

Reunion

On the evening of the party, the living room filled with people who—arriving at irregular intervals—entered the hallway, removed their coats or jackets, then moved into the living room. For these arrivals, Peter, invariably coming from the kitchen, answered the knock on the door, greeted the guests, laid their coats or jackets carefully across the bed in the bedroom, then escorted them into the living room where he served drinks. Some newcomers entered the kitchen briefly and greeted Susan before returning to the living room, to sit either on one of the odd assortment of chairs or large multicolored cushions scattered about or to stand together in small clusters, conversing.

That was earlier, however. Now the apartment is populated, the party underway.

The uncurtained windows face a boulevard invisible because of the apartment's elevation. However, because the windows are open and the street busy, the sound of passing cars is sometimes audible in the living room, rising above the volume of the various conversations or intruding into the lulls when everyone finishes sentences simultaneously. If there were curtains or even shades, the light breeze coming through the windows would disturb them.

Although the visitors circulate and talk as if familiar with one another, at moments an uncomfortable mood overtakes the otherwise amiable gathering. Perhaps it is the strobe-light effect of people moving around the room, forming small groups of two or three, having quick conversations while glancing around, then moving off only to pause again, organized in some new configuration. At times, the motion stops or starts as if on cue.

There is something else: this underlying mood may, like the somber bass line in a Tchaikovsky symphony, emanate from a solitary presence standing near the floral print arm chair by the windows—a person who remains alone and quiet, independent of

the others. (This isolated figure appears unrelated to the gathering, a nonparticipant. A stranger who has ventured into the wrong party. Or, perhaps, he sulks. Or simply doesn't care. Or the cars passing on the street below may fascinate him.)

But Jonathan ignores the traffic. Casting more than a furtive glance in his direction, you would notice that he isn't looking down toward the street nor even into the trees. Jonathan stares into the sky. He might be watching the large cumulus clouds that drift overhead passing from west to east. Or he may be watching the slowly darkening evening sky. In any case, he is an obvious presence in the room.

Now, Jonathan sits in the leather chair. (He may have been in the chair earlier, before everyone arrived. Then again, he may not have been standing by the chair but off by himself in the bedroom, or talking to Susan in the kitchen—although this last is unlikely.)

Even slumped in the chair, Jonathan is large and imposing. Conceivably, the unruly red beard and unkempt, curly brown hair—nothing more—produce this effect: given the proper attire and a different era, he might be mistaken for a pirate. (His dark clothing—a navy sweater and charcoal slacks—enhance the look.) Or he may be imposing simply because he remains so entirely disengaged.

(But he is not disengaged. He is simply not actively involved. Tired, perhaps. Or worn down. Something outside the apartment may have caught his attention and distracted him.)

When Peter approaches Jon and asks, "How're you doing?" Jonathan answers: "I'm okay."

Peter offers the wine bottle he has been carrying around the room: "Need a refill?"

Jonathan picks up a glass from the table between the chairs—a glass unnoticed until this moment—and, after a brief hesitation, replies: "Yes...please."

Peter fills the glass. For a moment Peter and Jon consider each other. Jon smiles or, rather, grins. Peter smiles.

Jonathan says: "Thanks for all your help."

Peter watches him for a moment then speaks: "This is hard for you, isn't it?" And when Jon doesn't reply, an expression (a grimace or, perhaps, a smile) briefly crosses Peter's face.

Finally, Jonathan replies: "I haven't done anything."

(No. Here he says, "I shouldn't have come back but I had no strength left." Or he might say, "Coming back was the easy thing." Or he may not respond to Peter's remark.)

A group of four people have come together near the center of the room; two men and two women talk. Two couples, perhaps, although this isn't clear from their arrangement: the two women stand near each other and are barely, but still noticeably, separated from the two men. Their conversations take place almost simultaneously, like voices in a fugue. But, because the voices are subdued and generally incomprehensible to a listener outside the group, you can only base speculations on observed movements and gestures.

The way the brunette in the red dress turns toward the other woman—who has light brown hair and wears a pleated navy skirt and white cotton sweater; the way these women turn their gaze away from the two men; the way the men continue talking even though the conversation splits into two dialogues.

At first, the two men, one with black hair and wearing glasses, continue as if they have not noticed the women's separate conversation. The smaller man, brown-haired, slender, and wearing a black, crew neck sweater, transfers a glass from his right hand to his left, glances first at the women, then at the taller man. The two men alter their positions and turn toward one another while still not shutting themselves off from the chance of easily rejoining a larger conversation with the women.

Although the volume of these dialogues is low and the overall conversation intimate in tone, a word or phrase occasionally emerges. The woman in the navy skirt, while adjusting her glasses, mentions that someone named Julia will get over something. One of the women (impossible to say which) says it's for the best; both men nod assent. The woman in the red dress rotates the wedding band on her finger and says how good it is now that someone or something is back, but the sound of a horn from a passing car obscures her words. The names 'Sue' and 'Jonathan' come from the woman wearing the navy skirt and white sweater. One of the men says someone finally listened to all the advice and did the right thing.

At this point, the separate dialogues converge, and everyone faces center again. Not only does the conversation become more directed, the group becomes closer, the members tighten its boundary and isolate themselves from the rest of the room. Their animation increases as if stimulated by a topic of mutual interest.

Two men sit near bookshelves along one of the walls. One wears wire-framed glasses and has brown hair cut in the style of a medieval page; he holds a cigarette in one hand and a drink in the other. Sitting cross-legged on a cushion, he speaks of commitment and uses words such as “social compact,” “duty,” and “responsibility.” He speaks disparagingly of lust, having already explained the allusions in T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* and the theme of indecision in *Hamlet*.

The other man lies on the floor, two cushions behind his head, one cushion under his feet. The cushions behind his head rest against the lower shelf of a book case. A bright print covers one of the cushions. The cover on the other cushion—the one upon which he rests his head—is a dark and somber brown with no obvious pattern. He has black hair, a drooping black mustache, and an aquiline nose. His hands cross on his chest. He has been listening for a long time, silently and without moving. If his eyes were not open, you might think him asleep.

Finally, the man lying on the floor sits up, faces the other man, and asks: “You’re one of Sue’s friends, right?”

“Yes. From school. Why?”

“Nothing... Hey, I suppose all this makes sense to you but it doesn’t seem right to me. What does Jonathan think he’s doing? You can’t let other people run your life. What’s over is over. Cut your losses. Don’t look back, that’s my motto.”

Susan’s friend replies, “Those who do not learn from the past are condemned to repeat it.”

“Doomed. Doomed to repeat it,” the other corrects.

Near the kitchen doorway, three others talk together in a particularly intimate conversation. A man and a woman stand side by side facing Peter, their closeness signaling a desire for privacy.

The man standing beside the woman speaks. He is taller

than either of his two companions, taller possibly than any of the other guests. He has blond hair, a deeply tanned face, and blue eyes.

"We just came back from Mexico," he says. "About a week ago." Then sips from the glass in his right hand and watches Peter. He waits, perhaps, for an answer to an unspoken or unheard question. But this may be no more than a deliberate and thoughtful way of speaking.

Peter, who has been studying the drink he cradles in both hands, glances up, but toward the ceiling, not at the man. As if suddenly realizing that someone has asked him something, Peter says, "I'm sorry, I must have drifted off for a second. What were you saying?"

Now, Peter stares directly at the man, removes his left hand from the wine glass, and raises the drink with his right. Almost a foot shorter, Peter has to raise his eyes to meet the other's glance. Peter adjusts his stance, swaying from side to side in a gentle, almost imperceptible rocking motion. His youthful appearance—probably because of his frail, delicate build—may cause Peter to be uncomfortable in a gathering of adults.

But the woman, not the man, answers Peter: "When we came back from Mexico the invitation was in the mail. All it said was 'Reunion. Jonathan and Susan,' then the time and address. We didn't—we still don't, in fact—know what 'reunion' means."

As she speaks, she moves closer to her companion as if for protection or comfort or merely to reassure herself. Or perhaps she seeks shelter from the periodic drafts of cold air coming through the open windows.

"The invitations were nice, weren't they?" Peter asks, then continues without waiting for a response, "Susan hand-lettered every one. She must have spent days working on them even though there weren't that many."

There must be another draft: the woman moves even closer to her companion, slipping under the arm he puts over her shoulders. Like the man, this woman, too, is blonde, only her hair is much lighter than his. She barely reaches his shoulder.

Meanwhile, Peter continues: "Susan and I spent almost a whole morning just trying to find the paper and the ink. She wanted

everything to be just right. I think the sepia ink on the cream-colored paper was an excellent choice! And the flowing letters—I can't remember the name of the script—are perfect: a little romantic and old-fashioned.”

At this point, the woman takes a step sideways away from the man, and standing with her feet apart, stares directly at Peter, and says nothing.

Both the man and the woman watch Peter who again begins shifting his weight from foot to foot while slowly sipping his drink. The man could be studying Peter; he watches his every movement as if trying to discern answers to larger, more universal concerns.

Peter glances from one to the other while continuing to drink, taking slow, endless sips until the liquid disappears. Only then does Peter take the glass from his mouth and ask, “How long were you gone?”

“Almost three months,” the woman answers. “We drove down the coast of the mainland almost to Guatemala.” She pauses for a moment then continues, “We haven't talked to Sue or Jon or anyone since we returned. What's happening?”

When she places her hands on her hips and leans toward him, the blonde woman seems to confront Peter. Peter steps back, but she simply steps forward, once more narrowing the gap. However, it may be only then that she leans toward him, that she has not really done so before. Actually, the entire group has rotated so Peter now faces the living room while the couple have their backs to it thereby trapping Peter and blocking all routes of graceful escape. They may have taken these positions earlier.

“They separated,” Peter finally replies. “I guess you didn't know about Julia either.” He pauses as if he has asked a question, glancing first at the woman, then the man, then down at the empty glass in his hand.

The man says, “We met her once. Jon brought her with him when he came to visit—just before our trip. It wasn't clear who she was—what their relationship was, I mean.”

“She seemed nice enough to me,” the woman remembers. “I liked her a lot, in fact. She seemed quite a bit like Jon. I think she said she was an artist—no...a musician. I remember: she and—”

(here the woman uses a name that apparently refers to her companion) “—played Debussy.”

“Excuse me,” Peter says, holding up his empty glass for explanation. “I’m supposed to be helping Susan in the kitchen.” He pushes past the couple and leaves the room.

A small kitchen adjoins the living room. Two women peel and cut vegetables that they arrange on a cut-glass serving dish. Already, medium-sized radishes whose red skins contrast with their blunt white, almost translucent ends fill the center of the dish. White cauliflower pieces hide one quadrant of the dish, carrot sticks another.

These carrots on the serving dish account for the mass of orange strips in the sink into which Susan, who has auburn hair that curls under gently at her shoulders, now drops pale-green celery leaves. Sue, as everyone except Jonathan and Peter call her, wears an apron decorated with folk art patterns over a plain white cotton dress that combines elegance with a suggestion of peasant clothing; petite, she moves with a child’s nonchalance.

At one corner of the sink, another, underlying, layer of vegetable matter is partially visible: dark greens and white radish stems with small pieces of the red base still attached. But now, Susan scoops the trimmings into the garbage disposal.

Taking the celery sticks from beside the sink, the other woman cuts them into short pieces using a large chef’s knife. She wears her dark hair short, styled to make her look professional and efficient: an effect she achieves. Her khaki slacks and a light-blue polo shirt add to this.

“Is everything okay now?” she asks Susan, arranging celery sticks in the third quadrant of the serving dish.

“I don’t know. Jonathan’s back; we’re together. But he seems tired, just tired. As though he just gave up, gave in to all the pressure. I don’t know...Better, maybe, but not okay.”

Susan removes several items from the refrigerator and places them beside the dish of vegetables: sour cream, cream cheese, mayonnaise. She gathers spices from a rack on the wall and puts them near the ingredients from the refrigerator. The woman in

the khaki pants, who monitors Susan's activities, watches as Susan gets a glass mixing bowl from the cabinet beneath the sink.

"Sue?" she asks.

The bowl falls from Susan's hands and shatters on the floor.

"What?" Susan questions, looking down at the glass shards on the speckled pattern of the brown linoleum. Her eyes glaze as if she thinks of something else. Or her eyes may be focused on something farther, more distant than the floor.

Without speaking, the woman gets a dustpan. Susan uses a broom taken from its storage place between the refrigerator and the wall. The two women are sweeping up the glass when Peter emerges from the living room carrying an empty wine glass.

"I think I should serve the mushrooms. I don't know if anyone knows they're here," the woman in the khaki pants explains, starting to exit.

"Mushrooms?" Peter asks. "Are they stuffed?"

At this point, the woman stops and turns toward Peter. Susan, who has picked up the glass splinters missed by the broom, empties the dustpan into a garbage container under the sink.

"Yes. Would you like one?" she offers the dish to Peter.

"No, thanks. I just wondered," Peter says before sitting in the single chair in the kitchen.

Now, the woman turns and exits the kitchen.

Susan walks to the table where Peter sits. While she arranges the *crudités* on the serving dish, she explains: "Jonathan likes them or, at least, he used to. Stuffed mushrooms were always one of his favorites."

"I guess that's why I asked," Peter answers. Without glancing at Susan, he fills his glass then replaces the wine bottle to its previous location—approximately halfway between the serving dish and his glass.

Susan watches Peter. She waits for him to take a sip of wine before asking, "How's the party going?"

"Fine," Peter says without looking at Susan.

"Really?" she questions. "I don't believe you. How's Jonathan?"

Peter takes a slow drink before replying, "Fine. Honest:

everything is great. It's a very nice party, Susan."

Peter glances at Susan after setting his glass on the table. For a moment their eyes meet. (Perhaps they watch one another for several seconds; perhaps there are questions not asked.) Susan places a stray carrot stick back into the vegetable arrangement.

"Is he talking to anyone?"

"Sure."

"Who? Peter, you're lying to me. I know he's not talking to anyone. I've had at least three people ask what's wrong with him. He doesn't want to be here."

"Don't worry. He's just being a little quiet. You know he doesn't do well at parties. He's okay. Do you think he's here just to keep up appearances? If he didn't want to be here, he'd leave, wouldn't he?"

This dialogue occurs without pause. Throughout this quick interchange, Peter seems aware of Susan's scrutiny.

But now, the topic exhausted, Peter tops off his half-full glass. Susan moves across the room and looks out the single window, so Peter goes, leaving her alone at the sink.

Meanwhile, the scene in the living room has altered. The two men who were seated together on the floor have joined other conversations: the darker man, with the black hair and drooping black mustache, sits in one of three kitchen chairs lined along a wall; the toy lamb lies on the floor beside his chair. The man who played Debussy with someone named Julia occupies the chair closest to the kitchen door. The middle chair remains empty. The two men talk.

The woman in khaki pants enters from the kitchen, carrying a large, white serving dish of mushroom caps stuffed with a crab mixture. She approaches the two men in the chairs, stopping nearby, but not so close as to intrude, while they speak.

"...the solitude of night...the jungle coming down to the sea—" one man says, before he breaks off and turns to the woman offering mushrooms.

The moustached man takes a mushroom. (Has she presented the tray to him or has this person simply reached out and taken an unoffered mushroom?)

The man with the page-boy hair and the woman in the red dress talk to Peter near the center of the room. The woman with the serving tray moves to this trio and, without hesitation, joins the group. Peter greets her. The woman with the red dress says “Thank you” as she takes a mushroom and smiles. Carefully selecting among the many mushroom caps, the fourth member of the group explains Ivan’s encounter with the Grand Inquisitor in *Karamazov*. Saying “I’d opt for freedom,” Peter turns away from the man. The woman serving mushrooms continues her rounds. The woman with the red dress walks to the kitchen, absent-mindedly playing with her wedding ring.

A group of three moves to the chairs by the window. The window is shut, eliminating the gusts of cold. A woman wearing a navy skirt goes to the floral-print chair; a smaller man with brown hair sits in the dark leather chair; the man with black hair and glasses reclines on a large cushion on the floor, facing the others. No traffic sounds intrude.

Having served the mushrooms to this group, the woman in khaki pants starts for the kitchen. As the blonde emerges from the hallway into the living room, she greets the woman in the khaki pants, indicates the dish, and says “Looks like that’s about finished.”

At the side of the room, these two women talk. A single stuffed mushroom remains on the serving dish. The blonde asks how Susan is doing then takes the mushroom. The other smiles and says something like “Everything’s fine.”

Carrying the dish of *crudités*, Susan comes into the room from the kitchen and glances around. Handing the vegetables to the blonde as she passes, Susan goes into the bedroom then the bathroom.

When she returns to the living room, Susan approaches Peter who stands by the chairs along the wall, speaking to the man with the black mustache and the one who once played Debussy with Julia. Susan interrupts the conversation as Peter begins speaking.

She puts her hand on Peter’s arm and turns him away from the others. “Where’s Jonathan?” Susan asks.

Jonathan has taken a coat from the closet in the bedroom and left the apartment. He walks along the sidewalk beneath the trees lining the boulevard. The traffic is much lighter now, quieter, only a few cars on the street. Against the dark sky, lights illuminate the street and sidewalk. A gust blows leaves swirling around his feet. Not far from the apartment, after waiting for a break in the traffic, he crosses the street between intersections—in the middle of the block—and walks into a small store on the next corner. This store, on the northeast corner, sits back from the street and has parking for about ten cars. There are two driveways into the parking lot—one from each of the streets that form the intersection.

Jonathan enters the store and stands in line behind a young man at the counter, the owner (probably) of a late-model, well-polished red truck in the parking lot; he has slicked his longish black hair back against his head but it curls slightly behind his ears. The man buys a six-pack of beer and talks to the girl behind the counter. Apparently, they know each other; the young man has just returned from somewhere; he has been gone for a few months but now he's back. The girl says something about things not always working out the way you expect and maybe, after school, she can see him tomorrow. When the young man leaves, Jonathan moves to the counter and hands the girl a dollar. He asks for change. When she gives him the three quarters, two dimes, and a nickel, she smiles and mentions the weather. Jonathan agrees that it has gotten cold earlier than usual this year.

Jonathan buttons his coat as he leaves the store. He crosses the parking lot and steps into a phone booth near one of the driveways. After depositing a coin, he dials. The phone rings four times before a woman's voice says, "Hello." Jonathan takes a deep breath then speaks into the mouthpiece: "Julia?"