

Ladies Who Lunch

by Tanya Bird

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My husband knows her as Perfect Kate. We know three Kates, but only this one looks well-slept and slightly bronzed at all times. This Kate supports charities for illnesses that I have never heard of and wears lipstick around the house.

When I called to suggest lunch, she told me it was a six week wait. Her calendar is filled with fun runs and brunches in trendy cafés the size of my laundry. “Bring the kids. I haven’t seen them in ages,” she said, in the same casual tone one would say ‘bring a coat’, or ‘throw in your togs’. Six weeks later she sits across from me wearing peep-toed heels and ironed jeans.

“I’ve always loved that blazer on you,” she says.

I’m sure it’s meant as a compliment, but it reminds me that I’m wearing the same blazer I wore when we worked together at LAC mags, six years ago. Underneath it is a five dollar t-shirt from Kmart and a stained maternity bra that has survived three pregnancies and three years of breastfeeding. I’ll burn it when I’m done.

“It’s so old,” I say, looking down at baby. The only new things of value I get nowadays are more children.

“It’s a classic piece,” she says, teeth flashing.

I’m reminded of why she always got more sales than me, why she is now head of sales. She is exactly where she said she would be according to her five-year plan, the one I overheard during a client dinner at Vue De Monde. It was before all of this. We ate five courses that night, with matching wines and palate cleansers in-between. I had worn strappy heels. I could walk for hours in them back then. Someone warned me during my first pregnancy that my feet would change forever. People with children love to scare people without children. They were right though. My collection of heels gathered dust, until they were eventually sold off on the local buy, swap and sell page. I made sixty dollars. That’s two boxes of nappies.

“I’m hungry,” says my three-year-old daughter next to me. She is kneeling on a high-back leather chair, the kind prone to tipping children. Her hands are splayed on the white tablecloth, and not the paper-covered kind that kids can draw on. This restaurant does not hand out crayons. I have given up telling

her to sit properly. Instead, I pick up the polished cutlery in front of her and place it in the middle of the table. All I see are toddler weapons.

I glance past my daughter to my five-year-old son. He is slumped in his chair with his knees pulled up, iPad resting against them. His pants are too short in the leg and his pilling socks and scuffed sneakers are on display: ninety dollar sneakers that are dragged alongside his scooter in place of a brake. He had wanted green shoes. All of the sale items had been blue. I had been preparing to negotiate when Miss Three wet her pants. I watched it pool around her feet as Mr Five announced it to everyone in the shop. We left with the green shoes.

“Ta. TA!” says baby. The clang of knives has drawn baby’s attention. Her chubby body strains against my experienced grip.

I move the glass of water into the middle of the table. This is when I realise the napkins are cloth, the starchy kind, useless for mopping up spilled drinks. I need the disposable serviettes, the ones in stainless steel dispensers that can be grabbed by the handful in an emergency.

“Did you bring a toy for her?” Kate says. “Looks like you brought everything else in that bag.”

Her jewellery is blinding me every time she moves. Rows of silver bracelets and gem-infused charms, no doubt romantic gestures from her husband for her amazing efforts at self-care. Her earrings almost touch the tops of her shoulders. It reminds me of when Mr Five was a baby and had taken hold of one of my earrings, almost ripping my earlobe in two. I still remember crying through clenched teeth as I tried to pry open his iron hand. I haven’t worn them since.

I glance at the bulging nappy bag hanging from the handle of the pram. The zip is undone, my life on display. I try to remember what toys might be buried among the wipes and sippy cups. My eyes trail over to Kate’s Burberry handbag. It’s the size of a wallet, the kind without loyalty cards and expired petrol coupons. I have designer handbags at home. They are a lot like my old shoes.



I pick up the paper menu in front of me and hand it to baby. It's secured on a wooden board with a leather tie. It does not stand a chance against her.

"It won't matter what toy I offer. She will want something dangerous or breakable." It is meant as a joke but it sounds like a complaint.

Kate picks up the wine list, as thick as a bible, and begins to slowly flick through it. My jaw tightens as I watch her. I have a forty-minute window before baby turns. If she gets overtired, she will be up all night. I will be up all night. Tomorrow we all suffer.

A waiter dressed in a black, buttoned shirt and pressed pants passes the table. His eyes flick to the children before briefly meeting mine. I give him that look that says we're ready to order. He continues past with his empty tray and I immediately forgive him. In an hour he'll be scraping our squashed food off the floor.

"Mum, when is the food coming?" Mr Five says, blinking at me with reddened eyes. He's been on the iPad too long. Another mummy fail.

"As soon as the waiter comes we'll order," I say in a whisper. It feels like a restaurant I should whisper in.

Kate is still reading the bible. She has paused on a page of Spanish wines, finger gliding slowly down as she considers, each, one. "Do you want to share a bottle of something?" she says, looking up.

I stare at her tinted brows. "I have to drive home." And keep the children alive for the rest of the day.

She smiles and waves a manicured hand in the air. "Of course. I forgot you brought your car."

Baby throws the menu and it knocks over my glass of water. The white tablecloth drinks it up greedily. "How else would I get here with three kids, a pram, and a fifty-kilo nappy bag?"

Kate is trying to mop up the liquid with one of the water-repellent napkins. I don't help. I do it every other meal.

"I thought meeting in Richmond would make things easier for you." She glances at me through a wall of waved hair. Her hair is naturally curly so I know that she would have straightened it first. Blow-waved it, straightened it, and then waved it. I am so grateful to get mine washed.

"MUM! I want chippies," Miss Three says.

"Please," I say, like a good parent does.

"They don't do chips," Kate says, "but they have rosemary fried potatoes on the tapas menu."

Brilliant. I get to pay four times as much and listen to the kids complain about the green bits which I will end up having to brush off with my fingers.

"Richmond may as well be the city for me." I wince at my sulky tone.

Kate lives in an apartment, a stone's throw from the casino, the kind with a gold-plated foyer and a concierge. She has a cat worth more than my car and a cleaner that comes once a week with fresh flowers for her Vera Wang vase.

Baby is arching her back now, she wants to get down and explore the forbidden floor. If we were at home I'd be trying to make lunch and she would be whinging at my feet to be picked up.

"Do you want me to take her for a bit?" Kate says, clapping her hands and offering them up to baby.

Baby leans towards them and is swooped up. I watch her settle into the new lap, a chuffed smile matching the glint in her eye. Kate gently takes hold of her hand and studies her tiny fingers. I try to remember the last time I cut her fingernails. Then I realise how long it has been since I cut my own. Mr Five bites his which both worries me and reduces my workload. Miss Three screams as though I am extracting them. She is that way with most things: hair washing, medicines, new foods, battery-operated toys that move on their own.

"Must be so nice having that big house filled with children now," Kate says.

It's claustrophobic.



Miss Three has taken advantage of the vacant seat and climbed into my lap. She immediately reaches for my cutlery and I catch her hands mid-air. “The kids kept coming. We had to buy the big house when number three surprised us.”

Kate blinks, revealing shimmery eyelids. “Be grateful it was so easy for you.” She looks down again.

“I’m sure one day I’ll be incredibly grateful. Right now I’m just trying to survive them.”

She tucks her hair behind one ear. “I wish we could swap problems.”

I shake my head, mentally blocking the sentiment. “Don’t wish that. You’ll understand why when it’s your turn.” She flinches at this and I realise that I am an appalling friend. I’ve dismissed her problems because I have my own under a giant magnifying glass. “Sorry, I’m tired. Not just the ‘I haven’t slept’ kind of tired, but the ‘I haven’t toileted alone in a long time’ kind of tired.”

Kate is looking only at baby who has burrowed into the nook of her arm, fat little legs pushing happily against her free hand. She is watching baby’s toes curl around her finger. “She has the sweetest feet,” she says, nose scrunching a little.

We all watch baby’s bare foot roll over her finger. A rare moment of stillness. Miss Three has gone limp in my arms and her thumb is in her mouth. I wonder if there would be more moments like these if I stopped treating life like a to-do list that I have to smash through.

“She really does,” I say.

“Everyone tells you how hard it is,” Kate says, ending the moment. “It doesn’t make me want it any less. I can work hard to achieve anything, except this.”

I see it then. The way her finger is stroking baby’s foot. The way she is studying baby’s hair. Longing. Her five-year plan is up and I’ve forgotten to ask her about her new plan. It’s a conversation for another time, when the children aren’t around.

“I’ll let you pick the wine. I need re-educating.” I pick up the food menu, ignoring the splashes of water. Miss Three pretends to read it with me. She feels important in my lap. She only got two years in it before she had to step aside for baby. She is as

bewildered as me. “There are no chips,” I say to her, “but there is fried ice-cream. I am fairly sure you guys will eat fried ice-cream.”

Mr Five’s eyes have gone as wide as the bread plates. For a kid that never hears a word I say, he has comprehended perfectly. I am not the kind of mum that lets them eat ice-cream for lunch. This suggestion challenges everything he knows about me.

‘Ice-cream!’ says Miss Three, pulling the attention of the room.

Baby throws her hands up in excitement. She has no idea what she is agreeing to, but she’s in. Mr Five is suppressing a smile. He is the kind of kid that squeals on the inside, like me.

“I think I’ll have the same,” Kate says. She smiles at Mr Five. “I don’t often have an excuse.”

I press my lips against my daughter’s messy braid. She smells of apple and popcorn. After a moment, she turns her face up to me.

“I need to do wee,” she says.

I exhale into her hair. “Ok, sweet girl!”

