

The Take-Out

Grant Collier could barely see.

“It’s the cytomegalovirus,” he said, his voice subdued. “I can see around the edges. A little. That’s all.”

When he had been able to see from edge to edge across the middle, he was far-sighted. If he wanted to read, he had to wear glasses. He didn’t like glasses, didn’t like the way they made him look—like a handsome young man wearing glasses—so he didn’t much read. Not books, anyway, or magazines, even. He read people, could see right into the parts of them that revealed why they do what they do. He couldn’t do that anymore, he was losing his mind.

His arms and legs were covered with sores. The legs didn’t show, he wore pants, but it was a warm day and he was in a short-sleeved shirt. There were the sores on the arms, they could be seen. His younger brother, Simon, who had been taking care of him and had taken him on this visit to Jeff, their old friend, guided him across Jeff’s one-room apartment and to the couch, sat him gently there. Jeff, who would say that Grant had once been his best friend, wasn’t ready for this, for this visit, these sores, the blindness, the present absence of the old friend, the childhood friend, who was sitting right there without being there, what was there was a blasted shell. Jeff knew they were coming today, Simon and Grant, it had been arranged, but he wasn’t ready for this. They were, they had to be, they had been living it for months, ready or not, here it was.

“I’m hungry,” Simon said. “Grant, are you hungry?”

“Mmm,” Grant said. “I don’t know. I guess.”

“You should eat something.”

“Okay.”

“I have some leftover Chinese,” Jeff said. “Some take-out. I can warm it up. If you like.”

“That sounds good,” Simon said.

Jeff opened the refrigerator at the kitchen end of his tiny apartment, pulled out the square, white cardboard containers of leftover take-out, set them on the tiny counter by the sinks, his back to Simon and Grant.

“Do you need some help?” Simon said.

“No,” Jeff said, cheerful, horrified. “I’ve got it.”

Yes, please help me. I am not ready for this.

“We’re going to have some Chinese,” Simon told Grant. “Does that sound all right?”

“Yeah. I guess.”

“It’ll be ready in a couple minutes,” Jeff said.

He pulled plates out of the cupboard over the sinks, forks and spoons out of the flatware drawer by the refrigerator, spooned the take-out onto the plates, set about warming the platefuls of leftovers in the microwave. His hands were trembling, only a little. The microwave hummed and beeped. He looked at Grant, sitting on the couch, looking at nothing.

Let me help you. Let me do something for you. Let me take some part of this away from you. Find a way. Make something up. Tell me lies.

“Almost ready,” he said, cheerful, devastated.

“Where are we?” Grant said.

“We’re at Jeffrey’s apartment,” Simon said. “Remember?”

“Oh. Yeah. Are we going to eat? I’m hungry.”

“Yes. Jeff’s making us lunch right now.”

“What are we having?”

“We’re having Chinese. I told you.”

“Oh. Yeah. I forget. We’re at Jeffrey’s apartment, right?”

“Yes.”

“Right. I thought so. Hi, Jeff.”

“Hi, Grant. Lunch is almost ready.”

Jeff took two plates in his hands, forks and spoons and warmed-over take-out on the plates.

“Here,” he said to Simon. He may have smiled, or may have thought he was smiling.

“Let me take Grant’s first,” Simon said.

Jeff handed Simon one plate. He took it and turned to Grant, reaching to take Grant’s hand and guide it to the plate.

“Here you go.”

Grant took the plate. Simon guided Grant’s hand to the fork.

“Okay,” Grant said. “I can do it now.”

Jeff handed Simon his plate, returned to the counter by the microwave and took up his own.

“It’s good,” Simon said. “Thank you, Jeff.”

“You’re welcome,” Jeff said, returning to the couch to stand by Simon and Grant while the three of them ate. “It was nothing. Just warmed up a little take-out. That’s all. It was nothing.”

“Is it all right?” Simon said to Grant.

“Yes.” Grant was eating slowly. Jeff, eating quickly, nervously, stood and watched.

Let me sit beside you. Let me touch you without being afraid. I am so afraid. Please don't guess how afraid I am. You're going away and I can't stop you, can't follow you. Let me hold you, for a while. Stay and we'll talk. We'll talk about all the people we knew, the things we did, the endless nights of drinking and dancing and celebrating being young and alive and in the now, the constant now. We'll talk all day long, and all night. Stay. Stay. Stay. I am so afraid.

“I can’t eat anymore,” Grant said.

“Here,” Jeff said. He reached quickly and took the plate, took it to the kitchen sink.

“Thank you,” Grant said. “Where’s Simon?”

“I’m right here, Grant.”

“Who else is here?”

“Just me,” Jeff said. “It’s me. Jeff. Remember?”

“Oh. Yeah. I remember. I’m tired.”

“Thank you for lunch, Jeffrey,” Simon said. He handed Jeff his plate. Jeff took it to the sink, put it there with Grant’s and his own.

“You’re welcome. You’re welcome. It wasn’t any trouble at all. I wish there was more I could have done.”

“I’m tired,” Grant said. “I want to go.”

“Okay,” Simon said. “We’ll leave in a minute.”

And in a minute, they left. After they were gone, Jeff stood at the kitchen sink. He didn’t see anything for a while, then he saw the plates there. Grant had eaten very little. Jeff picked up Grant’s plate, and one of the forks. He ate everything Grant had left, every bite.