

“Yes. I asked her, and she said she wouldn’t have any openings. She’s got her regular ladies and they keep her busy.”

“Oh, well. That’s that, then. Still, we’ll manage.”

I went off to brush my teeth before he could say there was no place to go but up. I checked on the children. Ned was asleep, holding his stuffed penguin. Mattie was reading under the covers with a flashlight but I was too exhausted

to get into it with her, so I pretended I hadn't noticed and slunk back to our room. Jerry was in bed reading a spy novel. He turned off his lamp and rolled over. I got in and snaked an arm around his waist. I thought about spending the evening in a tent lit by a kerosene lamp in the Brazilian jungle, drinking whiskey with Jerry and other members of our archaeological expedition. We would play poker and sort through the day's finds of axe handles and arrow heads. Someone would be good at telling ghost stories.

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