“Ally”

_The Night Before the Wedding_

It was to be a fall wedding, for reasons which were obvious to everyone. Despite the imminence of snow and the volatility of the wind, the ceremony would be held in the groom’s parents’ back garden. A marriage gazebo had been constructed. Plastic chairs had been unfolded into rows. Chinese lanterns were laced across the sky.

We spent the afternoon raking up leaves and collecting them in big black bags (which my brothers insisted on calling _green_ garbage bags) to take to the dump. I almost complained about the obvious futility of our chore, but decided that now was not the time for such an argument.

The night before the wedding we ate together at the good table, the one in the dining room that we hardly ever ate at when I was growing up. I don’t know who the fancy china and silverware were meant to impress, but they neither redeemed nor elevated the food. My mother had prepared one of her rote meals: roast with giant pieces of onion and carrot in a bland brown sauce that barely resembled gravy.

Eight of us were at the table: my father at the head, unreadable and silent; my mother at the foot, directing conversation; my sister Sarah to my mother’s left, directly across from me, looking bored; my younger brother Tom, speaking to everyone but his fiancée, and she beside him, speaking to no one; my older brother Luke to my right, who alone seemed to enjoy the meal, inhaling food as he was; and Pastor Alan to his right. The pastor was staying with us overnight. The ceremony was scheduled for early the next morning and he didn’t want to drive so far out of the city into the suburbs.

Gnawing our way through massive chunks of overcooked beef, we were at first too busy reassuring my mother that the food was alright to have a conversation. Once we had eaten enough to satisfy her, the discussion inevitably turned to weddings. Since none of us were yet married, my mother spoke first about the weddings of cousins I hardly remembered. She then moved on to generalities about married life.
“Marriage,” said my mother, “is a struggle and a challenge. But if you invest enough into it, you’ll find that it’s very rewarding.”

My father did not look up from his beef.

“I’ve married many hundreds of couples,” said Pastor Alan, dousing everything on his plate with gravy, “and each wed for different reasons and at different times of life. But all of them understood that it’s always better to be with someone than to be alone. Solitude is an unnatural and insupportable state for mankind.”

I frowned down at my carrots. For a long time I’d lived alone, free of a lover or a spouse. It wasn’t a wretched state, just a different kind of living. I didn’t say anything to contradict him though—I didn’t want to cause a scene about it.

“I agree,” said Luke through a mouthful of beef and buttered green beans. “It seems to me that marriage provides some stability and responsibility in a person’s life. Makes him realize his life isn’t all about himself. Gives him a job to do.”

“Well why aren’t you married then?” asked Sarah.

“Just haven’t met the right girl yet,” he said. “Like Tom’s here,” he grinned at my brother. “He’s found himself a keeper.”

Tom grimaced and looked down into his mashed potatoes. His fiancée avoided Luke’s suggestive leer and organized her peas into a four by six grid.

“Yes, congratulations again to Tom,” said my mother, raising her glass of milk as if to toast an accomplishment. Her chair creaked as her weight shifted.

“We’re all very pleased to welcome you to our family,” she added, speaking slowly and loudly to my future sister-in-law, who didn’t look up from her plate.

“It’s about time too,” she said, shooting looks at me, Sarah, and Luke. “I’ve been waiting for a wedding for a long time now, too long. And I agree with you, Pastor. A life alone is not how God intended us to live. Even in the Garden he made woman to partner man. If only the rest of you would find someone and settle down,” she looked at me. “Everyone should get married.”

I swirled the food around my plate, mixing everything into a heterogeneous mess. Here we go.
“Well some of us can’t get married,” I said to my beef.

This caught the attention of the table. I saw my family work through the obvious implication of my statement, reject it as impossible, then not understand any alternative.

“What are you talking about?” asked my mother. She regretted the question immediately; she had learned long ago that this was not a son to question, for he would answer.

“I’m saying that there are people in this country who are specifically denied the opportunity to marry.” I spoke to the entire table. My brother’s fiancée looked up from her peas.

“Those types of people aren’t interested in real marriage. There’s a reason we don’t let them marry,” said my mother. “Would you have some more beef? You’re looking too thin,” she said to Sarah, trying to reign in the conversation to a more compliant topic. Sarah shook her head and watched me. I pressed on.

“Why should it be any business or interest of yours? Who are you to deny them anything if they’re in love?”

My mother quivered, jiggling like the apricot Jell-O mould that served as our meal’s centrepiece. “Those people don’t know love. The things they do to each other, the things they do…” She blushed, and brushed at the sweat that was building up in the ridges of her face. “It’s a perversion of love. A perversion of marriage.”

I smiled; having heard this before, I was ready with a response. “The perversion of love is never love between two people, no matter who they are. The perversion of love is the forgery of love, the pretence of love by those who are truly incapable of it.”

“They’re incapable of it!” She barked. “They’re the ones pretending. It’s unnatural.”

“Sandwiches are unnatural, yet you enjoy them without fear of condemnation.”

My mother ground her teeth. “This isn’t the time or the place for this discussion. I don’t care about your political beliefs. I refuse to discuss the… we’re not going to talk about certain things in this house. Some matters are inappropriate for polite discussion,” she said, with an apologetic look at the pastor. “Have some more beef,” she insisted, shovelling it onto Sarah’s plate. She picked up her glass of milk and took a deep drink to calm her nerves.

“What’s inappropriate?”
She turned her attention to me, swinging her jaw around. She knew it was a challenge. I
would not let her drop her eyes, but held them looking into mine. She knew that I meant to
provoke her, but still she couldn’t dismiss her anger.

“What’s inappropriate?”

She spoke through a clenched jaw. She squeezed her glass until her fingers were white.
“Some people choose to live immoral, degenerate lives. We don’t need to talk about the details of
their lifestyles at my dinner table.”

“What type of people?”

“Oh my word,” she erupted, slamming her milk down so that some of it leapt up out of
her glass. “You want me to say it? Fine I’ll say it: the gays! The gays and the lesbians, mocking
us by having sham marriages and adopting other peoples’ children and pretending that they can
live normal lives with normal families!”

“What makes a normal family? Why can’t they be normal?” I pressed.

She looked again at the pastor, trying to express regret at her inability to control me
through her quivering brow. “This is a time for celebration, for your brother. We don’t need to
ruin his big night by arguing about such nasty things.”

“I’m not arguing. I’m trying to understand you. You’re the one who’s shouting at me.
There’s no need for any quarrel, is there Tom?” My brother would not look at me. “We just need
to have a rational discussion with our backwards parents about some things.”

“That’s enough.”

My father was not a man who shouted. I’ve always admired him for this. For as long as I
can remember, maybe for his entire life, he has chosen every word with great deliberateness. He
designed every sentence to mean exactly what he wanted to say and had no passion for shouting
matches—he would win arguments by hard, determined dogma. I was always amazed that
someone so well-read and so articulate could be such an ignorant, bigoted fuck.

I could feel the cold anger emanating from his end of the table. I felt my heart beat a little
faster and I wasn’t sure I could go through with it. I forced myself to turn and meet his eyes.
He sat stony faced at the head of the table, his lip curled and his brow heavy with disapproval as I stared him down. I felt the heat rising in my face and knew that the redness would soon follow. I tried to fight it off. I reminded myself that I had nothing to be ashamed of.

“No,” I said after a pause. “It’s not enough. There’s more. There’s something else I need to say.”

“You’ve said enough. Apologize to your mother. Now.”

I felt seven pairs of eyes pooling on me. I felt their physical weight pushing on the back of my neck, trying to get me to look down and break my father’s gaze. I raised my chin and held my neck erect. I would be proud.

“No. I won’t apologize for what I am.”

A resolute silence entered the room and threw itself across the table. Its presence made everything stop moving. The sudden stillness made me notice a ladybug flitting about on the far windowsill, right behind Tom’s ear.

“What do you mean? What are you talking about?” My mother couldn’t help herself. The questions spilled out of her mouth like someone was pushing on her gut. She couldn’t stop them, couldn’t take the dreadful confirmation.

“Isn’t it obvious? You want me to say it?” I couldn’t meet their eyes and not betray myself. I stared straight ahead. “I’m a gay.”

The ladybug was on Tom’s shoulder now, though he didn’t notice it. I watched it crawl down his arm. It must have tickled him—I couldn’t believe that he didn’t feel it.

The silence tried to return, but was driven away by a muffled scraping. My older brother was inching his chair away from mine awkwardly.

“No you’re not.” My father spoke each word as if they were slabs of concrete falling from his tongue. They slammed down on the table and shook the room, statements of unquestionable physical fact. Yet still I had to contradict them.

“Yes I am. I’m a gay and I’m your son and brother.”
The table was positively drenched in silence now. I saw each of them trying to reconcile these two facts—facts which they held to be absolute contradictions. They looked angry, but not yet angry enough.

I violated the silence. I drove it away under the table. I broke it apart with my words.

“You don’t seem to believe me. I regret that. Do you need proof?” I leaned into the table, almost putting my elbow in a crystal dish of pickled carrots and beets. “Shall I describe to you how I know I’m gay? Shall I tell you details of my deviant lifestyle? Will that be proof enough?”


“Do you need to hear of the things I’ve seen? The things I’ve done? The amusements and the pleasures I’ve experienced as a gay?”

“Enough!”

My father’s shout crackled through the air. Everyone at the table started. The sound was alien.

Still there was more. I breathed in. I made myself casual. “Would someone please pass me the peas? I seem to have been missed.”

“This is unacceptable.” My father whispered, as if to compensate for his horrible lapse.

I looked from my father to my brothers and sister. Sarah alone met my eye. She moved her gaze from me to my brother Tom, then to his fiancée. My gaze followed hers.

“No it’s not. It’s just a very small fact. It’s nothing to be ashamed of and it’s nothing anyone can change. Wouldn’t they, if they could? Wouldn’t they do anything to avoid it when they know that they’ll face such harshness for simply telling the truth to those that are supposed to love them?”

“Why tell us then? Why are you here when you know you’re not welcome?” Tom spoke. I looked him in the eyes and he blushed and looked away. The ladybug was now climbing on his mashed potato and gravy volcano.

“I’m here for my family. To show them what they mean to me and to let them know that I love them despite their immoral attitudes.”
“We’re not family, not with you.” shouted my mother. “You’re not a member of this family anymore. Get out! Get out of here you... faggot!” She spoke the word as if she tasted its sourness on her tongue. “We’re not family!”

“Really? It really takes so little to destroy us? It really takes so little for you to break this family?”

“It’s not us, it’s not our fault,” said my mother.
I turned to her. I reached for her hand. She pulled it away as if my touch would scald her.

“Mom.” I hoped that she could see the pity in my eyes. “I accept you. I forgive you for the wicked things you say and think, even though I have no good reason to. That’s what family is. That’s what we are.”

The silence leapt up onto the table once more, obstructing any further conversation with its massive girth. I had nothing more to say.

“I think you ought to go now.” My father’s voice was a low growl.
I stood. I put my hands on the table and leaned forward. I looked at each of them in turn. The only face which dared to face me was my father’s.

“You know I love you all very much. Every one.”
No one spoke.

“You know I can forgive you for the horrible things you’ve said, if only you ask me to.”
No one spoke.

I sighed. I had tried.

“You have disappointed me,” I said. I left the room.

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In the Garden

The moon shone. The clouds were gone. The wind was dead. The air was still, crisp and cold, holding a hint of winter.

I sat on the altar where my brother would marry his glowing bride the next morning. I smoked a cigarette and ate another strawberry Pop-Tart from the box beside me. My hands shook as I raised the cigarette to my mouth.
I heard the back door slam against the side of the house and turned to see who had opened it. Sarah came out and sat at the altar with me. The green and yellow glow from the Chinese lanterns was reflected in her hair. We sat for a long time, saying nothing.

“It’s horrible to test people like that,” she said at last.

“No it’s not. It’s horrible to revoke a love that you claim is unconditional because of a single meaningless fact. It’s horrible to adopt a convenient hate without question. And besides, they failed their test. They proved that their love for me is an accident, something that can be taken away in a moment. And that’s not real love.”

She leaned her head against a plastic vine-wrapped beam and turned to look at me. “You don’t seem that upset.”

I took a deep drag on my cigarette. “I was sad when I first decided to do this. But not tonight. I wasn’t surprised. I had already mourned the death of our relationship.” I released the remaining smoke from my lungs.

I waited for her to speak again. She just stared at me.

“What do you want Sarah?”

“Well fuck, I wasn’t going to stay in there,” she waved at the house. “They’re just sitting there in the dark, saying nothing. It’s horrible.” She took a Pop-Tart. “Where did you even get these?”

“I brought them with me from home.”

She took out a package of vanilla Pocky. “I also remembered mom’s cooking.”

We laughed together.

“So you’re not gay,” she said, taking alternate bites of Pop-Tart and Pocky.

“Is that a question?”

“No it’s not,” she said, her eyebrows raised.

I looked at her. I chewed on the inside of my cheek.

“How did you know?”
“I just did. I guess I’ve known you were straight for as long as I’ve known that Tom isn’t.”

I looked out at the congregation of lawn chairs. They were all identical, reflecting moonlight off their hard white skin. I nodded.

She took my cigarette and tried it but started to cough. “I think that he fucked that girl to prove something to himself, or to try to mend himself or some messed up shit reason like that.”

I took back my cigarette and stood, leaning against the opposite beam. I felt my fingernails begin to singe and threw the cigarette on the altar, crushing it into a sooty spot. Poor Tom. What a fucking nightmare that would be. Poor poor Tom.

“So what now?” My sister looked up at me as I lit another cigarette. “What happens next?”

“You know, I hadn’t really thought about it.” I looked down at her, and she held her face up to me. “I suppose I have to go.”

My sister stood. She took my hand in hers. “You’re shaking,” she said.

“I know,” I said. “I guess that was more intense than I thought it would be. I mean, I’ve been comfortable with the fact of my heterosexuality for a long time, but that didn’t making coming out to my family as a gay man any easier. It’s fucking difficult.”

She frowned at me. “Of course it is.”

We walked down the aisle, hand in hand. We sat in the front row of seats on the groom’s side. I realized that my chair would be vacant the next morning. We sat and watched the wind pick up, rustling the leaves beyond the dark edge of the garden where the lantern light gave way to night.

“Well, let Tom know that he’s safe with me. Let him know that when he begins to tell the truth, I’ll be there,” I said.

“I will.”

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