

The Waiter

Ainslee Johnson



You know how everyone has something wrong with them? Well, this man's one fault is that nothing seemed to be wrong with him. Absolutely repulsive. Disgustingly sublime. Let me paint you a picture, it isn't a pretty one, but it isn't bad. He walked up to the steps of my porch one foot at a time. He didn't slightly slip on that edge—the concrete ledge that stabs everyone in the back. I couldn't believe it. Many people stumble there; it's entertaining to watch. Now you think I'm a terrible person, don't you? I promise you I'm not. I can just feel the embarrassment sweating from the pores on their foreheads after they fall. It brings back memories of when I fell in the bleachers at a football game.

Everyone noticed it. Their eyes seemed to bulge out of their heads as they peered into every secret chamber in my soul. It was absolutely horrifying. I was like a deer staring into headlights, waiting for the car crash, the laughter. Back to this man, I can't even focus on him. I wanted to see if he was the-laugh-it-off kind of person or the, "I'm sorry, how embarrassing," type of person. He was neither. He was the confidently-smile-as-I-walk-to-pick-up-my-date type of guy. Now, I wasn't completely destroyed by the fact he didn't slip, I am not a terrible person. It was a series of small factors. This wasn't even a major one.

He had brownish green eyes, not particularly striking, and his hair was brown. His jawline was as sharp as a butter knife and a dull one at that. He could have been a nose model if that was a thing. Maybe it is a thing, I

don't know. There were no curves or dents in it, and it wasn't too short or too long. A bystander would have called him handsome, some. He wasn't too good looking, and he tried to be charming. His face was covered by a thin beard. His eyebrows were on the thick side and his hair was combed a little. He was wearing a light blue long sleeve shirt with darker blue lines. He wasn't ugly. No, even in my occasional insanity I wouldn't call him that. But in a large crowd, he couldn't catch my eye if it were thrown at him. Also, he didn't open the car door for me.

He decided to take me to an Italian restaurant. I had lived in this town for three years now and usually have a couple of friends come with me to this restaurant every other week. It was a classic old Italian joint. The best thing was their spaghetti—it was handcrafted by the finest artisans in Italy. The noodles were thin, and, if I didn't know where they came from, I could mistake them for someone's old Italian great grandmother's hand kneaded dough noodles. Pure angel's hair. The meatballs on top were, how do you say, "Mmmmmmmmmmm." If you aren't familiar with this onomatopoeia, it's the sound you hear when no one at the table is talking because they are too busy munching on the food. The air smelled like basil and margherita pizza. Classy calm jazz sung against the walls. It wasn't elevator music, no, it was magical jazz with unique phrases of notes. All the waiters knew me at this restaurant and seemed to enjoy my company, all but one.

When we sat down at the table, I waved to my usual waiter, Annie. She waltzed over to me and softly whispered, "We have a new employee and I am handing him to you. I know you will be a good person for him to wait on." I smiled at her and my date smiled too, but awkwardly. He had never been to this restaurant, yet he had lived in this town longer than I. He liked to eat at the places most people went to, not my hole-in-the-wall Italian diner. He liked to eat pizza and burgers and fries and toddler food. He had lots of friends, as you could imagine, but, I knew when he ordered a beer instead of red wine, I would never let him have the pleasure of coming to this place with me again.

As my date was telling me about how he played football in high school and was a team assistant in college, I saw him. He glided to my table dressed in the all black waiter's attire, but I couldn't care less. To me, he was a prince in a finely crafted suit making his entrance at the ball. His hair seemed to flutter in the wind as he walked. I could write a thousand

books on his eyes alone. They were blue. Sailors and pirates from all over the world could only dream of sailing in a sea as blue as his eyes. They were surrounded by a dark blue circle and then as you got into the pupil they got lighter, until they were like a sky on a summer's day with small, thin clouds floating in them. His face was finely sculpted and clear. I cannot stress enough how I actually thought he was an angel, an angel with a small tattoo on his wrist welcoming me to heaven after I died of boredom. He was absolutely beautiful, gorgeous.

My hands shook as he placed my drink next to me. I managed to whisper a thank you. He stood with perfect posture as he asked, "So you guys know I'm new?"

"Yes," the man sitting across from me sternly replied before I got a chance to speak.

"Well, I feel lucky to get to serve a couple of good customers like yourselves. I hear you come here a lot." The waiter smiled delicately, like a feather.

"We are happy to have you," I managed to spit out and peered at his nametag, "Isaiah."

Isaiah the great prophet, displaying God's beauty through his creation. Snap out of it. I tried to focus on the tablecloth as my date spoke into a black hole. I began to count the times he said, "Once I..." while I silently nodded. Seven so far. I tried to seem like I wasn't bored out of my mind with him. I tried not to stare too much at Isaiah as he danced from table to table like a dove floating upon the sun lit clouds. The date was much better now. I still resent my friends for sending me into this phantasmagoria of a blind date. They always dare me to do things and live through me. They treat me like I'm some toy or show; their eyes follow mine in amusement as I tell them my thoughts. They think I'm crazy, but people who would sentence their friend to eat dinner with my date are psychopaths.

"In high school, me and some buddies decided to have a party after our championship game and you'll never guess what happened." His face lit up, how cute.

Sigh. "What?"

"We lost, good thing it was only my sophomore year!"

"Ha, and don't tell me... I bet you won your senior year and planned a huge party after that one too."

“How’d you know?” I was almost scared by his surprise. Maybe he’s just trying to be nice or maybe he’s just dated a few blonde blockheads in his life.

“I’ve always had a way of sensing these things and I—”

“That reminds me of a buddy I had in college!” I swear if I hear him say “buddy” one more time, I will move out of the country and learn a different language. I will forget I ever knew English so I never have to hear that word again.

After the man, still disgusting in his simplicity, began to talk about his parents, I interrupted him to ask if he was ready to order. Of course, he was. This was the first time I genuinely smiled at him and looked into his eyes. Not because I was captivated by the “funny” stories he told about his fraternity brothers. Not because I liked him. Not because he complimented me. I knew that the faster we ordered, the faster it was over. Also, I knew Isaiah would have to come back. The man, that’s what we will call him because I already forgot his name, shouted to Isaiah and waved like some barbarian. I suppose he was jealous because he was handsome and the waiter was beautiful. Isaiah walked to the table and I took a closer look at him. His hands were sculptures of Michaelangelo. The veins stuck out of them in a perfect crease and his fingernails were perfectly shaped. They moved smooth as he wrote down orders—I suppose he had neat handwriting.

“Are you both ready to order?” His soft lips chanted. I nodded. Isaiah continued, “Alright then, what’ll it be for you?” He looked at me. He looked at me.

“The spaghetti and meatballs,” I looked up at him like a sad puppy, trying to smile. I imagined him sitting on the other side of the table with the man waiting instead of him. I would be rude to the man and make him work for his tips, while Isaiah would laugh and tell me to take it easy on the man.

“And for you, sir,” Isaiah looked over.

“I’ll have the house salad with ranch dressing and grilled chicken.”

The house salad? What kind of sick person orders a house salad at this place? What the hell is wrong with him? I could tell that Isaiah knew I was about to lose it. It didn’t take working there long to realize that ordering a salad at a restaurant this good was a mistake. My finger tapped on the top

of the table. I smiled and told Isaiah thank you as he walked away; I didn’t want him to go. I didn’t know I was capable of such colossal love. I quickly turned to the man and began to talk. This was the first conversation between us that I actually started.

“So, the house salad,” I looked at him sternly, but not mean. I’m not cruel. Plus, if I were rude to him, my friends would never talk to me again. They loved this man.

“Yeah,” he smiled, “not a big fan of Italian food.”

“Really?” I laughed while dying inside. He shook his head smiling.

“Honestly, I didn’t want to come to this restaurant, but I really like you.” Gross.

Honestly, I didn’t want to come to this restaurant either... well at least not with you. Control yourself. I managed to smile and look down at the table like I had done many times before. He wasn’t amused by that. It’s our first date and our last date. How can he say this to me? Has it not become clear to him? I caught myself pitying the man. I could tell he was floundering in his thoughts and trying to pull himself together. He seemed like a nice guy, but he wasn’t my type. I am cruel. I hope Isaiah doesn’t notice that I’m hurting this man. Isaiah may never grow to trust me, and, if he doesn’t trust me, all my faith is lost. I can tell there is something in Isaiah. Whenever he comes to our table, he treats me with such care and grace. I never want to heartbreak Isaiah.

As soon as I saw Isaiah carrying the salad in one hand, all pity melted away. I just wanted to sink into my spaghetti—to jump into a pool of it off a high dive. I would have eaten messy just in spite of the man, but Isaiah was there. Must act ladylike. I would have put my napkin on the table and dug in, spilling noodles and sauce all over my sweater. I’d wipe my tomato-stained fingers through my hair and trap parsley in its strands. I’d purposely get pepper flakes stuck in my teeth and drop the meatball on the floor. This isn’t me but I’d do it.

Just as I was finishing up my food, I realized that I let this man control me. He made me feel closed off. He put a glass wall between my reality and what I wanted. He made me small talk and eat with manners and not tell jokes. His motives may not be as clean as I thought. He wanted me to feel pain; he wanted me to hate myself. He longed for me to feel agony and restriction. “I think I am gonna go to the ladies’ room,” I told him.

"Okay, hurry back!" I certainly did not hurry back. Bursting into the bathroom door, I made sure all the stalls were empty. I put my hands on the edge of the sink and stared deep into the mirror. My confidence began to swirl down the drain. I am not pretty enough for Isaiah, so I must settle for this man. Behind the makeup, I am but a cruel shadow. I'm insane. My lipstick is wearing off and my mascara is flaking. I must settle for this man. I cannot do better. No one will ever love me. I have fallen into the trap of forced love like most do. This man has stolen my fairy tale desires from me and ripped me away from my home. The beating heart inside my ribs no longer longs for anything, no longer longs for anything attainable. I have lost the war, this man being the final battle. I knew when my friends set me up with him that they were taking pity on me. No one loves me. This man may not even want to be here with me now. Love has never given me a chance, yet I leave it all to chance. Fate is a wicked witch.

Tears overcame my eyes and I listened as they dropped. Trying to make no noise, I closed my eyes and dreamt of before the date. I wanted to never have met this man, and, it pains me to say this, I wish I had never met Isaiah's eyes. I wish the best for them both, but I would never play this role. Loneliness is a chair and I am happy to curl up in it while reading a novel. I want to dwell in my infinite empty space. The tears began to fall harder. I looked at myself again. Stop lying. I knew I didn't want to be lonely. What did I do to deserve my punishment, my destiny? I have laid eyes on an angel and cannot go back. I will not settle for this man. Why lower standards if I know I will end up by myself either way? I knew I must go back out there. After brushing my fingers through my hair and doing my best to wipe the tears away, I crept out of the bathroom.

"Ma'am are you okay?" I heard a sweet voice sing from behind me and pull me inside of it. I turned around and saw Isaiah's face staring into me. I had no words left, so I just stared at him. I must be dreaming. He took my hand and led me to the hallway next to the kitchen. I was far away, I was in another world. He whispered, "Has that man threatened you or hurt you in any way?"

"No, no, he hasn't. He's just a reminder." I managed to stutter this out, while tears beat the edges of my eyelids. I was with Isaiah, talking to him. This time I didn't want to be.

"A reminder of what? I know it's none of my business to ask this, so you don't have to answer. I just noticed you not enjoying yourself and Annie has told me so much about you." An angel and a saint.

"Isaiah," I spoke more confidently than ever like I knew he understood me, "a reminder of my failure and loneliness. I don't want to be here with him."

"Okay, I'm sorry." He seemed confused. I hoped he wasn't regretting the fact that he showed he cared about me.

"You think I'm a terrible person, don't you?"

"No, I don't. I just don't understand."

"Please, I don't know what to do. I'm so confused."

He smiled, "You know what? I am on my break and I don't want you to be sad. I think I can sort of see what's happening. Let's leave the man behind."

Isaiah snuck out two plates of spaghetti and we sat in the back of the kitchen, eating and talking. He told me he liked music, but he didn't have to. I could tell from the way he spoke that he was always a fan of the classics. He listened to rock and sometimes just piano music. We contemplated each note, dissecting them in our beating hearts. If this were the Renaissance, he would be a philosopher. Each word he spoke was covered in gold that shone perfectly when the light hit it. He said he had traveled to Mykonos and experienced the beauty of summer, but he came back to find love in the place he had grown up. He told me about all his adventures and promised to take me with him. I could almost smell the waves hitting the rocks as he described it to me. We floated on cotton candy clouds and soaked in a bottle of wine. The air was crisp and full of excitement. That man was nowhere to be found. I was glad he was gone. All I could see was the face of Isaiah.

I blinked and I was back, staring into my reflection in the bathroom mirror. Everything was grey again, the faded jazz. I rolled my shoulders and took a deep breath, holding my lungs as they absorbed it. My confidence was making an appearance, so I gathered my courage to return. I hoped Isaiah would meet me. I hoped the man at the table would be gone. All traces of messy makeup were wiped away. I walked back into the barely lit room to find him sitting there, awaiting my company. Of course, he was waiting to release some passive aggressive comment about the time it took.

"I was beginning to worry," the man said.

“Sorry, beauty takes time,” I smiled, “you never told me that my lipstick was fading.”

I’m glad I made him feel uncomfortable. He didn’t want to be there and it wasn’t his destiny to be with me. I would never, even if fate forced it, ever go on a date with a man like him again. He was extremely annoying in his efforts to act normal. I’m not normal. Nevertheless, we continued to dine. I refused to take small bites like a woman should. At this point, I feel like I’m more likely to go on a second date with my plate of spaghetti than the man. I don’t hate him. I just resent him. He was halfway done with his salad when he raised his hand to Isaiah. I almost let out a huge gasp.

“What can I do for you?” Isaiah said calmly. So sweet.

“I need more ranch,” he said, so rude. He was like a dirty pirate who could not read or write. He wasn’t the captain of the ship, no, he just scrubbed the deck. He wasn’t even a real pirate.

I grabbed Isaiah’s hand. It was soft and warm and gentle. “Thank you for all your help tonight, you’ve been great.”

“My pleasure!”

After he drenched his salad in ranch, I let him finish dinner and made some meaningless small talk. I turned my head as we walked out the door. I saw Isaiah standing, taking orders. Humble beauty. I smiled at him and longed to glance into his eyes again. Isaiah’s eyes are hope and his smile is victory. I let the man drive me home, but not walk me to the door. I even told him that I had a nice time. This wasn’t a lie. I think Isaiah and I are off to a great start. I let him do all these things because I knew it was the end for us. But it wasn’t the end.

