

Block-"The Party"

I stopped answering my phone unless I knew the number or I was expecting a call. My parents thought I was being paranoid, but they came around to my way of thinking after my grandmother came uncomfortably close to giving twenty thousand dollars in Google Play gift cards to a scammer who convinced her it was the only way to properly settle her debt to them. What these people do with the gift cards, I have no idea. But I do know that after this, phone calls became something that no one in the family really looked forward to anymore. Why then, with all my supposed reluctance to phone calls and my own experience trying to assure my grandmother that she didn't owe anyone nearly that much money, did I answer the phone on May 10th, 2016? Why did I invite into my life a change no amount of therapy could manage or medication could quash? In truth, I still don't know.

If I remember right, it was early in the day, at least by the standards of a college student who had not yet started their summer job. I was staying with my parents for a few weeks before heading back to school and starting a research project for a few months. Though I was still in touch with some friends from high school, they were all off at summer internships, vacations, or otherwise occupied. My days were taken up mostly by video games, biking, the occasional lunch with my mom and sleeping in. It was relaxing, for the most part. Some days though, the boredom would creep in. I'd wander around my parents house, wondering what to do before inevitably settling into another bout of absentmindedly staring at YouTube videos. So when my phone rang and a number I did not recognize filled the screen, I suppose that maybe I *do* know why I answered. I was bored out of my mind and I wanted something, anything to break up the monotony for even a little bit.

“Hel—” I started, but the robotic voice on the other end of the line started up immediately, cutting me off.

“T.O.O Events is hosting a party tonight at Jewel Lake. It will start at 6 PM. You are invited to attend. There will be wine and cheese. A text will arrive soon with your invitation attached.”

And then the call ended. I stared at the now blank screen for a moment, wondering what in the hell I had just heard. I was used to spam calls trying to keep me on the line as long as possible, not giving me five sentences in a stilted robotic voice and hanging up. A quick Google search told me that T.O.O Events was in fact a real event planning company servicing the Twin Cities and the seven county metro area. I doubted how effective of an organization they were if their method for distributing invitations to their events was to cold call random people with the most jarring voice you could imagine. I wasn’t going to pay it any further attention. I was going to put my phone down, fire up the Playstation or the computer, and veg out like I had been doing for a week now. But my phone buzzed once again, this time a text message popped up on screen. It was the promised invitation to the party.

‘You are invited to a party 🎉 at Jewel 💎 Lake hosted by T.O.O events tonight at 6 PM. We will have wine 🍷 and cheese 🧀 and an incredible opportunity for everyone. We hope to see you there.’

And suddenly, it all made sense. “An incredible opportunity”. This was some Multi-Level Marketing thing. Whoever was funding the party would get people to the lake, get them a little tipsy off of free wine, and pitch their essential oils, or protein shakes, or whatever it was. And this all assumed that there was even a party to begin with. I didn’t put it past a company with robot invites to just forgo the party altogether. I still didn’t understand the invitation distribution

method, and the abundance of emojis was a little off putting, but I was satisfied that I had figured it out. I slipped my phone back into my pocket and settled down again, ready to let my brain rot a bit.

Hours passed. I did very little, bordering on absolutely nothing all day. I would've argued that this was my right as a student home for a few weeks, the semester only having ended a few days prior. But life comes knocking and drags us kicking and screaming to our responsibilities, whether we want it or not. My responsibility took the form of preparing dinner for myself and my parents. This was a fair ask, I thought and I found myself feeling in much the way my mother must have when I was a child, constantly thinking about what to make for dinner. A dirty secret, one that I am sure would have been employed were I not a picky eater as a kid, is that if you have mushrooms, onion, garlic, veggie stock, sour cream and assorted spices, you're never more than forty five minutes away from vegetarian stroganoff. I used this to my advantage many times during the school year, and now that the clock was creeping closer and closer to "dinner time", it felt right to use it now.

Of course, a large part (the only) of that dirty secret was having all the ingredients and my cursory glance at my parent's refrigerator revealed that the mushroom situation was more dire than I had realized. I did some quick math. Ten minutes to the store, ten minutes to grab what I needed, ten minutes back. I'd still be cooking when mom and dad got home from work, but I decided that was acceptable and headed out.

There was a part of me that told me to just say "Screw it". To make something else, to make a pared down stroganoff, to order a pizza. But I had set my mind to mushroom stroganoff.

So I got into my car and drove the ten minutes to the local grocery store. And in doing so, I passed by Jewel Lake.

I was surprised to see anything going on at the lake. Despite the invitation that I had received, I wasn't even sold on the idea that there was a party. But as I passed the lake, I saw what indeed looked like a rather large party being set up on the beach. Two semi-trucks, white save for the black "T.O.O Events" emblazoned on the sides of their trailers, were being unloaded by employees in high visibility vests. Elsewhere, tables were being set up by and decorated with rather nice looking table cloths. A catering van was pulling into the parking lot as I drove past. This was in fact looking like a big deal. My immediate rejection of the entire idea of the party suddenly felt rash.

But this feeling had to be put aside. I had a dinner to make. On my way back, the event was looking even more put together. They had even set up an entire stage. I still felt like going to this party would get me on some marketing list I didn't necessarily want to be on, but would it necessarily be *that* bad? The car's stereo told me it was 4:45 PM. I could make dinner and not be too late to the official start of the party. Fashionably late, they call it.

Dinner was nothing special. Tasty, certainly, but I had made the dish so often I was akin to saying a word so often it loses meaning temporarily. Sustenance and nothing more. I assisted with the clean up, changed into clothing more acceptable for a party, and excused myself for the evening. Neither my mom or dad asked questions about where I was going. It wasn't that they didn't care about my whereabouts or well-being, but they trusted me to make smart decisions, to take care of myself.

Stepping out of my car and into the parking lot of the beach, I immediately began to question my decision to come, based solely on the basis that someone had organized a beach party in Minnesota in early May. The temperature was still not “summery” and the cool evening breeze combined with the lake chilled me more than I anticipated. But I was here and I had gone to the effort of putting on some nice clothes, so I decided to roll with it.

The typical entrance to the beach was blocked by a sign reading “Closed for private event”. A bored looking man dressed in a button down shirt and khakis sat at a podium beside the sign. Hewasn’t the type of person I would expect to see checking invitations or IDs or whatever it was he was doing. The guy was built – more of a nightclub bouncer than anything. As I approached, his expression changed from “I want to go home” to “corporate mandated happiness”.

“Name and Invitation?”

His face may have adopted a faux smile, but his tone certainly hadn’t. It was as if Ben Stein was checking me in. Not that I blamed him, this was probably the most boring station to be at. He had to be hoping for someone to get a little too rowdy so he could toss their ass into the parking lot.

“Ben Lawson”, I said as I fished my phone from my pocket and pulled up the text from earlier. I felt nervous for some reason, like I was trying to use a fake ID to get into a bar. I assumed it was because this guy could crack my head like an egg if he decided he didn’t want me here.

The bouncer barely glanced at my phone before turning his attention to his clipboard.

“Lawson, Lawson ... There we go”. He scanned his list, made a small mark on his paper and waved me in. I stepped past him and onto the path to the beach. By my watch, it was 6:30 PM. Fashionably late indeed.
