



Peg Silver, thirty-two, could make a man come, but she couldn't make him stay. She'd just spent two hours bemoaning this problem to her friend Nina at dinner, parsing to the syllable what she'd like to say to her most recent ex-boyfriend, if such an unlikely opportunity presented itself.

The night's chosen scenario: Bumping Into Each Other by Chance. Peg would be in a glorious gown, on her way to the Oscars, a nominee for Best Set Design in a Major Motion Picture. As she stepped out of her limousine onto the red carpet, she'd spot Paul in the crowd, looking like he'd just been attacked by dogs. He'd congratulate her, beg her to take him back. She'd be gracious. Briefly pitying. But she had to rush, since her date, Johnny Depp, was waiting, and he was a very possessive man. Besides which, having just won the lottery ("The same day I got the nomination!"), she was flying to the Bahamas for a year as soon as the awards ceremony was over.

Peg smiled to herself as she unlocked her apartment door. She knew, rationally, that spending hours refining tone and nuance in a conversation that would never take place was a waste of time. But, she thought, a girl can dream, can't she? Peg dropped her purse on her bed. The phone rang. She grabbed the receiver.

‘Hello?’

‘Peg?’

She recognized his voice instantly. It was Paul. He’d Called Out of the Blue. Panicking, Peg clicked the off button, giving herself three seconds to scramble for a good opening line before he called back. Something breezy. Casual. All she could come up with was, ‘You bastard, you ruined my life.’

The first time in three months she’d mindlessly answered the phone, the one time the ring hadn’t unleashed the flood of Pavlovian pre-traumatic stress syndrome symptoms – tight chest, shaky hands, constricted breathing, skin flush to a capillary-popping red. She felt eerily calm, actually, now that the wait was over. The phone rang again. She took a deep breath.

‘Hello?’ she said, exhaling sexily.

‘Peg, it’s Paul. Something’s wrong with your phone. I got cut off. And you sound nasal.’

‘Paul! What a surprise. How long has it been? A month?’ she asked.

‘Over three, actually,’ he said.

‘That long?’ she asked, as if marveling at the flight of time.

The morning of the breakup, he’d promised to call her that night. She never called him, not once, which was a show of strength that would fill her with dignity until the day she died. She had buckled a few times, sending him artfully terse and transparently neutral Just Checking In emails. Paul would respond a day later, a week later, with a few sentences – no caps or punctuation – if at all. Lazy, lying bastard. Peg should tell him to go fuck himself. She should make herself proud.

Paul said, ‘I need to see you. Tonight.’

It was eight on a Thursday in April, unseasonably hot for springtime in New York City. 'Where's the fire?' she asked, having a pretty good idea where.

'I've been thinking about you constantly,' he said. 'I have things to say, face-to-face. I can't go another night without seeing you.'

This was where she was supposed to say, 'Johnny Depp is a very possessive man.' Instead, she said, 'Can't.'

'You have plans?'

'No.'

'Early day tomorrow?'

'No.'

'Making a show of strength that will fill you with dignity until the day you die?' he asked. He paused, and then said shortly, 'I hope you and your dignity will be very happy together. I'll let you go . . .'

That was it? No more pleading, spilling blood while screaming her name and tearing his shirt? She said, 'Giving up so easy? You've got a lot to learn about groveling.'

He said, 'Please see me. I'm begging. I'm supplicating – wait, I need to find the thesaurus.'

'Meet me at Chez Chas in twenty minutes,' she said. 'And don't be late.' She'd waited long enough for him already.

Chez Chas was a bistro in the corner storefront of Peg's building on Grand Street in Soho. The restaurant had six tables and a tiny bar. Once featured in *New York* magazine as the smallest three-star restaurant in Manhattan, Chez Chas was, if not an A-list destination, a B+. Peg had never eaten there. They didn't take reservations, and it was impossible to get a table before

five o'clock. But the bar – cramped, poorly stocked – usually had a vacancy. Peg had spent many cocktail hours at that bar, with a friend or a Chuck Palahniuk novel. *Fight Club* was a guaranteed male magnet; she met the boyfriend before Paul while reading it.

With a glance in her mirror – she hated her new bangs – Peg ran downstairs to the bistro. She wanted to get one drink in her before Paul showed up. Steady the nerves. The bar was in the rear of the bistro. She had to squeeze between tables, apologizing to diners as she jostled their chairs. She sat on a vacant stool, draping her jean jacket on the one to her left. The bartender was new; the bartender was always new. This month's model was, most definitely, a model. Lean and young, he had a chiseled chin, speckled with stubble, and perfectly chunky bangs.

Peg said to him, 'How do you get your bangs to behave? Hours of private training? Is there a School for Bangs I should know about?'

The bartender nodded, as if he didn't speak English. 'What can I get you?' he asked. No accent. Nor sense of humor.

Peg had had wine at dinner. 'Whiskey sour,' she said.

'Out of sour mix.'

'White Russian.'

'Out of milk.'

'Vodka martini?'

'Out of olives.'

'I'll take it.'

He said, 'As you wish.'

Peg found that oddly comforting. Receiving her cocktail, she checked her watch. Five minutes more. She sipped and examined the couples at dinner. The tables

were set up for two. According to Zagat, Chez Chas was 'an ideal date destination.' Six couples had come for a night of French food and romantic ambience. A married couple in the corner (visible rings) talked loudly about an upcoming vacation. Another couple held hands across the table, gazing intensely at each other as if they were in a cult of two. Peg picked up her martini glass and drank her vodka.

They will do it tonight, she thought.

Ordinarily, a happy couple as such, in the shameless adoration of new love, would be too painful to behold. But tonight, Peg surveyed them with hope.

I will do it tonight, she thought.

Fuck caution. What was the point of denying herself? If Paul was sufficiently contrite, if he'd learned his lesson, mea culpaed and beat his chest, why shouldn't she bring him upstairs? Let him demonstrate his contrition by giving her a two-hour tongue bath?

Peg crossed her legs, her eyes drifting from the Moonie couple and settling on another pair. On the surface, they seemed made for each other. Same stylishness quotient, age, ethnic background. Same size head. But the stiff-backed tension and fidgety handling of forks told the very short story of their relationship: a first date that would not lead to a second.

Peg and Paul had had both the glassy-eyed attraction of the Moonies at table two as well as the superficial compatibility of the couple at table three. They'd practically lived together for a year. With centuries of time-honored tradition at her back, Peg wanted to take their relationship forward. To get married, have kids, talk excitedly in restaurants about upcoming vacations, like the couple at table one.

She unfurled her vision of their future on New Year's Day, the morning after their boozy crawl through Tribeca bars toasting to 2005 and each other. Despite the simplicity (the banality) of the idea, Paul was shocked by her suggestion, as if she'd asked him to commit murder for her, not commit to marriage with her. If that was what she truly wanted, he wouldn't stand in her way. She stood in his, begging him not to desert her on New Year's Day. Paul waited until the crack of dawn on January 2.

His call tonight, his 'I've got things to say, face-to-face' could mean only one thing: He'd changed his mind about marriage. Otherwise, why bother meeting at all?

'Another round?' asked the bartender. 'Same thing, or something different this time?'

Peg was stumped for an answer.

The door opened, street noise filtering into the room. Peg turned and saw Paul Tester framed in the doorway. He looked the same. Tall, confident, sloppy smile. Her months of loneliness, self-blame and anger instantly forgotten, Peg smiled as he made his way to her; each polished 'forgive me' as he squeezed between the tables seemed directed at her, not the diners. When he finally got to the bar, he put both arms around her waist and lifted her off of her stool in an embrace that emptied her lungs.

He said, 'You look gorgeous.'

She was still wearing her jeans and T-shirt from work. Not exactly the height of glamour. But Paul had always admired her low-key style. Little did he know that she agonized over her jeans choices, her T-shirts cost eighty dollars apiece, her skin tone was achieved with three types of foundation and she was forever laboring to add volume in her straight, nearly black hair.

'I like the bangs,' he said.

Peg said, 'I like the suit.' Black, three-button, brand-new.

'Picked it out myself,' he said.

She said, 'I'd like to see it on the floor of my bedroom.'

He frowned and said, 'Can we have a drink first? Catch up?'

He'd been in such a hurry to talk. Now he was stalling? He must be nervous, she thought. A glass of confidence would take care of that. He ordered a martini, and another for her.

He said, 'You must be working a lot.'

Her busiest time of year. 'I'm doing the atrium of the Condé Nast building.' Peg was an interior landscape designer, which was a fancy way to say indoor gardener.

Paul said, 'Bird of Paradise?'

She cringed. 'God, no. All tulips, all the time. Next week, apple branches. How about you?'

'Can't complain,' he said, chin out. Paul was a talent agent at CAA for animals. 'Doing a licensing deal for the winner of the Westminster Dog Show.'

'A poodle?' she asked. Wild guess.

'Mastiff,' he said. 'Stanley of Edinburgh. Oversized tartan collars, doggie coats and scarves.'

The bartender brought their olive-free drinks. Peg sipped quickly. Two minutes had been about enough catching up for her. She was ready to put the misery of the winter behind her.

Paul must have sensed her impatience. 'I want to apologize for the way I treated you when we broke up,' he dove in. 'It's been bothering me for a while. I never wanted to hurt you.'

'I never wanted you to hurt me either,' she said.

He smiled feebly. 'I was an idiot, Peg. You were devoted, loving, supportive. Everything I could have asked for, and more. But you blindsided me with the marriage talk. I was hungover. I couldn't make decisions in that condition. You looked at me like you would hate me if I said no. I couldn't give you the answer you wanted, and it didn't seem fair to string you along.'

She nodded vigorously. 'I told Nina that your dumping me was an act of sacrificial love.'

'What did she say?' he asked.

Peg said, 'She cursed your name and spit on the sidewalk.'

'Oh,' he said.

'You were saying how you broke up with me for my own good,' she prompted. 'How, at the time, marriage was repellent . . .'

'Right,' he said, pausing to drain his glass. 'Marriage *was* repellent then. But now, the idea of sharing a life, making a legal partnership, having children, teaching them values and growing together as a family seems like a grand idea. Otherwise, what are we doing? Killing time? Making money? For what? What's it all about, Peg? I'm not asking you to answer that. But I've been asking myself about this stuff from the moment we broke up. I really missed you that first month.'

'Just the first month?' she asked. For Peg, the earliest days weren't too horrific. She'd been through breakups before. Every woman in her thirties in New York had one or two dozen relationships that, in hindsight, were thought of as learning experiences. But as the weeks without Paul piled up, the loneliness grabbed Peg by the neck. The empty apartment, the zero messages on voice mail, the sexual frustration stretched taut, pushing her

dangerously close to the excruciating snap of fortitude, the deadly fusing of insecurity and bitterness. Any woman who'd had her share of learning experiences can attest, the insecure/bitterness combo could suck the soul right out of you.

Paul said, 'You were the best thing that ever happened to me.'

She put her hand on his knee, eyes damp. She said, 'Do go on.'

'You showed me everything I know about how to be caring and supportive. It took a while for me to get it. But I have. For the first time, I'm ready to take the next step.'

Peg said, 'And the next step is?'

He said, 'Marriage, of course.'

He was beaming. His sloppy smile spread across his cheeks like melted butter. Peg said, 'I can't believe this is happening.'

'You've got magical transformative powers, Peg. I couldn't see it up close. I had to get distance.'

'Forest, trees, I understand completely,' said Peg. 'You are so fucking hot.'

She got off her stool and reached for him, lips ready to make up.

He held her back and said, 'There's someone I want you to meet.'

'Someone . . . okay,' she said. Was he referring to the shrink who'd helped him see the light? 'I'll meet anyone you want.'

'I mean now,' he said.

'Now, as in *now*?'

'I'll be right back.' He got up, maneuvered around the tables and dashed out of the restaurant.

What the hell was going on? she wondered, rightfully confused and a bit annoyed that he'd bring another person into the privacy of their reunion. This was a party for two, and Peg had no idea who else Paul would want to invite.

Peg watched the door, baffled. The bartender said, 'Is your friend coming back?'

'I think so.' It wasn't possible that he'd run out on her again, was it?

'He owes me for the drinks.'

Reaching into her pants pocket, Peg found a twenty and put it on the bar. She said, 'Did you hear all that?'

'What?'

'He said he wanted to get married, and then ran out.'

The bartender shrugged. 'Do you want another martini?'

Peg said, 'You are the worst bartender in New York. You're supposed to eavesdrop on people's conversations and then, if asked, be ready to offer intelligent and insightful advice.'

The aspiring model said, 'Do you want another drink or not?'

'I'm good, thanks,' Peg said.

Paul reentered the bar. He was tugging a woman by the wrist. She was in her mid-thirties, wearing a skirt suit plucked off the racks of Strawberry's. Tan hose, white shoes, chunky gold jewelry. Her hair was a blond bubble, blown high and dry. Overdone makeup. Ten pounds overweight.

They pushed their way to the bar. Paul said, 'Peg, this is Bethany Bridge.'

Peg greeted her, looking to Paul for further explanation.

Bethany said, 'So you're the woman who transformed Paul.'

'I am?' asked Peg.

Paul and Bethany laughed merrily at her bafflement. Bethany said, 'You're the one who made him want to get married.'

Paul said, 'I met Bethany two months ago at a trade show.' He turned toward the blonde at his side, flashing her a Moonie smile. Bethany returned it, kissed him on the cheek, then wiped away the smear of orange-red lipstick with her thumb.

Bethany said, 'We've been inseparable ever since. We're going to be married in June. But I insisted that before we plan the wedding, Paul had to thank you for what you've done.'

Paul said, 'Thank you, Peg.'

Peg said, 'You're welcome?'

Bethany said, 'Don't be so modest, Peg. Paul said that if it weren't for you, he'd never have been ready to take the next step.'

'I am ready, Bethany,' he said.

'Oh, baby,' she said.

And then they kissed, open mouths. Drool.

Peg dearly wished their next step was off a cliff. Mustering her dignity (which she'd be proud of until the day she died), Peg said, 'I think I'm going to be sick.' She gathered her jacket and bag and stood to flee.

Bethany put a hand on her shoulder. 'I was hoping you would arrange the bouquets at my wedding. Paul says you're a gifted florist.'

'I'm not a florist,' said Peg. 'I'm an interior landscape designer.'

'But you can do bouquets?'

‘I’m on an extended vacation,’ said Peg.

‘You just said you were working at Condé Nast,’ said Paul.

‘When my schedule clears, I’m going out of town. For weeks. Maybe months. I’m going to the Bahamas. The thing is,’ she said, ‘I won the lottery.’

Bethany clapped her hands and said, ‘Congratulations!’

‘Thanks,’ said Peg.

‘I’m glad Paul cleared the books with you,’ said Bethany.

‘If only he’d swept the ashes,’ Peg said, giving him a mournful look.

‘Swept the ashes?’ asked Bethany.

‘If only he’d fucked me one more time.’

Bethany’s rubbery lips formed a red-rimmed O. Paul laughed nervously and said, ‘She’s kidding, honey. I told you, Peg has a bizarre sense of humor.’

The future Mrs Paul Tester patted Peg on the shoulder and sang, ‘Good luck with the rest of your life!’ Then she herded Paul out of the Chez Chas.

The bartender put a fresh martini in front of her, and said, ‘On the house.’

Peg said, ‘You might have a future in bartending after all.’