We Are Not Friends

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Abstract
There is something about the way the phone rings that lets you know it's Them - a kind of glitter in the chime, a certain je ne sais quoi to the cadence, which seems to skip a beat as if it can't believe that They are calling. You pick up, heart throbbing, getting ready to move your mouth, a sly frisson of sweat striking your palms.

"They asked me to call," Their assistant says. "They want you at the house next Thursday. And then you'll all go somewhere. A plane will be involved. You'll want to bring a passport. Until Monday, let's say. Can I pen you in?"

Of course, you say. Because, really, you know no other response. And you want to. And you like Them.

[excerpt]

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fiction BY FRED G. LEEBROK
When they’re not sailing their boat or hiking in places where nobody recognizes them, the two take their friends with them to Tuscany villas, where everybody cooks, drinks good wine, and stays up late talking and waiting for something unexpected to happen.

“We fly them in if they don’t have money,” she says of her mates. “One of the hard things about dealing with wealth is that you don’t want to lose your friends. And a lot of that is saying, ‘We happen to be very fortunate and very lucky—so let’s all enjoy it.’” (From a profile of Nicole Kidman, in Vogue magazine, June 1999.)

There is something about the way the phone rings that lets you know it’s Them—a kind of glitter in the chime, a certain je ne sais quoi to the cadence, which seems to skip a beat as if it can’t quite believe that They are calling. You pick up, heart throbbing, getting ready to move your mouth, a sly frisson of sweat striking your palms.

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All week you attend to dropping everything—meetings at work, the children at your mother’s, the cats at the kennel, your own self-involvement into the basement of your brain. You feel a wonderful tingle at the top of your head—someone likes you and it is Them. You shop for clothes, scout the itinerary that will get you to the house on time, and concentrate on biting your lip when anyone asks you if you have any special plans. One of your attributes is discretion, another is your wry or winning or self-deprecating humor, a third the fact that your personality doesn’t change when you drink. Beyond that, you’re not sure. It’s certainly not your looks or your bitterness or your propensity toward self-pity—which They simply will not tolerate. Maybe it’s just you. You’re a special friend, a mem-
ber of the inner circle, a trusted one. You have watched Their back and They have watched you watch it. Together you’ve skinny-dipped, drunk too much expensive single-malt, fallen down stairs and off trampolines. You know things about Them that you’ve made yourself forget, so fearful are you of being quoted by anyone who hounds you for tidbits.

At Their house—an ascetic zen bowl sink in the bathroom, ten-thousand-dollar rococo couches opposing each other on the hardwood floor, flames roaring in the marble fireplace even though it is spring outside—you sit dazed with the other friends, some of whom you don’t know at all and others whom you know too well. “I’ll tell you,” a loud brunette whispers, “the most surprising thing in my life is that I am Their friend.” You nod politely—you’ve been on many such junkets with her, you know her for the starfucker she is and you believe you are not—and yet your face saddens and you cast around inside yourself for some kind of truth—what does this summoning really feel like, this performance of friendship?

They saunter down the steps, smiles dazzling, eyes secreted behind sunglasses, the room growing brilliant in the light that great success can shed. “We set?” He says, in that muscular grunge way. “Shall we?” She offers, with that sweet slope of her voice. A tinted Mercedes van instantly pulls up. The assistant shoos you in, calling, “Disposable cameras are in your favor bags. I’ve made sure dinner is vegan.” And you drive off, people clicking off cell phones, everyone grinning as if in on a great secret, terrifics and excitings strewn about the interior like petals in the aisle at Their wedding. You’re not even sure where you’re going.

At the airport in the descending darkness waits a camp of paparazzi. Within the plush hush of the van you listen to His instructions: all friends off first, meet in the celebrity lounge. You open the door to the frantic glare.

“Who’s that?”
“Is it Them?”
“Don’t shoot, don’t shoot! It’s no one.”

Needlessly grinning, you hurry inside. From behind the heavy glass you can’t
Finally, it is Her. Dressed in white. Bright red lipstick. Sunglasses off. Smiling with élan.

help turning and watching. Eventually, He descends, stands smirking for an instant as flashes pop and spray, agreeably removes his sunglasses momentarily, mouths some ironic remark you cannot hear, and shoulders his way through. Finally, it is Her. Dressed in white. Bright red lipstick. Sunglasses off. Smiling with élan. Then they let Her go.

In the lounge you’re all panting hard from the near-celebrity exertion. The flight is called. Wait, you’re told. You sip a seltzer. The clock turns. “That time at Moomba,” one friend says. “What a bitch,” someone sneers. “Then Kenny did that thing to her.” Uproarious laughter when She laughs, solemn nods when He is pensive. There is industry chitchat that you cannot follow, names tossed out like so much parade candy. Five minutes before departure, you all rise. Those of you who have sunglasses put them on. At the wordless direction of the oldest friend, a multimega exec in a double-breasted suit with an electronic device in each pocket, you form a phalanx of escorts around Them and stride through the dark airport onto the dark plane.

“Should I know you,” an older stewardess nervously giggles to Them, taking the new dress on its hanger that She has somehow managed to purchase as She charmingly entertained in the airport. “I know I should know you. I’m sure my son would know you.”

You sit back in your seats, marveling at how hard it must be to be Them, to be commented to and on at every available turn, to surrender any iota of private embarrassment or pain or joy, to have all elements of life cut up into smaller and smaller pieces to be chewed and emitted by the bulimic media, to pose and play in full nudity in scenes that can be viewed and reviewed until everyone everywhere knows just where the coiffed curl of pubic hair gives way to scraggly fur. To be so exposed. You shudder honestly and sip your cocktail as the plane lifts and lifts.
Of course, you understand, this will all come to an end.

In Italy there are ten times as many paparazzi and their hands beat at the metal flanks of the Volvo bus as you sail by and away and the shutters stop, the road empties, and you are up past olive trees and lines of vineyards into the tender hills. The eight or ten of you who have made it this far beam radiantly and when a relative newcomer offers cigarettes you dismissively decline as you wisely await further instructions on protocol. Up front, by the driver, the Two who've brought you hold hands across the aisle. In the distance a white compound with red tile roofs rises, destined peaks of emotion and indulgence fronted by the tiny heads of many ingratiating servants and the bursting frills of bougainvillea and hyacinth.

Of course, you understand, this will all come to an end. Someday you will arrive late for a command appearance, flustered by a rough business lunch and the fact that you will have performed too much beforehand, and one of Them will tease you and you will tease Them too much in return, perhaps you will even talk back, perhaps you will even be rude. The assistant will snap her carnivorous jaws at you, He will look away in disappointment, She will wait you out in silence until you recognize that you must leave. You will stumble at the door, unwilling to apologize, unable to sense anything but the exhilaration of yourself unmasked as a person. Their look has lit you in a thousand different ways, at gala benefits and in cozy restaurants, on Page Six of the Post and in a dozen weekly magazines, on the beach and in lift lines, but now the gold has gone out of it. Is it something you have done to Them, or They have done to you, or you have done to yourself, or—incredibly—they have done to Themselves? What has this friendship meant if, in the instant you watch it slip from your hands, you feel both relieved and regretful, nostalgic and enraged, redeemed and vilified, negligible and tangible? Who knows, but in this long moment of first and last betrayal—their impatience, your indiscretion; your transgression, Their dismissal—shines the only time that They will ever remember that you were there.