

Luke's Dad

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Ellen needs a drink, and wants to slap her sister for suggesting a fountain soda at the food court. It is late in the afternoon, and Ellen has been in the mall too long. This day, this otherwise sunny and windy December Saturday, happens to fall between Thanksgiving and Christmas, that terrible period of sale-priced must-have merchandise, sparse mall parking, mobs of impatient children waiting to visit Santa, and crazed shoppers in jingle bell socks and holiday sweaters, armed with lists, coupons for free gifts, and a deranged mission to spend more than last year.

Ellen finds the mall too hot and too bright and it is impossible to maintain any personal space. She is suffocated, desperate, and on the brink of some madness she cannot diffuse. The toxicity of the environment has done something to her, and the sense of urgency she feels to get out is lost on her sister.

“But I haven’t bought anything for mom yet,” Ally complains, her iPhone buzzing with another text message. “And what am I going to get your stupid husband?”

Ellen is unsure herself of what to get her stupid husband. He wants a third flat screen HD television for the house and a riding lawn mower. So far, Ellen has purchased him some boxer shorts from The Gap – two pairs for 10 dollars. He expects to get expensive items and is not shy about asking for them. Ellen, when asked what she wanted, shrugged and mentioned a new line of lotions she admires at Victoria’s

Secret. Ellen is mindful of money and her husband is not. His spending caused them to refinance the house this year. She will not buy him a television or a lawn mower, fully aware that he will buy these things himself after the new year, justifying the purchases with sale prices or zero percent financing deals. And Ellen will have to cut back on something else to accommodate these new items in their budget – going to SuperCuts instead of the salon, for example, or buying store-brand groceries. The plan has already taken root. She does not like surprises.

“Get him some golf balls, Ally, it doesn’t have to be anything special.” She unzips her jacket, feeling the prickly warning of sweat on the back of her neck. People are shrieking and it feels like her head is throbbing to a drumbeat. “Let’s just get out of here, please? We can go across the street to Aldo’s and have a glass of wine.”

Ellen turns around and realizes she has lost Ally. People bump into her, annoyed at her sudden stop, and she glares at them. She backtracks a few steps, feeling the way backwards-swimming fish must, fighting a current or in this case, a mob. She gets a glimpse of Ally in front of a store called Lids, bent over her phone, skillfully balancing her shopping bags and purse while she taps away at the screen.

They are only three years apart, but Ellen often feels as though an entire generation stretches between them. Ellen still has a flip phone; something she senses should be embarrassing. It took a long time to persuade her to even get a cell phone. She hates computers and email and crowds. She marvels at her popular and extroverted sister, who uses Twitter and knows how to download music and make an online video. Ellen wonders if anything will change when her sister turns 30

next month, if she will settle down a bit. But Ally is different, and Ellen will not be surprised if she turns out to always live like a fabulous 20-something with the latest gadgets and \$400 jeans.

Ellen glares, and Ally eventually looks up. “Sorry. It was Martin. It’s just impossible to ignore him. He’s very persistent.”

“Is that the new man?”

“True. I’m not sick of him yet but I’m not excited about him, either. I prefer to text him because his voice drives me crazy. It’s nasally and whiny, like cousin Greg’s. Ew.” She scrunches up her nose in distaste and begins walking again, unfazed by the people she’s bumping. “The only thing he really has going for him is that he’s rich. I mean, loaded. Did I tell you his father is like some huge executive at Bank of America?”

“That does not impress me. I have my mortgage there and they screw up everything they touch.”

“You’re always so negative,” Ally says, pinching her sister playfully. “And I don’t think Martin can do anything about your lending fees. What he can do something about is my gift. I wonder what he’ll get me. We’ve only been dating for like three weeks, so that makes Christmas awkward, you know? I don’t think I need to get him anything, do you?”

“If he’s rich, he probably already has everything. Seriously – let’s get out of here and have a drink at Aldo’s. Then, we can discuss dinner.”

“We’ll spend half an hour trying to get out of the parking lot,” Ally says, smiling at the beeping of her phone. “Let’s just go to the Ground Round. It’s down there, near JCPenny.”

Overhead, the early notes of “Jingle Bell Rock” begin to play, and Ellen wants to scream. She’s heard the song three times already that afternoon. This particular version is by Anne Murray, which for some reason makes it even more unbearable.

“The Ground Round? Are you serious? I get Andy to take care of Holly for an entire day, which is unheard of, and you want me to go to a place that specializes in chicken fingers?”

“It’s only a few steps away and I think dealing with the parking lot right now will give you a stroke,” Ally laughs. “Just listen to the way you’re squeaking when you talk. Seriously, you need to relax. It’s holiday time, you know. We’re supposed to be filled with cheer. And the spirit of the Baby Jesus.”

There are families, swollen shopping bags the size of parachutes, strollers and balloons crowded around the entrance of The Ground Round. A skinny teenager in black jeans and a white shirt stands with a clipboard, trying to maintain order. Ellen and Ally walk past her podium and make their way to the bar, which is busy, but less crowded. They immediately claim the only two available seats, and Ellen sighs out loud in gratitude when she sits down. Her pointy black heels pinch her in several places on both feet. This is what she gets for trying to keep up with her sister’s sense of fashion.

Ally dumps her bags on the barstool next to Ellen and says she’s going to the ladies room. Naturally, she takes her phone with her.

Ellen takes a breath and fluffs out the back of her short hair, the ends of which are starting to curl from the sweating. Her fingernails feel good on her scalp, and she wonders if people would think her odd were she to sit there scratching at her head for an hour. She

looks around, irritated with all of the people laughing and chatting at the high square tables behind her. Elvis is on the radio crooning old school holiday tunes and a young voice comes on the loudspeaker to announce “Faber, party of six.” Ellen rolls her eyes, and realizes that Ally is right – she is too negative.

She tries to get the bartender’s attention and looks to her right. The man next to her is tall, attractive, and familiar. Ellen realizes it is one of the parents from Holly’s daycare center. He’s leaning onto the bar, his head tilted up towards the television showing a football game, and his arms look remarkably well-built in his short sleeved polo shirt. She had noticed those arms before – Luke’s dad, that’s who he is. He has blond hair and large blue eyes. He looks like he belongs in California rather than in this stuffy Connecticut suburb. Ellen imagines him in California; he could be coming out of the water, running onto the sand with a surfboard hitched under his arm. He would be wearing a wetsuit and he could wear a wetsuit because he is definitely in shape and -

“Oh, hey,” he says, doing a double-take when he glances at her.

“Hi,” she says shyly, embarrassed by her mini-fantasy. He drives that hulking Nissan Titan. It’s black and always clean. And intimidating next to her little green Honda.

“Don’t we go to preschool together?” He sits back on his seat.

“Harwinton Methodist, yes,” she nods. The bartender finally wanders over and puts a cocktail napkin in front of her. “Ketel One martini,” she says, “dirty, with an extra olive.”

Luke’s dad smiles at her. “There’s a woman who knows what she wants.”

She smiles back, knowing this is not true, but enjoying the perception anyway. "This time of year calls for something strong." "I'm August Kenney," he says. "Luke's dad."

"Ellen Meekins. Holly's mom." They would shake hands, perhaps, if there was more room. But with the bags and the people and August's brawny arms folded across his chest, there is no such opportunity.

Ellen takes off her jacket, unsure if their mutual recognition requires them to continue communicating. She drapes it over Ally's packages and looks around for her sister. Crying erupts at a booth nearby and a team of waiters and waitresses have begun clapping and singing happy birthday to a patron wearing a cone-shaped party hat. This place is a zoo, Ellen thinks, not caring if it's a negative thought. August would probably agree. And what kind of a name is August?

"Why is it always so hot in these places?" he asks, sipping from his glass of caramel-colored beer. "I feel like I'm in a sauna."

"I think it's mostly body heat," Ellen says. "This mall has to be over capacity." The martini is gently set down in front of her and she leans in for a sip without picking up the glass. "Are you married to one of the real estate Kenneys?" she asks. Rita and Marjorie Kenney are on billboards all over town. She had always wondered if one of them was Luke's mother.

"Divorced from Rita," he says. "I got to keep our home, because she was anxious to buy another one. From herself." He smiles and takes another sip of beer.

"Oh! Sorry." Ellen winces.

"Don't be. It wasn't bitter or painful and everyone has moved on."

Ally returns in a whirl, with her phone on her ear. "I have to take

this," she whispers to Ellen. "I'll be right back." She grabs her purse and leaves the restaurant, disappearing into the surge of hungry people waiting to get inside.

"My sister," Ellen says. "She has a new boyfriend, so everyone else takes a back seat." Ellen adjusts the shoulders of her black sweater. It's a bit low cut and she would normally wear a turtleneck or a tank top underneath it, but Ally made fun of her for that earlier this afternoon when they were preparing to leave. She's glad, now, because she'd be roasting in an additional layer.

"That's what happens," August says, his eyes dropping to glance at her cleavage. It is not subtle. Ellen would normally be mortified, but instead sits up straighter and reaches for her martini. "You meet someone and nothing else matters."

"I wouldn't know," Ellen tells him, allowing an olive to explode between her teeth.

"That's because you're married," he says simply, laughing a little and pointing at her left hand.

Ellen says nothing. They are, at least, nice rings. Andy had done well when it came to the choosing of the jewelry. The major failings had not surfaced until after the wedding.

"So, are you here with Luke?"

"No, I'm actually supposed to be meeting someone here," he says, checking his watch. The hair on his arms is light and long. "She's late. We were going to have dinner and go see a movie."

A date, Ellen thinks. At the Ground Round.

"She works at the Estee Lauder counter at Macy's," August says, as if reading her mind. "So she wanted to meet here. Plus, the movie

theater is here too and parking is such a mess this time of year.”

She nods and plays with the end of her napkin. “Makes sense.”

“But, it looks like she may be blowing me off. In which case, you’ll have to have dinner with me.” He gives her a charming smile and she giggles a little, as if she’s some silly teenager who finally has the attention of the quarterback.

“I’d be happy to step in. It doesn’t look like I’ll ever see my sister again.”

They settle into conversation. It’s a light banter, the relaxed getting-to-know you chitchat that neither threatens nor truly informs. They do not discuss the children or daycare, and no more is said about marriage or divorce. Something has manifested between them, and they are fueling it and pretending to ignore it at the same time. Ellen finds it tasty. She allows herself to imagine what those arms would feel like around her waist, their bodies crushed together, their clothing coming off. She has already fast-forwarded in her head to the first time they sleep together, which bra she will wear, where they’ll meet, what he’ll smell like, what excuse she’ll give Andy for why she needs to go out all night.

Ellen blushes and wonders what he could be thinking while he talks about his construction business. Does he feel this magnetism? Is he just being polite? Is he thinking of her as a potential one-night stand? A long-term affair? A second wife? She finishes the martini and feels so much better. It’s been a while since she’s flirted with anyone.

She knows that she will have dinner with this man if he does ask, and that some people may consider that cheating on one’s spouse, and maybe it is. She’s never done anything like it before, but August

Kenney has never asked before. No one has, in fact. The things she finds out about Luke's dad seem very important; that he wants to get a dog; that he grew up in Austin but abandoned his accent when he went to Framingham State; that he likes the Red Sox; that he played football in high school; that he hates talking about current events and politics; that he really likes red wine, but does not trust the Ground Round wine list.

He's easy to talk to and funny and Ellen forgets about Jingle Bell Rock and crowds of consumers and absurd inflatable lawn snowmen. She thinks August has a handsome smile and would probably be very good at putting up a Christmas tree. August is the sort of guy who has ignored her for most of her life. And here she is, sitting next to him and thinking about ordering another martini. She's glad she wore nothing under the sweater. She's glad Ally is preoccupied with her new boy. She's glad to be in this oppressive mall on this oppressive evening in this oppressive town. It's Christmastime, damnit.

The little blond hostess, her wreath pin twinkling on her turtleneck, comes between them to tap on August's arm. "Um, excuse me sir, we cannot hold your table any longer. If you're not going to be able to take it right now, I'll have to seat someone else. We have a 45-minute wait."

August finishes his beer and raises his eyebrows at Ellen. "Shall we?" He holds his hand out as if he's asking her to waltz.

"Sure," Ellen says, grabbing her jacket and realizing that the only way to get her sister's attention will be to call her on that dreadful cell phone which is permanently attached to the girl's head or palm.

He signals the bartender, who produces a bill for both of them.

“Oh, let me,” Ellen says, reaching into her bag for her wallet.

“Don’t be absurd,” August says. “I’ll get it.”

“No, no,” Ellen says, sliding a bill towards the bartender. “I’ll let you pay for dinner. And, besides –“

A statuesque redhead rushes up to them before Ellen can finish her sentence or collect her change.

“I am so sorry,” she’s saying, ignoring Ellen and giving August’s bicep a squeeze. “I got stuck with this nightmare customer.”

This woman is wearing too much makeup, Ellen thinks.

“You’re over half an hour late,” August says, looking at his watch. “And you didn’t call.”

“I know, and I’m sorry. Do you know what my job is like this time of year?”

“This way,” the hostess says, and the redhead follows her.

August looks at Ellen and frowns. “That’s weird. And awkward.”

Ellen looks for her voice. “No it’s not,” she says quickly, collecting her change and leaving a larger than necessary tip. “I’m glad she made it. Enjoy your dinner.”

“I’m sorry,” August says, chewing his bottom lip and looking towards his date.

“Don’t be,” Ellen says. She pulls a business card from her wallet and considers giving it to August. It can’t hurt to give him her number. But she decides against it, she has no reason to compete with his real dates, and drops it into her purse.

They stand there looking at each other, desperate to end this, whatever it is.

“So I guess I’ll see you at preschool,” Ellen says, gathering Ally’s

bags as well as her own. Something drops, a book it sounds like, and she contemplates leaving it.

“I owe you a beer,” he says. “Or a martini.”

Ellen takes a deep breath and smiles. She cannot leave without touching the arms, so she lets her left hand rest on his right forearm and leans towards him. “Have a good night, August. It was nice talking to you.”

She leaves The Ground Round with four or five bags in each hand, her purse slung around her shoulder, and her coat draped over one arm. She feels him watching her and she smiles, thinking that while she may feel insecure and unattractive around her younger sister, she almost had a date with the high school quarterback. And, she finds herself a lot more attractive than that makeup salesgirl he’s having dinner with. And, if she ever did date him, she would insist on something finer than a family-friendly restaurant in the middle of a busy shopping mall.

Ally waves to her from the front door, her phone buried under her dark curls. Ellen can’t believe it, but “Jingle Bell Rock” is coming on over the loudspeaker. Pushing through the doors and dropping a dollar into the bucket of the Salvation Army volunteer dressed as Santa, she’s accosted by cold, harsh air, and she breathes deeply, ready to face the parking lot. □