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*a satirical taste of L.A.*

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This is a work of fiction. Characters, places, and events are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to real people, companies, institutions, organizations, or incidents is entirely coincidental.

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First edition

*To Katrina Leffler and the whole family.*

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Apologies and salutations to the multitude of characters who, in some way, resemble the "fictional" cast of characters who lunch.



# Ladies Who Lunch





# 1. Perusing the Menu

MY FRIEND BOB had a pet theory about ladies who lunch. He came up with it late one night years back, before my kids Jessie and Riley consumed my days and doing lunch became a pathology (his word). Bob was one of those closet eggheads who needed only a few drinks to lubricate his intellect and get it in gear. As for myself, a few drinks serve mainly to jog the memory and get me thinking about what might have been. Unless, of course, I'm lost in the special whirlpool of lunch with a few friends. Then, the moment is the thing.

Until the check arrives.

Bob: "The thing I've noticed about your midday clique—these Ladies Who Lunch—is that they glide through their worlds, gracefully or otherwise, and leave a trail of misconceptions or regrets. They can be going through interpersonal trauma or psychic unraveling, but they pull themselves together, paint the face, press the blouse, look in the mirror and say 'damn it all. I'm going to lunch. And I'm going to enjoy it if it kills me!'"

Bob had reached that point in his fit of theorizing where he was flaring his nostrils and wheezing a bit from the exertion.

"And these beautiful creatures, temporarily impervious to the slings and arrows of misfortunes great and small, converge like gazelles

around a pond of purest water." I was trying to stifle my laughter, knowing that he's half serious. "At best, these Ladies Who Lunch meet and know enlightenment for a few hours. The world could cave in. Their marriages or escrows could collapse, but those beatific grins—with maybe some crumbs or salad dressing on the lower lips—these are the grins of immortality. They've reached a state of grace, fleeting though it is." He exhaled, for effect.

These were words of wisdom, especially coming from someone who took great delight in examining my lifestyle. Bob could never get over this lunch business, for instance. I would be rushing around the house we used to live in, getting ready for lunch—getting "the package wrapped," says Bob—and he'd be milling around in his frayed bathrobe watching TV commercials for research. He was always trying to come up with potential comedy ammo.

"You're in that pre-lunch frenzy again, Danielle," he'd say. "Slow down. You're making me dizzy. I'm here trying to justify my inertia, peering into the void of the mass media bubble and you're bouncing off the walls preparing to lunch. That's lunch, the verb to be. You know, you'd save a lot of time, trouble and toiletries if you could do lunch over the phone. No, really: you all get on a conference call, get the sushi and synchronize your wine selection. It would be the next best thing to being there, and you wouldn't have to get dressed, comb your hair or validate your parking ticket. I think I'm onto something here."

"Yeah," I'd say, between applications of lipstick or some such thing. "And I hope you come off it soon."

That Bob. What a card. I suppose our relationship just slipped through the cracks of his joke patter.

I met Bob what seems like eons ago. He was a fledgling stand-up comic and I, a young hostess ushering customers into the Schtix club. Looking back, as I lately catch myself doing too often, I see my life as a series of stages, some of which are revolving and some of which are in storage, gathering dust but still lurking back there somewhere. Fashion, comedy, the social swirl, and, yes, marriage...these are some of the stages that have loomed large in my own private biography.

Thinking back, a lot of critical junctures in my life, the transitions between these stages, have occurred at lunch. Before Bob and I became an item, he'd ask me out, to dinner, to the movies, to the inevitable. I was playing it cool, maybe a bit hard to get. I was scouting for the best prospects, and Bob's deeper virtues hadn't yet been revealed to me. But he wouldn't take "maybe" for an answer. He knew that humor is an effective means of leverage.

He came up to me at the Schtix club one night with that hungry glint in his eye and a funny swagger that said, "hey, baby, resist me at your own risk."

"I've got a proposition for you, woman."

"Again? You and half the western world, chum. Take a number."

"Will you accompany me to the sleazy motel next door, the one with mirrors on every ceiling and a Gideon Bible in every other drawer, and be a consenting partner in the horizontal mambo?"

"Oh, you mean sex? Not in this lifetime."

"Lunch?"

"Maybe."

Of course, the "maybe" spurred him on. We did lunch, which, by his definition, was BLTs and house wine at midnight down at the All-Nighter Cafe on the Strip. I could tell his mind was on the sleazy motel and all that it stood for. We didn't proceed to that for at least a month. The day after, he gave me a present: a mirror-encrusted Gideon Bible. That Bob. What a card. Later, mirrors came to represent an aspect of Bob that was more tragic than comic. The money went, the quips went, and, finally, I went.

At another lunch not long after the Bob scenario, Donald snuck into the screenplay of my life. Yes, Donald—devoted protector, loving husband (well, in an on-again/off-again kind of way), and most importantly, father to my children, my prizes—won me over a pasta salad. At the time, eight years ago, he was just coming off of an ugly divorce (he didn't know what ugly was, yet) and he was the emotional equivalent of a bruised puppy and a wild Appaloosa, simultaneously. He was a developer—of sorts—with a twisted sense of humor and a sincerity beneath the steady barrage of gags. Me, I was attached,

officially, but actively looking for missing pieces for the puzzle of my heart. Bob had snorted up everything but the kitchen sink powder and I was tired of playing his Florence Nightingale.

So the die was cast when Donald stopped by the table where four of us were commiserating over matters of the heart. The raspberry tort came just as a strange voice boomed over my shoulder.

Belinda O'Neal smiled at this stranger in a nice suit. "What's shakin', big guy?"

"Pocket change and daydreams, darlin'." He rolled his eyes, like someone embarrassed by his own willingness to be a class clown and/or a jerk. Maybe that little roll of the eyes was the first thing that endeared me to him. Los Angeles is full of folks who are full of themselves, but precious few will admit it. I don't know if my attraction registered on my face, but Donald visibly brightened as he shook my hand. Sometimes, you can see right through the social gestures of even the smoothest operators and catch a glimpse of the truth—like pearls in glass oyster shells.

"Sometimes, Donald," said Belinda in mock-disbelief, "a little restraint is in order."

Donald jumped in, as if reading cue cards, "well, then, you'll just have to get a restraining order."

"Ha ha. Insert laughter here," Belinda deadpanned. "If we invite you to sit down, will you can it already with the shabby routine?"

"You bet. Thought you'd never ask."

By this point in our pre-relationship, I was torn between two emotions. On the one hand, there was a germ of intrigue for this giddy fellow trapped between adolescence and middle age. I could sense—even on limited info—that he had the makings of a fun-loving, taxpaying mate with enough upstairs to hold things together, but not so much that he might be a loose-lipped egocentric bore. I'd had a few too many of those in my life already.

Then again, the little white guardian angel on my other shoulder was whispering: "Beware the jokester. He shall not set you free. He shall leave you laughing, breathless and penniless, by the side of life's road." Having spent a fair amount of time in the hornet's nest of

comedy, I knew a little something about the darker side of the funny business. I used to roll my eyes when my brother, a frustrated egghead, trotted out one of his strange little sayings. He'd say, "humor is the language of the desperate." I'd snicker, but gradually came to know what he was getting at.

So, was this Donald guy secretly desperate or just openly a wise guy? Were these cheap attempts at comedy a tip-off that he was substituting "charm" for moxie, style for substance? Where did he get those dimples? Why was I asking myself all these questions? I owed it to myself to investigate further.

"So Donald, are you meeting someone here?" I asked him as he sat down next to me, instantly wondering if I'd opened some colossal can of worms without really trying.

"Oh, life is a long series of meetings," he paused for effect. "Or potential meetings." He straightened his back—and his attitude. "Seriously, I'm here to meet with a business liaison who may help with my cash flow potential. Let's say he may link my futures with some very attractive pork bellies."

Once a kidder, always a kidder. I know the type. Biblically. Kidding aside, the hook was in, the fish was squirming. And the fish was me.

"We have a lovely fillet of sole smothered in a special Basque sauce today," the waiter's voice interjected.

That strange teaser of an episode seems like something out of another lifetime from where I sit now. Who can help wondering about what turns things would have taken had I not been lunching that day, or if I followed some bone-deep, basic human instinct to avoid scoundrels or people who allow bad jokes to pass through crooked grins, however charming.

Life with Donald resembled the trajectory of a roller coaster, on many fronts at once. Romantic highs and lows, sprawling mood swings and an unpredictable all-or-nothing financial status: these were the facts and the days of our life. I say that Donald was a developer, and I never really understood how that word is closely aligned with flakiness until I was in the back seat, my life in the hands of a blind driver.

To develop—unless you're a wizard at it, and Donald was more of a dabbler in love with the idea of development—is to turn hallucinations to concrete. The developer, imagination run amok, fueled by a kind of wanton greed, looks at a piece of dirt or a decaying building. Where we see only dirt or decay, the developer sees raw clay that can be molded and transformed into gold.

This, of course, is the story of Southern California, still unfolding. What if they took a yawning expanse of dry land not meant to support vast human population, and put the idea in the heads of a dissatisfied, nomadic people that the good life was out West—way out West? What if they slapped together countless townships, and renegade brigades of squinty-eyed developers found the right buttons to push in potential customers everywhere?

Where would the crude art of developing be without Southern California? Forget about movie stars and moguls. Los Angeles is the mythical landscape of dreams hatched in developers' offices. And, of course, California of the here and now is a Great American Dream in the midst of a rude awakening.

So there was one positive upshot of my being with Donald: I got to thinking about life, Los Angeles, and the tenuous connection therein, not because of any natural inclination on my part to question the dubious origins of my native soil.

Blame it, too, on Bob, the thinker, who continually thinks out loud about it, giving me no rest with this stuff about the psycho-sociology of this strange place we live in, this "tarnished paradise which inspires, at very best, a selective pride. There is no consensus opinion about anything in Los Angeles, including what defines the city to begin with. What is the real L.A.? The sparkly, security-guarded streets you call home, or is it those unmentionable, unnameable suburban developments and ghettos?" He wasn't laughing.

All of which is to say that Donald—the developer—had these big ideas, these profit-margin hallucinations, just like the legends of the trade, but his idea was to massage the surface without the fuss and muss of actually turning dirt to gold. He took cans of gold spray paint to his little patches of dirt and prayed for sunshine. And he smiled

that oily smile all the way to and from the bank. Ditto, to and from my little red heart.

But these are not the kinds of things we usually talk about over lunch. I digress. Who doesn't? Isn't lunch a digression thing?

Somehow, most social encounters and conversations seem to take elaborate routes around the basic subjects dear to our hearts and minds: money and sex. Money is fun to talk about when you've got it, or you stand to get it in the near future. It's not as fun to talk about the lack thereof, but if you get in the right spirit, you can laugh at your woes like somebody doing a dervish dance on the edge of the abyss. And when you can at least still bankroll your drowned sorrows with bendable plastic or rubber checks...what, me worry?

Even so, at some point, my friends tired of hearing me whining about bounced checks and other such trivial trials. One day, Marlee Jimson—the lovely blonde wife of the airline magnate George Roca—beat me to the punch before I even broached the subject of our relative poverty.

"Does your husband have any new get-solvent-quick schemes up his sleeve?" she grinned, foxily.

There was muffled snickering around the table. Mine was the loudest. "As someone on a sitcom last night said, we've got holes in our overhead." Subject closed.

Marriage, likewise. Before the marriage could be officially pronounced dead, I had to wait patiently for a ruse, a rationale. It wouldn't be long in coming. But that's another story.

If you must know, most of my lunchmates are lovely blondes—real or otherwise, and usually otherwise—myself included. Blonde, that is.

This remarkable coincidence was never lost on astute outside observers such as Bob, natch. He likened us to being the "Invisible Blondes," who go to great personal lengths to aspire to a kind of blissful blonde sameness, with roughly the same degree of a slight mussiness. We are unwitting members of "the Lookalike Club," he says, jabbing gently without understanding what makes us tick.

Bob made it his business to size up the points of similarity in my