

## UPSIDE-DOWN CAKE

By Paul Theroux

Every visit to an aged parent is in the nature of a farewell. When I got a save-the-date postcard for Mother's ninetieth, I thought, Oh, God. A birthday can seem like a kind of funeral. Then I saw an opportunity, and said yes, and made my arrangements, and looked forward to the event. But the private function room at the Happy Clam was funereal, with bouquets and long faces—Rose with her back turned, Gilbert and Fred conferring, Franny fussing over her son, Jonty. We all stood gaping and glassy-eyed, as though we were about to bury Mother.

I had arrived on time, resolved to see it through. The spouses were rattled—Franny's husband, Marvin, ill at ease out of his security-guard uniform, Fred's wife, Erma, sighing and snatching at her hair, Rose's husband, Walter, monkeying with a camera as a way of snubbing everyone else. Jonty's little girl, Jilly, was the center of attention, the adults shouting at her as she ran back and forth.

"Run to Granma! Run to Granma!" Jonty called out. "Jilly, listen to me!"

Mother recoiled as the child approached, then smiled slightly when Jilly tripped and fell. Jonty swept up Jilly, who began howling.

"I had a child named Angela," Mother said. "She died. She's in Heaven."

"Granma is, I believe, the name of the official Cuban newspaper," someone said very loudly. It was Floyd, in a black fedora, leaning on his tightly rolled umbrella. "I always found that terribly ironic. It was named after the yacht that brought the guerrillas to fight in the Cuban Revolution in 1956."

"But why was the yacht called Granma?" Rose asked.

"Funnily enough, because the man who owned it, a gringo, had named it after his Granma. But you knew that, of course."

"Jilly, tell me where it hurts, honey," Jonty pleaded with the shrieking child.

"Who was it who said, 'If you're strong enough to scream, it can't hurt that much'?" Floyd said, winking at Mother and stepping past me to give her a kiss. "Was it you, Mother?"

This was the Floyd I remembered from happier days, the man who burned up the air in the room and left people gasping in the vacuum, the man who told me once, "Mother's obsession with dead Angela is harmless enough. Think of Paul Verlaine's mother. She kept her dead fetus—was it a pair of foeti?—in a bottle of alcohol for years, for the family to mourn."

"We're waiting for Hubby—oh, there he is," Fred said, as Hubby appeared at the door. His wife, Moneen, hurried to the other spouses, the second tier of relations, in the cheap seats.

Franny handed Floyd a shopping bag. "Your favorite," she said. Floyd picked through the bag, sorting fruit and candy, and held up a pink metal drum of Almond Roca.

"The trouble with them is I can't open them fast enough," Franny said.

"One would never have known that," Floyd said, "to look at you." He found something else, a cellophane bag.

"Mixed nuts. That is so appropriate to this day of days."

The triumph at such a family gathering lay in concealing your real feelings. But already this was unravelling.

"Maybe we could sit down," Fred said, raising his arms. "Everyone's here."

Floyd began shaking nuts into his hand. "Why is it," he said, as he rattled the nuts in his fist like dice before shooting them into his mouth, "that people always do this when they're eating nuts?"

Formatted: Font: 10 pt

Formatted: Line spacing: multiple 1.15 li

Formatted: Font: 10 pt

Comment [DM1]: Opening with exposition... hmmm.

Comment [DM2]: Diction here is strong: back turned, conferring, fussing... suggests depth.

Comment [DM3]: Nice usage of a character list to say more about the narrator. Though, if these characters are to be in any way significant, then this is a mistake. Also the narrator is making a tremendous amount of judgement for a first person... has omniscient tendencies.

Comment [DM4]: This is excellent, coupled with the recoiling. The smiling tied to the fall is heavy handed

Comment [DM5]: Quirky ensemble or not, there are way too many fucking named characters in the first page.

Comment [DM6]: See previous, for fuck's sake.

Comment [DM7]: That's funny. Then the next bit, just annoying.

Comment [DM8]: At this point, we have forgotten that there is a first person narrator. He/she is becoming insignificant.



"I'm not sitting next to him," Hubby said, and moved his place card down the table.

"Lovely shirt, Hubby," Floyd said, chewing. "I always knew those were going to come back into style someday."

"For the love of God," someone muttered.

"The placement," Floyd said, pronouncing the word the French way—plassmon—and fluttering his fingers at the place cards. "It's worthy of the court of Versailles. 'I know my place.' 'Who's in, who's out?' 'I won't sit next to you.'"

"But there's an extra place," Marvin said.

Mother stared at him. He stammered and clutched his belt, as no doubt he did at the mall, one hand on his Taser, one on his Mace can.

"Mah-vin," Franny said. Still an outsider, not one of us, after all these years, Marvin did not realize his mistake even when it was pointed out to him. This seemingly extra place was, of course, for Angela, who had been with us, guiding Mother, for fifty years, since dying at birth.

Fred and Gilbert sat on either side of Mother, Franny and Rose next to them, then Hubby, Jonty—Jilly on his lap—and the spouses, Marvin, Moneen, and Erma. Walter was snapping pictures. Floyd took his seat, and I sat next to him.

Floyd started to tug at my shirt. "This is—what, Jay? Shirred silk? Chiffon? I like its epicene in-soo-shuntz. Its diaphanous drape. Its hand."

Mother sat like a queen, beaming over the motley crowd at the table. Seven years on from Father's funeral, we all looked bigger but droopier, the same people wearing odder, older masks, all of us like large, misshapen children.

"How wonderful to have all my family here," Mother said. "I'm so lucky."

"We're the lucky ones, Ma!" Franny said.

"Mumma, we've been looking forward to this," Rose said.

Hubby said, "Will someone pass the bread?"

Floyd juggled a bread stick and said, "Are you saying you'd like one of these up your end?"

Breathing hard with impatience, Hubby scowled. He said, "So, do we get menus?"

"Menu is, of course, the grandson of Brahma, and his law must be obeyed," Floyd said. "One apposite law regarding temperance is 'He must eat without distraction of mind.'"

"No menus. Fred chose the meal," Mother said. "It's simpler. We thought you'd prefer it that way."

Mother said she was happy—and for once she seemed to be telling the truth. But her happiness was possible only because the rest of us were miserable. Looking around the room, I saw how shamefaced we seemed. We had betrayed one another too many times to be able to sit comfortably around the same table together. But Mother had prevailed; she had insisted on our being there, and had implied—as she often did—that if we cooperated there would be a reward for us in her will. She held out the prospect of her death to command our attention, yet she was the only person at the table who, small and sinewy, looked healthy, even indestructible. Just a glance told me that the rest of us would leave the table much angrier than before. So Mother had got her wish and was fulfilled in all the important ways—having her birthday party, receiving presents, and, with this large get-together, dividing us by creating more confusion.

"May I request a beverage?" Floyd said.

**Comment [DM9]:** Snore. Anti-climactic. Importance of names... most of the cast has something interesting there. The narrator, not at all. Telling?

**Comment [DM10]:** This is attempting to be universal in the oddities of families everywhere, yet there are a zillion characters and no motivation for any of this. So, don't care.

"Take your hat off," Fred said.

"If you say the magic word," Floyd said, removing his hat and spinning it on his finger. "A drink, 'a beaker full of the warm South'"—he was leaning toward Jonty—" 'the blushful Hippocrene, with beaded bubbles winking at the brim.' Source?"

Jonty turned away. Hubby set his face at him. Franny and Rose shrugged.

"You want Johnny Keats," Floyd said, and raised a finger, reciting, " 'The dunces flutterblasting, with food-splashed faces'—a citation, if you please."

Hubby said "Diet Coke" to the waiter.

"I think you'll find that it was I who penned those words," Floyd said, crossing his legs. "Why is it that your so-called diet drinks are the preference of the chubbies and the chunkies, as if some arcane magic attached . . ."

"Shut up," Hubby said.

The drinks were handed out, we toasted Mother, and the first course was served—clam chowder and soda crackers.

"Careful, hon," Franny said to Marvin, "don't season it." She explained to the table, "He's got acid reflux wicked bad. He's on Zantac."

"For the P.P.I.," Marvin said, with the pedantry of a chronic sufferer, "Proton-pump inhibitors."

"I seem to recall it was stool softeners," Floyd said. "A bewitching pair of words. Like panty shields."

When Marvin looked up, his chin thrust out like a claw hammer, Rose said, "It's not funny. I'm on prednisone, Ma."

Mother smiled like a cat and licked the chowder rim from the bristles above her lips.

"Has anyone here tried Ambien?" Gilbert said. "I've finally gotten a night's sleep with it. Call it my drug of choice."

"Walter's on Paxil," Rose said. "It seems to calm him down—doesn't it, honey?—and helps him sleep."

"I take, like, a ton of potassium," Jonty said. "I've got a problem with electrolytes."

"I love the gallant names," Floyd said. "Ceedrex, for my liver and lights. I eat them like candy."

"All I take is blood thinner," Hubby said.

"What about that stuff to lower your cholesterol?" his wife said.

"And that—Lipitor."

"What are you on, Ma?" Franny said, raising her voice, as we all did when addressing Mother.

"These people who take nitroglycerin for their heart," Floyd said. "Why don't they explode? And, by the way, in which novel does a character self-combust?"

" 'Bleak House,' " I said. "The rag-and-bone man, Krook. 'Inborn, inbred, engendered in the corrupted humours of the vicious body itself.' "

"Isn't education a wonderful thing?" Floyd said.

"What am I on?" Mother said, but did not speak again until all eyes shifted to her, as she sat glaring at Franny. When we had fallen silent, she said again, "What am I on?" She spoke loudly and became indignant. Her girlish shudder was studied and stagy. "I'm not on anything."

Though we marvelled at Mother for taking no medication, it seemed to me that she was calling attention to her stoicism; mortification was her way of outdoing us in our maladies.

"There is no medicine for what I have," Mother said, her fingers stroking the skin flaps of her scrawny throat.

Comment [DM11]: It's great in concept. Execution... heavy-handed.

Comment [DM12]: There could be chops here. But it is too obvious. Lose the cat bit. Obvi.

Comment [DM13]: Who the fuck cares? The narrator is wasted space. 3<sup>rd</sup> person, maybe?

Comment [DM14]: I like this.

Comment [DM15]: This was a surprise... NOT AT ALL. So predictable. Blah blah blah.

Comment [DM16]: Is this truly a mis-spelling in TNY??? Love it.



"Mumma!" Franny cried, as though summoning her.

"Old age is incurable." Mother half closed her eyes. "My bags are packed."

"Please don't, Mumma," Rose said, whinnying a little.

Gilbert placed a reassuring arm around Mother, who wore an expression of quiet suffering.

Marvin whispered to Jonty, "You gonna finish the rest of that chowda?"

The spouses were flustered. In his confusion, Walter was still walking around the long table, his head bowed over his viewfinder, snapping pictures of us.

"Why don't we all take turns telling our happy memories?" Fred said. "Of Ma. Way back when."

Mother closed her eyes completely. She seemed to be lying in state as the meal became a proper funeral, with valedictions and reminiscences, Mother in the place of honor among the flowers, looking thwarted and doll-like, as the dead do, her skinny fingers twisted in her green shawl.

"Like when we had that creamy oatmeal," Hubby said, "that was never lumpy. Yum-yum."

"My favorite was the al-dente pasta," Rose said. "With the Bolo sauce."

"Both were thewly and farinaceous," Floyd said, tearing at a piece of bread. "And what was that witches' brew we had on Saturday nights, with the crunchy undercooked onion? And the fatty meat—that was the best part!"

"Pea soup," Franny said. "Kidney stew."

"Dad's favorite," Mother said. She was deaf to irony. Believing that her cooking was being praised, her eyes puddled, she began to cry. She dabbed at her eyes. "I tried so hard to please you."

Floyd said, "Pot roast. Baked chicken. Fork tender."

"The way you put crunched-up potato chips on your fish casserole is what I used to like," Rose said. "I do that for my Walter."

"Ma made her own rolls," Hubby said. "No one does that anymore. Home-baked and fluffy."

"Parker House rolls," Mother said.

"Your pineapple upside-down cake," Gilbert said. "You put a cherry in the middle of each pineapple slice. The top was on the bottom, kind of a metaphor."

"My favorite," Mother said.

"And bœuf en daube," Floyd said, "a splash of brandy and a lovely Côtes du Rhône in the pot, served with baby carrots, lightly sautéed morel mushrooms, the pancetta, the bouquet garni, the white truffles, just a hint of tarragon."

"Don't be a jerk," Fred said.

"I have all Ma's recipes," Franny said.

"Sure you do," Hubby said. The flecks of chowder in the corners of his mouth made him seem more menacing.

The sarcasm about Mother's food thickened the air with frank hostility. We disapproved of the way we were behaving; we were childish and insincere. None of us wanted to be there, so we were spoiling it, and as we did the main course was served. Broiled scallops, mashed potatoes, coleslaw, and for each person an ear of corn in its own trough-shaped dish.

"I can't eat," Mother said, her face slackening.

"Are you upset, Ma?" Franny said.

Comment [DM17]: She's a fucking horse now? Wrong word... your fancy diction jumped the shark here, asshole.

Comment [DM18]: Easy to digest...because it's cliché. Also, who the fuck is Gilbert??

Comment [DM19]: There is no fucking way this woman is dead to irony. Huge character misstep here.

Comment [DM20]: No no no no no no no

Comment [DM21]: Ha ha... deaf to irony? No.

Comment [DM22]: For what, Fucktard?

Comment [DM23]: Was there some clue he was menacing before? Like when he moved his place card? I don't know where the narrator is going here at all. In fact, we should be reading this as the narrator's feelings on Hubby, that he is menacing, but the narrator is so absent that we read this as authorial and then we wonder what the fuck the author is doing, no even knowing his own characters.

Comment [DM24]: Now 2<sup>nd</sup> person! Yes! Oh, wait, are you deaf to irony?

Jonty said, "Just take a bite for Daddy," to his daughter, poking at her face with a spoonful of potato.

"Bay scallops," Marvin said, but pronounced it the off-Cape way, instead of rhyming it with "wallop," and we all stared at him.

"You always wonder, Which bay?" Floyd said. "But I happen to know. It is, of course, a species and not any specific bay! Your anthropologists will tell you that communal eating is a grand gesture of harmony. We are partaking, therefore we are in accord, and all our ill will is behind us, our—dare I say?—motiveless malignity."

Mother's eyes were shut, her expression meditative, slightly sunken. No one responded to Floyd. We went on eating. The conversation became milder, brittle with forced politeness. The more correct we were, the more obviously hostile.

"May I have a piece of bread?"

"You may have a piece of bread."

That sort of thing. This went on for a while, and then the table was cleared, the cake brought in and placed before Mother. The waitresses seemed harassed and incompetent, teen-age girls with untidy hair. "Enjoy," one of them said.

"An expression I deplore for its being a grammatical goofball," Floyd said. And to Jonty, "A solecism, as you might put it."

Mother smiled at the slumping, soggy cake, topped with eight lurid pineapple slices, most of them with a cherry in the middle, two with candles, and, on the sloping side, "mother" spelled out in shaky worm-cast piping, with scrolls and roses around it.

"Make a wish, Ma," Franny said. "Pineapple upside-down cake. Your favorite."

But Mother had begun to look past us. "Hello?" she said, as though answering the telephone.

I followed Mother's gaze and saw, at the door of the room, just entering, Charlie and Julie, and little Patrick asleep in Julie's arms. The moment they arrived, the temperature in the room went down, the silence and the stillness shadowing forth a chill.

I stood up and said, "Let me introduce everyone." When I turned back to the table I saw puzzled, unwelcoming faces—crouching savages, staring at outsiders who had invaded their jungle feast. "This is Charlie, his wife, Julie. And Patrick."

"Dead to the world," Charlie said. "Long ride!"

No one spoke. Mother straightened in her chair and looked resentful, for the attention had been taken from her. Hubby and the others shifted in their seats. As though sensing the bewilderment, Jilly began to bawl. Little Patrick's eyes fluttered at the squawk, seeming to recognize the child's complaint, like a common language.

"Let me get you chairs," I said.

"How about this one?" Charlie seized a chair back.

Someone snorted. "No, no," I said. "That's Angela's."

"She in the john?" Charlie said.

"She's in Heaven," Mother said.

I found some folding chairs stacked in the corner. Charlie helped me set them up, a second row behind me. No one else moved or spoke.

"Blow out your candles, Mumma," Rose said.

Comment [DM25]: Should have been able to do something with this, as it's good, without being so HEAVY HANDED

Comment [DM26]: Passive...why?

Comment [DM27]: Asshole.

Comment [DM28]: Heavy. Handed. Heavy. Handed. HEAVYHANDEDOUFUCKINGTWATBURGLAR

Comment [DM29]: And then this works and you wonder what could have been.

Comment [DM30]: YAY!!!! Three more characters!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Comment [DM31]: Cut, you rube.



The candles had melted and dripped and charred the flesh of the pineapples, but still the orange flames swayed.

"Here goes," Mother said.

"Her ninetieth," Marvin explained to Charlie, who had drawn his chair nearer the table so that he could see better. Julie held their sleepy child. Their presence delighted me.

Everyone at the table had gone silent, not knowing how to handle the abrupt entrance of these intruders at Mother's birthday party. They had stumbled upon our secret ritual and might have overheard us in our mumblings and chants. And, because I had introduced them, the hostility was directed at me. I was glared at more than Charlie.

"Take a group picture, Walter," I said.

"What about Angela?" Charlie said, gesturing to the empty chair. He must not have heard when Mother had said that Angela was in Heaven. Mother shut her eyes and suffered a little, as Franny and Rose gave Charlie dark looks.

After the upside-down cake had been cut and apportioned, Walter obliged with a family portrait. Floyd stood at the rear and, just before Walter snapped, exclaimed, "The House of Atreus!"

I knew my family's moods from the pulses in the air, the barometric pressure, a certain unmistakable whiff and wrinkle of sound, and I could tell that they resented these strangers' sharing in the photograph, taking up space with their smiles.

"Jay is something of a fop, but we forgive him his pretensions and his résumé inflation," Floyd said to Charlie. "He's the objective correlative by which we assess our plausibility. Let's face it"—we were still posing, Walter still snapping—"he has made some questionable choices. But in his mind he is the sane one, and we are grotesques."

"Give it a break," Fred said. "Ma has a headache."

But family needling was a form of congeniality, and Floyd was being friendly. I took his teasing as a peacemaking gesture.

"Floyd's choices have been irreproachable," I said, and Floyd laughed.

"It's nice of you to have us," Charlie said, glancing at Mother, who stared at him. "Especially on this big day."

"Ya welcome," Rose said out of the corner of her mouth.

As though dismissing Charlie and Julie, Fred said, "Want seconds on the upside-down cake?"

Coffee was served by the harassed waitresses, but by then the family members had got to their feet, yawning, making grunts of farewell, mutters of apology, shufflings of departure. With the arrival of Charlie, the birthday had come apart, and only a residue, a faint echo of the meal remained. The hostility had leaked away, leaving—what? Confusion, collapse, for ill will had held us together and now there was simply indifference.

"Stick around," I said. "We can talk."

But no one lingered; no one gave Charlie a second glance.

"Charlie owns a software company in Boston," I said. "Ma, Charlie was looking forward to meeting you."

But Mother was being helped out of the room by Gilbert, and Fred pointed his finger at his head and made a face, meaning "headache."

When we were alone in the room, Charlie said, "Sorry, did we break up the party?"

"No, of course not," I said. As I spoke he gave me a hug, and little Patrick said, "Who's that man?"

Everyone in the big, porous, leaky family complained about Mother's birthday party afterward, whispering heavily into the phone, even Mother—guest of honor, recipient of presents—who'd had a good time.

**Comment [DM32]:** And the reader doesn't care because you are nothing, sir narrator. Opportunity lost. In fact, this is a crucial point, as this is building toward some great conflict about which we couldn't give two shits because the narrator has not been developed.

**Comment [DM33]:** And then this, which is good. Give the good some room, goddammit.

**Comment [DM34]:** Barf

**Comment [DM35]:** I don't even have that for this story.

**Comment [DM36]:** Are we back to Checkov here and the characters who matter not at all?

"I can't believe that Jonty had the nerve to bring that daughter of his," Mother said to me, when I visited. "Who ever gave him permission to do that? And where was Loris—isn't that supposed to be his wife's name?"

Comment [DM37]: Time, place, plot... nope.

I was surprised by Mother's fierceness, excessive even for her. She grew hoarse in her indignation and choked slightly—hlook! hlook!—a bone-in-the-throat gasping that always got my attention, even when I despaired of the naggy emphasis of her ham acting.

"Jonty should have known better. I specifically said, no children."

Child-hating was not a pretense for Mother, the jokey exasperation of a sentimental woman, who spoke of her children insincerely as rug rats and burdens. She had already raised seven of them, plus the ghost of Angela—why more? Children bored her, they irritated her, they were always in the way. Worst of all, they took attention away from her.

"And only the immediate family," she said.

Then I knew what this was about. In this outburst of criticism, Mother was, of course, reprimanding me for inviting Charlie and Julie and little Patrick to the family event. This was how she stirred: criticism was always oblique.

Comment [DM38]: Thanks for explaining the obvious.

Mother said, "Who did Jonty think was paying for that party?"

"I forgot to ask—aren't we sharing it?"

"I paid for it with my own money!" Mother said, screeching like a child shaking an empty piggy bank.

I watched her for a while and then said, "Maybe I shouldn't have invited Charlie."

Mother said, "He seemed very nice. I didn't mind his being there. I'm sorry I didn't get a chance to talk with him." The noncommittal way she rolled the bones in her shoulders told me otherwise. The bones said, Why are you putting me through this by saying that?

"No one said much to them."

Seizing this with a jeering laugh, Mother said, "We were there for another reason, Jay. You can't just show up and expect people to be at your beck and call."

"But they had a good time. They liked meeting the family."

Mother smiled unpleasantly. "The little one came back for a second piece of upside-down cake."

A day or so later, Franny confirmed my suspicions.

"Ma was kinda put out by your friends," Franny said.

"They didn't eat much."

"They had an awful lot of cake."

Criticizing a three-year-old for eating cake was so preposterous I could not think of a reply. I hoped my silence would shame Franny. But she persisted.

"Hubby had seconds of chowder. And three big hunks of cake, a pineapple slice on each one."

Comment [DM39]: She persisted by talking about someone else? Continuity?

"Is that a problem?"

"I'm just saying. I'm kinda worried about his health. He has issues. And he's always been heavy."

Another family irony was that the target of one person's criticism was often the critic of his accuser, and the complaint was usually identical. Franny said that Hubby was fat and greedy, and then covered it with this insincerity about his health; Hubby returned the compliment.

"Franny really stuffed herself," he said to me the next day. "And she's a blimp."



When, a few days later, Rose found fault with Fred—"wicked bossy bastard, playing God with the menu"—I knew that Fred would have a reply, and he did: "Her pushy husband sticking his camera in my face. And she's getting so manipulative."

My phone kept ringing, and always it was a brother or a sister carping about another brother or sister. The subject was Mother's birthday party, what a bad idea it had been, what a failure. And the soggy upside-down cake!

"At least Ma had a good time," I said.

"She was upset by all the little children," Fred said.

Two children—one of them my guest. No one dared criticize me to my face, which meant that behind my back they were buzzing, all of them angry with me.

All Charlie said afterward was "Thanks for having us. What an amazing family, even if it's a little scary. But I'm so happy to have a real grandmother."

In all this rancor, a voice that was generous.

The biggest surprise to me at Mother's birthday party was Floyd—that he showed up was something of a miracle, but that was not all. His bearishness and his way of flaunting his scholarship were immutable aspects of his personality. What I had not expected was the energy and inventiveness of his incessant fooling. Though you had to have grown up in the family to appreciate the nuances of it, his teasing had been a compliment, the nearest thing there was in this family to a hug.

Walter sent everyone a set of pictures. Most of them were generic snapshots of us eating—faces chewing, busy arms—or of Mother posing with Fred and Gilbert, then with Franny and Rose. Hubby was shown sneaking a second helping of cake. Jonty's daughter, Jilly, looked ghoulish, like a furious dwarf in a folktale, her face smeared with resinous yellow icing. One of Mother—amazing how merciless the camera is—made her look like a Roman matriarch, one of those poisoners and plotters. From the snapshots, ours was clearly a heavy family, with balding men, pot-bellied women, hunched joylessly with fixed expressions, only Mother exulting.

Comment [DM40]: Did she?

The best picture, one I had hoped for and treasured, showed us all, with Charlie and Julie in front, little Patrick on Charlie's knee. I was crouched next to them. Mother was right behind them, affecting a pose of superiority in the way she leaned back, the better to be seen.

This was my prize. I had the photograph enlarged, so as to give it the formality of a portrait. Then I wrote a little note and made multiple copies of it:

I am enclosing a picture taken at Mother's birthday party, which shows my son, Charlie, his wife, Julie, and my grandson, Patrick. You may remember that he was born in 1961 and put up for adoption. He has recently come into my life and is a part of my family. I omitted to mention this on the day.

This I sent to everyone. It was a dig, of course. They had not deserved to be told who he was. They had blamed me when he was born, had never inquired about him, had forgotten about him. At the party, as an anonymous stranger—but a cheery soul—he had been ignored. Yet here he was with a name, my flesh and blood, prosperous and happy, with an obvious family resemblance. I wondered what they would say.

Mother was the first to call. She was at once combative, cross that she had been upstaged. "Why didn't you tell me?"

As a stranger, Charlie had excited no interest; as my long-lost son, he was sought after.

"No one talked to him," I said.

"We didn't know him."

"You were angry that I invited him."



"How was I to know he was your son?"

"That's the point. He was a guest, obviously someone close to me. You thought he ate too much. Afterward, when I mentioned him, you said to me, 'You can't just show up and expect people to be at your beck and call.'"

"I never said that. I am a warm and hospitable woman, who would never send a helpless person from my door."

"Charlie has a lovely house. He owns a big company."

"Where does he live?"

"I'd rather not say."

"I want to write to him."

"He's thirty-eight years old. Isn't it a bit late for a letter?"

"I'm his grandmother!"

"You were angry when he was born. You said I should be ashamed. You never went to see him at Mass General."

Snorts on the phone indicated that Mother had begun to cry.

"Want to hear the funny part?" I said.

Sobbing, she sounded to me as if she were swallowing soup, gulping it.

"I want to send him a little something," Mother said.

"That's the funny part," I said. "He's a multimillionaire."

"Jay," Mother said, moaning with regret. "You can be so cruel."

Fred called. He said, "You made me feel like a fool. You didn't say anything about him."

"I left it up to you. It was a test of initiative. You failed, Freddy. Everyone failed. Ma failed."

"She called me. She told me you insulted her. She's a wreck."

I had no sooner put the phone down than Franny called.

"I had a feeling," Franny said. "I thought he looked like you. I knew all along. I didn't want to say anything."

Rose didn't call. Gilbert sent me a postcard from Bahrain. Hubby said, "I was just a little kid when he was born. As Dad would say, it's ancient history."

Floyd sent me a postcard with an enigmatic image on it, a painting by Goya titled "Perro Semihundido en la Arena," "Dog Half-Submerged," a dark study of a little mutt buried up to its ears in sand, its snout upturned, its eyes imploring, under a big smoky-yellow sky. His message: "I think this just about sums it up."

Not wishing to let him have the last word, I replied with a postcard of my own, a more hopeful one, Poussin's painting of Moses discovered in the bulrushes, and wrote, "Or this." ♦

**Comment [DM41]:** This guy is as big of an asshole as all the rest of them.

**Comment [DM42]:** He just has this postcard sitting around?

*OK, this story is terrible. So many characters about whom you don't care, a narrator who is so absent that you care even less, and a twist that you couldn't possibly give two shits about because see above.*

**Formatted:** Font:Italic