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Summer 2003	<p>“Don’t expect me to be entertaining tonight!” Linda called from the bathroom.</p>
Editor's Note	<p>“I don’t expect anything, sweetie,” Martin called back from the bedroom. “I’m just relieved you agreed to come.</p>
Guidelines	<p>Relieved, she thought. I’ll bet. She stood in front of the mirror, naked, and pinched a roll of fat behind her hip. Then she cupped a breast in each hand and lifted them up to where they had once been. She let them sag again and realized she couldn’t remember when her body had morphed to this plump, middle-aged stranger in the mirror. Time had just crept up on her. She had been cruising along in life, feeling like herself -- a young, vital woman with certain plans -- and then, wham! this stranger in the mirror had appeared to show her something different. She realized she was growing old. The better part of her life was over, she lamented.</p>
SNR's Writers	<p>Leaning closer to the mirror to check her eye shadow, she saw the bags under her eyes were still visible through her foundation. Her hair was thinning, a fact demonstrated by the clot of copper strands wound through her curl brush. She forced herself into her bra and underwear and then wrestled into her sleeveless black dinner dress. Her shoulders looked too bulky under the thin straps, so she went into the bedroom to find a light sweater.</p>
Mail	<p>“Just promise you’ll be cordial, at least,” he begged.</p> <p>“Don’t push it,” she said from the closet. “You’re lucky I’m even going. And who’s this VIP we’re supposed to be entertaining, anyway?”</p> <p>“I told you. He’s the CEO’s brother.”</p> <p>“And tell me again,” she said, trudging out of the closet with her sweater, “why did you get the assignment of babysitting the CEO’s brother? Draw the short straw?”</p> <p>“Ha. Ha. No. I told you, I volunteered. It’s a great opportunity. This guy might be appointed head of the board of directors someday.”</p> <p>“La dee da. So why don’t you just go out with him? Do some guy things, like hang out at the club all night and then cheat on your wives.” She saw the comment stung</p>

him, and she was glad.

Martin pouted on the edge of the bed. Linda knew he was only pretending he hadn't heard her when he quickly changed the topic. "He's never seen a Polynesian dinner show. He wants to see the live divers, and he's bringing his wife. I've told you. I can't very well go to dinner with the CEO's brother and his wife, solo."

"Like I said, I'll go. But don't expect much enthusiasm. I'm only doing this for you, god knows why."

"And I'm glad you agreed to come, sweetie. I have to make a good impression tonight. It could mean a promotion, you know, and the CEO's very particular about who entertains his brother when he's in town. We have to show a little class tonight."

"Wonder he should pick you, then," Linda sneered.

She fished her shoes out from under the bed and, after some effort, slipped them on. Bloated again. No wonder he cheated on me, she thought. But, my God. Why did he have to pick the meter reader? Of all people! Isn't it normally the secretary? The co-worker after months of late-night projects? The woman's own best friend, even? But the electric meter reader! So what if she had firm legs. What twenty-five-year-old who had to walk all day wouldn't? And what kind of a yo-yo gets to know their meter reader, anyway? How does that happen?

"We better get going," he said. "We're supposed to meet them at seven."

"One last thing," she called, heading back into the bathroom. She closed the door and braced herself against the counter. She took three deep breaths and looked herself over again. "I hate you!" she mouthed.

It had been over a month since he had come home suddenly to sit her down and tell her all about it. He had simply confessed, out of the blue, yanking the carpet out from under her life in one baffling sentence. She hadn't even suspected he was having an affair before then. That was the weird thing. It wasn't supposed to be like that. Weren't there supposed to be the suspicions first? Then his denials? Then, ultimately, the discovery and bam! here's your divorce papers, you son-of-a-bitch. But he had denied her the intrigue, climax and denouement of it all. He had simply confessed and then asked her to forgive him. What was she supposed to say? She had to think on it.

Since then things had been awkward. Martin kept trying to be extra sweet, kissing her ass, really. He had even bought her flowers several times -- and for no particular reason. She couldn't remember the last time he'd bought her flowers before his big "confession". He was overdoing the "good husband" thing and it was beginning to smother her. She hadn't made up her mind yet whether to forgive him or to file for divorce and just take him for half of everything. What she needed sometimes was to talk to him about it. But whenever she brought up the topic, he would clam up and just stare at her like some wooden statue in a cigar store window, or he would quickly change the topic and ask how she liked the recent flowers he had bought her. As far as making a decision about what to do with their marriage, Martin was being no help at all.

He opened the passenger door for her in the parking lot. It was another self-conscious gesture that had begun recently, and Martin always wore an awkward smile to match. His face often wore the expression of a penitent puppy dog that has

just been caught peeing on the carpet lately. It was driving Linda crazy.

On the way to the restaurant, Martin pointed out some places that should have brought back good memories. “Oh, and remember that joint?” he said, pointing out a Chinese restaurant on the corner. They were waiting for a red light. “That’s where I fell into the carp pond, and we both got food poisoning from the General’s Chicken.”

Linda had stopped listening, though. Instead, she thought about the recurring dream she’d been having recently. In the dream she’s always standing on the edge of a very tall building. Safety lies behind, she knows. But she always steps off the edge and falls, tumbling headlong into an incomprehensible space for an unintelligible length of time, and she always wakes just seconds before hitting the ground. After she’d had the dream a few times, Linda remembered that she’d once heard something about dreams that involve falling: you could never hit the ground in a dream, her best friend in grade school had told her, because if you did, you would die of a heart attack in your sleep. Linda now wondered how many people who died in their sleep had actually been dreaming they were falling.

The odd thing about this new dream, Linda realized, was that she always chose to step off the edge instead of moving backwards to safety. This was strange because she had always been deathly afraid of heights. She remembered the time in swim class when she was thirteen and all the students had to perform at least one high-dive from the ten-foot board in order to pass. Everyone had lined up to climb the ladder and, one-by-one, they all made their way to the edge and jumped. In spite of her fear, Linda had convinced herself she would simply climb and then jump like the others, but she had made the mistake of looking down when she reached the top. The board wobbled crazily under her feet and she became dizzy. She had to sit, clutching the sides for dear life. It didn’t matter how much the other kids jeered and laughed, she wouldn’t budge. Finally, the instructor climbed up and brought her down to safety. Now, all of a sudden, she was jumping off of skyscrapers in her dreams.

They met the CEO’s brother in the restaurant lobby. He was a small, round man who introduced himself as Richard, and his red-rimmed eyes gave Linda the impression he’d already been at the cocktails for a while. His white beard and mustache were trimmed in a distinct Scottish style, which prompted Linda to wonder where he had left his kilt and bagpipes. At his side leaned a tall but stooped woman whose small eyes seemed too close together for practical function. She was at least four inches taller than her husband but seemed to be slouching on purpose to appear shorter than him. Richard introduced her as Franny. Franny took Linda’s hand and said nice to meet you. Linda said likewise. Richard said he was glad they had sent someone with such a beautiful wife. Martin beamed, stupidly, when Linda smirked. Richard appeared to mistake her smirk for graciousness: he winked back, obscenely. Franny seemed to wilt even more, and her eyes appeared to grow smaller and closer together.

“Let’s find our table!” Richard boomed with the abandon of a drunk. “The show’s starting in five, and we don’t want to miss it. I reserved us a place up high so we can see everything. Did you know they actually have cliffs and real divers in there?”

What a world!”

The restaurant décor was traditional Polynesian, and loudspeakers piped in the sound of tribal drums and tropical birds. The lights were turned down to imitate nightfall. Designed like a theater, the upper decks were little grass huts with dining tables in them. The stage soared forty-feet high and looked like a wall of Island cliffs. If one didn't know better, they might think a little piece of Samoa had grown legs and marched itself right down to the restaurant. A waterfall tumbled from the wall and into a small pool twenty feet below. The pool extended the length of the cliff and jutted out ten feet into the lower dining area. A concrete barrier surrounded it. Tables were arranged around the pool, and a few families sat there, eating. They were waiting for the show to begin.

The CEO's brother led them all to their grass hut. On the table sat coconut husks that held their napkins, and Linda suddenly felt like she had just stumbled onto Gilligan's Island. Martin swooped in to pull a chair out for her, and, in his haste, their feet got tangled. Linda nearly ended up going over the side. It would be just her luck, she thought.

A waitress bounded up and set a basket of fresh fruit on their table. She handed menus around, and Richard ordered another cocktail. Franny declined to order anything and Linda followed suit. Martin said he'd have what Richard was having. When the waitress left with their order, Richard winked slyly at Martin and said, “Good-looking waitress, huh? Ah, if we were just a little younger!”

Martin forced a guilty smile. Linda gaped across the table at Richard, stifling an urge to claw his eyes out. Then she looked at the CEO's wife. Franny had slumped a little farther in her seat and now hid her face behind a menu. If she made herself any less conspicuous, Linda thought, the woman would vanish into thin air.

“Martin,” Richard continued. “I only have one rule during dinner. I don't talk business. Let's keep it light and enjoy the show.”

“Anything you say, Mr. Johnson.” Martin concurred.

“And that's my second rule. You have to call me Richard.”

The waitress returned with their drinks and Richard leered. “Ever wonder what it's like to be with an older man?” He giggled suggestively.

“With or without Viagra?” Linda shot back. The waitress quickly fled, understanding she had just been bailed out of an embarrassing spot.

Richard glanced balefully at Linda, and then looked to Martin, who could only offer a slight shrug. As if pondering some great riddle, Richard stared stupidly at Martin and took a gulp from his cocktail. Suddenly he raised an eyebrow, as though he had discovered the answer to his conundrum. He laughed out loud then. “Viagra. Ha!” He slapped his knee and then turned to his wife, smiling. “You really ought to order you a drink, Fran,” he chuckled. “You know I hate it when you're so uptight.”

Franny said nothing.

“You know she used to be a javelin thrower? Wouldn't imagine it would you?” Richard announced, patting his wife on the back. “Had a university scholarship, she did. Might have gone to the Olympics, too, if it wasn't for that unfortunate accident. I blame the wind, I've always said. But Franny, she never got over it.

Isn't that right, Fran?"

Franny smiled sheepishly, her cheeks coloring. Linda wondered why Franny hadn't stuck a javelin in her husband's back long ago.

"Hey!" Richard said, turning to Martin again. "My brother told me about this new strip club downtown. How about you and me take the ladies home after dinner and we go paint the town?"

Linda snapped shut her menu. Martin coughed, pretending to choke on his fruit. Franny patted her lips nervously with a napkin. Before Martin could answer, a sudden flash of lightening from the stage lights bailed him out. Thunder roared over the loudspeakers, and a young woman in a swimsuit appeared on a ledge above the waterfall.

"Look! Look!" Richard pointed. "She's a hot one! Nice legs on that one!"

Linda turned her chair toward the stage, her back to the nuisance now. Franny sat stock still, hunched over her menu. Her eyes could have burned two holes in the entrée section.

The girl in the bathing suit stood poised on the cliff and then let herself fall gracefully over the edge, jackknifing halfway down and then straightening herself out for a smooth splash into the pool below. Children in the audience stamped their feet wildly, and their parents stopped eating long enough to applaud.

"Now that's what I call dinner entertainment!" Richard guffawed over his cocktail glass, winking at Martin. "Oh, another one!"

A second young woman in a different colored bathing suit now stood on the ledge. She too raised her arms in a diving pose and then let her body fall forward. She wrapped herself in a neat ball and did three somersaults on her way down.

"By God! If they would only do that naked," Richard bawled. Linda slammed her fist on the table and stood to leave, but a young man appeared on the diving ledge then. She sat back down, fascinated suddenly.

"Hey! What's with this guy?" Richard complained. "We're here to see the girls dive!"

Linda leaned forward and gazed at the young man perched on the ledge. She imagined he was some college student, diving for extra money to pay his tuition. He stood there in Speedos, taut body erect, arms extended over his head, muscular brown legs coiled, toes curled down over the ledge. At first Linda found him attractive, but she suddenly realized she had nothing in common with him. The young man was just beginning life, she thought, probably full of hopes and dreams. He would finish college, get some silly girl to fall in love with him and then marry her. They might have children. He would work, and then work more, and then wake up one morning and no longer find his wife attractive. He would probably need to find someone younger than to make himself believe he was still this same hopeful young man standing on the ledge preparing to dive now. She had already fallen victim to those illusions. That part of her life was over.

Linda suddenly hated him. She also realized that leaving her husband now would only mean a life of loneliness, unless she was prepared to entertain men like these old, jaded wretches, men like her own husband or, god forbid, like the CEO's

brother, men with their own baggage and broken dreams. She would be starting out fresh with a major handicap on her scorecard.

The young diver bent slightly at the knees and then propelled himself from the ledge. Linda immediately saw that he'd misjudged his own strength. He folded himself in half to grasp his toes on the way down. He snapped himself straight and then came down directly on the concrete barrier surrounding the pool. The sickening thud of a human skull hitting the barrier could be heard even over the din of the loudspeakers. A collective gasp echoed through the restaurant and everyone sat in silence waiting for an announcement to tell them that it was all part of the show. The young diver lay crumpled over the top of the concrete barrier, legs splayed like a large dead bug. Then the house lights snapped on, nearly blinding everyone. The children were the first to scream. At some of the tables, women were crying. Two men in black suits scrambled to the diver's aid. The restaurant managers, Linda thought.

She sat there looking at the unconscious young man and unexpectedly felt an urge to laugh. It came on so suddenly that she couldn't stop herself. She realized how absurd it was to be laughing about such a tragedy, but she laughed out loud until she became hysterical and tears came into her eyes. She looked across the table and saw that Franny was beginning to laugh, too. It was a tiny laugh, hidden behind her hand at first, but soon both women were laughing together as though they had just seen the funniest comedy act in the world.

"What are you two laughing at?" Richard demanded then. Martin just sat there, wooden, mouth open. "What do you two find so funny? The man most likely killed himself! There's nothing funny in that."

Linda and Franny kept right on laughing and couldn't stop themselves.

"Fran! Stop that this instant. You're embarrassing me. That young man must have cracked his skull in fifty places! Stop laughing."

The women only laughed harder. They were holding hands across the table now. Richard looked at Martin as if to say, curb your wife. Martin only stared back, stupidly, unable to understand what was happening. Richard stood abruptly and took his wife by the arm. "Come on, Fran. We're leaving. I don't know what's wrong with that woman!" He pointed at Linda to indicate he knew she was the instigator and had led his wife astray.

Fran left obediently with her husband, still laughing, and Linda hoped she would someday find the part of herself that once enjoyed throwing javelins.

Martin turned to his wife. "I don't understand you," he said. She was wiping her eyes with a napkin. "I guess you never will," she said. "Let's go."

On the way home Linda tried to understand why she had laughed at the young diver's misfortune. It was horrible really, and he might have been killed. She wondered if he had realized his mistake before hitting the concrete. Linda understood that diving from such heights was dangerous business, but the young diver had shown courage by diving in the first place. Sometimes you just have to jump and take your chances, she thought.

Before they reached home, she knew she would have the recurring dream that night, and she was certain she would step off the building again and fall. Suddenly she understood why she always chose to leap instead of walking backwards to safety.

All she could do now was hope she would wake up one last time before hitting the ground.

This story originally appeared in *The Blue Moon Review*.

Neal Dorenbosch has also published his writing in *The Pittsburgh Quarterly*, *Foliate Oak*, *South Ocean Review*, *Literary Potpourri*, *Collected Stories*, *Fiction Warehouse*, and *Southern Cross Review*. By the end of the summer, his work will also have appeared in *Laughter Loaf*, *Lunarosity*, *Apollo's Lyre*, and *The Deepening*. *Lily Literary Review* nominated his story "Only the Washed" for the Million Writer's Award for best fiction appearing online in 2005.

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