

I'm Here to See Jude

Gwen arranged to meet Jude at ten, after dropping the kids at their morning camps. She'd already delivered Nate to Nature's Workshop, and now drove her daughter to the pool. It was Nora's last day of swim camp and Gwen had baked a tray of cupcakes, vanilla with whipped cream frosting and red, white, and blue sprinkles left over from July 4th.

Nora balanced the tray on her lap in the backseat, snitching frosting edges under the plastic wrap. Two cupcakes were missing, eaten by Nora and Nate in the car, wrappers discarded on the floor, crumbs flattened into the seats.

"Honey, will you be able to carry the tray if I drop you off in front?"

Nora hesitated. "I might spill them."

"Not if you're careful."

"Will you do it?"

Because she was anxious to get downtown, Gwen almost snapped back at Nora about being old enough for this small responsibility. But she reminded herself that Nora was only seven, a loving, intelligent girl, tall and strong and for the most part capable, yet fearful of small things going wrong—such as dropping a tray of cupcakes. You had to accept your children were people, with their own quirks and limitations as well as talent and potential. Once you realized you couldn't mold them into

robotic perfection, you could do a much better job parenting; for instance, by carrying the cupcakes for your daughter who was afraid of spilling them.

“Okay, sweetie. You carry your towel and backpack and I’ll carry the tray.”

Gwen parked in the drop-off zone in front of the pool complex, navigating a place between the other cars coming and going.

“Mom, you’re not supposed to park here, it’s for drop-off only,” Nora told her.

“It’s just for a minute—you want me to carry the cupcakes, don’t you?”

“You might get a ticket.”

Nobody issued tickets at the Morrissey town pool.

Gwen lifted the tray from Nora’s lap and waited while her daughter located her flip-flops, centered her backpack on her shoulders, got out of the car without her towel, and climbed back in to retrieve it after Gwen reminded her.

“Come on, honey,” Gwen urged her.

“I’m not late.”

“Mommy has a lot to do today,” Gwen said. “Remember, you’re going home with Abby. Mrs. Fitzgerald will drive you and I’ll come get you this afternoon.”

“And then we’re going up to the lake?”

“As soon as Daddy gets home.”

“I can’t wait to swim in the lake.”

And Gwen couldn’t wait for the getaway with her husband and family. Four entire days at their house on Tear Lake, which they’d hardly been to this season because of camp schedules and Brian’s work. Four days of rest, relaxation, and love.

They walked to the entrance where Nora stopped to remove her backpack and look through two zipped compartments to find

her pool ID card. Gwen explained to the desk attendant that she was just delivering cupcakes for her daughter's camp party.

The party consisted of two picnic tables pinned with paper tablecloths on a grassy area between the kids' pool and the big pool. A breeze flapped the sides of the cloths and rippled the surface of the water. Not a great day for swimming, not for Gwen anyway, who liked hot weather and warm water. The pools would close for the season in another week, right after Labor Day.

She found a spot for the cupcakes on one of the tables and spent a few minutes thanking the instructors—college kids home for the summer, heading back to school this weekend—and when she turned to leave she was waylaid first by Carly Eller asking Gwen which teacher Nora got for third grade, and then by Heather John who reminded Gwen about their annual open house on Sunday, one of the few adults-only social gatherings among their circle. Gwen apologized for having to miss out. If they were in town it would have been fun to go; the Johns played great music and hosted a karaoke contest that commenced after everyone had spent an hour or two loosening up at the patio bar.

“You won't be there to defend your karaoke crown,” Heather said.

Last year, Gwen and Brian were voted karaoke king and queen for their Sonny and Cher duet, “I've Got You Babe.” In a silly rush of sentimentality, Gwen had felt tears when she sang, “So let them say your hair's too long, 'cause I don't care, with you I can't go wrong,” and Brian, sporting a fresh haircut, had answered, “Then put your little hand in mind, there ain't no hill or mountain we can't climb.” In her acceptance speech, margarita in hand, Gwen had reminded everyone she'd played the role of Maria in her high school's production of *West Side Story*, sans the painted-on Hispanic tan that Natalie Wood sported in the movie version.

“Some other lucky talent will have to go home the winner this year,” Gwen said. Using talent in its loosest meaning.

“We’ll miss you guys,” Heather said.

A last check with Nora. Did she have the gift cards for her instructors? Her goggles? Hairbrush? Love you, sweetie. A final hug and Gwen made her way back to the car, stopping once to dig a stone from her sandal, then driving downtown to meet Jude.

In the car she called Brian. He didn’t pick up—no surprise. Whenever he planned time off work, the few days leading up to it were crazy. She knew he had a big presentation today. When she got his voice mail she said, “Hi love, just wanted to wish you good luck again in your meeting. I dropped off the kids and am running errands, then going home to pack. I can’t wait for the weekend. Love you.” Then she added, “Call me if you need anything.”

She parked in a metered spot across the street from Gull. She checked herself in the rearview mirror and played with the flip in her hair, without success, then touched up her lips. She found two quarters in her purse to feed the meter, which gave her thirty minutes.

A neon sign with blue lettering hung perpendicular from the transom over the door to the restaurant, with the Ls in Gull tipped to the side to resemble a bird’s wingspan. A pair of real gulls, up from the river, circled overhead, screeching.

Gwen expected the restaurant to be empty—it didn’t open for lunch until 11:30—but she was greeted at the hostess stand by a short, dark woman with bangles running up and down both wrists.

“Do you want to fill out an application?”

“Excuse me?”

“Are you applying for the cocktail waitress job?”

“Oh, no. I’m here to see Jude.”

"Who should I say is asking?"

"Gwen Raine. He's expecting me."

"Why don't you wait in the bar?" the hostess suggested. "I'll find him for you." She reached for the phone next to the reservation book.

Gwen sat in the bar. Three women occupied other tables. They all appeared to be in their early twenties, long hair, each wearing at least one article of black clothing—miniskirt, cami with bra, spandex T-shirt—each with dark lipstick and piercings. They all displayed a degree of cleavage.

The women were filling out job applications. Could Gwen really have been mistaken for a potential cocktail waitress? How could she—with her Eileen Fisher tee and khaki slacks and sandals—even if she had carefully picked out her clothes this morning and spent an extra minute in front of the mirror before coming in? And with the real giveaway: her crow's-feet ticking off time like the markings of a clock around her eyes.

Gwen had worked in a bar once, but that was almost nine years ago, during law school. She never finished law school, even the first year, but she'd had a blast working in the bar. It's where she first met Jude, who hired her, and later, Brian, who married her.

The woman at the table closest to Gwen tore her job application and shoved the pieces in her handbag. She was the one with the miniskirt, and when she stood, Gwen got a look at her trim, tanned legs all the way up to where her skirt just covered the curve of her butt. Not an inky vein or cellulite crease in sight. I was like that, Gwen thought, two kids ago, sigh, although she never wore her hem that high.

The woman who ripped her application left the restaurant, averting her face from the hostess.

A moment later, Jude appeared from the dining area. He approached Gwen's table, his pace slow and unhurried. Gwen

remembered that even on the busiest nights at the Patriot, Jude never rushed around, appearing calm and poised amid the chaos of the dinner crunch.

She stood and hugged him briefly, catching a drift of the same cologne he'd worn when she worked for him. Whether it was Armani or Old Spice, she didn't know: it was Jude. She'd recognized the scent a few times over the years, on a stranger standing nearby or walking past her; every time it reminded her of Jude, and every time she looked around expecting to see him.

"You must have had a great summer, you're so tan," he said.

"A lot of pool time with the kids. One of the advantages of being a full-time mom."

Gray flecks streaked Jude's hair, along the temples and sideburns. He wore what Brian called an executive cut—trimmed, parted, gelled into place. Except Jude had these long straight sideburns that tapered below the ear. On someone else they would have been a mistake.

"I'm sorry I'm a few minutes late. I had to get my daughter settled at her swim camp."

Jude waved off her comment. "It's fine. Can I get you a drink? Glass of wine? A Bloody Mary?" He motioned to the bar.

"I'd have to take a nap, and it's not even noon yet."

The two remaining job applicants looked up, unsure whether Gwen had cut ahead of them in the interview line.

"Coffee then?"

"Coffee sounds good."

"We'll go to my office." On the way through the dining room Jude stopped at a dish station where a fresh pot of coffee sat on a burner. He lifted two cups down from the shelf and poured.

"You must be asking hard questions on your job application," Gwen said. "I saw one woman tear hers up and walk out."

"We get a lot of response to our ads but it's hard to find anyone who really wants to work. You ready to come back?"

"Your hostess thought so."

"In your case I'll waive the application."

"I'm sure it would be fun, only now I'm in bed every night by eleven—about the same time the bars get busy."

Jude smiled. "So much for the good old days. Let's see, coffee black, right?"

She nodded.

Jude carried both cups. They passed double doors with port-hole windows and Gwen glimpsed the kitchen where two cooks performed prep work while listening to music.

At the end of the corridor they climbed a staircase, traversed a hallway, and ended up in Jude's office, which provided a second-floor view of the river, passing slow and gray in the direction of New York City. Jude settled behind a glass desk that held nothing except a laptop. There wasn't a surface in Gwen's house that clean, despite her constantly picking up and putting away. The credenza behind him was a different story, brimming with papers and folders and books—everything from novels to business books to cookbooks. Another shelf unit to the side held a stereo dock and a pile of restaurant magazines.

Gwen sat in a chair opposite the desk, holding her cup. She didn't want to set it on the pristine desktop, although Jude had put his down. She turned to check that Jude had closed the door. This part made her tense, and she listened for footsteps, voices, anything to indicate someone approaching.

"You can relax, there's no one else up here," Jude told her.

"I'm fine," Gwen said, her face heating. Was she that obvious? She sat up straighter, set her shoulders back.

"How are Brian and the kids?"

“They’re great. We’re going away this afternoon for a mini-vacation, so thank you for seeing me today. We have a house in the Adirondacks now. Tear Lake. I don’t think we had it last time I saw you.”

“No kidding? I have a place up that way, too, just an old cabin; it was in Claire’s family for years. I’m also heading north this weekend because Dana’s starting her freshman year at St. Lawrence.”

“Wow, that’s right. Be sure to tell her I said hi. I mean, if you want to. She probably doesn’t remember me.”

There was a photograph of Jude and his daughter next to the stereo on the bookshelf. They wore skis. Their arms and ski poles were tangled around each other. It looked like a recent picture, Dana tall but still much shorter than Jude, with dark straight hair flowing from underneath a ski hat. Her wide smile showed off dazzling teeth, the mark on her eye just a shadow from this camera angle.

“I’ve been thinking about you since last time,” Jude said. “I was wondering when you would call again.”

She had visited Jude for the same purpose over the winter, and then in April when she had to come downtown to serve jury duty. Gwen didn’t get picked for a jury, but she stopped at Gull and had lunch with Jude one day that week. Otherwise, she hadn’t seen him the past nine years, and although she didn’t respond to Jude’s comment that he’d been thinking of her, she had thought about him a few times as well. Not about their brief relationship years ago, but about Jude’s life now. She wondered if he was the only unmarried man she knew, which didn’t say much about the diversity of her circle. He was the only one who didn’t have the look of married men, like they were part of a whole, and when on their own came off as incomplete or inadequate, as if they hadn’t

dressed quite right or had gotten a bad haircut. Gwen also knew how married men looked at her, as if conducting a compare and contrast study: How did this woman stack up to my wife? Was she better looking, younger, smarter, thinner? Or just different—which may be the best attribute of all? With Jude looking at her right now, she sensed his appraisal was based more on a clean slate than a weighted scale: Is she desirable? A question that carried no qualifying conditions, just an eye of the beholder. A question whose answer made her fidgety. A question she'd rather not address because she also wondered if she might be rekindling a friendship with Jude, if such a friendship were allowed, no matter how casual—a married woman having an unmarried male friend, who also happened to be a former lover. Not against the law, but likely against the rules. She doubted Brian would welcome the news without suspicion.

“I thought you and Brian were coming in for dinner some night,” Jude said.

“We haven’t been out in months, he’s been so busy with work, but we will.”

A few seconds ticked off. “Or just come by yourself,” Jude said. “We’ll have lunch again.”

Gwen looked at the clock on Jude’s bookshelf. Ten minutes left on the meter.

“I meant some other time,” he added. “When it’s not business.”

“Okay.”

“You don’t have to call ahead, just show up. That day you came in, it was a nice surprise.”

Another thing about having a male friend: it would probably be okay if he was unattractive or unavailable, but in Jude’s case the *un-* didn’t apply. It definitely applied in her case, though, at

least the unavailable part. She was firmly married, entrenched, and fulfilled in her life and role as mother, wife, and volunteer. Her days of messing up relationships were distant memories, played out by her younger, less mature, and more experimental self.

Gwen reached into her purse and handed Jude a white business envelope, the flap unsealed. “I really appreciate this,” Gwen said.

“You’re one person I’m happy to make a call for.”

“Five hundred, right?” She was nervous and sure her voice betrayed her, although the risk seemed so low here with Jude.

“That’s perfect.” Jude placed the envelope on his laptop keyboard without looking in it. He opened a desk drawer and took out a brown paper lunch bag and set it in front of Gwen.

“Do you want to try it first?”

The question surprised her; he hadn’t asked her this last time. It was tempting, like the old days at the Patriot, but was Jude going to join her or leave her solo? Would she get stoned with him now upstairs in his office? That wasn’t a good idea.

“Actually, I’d better go,” Gwen said. “I have to get packed for the weekend.”

Jude shrugged his shoulders. She put the bag in her purse.

“I should get your number,” Jude said. He unsnapped a phone from his belt. “You have mine, I should have yours—in case it’s me who needs a small favor next time.”

“Oh, sure, of course.” She gave him her cell number and he keyed it into his phone.

Then Jude stood up. “Have a great trip, Gwen. Come see me when you get back. You don’t have to wait until you run out.”

He walked her downstairs and through the dining room, out to the bar and hostess area. A new applicant sat at one of the bar tables, filling in blanks.

“Oh, and one more thing,” Jude said, leaning close and lowering his voice. “Don’t tell anyone. I’m only doing this for you.”

“I promise,” Gwen said.

“I don’t want anyone getting the wrong idea.”

He pushed open the door for her. He followed Gwen outside and they were alone on the sidewalk in front. She turned for the good-bye hug but Jude reached for her, touched her chin and cheek, leaned in, and kissed her. Time slipped for the second or two that his lips found and pressed against hers, then pulled back and were gone. She hadn’t seen it coming. Her breathing halted, heart drummed. She stepped back and turned without meeting his eyes and walked quickly to her car. By the time she dared a look, he’d gone back inside.