

stories

cary fagan



a fast horse never brings good news

A
FAST
HORSE
NEVER
BRINGS
GOOD
NEWS

Five Stories

CARY
FAGAN

FIRST EDITION

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THE BIG STORY



THE IDEA OF DINNER WITH STRANGERS IN A RESTAURANT with a dress code—who could possibly find that appealing? But I was in town for work and my boss asked me to present myself, representing our office, as it were. I put on a dress, something conservative but nice, and got there ten minutes after the hour to find that the five of us had been put into a private room, which I considered even worse. Airless and without the distraction of other people coming and going, waiters opening bottles, couples having arguments, it felt to me like a kind of incarceration. I was the second-last to arrive—good timing, I thought—and we all sat down at the oval table with the white cloth and the properly laid-out silver and glasses and the wine-coloured carpet under our feet and the hunting prints on the walls. Immediately wine was poured, and it turned out that the menu had been pre-chosen, so at least I didn't have to listen to the others hemming and hawing over their choices.

We exchanged names. Eileen, Burak, Simone, Orin, and me. Eileen and Burak were a couple and Eileen and Simone knew each other from some yoga retreat. That left only Orin and myself as complete strangers, but I didn't respond to his sympathetic glance. Not looking for any allies, thank you very much. I just wanted to get through the evening and have myself a long hotel-room bath.

The appetizer arrived, a sprinkling of roasted vegetables on a bed of wild rice. As we started to eat, Eileen made a reference

to somebody's big story. To my surprise they all started talking, and although I'd planned to keep quiet, I couldn't help opening my mouth. "Sorry but I'm not following. What do you mean by a big story?"

"I'm sure you know," Simone said, smiling with encouragement. "That idea everyone's been posting about."

"I don't think so."

The others exchanged glances, which rather annoyed me. Burak said, "It's this theory that's going around."

"Not a theory," Eileen said. "It's the truth. It's real."

Others nodded. I was starting to feel like the backward kid in class who just couldn't get long division. "Okay, I'll bite. What is it?"

Only now did Orin admit that he, too, had never heard of the big story. What a coward! And so they explained, Eileen starting, Burak jumping in, Simone adding detail. None of them knew the origin, but it was really quite simple. Every person, so the theory went, had a story from childhood that explained them in the deepest, most essential way. Of course people had childhood anecdotes, but this was different, the big story that explained why a person grew into the adult they had become.

"I don't mean to disrespect anyone's belief," I said, "but doesn't that seem a little simplistic to you all?"

"I suppose it makes sense to you or it doesn't." Simone sounded a little defensive.

"It's easy to be cynical," said Burak.

"I'm not trying to be and I'm sorry if I sound that way. Maybe you could tell me more. I mean, what's your own big story, then?"

It was as if I'd shoved open a window and let ice-cold air into the room. This was not going the way my boss had wanted. I would have to find a way to change the subject and, with luck, the mood.

But then Simone said, "I'll tell you mine."

"You don't have to," Orin said. "I mean, I've never heard of this

before, but it seems to me that a person might want to keep such a thing to themselves.”

“It won’t be the first time I’ve told it,” Simone went on. “It’s good for me, I think. Isn’t that also the point, that knowing your big story and telling it gives one a greater self-knowledge? I was very young. In the night I woke from a nightmare. My room was dark—I wasn’t allowed any sort of light, you see—and I called out for my mother. But she didn’t answer. Even though I was scared, I got out of bed. I can remember very precisely the cold floor on the soles of my feet. I went out of my room and tiptoed down the apartment hall to my parents’ bedroom door. The rule was to knock, but I thought they would be sleeping so I opened it up slowly and peeked in. No mother or father. The bed still made. I went to the sitting room and the kitchen and even the toilet, but I didn’t find them. And that is when I knew that the monster from my dreams had eaten them up. I was overcome with terror but I managed to crawl under the dining room table. I wept as quietly as I could since I knew the monster had extremely good hearing. My sobs grew less controllable and louder, and I thought I might start screaming, when the apartment door opened. In came my parents, holding on to one another. Topsy, laughing. In that instant I understood that they had left me all alone to go to the bar next door. I managed to slip back to my room undetected. But after that, I hated my parents and now as an adult I live on a different continent and rarely call. It’s the reason I mistrust people and fear being abandoned. My partner, Constance—it’s a good name, no?—she has to give me constant reassurance, and even then I am convinced she will leave me one day.”

Everyone looked grave. By now the main course—baked cod with roasted potatoes—had been served. I was hungry but didn’t want to be first and so I waited for Simone to finally pick up her fork. She said, “Is it just me or does this fish seem dry?”

“And too salty,” said Eileen. “But I can’t resist a free dinner. Do you want to hear my story?”

“Your *big* story?” said Simone.

“Yes, my big story. I was older, almost eleven, and went on holiday with my family. To the ocean, which I’d never seen before. I fell in love the moment I saw it, and with the beach, too. I’d only been on stone beaches and lakes. My mom couldn’t get me out of the water. I’d play in the shallows, swim out a short way, let the waves bring me back in. I remember one late afternoon when I was pretending to be a porpoise, diving down, touching the sandy bottom, rising up again. I’d gone out just far enough so that I could keep my head above water if I was on my toes. But then the tide started to come in—gradually, so that I didn’t realize it until a big wave rolled up and swamped me. I went down, swallowed water, and came up sputtering. I tried to stand, but my feet flailed without touching bottom. I felt a rising panic and slipped under again. This time I managed to hold my breath until I could fight my way to the surface. It was hard to see because of the waves and the water in my eyes, but I could tell that I had drifted further from the shore. Another big wave came, I held my breath, I went under and came up. I was growing tired. I was no longer certain which way was land. I was sure—I’m still sure—I was going to drown. My head went under again. And then two arms appeared around me. They took me around the waist and hauled me up so I could breathe. Of course I knew instantly that it was my big brother. I started coughing. He swam toward the shore while holding on to me. It couldn’t have been easy, because I was fighting him the whole way. And then finally when he tried to let go of me, I clung to him. But we were back in the shallows, and when I did let go I fell on all fours. I just stayed there shaking and trying to breathe.”

“So your brother was a hero,” Orin asked.

“He was only fourteen. I was too upset to thank him or even talk about it, and to this day we never have. But here’s the thing. It didn’t make me afraid of the water or anything else. It had the opposite effect. Since then I’ve carried this unshakable belief that

no matter what I do, no matter what risk I take, I'm always going to be all right."

We were silent. Finally Simone said, "I like your story better than mine." Everybody laughed.

We had all finished our cod except for Eileen, who had been talking, and she began to eat ravenously. It was while they were clearing away the main dishes and bringing us small bowls of salad that Burak began telling us about his big story. "I was nine years old and my entire identity was wrapped up in playing the violin. I'd started on the Suzuki method when I was six, which wasn't even that young. My parents had both been amateur musicians, playing in a municipal orchestra. In fact, that's how they met. So they were thrilled to find that I had a natural talent and I loved playing. I never had to be told to practise. If anything, they had to make me stop and go play outside. But the one thing I didn't like doing was performing for an audience. Whenever my parents had a party, they would ask me and I always made up some excuse, like I had a stomach ache or one of my violin strings had broken. I had performed once at the music school concert, but I was seven and it was with a bunch of other kids. I'd avoided doing it again, but when I turned nine my teacher phoned my parents to make sure I was going to be in the concert that year. She said I was the best student she'd had in a long time and had assigned me a solo to learn, the first movement of Mozart's Violin Concerto No. 3 in G Major, with her accompaniment on the piano. I loved practising it but I still didn't want to perform."

"But why?" asked Simone. "When it was your joy."

"At the time I couldn't understand my feelings. It seems so obvious to me now. My teacher. She was a failed and disappointed concert violinist and was living vicariously through me. I couldn't see how manipulative she was, cold one day and affectionate the next, making me so hyper-aware of her moods that I would try to anticipate what she wanted. What a thrill I felt when she touched my arm or gave me a compliment. Those lessons always

left me feeling sick. That's the only way I can describe it. But even though I wanted to make her happy, I thought performing was just too much for me. So on the day of the concert I refused even to get into the little suit my mother had bought for me. My parents couldn't understand it. They saw how I lived to play; why wouldn't I want to share my talent? But they let me decide. Finally I resigned myself and got dressed, slumping into the back of the car. The school had rented an auditorium and it was pretty full. I sat with my parents, and when my turn came, I went up onto the stage and tuned my violin and my teacher nodded at me and I started to play. How well I performed I can't say—I have no memory of it. But I can recall everything immediately afterwards, the standing ovation, my teacher beaming. And as I stood there I knew I would never, ever touch the violin again. And I've kept to my vow."

Somebody put down a spoon. A chair creaked.

"Of course I know this story," Eileen said. "But I don't understand why you can't start again, even now. Just for your own pleasure."

"No, it's too late. And there's no positive end to my big story. I was robbed of something I can't ever get back. And it has left me with a melancholy that never completely goes away."

Simone said, "I'm so sorry that happened to you." But her sympathy was cut short by the arrival of one waiter to take away the salad bowls and another with dessert. Crème brûlée with a dollop of house-made whipped cream and a sprinkling of raspberries on the side.

"What about you, Orin," Burak said. "I know you're hearing about this for the first time, but most people know immediately what their big story is."

Orin looked up, his spoon posed in the air. He looked as scared as a kid who'd been caught shoplifting a dirty magazine. "I...well, to be honest, I don't think I have one."

"Come on," said Eileen.

“Really. I’ve been thinking about it while you’ve all been talking. In fact, I’ve been racking my brain. There was this one time when a clown scared me at a birthday party. And another when I was ten and somehow managed to break my arm in an elevator. But I wouldn’t call them life-changing. I don’t really ever think about them. Or much about my childhood, really. It wasn’t bad or anything. It was pretty ordinary. I don’t think I have a big story.”

“If you don’t want to tell us, you can just say so.” Simone sounded miffed.

“No, I would tell you if it was that.”

“Hey,” said Burak. “Not everyone is naturally self-reflective.”

There was another change in the air, either from disapproval of Burak’s comment or a loss of interest in Orin. Everyone ate their dessert in silence except for Eileen, who took only one bite of hers. Orin himself looked pretty uncomfortable. I saw him glance surreptitiously at his watch.

The waiter came in with coffee. “Do you have decaf?” Eileen asked.

“Perhaps it’s not fair to ask someone without warning,” Simone said, nodding at me. “We can just change the subject.”

“Unless *you* actually know your big story,” Burak said.

“Right,” Eileen nodded. “We might as well give you the option.”

Now they were all looking at me. Even disgraced Orin. I glanced at the door, tempted to make a run for it. I could feel myself chewing my lip, the way I did when I got anxious.

Picking up my coffee, I downed half of it in a gulp. “Maybe I have one.”

“We’d love you to share,” Eileen said.

“All right. I was seven—no, eight. I’d already had my birthday. It was late spring, I remember. Been raining for a week and then finally the sun came out. I had these yellow boots that I loved, and I put them on to go into the backyard. I used to walk around

saying hello to everything. ‘Hello, fence. Hello, grass. Hello, rock. Hello, tree.’”

“Cute,” said Eileen.

“‘Hello,’ the tree said back to me. Huh? I looked up and saw this woman up in our tree. Crouching on a branch. There was a man, too. And a boy and a girl. And a baby in the woman’s arms. And an old man with a white beard and also a little dog.”

“Are you serious?” asked Simone.

“I am. The woman started nursing the baby. She said it was a very nice tree and would it be all right if they stayed in it for a while? So I ran inside. I told my dad there was a family in the tree. Could they stay awhile? He didn’t see why not, as long as it was okay with my mother. She was in the living room. I asked her the same thing. My mom didn’t see why not, as long as it was okay with my father. I ran out again and told them they could stay. I spent the whole afternoon playing with the boy and girl. The boy and I played catch—he tossed the ball down from the tree and I threw it back up, which wasn’t so easy. The girl made each of us a crown of leaves and twigs. I wore it on my head for hours.”

Burak said, “I’ve never heard anything like this.”

“Maybe I won’t tell the rest.”

“No, go on. Please.”

“All right. So the next morning I put on my jacket and ran out to the backyard. The man and the woman were cooking breakfast in the tree on this little portable stove. The boy was playing guitar, trying to figure out some chord. The girl was stringing beads onto a necklace. The old man was doing calisthenics.”

Orin said, “You forgot about the baby and the dog.”

“I don’t remember what they were doing. The woman asked me if I’d like some pancakes, only she didn’t call them pancakes but something else. They were warm and delicious. It’s not as if I didn’t know this was weird. Why would a family hang out in a tree? But I didn’t feel right about asking them.

“In the middle of the night when I got up to pee, I looked out

the window and saw them all sleeping. Summer came. I went out every day. I've no idea how they relieved themselves. One morning I went into the kitchen and said to my parents, 'You haven't met the family in the tree. Do you want to come to the backyard with me?' They said of course. So we all went out. 'Oh my,' my mother said, and put her hand up to her mouth. The tree had blossomed. It was full of these tiny white flowers, so many that even I could hardly see the family. 'Amazing,' my father said. 'That tree hasn't blossomed in years.'"

"Your parents didn't see them?"

"Not as far as I could tell. The summer grew warm. I watched the old man teach the girl how to waltz. The boy got kind of moody and didn't always want to play. I tried to cheer him up by playing the one song I knew on my plastic recorder. It grew cooler, and one day the girl said, 'Catch!' and threw me something. An apple. Not large but crisp and sweet. The boy and girl picked more apples and tossed them down to me. I caught them in my shirt and took them inside.

"Why, that tree hasn't had apples since we moved here,' my father said.

"I'm going to make an apple pie,' my mother said.

"It grew colder. I had to put a sweater on under my jacket. The family put on sweaters, too. Leaves started to fall. Sometimes it rained. They started to look miserable. And then early one morning it began to snow. I jumped out of bed, got dressed in my winter boots and coat, and went out. The family was climbing down from the tree. First the woman. Then the man. Then the boy carrying the baby and the old man holding the girl's hand. Last came the dog, jumping into the man's arms.

"'Goodbye,' called the woman. 'Goodbye,' said the boy and girl. The dog ran up to me, and when I leaned down, it licked my face. I followed them to the front of the house and watched them go down the sidewalk until they turned the corner and I couldn't see them anymore."

The waiter came in and asked if anyone wanted a liqueur. Orin asked for a Drambuie.

Eileen said, "But what do you think now? I mean, were they homeless people? Refugees? Did you possibly dream it?"

"I can only tell you that I remember it perfectly."

"And what does it say to you?" asked Simone.

"Right," Burek nodded. "Did it change your life in some way?"

I shrugged but said nothing. There was a long pause, and then they gave up waiting and began to push back their chairs. We filed out of that stuffy room, through the half-empty restaurant, and onto the street. It was dark except for the circles cast by the street lights and a few neon shop signs. The others decided to walk back to the hotel together. I said I wanted some air and quickly went in the other direction. I walked several blocks, buttoning up my jacket against the chill. A small park appeared and I followed the path that crossed it. I stopped at a tree that had mostly lost its leaves. What kind it was I didn't know, but it had the right sort of branches for climbing, strong and set apart. But I was too old to climb and just put my hand on the trunk. Well, of course, I thought. Doesn't every story change something? And then I started walking again.