

“I’m home.”

“Hello dear,” she says, giving him a peck on the cheek.

“What’s for dinner? I’m starved.”

“Wyoming Burgers and Idaho Fries.”

“Again?”

She sighs. “I only have three recipes that I can make with what they have at the store. There are some Iowa chicken cold cuts if you would like a sandwich instead.”

“Burgers are fine. I know shopping is a chore. It’s nobody’s fault.”

Over dinner, he asks, “The state elections are coming up. Do you like any of the candidates?”

A smile dances across her lips. “You know that I’m not political,” she replies. “As head of household, you can cast our vote any way you see fit.”

“Are you sure? The state legislature appoint the electoral college now, who then elect the president.”

She nods. “I’m sure.”

“Okay, just thought I’d ask.”

"I love that you ask, but politics are like the weather to me. No matter what we say about it, what happens, still happens. You vote, I'll cook."

"Deal — And the beef is delicious."

After dinner, she asks, "Did you check the streaming schedule? Is there anything new tonight? We're falling behind on our Patriot Points."

"Yes, we have 'Beaver Meets World', 'My Father the Car', and 'ICE Nashville'". He starts humming "*What are you going to do when they come for you.*"

"That sounds nice, dear. Can we watch ICE first? I don't like too much excitement right before bed."

"Sure," his voice drops, "... or I found an old DVR in the attic with a DVD still inserted."

"Where did it come from? How did the Collectors miss it?"

"I bought it at a garage sale back in the '20s and forgot about it. The DVD is 'Brewster's Millions'."

Eye brows raised, she says, "You know that's banned."

"No one will know. I can cut the network and cable it in directly."

"It's too risky. We have a baby on the way. If the Monitors find out, our child could be raised without us while we go to rehab."

"You're right. I'll get rid of it." He holds up the remote and selects a show.

Later, at midnight, he pads down to the kitchen for a snack. Murmuring out loud, he says "I miss the days when you could use porn to help you sleep."

He tilts his head for a second, thinking wistfully, "YOLO." Walking to the hall closet, he pulls out the illicit DVR.

Standing in line for coffee, a woman taps him on the shoulder. "Robert, how nice to see you."

Turning, he says, "Eloise, splurging on coffee now?"

"Now and again. How have you been?"

"As well as can be expected. Your sister is as big as a house, but still getting it all done. How's Billie? Is she ready for a new cousin?"

"I think she's already counting the babysitting money."

The line moves forward and Robert orders a latte, adding, "Along with whatever the lady is having."

"Thank you, but I can buy my own coffee."

"Indulge me. I hardly ever see you."

Stepping away from the coffee cart, Eloise says, “Can we walk and talk for a moment?”

“Sure. I have a few minutes yet.”

Eloise casts quick glances skyward as she steers Robert toward a neighborhood park. Pausing under a tree, she says, “A lot of people don’t know that when you disconnect a television from the web, it continues to log activity and uploads it when it reconnects.”

Robert coughs and almost chokes on his latte.

“Now the log doesn’t know *what* someone watched offline, but it does know something ran for a certain amount of time, say 101 minutes.”

Robert’s eyes dart from side to side, clearly concerned.

“I love my sister,” says Eloise, “and I want her to be able to care for my niece or nephew.”

Robert stutters, “It won’t happen again.”

Eloise turns to face him. “See that it doesn’t. And destroy any contraband.”

She tips her styrofoam cup toward Robert. “Thank you for the coffee.” Eloise turns on her heel and walks back the way they came.

At 1.8 meters tall, Billie’s teacher blocks most of the erasable board. Turning his back to the class, Mr. Evans starts writing smoothly with a large marker. His

thick blond hair brushes his shoulders as he writes.

Mr. Evans is the heart throb of most of the girls in his class. (As well as some of the boys. Shhh.)

Turning around, and stepping to one side, he reveals the popular slogan:

Elections have consequences.

“Monday is Mandate Day. What is the mandate that we celebrate on Monday.
— Billie?”

“We celebrate the rise of Nationalism, and the fall of Antifa,” answers a girl with green streaks in her dark hair.

“Yes, in the 2020s some misguided people were trying to destroy our country.
— Can anyone name a problem we had then?”

Different voices call out,

“Illegal aliens.”

“Vaccines.”

“DEI.”

“Tylenol.”

Evans clapped and then raised his hands to calm the room.

“The mandate (I’m reading from the text here) ensures that we never have to vote again.

“Our leadership is free to choose the best people to represent our interests in the betterment of our nation.

“Why is voting not free? — Anthony?”

A boy with dark hair and a single white streak across the brow answered.

“Elections are like a pickup basketball game. Picking should not be a popularity contest. We are free when our leaders can act on our behalf and make the important choices. The households elect the state legislature, and our leaders do the rest.”

Evans nodded, and asked the room:

“If I favor voting, what am I?”

“WOKED!”

“And who is woke?”

“Antifa!”

“Class dismissed.”

Eloise missed having a man in her life.

It’s been ten years since her husband, Roger, had died. She could count her

number of dates on one hand, with fingers to spare.

At first, it was all she could do to look after their daughter, Billie. At least the generous ICE pension paid the bills.

When Billie was older, she began to wonder: Where does a single mom meet a single man?

Coming in through the kitchen door her daughter asked “Hi, mom, what’s for dinner?”

“The store had Wyoming beef today, so I made meatloaf.”

“Yum, are there any green beans?”

“Not today, but we can have Idaho freedom fries. — How was school?”

“About that … There was an incident.”

“You mean a shooting? I didn’t hear anything.”

“Not a shooting. But there was an altercation between two students.”

“Was anyone hurt.”

“No, a drone broke it up, and security grabbed the kids.”

“Was it anyone you know?”

“Kinda. It was two girls.”

Eloise made a tsk-tsk sound with her tongue.

"The first girl posted something about the second girl's mom online. Second girl asked first girl to take it down. First girl refused. Second girl pushed her. Drone broke it up."

'Did any one get tased?"

"No. The drone brought them to the principal."

"I feel bad for the parents."

"Me too," says Billie, handing her mom a tablet.

"What's this?"

"I was the second girl. Carrie posted a caricature of you online and wouldn't take it down. It's in an attachment."

Eloise opens the attachment. It depicts her with pointed ears wearing a red robe with a black belt. Her hands and feet are furry paws. In one paw-hand, there is a wooden cane. A pointed ribbed tail snakes out from the back of the robe.

The caption just reads "Welcome to the Rat Pack".

"Carrie said her mom didn't put up a sign and you reduced their benefits."

"I don't control anyone's benefits, but if she was already low on points, I guess it could happen."

"Can you make the meeting with the principal tomorrow? It's mandatory when a drone is involved."

"I guess I'll have to," Eloise replies, wondering how Billie got the upper hand.