

A Man Alone

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II

Buffet

Geisha girls. I don't know why that thought crosses my mind every single time I see an Asian girl. It's just erotic. There's a mystique surrounding the black hair and slim eyes. I could never shake it. It's inborn. It shouldn't be in my blood; my dad didn't fight in Viet Nam and my grandfathers both fought in Europe during World War II (the sequel based on the immensely popular First World War).

As Zach and I filled our plates going up and down the buffet (sweet and sour chicken, General Tso's chicken, lo mein, egg drop soup, crab meat rangoons, egg rolls, shrimp fried rice, almond cookies, fortune cookies, onion rings [?], Jell-O [okay]), I kept eying the cute Chinese girl that stood next to the soda machine.

I sat down so I could face her.

"What did you do the other night?"

I set the egg drop soup aside for the moment as it was piping hot. "Not a lot. Celebrated my mom's birthday alone. Fell asleep with her picture. I don't really want to discuss it." I didn't mention the empty bottle of Southern Comfort that was at my feet as I lay passed out. It had become something of a solitary tradition since I was nineteen. Zach held up his hands. "Didn't you have dinner last night?"

He nodded. "That guy Dale and I went out after work."

I narrowed my eyes. "That so?"

"Mmm." Zach crunched an egg roll dipped in sweet and sour sauce.

I waited for him to continue, but he didn't. She was avoiding eye contact with me—the geisha girl. "Tell me about it."

His eyebrows arched. "Like what?"

"Where did you go?"

"Roma."

That's that new Hawaiian burger joint, I thought to myself and smiled.

"Don't you need a reservation to get in there?"

"Yeah, Dale made one in advance."

"I see." I tasted my egg drop soup and enjoyed the saltiness as it slid down my throat.

"Did Dale drive, or what?"

"Yeah, he drove from work and dropped me at my car afterwards."

"Drinks beforehand?"

"Yes."

"What?"

"What?"

I shrugged. "Just curious as to what you guys drank."

"Millers for me and fuzzy navels for him."

"Ah. Dinner?"

"I had a steak."

I found it hard to not smile. "And Dale. What did he have?"

"Chicken."

"What kind?"

"Grilled."

"Did you split the check?"

"No, actually he picked it up."

"Oh my."

"Oh my, what?"

"Did he—did he open the door for you, too?" My my my, the chicken chunks on my plate were tender—I love that.

"What?"

"Do you know what you experienced last night?" The look on his face was priceless and his silence was astonishingly appropriate. "You had your very first date with a guy. Congratulations." I chewed on a large mouthful of lo mein.

"No no. There was no date. It was just dinner."

"Trust me on this one. You had a date."

"Well, then this is a date, too. This right here. You and I...are on a date."

Poor guy. "No, this is lunch. This is you and me sitting here serving ourselves at the Super China Buffet. You paid for you; I paid for me. We drove separately. There are no fuzzy navels here."

"This is crazy. You and I have gone out before where one of us drove the other and had drinks before dinner and have even picked up the check for both of us. Why was last night any different?"

The General wasn't as good as usual. I pushed his chicken aside. "See, we've been friends for years. I know you. You know me. Wasn't last night the first time you and Dale did anything together outside of work?"

He nodded, beginning to grasp the reality. "Let me ask you this: did Dale smile a lot and tilt his head when he spoke to you?"

"There was some tilting, I guess. And—and smiling."

"Did you do it back?"

"I'm sure I smiled once in a while, but I don't think I tilted. Does that matter?"

"It matters if you didn't want to flirt back, sure. At the end of the date, what did you do?"

"After dinner we had another couple drinks and then he drove me back to my car. And that was it."

"When he dropped you off, did the two of you talk in his car for a while?"

Or did you get out right away?"

"I think we talked for a minute or so."

"How did you say goodbye?"

"Handshake with an 'I'll see you tomorrow at work.'"

"Did the handshake linger from him? Did you get the sense that he didn't want to let go, rather he wanted to pull you closer?"

Carefully: "No, I did not."

"Oh, then maybe I'm just seeing things where nothing exists." I got up to fill a new plate. This time the Chinese girl looked at me and didn't look away when our eyes met. She stood by the fruit and I went over pretending to pick out some choice musk melon. I took two wedges and looked at her.

She still did not look away. "How are you today?" I asked.

She said something. God, it was awful. Some of that Chinese shit that they talk. Like I understood what the hell she said. "All right, then," I told her as I returned to the table. Crazy man, turned me right off. Call me a nut, but I like to know what a girl's saying to me.

Zach was still stunned. "Relax," I told him. "It's not like you tongued him or anything." Time to move on. "Did you want to do the religion thing?"

"What, now?"

"Sure. Let's go."

He rolled his eyes and first got up to refill his Sprite but not his plate.

He must've lost his appetite. Thinking you had a gay experience can do that for a homophobe. He sat back down and asked, "Ready?"

"Ready."

"Creation."

"Evolution." Good ass almond cookies. I often take a stack with me.

"Why?" he asked, switching it up on me.

"Scientific fact."

"Science changes its mind all the time. The world is flat. Earth is the center of the universe. The universe was created by a Big Bang. All false."

"Scientific theories adapt based on well-substantiated observations and experiments. Religion is more static than a rock. Religion ignores and twists facts that don't support its propaganda. The world is round and not at the center of anything but the moon's orbit. And the universe was created by the Big Bang."

"Prove it."

"Shit. The Bible says that the Earth is 10,000 years old. We can use some kind of uranium dating to prove that many objects are millions of years old. How can that be if the world isn't more than 10,000 years old?"

"God made it look that way."

"Please. That's the easy way out. How about the Great Flood? There is absolutely no way that it happened. It's impossible for that much rain to fall that fast. Wait, I know: God's will."

"Evolution?"

"Yes."

"We're descended from monkeys?"

"Sure. The Big Bang created the universe. Then amino acids appeared on this planet something like three and a half billion years ago. Two billion years ago they became single celled organisms and then they became more complex: fish, dinosaurs, mammals. A monkey—or whatever primate it was, maybe a chimp—evolved into a Neanderthal and then to the homo-erectus and then to the homo-sapiens. I mean, there's steps in there that I skipped, but I'm no paleontologist. I'm just some guy."

"Amino acids just appeared one day?"

"Three and a half billion years ago, yeah."

"How?"

"I don't know. They just did."

"If that's not good enough for God, then it can't be used for you, either."

"Fine. Lightning struck a puddle and amino acids were formed from that spark."

"Sure. Then how did we get from apes to man? How are we intelligent? How did we get that spark of self-consciousness?"

"Chimps are smart little things, the damn dirty apes. They can use sign language. They can mimic our behavior to incredible extremes—"

"Mimic is all they do."

"They understand the sign language they are taught. We work the same way. You're wearing a blue shirt, but if I was taught that it was green, I wouldn't know any better. I'd believe it. We aren't that far from apes—a few million years only. In that time why can't our language skills and mental skills have increased enough to allow us to be self aware? And who's to say that in another few million years, today's monkeys won't be just as intelligent as we are now?"

"I don't buy it."

"Oh, but you buy that some guy in the sky you can't hear, see, taste, smell, or touch just made all this in six days."

"Sure."

"And no one's ever heard from Him—except Moses who brought down ten rules for us to follow. But let's back up, Adam was the first man. And Eve was made from one of his ribs. What kind of bullshit is that?"

"It's in the Bible."

"So what. Bible thumpers take it at face value without ever questioning it because it's blasphemous to do so. Well, I think there's something intrinsically wrong with not being able to question. Just because some book says this doesn't make it so—I don't care how old it is."

"It's a matter of faith."

"Well, how about this: If God made all this 10,000 years ago, what was it like before that?"

"There was no before that."

"Huh?"

"Before God created the heavens and the earth, there was nothing."

"Well, was He just sitting around scratching His balls, or what?"

"There was no before, either."

"Huh?"

"God created time at the same time He created the universe."

"I am puzzled."

"God created the world from nothing—I know this breaks the law that states matter can neither be created nor destroyed, but it is called creation for a reason. He can do whatever He wants. Now, God couldn't've been waiting around until He decided to create the universe because that would imply a change in God's mind and since God is infallible; He can't change His mind because He's always right. So God created time and the world together. That's why it says, 'In the beginning'."

"Oh. But that's just a theory. I need proof. Gimme proof."

"All right. Your existence is a link in a chain. You're supported by your job and your job is supported by your company which is supported by the companies that buy from your company and those companies are supported by the companies that buy goods from those companies that are supported by people that purchase those finished goods from those companies and those

people are supported by their jobs and so on. But a chain is just a chain. What supports the chain?"

"Free enterprise."

"Okay, business was not the way to go. Think of a room full of mirrors and light is bouncing from mirror to mirror."

"Light reflects, not bounces."

"Fine. Where did the light come from? Mirrors don't give off light; they only 'reflect' it. The light had to enter the system of mirrors from outside of it."

"A flashlight. The sun. Those examples are not proof."

"Prove there is no God."

"Look around. Are you a happy man? I thought that God created this place so we'd be happy."

"He created Eden until Adam and Eve fucked it up and got us all banished."

"Original Sin, right. We are all sinners because Adam and Eve disobeyed God, so unless we take Jesus into our hearts, we go to Hell. Even a baby who dies of SIDS will go to Hell because he or she was guilty of Original Sin and wasn't able to repent because she didn't have the ability to do it."

"The mentally ill who commit crimes are judged based on their illness, not their acts. A child who dies would be judged the same. But an adult that has lived for fifty years—hell, even twenty years—has had the opportunity to turn to religion. If they haven't, they go to Hell."

"Until Jesus, God was a vengeful deity. He sent Jesus to show us the way. He used to smote people, and then His boy comes to Earth to teach and heal. He changed His tactics. I thought that change implied imperfection. If there is a God, then He's imperfect. I would think the first clue of that imperfection would be the guy outside the doors right now with a cup of change in his hand. But we all ignore that. So God goes from vengeful to benevolent. That is a big shift. Did He have a moment of clarity? We're always taught that God's perfect. Now we find that He's not. So, if the God in the Bible isn't perfect, then maybe He doesn't exist. And if there is no God, then it would stand that evolution is right because there are no other theories out there that we hear about."

Zach stopped and grabbed his cup. Sprite looked like water with bubbles.

"Good point."

"Thank you. Next time let me take religion."

"All right." He held out his hand and I shook it. Good game. "Well done. Wonderful theory."

"I just thought of that," I said calmly, feeling somewhat amazed.

"So, what are you up to this weekend?"

"I'm not sure."

"Going out with Tom and Justin?"

"I doubt it." I semi-consciously touched my bruised and healing knuckles.

"Are you going to do something with Steph?"

I chewed my lip.

"Are you going to answer me?"

"I don't know. She hasn't called me in a while."

"Have you called her?"

"Not as such."

"Give her a call."

We sat for another hour nibbling and sipping before going our respective ways.