

Glass

Even before I get to the party, I know it won't be the kind of party where I have to worry about the impression I make. I think of myself as normal, so I just have to be myself, and I will fit in. To think I'm crazy for thinking I'm normal is to be crazy, which I have decided I'm not, so I don't.

But not to say I'm not nervous. I am nervous, just not for me. I'm the normal one.

I walk between the cars in the driveway and the side of the house to the escalating chatter and splashing and smell of barbecue. I've come alone, but I know that here, in my good neighbor's backyard, I will be among friends.

At the gate, I pause. There's a pool, swimmers, a tent over picnic tables. I recognize everyone but the kids in the pool, who all look alike in the pool. I don't see Grace, the woman I'm nervous about, a woman others think is crazy, a woman whose eccentricities I've risked my reputation defending, but I know that from here I can't see everybody. Only when a kid cannonballs, demanding everyone's attention, do I enter.

The first to see me are Mrs. Anderson and Zane's mom, both standing at the grill, both drinking bottled beers. They open their arms for me, and soon, as those previously preoccupied with the cannonballs gradually grasp my arrival, I've exchanged greetings with almost everyone.

A long patio that looks like a sidewalk but functions as a patio lines the back of the house. At the other end of the patio is a glass door to the kitchen.

I look for Grace in the kitchen. I hope she hasn't already made a fool of herself.

I walk by women drinking wine and dressing salad, kids playing video games, a dog in its cage, barking, looking sad, knock on the bathroom door, enter. I do my thing, do my other thing, pet the dog through the cage, and walk back into the yard.

“Is your friend coming?” one of my friend’s mom asks. She’s eating a chicken wing and wiping her hands on the towel wrapped around her waist, this being more polite than licking each finger clean. But I’ve forgotten whose mother she is, exactly.

“Who?” I say, but I know of course she means Grace. Everyone knows Grace, whether they’ve met her or not.

She shrugs, licking a finger finally.

I realize that Grace has already let me down. She will be the last to arrive to this party, and the last person to arrive at the party always ends up standing out a little extra somehow, as a sort of final symbol of hope for patrons who have yet to have their expectations for the party met, and standing out, making her presence known, is not what I wanted for Grace today.

My friend’s friendly, wet, greasy mother heads indoors, where I guess she’ll change. I think about her only words to me, her only words about Grace, her choice to refer to Grace as “your friend”, instead of as “Grace”, and think about how Grace had already let me down even before showing up late, how she is only welcome at this party because she is a friend of mine, judged by the women who claim to know her but have only seen her and heard stories about her. But true stories. Yes, Grace has only ever let me down.

Children and their fathers are playing and eating off paper plates in and around the pool. My friends my age are also late, but should be here soon. I go back to the grill, where Mrs. Anderson and Zane’s mom are still talking.

Then I see Grace, and she looks lost. She’s dressed normally, at least – brown top, blue jeans, natural brown hair past her shoulders in a sort of lazy ponytail (she has a single braid that runs down with the rest of her unbraided hair; if there’s a name for this hairstyle, I don’t know it, and it doesn’t matter, really, because the point is that it was nothing anyone else would make a note to remember, an omitted detail in the future telling of whatever embarrassing moment Grace would inevitably contribute to today) – and carries, like a good guest, a tray of food to contribute to the picnic. She looks like she’s looking around for someone she knows.

“Grace,” I say, smiling. She hands me the tray, nodding, watching the party, looking like she’s looking for someone else. “Hmm,” I say. “What is

this? What do you call this?”

I am referring to any or all of the five glass saucers balanced on the tray, each filled to the brim with cloudy broths of different colors disguising iceberg-like chunks of various shapes, colors, and apparent consistencies.

“Oh, that,” she says, smiling now. “That’s just a few healthy broths. And these...” She reaches in one of the broths with her dirty hands and pulls out a scorpion. She holds it up for me to look at. Either the wind’s blowing very strongly, and I don’t feel it, or this scorpion is very much alive. “These are proteins!”

I open wide, as if hypnotized, and she drops the protein in my mouth. I kill it, chewing.

“Hmm,” I say. I’m thinking about all the little kids here going up to the picnic tent themselves, because their parents don’t care, as long as they’re eating, and because dessert isn’t out yet anyway. “And kids can eat it?”

“Sure,” she says. “Would you mind putting this down for me? I want to get something out of the car.”

“Sure,” I say.

I walk carefully over the concrete and grass surfaces leading to the picnic tent, trying to keep the five broths from spilling. But they’re filled to the brims, and I have to watch where I’m going, and guests come up to me to see what I’m carrying and ask what it is, or what they are, and who brought it, and where she is, and how I know her, and which one or two I would recommend and how I would recommend to eat it or them, and ask whether I’m sure they could use their hands, whether I’m sure it’s okay they spilled a little into the tray, and plus, when I get to the tent, there’s no room on the tables, so I have to balance the tray partially on the table and against my body, and move more stable trays to the ground to finagle this terribly unstable tray onto the table first, and then rearrange everything, not only to get all the dishes back on the table, but to make Grace’s dishes look as edible as possible, which is to say as edible as they looked when she handed me the tray, which is not very edible, and also impossible because by now, all five glass saucers have spilled their broths considerably, the lipped tray itself now a long, wide, shallow saucer barely containing the mixture of all five broths and the more buoyant chunks of solid food, the

tray itself now a saucer of broth with five little glass saucers floating on the surface, each with just a little bit of broth and dense chunks of food I can't identify. The broth on my arms I wipe on my bathing suit.

Back at the grill, I wait for Grace.

"What was that?" Zane's mom asks.

"Some soups," I say.

"And is that what's-her-name?" Mrs. Anderson asks.

"Grace, yeah," I say.

"And is she much older than you?" one of them asks. "I forget."

"She's 34, I think. I don't know. I've never asked."

Grace returns in a bathing suit that makes me think she could be anywhere from 30 to 54, what do I know? She comes up to me, and I introduce her to my friends' moms.

"I've heard so much about you, I feel like I know you," Mrs. Anderson says.

"Do you know my son, Zane? I'm Zane's mother," Zane's mother says.

"I don't know Zane," Grace says. "Is he here?"

"Not yet," I say.

"I think he and Aaron are driving over later," Mrs. Anderson, Aaron's mom, says.

I want to lead Grace away from these women. I want her to myself, with someone who won't judge her, me, the only one here who won't judge her.

"I wanna try one of what you brought," I say. "What would you recommend? Also, I had a bunch of people asking me what the best way to eat it was."

"*Is*," Grace says. "What the best way to eat it *is*." She smiles at my friends' moms. "Just bring back five little cups, a scoop of each, and I'll show you. There are cups there, aren't there? Don't tell me. And spoons? "

I nod and turn. More kids cannonball into the pool. Other kids hang out on the trampoline, eating off paper plates. Adults drink beer in the shallow end. A few women in straw hats tan up on the hill. More kids surround the picnic tent.

Near the pool, I step with my shoes on something that seems to hold, give, and scratch. At first, I think "toy", but bending down, see the

pieces of glass I've broken. I pick up the pieces, aware of my mistake in plain sight and the bare feet around me, but while picking up the pieces, I see many more pieces around me, pieces of glass only others could have broken and neglected. But aware of my still being watched, and of the urgency of removing broken glass from the play area of barefooted children, I begin to pick up all the glass I can see. I pick up more than I can carry, glass dropping from my grasp, and rush to the garbage by the picnic tent, hands miraculously yet to bleed.

Next, I check for scrapes. There are a few scrapes, but no blood. There are also no cups on the table to bring back samples of Grace's broth. Whether the scrapes are new, from the glass, or not, is unclear. I take a paper plate, which I decide must pass for a shallow saucer. But the tray is almost empty. Whether the five dishes or mixture was so popular as to be consumed within minutes, or whether the broth spillage was taken for garbage and wiped clean, is also unclear. Also, the glass saucers are chipped.

Onto the plate, I empty the solid contents of the five chipped glass saucers and pour what's left of the broth mixture out from the corner lip of the tray. The grayish, greenish, broth permeates the solid chunks of what look like – in addition to scorpions – potatoes, scallops, pieces of egg, eyeballs, and diced chunks of dried blood. There are also pieces of broken glass floating around in the mixture. I watch where I step.

I'm removing glass from my plate, filling my pockets, when I see a little kid I don't know, maybe three years old, in a diaper and water wings, sitting alone on the grass, in the broken glass, feeding himself scorpions, making faces. I take the plate away from him and pour its contents onto my own. He cries, still years away from being able to understand the concept of me saving his life. I run my hand through the broth to check for any glass I've added to my plate. Something bites me. It's a scorpion. I eat it.

There is so much broken glass on the ground that the best I can do is step over the larger chunks of glass, so as not to break them into smaller, sharper, more unavoidable pieces. I reach the grill, having spilled only half the plate's contents and yet removed all the glass. I hand the plate to Grace, who looks at me with disappointment.

"There were no cups," I say. "Are no cups."

Grace has taken what looks like a chunk of potato and begun rubbing it around the plate. “You want to sop up as much flavor as you can,” she says. “That’s the idea. Pack each bite with as much flavor as possible. As much flavor as you think you can.” She picks up the soppy potato-looking chunk and offers it to Aaron’s mom, who declines, and then to Zane’s mom, who declines, and then to me.

“Mmm,” I say. “What is that?” It’s tougher than potato.

“That’s a protein,” Grace says. “That’s all it is. Just proteins and flavorings.”

“Hmm,” I say. “What kind of protein?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Grace says. “My dishes don’t have names.”

“But what about the ingredients you use?” one of my friend’s mom says, finishing her beer. “What do you buy at the store to make this... interesting concoction?”

Grace shrugs, smiling, about to answer. To stop her, I interrupt, changing the subject, afraid she’s about to embarrass herself, to embarrass her and me, afraid she’s going to say something completely wild and unnecessary, revealing some crazy idea or superstition she has about separating her groceries into “protein” and “flavoring” jars, and mixing them all up, and then when preparing a dish, throwing a dice or choosing in some other mysterious, maniacal way some combination, some way maybe not all that different from what she pulled today, which was presenting a single dish disguised as five different unstable dishes, their inevitable combination by human error the final step in her recipe.

“There’s broken glass everywhere,” I say. “It’s not safe.”

The three of them look at me.

“I just picked up a whole bunch, and there’s a whole lot more too. I’m worried about all the kids running around.”

Because everywhere there are kids running around, kids in party hats playing barefooted on broken glass and eating scorpions and eyeballs. Kids in the pool. I look in the pool, and there’s glass everywhere. Kids and their dads swimming in glass. I reach into the pool and scoop out handful after handful of glass. I look back at Grace, to see if she’s seen me, but she’s gone, and the women at the grill are paying attention only to each other, as before. I pick up more glass at my feet and use the end of my shirt as a wheelbarrow to carry what I can to the garbage.

The garbage has become a pile of glass, no can. The picnic tables themselves are chipped glass tables. The five saucers on Grace's tray have become what look like a pile of sand. I pick up a tray and a whole table collapses. I pick up all the glass I can, on the table, on the grass, in the pool, dump it atop the glass pile of garbage.

And Grace is in the pool, holding on to the edge in the deep end. She is as unfazed by the broken glass as everyone else. I don't understand it. Everyone keeps narrowly missing the broken glass. It makes no sense. A kid falls onto a pile of broken glass, gets up with grass stains on his elbows. I walk over to Grace.

"Get yourself in here!" she says to me, splashing me.

I hear a splash louder than a cannonball and see a kid surface with a kickboard.

"My tray!" Grace says happily. The kid is using her tray as a kickboard.

I ask the women at the grill what they think about all this.

"It's really very sweet of you," Mrs. Anderson says.

"It is," Zane's mom says. "Now, how do you like your chicken?"

It's clear they don't believe me, clear that from the grill, they can't see the extent of the problem, that not only is there more broken glass here at the party than is normal under any set of circumstances, but that there are kids running around barefoot! And what's really crazy is that no one's reacting to the glass besides me, me reacting like the only normal one here, everyone else just going about their business as if they see or feel nothing wrong. So of course, these women who can't see the glass – glass is clear, after all, as clear as it gets – have no reason to suspect anything different if nobody's acting any differently. It's like they think: if everybody's normal, then so is everything.

"Hey!" I yell. "Everybody stop moving!"

Everybody does. They all stop moving, all looking at me now.

"I don't want to hit anybody," I say.

Now everybody's looking at me. Now I've got all of their attention. I kick off my shoes, toss my shirt to the side. Kids on the other side of the pool roll down the dune of broken glass. The dog freed from its cage licks glass off a toddler's plate. The women at the grill have stopped talking to look at me. Grace wipes her eyes, the back of her hand bleeding. The sun

smiles warmly.

I tell myself it's only glass. I close my eyes and pinch my nose. It's only glass. Grace shrieks. "Don't!" she says. But she's already let me down. The dog whimpers.