

"You Go"

by Alicia Gifford

You like your life. Ducks march in a row. You've reached a certain age but you're strong. Healthy. You've got food, clothing, shelter. You have insurance and important papers.

You don't have a man in your life, and you admit—

Admit *nothing*.

The phone rings; it's Val, your younger sister. She wants you to meet her boyfriend's older brother who just moved to L.A. from Chicago.

"Early fifties, attractive in an Ed Harris kind of way," she says. "Don't think of it as a setup. No big deal—can you come for dinner tonight?"

Say: "Tonight? I have plans tonight." Be convincing.

"Don't lie, you told me an hour ago you were going to rent some sappy video."

"*Swept Away*, I want to see it again. The Lina Wertmuller one."

"Watch it tomorrow, jeez. C'mon Amy, it's just a casual, no-big-deal get-together. Sisters and brothers. Be here at seven."

Low like a cow. Put your hand on your forehead and feel for a fever. Rack your brains for another excuse. Say: "Ah, well—" while you think of something. Anything.

Val says, "You're turning into an old fart, you're becoming Mom. You haven't left that house in days, are you going to be here at seven?"

Roll your eyes to the ceiling and make an ugly face. Heave a lungful of air into the phone, forming an "O" and a "K" and hang up.

Look at the photo of Benjamin, the one taken on Halloween when he was dressed like a spider with a top hat. Let yourself smile. Kiss your finger and place it on his face. When your mind starts drifting dangerously, think about how happy you are, tucked away in your cozy cottage in folksy Montrose with its DVD, CD, VCR, TV and PC. How your home gym and studio are there, your inks and paints. How you hardly ever have to leave.

Try not to think that anything social is a drag; that if you really wanted to drain yourself, you'd donate blood.

A date? You haven't been out on a date since Quirky Larry. He marched to his own drummer; that's what you thought of his panicky fear of live chickens and wax, or when he'd stay up for three days working on two or three huge, brilliant canvases. He adored you, made you hot-and-sour soup and taught you Tantric sex. "The science of ecstasy," he whispered, raining sweat down upon your face.

He got quirrier. "I'm receiving my agenda," you heard him say. "Are you talking to me?"

"Shhh!" he'd hissed. "Listen!" He'd rolled his eyes in the corners of their sockets and conversed with an unseen, unknown thing inside his head while you blinked and smiled nervously.

The police extracted him from a foil pyramid he'd made while he ranted that he was the Village Voice who controlled God's vermin.

"He means the village idiot," you heard a cop say. They took him to Gateways Mental Health where he spent six weeks gulping psychotropic drugs that left him with a pharmacological lobotomy. He wasn't Quirky Larry anymore. He was Scary Larry. Nerve-Wracking Larry. No-Fucking-Way Larry.

You told him it was over, and you felt bad when he cried. You felt worse when his bent-over, white-haired, half-deaf mother came to the door with homemade potato gnocchi.

"Please, I'm begging you, don't leave him. He's weak, hanging by a thread. You'll kill him," she said. "Look, I made gnocchi."

You told her to leave and to take her gnocchi with her. When she said, "What?" you told her again, louder. When she left you opened a bottle of wine and downed the whole thing in fifteen minutes.

And three years pass like a good night's sleep.

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See if you can change your attitude. Worry that you are getting reclusive and weird. Shower and blow-dry your hair. Inspect your face with a 3X-magnifying mirror and tweeze a few dark, bristly

hairs from your chin. Put on your make-up and contact lenses. Dress casually—jeans, a white T-shirt, a black blazer, sandals.

Look at yourself in the mirror and think: Not bad. Say to yourself: "You *go*." Mean it.

When you're leaving, stop by another photograph. Feel the familiar wince when you see the cherub you carried in your body, standing in a field of wild irises.

Drive to Pacific Palisades where Val lives with her boyfriend, Huey Vega, a character actor that people see in movies without ever knowing his name. "Oh look, it's that guy," they say about Huey when he's out in public.

Arrive at their townhouse with its panoramic view of the Santa Monica Bay at seven-fifteen just as the sun starts its downward slide into the maw of the Pacific. Knock on the door clutching a bottle of wine.

"You made it," Val says. Her cheeks are flushed and her neck is splotchy meaning she's nervous. Her gold hair gleams and curls like gift ribbon around her face and shoulders. She wears baggy blue linen overalls with a sleeveless yellow t-shirt. She looks like a teenager instead of a woman in her forties.

He's in the bathroom, she mouths.

Huey watches a baseball game with the sound off. Miles Davis's *In a Silent Way* plays on the stereo.

"Hi Amy," Huey says to you from the sofa. He winks and gives you a thumbs-up then turns back to the game.

"I'm making soul food," Val says. "Tony Roma's ribs, black-eyed peas, dirty rice, collard greens with ham hocks and cornbread."

"Yum," you say. You see a medium-tall man in tan khakis and a blue oxford shirt come in the room. He has thinning, sandy hair and sun-etched lines around brilliant blue eyes.

"Amy, this is Huey's brother, Gary," Val says.

"Nice to meet you," Gary says.

"We'll see," you say.

"See what?" he asks.

"How nice it is to meet me." He looks troubled. You wish you could hit rewind. "I'm trying to be funny." You hope that you're not blushing.

"Jeez you're all red," Val says.

Thrust the wine at her. "Life is a cabernet old chum."

Gary smiles. "That's good. Stick-to-itiveness."

"We've got Colt 45 too," Val says. "Huey has to have it with his soul food." Huey gives a thumbs-up from the sofa, and turns back to the TV.

"And Gary brought champagne, woo hoo Gary!" Val says. "Let's have a drink."

"I'm all for that," you say.

Note that Gary brought two bottles of Piper Heidsieck and score this as a plus. You may be a hermit but you're a champagne-loving one.

Gary opens the champagne and pours it into four crystal flutes. Val distributes the fizzing glasses. She raises her glass. "May our hearts always be joyful, may our song always be sung, and may we stay-yay-yay, forever young." Click glasses and drink. Look around and see Benjamin's picture in a little silver frame with a teddy bear in the corner, taken on his third birthday, two months before the accident. Drink some more.

Val brings out guacamole, chips and salsa to the faux stone coffee table in the living room.

"How about a doobie?" Huey asks. "Amy?"

"I'm game," you say gamely.

"When was the last time you smoked a—*doobie, Brother?*" Huey asks Gary.

Val moans. "Take it to the streets," she says. She looks at you. "Get it?"

"Oh I get it," you say, and you laugh too loud.

"So Gare, when was the last time you smoked a bone?" Huey says.

"When Karen was getting chemo," he replies.

"Who's Karen?" you ask.

"My late wife," Gary says.

Everyone looks somber for a moment. Fiddle with your napkin.

"I haven't smoked since—" Huey looks at his watch, "an hour ago." He laughs and Val titters.

"We're kind of stoners," she says to Gary, nodding her head.

Huey packs the bowl of a brass Protopipe with moist, fragrant bud. He lights it and passes it to you. You take a hit and pass it to Gary, who takes a hit and passes it to Val. It goes around again. And again. Everyone sips champagne, and it goes around again.

"I hear you're an illustrator," Gary says to you after a stretch of silence.

"Graphic artist-illustrator," you say. "I do mostly book jackets, some posters."

"I recently took up ceramics," he says.

"He made me a very cool, personalized coffee mug," Huey says.

Say: "How sweet."

"It holds about three ounces of coffee and weighs like, fifteen pounds," Huey says, laughing. "What the fuck's in it, scrap iron?"

"Lead," Gary says, grinning. "If you drink from it you die."

Titter with everyone else.

"You gotta see this thing," Huey says wiping his eyes. He heads to the kitchen. Val pours more champagne all around. Become aware that you are leaning forward and scooping guacamole and chips into your mouth as fast as you can.

"What did I come in here for?" Huey calls from the kitchen. Flop your head and laugh with Gary and your sister.

"The *mug*," Val says and she snorts, which sets you all off again.

"It's on the table, full of daisies." She turns to Gary. "That's OK, isn't it? It's a darling vase."

Val leaves to open the other bottle of champagne and to check the cornbread.

"What do you do?" you ask.

"I'm a wildlife biologist. I just got a job to chair the zoology department at UCLA."

"Yeah? Like Ross, on *Friends*."

"Thanks," Gary says. "My hope was *not* like Ross on *Friends*."

"Yeah, I know," you say. "Besides, he's a paleontologist."

Val comes back with champagne and refills the glasses. Huey comes in carrying a huge mug with half-inch-thick walls, beautifully finished with a metallic glaze. It's stuffed with white daisies.

Say: "The colors are gorgeous. A zoologist-ceramicist. You could make biologically correct ceramic animals and sell them at the museum store."

"Uh-huh," Gary says. He looks at his champagne flute, swirls it around, his brows drawn together in a little frown. Wonder what he'd be like in bed. Feel a stirring down in the netherworld of your female parts and be surprised. Fear that dust and cobwebs line your vagina.

"Dinner's served!" Val calls from the dining room. Guzzle the rest of your champagne.

Drink Colt 45. Drink cabernet. Suck barbeque sauce off your fingers and slather I-Can't-Believe-It's-Not-Butter on giant chunks of cornbread. Say: "This is the *best* cornbread," when you reach for your third piece.

Listen to Gary and Huey talk about growing up in Mammoth Lakes in the Eastern Sierras, skiing in the winter and backpacking in the summer. Laugh at their funny stories about practical jokes they played, like building giant snow penises in the schoolyard, flouring ceiling fans and stapling their parents' clothes.

Rack your brains with Val for a single funny story. Frown. Concentrate.

"We had pet roosters," Val says, "but they were *hilarious* pet roosters." She looks at you for support.

"Oh they were crack-ups," you say. "A laugh a minute."

When Gary and Huey talk about someone from their high school who recently became a judge, you take a drink of water and glance at Val who's staring at you with the eyes of a maniac. She opens her mouth wide and black-eyed peas, greens and cornbread tumble out in a revolting mess. When water bursts from your nose and mouth, you both shriek with laughter.

"Oh yeah," you say, "there's that."

Huey passes the pipe around again and Val brings out a homemade sweet-potato-pecan pie and a tub of Extra Creamy Cool Whip. She divides the pie into fourths and puts them out on plates.

"Just eat what you can," she says. Pass the Cool Whip. Pass the pipe.

"I forgot the coffee," Val says. "Huey—go press the 'start' on the coffee maker." Huey wolfs down two big bites of pie and Cool Whip and goes to the kitchen.

"I love your brother," Val says to Gary with glassy, swacked eyes, and she hiccups. "Wouldn't it be wild if the four of us became family?" she says.

"Have another drink," you say to your sister. Shake your head and roll your eyes toward Gary who gives you a nice smile. Notice his eyes, like shots of sky.

Val corners Huey in the kitchen to do dishes with her. "Want to step out on the balcony?" you ask Gary.

Step outside and smell the ocean. See the riot of color and lights of the Santa Monica pier. Feel the warmth radiate from Gary's body next to you.

"Nice view," Gary says. "Quintessential California."

"So how long have you been a widower?" you ask.

"Two years," he says.

"Cancer?" Hope you aren't "invading" his "space."

"She had cancer, breast cancer but she didn't die from that. She died of a bee sting, pruning roses. She had an allergic reaction and I found her dead in the garden when I got home from work."

Clutch your throat. "Jeesus," you say. "That's—" Sputter a moment. "How long were you married?"

"Ten years."

"Whoa," you say, not in reaction to what he just said but because you're unsteady on your feet. "Is this balcony a-sea?" Gary holds your elbow.

"Have you dated any?" you ask. "I hope I'm not being too nosy."

"It's OK. Not really. A few one-night kind of deals."

"I get it," you say.

"What about you, you're divorced right?"

"Eleven years or so."

"So have you been in relationships?"

Ruffle your lips like a horse. "Oh yeah," you say. "Not lately though."

He asks, "Do you have kids?"

Feel yourself glaze over. "No," you say. "No kids."

"Me either," he says.

Stare out to the abyss of the ocean, the phosphorescent tumble of waves. "I had a kid. I had a kid but he died. He died when he was three. He'd be sixteen now, learning to drive."

"That's awful," he says. "Much worse than a spouse."

You feel woozy. You might barf. Tell him: "I need to lie down."

Go inside and flop on the sofa. Note that Val and Huey are still in the kitchen. He offers to get you some coffee or water but you feel better just lying down. He pulls up a chair.

"It blindsides me, now and then," you tell him. Chewing the inside of your cheek, let your mind drift to the dark side of your brain.

"It was an accident," you say. "My husband and little boy were Christmas shopping. My husband went to pay for something and my son slipped out the front door and ran into the street. A car hit him. He died three days later, in the ICU, all wired up, while Christmas music played. We gave away his heart, liver and kidneys." Take a deep breath. Let it out slowly.

"I'm so sorry," Gary says.

"We stayed married a couple more years and I said to him, 'It was an accident and I forgive you'—but I didn't mean it. We drank and fought like a couple of stumblebums loaded with booze and grief and blame. I couldn't bear the sight of him." Look at Gary and say, "Put a Colt 45 to my head and I'll tell you anything."

He smiles. "I was miserable with my wife. I was going to leave her, and then she died. I wanted a divorce earlier but when she got breast cancer I held off. She finished treatment and it looked like she was going to be okay so I started looking for an apartment. Then

I found her dead." He stares out the sliding glass door. Huey and Val murmur and giggle in the kitchen.

"Wow," you say. "Heavy. You must've been, uh—"

"I was shocked. It was terrible, finding her like that." He frowns. "I got flowers, sympathy cards—all this outpouring. I tried to feel grief, but I just felt so free. I would've been wiped out in a divorce and now I had everything plus a few hundred thousand dollars in life insurance." He covers his hands with his face. "I felt bad that she died, but it was like winning the Lotto."

Think about the weird guilt in being glad when someone close to you has died.

Wonder if he killed her.

Start a *Murder She Wrote* plot in your head featuring him as the Biologist Bee Murderer.

"How'd they know it was a bee sting?" you ask.

"The stinger was in her neck. The coroner could tell she'd had a cardiovascular collapse."

"Did you know she was allergic to bees?"

"No, neither did she. It can happen that way, you don't know until you die." The Miles Davis disc plays over and over. You stare at the ceiling, wondering.

After a moment he says, "I didn't kill her, *Mrs. Columbo*."

Bark like a seal; then laugh. Melt like butter in a hot skillet when he looks at you. When he smiles a wide crinkly smile.

Say: "Whew." Fake a brow wipe.

When he asks you gently, "What was your little boy's name?" tell him, "Benjamin." Try not to wince. Say it again. "His name was Benjamin."

Huey and Val come back from the kitchen.

"You guys can spend the night if you want, we have two guest rooms," Val says.

"I should get going," Gary says. "I'm expecting the moving van tomorrow."

"I'm leaving too," you say.

After a round of thank-you's and hugs, walk out to your car with Gary.

"It was nice meeting you," he says.

"It was fun, really fun. I'm glad we met." Fumble for your keys.

"I'm in the middle of moving then I'm going to be busy orienting for the job but maybe we could have dinner one night, when I'm more settled." he says.

Say: "Sure." Say: "That would be nice."

"I'll get your number from Huey."

Drive up Sunset, leaning into the curves with the window down. Feel something searing and prickled open up inside of you, like a foot gone to sleep, waking up.

Let the wind scramble your hair and notice things: the smell of star jasmine on the night air, the low and heavy, lopped-off look of a lambent waning moon, the rhythmic lean of palm trees waiting for the sun. You hope he'll call, but if he doesn't, you'll be fine. It's enough to know there's something still inside of you that's willing. Something yet unspent.

