

P.J.P. Hayes

A Ragamuffin's Dinner

The frog in Elaine's soup sat up with a banjo and started singing. And right away I knew I was screwed.

How could it happen. A Five Star restaurant. The DuPont Hotel. And the frog in Elaine's entrée wasn't dead before the chef prepared her dish. Nor did the chef bother to separate the legs from the rest of his body.

"Nobody knows the trouble I've seen," The frog wailed, "Nobody knows but Jesus."

Elaine's eyes widened. She jerked a napkin up to her mouth.

"I don't believe this," My words tumbled out in self-defense, "I'll speak to the manager right away."

"Norman...he's *singing*," Elaine choked.

This was supposed to be our makeup dinner. After all the nights I'd been out running around. Neglecting her. Blowing the rent money on nameless stupidities.

A few nights ago she'd had enough and threw a microwave out the window at me. So I'd promised and cried and spoke of a new start.

But the frog twanged his banjo and really belted it out: "Sometimes I'm up/ Sometimes I'm down/ Oh, yes Lord/ Sometimes I'm almost to the ground."

The little flame from the candle in the middle of our table flickered slightly. It cast the frog's shadow across the tablecloth.

"He's...he's got a nice voice," I said.

Hot tears streaked Elaine's mascara down her cheeks.

Her bottom lip shook.

“You look beautiful tonight, honey,” The frog in my throat was another story altogether.

I raised my glass of wine, “To us.”

Her eyes floated down to her glass but she didn’t move.

I leaned back and downed mine in one gulp.

This could be the end of the line. She *had* to see it. I’d failed at the make-up dinner. Couldn’t even take her to a spot that properly killed its animals before serving them.

Five years of marriage...

On the table, the frog stopped singing. His eyes popped wide like someone squeezed his throat.

“Jiminy Cricket!” He screamed, looking up.

The Head Chef swung his meat cleaver and chopped the frog in half mid-scream. The chef, he’d crawled across the floor commando style so the green fellow wouldn’t spot him.

Frog blood and part of the banjo splattered onto Elaine’s dress.

Her eyes emptied in shock.

“Chopped him up right in the middle of a serenade!” The Head Chef whooped and thumped his chest with hairy fists. He turned and stalked off, dragging his knuckles across the carpet.

“I’ll get the check,” I mumbled, “The food doesn’t seem to be agreeing with us.”

Outside, Elaine ran crying down the sidewalk and fell into a puddle.

“Elaine-” I reached for her arm but she jerked away.

A light drizzle misted the back of my neck.

The boy from the valet service came by, “Should I bring up your car, sir?”

“Yeah, the car,” I said.

We drove down Market St. without saying much. The windshield wipers added an almost comedic rhythm to Elaine’s sobs.

Of course, I knew it couldn’t be over.

And when we got to be a couple blocks from home, Elaine let it out.

“So, I guess once you drop me off you’re going to head over to Dylan’s?”

Dylan’s. The name hit me like cyanide in the gut. Typical Elaine. Jugular shot right away.

The first time Dylan stopped by our apartment a wave of cheap cologne and cigar smoke strangled out all the oxygen.

“I don’t know,” I said, careful to keep my voice even, “Why would you say that?”

Even asking her that question was like throwing the first haymaker in a slugfest.

I first met Dylan the day he got fired from my painting company. The day he got fired was also his first day on the job. He spilled a five gallon bucket of paint on the carpet of this huge Greenville mansion.

“You know why,” She snapped, “Every time we fight you run over to hide at his place.”

“You gamble and waste our money and do God only knows what else,” She continued.

I’d broken the dam wide open.

“I work hard,” I told her, “And you only complain.”

“Oh, oh, oh, I get it. The harder you work the more right you have to throw our money away? And don’t give me crap for complaining. I’m the one that got married because some guy promised me the world and only gave me a ghetto loft.”

Right. Back then I thought Jimmy Stewart’s moon-lasso monologue held more than water.

Dylan’s downtown apartment was a gambling parlor. Bunch of us gathered Friday and Saturday nights to play poker. We called it a Gentleman’s Club. We put on bathrobes, lit huge cigars, drank whisky and played cards. Mostly we just went there to escape our marriages and other such failures.

“I pay all the bills, miss,” I reminded her, “You spend your days in face-paint school.”

And that’s the truth. Well, Cosmetology school.

“You used to call yourself an incurable romantic,” She lamented, turned her face to the window, the city lights.

Raindrops on roses, baby.

“We used to have these deep connections,” Elaine moaned, “Do you remember any of that?”

Speaking of connections...

All the sudden it hit me why I’d made such a fuss about going to a Five Star restaurant.

Connections- The electric company promised to cut our power weeks ago. And the water company too. I’d been intercepting the notices.

“Uh, let’s not go home,” I said, “Let’s walk around Rodney Square.”

Elaine eyed me, "It's pouring rain."

"Yeah, the rain," I said.

We pulled up in front of our old red-brick abode. The porch now lay barren from junkies carrying our chairs and tables away. Same two gray cats perched on the railing. If someone looked at our house dead-on from the street, they'd see ours was the odd one out. It was sunk lower than the rest so our roof appeared cockeyed. The neighbors told us we bought the 'Special' house.

Elaine stepped out into the rain. Ankle deep in a puddle. She hopped from one foot to the other.

"Are you coming in?" She asked, "Shut the car off, will ya?"

"I'll be right in," I told her, pretended to look for something in the glove compartment.

"Oh, ok," She scoffed, "You're going to run off to your little friend's place."

Lightening cracked across black clouds.

Closest thing to electricity we're having tonight, baby, I thought.

"No, no, I'm not," I sputtered, "I just need time to think."

"Don't stay out here all night," Elaine slammed the door shut.

For a long second the only thing I heard was her heels tapping up the front steps. The front door screeched to a close.

Wait for it. Wait for it.

I dialed Dylan, "Hey, buddy. Just got back from dinner."

"How'd it go?"

"Total disaster. You were right."

Dylan sighed, "I hate being right all the time. So where're you at now?"

I leaned over the steering wheel and looked up at the dark house, "Well, she just went inside and I'm still out in the car."

"Oh, no. She's gonna find out the electric and water got shut off."

A sudden high-pitched shriek cracked the night's silence. Followed closely by a microwave going through our kitchen window and landing with a solid crunch on the pavement below.

"Yeah, she just found out," I said, "Boy, she's mad."

"Did she throw the microwave out the window again?"

“Oh, yeah.”

Elaine stuck her head out the shattered window, “Norman, you piece of crap get up here! The lights won’t turn on! Nothing works!”

Dylan whistled, “Is that her screaming? I can hear her like she’s standing right in front of me.”

“Yeah, she’s shaking her fist at me too.”

“Buddy, you need to get out of there. Come to my place. You’ll be safe here.”

I rolled the passenger window down, “Elaine, I have to go-”

“Get back up here, Norman! I mean it! You monster!”

I hit the gas.

“I love you!” I shouted, “You look beautiful!”

Idiot. Norman, you’re such an idiot.

Nobody knows the troubles I’ve seen...Nobody knows but Jesus...