

WINNIPESAUKEE

by Laura Barnett

To start: House cocktail. Orange juice. Bottomless coffee.

“I used to come here with Christina,” he said. “To see the fall colours.”

A few seconds passed before Gloria, preoccupied with her drink - a strange, muddy confection, like chocolate milk, but with a stealthy undercoat of vodka - realised that Stephen was no longer speaking. She set the drink aside; struggled to slip back into the flow of a conversation that seemed to be streaming along quite happily without her.

“You did?” she said. “Well, I can see why. It’s just beautiful.”

Gloria was beginning to understand that everything in Stephen’s life was beautiful - from his sleek silver car to the ex-wife (Christina) whose glossy, coiffed photograph he still carried in his wallet; and of course the two grown-up children, with their white-toothed smiles and loose, athletic limbs.

Here, Lake Winnepesaukee lay mirror-like beyond the plate-glass windows, and the trees were a paint-sample spectrum of red, gold and orange. Yet her view was of Stephen; when their server showed them to their table, he’d taken the seat that looked out over the lake. *I will not mind*, she thought, discreetly tugging down her skirt as she sat (she’d bought it

the day before at the mall; she'd hesitated, worried it was mutton-dressed-as-lamb, but Linda had insisted. *You'll look great, Mom! He won't know what's hit him!*).

"She's a natural yachtswoman," Stephen said. "Thought about turning pro, after Harvard."

Christina, tanned and slender, standing capably in the bow of a gleaming white yacht.

"Did she?" said Gloria. "Isn't that something."

To follow: Chef's special buffet brunch. Omelettes freshly prepared on request.

The jazz band started up just as they were finishing their omelettes.

"Oh," said Gloria. "Would you look at that?"

They looked; saw two men of their own age in patterned waistcoats, strumming listlessly to an indifferent crowd. For a moment, Gloria was ashamed of her enthusiasm - that cocktail must have been stronger than she thought - but then the double bassist caught her eye, and winked, and she felt a flush rise up from her neck.

Stephen didn't seem to notice. "Those guys have been playing here for years," he said. "Not much of a life, is it? Playing for tips and a free feed."

"Oh, I don't know," Gloria said. "Linda - my daughter - is an artist. She doesn't earn much, but she doesn't care a bit. She says she's only happy when she's painting. Like, that's when the world makes sense to her."

It was the longest speech she had made since they'd arrived. Stephen laid his knife and fork neatly on his plate. "Well," he said. "We can't *all* be artists, can we? Some of us need to go out and make money so that these so-called *artists* have someone to sell their paintings to."

“I guess you’re right,” she said quickly, though she had caught the vinegar in his tone. She took a sip of cold coffee and looked away, at the musicians, now starting up a song she vaguely recognised, though it was difficult to name it without a singer to guide her. Snatches of lyric returned to her, like half-remembered dreams. *The way you wear your hat. The way you sip your tea.* Larry, singing tunelessly, taking her in his arms and spinning her round the kitchen; dried smears of flour on her cheeks. A summer afternoon, Florida Keys; that song again, on another radio; warm limbs, the flitting shadow of a ceiling fan.

“Will you excuse me?” she said, because she could feel the old sadness rising. Stephen nodded - “Are you alright?” - but she was away before she could reply; away and stumbling down the stairs to the ladies’, where she could pat her eyes dry, and return to the table as if nothing was amiss.

To finish: Chef’s special waffles.

Gloria was most annoyed with herself; not with Stephen, who was, after all, nothing other than he’d claimed to be (*Still handsome M, 60, likes the finer things in life; WLTM attractive F, 40+, for wining, dining and maybe just a little bit more*). Unlike the others she’d met, he’d been entirely truthful: she’d been surprised, on their first date, not to see a man of seventy or more. That seafront restaurant, all laundered tablecloths and shrimp on ice; the way he reached, without a word, for his credit card (even if in doing so he had revealed his hand, in the ever-smiling face of Christina): she had liked all that. Liked it enough to make light of the fact that his conversation rolled on without her; an actor with an audience of one.

But look at him now: shovelling syrup-soaked waffle into his mouth; still, would you believe it, talking. The daughter, this time; the one who was taking a year out from college

(dropped out, more like). “She’s getting a real insight into what life’s like for the *other half*,” Stephen was saying. “The drugs these people take, the chaos of their lives: I mean, just because they’re poor, is that any excuse?”

And then, before she knew it, Gloria was on her feet. “I’m sorry, Stephen, but I really must go. I’ve got to... My daughter Linda, she’s...”

Then she was crossing the restaurant once more; down the stairs and out into the crisp fall air, with its taste of lake-salt and woodsmoke, just like the air down at the cabin she and Larry had once rented in the Catskills. Just like the air on that last day in the hospital. Larry’s last breath, the loosening of his hand on hers; then running out through the strip-lit corridors into the sudden shock of an October afternoon.

And she was running now: down onto the boardwalk, the boards rattling beneath her feet like track-slats; the lake hard and cold as steel, and beyond it the trees flaming and burning, as if the whole world were on fire.

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