

Scrambled Eggs

Boris Riskin

“No way!” Even though Morty was my best friend, I told him I wasn’t going to his annual shindig.

Sherry and Dr. Morty Adler threw one of the best parties of the Hamptons’ season. The booze was Chivas, Kettle One and Bombay, and the food was supplied by a caterer called *Bringing in the Sheaves*, who produced pots of beluga, bushels of plump oysters, and a dessert so drenched in chocolate sauce and strawberries that people waited in line for it like the British queuing for a bus.

“No way am I going,” I said.

“Asshole,” Morty said. “You can’t hide from her. You might as well come and have a good time. It’s better than moping around the way you’ve been the last couple of weeks.”

The “asshole” Morty referred to was, of course, me. The “her,” Morty referred to was Rosalind, my wife of twenty-five years, who had walked out on me those same few weeks ago.

I'd only let a best friend talk to me like that, especially since I thought he might be right. I had to admit, I felt like an asshole because I hadn't had a clue that Rosalind was going to do what she did. Worse, I felt pain. Real, gut-wrenching pain.

Morty had been my best friend since about half way through second grade. He'd been just another kid who walked home from school in the same direction I did, when one afternoon he stopped at my house and we began horsing around in the front yard. He picked up a stone and said, "Watch how far I can throw this." His aim wasn't as good as his arm and the stone sailed through a neighbor's window. The neighbor was the kind of person who seemed to have nothing better to do than to yell at any kid who came near her property.

The glass shattered and we froze. Then I said, "Come on." We ran as fast as scared kids could into my house where I hid Morty in a closet. In a short while there were loud knocks on the door.

I knew I had to do something. Luckily, I was blessed with a mother whose love for me had no limits. I blurted out the story, then added, "It was an accident, Mom. We didn't mean to do it."

"I know." My mother smiled her beautiful smile at me. "Don't worry. I'll take care of it."

And she did. While I hid behind her, she defused the neighbor's anger by offering to pay for the repair of the window. I waited until the door closed, then let Morty out of the closet and introduced him. My mother gave us milk and cookies, and from that day on Morty and I were buddies.

Two years later it was discovered my mother had breast cancer and nothing could be done to save her.

I followed Morty's advice. I put on my Ralph Lauren blazer, 44 regular, and checked myself in the mirror. Even though I did my share of ingesting calories both liquid and solid, my weight was okay because I worked out at the gym, played tennis and did a lot of biking. I still had all my hair, although it was obvious the gray was doing a blitzkrieg into the brown. Rosalind used to say I was handsome but I never thought so. I went closer to the mirror and looked at my eyes. There were plenty of red streaks. I was sure a lot of that was due to my fast approaching sixty. Sixty. Hard to believe since most of the time I still thought of myself as twenty-five. Not then. Not with the devastating amount of hurt I felt deep inside me.

"Never mind," I said to the guy in the mirror. "You're going to that party and you're going to have a good time."

I didn't.

Mostly, I hung around the bar and drank a lot of *Kettle One*. I also couldn't help being on the lookout for Rosalind. I thought she might be there with the friend she'd gone to stay with when she left me. This friend was the rather famous Toby Welch, the one with the TV show who instructed an audience of millions how to decorate a house with walnut shells and a few dabs of Elmer's Glue, or how to turn five dollars worth of dinner napkins into slipcovers for a sofa. In the past few years, Rosie had put in a lot of time doing charity work. It seemed Toby did quite a bit of the same thing herself. The two of them had hit it off and become good friends.

I called there a dozen times. At first I tried to get Rosie to come back but she wouldn't consider it. Then I tried to get her to tell me why she'd left. *Because I honestly don't know*, I said. *Then you'd better give it a lot of thought*, she said.

On my way back to the bar for about the fifth or sixth time, I bumped into Morty's wife, Sherri. Sherri was a beautiful woman but it was a hard beauty, as if she'd been sprayed with *Glo-Coat*. She gave me one of her looks. Sherri had a variety of looks that she directed at people. Depending on where you stood on the social (read monetary) scale, her looks could go from simple disdain to disapproval to contempt, or all the way in the other direction, to admiration, or even, if she were regarding someone famous such as Toby Welch, adoration. In my case, when Morty began going out with her and first introduced us, he was already on his way to being a successful surgeon and I was just a high school English teacher. So the first look I got from her was disdain. When she learned we were best friends, her look turned to disapproval. I was pretty sure she thought Rosalind had done a wise thing in leaving me.

"Hi there, Madame Hostess," I said. "Have you seen my wife, by any chance?"

"No," Sherri said, giving me her disapproval-contempt look. "And if you're lucky, she won't see *you*."

I continued on to the bar vaguely wondering what she meant by that remark when a knockout of a dish, dressed in white and adorned with gold jewelry, took hold of my arm.

"Are you Jake Wanderman?" she asked.

"I am, unless you're from the IRS."

"Could I talk to you?"

“Sure.”

She pulled me into a corner. “Morty Adler said you would help me.”

“To do what?”

“He didn't tell you?”

“No.”

“Oh,” she said. She had blonde hair and eyes the color of dollar bills. She sucked in her carmine lips. “He said he would explain everything.”

“I guess he didn't have a chance,” I said. “So why don't *you* tell me?”

She looked around as if someone might be listening. “Not here. Come to my house. We can talk there.”

“Now?”

“It's vital.”

I tried to grasp the concept of what she meant by “vital”, but couldn't. Abruptly, my brain signaled that it wasn't working too well because I'd had a tankful of vodka. It also told me I had just about enough energy to get home and crawl into bed. “Why don't we make it tomorrow? I'm sure whatever it is can wait a day.”

She shot me a green eyed look that was like a jolt of electricity. She took hold of my hand and in a minute we were outside. The night air was fresh and sweet. I gulped it in. “My car's just over here,” she said, tugging at me. I stumbled after her. We came to a Jaguar. She got behind the wheel. “Hop in,” she said.

I hopped as well as I could.

She went down Ocean Road where she made a series of turns. I didn't know the names of the streets but I knew we were in the neighborhood where tall, elegant women holding iced martinis, smiled down upon their short, rich husbands.

We drove up to an iron gate. She pushed a button on the remote clipped to the sun visor and the gate swung open. A string of security lights lit up the curving driveway. We went about a hundred yards before we came to the imposing double-doored entrance of what looked like Frankenstein's castle.

I expected to see Frau Blucher and hear a horse whinny, but instead, the door was opened by a small woman in a maid's uniform.

“Everything all right?” my driver asked.

The maid nodded.

“Good. You can go to bed now.”

The foyer was the size of my livingroom. It was filled with plants as tall as trees. Hell, maybe they were trees.

“Follow me,” the blonde said, and began climbing the marble staircase that led from the back of the foyer to the second floor. I followed, enjoying the interesting motion of her tush beneath the clinging dress, and wondering if she lived here alone or if there was husband or lover, and if so, where was he or she?

We went along a hallway and into a huge, brightly lit room. A king-size four-poster bed was placed against one wall. There were dolls propped up against the pillows on the bed, lots of them: big and little, long and short, wearing uniforms, dresses, gowns. Their eyes were open, staring, asking me what I was doing there. A secretary desk stood open with a pile of papers scattered across the top. A crystal chandelier hung from the

ceiling. The room was done in varying shades of pink: the walls, the trim, the furniture. There were enormous amounts of lace and ruffles. I had trouble breathing. I felt as if I'd been shoved into a rose.

“My husband had an office in another part of the house,” she said. “I brought most of the stuff in here. I'm trying to figure out the checkbook, paying bills, that kind of stuff. Boris always took care of that but I'm having a lot of trouble.”

“Boris is your husband? Where is he?”

“Dead.”

“Gee, I'm sorry. How long has he been...gone?”

“Since a week ago, yesterday.”

She took a key out of her handbag and unlocked the bottom drawer of the secretary. “I want to show you something.” She removed an attaché case, took it over to the bed and sat down with it on her lap. She smiled at me and patted the bed with one hand. Her attitude seemed to underline the idea that she was not going to allow her status as a widow to be a hindrance to her social life.

Cautiously, I sat next to her, wondering what was going to happen next. What was in that case? Handcuffs? A whip? Curiosities made of black leather?

She clicked the locks and opened the case.

I leaned over to get a better look. Her perfume went up my nose. Heat came off her body as if she were a radiator.

The case was filled with white cotton. She took one section of cotton out of the case and unwrapped it, revealing an egg-shaped object. She gave it to me.

I held it in my hand and felt my fingers tingle. “Is this what I think it is?” I was ten years old when I first saw a Fabergé egg. My father was usually out hustling a buck, but after my mother died he tried to spend some time with me. One of those times he took me to the Forbes galleries on Fifth Avenue to see the collection old man Forbes had put together. It had been astounding to see those fantastic jewels. They were so exotic, so foreign. They seized my imagination and sent it soaring. I saw Tsars and Tsarinas draped in furs and jewels, icy landscapes with wolves howling in the background. It might have been then that I first began to dream of traveling to far off places, meeting strange and glorious people, having great adventures. “What do you think, Jakey?” my father asked. “How would you like to have one of those for yourself?”

Now I was actually holding one. It had a background of royal blue and over it were concentric circles of gold leaves. In the midst of the leaves and encircling the egg was a diamond-studded snake with emerald eyes. I didn’t know how much it was worth but I knew it was a lot.

“There are six of them,” she whispered. “All different. One is more beautiful than the next.”

“Wow,” I said. I handed it back to her, feeling a lot more sober than when I’d come in. “I’m impressed. But I have the feeling that beauty is only one part of the equation.”

“Dr. Adler said you were smart.”

“He’s biased.”

“I suppose you want to know where I got them from.”

I didn't answer. Actually, what I was thinking was more along the lines of, *what do you want from me?*

Well," she went on, "the whole thing was a big surprise because I found them by accident."

"Excuse me?"

She pointed to a painting on the wall that looked like Gainsborough's "Blue Boy," only this boy was dressed in pink. "There's a secret closet back there. Boris had it made especially. I thought I ought to check it out after he died."

"Good thing you did."

"And how. There were also a few gold bars and some cash."

"I'd call that a nice closet."

"I thought so, too. Then I got a phone call. A man said he was a business partner of Boris's. He said Boris had something that belonged to him and did I know anything about it. I guessed he was referring to what I just showed you. I thought the best thing to do was play dumb. I told him I had no idea what he was talking about."

"You didn't know this guy who said he was your husband's partner?"

"I may have heard the name. But Boris never told me he had a partner. For that matter, he never told me anything about his business. That's why I needed you to come here tonight. Morty said you were very smart. You would know what to do."

"He did, huh."

She put the flat of her hand on my chest directly over a nipple. I could feel the texture of the hand through the shirt I was wearing, the heat from it working its way through the epidermis, beyond the subcutaneous layers and into the blood cells.

“I’m all alone,” she said. “I don’t know who to turn to. Will you help me?”

I did not have a clue as to what kind of help I could give her but a feeling came over me. I felt a glow--maybe it was still the vodka--as if I were being bathed in a bright light from above. Suddenly, I was King Henry, he of the sceptered isle, raising my fist to my army, declaring victory for God and country. At the same time, I was aware of a hint of doubt in the far back recesses of my brain, but I didn’t let it hold me back. “Of course I’ll help you,” I said.

“Promise?”

“I promise,” I said, enjoying the idea of being reckless and bold.

“Thank you.” She surprised me by kissing me, pressing her lips hard against mine.

“Does anyone else know about this closet?” I asked, after taking a deep breath.

“Not as far as I know.”

“What about the people who built it?”

“It was built by one man, an old friend of my husband’s, from Russia. He died only a short time after he finished the job. Boris gave the eulogy at his funeral.”

Convenient. The only guy who could tell anyone about the closet just happens to drop dead.

“Okay,” I said. “I think the first thing to do is put the case back in there and pretend you never saw it. Forget there’s a closet altogether.”

“All right.” She re-wrapped the egg and put it back in the case. I followed her over to the pink “Blue Boy.” She did something at the bottom of the painting and the wall suddenly slid open, smoothly and silently. A light switched on revealing a space just

large enough to walk into, with shelves on the left side and a safe in the wall opposite. She placed the attaché case on the middle shelf, stepped back, pressed something again, and the wall closed up.

“Would you like a drink?” she said. “We could have one downstairs, or I could bring it up here.”

Something in my stomach rebelled. “Thanks, but no thanks. As a matter of fact, I think I’d better be getting home.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“Okay. I’ll drive you.”

On the way back to Morty’s house, I asked, “When did you say you first heard from your husband’s so-called partner—what was his name?”

“Solofsky. He called me the day after the funeral. Couldn’t wait, could he?”

“And he hasn’t called you since?”

“Sure he has. But I haven’t spoken to him. I told my housekeeper to say I wasn’t taking any calls. But I’m frightened.”

“The police...?” I began, and stopped. We both knew that was out of the question. It didn’t take much of a brain to know the eggs were not kosher. “What about Morty Adler? He know about this?”

She shook her head. “I didn’t tell him anything. You’re the only one who knows.”

“Good. Let’s keep it that way for now.”

We were back at Morty's. I began to get out of the car when she leaned over and planted her mouth on mine again. "That's just my way of saying, thank you. I really appreciate what you're doing for me."

"Fine," I said. "Fine. But if you're going to keep kissing me, I think I ought to know your name."

"It's Cynthia. Cynthia Organ."