

The Invitation to Lunch

One simple invitation to lunch turned out to be more than I bargained for. I look forward to our monthly lunch dates. She can make me laugh or smile right when I need it. There is something about my childhood friend that always puts my mind at ease.

Today, my friend sits across from me with a hollowed look in her eyes that I've never seen before. I don't like it. I don't like this place we're in—this place where the air is humid and drenched with anxiety.

She sighs because that's about all she can manage to do. "I never thought I'd find myself in a situation like this," she says.

"I never thought I'd find myself in this situation with you," I say nervously. There's a bowling ball in the pit of my stomach that I wish would go away. I'm not accustomed to situations like this. I'm afraid I can't help my friend. What can I say? What can I do to ease her heart, her pain? How can I help someone whom I rely on to talk me off the roof when I threaten to jump?

Silence came and sat with us at our table and stayed for at least two drinks. He watched her stir the greens of her salad on her plate with her fork. Would she ask him to leave? I reach out to touch her hand, which is well-manicured but balmy to my touch. I hold her hand for dear life. It's my turn to keep her from going over the edge.

"What does Harold say about all this?"

She looks at me with a surprised yet confused expression upon her face like I had reminded her of something she'd forgotten to do but she was not sure if she was supposed to really do it. "I haven't told him yet. Oh my God, I go over the scenario again and again in my head. What will he say when I tell him? How will he think of me once the truth is known? Will he continue to love me?"

I study her as the hollowness in her eyes is joined by tears. She pulls her hand away from me as if it had suddenly grown hot. I've practiced for years being the one who needed to be saved, not the one who saves. Life didn't prepare me for this. In her fragile defense, life didn't prepare her for this either.

"Well, I can take the boys for a day or two if you need it. I mean, you know . . . while you get it together and tell Harold. He has to know about this and the longer you wait . . ."

"Don't you think I know that? I mean, who do you think you're dealing with here? I'm not stupid!" She forces these words out in a heavy whisper as if she needed to hear them.

She looks around to see if anyone notices her heated reaction. She used to react this way when we were kids because she was afraid her mother would catch her smoking. I miss my friend. I would rather not have lunch with this person. I would rather be the one who carried the pain, the torment. That's the way things were with us. I want my friend back.

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