

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 and excused myself for the evening.

The downside of visiting home is that I was working with a fraction of my usual wardrobe. I didn't have a great handle on what appropriate dress for this party would be. Passing by the lake didn't give me a ton to work with. Neither did the robot who called me or the emoji-filled text. I fixated on the word "wine" in the invitation. Wine was fancy, wasn't it.

Nothing in my wardrobe really screamed fancy, even if you considered my expanded selection back at my apartment, several hours away.

I kept it simple. Grey t-shirt, pink button down, and khakis. Throw in a light sweatshirt for good measure (again, this was a May evening in Minnesota) and I figured I would look acceptable. After a quick check in the mirror, I grabbed my wallet, phone, and keys and headed out.

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 sound of the party wafted out in the parking lot. Music, laughter, all the typical sounds of reverie. 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. He wasn'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 and made a small mark on his paper. I expected him to wave me in, but he just looked at me.

"You're late."

The words chilled me. He hadn't wavered from his flat tone, but something in his voice caught me off guard. We stared at one another for a beat before he waved me in. I wanted to respond but nothing came to mind. I stepped past him and onto the path to the beach. By my watch, it was 6:30 PM. Fashionably late indeed.

The sound of the party grew louder as I traversed the short path. When I stepped onto the sand of the beach, I had let go of any feelings of unease. I was going to have fun, dammit.

The festivities spread across a wide swath of the beach. There was the stage that I had seen, currently featuring a karaoke machine and a guy really giving his all on the high notes of "Take On Me". In front of the stage, a fire was roaring in a pit, the area around it peppered by adirondack chairs. Those sitting in them were eating and drinking the promised cheese and wine

while chatting and laughing at the brave and thankfully nearly completed choice of karaoke song. There were games set up a couple dozen meters from the fire, far enough that those playing didn't have to worry about running into or throwing anything into the fire. A volleyball game was in full swing, a few cornhole games were seemingly getting competitive, and a few of the jockier looking guys were tossing a football around, making diving catches into the sand.

“Can I help you?”

I flinched pretty hard at the sound of the voice. I had become so entranced with watching people that I had not noticed a woman approaching me. Her black polo shirt was emblazoned with white letters. T.O.O Events. She was a staff member.

“Oh, sorry”, I stammered out, embarrassed at my reaction, “I was just taking things in.”

The woman smiled and I was immediately at ease, embarrassment erased. It was a warm smile. The sort you'd get from a grandparent during the holidays.

“Oh, as you can see, we have all sorts of activities set up”, she gestured to the stage, the fire, and the games, “And we have drinks and hors d'oeuvres at that that table and we'll have sandwiches ready for everyone shortly”, gesturing to another table where there were indeed bottles of wine, water as well as cheese and crackers set up.

She stared, as though she expected me to say something. I wasn't entirely sure what, so I thanked her and made my way over to the drinks table. She smiled again. If this was some sort of MLM thing in disguise, at least they made you feel welcome.

I am not a wine drinker. I never have been. I had assumed that there would be other drinks, cheap beer or simple cocktails. Something for those of us who weren't wine drinkers. I was apparently mistaken as the only thing present at the refreshments table was a rather impressive selection of wine, with a smaller smattering of bottled water. There wasn't even any

white wine. It was all red. I dislike white wine. I *hate* red wine. Sighing inwardly at the only problem I had with the party so far, I grabbed a water bottle and made my way to the fire. I didn't want to simply butt into one of the on going games. I figured I would sit by the fire and wait for something to wrap up and sneak in at that point.

The chair closest to me that also happened to be empty was close enough to the to enjoy watching the flames dance in the pit but far enough that I couldn't feel its warmth, making me thankful that I had decided to bring a sweatshirt. A few small groups had formed, conversations filled the air around me. I focused on one, then another, then another, trying to find a conversation that I could jump in without much trouble. As I was focusing on the fire and the conversations around me, something from the corner of my eye caught my attention, and I tilted my head slightly to see what was happening.

A girl had taken up residence in the chair next to me. I nodded, smiled, and said "Hello", in the way that you do when a stranger approaches you and I turned my attention back to the fire.

"What are you looking at?"

This time, I didn't flinch at the unexpected sound of someone talking to me. I turned to face the speaker, the girl who had sat next to me.

"I'm sorry?" In my surprise, I hadn't fully processed her question. It shouldn't be too much of a shock to learn that I am not used to people, especially women speaking to me out of the blue.

"You're staring at something pretty intently. What's up?"

I was still a little in shock. This woman was very pretty and she was talking to *me*.

"Oh. It's the fire. I like watching the flames. I think it's pretty."

She laughed. "Fair enough. Another question: Are you OK? You seem a little off."

It's not every day that you get invited to tell someone that you're surprised that they'd give you the time of day, and I struggled for a moment internally before responding.

"I guess I just wasn't expecting someone to just sit down and start chatting, is all".

"You're at a *party*" She looked at me like I was crazy. "OK let's try this." She stuck her hand out and smiled at me. "Hi, I'm Lavinia. What's your name?"

I returned the smile as I took her hand and shook it, my heart skipping a beat as I did.

"I'm Ben. It's nice to meet you, Lavinia."

After that, conversation got easier. I started looking less at the fire and more at my new found fireside companion. I learned that she too was in town for a bit before going back to school and that she had also gotten a weird invitation to this party. As we talked, we got away from talking about the party and more about ourselves. We discussed college majors (Astronomy for me, English for her), hobbies (while she didn't share my enjoyment of video games, we learned that we both enjoyed biking), and even our families.

As the sun got lower and lower in the sky, I noticed Lavinia starting to shiver. I decided to risk sounding cliché.

"Would you like my sweatshirt?" I probably sounded incredibly awkward, but I hoped that I played it off cool enough.

She laughed, a sound I had become accustomed to over the last hour or so. "I'm actually going to see if I can find the restroom and get this topped off". She pointed at her wine glass. "I might take you up on that in a little bit though."

She stood and walked away. The sun was now low enough that the fire was casting long shadows across the sand and I followed her shadow until it faded into the night. Five minutes passed, then ten. When half an hour had gone by without her return, I allowed myself to feel a

pang of sadness. While I never expect anyone to feel like they're stuck talking to me, I guess I would've appreciated a "Hey, I'm gonna go chat with some other people now". Regardless, I had been having a good night. I had already gotten more out of it than I had ever expected. I wasn't going to let this ruin my night.

I stared into the fire again, the flames seeming even larger and more impressive in the rapidly fading sun. I could hear the wood cracking under the intense heat, even sitting as far from the fire as I was. Fascinated, I watched the flames dance up and down for a long time. I let my brain revert to "school mode" for just a short time as I considered the forces and effects that shape the flames and that make it dance so beautifully.

I shook my head. There would be time for school later. For now, I needed more water. I decided that Lavinia probably wasn't coming back at this point and left my seat, making my way to the drinks table again. The table was being restocked by another T.O.O employee, who didn't seem to notice my presence. As I approached, I could hear a low sound, almost like a drum beat. It wasn't until I got within a foot or two of the table that I realized the sound was a chant from the employee stocking the table. They grabbed a bottle of wine, chanted a short phrase and placed the bottle on the table. It reminded me of the Catholic masses that my parents dragged me to as a kid. I hadn't realized that T.O.O Events was a religious organization, but it didn't bother me, so long as they didn't kick out non-believers.

My footsteps were dampened by the sand. This time, I was the one who did the startling. I tapped lightly on the table, shocking the poor guy, who dropped the bottle onto the sand.

"Oh, I am so sorry!" I rushed to pick up the bottle and handed it back to the man. "I didn't mean to startle you. Are you blessing the wine? What language was that, Latin?"

I didn't and still don't know what Latin sounds like. The guy could've told me it was Portuguese and I would have believed him.

"Uh, yeah. Sorry. Just a personal thing, I hope that doesn't make you uncomfortable." The guy seemed genuinely sorry and I wasn't even drinking the wine, so I just smiled.

"No worries, man. Could I just get a water bottle?"

He passed me a bottle straight from his cooler, which I appreciated immensely. As I turned to go back to my chair, I could hear the chanting begin again, low and slow.
