

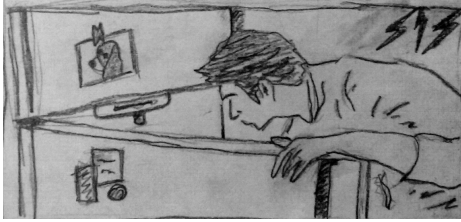
A Conditional Dinner

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Chapter 1

I lifted my chin from my fist and looked at my watch. Seven twenty-two. I tried to shift my weight on the hard, wooden bench in a futile effort to relieve my bottom which had started to go numb, though it was difficult as the five of us were practically on top of each other, packed on it like sardines. We had gotten to the restaurant right on time at seven o'clock and given our name to the hostess who had assured us it would be a twenty minute wait at most. George had commented the wait would be perfect since his wife, Kim, was always late anyway and then made up some story about how they had come separately because he had driven here straight from work. I knew perfectly well that was false because my kitchen happened to be the perfect place for me to listen to them fight for practically three weeks straight at every waking and non-waking hour, including tonight right before Lisa and I had left for the restaurant. Furthermore, some time ago as I was preparing a particularly tasty pot roast for Lisa's and my anniversary, I found out that George hadn't even had a job in upwards of three months because he had gotten fired for stealing office supplies and "stayed home all day watching trashy daytime television yet couldn't even be bothered to have dinner ready instead of applying for jobs." I had been so enthralled in the dramatics, I completely lost track of time and was only reminded to put the roast in the oven by the gnawing feeling in my stomach.

Chapter 2

It was now seven thirty-four and my stomach seemed to grumble louder each time a waitress came to seat another party, which would prompt a new insult about Kim from George. I had eaten a sizable lunch for someone with dinner plans, but for some reason I felt absolutely starved sitting on that bench. Most of the time I was meant to be making Year 2000 date expansion software updates today at work had been spent debating whether or not I would last long enough through the dinner to make it to dessert so I could try the *crème brûlée*, but sitting there with George buzzing in my ear, it was almost to the point that it was all I could think about. I had heard co-workers raving about it on several occasions and figured it was such an obscure dish for a relatively downmarket restaurant to have as a specialty that it must be particularly good. And sure enough, tray after tray of the most exquisite looking *crème brûlée* I had ever laid eyes on was being served to guest after guest as they finished their meals. I was honestly surprised at how divine those little white dishes of custard looked as the tacky mismatched decor and striped polo shirts did not exactly scream “Michelin star” to me. I watched as the somewhat lanky, but attractive couple seated closest to our bench took their first bites, chewing with their mouths partially open to reveal little blobs of cream, rolling their heads around their giraffe necks as their eyes bulged out and making mouth noises. It should have repulsed me, but instead it made it seem even more tempting.

Chapter 3

Just then, in either an act of altruism or self-preservation, Dick excused himself from George, who had gotten himself so worked up about Kim he was now practically shouting as little beads of sweat formed on his flushed brow, to inquire with the hostess how much longer it would be. Thank God, because my stomach was really starting to develop its voice.

Chapter 4

“She said it would just be a few more minutes.”

I nodded gratefully at him, eyeing a fresh tray of crème brûlée. My stomach growled so loudly, I thought it had startled George until I realized he had only paused his latest rant to react to the little coaster pager they had given us. I grabbed it from him in what even I can admit was a somewhat hostile manner and took it up to the hostess.

“Party of six?”

I answered “yes” and gestured to my neighbors seated on the bench.

“Is everyone here? I only see five.”

“No, one person is running a little late.”

“I’m sorry, I can only seat full parties. If you let me know when she gets here, we can get you situated or I can change the table to five.”

I have to say at this point I was fairly disgusted with the whole thing and if not for that crème brûlée in the back of my mind, I would have walked out of that restaurant right then dragging Lisa behind me. But instead I walked back to the bench and explained in a tone that could only be described as accusing that we won’t be able to be seated until Kim arrives, spurring several expletives from George who was looking like a blotchy overfilled balloon that would burst at any moment. I’m no doctor, but his blood pressure must have been through the roof. Dick and Jane looked as if they wanted to shrink into oblivion and truthfully I wished they would have just so I had more room on that bench. Something had to make up for George’s swelling.

Chapter 5

It was only a moment later that Jane, as she was seated closest to the door, announced that she saw Kim walking in. Lisa later denied it, but I'm sure I saw her breathe a sigh of relief, grateful for a brief intermission in the terribly detailed description of the plot of a novel Jane was drafting, which sounded suspiciously similar to *Pride and Prejudice* to the extent that it even featured a character named Mr. Darby. No sooner did Kim set one foot in the restaurant than George immediately sprung up and began to accuse her of making everyone starve to death. Before they could really get into it, Dick, who I was really starting to come around to, announced that he would let the hostess know everyone was here so we could be seated. I prayed that we would be so I could appease my stomach, which now seemed to be competing with George's roars.

Chapter 6

I watched Dick all but plead with the hostess before he came back and said that it would probably be another twenty minutes now. This caused George and Kim to engage in a full fledged verbal brawl, drawing the attention from almost everyone in the restaurant. By this time Lisa and Jane had inched so far away from the bench they were practically in the bug-eyed couple's booth and I had lost sight of Dick altogether. As I scanned the room, I noticed a waitress just to my left staring at George and Kim, completely ignoring the fresh tray of crème brûlée in her hands. I was torn between flat out attacking her and retaining my front row seat to the horrifically public airing of personal grievances. In the span of roughly thirty seconds the whole restaurant had learned about what a terrible cook Kim was and George's kleptomania and how Kim should have known marrying George was a mistake ever since he had cheaped out on the wedding. I was straining to hear about Kim's secret lunch meeting with her high-school lover over what I would consider to be my stomach's attempt to break the sound barrier when I saw the hostess heading in our direction. The look in her eye said we were about to be asked to leave and I saw my chance at that crème brûlée dwindling with each step. Almost at the exact second Kim screamed that she wanted a divorce, I pushed the hostess out of the way and lunged at the waitress's tray, knocking both of us down in the process. I knew I didn't have much time so I practically inhaled that sweet, sweet custard using my bare hands as spoons. All of my commotion caused George and Kim to stop screaming at each other long enough for everyone to direct their attention to me. Without even looking, I felt another one of Lisa's daggers hit me, only this time it was as if the deliciousness of the crème brûlée was my shield, protecting me from her visual lashing. I'm not sure if it was just because I was starving, but it really was the best crème brûlée I ever had the pleasure of tasting.

Chapter 7

The entire restaurant seemed to freeze for a minute not knowing how to react until Dick walked back in and the hostess shouted at him that we all needed to leave immediately. Somehow as the moving target poor Dick had gotten the brunt of the hostess's wrath despite having missed all of the drama unfolding. Kim miraculously managed to avoid it altogether as she had stormed out at some point while I was sitting frozen on the floor among all the other little dishes of custard from the waitress's tray that had spilled over my pants. Lisa marched over and dragged me, still covered in crème brûlée, out to the parking lot. The others followed behind us- George beet red as ever, but now wheezing and clutching his left arm, Jane looking like she had just witnessed a murder, and Dick in a state of confusion having missed all of the dramatics.

Chapter 8

“What happened in there? I just went over to the burger place next door to put our names in. They said it would be a twenty minute wait.”

Chapter 9

George immediately declined, insisting he really should be getting home as he unsteadily traipsed to his car before driving off, in the opposite direction of the apartment building I might add. I had somehow been able to stop myself from yelling after him that he really should be going to get looked at instead, a feat of which I am still quite proud. Surprisingly, Lisa said that we should probably be going, too, and mumbled something to me about a “Mrs. Kennett” under her breath. But with the crème brûlée and excitement lining the bottom of my stomach coupled with my newfound admiration for Dick, I rather animatedly tried to convince her that waiting twenty minutes for a lousy burger was genuinely the greatest idea I had ever heard. Not wanting to cause any more of a scene, she reluctantly agreed on the condition that I apologize to the Johnsons. A part of me did feel genuinely bad that the rest of our party hadn’t gotten a chance to have their way with that crème brûlée and Jane in particular had been looking like she didn’t want to be anywhere within fifty feet of me, so I dutifully expressed my regret over my behavior and somehow persuaded them to continue our evening. To tell the truth, I can be quite charismatic when I want to be and once I mentioned that I had a line as the apothecary in my high school’s production of *Romeo and Juliet*, even Jane started to warm up to me, and on that note, we four remaining party members headed into Burgerland to again try our luck. I was sitting quite comfortably on the cushioned (cushioned!) bench next to Lisa, who was blotting the crème brûlée remnants on my pants with a tissue from her purse in a largely unsuccessful attempt to erase her embarrassment and avoid Jane’s never-ending list of ideas for the screen adaptation of *The Notebook*, which I’ll admit were fairly amusing one way or another.

Chapter 10

Miraculously, my hunger was even beginning to subside... until I spotted the bickering couple from the apartment upstairs and immediately felt my stomach give a Pavlovian snarl.

A Conditional Dinner was initially an exercise in attempting to apply the idea of a bottle episode to a short story. Bottle episodes are commonly used in television when budget constraints necessitate an episode that is able to be produced cheaply or quickly, often meaning the entire episode is restricted to a single set and core cast members. Some famous examples include Friends' *The One Where No One's Ready*, Breaking Bad's *Fly*, and Seinfeld's *The Chinese Restaurant*. An additional use of bottle episodes is to focus in on characterization and explore traits and motives. I found this to translate nicely to this piece, which is already placed under certain constraints- a word bank, the length, and the requirement to create an arc. To go along with the theme, I wanted the cast of characters to feel like an ensemble that could be part of a sitcom yet be able to focus in on the thoughts of one specific character, in this case our unnamed narrator who serves as the "Anchor" comedic archetype. The inspiration for the premise was the aforementioned Seinfeld episode, although any other similarities are purely coincidental as I haven't seen the actual episode. Stylistically I would say the piece was heavily influenced by the first half of JD Salinger's *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters*, in which an eclectic cast of characters are sandwiched in a car, stuck in traffic, in an attempt to make their way to a wedding reception. I just couldn't resist a narrator that we want to dislike, but deep down probably have more in common with than we'd like to admit. In keeping with the sitcom-y feel, I wanted to make sure there were both layered and overt jokes in the piece as well as some "just a hair too unrealistic for real life" situations. As a reader or viewer, I like having to work a little bit for a laugh as it makes me feel like I am in on a private joke with the creators. It wasn't until after I finished the first draft that I realized what I had actually created: a story about a man who has spent so much time eavesdropping on his neighbors' arguing from his kitchen, he has conditioned his stomach to react.