

LEFTOVERS

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Ralph Fentriss put the phone down, scowling.

His wife, Emily, still seated at the breakfast table, glanced up from the morning newspaper and stopped sipping her coffee.

"Who was that?" she said.

"Beryl," said Ralph, still scowling.

"Beryl?"

"You know. Sam's girlfriend, mistress, almost his wife, lover, Beryl what's-her-name."

"Ah, yes," said Emily Fentriss, buttering her toast. "Beryl Veronique Glass. That's the only way I remember: with the whole name. Veronique, especially. Do you have a headache?"

Ralph Fentriss touched the scowl fixed to his forehead.

"I'll be damned," he said. "How did that get there?"

"What did Beryl Veronique Glass want, Ralph?"

"Us," he said, rubbing his brow.

"Us?" Emily abandoned her toast.

"For dinner," he added.

"Oh, my," said Emily.

"You can say that again."

"How many years has it been? Since Sam died, that is."

"Three, maybe four. Four, I guess."

"Can't we get out of it? The dinner, I mean."

"Tell me how," he said.

"Oh, my," said Emily Fentriss again.

"Why," said Ralph Fentriss, seated in the restaurant, "do they keep calling me? Old flames, old friends of our daughters, former lovers, lamebrain suitors, flimsy girlfriends, friends of friends, first cousins to distant acquaintances. And now, tonight, what in hell are we doing here? Where is she?"

"If I recall correctly," said Emily Fentriss, drinking her second glass of champagne in preparation, "she was always late. And as for your first question, they call because you keep answering."

"You can't just hang up on people."

"No. Promise to call back, then don't."

"I can't do that."

"I know, and that's the cross you'll have to bear."

"You don't call back ever, do you?"

"No, and I have a better life for it. Beneath this silk bosom, no bleeding heart."

"Bleeding heart?"

"Every drunk in a bar thinks you're the Second Coming, every homeless bum thinks you're Jesus of

Nazareth arrived to carpenter their souls, every prostitute thinks you're the lawyer to beg her case, every politician knows that your heart lies under your wallet and pours on the banana oil, every bartender tells you his life story instead of you telling him yours, every cop looks at your face and doesn't give you a ticket, every rabbi asks you to lecture Friday nights even though you're a fallen-away Baptist, every—"

"All right, all right," he said.

"I just ran out of gas anyway. Tell me again, who are you?"

"Winner of the Bleeding Heart Red Cross New Year's Award."

"And don't you forget it. Pipe down! Here she comes."

"Beryl Veronique!" Ralph Fentriss cried, with mock joy.

"Just Beryl will do," said the young woman, very lovely and, for now, very quiet.

"Sit down, sit down."

"I am, don't you see. Is that champagne? My God, this glass isn't big enough. What are you waiting for?"

He filled her glass till it overflowed.

She drank it down and gasped: "Please, sir, I want some more."

"This is going to be a long evening," murmured Emily Fentriss.

"Beg pardon," said Beryl Veronique Glass.

"Fill the glass, and mine, too, while you're at it."

With a death-rictus smile Ralph Fentriss refilled the glasses.

"Well, it's good we're all together again," he said.

"Not really," said Beryl Veronique Glass.

"How long has it been?"

"Four years, one month, and three days," said the young woman.

"Since last we met?"

"Since he died."

"Sam?"

"Why else would I be here? Top this, will you?"

He topped the champagne.

"Still bother you, does he? Sam, I mean."

"He never lets up."

"Even though he is long gone?"

"What has death got to do with it? I wonder, can you sue the deceased for harassment?"

"I never thought. Sam was persistent in life, and, I gather, dominates the moments even now that he's out of here. Go on." Fentriss glanced at his watch.

"Why did you call us, of all people?"

"Because I have a new boyfriend."

"Good for you!"

"No, not good. We're both fingernails-on-the-edge-of-the-cliff. I reach up, he reaches down, but we've never touched. More than a year now, a year and two months, I've been seeing him but every

time I see him I start crying. Sam again. Always Sam."

Ralph Fentriss took a healthy swig and dared to say: "Might I make a suggestion? Your new friend, if, finally, you let him cover you, that should put a lid on the coffin."

"I beg your pardon?!"

"I'm saying, if you let your new friend make love to you, really cover you in the old Biblical sense, then Samuel, Sammy, Sam, will really be dead. At last," he added.

Beryl Veronique Glass stared at him for the longest moment until Ralph Fentriss glanced down at his dinner. Then she burst into tears.

"Don't," he said.

"I've got to," she said, and let the tears flow, with very little sound. When she was finished she examined her salad and said, "My God, look what I've done to my lettuce."

"It probably needed some salt anyway," he said, with a nervous smile.

"It did," she said. "He never has."

"Never has what?"

"My new friend. Never has. Covered me."

Fentriss ordered a good wine, waited for it to be opened and aired, and at last said, "It's time."

"I guess so."

"You know it is. Shut the casket and close the grave."

"Ohmigod," she wailed and the tears flowed again.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Don't be. I needed to hear that. Is it all right?"

"Is what all right?"

"If he covers me? You were his best friends. So I'm asking your permission."

"Permission? Just go ahead!"

"No, no, I can't, don't you see. Because Sam loved you and you loved him so much, so long, so intensely, since your lives were so together, since you knew everything about one another, since you went to school with him and were in business with him and, a long time ago, loved the same women together, well, then, don't you see? You're all that Sam had as family. I had to come tonight for the divorce."

Fentriss sank back in his chair. "My God, is that what it is then, after all this time? Not just a separation, not just a partnership over, but a divorce, both legal and religious?"

"Religious is more like it. He worshiped both of you. He worshiped me. It's hard to finally," she paused and almost blurted, "get it over with. Sometimes at three in the morning the phone rings. I'm afraid to answer. He might be calling to say I love you."

"He can't do that."

"He might. I'm even afraid of answering it at breakfast, we had some wonderful breakfasts, or lunch, the lunches were amazing, do you remember the lunches? At the Grand Cascade or out in the country at the Hôtellerie du Basbreau or out at Pierrefonds in that no-more-than-a-sandwich-stand, but he brought the best wine along and we drank it and the sandwiches tasted like manna. Or out at Avillon at the Hôtel de la Poste, how many Hôtels de la Poste are there in France—?"

"I—" said Ralph Fentriss.

"Where they had that incredible tomato soup that Sam helped invent with a thin crust over the top you had to break through to get to the soup. Do you remember that day we had three orders of soup and nothing else but three bottles of Le Corton with it and it was lucky they had a room where we stayed the night, we couldn't have driven back to Paris, and you slept in the bathroom—"

"I didn't want to interfere—"

"And Sam said come to bed with us, just avert your gaze—"

"Good old Sam."

"And he meant it."

"Oh, yes, he did. This was before your time, Emily, my dear."

"No, it wasn't," said his wife. "It was just six years ago when Wilma was fourteen."

"Oh," he said.

"It was all right. I gave you permission to go. Nothing seemed wrong if Sam said so."

"Good old Sam. Anyway I stayed in the bathroom and more than averted my gaze, I stuffed Kleenex in my ears."

"I hope we didn't offend you."

"A few moans and yells of joy never hurt anyone." He poured more wine.

"And do you remember how Sam told the mayor of Paris to make the Eiffel Tower a different color? The nerve! And they did it. When they installed lights all over, a lovely soft orange, a warm sepia color, like the marble in most of the Parisian buildings. And he fought to keep some of those old dirty buses with the platforms in back where the young men could mob and yell at pretty girls as they crossed Paris. Sam did that."

"My God, yes, he did!"

"And don't you remember he was the one, no one else, not even the Hemingway Society, who got the *Weekly Tour* magazine to list Harry's Bar in that little alley just off L'Opéra where you could have a fine hot dog and a glass of beer, cheap, and hear the bartender remember Papa. And then, just around the corner at the Place Vendôme, Sam convinced the manager at the Hotel Ritz to reopen the Hemingway Bar, beautifully lit, all warm citrons and orange umbers, with Papa's picture and his

books all around, and they served grappa, which no one much cared for but Papa liked it! And remember it was Sam who ran that contest in the *International Herald Tribune* under the headline WHO REALLY IS BURIED IN NAPOLEON'S TOMB and proved it was General Grant! And—"

"Hold on!" said Ralph Fentriss. "You'll run dry. Wet your whiskers."

She watched him pour the Le Corton.

"That was the wine we drank at Avillon!" she said, amazed.

He stared at it and blinked. "How come I ordered it?" he said.

A tear ran down her cheek.

"Do you know something?" he said.

"What?"

"I have a feeling you really loved Sam."

"Yes! And that's why you've got to help me exorcise him. Tell me some terrible things about him so I can begin to disrespect and then not like and maybe, at last, hate him and tell him to leave."

"Let me think. Try to recall something really despicable that he did, something truly inhumane. Ah. Mmmm. Ah. Well."

"And?"

"Can't think of a thing. Oh, sure, Sam was a cad and a bounder and a womanizer, all those good things. But do you know, it fit him like a new pair of spats, or a hunting cap, or the wrong color shoes

to go with a dark suit. He no sooner did a terrible thing than it just melted away. Everyone said, oh that Sam, my God, that awful boy. There, did you hear? He never grew up. I haven't done much of it myself. But he made an art and occupation out of it. You caught him peeing off the roof and he shrugged and said, checking the weather for tomorrow. Found him in bed with your current love and he gave you that fourteen-year-old lad's blink and said, wanted to find out just what you see in her! Good show. Continue! And he sailed out the door. And you were so busy laughing, yes, laughing, you forgot you were in a rage? My God! Remember when he went to France for the Two Hundredth Anniversary of the French Revolution and told all his Parisian friends he had returned for their Failed Revolution? And before they could kill him he listed all their failures! The Revolution, ending with the Terror and Napoleon. The monarchy come and gone, the 1870 Paris Commune when the French fought the Hessians outside and killed each other inside the city. 1914? Failure. We had to save France. 1940, 1944? We fought and brought de Gaulle into Paris. Failure, failure, failure! And out of all these failures, said Sam, as his friends lifted their knives, what have you done? Created the most beautiful country in the world, and the most beautiful city in history: Paris. And his French

friends sheathed their knives and kissed his cheeks. Sam! Sam!”

And now tears were rolling down his cheeks.

And now it was her turn to lean forward and say, “Know something? You loved him, too.”

“Hell, I was jealous of his love for you. Don’t tell anyone.”

“My mouth is sealed,” said Emily Fentriss, his wife in waiting, pouring more wine.

Beryl Veronique Glass finished her glass, dabbed at her mouth, reached over to dab his cheek, and rose.

“Thanks for the fifty-minute hour.”

She started to open her purse.

“Stop that,” he said. “Now, then. What are you going to do?”

“Go call my new boyfriend, I guess.”

“And?”

“And ask him to do what you said. Cover me.”

“And what if it doesn’t work?”

“You mean if I’m still afraid of answering the phone at three in the morning?”

“That.”

“Well,” she said, slowly, “I mean I hate to ask . . . but . . . could we . . . have. Another. Dinner? Or if that’s too time-consuming. Lunch. Or drinks?”

“Drinks,” he said. “With dinner a possibility.”

Her eyes brimmed.

"Get out of here," Ralph Fentriss said.

"Here I go," she said.

And kissed Ralph and his wife and went.

"Are you still here?" Ralph asked the woman at the table beside him.

"I felt as if I wasn't," said Emily Fentriss.

There was a young man, almost a boy, sitting at the bottom of their front steps. He did not move when Ralph and Emily Fentriss came up the walk. They stood and looked at him long enough for him to feel their presence and then he lifted his weary head and peered at them with uncertain wellspring eyes.

"Good Lord," said Fentriss, "can that be you, Willie Armstrong?"

Willie Armstrong shook his head. "It used to be."

"Christ, speak up. I can't hear you."

"I don't know who I am anymore," said the young man retrogressing to his previous boyhood.

"Wilma won't speak to me."

"You haven't been seeing Wilma for six months."

"That's right," said Willie Armstrong, laying his head back down on his arms and speaking with a muffled cadence. "But she still won't take yes for an answer. I call her every day. She hangs up."

Fentriss mused. "Doesn't that tell you something?"

"Yeah," came the muffled response, "she won't talk." A thought roused Willie Armstrong to lift his head. "Will you talk to me? Can I come in?"

"Willie, do you know what time it is?"

"I lost my watch. I've lost everything. I'll stay five minutes, I promise, just five."

"Willie, it's after midnight. Say what you must right here. We'll listen."

"Well . . ." Willie wiped his nose on the back of his hand. "You see . . ."

"I'll let you men gab." Emily Fentriss brushed by her husband. "Good night, Willie. Don't stay out late, Ralph. Bye."

Ralph Fentriss put out one hand to stop her but the door opened and shut and he was alone with Willie.

"Sit down, Mr. Fentriss." Willie patted the step by his side.

"If it's just five minutes, Willie, I prefer to stand."

"It might be ten, Mr. Fentriss." Willie Armstrong's voice wallowed into a blubber.

Fentriss stared at the doorstep. "I think I will sit." He sat.

"Well," said Willie, "here's how it is. Wilma, she . . ."

Ralph Fentriss entered the bedroom dragging his coat and unraveling his tie. "I am now sober," he said.

His wife looked up from turning pages in a book.
“Just back from a funeral?”

“I promised to get Wilma to take one more call.
What are you reading?”

“One of those silly romances. Just like real life.”
“What are these?”

He nudged some scraps of notepaper on the bureau.

“Phone messages. I didn’t look at them. Over to you.”

He scanned one of them. “‘Urgent. Bosco.’
Who’s Bosco?”

“We never knew his last name. One of Tina’s pals. Watched TV. Ate us out of house and home.”

“Oh, yeah. Bosco.” He touched another note.
“Here’s Arnie Ames. *Immediamente pronto* or I’ll kill myself.’ Do you think he will?”

“Why not? He was a charmer, but never stopped talking.”

“Motormouth, yeah. Here’s a third. From Bud wondering what ever happened to Emily Junior. What ever did happen to Emily Junior?”

“That’s the daughter who’s in New York, writing soap operas. Does it come back to you now?”

“Oh, yeah, Emily Junior. Got out of town while the get was good. Boy, am I thirsty. Any beer in the icebox?”

“We junked the icebox years ago. We have a fridge now.”

"Oh, yeah." He tossed the messages down. "You want to help with these panic notices? Someone's got to answer. How about a split? Fifty percent you, fifty me?"

"Oh no you don't."

"I thought marriage was sharing."

"Unh-unh." She turned back to her book and scowled. "Where was I?"

He ruffled the pile of messages, clutched them with a weary croupier's hand and lurched down the hall, passing one empty bedroom after another, Emily Junior's, Tina's, Wilma's, and reached the kitchen to fix the messages on the refrigerator door with some Mickey Mouse magnets. Opening it, he gasped with relief.

"Two beers, thank God, no, three!"

Fifteen minutes passed and the refrigerator door stayed open, its light playing over an almost happy becoming a happy man in his early forties, a can of beer in each hand.

Another minute passed and Emily Fentriss came shuffling along the hall in her bedroom scruffies, a robe over her shoulders.

She stood in the doorway for a long moment, examining her husband across the room as he peered into the refrigerator, examined various items, brought them forth, and turned them upside down to dump their contents into an open trash bag.

Some green peas in a small bowl. A half cup of

corn. Some meat loaf and a slice of corned beef hash. Some cold mashed potatoes. Some boiled onions in cream.

The trash bag filled.

With her arms crossed, leaning against the door-sill, Emily Fentriss at last said, "What do you think you're doing?"

"Cleaning the icebox. The fridge."

"Throwing out perfectly good food."

"No," he said, sniffing some green onions and letting them fall. "Not perfectly good."

"What then?" she said, motionless.

He stared down into the trash bag.

"Leftovers," he said. "Yeah, that's it."

And shut the door, dousing the light.

"Leftovers," he said.