

Dinner at the Bigelows'

by Linda Boroff

At age sixteen, Tessa Markey learned once and for all that fate would not be thwarted. No matter how elaborate your avoidance strategy or cautious your moves, fate simply bided its time, and then it came for you.

Tessa's father, a bankrupt contractor with a drinking problem, had separated from Tessa and her mother earlier that year. He had not formally left, but his absences had elongated, like a piece of chewing gum stretched, until the connection became a tenuous strand, floated apart, and disappeared. Tessa now lived in a grimy white stucco apartment house in south Santa Monica, the embodiment of last decade's casual building codes. The place even had a name, "The Spafford," written with a flourish across the front in once-silver glitter gone gray and dour, like an aged starlet. Beneath the bathroom windows, trails of rust descended into the weeds.

The Spafford fronted on Olympic Boulevard, the most indifferent-to-human-life thoroughfare in all of Los Angeles. Every morning, Tessa crossed the broad, deadly torrent of rush-hour traffic to catch the city bus to school, expecting every moment the fatal impact, the helpless trajectory.

The school clerks had known of Mr. Markey's fondness for pills and liquor. In fact, toward the end of his marriage, he had taken to dropping into the administration office late in the morning, when he had a mild package on and nothing much to do, on the pretext of checking up on Tessa. The office ladies were tolerant and flirtatious. A handsome man with too-blue eyes and thick sandy hair, Sloan Markey had sometimes serenaded the clerks with light opera in his fine, drunken baritone.

"And the sun comes up like thunder, out of China cra-hosses the Bay," he bellowed, and the clerks applauded, giggling, glancing through the window at the sun across Santa Monica Bay. Tessa would learn of these impromptu concerts via the school grapevine.

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After her husband left, Mrs. Markey's own nervous condition kept her from working more than part-time. "Well, Mom's in the bucket too," noted Bea Kinderblut, junior class guidance counselor, to Connie Lawrie, attendance clerk. "Either we find little Miss Markey an after-school job or she is going to end up on the wrong side of the tracks sure as I'm sitting here."

"So sad," said Connie.

"She's a good girl, really," said Bea, and inwardly congratulated herself on suppressing a powerful impulse to say something truly bitchy.

So the high school job placement office sent Tessa Markey to babysit for the Bigelows' blonde, precocious children, Ford, age five, and Laureen, eight. Sometimes the parents threw dinner parties on Saturday nights, and Tessa worked as a sort of scullery maid. She also served canapés and refilled water glasses, from the left of the diner only.

The clerks knew right away that they had scored a coup when Ida Bigelow, who had been chronically dissatisfied with her after-school help, suddenly stopped nagging and tattling. The clerks also noticed a change in Tessa, who cut her hair into a smooth bob, hanging longer in front, leaving the back of her neck fashionably exposed. The girl showed a flair for dress too, blossoming out in short, Carnaby Street skirts and patent leather boots.

The Bigelows lived in north Santa Monica near San Vicente, a short geographical distance but a social dimension away from Tessa's home. In her mind, Tessa called the Bigelows' neighborhood "gentle money", the kind that did not sock you in the eye and steal your breath, as did the houses lording it over Sunset Boulevard even farther north. Those homes seemed to hurl Tessa's own poverty at her, making her cringe and blink. But homes like the Bigelows', whose owners might be just as rich, were older and smaller, their landscaping relaxed, not stiff and harshly barbered. Evergreen trees shed cones and needles in the Bigelows' front yard, and palm fronds wafted onto the lawn. The children dug in the shrubbery.

Hugh Bigelow was a vice president of finance for a large

movie production house. "I counts the beans for the big boys," he said. He was a pear-shaped Texan with watery blue eyes and flaxen hair pasted across the reddish dome of his skull. His accent was redolent of sagebrush, dogies and lariats, which may have been why Mrs. Bigelow talked over him when company was present.

Ida Bigelow was small and quick, with curly, light brown hair that fell to her shoulders. She came from one of those states that were all jammed into the upper right side of the country and whose names had to be printed out in the Atlantic.

In the Bigelows' study were framed photos from the forties: Mr. Bigelow, in wartime Italy, wore an Army uniform and looked much as he did today. But Mrs. Bigelow fairly leaped from her frame, proud breasts upthrust in a clinging red sweater, a teasing glance lobbed boldly at the camera. Now, two faint, dissatisfied lines cleft the space between Ida's plucked, arched brows. Her gray eyes held a faraway gaze, as if she felt the tug of the her dense, civilized origins.

Here in chaotic Los Angeles, the sun was a rude, intrusive blaze that followed one indoors. Clothing came in ill-behaved colors; oranges and hot pinks and chartreuses, melting together. Mad Man Muntz bellowed from the television screen, and restaurants actually assumed the shape of the food they served. Mrs. Bigelow muted her world within pale gray walls; curtains the color of dried blood brushed wooden floors polished to a hard Yankee gleam. The Bigelows' house dated back to the twenties, with a recessed loveseat at the living room window.

"That," said Ida, pointing at the loveseat, "is where John Gilbert betrayed Greta Garbo in 1925 with Renee Adoree. While drunk of course." She sounded as disgusted as if it had happened that afternoon.

"Oh no," said Tessa, scanning for telltale stains. A light breeze suddenly brushed her face, the attenuated spirit of tragic, guilty pleasure.

"Well he was just an opportunist, that's all," snapped Ida.

"He was," Tessa said, trying for a point between question

and assent.

"But he certainly didn't deserve what he got. To be ruined that way."

"No."

"Louis B. Mayer just had blood in his eye."

"In his eye?" said Tessa, an unspeakable image crossing her brain.

Mrs. Bigelow's dinner parties were, for Tessa, ordeals akin to athletic events; tightly organized and strenuous. She stood, solid yet kinetic, amid huge clouds of steam from the restaurant-quality dishwasher. Yellow rubber gauntlets reached her elbows. Her dark hair curled around her flushed face and rivulets of sweat tickled her back.

On dinner days, Tessa arrived early to polish silver and set the table for fifteen guests. Mrs. Bigelow owned an astonishing silver service; storms of spoons, forks with two, three, or four tines; knives that progressed in deadliness from blunt little butter commas all the way to scimitars that reflected Tessa's anxious blue eyes like diabolical mirrors. This, thought Tessa surveying the banks of silver deployed like soldiers on a battlefield, was true civilization.

Mrs. Bigelow loaned Tessa a black tulle maid's uniform and helped her pin it in at the sides. She tied on Tessa the stiff white apron. Slippery, pale, opaque stockings of real silk oozed through the girl's fingers, secured by a heavy satin garter belt. A white scalloped frill was bobbypinned to Tessa's head.

When the guests arrived, Tessa greeted them with canapés on a monogrammed silver tray. Mrs. Bigelow herself prepared the cunningly shaped little treats: faux oysters, multitiered whipped cheeses and crackers that fell into buttery flakes in the mouth. She had attended a famous eastern women's college where canapé construction had actually been in the curriculum.

"The philosophy was," said Ida Bigelow, "that some skills must be mastered before being delegated."

Tessa stood at the oven transferring hot canapés to doilies. Here she was, supposedly beginning her life, but everything seemed

as hollow and raw as a construction site. The boys at school were oafish and wild, shaped and driven by furious hormones, bloodying one another in sports, in fights. Even the nice ones might turn into barbaric, lustful monsters after a couple of drinks.

But Tessa's desperation receded a bit at the Bigelows'. She enjoyed taking the Montana Avenue bus after school with the wealthier students, rather than the bus that headed "down" toward Olympic and Pico. She even pretended in her mind that she lived at the Bigelows' too, that the children were her half-siblings.

One Saturday night, Mr. Bigelow was gone. In his place at the table had materialized a man named Warren, handsome in a decadent, pouchy way, with sleek, dark hair combed straight back. Warren wore a gold ring with a large blue stone and insignia that he flashed at every opportunity. The arriving guests all greeted and hugged him without a single hesitation or puzzled look. Whenever Tessa stole a glance at him, he was looking at her.

That night, when Warren drove her home, he pulled over to the curb just below Montana Avenue and turned off the car lights and put his head in his hands.

"Tessa," he said softly from between his fingers, "It should be contessa." Tessa blurted a giggle and stopped herself abruptly. "Can I talk frankly to you?" Without waiting for an answer, Warren extended his body across the seat and took Tessa by the shoulders. She saw pursed lips aimed at her and ducked, so that the lips encountered the top of her head. Warren pretended that that was what he had meant to do all along. "My dear one," he said, nuzzling her hair.

Tessa tried to open the car door, but Warren reached across and took her hands.

"I really have to get home," said Tessa.

"Just let me look at you for a moment," said Warren. "You're so beautiful I have absolutely flipped over you. I know this is wrong."

"I . . . have a boyfriend." Tessa lied.

"Well he's not worthy of you." Tessa sighed and closed her

eyes, pulling her hands backwards and twisting them until Warren had to let go. "May I call you?"

"No. Please."

"Just give me a chance, that's all I ask. Look, here's my card. When you're ready, you call me." He handed Tessa a card with his name engraved in gold: "Warren Felder" and the words "Equity Investment" and a phone number.

The next morning at school, Tessa stopped her friend Shannon in the hallway.

"How much did you make last night?" Shannon asked.

"Ten dollars." Tessa said. "But something else happened. I don't know if I can tell you."

"You can."

"Don't think I'm bad, okay?"

"I won't," said Shannon.

"Mrs. Bigelow's husband is gone and she has a new boyfriend and he tried to kiss me in the car on the way home. He put his hands on my shoulders and said he wants to call me. He said a bunch of other stuff too and he gave me his card."

"Wow!" Said Shannon. "What are you going to do?"

Tessa wrinkled up her nose. "I'm not going to talk to him. I'm going to hang up if he calls."

Shannon rolled her eyes. "You're so dumb."

"Why?"

"Don't you know anything?"

"I know I want that old man to leave me alone."

"He's in the palm of your hand."

"Shannon!"

"He'll buy you stuff, dopey," said Shannon. "Do you have all the money you need?"

"Well, sort of. "

"No you don't. Your father is not paying his child support. I don't even have a father. We need cash. Get him to give you money and we can split it."

"That's horrible."

"Oh for heaven's sake," said Shannon. "Grow up." That evening, the girls stole a bottle of wine from Shannon's mother's cache and brought it to Tessa's and drank it while listening to the new Beatles album. The music and the wine gave Tessa an odd, hollow ache. The Beatles and their trendy, impossibly chic world were forever inaccessible to her, the music only a reminder of how puny and inconsequential she was. She dwelt on the peripheries of other peoples' lives, a parasite of their goals, their dramas, their romances. When Tessa felt Shannon's hand on her breast, she struck it off.

"Don't you want to try it?" said Shannon.

"No."

"You might as well. You don't have a boyfriend."

"I don't care," said Tessa. "I don't want any of it."

"Me neither," said Shannon. "I hate everybody."

The only change in the Bigelow household now seemed to be the presence of Warren himself. The children, decorous and oblivious as usual, did not mention the substitution, but they talked more with each other, keeping their eyes on Tessa and quieting abruptly when she approached. Tessa considered reassuring them that her own father too had left, and here she was, just fine. But that was not really true, and besides, what if Mrs. Bigelow found out and accused her of prying or exceeding her place? Tessa remembered her own mother's fury at the nosy condolences of their neighbors on Mr. Markey's departure.

"Trolling for details, that bunch of old snoops," Ellen Markey spoke around her cigarette. Her blonde hair hung lank, with dark, graying roots at the part. "They haven't had a man since Herbert Hoover was president." Ellen drew on her cigarette and exhaled without touching it. "And how is her highness Mrs. . . . Bingham is it?"

"Bigelow," said Tessa.

"I knew it was something like that."

"She's fine I guess."

"You keep it that way. That job is a gold mine for you." Ellen

dragged on her cigarette and tapped it in the sink with a throwing motion. "Everybody's got something," she said.

Tessa thought of the suffering that resided behind every door. In her own neighborhood, a fever seemed to emanate from the windows, from the very crevasses of the sidewalk. At night, shouting and screams pierced the dark; sounds of shattering glass and occasionally gunfire. The homes were flimsy, with cheap siding and fiberglass awnings bolted on cockeyed. The yards were patchy and sparse, littered with battered toys and obsolete engine parts. When Tessa crossed Olympic Boulevard, the cars seemed to roar and moan in anguish, their engines struggling, flatulent.

"I'd just like to know what the hell is going on around here, that's all," came Hugh Bigelow's voice from behind the front door. He yanked open the door and turned away at the sight of Tessa without greeting her, and walked back into the living room. Ida was sitting on John Gilbert's love seat. She seemed to have become insubstantial during these last few weeks, as if she were disappearing into the past. The clothes she wore were pale and thin like ghost draperies.

"Well here I am," said Tessa with false cheer, hearing her own voice from a great distance. Ida looked at Tessa blankly, as if she were an intruder.

"Oh, Tessa," she said. "Go ahead and start polishing, and do the creamers first this time, could you?"

"I'm telling you, the man is a bum," said Mr. Bigelow. "I ran his Dun & Bradstreet and it made me sick."

"Since you believe that Dun & Bradstreet sums up the existence of a human being, then I suppose it would make you sick." Ida paused. "You sick man."

"I sick?" said Hugh, "I am not having the adulterous affair. You are the one betraying your marriage vows for all the world to see." Mrs. Bigelow looked at her husband's crimson scalp with bottomless loathing. "And how you can keep throwing these ridiculous parties to flaunt your shame is beyond me. All I'm saying," he said, "is that either Warren goes, or the children live with me. It

is not good for them to be in the midst of . . . of turpitude.”

“They are not.”

“And you so irrational all the time.”

“I am not irrational all the time,” said Ida.

“And this household going to rack and ruin,” said Mr. Bigelow.

“It is not!”

“Will you shut up shut up shut up,” he shouted. “Everything I say, you just parrot it back to me. All you do is contradict . . .” Ida Bigelow's mouth opened to say “I do not,” but no sound came out.

Tessa quietly slid out the cherrywood drawers in the dining room with trembling hands and removed the silver and began to polish. She forgot to do the creamers first. Breathing shallowly, she curled her toes in her shoes until they hurt. Her thoughts raced in circles.

“I have a ride home tonight,” Tessa told Ida, as the party was breaking up. Waiting until Warren was out of the room, she escaped from the front door into the quiet Santa Monica night. She walked quickly down Seventeenth Street, crossed Wilshire and headed south, ducking into backyards or behind shrubbery if she spotted a car following. Mongrels barked at her. The freeway traffic in the distance sounded so cold and alien it might well have emanated from another solar system. When she arrived home, her heart did not stop pounding for an hour.

In her mind, Tessa pictured Warren lying naked across the bed, lips pursed, private parts engorged and thrusting, his arms reaching. She could not get the picture out of her mind. She wondered if she were going mad. Now she understood why Ida needed to polish her silver and set it out in defined positions and make people sit at her table and choose the right implement at the proper time. At least for a few hours, they would behave and be civilized. But then she . . . and Warren. Tessa shuddered.

“Just tell him hi, you've been thinking about what he said, and get him to bring us some booze,” Shannon whispered to Tessa.

“Oh I can't,” Tessa threw the phone and the business card at

Shannon, who picked them up and dialed briskly.

"Hi, is this Warren?" Shannon said. "Hi, Warren, I'm Shannon. I'm a friend of Tessa's." There was silence. "Yeah, she's here, but she's a big chicken, so you'll have to talk to me instead. What do I look like? Well, I'm kind of tall, with green eyes and— is my hair blonde Tessa? No, it's more like light brown." There was silence again and Shannon laughed, but low and sexy. "I guess you could say I am," said Shannon.

Tessa ran to Shannon's bed and buried her face in the pillow so she could scream.

"Well she's kind of falling apart right now," said Shannon, "but we can't make too much noise because my mother is taking a nap downstairs and if she wakes up, we'll both catch it." A pause. "Well you're a naughty boy, so that makes two of us." After a while Shannon asked Warren if he would buy the girls some booze. Half an hour later, she met Warren in the alley behind her apartment and returned after fifteen minutes with a pint of vodka.

"That's all he gave us?" said Tessa.

"Well, it's better than nothing," said Shannon. "We'll get more next time. This was just for starters."

"What did you have to do for it?"

"Just watch him," said Shannon. "What a relief." The girls mixed the vodka with orange juice and drank the whole pint. Afterwards, Tessa went home and threw up.

"Hugh was here yesterday, in defiance of our agreement," said Mrs. Bigelow the next Saturday when Tessa arrived. She looked like an angry rodent. "He came in while I was out at Jurgensen's buying spinach for the canapés. Now I have to do an inventory and find out what he took. I fear that he may become violent." Ida hurled herself onto a chair, head tossed back. "I'm so confused. These men, battling over me . . ."

"I'm sorry," said Tessa. But she must try to help Mrs. Bigelow face the truth about Warren. Warren was evil and Shannon was evil, and the whole situation was soon going to spin out of control. "Mrs. Bigelow," Tessa said, "Warren . . . you should know . . . he tried to

kiss me when he took me home. He wanted my phone number.”

Ida Bigelow rose, eyes wide. “What are you saying? I don't believe you.”

“It's true. He bothered me. I told him not to call, even though my friend Shannon said I should try to get money, but I would never do that.” Ida seemed to stumble. She grabbed for the back of the chair she had been sitting in.

“Hugh put you up to this, didn't he? Was it Hugh's idea that you seduce Warren?”

“No!”

Ida reached back and slapped Tessa's face with all her strength. “Why you filthy little slut. You little whore. I knew something was going on.”

“Mrs. Bigelow, no. I swear to God it was Shannon . . .”

“You get out of this house right now. She spit on the floor. “The sight of you disgusts me.” She approached again and Tessa cringed away. “Conniving. Tricky. Deceitful tramp. Get out of my sight.”

Tessa turned and ran for the front door, past the open-mouthed children, past John Gilbert's fateful loveseat and the battalions of silver all lined up, ready to check the vicious primitive lunges and besotted cravings and gluttonous impulses of the world. With a wail, Tessa groped at the front door and opened it and ran out through the yard, feet slipping on the pine needles. She ran down the block of gentle money and into the street without even looking, stumbling and catching herself and staggering again until she fell sprawling at the curb. Sitting up stiffly, she saw the pink scrape on her knee grow bedewed with blood. Above her, the palm trees held themselves apart, thin and tall and proud. And through their leaves, shining down on her, blinding her, came the damned sun.

The next day, Sunday afternoon, two detectives in business suits and a uniformed policeman came to Tessa's door with the news that Ida Bigelow had murdered Warren Felder the night before with a kitchen knife as he slept.

"Mr. Bigelow told us that you babysat for the children and did household chores," said one of the detectives. He had a bristly head of blond hair and small blue eyes nearly obscured by the bags underneath.

"I . . . did," said Tessa.

"Do you have any idea why she would have wanted to kill him?" Tessa stared at the detective.

"No," she said. "They always got along from what I could see."

"She doesn't know anything that everybody else doesn't already," said Tessa's mother.

"Let's let her answer," said the detective.

"I . . . I only know that Warren...Mr. Felder was with Mrs. Bigelow and Mr. Bigelow had left," said Tessa, looking down.

"Did Mr. Bigelow and Mr. Felder ever have words?"

"No . . . not that I heard."

"Tessa," said the detective, "it is possible that you may have to give evidence in a court hearing. We will let you know, if it comes to that."

"Why don't you get out of here and let the girl alone," said Tessa's mother. "She doesn't know anything about those people." The detective looked around the kitchen and saw a bottle of rum on the counter.

"Nice all-American home," he said loudly to the other detective as they were turning to leave.

When the attendance clerks called Tessa in that Monday, she was sure that she was in trouble, but Bea Kinderblut, the bitchy one, got up from her desk and put her arms around Tessa. After a moment, Mrs. Lawrie the obese attendance clerk, joined her. Tessa nearly suffocated under the weight of all that administrative compassion.

"Tessa, we're so very sorry," said Bea.

"It's such a tragedy that your nice job had to go and end like that," said Mrs. Lawrie.

"Are you sure," said Bea, "that you never saw it coming?"

"I . . . never saw it coming," said Tessa.

"Leave her alone," said Connie Lawrie.

"Oh I think she knows a little more than she's letting on," said Bea. But she dropped the subject.

Ida Bigelow was eventually charged with involuntary manslaughter in the death of Warren Felder and given five years probation. Mr. Bigelow took Ida back, and Tessa learned that the family had moved to Texas.

Under the pressure of uncomfortable silences and dropped gazes, the friendship between Tessa and Shannon soon disintegrated. But Tessa was not surprised when rumors began to circulate that she had been the reason Mrs. Bigelow had murdered her lover.

Tessa began to picture Warren lying naked across the bed, the upper part of his torso hanging over the other side, a puddle of dark blood spreading out on the shiny floor, a silver steak scimitar protruding from his chest. Those steak knives were as keen as razors and always made shreds of the polish cloth. "No!" Tessa would cry, with a shudder whenever this vision invaded her mind. She would quickly try to substitute the image of Warren, still bold and intact, reaching out from his fate to kiss the top of her head in the car.

