

Break Up, Break Down, and Break Face - Paul Blake

“No,” she said.

It took a moment for the words to sink in. This wasn't right. That's not how it goes. I opened my mouth to say something. Anything. Nothing came out. I closed my mouth. Opened it. Closed it. Like a fucking Hungry Hippo. Grasping for the right words. The plastic pill to change her answer.

“Get up. You're making a scene. And put that thing away,” the disgust on her face was plain to see.

I looked down at my hands. Shaking in misunderstanding. The diamond ring, beautiful and mocking. I became aware of the people at the tables around us. The laughter and the embarrassed silence. The maître d' behind me with the three-hundred-pound magnum of champagne already opened, the naturally carbonated fizz leaking out of the bottle into the night like my dreams. I lifted my knee off the carpet and slowly rose. I kept my head down to avoid the stares and the pity and her. My heart was beating round my ears, its rhythm matching the pulsating throb in my temple. An aneurysm? I hoped, wishing for release from this world.

“Sit down, Stuart.”

I numbly followed her order and sat on the chair, unconsciously pulling it in closer to the table, erasing my earlier exuberance of pushing it back with force as I leaped up to deliver my fool's errand. I stared at the plate before me. The half-eaten cheesecake with its blood-red coulis smeared around the plate like my future. The maître d' placed the bottle beside my plate and exited without a word. Condensation dripped down the bottle to the tablecloth, darkening the material. I placed the ring in the wet patch. It glittered in the low lights of the restaurant like the diamond it was.

“I wish you hadn't done that,” her voice was tight. Strained. Like she was struggling to contain her anger. “I was going to tell you.”

My ears picked up on that, and I glanced at her. So beautiful. So cold. I looked back down.

“It’s over between us. It has been for a long time.”

But we’d just bought a house together a couple of months ago. My mind protested. Why would you do that if you didn’t love me?

“I’m in love with Marcus. No. We love each other.”

Marcus? A thousand images of my oldest friend, my best friend, my would-be best man. Us together. Since forever. From the earliest schooldays to this year. He had been my one constant. The only one, apart from her, who knew me.

“He is going to move in. You will need to find somewhere else. I’ll pack your stuff over the next few days, and you can collect it,” she stood up and walked past me. She accidentally nudged me as she passed. No apology.

I slumped in my seat. My elbows on the table and in the cheesecake. My face cradled by my hands. The restaurant faded into blackness as I closed my eyes.

“Stuart, there’s something I want to tell you,” she said. I could see she was excited but trying to hide it. The corners of her perfect mouth kept rising and falling. Her hands were behind her back.

“Go on then,” I said. “Tell me.”

“Let’s go over to the sofa.” She skip-walked across the living room, past the cardboard boxes strewn around the floor to the salmon-pink leather sofa under the window. She practically jumped into the seat and patted the cushion next to her.

I walked over and sat beside her. Her summer dress had risen, showing her toned and tanned inner thigh. I reached out to stroke the soft skin, and her hand came out from behind her back and slapped it away.

“Later,” she said with a smile.

I felt a draft of chilled air hit the back of my neck. I shivered as the goosebumps popped up along my arms. She noticed and squealed, “You’re excited!”

“The suspense is killing me.” I smiled.

“Okay, close your eyes and hold out your hands.”

I did as she said. The draft was still there. Colder now. With a damp tinge to it. Her hands were warm. I felt her fingertips run across my outstretched palms, then placed an object in my hand.

“Don’t open your eyes yet. I want to get a photo.”

I felt her cushion rise as she got off the sofa. She ruffled my hair as she passed and then planted a light kiss on the top of my head. I heard her go into the kitchen. The temptation to open my eyes was immense. I wouldn’t though. She wanted to see my reaction. I wanted her too as well. Anything to make her happy. The chill air hit me again, this time it ran down my back, along my spine. It was like iced water. I kicked out in surprise. Still balancing the object on my palm. My foot hit one of the boxes on the floor. It made a thumping noise, but the box did not move.

“You didn’t peek, did you?” she asked as she came back in the room.

“I wouldn’t dare. Cross my heart.”

I heard the leather cushion beside me squeak as she sat down. She put her hand on my knee and gave it a stroke.

“You can open your eyes now.”

I opened my eyes, blinking a few times to adjust to the exposure of light. I heard her phone make its camera shutter sound.

“Enough of the bacon sandwich pictures,” I joked referring to the infamous picture of Ed Miliband, former Labour party leader that cost his party the general election. Another blast of icy wind hit me from behind.

I looked down at my hand, and there was a white plastic stick, with a little window and a blue case covering one end. I looked at the window and saw three lines, two on one side and the other under the word ‘pregnant.’ Her phone kept making the shutter noise. I

could feel my mouth start to make an 'O' shape of shock which I quickly changed to a wide smile, all teeth, and happiness.

“We’re pregnant? That’s incredible.” I stood up and then picked her up. I swung her around the room, being careful to mind the boxes that surrounded me. Her laughter was like little bells.

“Stop! Stop! I’m getting dizzy,” she said in between laughs.

I slowed and stopped. I placed her gently back on the sofa.

“I’m going to have to fix where that draft and get rid of all these boxes. My study is going to have to be a nursery I suppose.”

“What draft? What boxes?”

“I didn’t mean to hit him. Officer,” the man said. “He surprised me, and I thought he was attacking us.”

The man was next to the doorway of the restaurant, his girlfriend? Wife? beside him hugging him. The blue lights of the police car kept sweeping over the pair. Blue. Blue. Blue. Blue. Like the world’s worst nightclub lighting system. Fuck, that punch hurt. I could feel the blood tricking through my beard. I was sitting on the kerb next to the police car. I wrinkled my nose trying to see if it was broken. For a change I couldn’t smell myself, so that’s one good thing. What the fuck am I doing, she doesn’t even look like her. They never do.

“It’s ok, sir. This man is known to us. He does this at least once a week. Not always at this restaurant. He did it to a couple at Nandos the other month.”

“He should be locked up, you people should do your job, disgusting letting perverts like that on the street,” the girlfriend, of course.

The Police Officer, to his credit, paused a moment before answering. “For surprising people? Ma’am if we did that, Jeremy Beadle’s career would have been a lot shorter than it was. He’s harmless. We’ll take him back to the station. Get him a hot drink and a warmish

bed. Much better than cardboard city, over by the canal, where he normally sleeps. That is if he decides he isn't pressing charges, of course."

"He press charges?" Her voice rose.

"He's the one who was assaulted, ma'am," I could hear the smile in his voice. "Your boyfriend might be lucky, Stuart's never done so before."

I started to feel funny. Not funny ha ha, but like I'd drunk a ton of bad wine funny. My vision started to blur, and it felt like I was swaying. The police car lights became too bright, and I closed my eyes. The after light burned on my eyelids looked like a shining blue diamond ring. A blinding pain struck me just behind my left eye. I slumped against the car. Everything went black. And stopped.

END

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