

AFTER DINNER Conversation

Philosophy | Ethics Short Story Literary Magazine



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After Dinner Conversation *Magazine* — June 2024

This magazine publishes fictional stories that explore ethical and philosophical questions in an informal manner. The purpose of these stories is to generate thoughtful discussion in an open and easily accessible manner.

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From the Editor

These stories have caused me to reflect on aging. For most of my life, I've felt twenty-five years old and wondered who put this aging body around my unchanged mind.

Turning fifty feels different, though. For the first time, things are happening that I don't have an interest in following. For the first time, what I really want is to be almost entirely left alone from things that don't matter to me. A cat, a cup of hot tea, a reading chair, and a book... Should I be getting testosterone shots? No, I think not. I think I like getting old.

My mother once told me, "When I was young, I was afraid I wouldn't be able to do the things I wanted to do when I was old. Now that I'm old, I find I no longer want to do them."

She also told me, when I was seventeen and still walking through the toy aisle at the store, "There is nothing wrong with walking through the toy aisle. Keep walking through the toy aisle until it's not fun anymore."

Maybe that's what getting old is; you've walked the toy aisle so many times, you just aren't impressed by the toys anymore... But also with dating, with trivial media, with sports, with people who aren't worth your time. You've just walked that aisle so many times you aren't impressed anymore.

And I think if that's what getting old is, simply saying, "I've seen ten versions of this already, so I no longer find it interesting," maybe I'm okay with getting old.

Kolby Granville – Editor



The Bathroom

Laurel Doud

* * *

Content Disclosure: Sexual Innuendo

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The garage light flips on like a flashbulb, freezing me in a mug shot.

“Del, you out here?” my wife says sleepily as she steps down the cement riser.

She looks at me standing before the window; then her attention is diverted to the patio chair, the newspaper and coffee mug at its feet, its angle to the glass. She seems puzzled at first but focuses her gaze through the window, over the fence, and into our neighbor’s bathroom, our windows strategically placed like both ends of a telescope, and her drowsiness dissipates.

The girl stands there naked and exposed.

I see dawning suspicion in my wife’s eyes as they harden.

Then I hear the girl’s boyfriend exclaim from the bathroom, “Hey, I know that guy.”

* * *

I have an ear for the bathroom door: the click of the knob, the squeak of the hinges, the bang as it stops against the wall. It's not that I always hear these things because, like everything else in my body, my hearing is not as sharp as it used to be, but I can sense them like a change in the atmospheric pressure. From my garage, however, where I spend much of my time during the weekends, I can see as well as hear, for it's from my garage that I watch her.

She doesn't know I'm here, sitting in the broken patio chair that faces the window at the back and looks across four feet of fenced side yard into the bathroom of a small cottage behind a main house. I presume the man rents, and she visits on the weekends.

I haven't seen her for a while, though, and I'm beginning to envision all sorts of horrible things. It's a dangerous world out there these days. What if she never returns? What if he was stupid enough to let her go? I'm going to have to find out whether she's safe, or it might be the death of me.

I first saw her last August. There had been others before her: small, dark-haired young women, pallid and intense, but I hardly noticed them. This one was different: golden-haired and robust. I was pulling groceries from the car when something danced in my peripheral vision. She had opened the mirrored medicine cabinet and was taking out a tube of toothpaste, using her index finger as a brush. She rinsed her mouth and then turned toward the half-opened, screenless horizontal slider. She stuck her head out, her long hair swinging forward and glinting in the sun like pyrite. She looked down on the stacks of old lumber and PVC pipe and then, shifting, stared right through my window. I gave her a startled little wave. She lifted her hand

in response but then tucked her hair behind an ear, and I realized she couldn't see me the way the light glanced off the pane.

She came sporadically, then more frequently, then like clockwork. I saw her as I passed from house to garage, garage to house, washing her face or combing her hair or using a toothbrush that was now left in a cup for her. I came to know her toiletries by heart.

When I timed things perfectly, her shower was my prize. She never undressed in the bathroom but came in wearing a silky blue bathrobe, letting it slip like water from her shoulders. I glimpsed her pale breasts, the tan lines outlining their fullness, before she stepped into the shower and slid the frosted glass across her. When she stepped out, she'd be slightly blotched from the hot water, and she'd begin to dry herself off. The seasons have passed with her towelings. When it was hot, she blotted her skin in quick little dabs. When it was cold, she buffed and burnished her skin to a high color. In spring, she dried herself luxuriantly, finishing up with lotion, her hands massaging her shoulders and arms, cupping her breasts with practiced ease. Then she slipped the robe back on and disappeared from the bathroom and from my view.

She's a wholesome-looking young woman. She probably thinks she's too heavy, the way young women feel these days and *wholesome* may not be the compliment it used to be.

Youth never seem to realize how beautiful they are with that glow of health and vitality, the aura of possibility that's so alluring and seductive. They have seemingly endless days of the unpredictable, the unforeseeable, the unexpected. Don't they realize how precious that is?

* * *

I hear a noise, a squeak, like rubber scraping across the floor.

"You coming in soon?" my wife says, standing in the doorway leaning heavily on the walker with the tennis ball feet. Her hip must be aching. "It's almost time to call Denny, and I made you a sandwich."

"You're not supposed to do that," I say with some guilt.

"Oh, pfft. I'm perfectly fine."

She feels sorry for me as I've had to take on all the housework. The only time I get out, it seems, is to the grocery store and her doctors' appointments. Vee hasn't bounced back from this surgery like we thought she would.

"I feel like I've aged a decade in the past nine months," she told me the other night and, in a rather uncharacteristic unburdening, she added, "I've become that scrawny old woman I said I'd never be. I just didn't realize I wouldn't have a choice. I can't even look at myself in the mirror anymore."

I don't look at myself in the mirror either, not wanting to see the bald old man with age spots marking his time. I'm not scared of death. Dead is dead. Clean and tidy. But dying is messy, the body grinding down in its relentless, vicious progression.

I don't have to be there when Vee calls Denny, as both Denny and I leave her to be the exchanger of news, but she likes to have me in the same room, even if it's only to hear her side of the conversation.

When Denny was young, we had a decent relationship, but when he turned fifteen, we started to butt heads. He respected his mother, but he'd walk away from me, muttering,

Crazy old man. My father would have had me by the throat if I had said anything like that. I left Vee to deal with him until he grew up, but he went to college back east and never came home. We hardly ever see him now. Not alone anyway. Denny's kids used to visit every few years, but when they hit their teens, trips out west to see Delveeta—that's what the eldest called us—weren't so fun anymore. We get announcements now: birthdays, graduations, and Vee sends off a check. She gets nervous using the computer to go to all those websites they list.

"Money's still okay, isn't it?" she asks me every time.

* * *

The boyfriend's cottage is a ramshackle little place. The front door is open, so I knock on the warped screen door. It's a shadowy cave inside.

A voice calls from the gloom, "Come on in."

"Matthew Cooper?" I answer haltingly.

"Yeah, come on in. Screen's unlocked."

I gingerly step inside. The room that combines a living space and a kitchen is low-ceilinged and dim. All the windows are open, but it's still terribly hot and stuffy.

He appears from another room, presumably the bedroom, and stops, obviously surprised. "Oh, I thought you were the... Sorry. Can I help you?"

He's wearing practically nothing, a pair of drawstring shorts, and I suppose he's considered handsome with that mass of dark, curly hair and unblemished skin.

I gather myself and get to the point. "Mrs. Ferguson in the front house was nice enough to show me back here, Mr. Cooper. My name is Del Silva? I'm your neighbor from around the corner?" I'm ending my sentences in a question mark like a

moron and stumble on. “To tell you the truth, I’ve been corralled into this. You see, my wife, she had surgery, but she already committed, so I agreed, and, well, I’m soliciting for the March of Dimes.”

He laughs pleasantly and gestures to a worn Chesterfield. “Have a seat. I’ll be right back.”

He heads back into the bedroom, and I look around quickly, but there’s no sign that the girl has returned. Books are scattered over the coffee table, and a dead plant hangs from a macramé sling, its brown, curled leaves lying limply over the lip of the pot. There’s a pile of dirty dishes in the kitchen sink and, on the linoleum, an overflowing recycling bin of empty beer cans and bottles. To the right, the bathroom door is partially open, and a slice of golden light is arrowed on the floor like an invitation.

He comes back into the room, wearing a faded T-shirt with a stretched-out neck.

“Wonderful little place you have here,” I say and mean it. It reminds me of my youth, my salad days when life was full of possibilities, when a ramshackle place was perfect because it was yours.

“Thanks.” He points to the sofa again. “Please, sit down.”

I fall into the Chesterfield’s sagging cushion.

“It’s unusually warm today,” I offer.

He sits down at a scarred but sturdy desk, his chair on wheels chittering on the wood floor. “Sorry. It’s almost hotter in here. Mrs. Ferguson bought an AC unit, but they haven’t installed it yet. I actually thought you were the...”

I incline my head in understanding, though I could have installed an AC unit once upon a time.

“Do you live here alone?” I ask, moving on to perhaps unsafe topics but ones closer to my heart.

He nods.

“Yes, this seems a little small for two people.” I smile, hoping to divert him from the disingenuousness of the remark.

“It doesn’t normally look this bad.” His face tightens, and he rummages around on the desktop. “It’s been a rough couple of weeks,” he adds as if he can’t help himself.

I know how that feels.

“May I use your bathroom?” I ask, suddenly realizing that I can.

“Sure. It’s there on the right.”

I push the bathroom door open slowly, savoring the beloved sound of it. The brightness of the room blinds me for a moment. When my vision adjusts, I see a shade over the window. She could have pulled it down any time, but I know why she didn’t. It’s a delight to the body and soul to revel in the light after the dimness of the living room.

It feels quite odd, this perspective from bathroom to garage, and, startled, I realize my garage door is open, and the patio chair is silhouetted against the light. I never wanted her to feel uncomfortable, thinking someone might be watching her.

It’s been a rough couple of weeks.

I stand at the sink and breathe deeply. I hoped the bathroom might smell of her, like orange blossoms, or so I’d imagined, but it smells of some overpowering cowboy cologne. There’s a physical presence of her, though. Her toothbrush still stands in the cup on the sink, and her blue bathrobe hangs on the back of the door. I briefly touch the sleeve and turn away. I flush the toilet and turn the faucet on, splashing water over my

heated face, patting it gently to dry. How many times had I seen her do that? I go back into the living room and sit down.

He's writing out a check.

"I sympathize with you," he says. "My grandmother would drag me around with her when she marched, all dressed up like we were going to church, and we'd come home with about five dollars. I admire your fortitude. I didn't even know people walked door-to-door anymore."

He hands me the check for twenty-five dollars. I won't cash it.

"What profession are you in, Mr. Cooper?"

"I just finished my first year of teaching high school English."

"A teacher?" I can hear the tone in my voice. *Incredulity*. The grubby shorts, ratty T-shirt, and two days of beard stubble. "Does that get you into trouble with your young charges? Being that you're not married?"

I don't expect him to answer, but he does. "No, not really. They just want you to treat them like adults. And the girls—well, they like to hear all about your girlfriends."

"Ah, a man around town," I say lightly, but my spine stiffens, preparing to defend her.

"No, there's just one," he says with conviction, but then adds more hesitantly, "Or I think there is."

I force myself to remain calm. "Problems?"

"Well, she went off to Europe to study this summer. In Germany. She's been gone for a month now. We talk and text, but..." He jiggles his right leg up and down. "I kinda got used to having her around. I don't know what to do with myself."

I know exactly how you feel, I want to tell him.

“When will she be back?” I ask as nonchalantly as I can.

“September 7.” He points to a calendar tacked above the desk. “Eight weeks, two days.”

I take a steadying breath and pull myself up from the couch. “Well, Mr. Cooper, I do thank you for your kind contribution. I hope the other neighbors will be as pleasant and receptive as you have been.”

He follows me to the screen door and holds it open. I step out into the sunlight, the heat dropping on me like a shroud.

I should be happy she’s safe, and he seems to be a decent sort, but I had been so looking forward to watching her tan lines deepen.

* * *

The two months have been interminable. I’d like to punch the guy who said time goes by faster as we age. But the seventh of September has come. Finally. Vee seems to have had a lovely summer. She’s gotten most of her strength back, and she’s even feeling a bit frisky.

“I think we should plan a trip,” she says at dinner. “Visit Denny and the kids. He thinks it’s a wonderful idea. He says it’s been too long. He says he can get tickets to a Red Sox game. Wouldn’t that be nice? Wouldn’t it be nice to have something to look forward to?”

I make the appropriate noises, but I’m anxious to get outside to see whether Matt Cooper’s car is still there.

He leaves after dinner, his face excited, his hair damp and curling. I can just stop myself from shouting, *Take me with you*, as he drives by.

After I tuck Vee into bed, I see that the car has returned, and I run back to the garage and wait.

* * *

The light blazes in the bathroom, and there she stands, naked, like Venus rising, her bed-tossed hair tumbling down her shoulders and back, the soft curve of her breasts outlined, her tan marks only a shade darker than they had been before she left.

She looks wonderful. She looks beautiful. I move closer to the window until she's the only thing I see.

She begins to comb her hair, her arms high over her head as she pulls it straight back over her scalp, the hair slipping through the teeth, then cascading back down around her shoulders, the part reappearing like a path to heaven. I wonder if there are gold-colored strands in the comb. Maybe I could steal some and wrap them in a glass-encased fob like the Victorians did. I think I still have my grandfather's pocket watch somewhere.

She puts the comb down on the toilet tank and stares into the mirror, her expression intense and focused. Then she smiles. It's a faraway smile, even a queer smile. There's something different about her. I'm not quite sure what it is.

She turns and slides the window open, thrusting her head and shoulders out, her breasts jutting forward like a living figurehead on a ship's prow. She looks up—the night is clear, the moon new, the stars freckling the sky—and then she drops her head level and seems to stare right through my window, into the darkened garage, into my soul.

I see now what's different about her. There's a boldness, a self-confidence that wasn't there before.

She lifts a hand. She's going to wave this time, I just know it, an affectionate little gesture of friends meeting after a long

absence.

The garage light flips on like a flashbulb, freezing me in a mug shot.

I see dawning suspicion in my wife's eyes as they harden.

I hear the girl's boyfriend exclaim from the bathroom, "Hey, I know that guy."

I twist around. Matt Cooper, framed by our respective windows, grabs the blue bathrobe and drapes it over the girl who has pulled herself back inside, her arms crisscrossed over her breasts like a bandolier.

But there it is again. A shift in the eyes. I see that new poise, that new self-assurance. She shakes the boyfriend off, drops her arms, and the robe slips like water from her shoulders. *Let him look*, she seems to say and takes a step closer to the window, the ship's figurehead plowing pitilessly toward me. Her eyes are furious now, the pupils glittering. I feel a stab somewhere in the region of my gut, in that place that makes me want to retch and defecate at the same time.

They're getting it all wrong. They don't understand. It's not what she thinks. What he thinks. What Vee thinks.

This girl had... I didn't know it until this very moment... had truly touched my soul.

I've never thought much about my soul before. What nourishes it. What sustains it. But I realize now the sight of her fed it in a way that, once upon a time, other things had but, for a long time now, have been missing from my life.

A memory fills my mind. No, more than a memory, a reliving. The moment Denny was born. His eyes are open and already curious. His downy head fits perfectly into the palm of my hand. The delicate fingers of his left hand grab ahold of my

pinkie and won't let go. Such a powerful grip for something so new. I'm brimming with a sense of fullness, of completeness. Of the awe and appreciation of existence. Of the majesty of a life yet to live.

The image fades too quickly, replaced by my corporeality now, constrained to this, living in a darkened garage, waiting for the light to unveil a bathroom and its parceled life.

I realize with a pant that seizes up my heart what I took from her. How I fooled myself into thinking she offered it freely, even reveled in it. But I stole it. I took it like a thief... like a peeper.

A spidery hand seems to move from my spasming heart over my shoulder to grasp my throat, the fingers a vise grip around my larynx. It takes my breath away.

As I sink to the garage floor, I am so very sorry. I'd like to explain everything to the girl. Then to Vee. And then to our... but the darkness spirals down my vision.

Just before the light is extinguished, I'm flooded with that sense of abundance, that expansion of my body inside and out. I feel a pressure in my hand, and it takes me only a moment to recognize the heft of my son's head, the nubbin of warmth radiating from my palm like stigmata, his fingers grabbing mine, not wanting to let go.

* * *

Discussion Questions

1. The narrator (*Del Silva*) tries at the end of the story to explain (*or justify*) why he is spying on the neighbor. Why do you think he is watching her?
2. Is there another way the narrator could have gotten what he needed without spying on the neighbor? What might you suggest he do instead?
3. What should the narrator do now that he has been caught? Should he go next door and explain himself and/or try to apologize?
4. If you were the narrator's wife in the story, what would you have done after catching him looking at the young woman across the way?
5. The narrator says, "Youth never seem to realize how beautiful they are with that glow of health and vitality." What might a person do to try and hold onto that vitality into old age, or is holding on simply impossible?

* * *

Author Information

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Today is a Day Like Any Other

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The Bathroom

Laurel Doud's novel, *This Body*, was published by Little Brown, translated into German as *Wie Das Leben So Spielt*, and optioned to Hollywood, where it disappeared into development hell. Bummer. Her short stories and creative nonfiction essays have been published in various online magazines and literary journals such as *Air/Light*, *Into the Void*, and *Smoky Blue Literary and Arts Magazine*. She lives in the Sierra Foothills of California with her husband and their dogs and is an academic librarian at a local community college.

Uncle Jed's War

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