

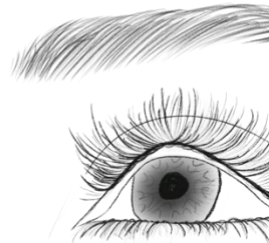
# *The Dinner Party*

*April 6, 2017*

The McMurphys moved in last week. They took the empty house across the street. The place was only vacant for a few days before they showed up. Not too much of a surprise, though, the house was beautiful. I had gotten to see the interior a few times when the Harveys lived there. It was really a shame to see them go. But after it came out that Michael was sleeping with their nineteen-year-old babysitter, it became clear why Robin made him leave. She followed not long after, with her kids, and went to the other side of the country. I think they're really enjoying North Carolina now.

Their absence invited Ross and Jennifer McMurphy. They were an older couple, mid 60's maybe. At least that's what Jennifer implied when I went to greet them the other day. Yet, even though their hair was struck with grey, they looked no older than 25. Impossible, I was sure. Her skin was still so tight and glowing on her face. Her hair, though many shades lighter, was still thick and bouncy. And her movements, still easy and quick.

But her eyes, though still a glittering green, looked old. Like they had seen too many things, squinted too hard at too many controversies;  
stared too long at too  
many bright lights.  
Gawked too long at too



many horrifying sights.

And her voice was too soft. Like she had been speaking for centuries, crying for years, screaming for days. And Ross, I didn't speak to him for too long, but he seemed to share his wife's afflictions. Her youthful outer glow but an elderly soul. He was a taller man: broad set shoulders, muscular build. One would suspect a man his age wouldn't look as good as he did, but I was surprised by how well he maintained his physique. He was maybe a bit taller than my husband and I could see through his T-shirt that he was a muscular man.

They were an interesting couple, no doubt.

Yet, Jennifer invited my husband and me over for dinner that night. She wanted to thank us for graciously welcoming them into the neighborhood. How could I refuse? I did not want to refuse. William, on the other hand, did not take the news well.

"No," he said quickly. "I won't go."

"Why not?" I laughed, surprised by his reaction.

He glared down at me through his piercing blue eyes. "The McMurphy's are a weird couple."

"So," I shrugged. "A lot of people are weird. Does that mean we shouldn't be nice to them?"

"I just don't think we should go to their home and close ourselves in."

I gawked at him for a moment. William was usually the reasonable one of the two of us. He can normally remove himself from most scenarios and provide an objective point of view. He was acting so irrationally. So unlike himself. Of course, my feverish need to be

Jennifer's friend was a little naive and irrational in and of itself, but at least I acknowledged it. But *his* behavior was a tad offsetting.

"What's going on?" I asked, confused.

He took a step closer to me. "Last Monday, I didn't have to go to work, right?" I nodded, remembering he had the day off. "So I went by the McMurphy's. Thought maybe I could talk to Ross and see if he wanted to come by sometime and have a drink or watch the game. You know, be bros." I nodded again. He looked around and took another step closer. "When I got there, the door was open, so I just went in. I knocked, but I just invited myself in." I rolled my eyes and sighed. "Listen," he insisted. "I walked around into the kitchen and saw Ross hunched over, eating a chunk of raw beef."

"What?" I questioned in disbelief.

"He was shoveling it into his mouth with a ladle!"

I shook my head. "Big deal." I had read somewhere that raw meat was good for the digestive tract or the colon or something. I mean, I was pretty sure I had read something like that. After all, Ross probably knew what was good for his body. "He's up to date with the newest diet fads. Maybe we should try something like that."

William crossed his arms and pouted. "Sage," he shook his head. "I'm not going."

I frowned at him. "William, you're acting like a child."

He grabbed me by my shoulders and pulled me to sit down next to him on the couch. He wore a

bewildered look on his face as he spoke. “Listen to me. There is something very odd about the McMurphys.” He shook his head radically, taking another look around the room and began to whisper. “The other day, I got back from work; you were still at the Mayor’s office. You had a late meeting, remember?” I nodded. “Ok, well I saw Jennifer getting out of the shower and-”

“Freeze.” I held up a finger, pulling out of his grasp. “You were watching Jennifer shower.” Jennifer McMurphy was a beautiful woman by every definition. I won’t pretend that she didn’t spur a bit of jealousy within me. Maybe that’s where my juvenile need to be close to her came from.

Shock and panic spread across William’s face. “It wasn’t like that. She was shedding -”

“The only way you can see into their master bathroom is from my office window, upstairs.” I tried hard to suppress my outrage as, a long time ago, we agreed to never yell at each other.

“I didn’t seek her out, I swear.” He held up his hands.

I leaned away from him and crossed my arm. “Why were you in my office, William? You know that I have to keep track of very sensitive information. And you know that I’ve asked you not to snoop in there, so there’s no way that you just happened to be in my office and just happened to glance out the window. ”

“I know, I know,” he said slowly. “I was doing some work from home and was looking for some staples.” I pierced my lips at him. “Cross my heart.”

William was a bad liar. As a result, he made a regular habit of not doing it. And at this point in our marriage, I usually could tell immediately when he was trying. This was not one of those times.

“Look,” I placed my hands on his knee. “I just really want to know them. It’s something about the way they move or how they speak. I just wanted to soak up their presence.”

“That’s how they get you!” He snapped. “They charm their way into your life until they’re close enough to take a bite! Like vampires.”

“What?” I laughed. He chuckled too, hearing his own voice. “Look, one night is all I’m asking.”

Reluctantly, William agreed, and that was the end of the conversation. William was not a man fond of social activity, I knew. But I thought that he would like the Murphy’s if he had a chance to talk with them. A little while later, William and I were at their door carrying a pie. I didn’t think it was a formal gathering, but when Ross answered the door in a white button-up and slacks, I realized I was wrong.

“Sage!” Ross outstretched his arms to hug me. William quickly handed him the pie to interrupt his path. Ross’s attention immediately shot to William. “Uh, thank you,” he laughed. “I’m allergic to apples, though.”

“It’s peach,” he said dryly.

“Your wife had already told me,” I bubbled, trying to counteract my husband’s heavy undercurrent.

Nodding, Ross, led us into his home. The house was even more beautiful, with everything unpacked. They had crystal statuettes, glass fixtures, and completely white furniture. Everything was white. I'm not sure when they repainted, but the light blue that once themed the house was no more.

He led us back to the dining room behind the kitchen. It housed an ivory wooden dining table, below a twinkling glass chandelier. Waiting for us was Jennifer, two other men, and another woman. In their presence, our attire seemed so underwhelming. My blue jeans and the purple blouse was so mundane compared to the gowns and suits that sat before me. Even William was dressed better than I was, still in his work suit.

“Sage!” Jennifer screamed when she saw me.

Quickly, she rounded the table to hug me. Immediately I stepped into her embrace before William could interject. Still holding me, she pulled me to my seat between her and the other woman in the room. Sitting down, I could get a full look at her dress. It was a rose, cotton dress that came down to the floor and fell off her shoulders. She was breathtaking.

“Are we celebrating something?” I asked.

“What else but you?”

I looked up to see Ross had led William to his seat across from me, and Jennifer introduced the other woman as Rosaline, her adoptive sister. She came with her husband, Caleb. Along with them was Theodore, a friend of Ross.

“Actually, Theodore is my brother,” Ross corrected. “Adoptive also.” He looked at William as he spoke in a way that was almost mockingly. Like he was making a jab at him or telling some inside joke that I wasn’t aware of.

I nodded gleefully at them. They were a beautiful bunch of people. Rosaline and Caleb didn’t share the McMurphy’s greying hair, but they all carried the same youthful glow. Rosaline was a blonde like I believe Jennifer once was. It was cut into a short bob that framed her slender face perfectly. Her eyes were big and bold, brightening up her face. Yet, they too had seen too much. Her frame was thin as a bird. Not in a sickly manner, though. In more of a way that made her look light and graceful. In a way, her soft silk blue dress slid over her body in regal fashion. But then there was Caleb, who was just the opposite of his wife, but just as bewitching. His hair was very dark, a brown color. He had cut so that it tapered along the sides and long, but slicked back, in the front. It suited his edged face well. The sharpness of his jawline back up to his cheekbones. The fullness of his lips. The natural high arch of his eyebrows. He was a billboard businessman. And he was broad. He had wide-set shoulders, like a linebacker, and a full chest. He was tall as well. It looked as if he could crush Rosaline in just a hug.

Then there was Theodore, who sat at the head of the table. He looked as if he were older than Jennifer and Ross, but I wasn’t sure if that meant anything. Like them, he too had greying hair. He was thin as well. Not

nearly as thin as Rosaline but smaller than Ross. They held the same glittering green eyes. Actually, they all had the same eyes. Beautiful people they were. I could see the relation between them.

Except, they weren't really related.

I told Jennifer that I had loved what she had done with the place and hoped it didn't sound too cliché. I mean, it was gorgeous. Every time I looked around; I was amazed by something new. The wooden floor that was once there was ripped up and replaced with glittering tile. The window seals were redone with a different design. A glass china cabinet was placed behind me. Even the ceiling had been repainted in eggshell, then overtop a white lace. Feeling even more out of place in denim jeans, I shrank into myself.

I believe that Jennifer saw me because she reached out and grabbed my hand.

“Would you like to change into one of my gowns?” She stared into me excitedly. “I have one that I know you'll just glow in.”

Reluctantly I nodded, feeling a tad put off playing dress up as we were grown women. But I wouldn't dare reject Jennifer's kindness. She stood and dragged me behind her. She only stopped to wave Rosaline along. Then she pulled me back through their living room, up their redone stairs. They were once covered in a tan carpet. I wasn't sure if they were power cleaned or replaced, but the carpet was now white—White like bleached cotton, to match the rest of their home. We went into their master



bedroom, which to my surprise, was a lime green color. The comforter on the bed and curtain followed this theme. The bedframe was ivory. The rug at the foot of the bed was a green color and the vanity as well.

In her room, Jennifer disappeared into her closet, leaving Rosaline and me to chat.

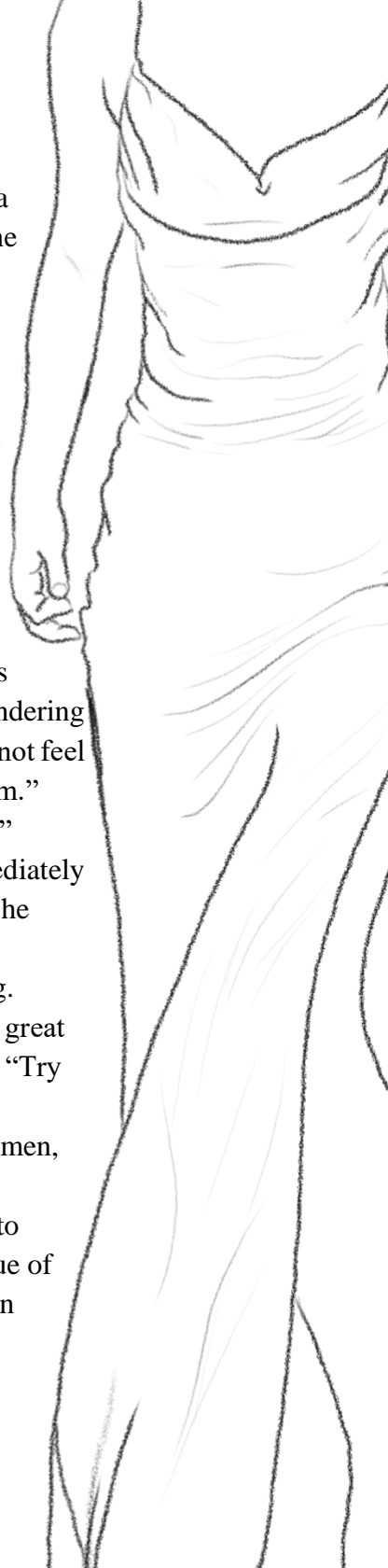
“So,” I began. “How long were you in the system?”

“What system?” She stared. Her gaze slid over me, checking me out as if *I* were the outfit, and she was wondering how I’d fit. I stumbled over myself to not feel uncomfortable. “Um, the foster system.”

“Oh,” she laughed. “That system.” Her voice was like a song, and immediately I was again enchanted with her. But she never answered me. Instead, Jennifer reemerged with a silk gown, bubbling.

“Now, I think this dress will look great on you.” She shoved it into my arms. “Try it on.”

Being stared down by the two women, I peeled off my jeans and donned the dress. I wasn’t particularly a woman to dress up frequently. But the silver-blue of this silk was a nice contrast to my skin



tone. It slid along the curve of my hips to give my figure a sexy appeal. Rosaline made quick work of pulling my hair into a bun. I looked elegant, almost regal. I might have worn it the next time I had to host a fundraiser banquet.

Jennifer also handed me a pair of crystal earrings and grey stiletto pumps. Then she led us back downstairs. When we reappeared in the dining room, William quickly stood. He rounded the table and took my hand. He placed a kiss on my knuckle before moving up to my wrist. As I said, I wasn't a woman to dress up frequently. I took his awe as a compliment.

The moment didn't last long. Ross took my other hand and led me back to my seat. "You look beautiful," he said, before pushing the chair in behind me. Caleb ushered William back to his seat. We all sat down and began talking as Jennifer began to serve dinner.

Theodore was nice enough. He asked a lot of questions about me more than anything. He insisted that I call him Theo. Caleb didn't speak very frequently but watched William very closely, which, in turn, made him glare at me. The rest of us talked amongst ourselves. I made a point not to look at William for a little while, enjoying the steak dinner Jennifer put in front of us. When I finally did look back at him, he mouthed that *no one else is eating*. I shrugged it off and continued my conversation with Rosaline. But he was right. No one else was eating but me and William. It was a tad concerning, but perhaps they were full.

Except upon further investigation, I saw that no one else had even lifted a fork.

Before I had a chance to really turn it over in my mind, William slammed his hands on the table and stood up. I was the only one who jumped, unprepared for his aggression.

“Enough of this,” he said. “I refuse to fall victim to you, soulless creatures.”

“William!” I gasped in shock. No one else seemed to share my horror. Instead, everyone else watched him knowingly.

“You were right,” Theo said. “He is pretty smart.” Ross nodded. Calmly Theo gestured for William to sit back down. When he didn’t, Caleb and Ross forced him into his seat. I looked around, confused, but Jennifer just smiled at me.

“What is happening right now?” I demanded.

“Don’t you get it?” William struggled in his chair, Ross and Caleb holding him in place effortlessly. “We’re about to die!” I shook my head, confused. “They’re vampires!”

“Vampires?” Rosaline laughed. “How’d you get that?”

“I thought you said he walked in on you the other day,” Jennifer questioned.

“He did,” Ross nodded. “Maybe I overestimated his intelligence.”