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# Prelude

Curtis McCoy was early for his ten o'clock meeting so he carried his coffee to a table by the window, where he could feel the watery April sun. It was a Saturday, Joe Coffee was crowded, and Brooklyn Heights was alive, women in running tights pushing strollers along Hicks Street, dog walkers congregating at the benches on Pineapple Street, families dashing to soccer games, swimming lessons, birthday parties down at Jane's Carousel.

At the next table, a mother sat with her two adult daughters, drinking from blue-and-white paper cups, peering at the same phone.

"Oh, here's one! This guy's profile says he likes running, making his own kimchi, and 'dismantling capitalism.'"

Curtis tried not to listen but couldn't help himself.

"Darley, he's twice my age. No. Do you even understand how the app works?"

The name Darley rang a bell, but Curtis couldn't quite place her. Brooklyn Heights was a small neighborhood, she was probably just someone he'd seen in line ordering sandwiches at Lassen, or someone he'd crossed paths with at the gym on Clark Street.

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“Fine, fine. Okay, this guy says, ‘Cis male vegan seeks fellow steward of the Earth. Never eat anything with a face. Except the rich.’”

“You can’t date a vegan. The footwear is ghastly!” the mother interrupted. “Give me that phone! Hmm. The whiffy here is terrible.”

“Mom, it’s pronounced ‘wai-fai.’”

Curtis risked a quick peek at the table. The three women were dressed in tennis whites, the mother a blonde with gold earrings and a notable array of rings on her fingers, the daughters both brunette, one lanky with straight hair cut to her shoulders, the other softer, with long wavy hair loosely tied in a knot. Curtis ducked his head back down and broke off a crumbly bite of poppyseed scone.

“‘Bi and nonmonogamous looking for a Commie Mommy to help me smash the patriarchy. Hit me up to go dancing!’ Am I having a stroke?” the older woman murmured. “I don’t understand a word of this.”

Curtis fought back a snicker.

“Mom, give me the phone.” The wavy-haired daughter snatched back the iPhone and tossed it in her bag.

With a start Curtis realized he knew her. It was Georgiana Stockton; she had been in his high school class at Henry Street ten years ago. He contemplated saying hello, but then it would be obvious he’d overheard their entire conversation.

“In my day, things were so much simpler,” Georgiana’s mother tutted. “You just went out with your deb ball escort or maybe your brother’s roommate from Princeton.”

“Right, Mom, but people my generation aren’t giant elitist snobs,” Georgiana said and rolled her eyes.

Curtis smiled to himself. He could imagine having the same exact conversation with his own mother, trying to explain why he wasn’t going to marry her friend’s daughter just because they owned

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adjoining properties on Martha's Vineyard. As Curtis watched Georgiana out of the corner of his eye, she suddenly jumped up from her chair.

“Oh, no! I left my Cartier bracelet in Lena's BMW and she's leaving soon for her grandmother's house in Southampton!”

Georgiana tossed her bag over her shoulder, grabbed her tennis racket off the floor, planted quick kisses on both her mother and sister, and clattered past Curtis to the door. As she swept by, her tennis racket banged Curtis's table, sloshing his coffee, dousing his poppyseed scone, and leaving him frowning in her wake.

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ONE

## Sasha

There was a room in Sasha's house that was a portal to another dimension, and that dimension was 1997. Here, Sasha discovered an egg-shaped iMac computer with a blue plastic shell, a ski jacket with a stack of hardened paper lift tags still affixed to the zipper, a wrinkled pile of airline boarding passes, and a one-hitter with an old yellow lighter hidden in the back of a drawer. Every time Sasha mentioned to her husband that she'd love to put her sister-in-law's high school ephemera in a box, he rolled his eyes and told her to be patient. "She'll get her stuff when she has time." But Sasha had her doubts, and it was weird living in a home where one bedroom was entirely closed off, like a preserved shrine to a lost child.

On good days, Sasha could acknowledge how incredibly lucky she was to live in her house. It was a four-story Brooklyn limestone, a massive, formal palace that could have held ten of the one-bedroom apartments Sasha had lived in before. But on bad days, Sasha felt she was living in a time capsule, the home her husband had grown up in and never left, filled with his memories, his childhood stories, but mostly his family's shi

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When Sasha and Cord had been in the house for three weeks, Sasha invited her in-laws to dinner. “I’ll make mushroom tarts and a goat cheese salad,” she said in the email. She spent all morning rolling pie dough and even walked to the fancy market on Montague for pomegranate seeds to sprinkle over baby lettuces. She vacuumed the dining room, dusted the bookshelves, and put a Sancerre in the fridge. When her in-laws arrived, they had three L.L.Bean canvas bags in tow. “Oh, you didn’t have to bring anything!” Sasha exclaimed, dismayed.

“Sasha,” her mother-in-law trilled, opening the closet to hang her Chanel bouclé jacket. “We can’t *wait* to hear all about your honeymoon.” She carried the bags into the kitchen and proceeded to pull out a bottle of white Burgundy, two flower arrangements in low vases, a tablecloth with fleurs-de-lis on it, and three scalloped Williams Sonoma baking dishes with lids. She lined them up on the counter and, like a woman at home in her kitchen of forty years, opened up the cabinet to take down a glass for her wine.

“I’ve made mushroom tarts,” Sasha tried, suddenly feeling like the lady at the Costco free sample table, trying to sell warm cubes of processed cheese.

“Oh, I saw in your email, darling. I gathered that meant it was a French-themed dinner. You just let me know when you’re ten minutes away and I’ll pop my coq au vin in the oven. I also have endives Provençal, and I brought plenty, so we might not need your salad. The candlesticks are in the drawer there, now let’s go take a look at your tabletop arrangement and I’ll see what else we need.”

Out of solidarity, Cord ate the tart and the salad, but when Sasha caught him looking longingly at the endives, she gave him a thin

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smile that said, “You can eat the damned vegetables, but you might have to sleep on the couch.”

The agreement was new for all of them, and Sasha understood it was going to take some getting used to. Cord’s parents, Chip and Tilda, had been complaining for years that their house was too big for the two of them, that it was too far from their garage, that they were tired of doing their own shoveling and hauling their own recycling out to the curb. They were investors in an apartment building two blocks away—the former Brooklyn Heights movie theater that was now five luxury condos—and they had decided to take the maisonette for themselves, moving in over the course of one week, using only their old Lexus and their housekeeper’s husband, whom they paid three hundred bucks. That seemed like a quick divestment from a house they’d inhabited for four decades, but aside from their clothing, Sasha couldn’t really figure out what they had brought to the new place. They had even left their four-poster, king-size bed in their bedroom, and Sasha felt more than a little weird sleeping there.

The Stocktons decided to let Sasha and Cord move into their vacant house and live there as long as they would like. Then, when they sold the place one day, they would split the money between Cord and his two sisters. There were some other pieces of the agreement designed to evade unnecessary inheritance taxes, but Sasha looked the other way for that bit of paperwork. The Stocktons may have let her marry their son, but she understood on a bone-deep level that they would rather let her walk in on them in the middle of an aerobic threesome with Tilda’s bridge partner than have her studying their tax returns.

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After dinner, Sasha and Cord cleared the table while his parents headed into the parlor for an after-dinner drink. There was a bar cart in the corner of the room with old bottles of cognac that they liked to pour into tiny, gold-rimmed glasses. The glasses, like everything else in the house, were ancient and came with a history. The parlor had long blue velvet drapes, a piano, and an itchy ball-and-claw foot sofa that had once belonged in the governor's mansion. Sasha made the mistake of sitting on it once and got such a bad rash on the backs of her legs that she had to use calamine lotion before bed. There was a chandelier in the foyer, a grandfather clock in the dining room that chimed so loudly Sasha screamed a little the first time she heard it, and an enormous painting of a ship on a menacingly dark ocean in the study. The whole place had a vaguely nautical vibe, which was funny since they were in Brooklyn, not Gloucester or Nantucket, and though Chip and Tilda had certainly spent summers sailing, they mostly chartered boats with crew. The glassware had ship's wheels etched in them, the place mats had oil paintings of sailboats, the bathroom had a framed seafaring chart, and even their beach towels had diagrams for tying various knots. Sometimes Sasha found herself wandering the house in the evenings, running her hand along the ancient frames and candlesticks, whispering, "Batten down the hatches!" and "Swab the deck!" and making herself laugh.

Sasha and Cord finished moving the plates to the kitchen and joined Cord's parents in the parlor, where he poured them each a small glass of cognac. It tasted sticky and medicinal and made Sasha weirdly aware of the small hairs inside her nostrils, but she drank it anyway, just to be companionable.

"So how do you kids like the place?" Tilda asked, folding one long leg over the other. She had dressed for dinner and was wearing a colorful blouse, a pencil skirt, sheer stockings, and three-inch heels.

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The Stocktons were all quite tall, and with the heels her mother-in-law positively towered over Sasha, and if anyone said that wasn't a power move, they were lying through their teeth.

"We love it," Sasha smiled. "I feel so lucky to have such a beautiful and spacious home."

"But Mom," Cord started, "we were thinking we'd like to make some changes here and there."

"Of course, sweetheart. The house is yours."

"It really is," Chip agreed. "We're all settled at Orange Street."

"That's so kind," Sasha jumped in. "I was just thinking that the bedroom closet was a little tight, but if we took out those built-in cubbies in the back—"

"Oh no, sweetie," Tilda interrupted. "You shouldn't take those out. They are just the perfect thing for all kinds of bits and bobs—off-season footwear, hats, anything with a brim that you don't want crushed. You'd really be doing yourself a disservice if you took those out."

"Oh, right, okay." Sasha nodded. "That makes sense."

"What about this parlor furniture, though," Cord tried again. "We could get a really comfy couch, and if we changed out the velvet curtains we could have a lot more light."

"But those drapes were custom made for the room. Those windows are absolutely enormous, and I think if you took the drapes down you'd just be so shocked to realize how hard it is to get the right kind of thing there." Tilda shook her head sadly, her blond hair shining in the chandelier's light. "Why don't you just live here for a little bit and really get to know the place and put some thought to what might make you the most comfortable. We really want you to feel at home here." She patted Sasha's leg firmly and stood, nodding at her husband and tugging her way to the door. "Well, we'd best

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be off—thanks for dinner. I'm just going to leave the Le Creuset here and you can run it in the dishwasher. No problem at all there—they don't need to be handwashed—and I'll take them home next time we come for dinner. Or you can just drop them at ours. And you can keep the vases—I noticed your tablescape was a bit spare.” She slipped on her jacket, ivory and pink with a hint of lavender, looped her handbag over her arm, and led her husband out the door, down the stairs, and back to their newly furnished, totally not-nautical apartment.



WHENEVER PEOPLE asked Sasha how she and Cord met she would answer, “Oh, I was his therapist.” (A joke—WASPs don't go to therapy.) In a world of Match and Tinder, their courtship seemed quaintier than a square dance. Sasha was sitting at the counter at Bar Tabac drinking a glass of wine. Her phone had died, so she had picked up an abandoned *New York Times* crossword puzzle. It was nearly finished—something she'd never come close to accomplishing—and as Sasha studied the answers, Cord walked up to place an order and started chatting, marveling at the beautiful woman who also happened to be an ace at crosswords.

They'd gotten together for cocktails a week later, and despite the fact that “their whole relationship was based on a lie,” a phrase Cord liked to use regularly once he discovered Sasha couldn't actually complete even the Monday crossword, it was pretty much the perfect romance.

Well, it was the perfect romance for a real, functional pair of adults with a normal amount of baggage, independence, alcohol use,

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and sexual appetite. They spent their first year together doing all the things New York couples in their early thirties do: whispering earnestly in the corner of the bar at birthday parties, expending outrageous effort getting reservations at restaurants that served eggs on ramen, sneaking bodega snacks into movie theaters, and dressing up and meeting people for brunch while secretly looking forward to the time when they would feel comfortable enough together to spend Sundays just lying on the couch eating bacon sandwiches from the deli downstairs and reading the *Sunday Times*. Of course, they got in fights too. Cord took Sasha camping and the tent flooded, and he made fun of her for being scared to pee alone at night, and she swore at him and told him she would never set foot in Maine ever again. Sasha's best friend, Vara, invited them to opening night of her gallery show, and Cord missed it, stuck at work, and didn't understand the magnitude of his transgression. Cord got pink eye and had to walk around looking like a half-rabid bunny, and Sasha teased him until he sulked. But overall, their love was storybook stuff.

It did take Sasha a long time to figure out that Cord was rich—embarrassingly long, considering that his name was Cord. His apartment was nice enough, but normal. His car was an absolute beater. His clothing was nondescript, and he was a total freak about taking good care of his stuff. He used a wallet until the leather cracked, his belts were the same ones his grandmother bought him in high school, and he treated his iPhone like it was some kind of nuclear code that needed to be carried in a briefcase handcuffed to his wrist, or at least wrapped in both a screen protector and a case thicker than a slice of bread. Sasha must have watched *The Wolf of Wall Street* too many times, because she always thought rich New York guys would have slicked back hair and constantly be paying for bottle service at clubs. Instead, they apparently wore sweaters until they

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had holes in the elbows and had unhealthily close relationships with their mothers.

Cord was borderline obsessed with his family. He and his father worked side by side every day, his sisters both lived in the neighborhood, and he met them for dinner all the time, and they talked on the phone more than Sasha spoke to anyone. Cord did things for his parents that she couldn't fathom—he went with his father to get haircuts, whenever he bought new shirts he bought his father the exact same ones, he picked up the French wine his mother liked at Astor Place, and he rubbed her feet in a way that made Sasha leave the room. Who rubbed their own mother's feet? Whenever she saw it, she thought of that scene in *Pulp Fiction* where John Travolta compared it to oral sex, and she got so upset she felt her eye twitch.

Sasha loved her parents, but their lives weren't intertwined like that. They were casually interested in her work as a graphic designer, they spoke every Sunday and texted a bit in between, and sometimes when she went home to visit she would be surprised to realize they had traded in their car for something new and never mentioned it, and once had even knocked down a wall between the kitchen and the living room.

Sasha's sisters-in-law were nice to her. They texted on her birthday, they made sure to ask after her family, lent her a racket and whites so she could join in family tennis on vacation. But Sasha still felt that on some level they would prefer she wasn't around. She would be in the middle of telling Cord's older sister, Darley, a story, and when Cord walked in the room Darley would simply stop listening and start asking him questions. Georgiana, his younger sister, would ostensibly be talking to everyone, but Sasha noticed her eyes never left her siblings. Their family was a unit, a closed circuit Sasha couldn't ever seem to penetrate.

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THE STOCKTONS were in real estate. At first, this made it feel even stranger to Sasha that their house was so cluttered. Shouldn't they be living in some kind of spare, *Architectural Digest* dreamscape? But it turned out their interest in real estate was less about selling single apartments and more about large-scale investing. Cord's grandfather, Edward Cordington Stockton, had inherited a modest fortune from his family. In the 1970s, he used that money to buy up property on the Upper East Side as the city teetered on the edge of bankruptcy. He spent forty-five dollars per square foot. That real estate was now worth twelve hundred per square foot, and the Stocktons were extraordinarily wealthy men. With his son, Cord's father, Chip, they bought up waterfront in Brooklyn, moving along Dumbo and into Brooklyn Heights. In 2016, when the Jehovah's Witnesses decided to divest themselves of their Brooklyn Heights properties, they jumped in, joining a group of investors to buy the famous Watchtower building, along with the former Standish Arms Hotel. Edward Cordington had passed away, but Cord now worked alongside his father, the third generation of Stockton men in New York real estate.

Paradoxically, the Stockton family had chosen to live in the fruit streets section of Brooklyn Heights, the three little blocks of Pineapple, Orange, and Cranberry streets situated on the bluff over the waterfront. For all their investment in converting old buildings to new high-end condos, they made their home in a section completely barred from significant change by the Landmarks Preservation Commission. There were little plaques on various homes in the neighborhood, signs that read "1820" or "1824." There were tiny white clapboard houses. There were leafy gardens hidden behind

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wrought-iron gates. There were former stables and carriage houses. Even the CVS looked like part of an English hamlet, with walls of ivy-covered stone. Sasha particularly loved a house on the corner of Hicks and Middagh streets, a former pharmacy, where the tilework on the entryway spelled out “DRUGS.”

Cord’s mother’s side of the family was perhaps of even more prestigious pedigree. Tilda Stockton, née Moore, came from a long line of political royalty. Both her father and brother had been governors of New York, and she had been featured in family profiles in *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair*. She had married Chip Stockton when she was twenty-one, and though she had never had a proper nine-to-five job, she had earned a reputation as a wildly successful event consultant, mostly by connecting her wealthy socialite friends with her favorite party planners. For Tilda Stockton, no evening was complete without a vision, a theme, a tablescape, and a dress code. It all made Sasha want to hide under a pile of monogrammed cocktail napkins.

Sasha spent the months following her wedding trying to settle into her new Pineapple Street home. She decided that she was an archaeologist, studying the ancient civilization of her in-laws. But instead of Tutankhamen’s tomb, she found an ashtray Darley made in sixth grade that looked like a malformed mushroom. Instead of the Dead Sea Scrolls, she found Cord’s elementary school science paper on types of pinecones. Instead of the Terracotta Army, she found an entire drawer of free toothbrushes from a dentist on Atlantic Avenue.

Of the four bedrooms, Darley’s room was the worst, but none of them was truly vacant. Cord’s old room had been cleaned out when he left for college, but it still held a candelabra, a set of

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Mandarin floor vases, and dozens of framed paintings, artwork that the family had acquired over the years but had no place to hang. Georgiana's room still held all her college textbooks and photo albums, along with an entire shelf of tennis trophies; and the primary bedroom, while emptied of clothing and jewelry, still contained the décor and furniture of the previous residents, and it was extremely hard for Sasha to achieve orgasm while the mahogany headboard that probably belonged to a congressman or secretary of transportation banged against the wall.

As she squeezed her empty suitcases into already-crowded closets, she pondered whether she might be allowed to replace the shower curtain. She would wait a few months.



CHIP AND TILDA decided to throw a housewarming party at their new apartment on Orange Street and asked that their children and spouses arrive early. It was on a Wednesday evening, because most of their friends spent their weekends at country homes and some liked to go up Thursday night. The Stockton parents' social life in the city existed only between Monday and Wednesday, before their friends scattered to the far reaches of Long Island and Litchfield County.

"What should I wear?" Sasha asked Cord, standing in front of the closet. She never knew how to dress around his family. It was like there was a mood board everyone else seemed to be consulting, but the vision eluded Sasha every time.

"Wear whatever you want, babe," Cord replied unhelpfully.

"So I can wear jeans?"

"Well, I wouldn't wear jeans," he frowned.



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“Okay, so should I wear a dress?” Sasha asked, annoyed.

“I mean, Mom said the theme is ‘upward and onward.’”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“I’m just going to wear what I wore to work. I’m sure most people will do that.”

Cord wore a suit and tie to work, so that was about as relevant to Sasha’s life as if he wore operating room scrubs or firefighter overalls. She was flummoxed, so played it safe and wore a pretty white blouse tucked into navy blue trousers, and the small diamond earrings her mother had given her for college graduation. She put on lipstick, and as she checked herself in the old mirror over the fireplace, she smiled. She felt classic, like Amal Clooney leaving the UN for dinner with George. Upward and onward, indeed.

When they arrived at the apartment, Cord’s sisters were already there, Georgiana looking beautifully bohemian, her long brown hair cascading down her back, a floaty dress skimming her ankles, freckles dotting her nose, and Darley wearing a belted jumpsuit that had surely been featured in *Vogue Italia*. Darley’s husband, Malcolm, was standing at her elbow, and Sasha breathed a sigh of relief. Early on she had identified Malcolm as an ally in the strange world that was siblings by marriage, and they even had a code they muttered when things got really weird: NMF. It stood for “not my family,” and it exonerated them from any situation where they felt like outside witnesses to bizarre WASP rituals, like the time in July when the Stocktons had insisted on taking a professional family photo for their Christmas card and made them all wear shades of blue and white and stand in a semicircle around Chip and Tilda, who were seated in two chairs. The photographer directed them for nearly an hour, the sun baking down upon them as Berta, their housekeeper,

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bustled in and out setting up the grill, and the gardening staff watered the plants, carefully avoiding eye contact. Sasha had felt like part of the Romney family and was completely mortified by the whole thing, but at least she'd been able to exchange pained glances with Malcolm. Together they were foreign-exchange students, united in their understanding that they had arrived in a deeply strange land.

Berta had been preparing all day for the housewarming party, and the dining-room table was groaning under the weight of silver platters of shrimp on ice, roast beef on crusty round melba, smoked salmon on toast points, and tiny one-bite crab cakes. She had poured glasses of white wine and arranged them on a tray that she would hold near the entrance, so that guests might begin drinking immediately upon arrival. Red wine was forbidden, obviously, mainly for the sake of the new rugs, but also because red wine teeth made everyone look terrible. Tilda was obsessed with teeth.

The guests began to arrive, and Sasha recognized many of them from her wedding. The Stocktons had so many friends at the wedding that Sasha had spent the entire reception shaking hands and trying to remember names, pausing only when her cousins pulled her out on the dance floor to shake it to "Baby Got Back." It was an elegant affair.

Cord knew everyone and was soon swept off to the study to show a bald gentleman his father's collection of watches. Some were rare military watches, some vintage Patek, some Rolex with matte and gilt dials, and they had been passed down from Cord's grandfather. They were so valuable that Chip had been approached by various auction houses with offers to buy them, but he declined. He never touched them or even looked at them, but Cord said Chip liked knowing he always had money in his apartment, like wads of cash

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hidden under a mattress. (Sasha privately thought it might have more to do with the family aversion to decluttering.)

Georgiana was sitting on the sofa whispering with her godmother, while Darley and Malcolm were holding court with a small group from their racket club on Montague Street, showing them iPhone pictures of their children. Georgiana often looked prettily disheveled, her jacket slung over her shoulders and her wrists stacked with mismatched beaded bracelets, but Darley looked clean and expensive, her brown hair cut to shoulder length, her makeup barely there, a small gold watch and her wedding rings her only jewelry. Sasha stood awkwardly at the periphery, unsure how she might insert herself into a conversation. She was relieved when a woman with a helmet of blond hair made a beeline toward her and smiled broadly.

“Hi, I’d love another chardonnay, thanks so much,” the woman said and handed her a glass smudged with greasy fingerprints.

“Oh, I’m Sasha,” she laughed, putting her hand to her chest.

“Thank you, Sasha,” the woman replied cheerfully.

“Oh, sure,” Sasha recovered. She took the glass into the kitchen and refilled it from one of the bottles in the refrigerator and brought it back out to the dining room, where the woman took it with a whispered thanks and retreated to the table, where her husband was eating roast beef. Sasha made her way into the living room to look for Cord but was intercepted by a rotund man in a bow tie who handed her his dirty plate, nodding briefly before continuing his conversation. Confused, Sasha walked his plate to the kitchen and set it on the counter. This happened another four times before Sasha finally made it to Cord and glued herself to his side, nursing her own glass of wine and counting the minutes until she could go home. Could they smell that she wasn’t a blue blood? Did her public school education waft from her hair as though she had spent a long day cooking

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on a spattering griddle? She let her eyes roam around the room, studying the women around her. They were a pack of fancy poodles, and she felt like a guinea pig shivering with nerves.

Finally, the guests departed, and Chip dragged Cord into his office to give him an article he'd clipped from the *Journal*. (Chip and Tilda still clipped articles, refusing to forward links like everyone else.)

"Did you have fun?" Darley asked, tucking a shiny lock of hair behind her ear.

"Yeah, it was really nice," Sasha tried.

"Such a cool way to spend a night out," Darley said wryly, "hanging out with old people you don't know."

"There was one sort of funny thing," Sasha confessed. "People kept handing me their dirty plates. I mean, it was fine, but did they give you their plates too?"

"Oh!" Darley laughed. "That's so ridiculous! I hadn't noticed but you're wearing the same thing as Berta! They must have thought you were a caterer—shit! Malcolm!" She called her husband over to tell him.

Everyone laughed, Cord walking up to rub her shoulders to make sure she thought it was funny too, and Sasha played along, knowing deep in her heart that she would never wear a white blouse to a Stockton family party again as long as she lived.

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