

# The Dinner List

REBECCA SERLE



FLATIRON  
BOOKS  
NEW YORK

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How many miles to Babylon?  
Three score miles and ten—  
Can I get there by candlelight?  
Yes, and back again—  
If your feet are nimble and light  
You can get there by candlelight.

—TRADITIONAL NURSERY RHYME

The stars you see at night are the  
unblinking eyes of sleeping elephants,  
who sleep with one eye open  
to best keep watch over us.

—GREGORY COLBERT,  
*Ashes and Snow*

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*The  
Dinner  
List*

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7:30 P.M.

WE'VE BEEN WAITING FOR AN HOUR." That's what Audrey says. She states it with a little bit of an edge, her words just bordering on cursive. That's the thing I think first. Not *Audrey Hepburn is at my birthday dinner* but *Audrey Hepburn is annoyed*.

Her hair is longer than the image I've always held of her in my mind. She's wearing what looks to be a pantsuit, but her legs are hidden under the table so it's hard to tell. Her top is black, with a crème-colored collar, three round buttons down the front. A cardigan is looped over the back of her chair.

I step back. I take them in. All of them. They're seated at a round table, right in the center of the restaurant. Audrey is facing the door, Professor Conrad to her right and Robert to her left. Tobias sits on the other side of Robert, to his left is Jessica, and in between her and Tobias is my empty chair.

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“We started without you, Sabrina,” Conrad says, holding up his wineglass. He’s drinking a deep red; so is Jessica. Audrey has a scotch, neat; Tobias has a beer; Robert has nothing.

“Are you going to sit?” Tobias asks me. His voice cracks a little at the edges, and I think that he’s still smoking.

“I don’t know,” I say. I’m surprised I have the ability for words, because this is insane. Maybe I’m dreaming. Maybe this is some sort of mental breakdown. I blink. I think maybe when I open my eyes it will be just Jessica seated there, which is what I’d been expecting. I have the urge to bolt out the door, or maybe go to the bathroom, splash some cold water on my face to determine whether or not they’re really here—whether we’re all really here together.

“Please,” he says. There is a hint of desperation in his voice.

*Please.* Before he left, that was the word I used. *Please.* It didn’t make a difference then.

I think about it. Because I do not know what else to do. Because Conrad is pouring Merlot from the bottle and because I can’t just keep standing here.

“This is freaking me out,” I say. “What’s going on?”

“It’s your birthday,” Audrey says.

“I love this restaurant,” Conrad says. “Hasn’t changed in twenty-five years.”

“You knew I’d be here,” Jessica says. “We’ll just make room for a few more.” I wonder what she said when she got here. Whether she was surprised or delighted.

“Perhaps we could talk,” Robert says.

Tobias says nothing. That was always our problem. He was so willing to allow silence to speak for him. The frustration I feel at him next to me overwhelms my disbelief in my situation. I sit.

The restaurant bustles around us, the diners undisturbed by what's going on here. A father tries to quiet a small child; a waiter pours wine into glasses. The restaurant is small, maybe twelve tables total. There are red potted hydrangeas by the doorway and a soft sprinkling of holiday lights line the place where the wall meets the ceiling. It's December, after all.

"I need a drink," I declare.

Professor Conrad claps his hands together. I remember he used to do that right before class would let out or he'd assign a big project. It's his way of anticipating action. "I came all the way from California for this blessed event, so the least you could do is catch me up on what you're doing now. I don't even know what you ended up majoring in."

"You want an update on my life?" I ask.

Jessica rolls her eyes next to me. "Communications," she says.

Professor Conrad puts a hand to his chest in a show of feigned shock.

"I'm a book editor now," I say a bit defensively. "Jessica, what is going on?"

Jessica shakes her head. "This is your dinner." My list. She knows, of course. She was there when I made it. It was her idea. The five people, living or dead, you'd like to have dinner with.

"You don't think this is insane?" I say.

She takes a sip of wine. "A little. But crazy things happen every day. Haven't I always told you that?"

When we lived together, in that cramped apartment on Twenty-first Street, she had inspirational quotes everywhere. On the bathroom mirror. On the Ikea desk that held our television. Right by the door. *Worrying is wishing for what you don't want. Man plans and God laughs.*

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“Is this everyone?” Robert asks.

Audrey flips over her wrist. “I’d hope so,” she says.

I take a sip of wine. I take a deep breath.

“Yes,” I answer. “This is everyone.”

They look at me. All five of them. They look expectant, hopeful.

They look like I’m supposed to tell them why they’re here.

But I can’t do that. Not yet, anyway. So instead, I open my menu.

“Why don’t we order,” I say. And we do.

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# ONE

I FIRST SAW TOBIAS AT AN art exhibit at the Santa Monica Pier. Four years later we exchanged names on the subway stuck underground at Fourteenth Street, and we had our first date crossing the Brooklyn Bridge. Our story spanned exactly one decade, right down to the day we ended. But as it's been said before—it's easier to see the beginnings of things, and harder to see the ends.

I was in college, my sophomore year. I was taking Conrad's philosophy class. Part of the course was a weekly field trip organized by students on a rotating basis. Someone took us to the Hollywood sign, another to an abandoned house on Mulholland designed by a famous architect I had never heard of. I'm not sure what the point was except that Conrad, self-admittedly, liked to get out of the classroom. "This is not where learning takes place," he often said.

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For my outing I chose the art exhibit *Ashes and Snow*. I had heard about it from some friends who had gone the weekend before. Two giant tents were erected on the beach by the Santa Monica Pier, and the artist Gregory Colbert was showing his work—big, beautiful photographic images of human beings living in harmony with wildlife. There had been a giant billboard that sat on Sunset Boulevard the entire year of 2006—a small child reading to a kneeling elephant.

It was the week before Thanksgiving. I was flying home the next day to Philadelphia to spend the holiday with my mother's extended family. My mom was contemplating a move back East, where she was from. We'd been in California since I was six years old, since right after my father left.

I was flustered. I remember cursing myself that I'd signed up to organize this event when I had so much other stuff going on. I was fighting with Anthony—my on-again, off-again business-major boyfriend, who rarely left the confines of his fraternity house except for “around the world” parties, where the only traveling was to the toilet after mixing too many different kinds of booze. The whole relationship was fiction, comprised mainly of text messages and drunken nights that we somehow cobbled into togetherness. In truth, we were biding our time. He was two years older, a senior with a finance job in New York already lined up. I thought, loosely, we'd someday transition this playing pretend into playing house, but of course we never did.

*Ashes and Snow* was stunning. The indoor space was dramatic and yet serene—like practicing yoga at the very edge of a cliff.

Our student group scattered quickly—mesmerized by the scale

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of the thing. A child kissing a lion, a little boy sleeping with a bobcat, a man swimming with whales. And then I saw him. Standing in front of a photograph I can only recall with a pull in my heart so strong I have to take a step back. The picture was of a little boy, eyes closed, eagle wings spread behind him.

I was instantly in awe. Of the photographs, the image itself, and this boy. The one outside the photograph. Brown shaggy hair. Low-slung jeans. Two brown shirts layered like dirt. I didn't see his eyes immediately. I didn't yet know they were the most searing shade of green, like jewels, so sharp they could cut right through you.

I stood next to him. We didn't look at each other. For minutes. Ten, maybe more. I couldn't tell what I was seeing—him, or the boy. But I felt a current between us; the sand kicked up around us like it was charged, too. Everything seemed to converge. For one beautiful, exquisite moment there was no separation.

"I've been four times already," he told me, eyes still gazing forward. "I never want to leave this spot."

"He's beautiful," I said.

"The whole exhibit is pretty incredible."

"Are you in school?" I asked.

"Mm-hm," he said. He glanced at me. "UCLA."

"USC," I told him, tapping my chest.

If he were a different kind of guy—say, Anthony—he would have made a face. He would have talked about the rivalry. But I'm not even sure he knew about this ritual we were supposed to engaged in—the Trojans versus the Bruins.

"What do you study?" I asked him.

He gestured toward the canvas. "I'm a photographer," he said.

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“What kind?”

“I’m not so sure yet. Right now my specialty is being mildly bad at everything.”

He laughed; so did I. “I doubt that’s true.”

“How come?”

“I don’t know,” I said. I looked back at the photograph. “I just do.”

A group of teenage girls hovered nearby, staring at him. When I looked over they giggled and dispersed. I couldn’t blame them—he was beautiful.

“What about you?” he asked. “Let me guess. Acting.”

“Ha. Hardly. Communications,” I said.

“I was close.” He extended his pointer finger out toward my chest. I wanted to grab on to the end. “Anyway, good skill to have.”

*The most important thing in communication is hearing what isn’t said.*

“That’s what my mom tells me.”

He turned to me then, and his eyes opened to mine. That’s the only way I know how to describe it. It was a key in a lock. The door just swung free.

The wind picked up, and my hair started flying around me. It was longer then, much longer than it is now. I tried to tame it, but it was like trying to catch a butterfly. It kept escaping my reach.

“You look like a lion,” he said. “I wish I had my camera.”

“It’s too long,” I said. I was blushing. I hoped the hair was covering it.

He just smiled at me. “I need to go,” he said. “But now I don’t want to.”

I could see Conrad behind him, lecturing four of our group near

a photograph of a giraffe that appeared to be almost to scale. Conrad waved me over. “Me too,” I said. “I mean, me neither.”

I wanted to say more, or I wanted him to. I stood there unmoving, waiting for him to ask for my number. Any more information. But he didn’t. He just gave me a little salute and walked back toward Conrad and out of the tent. I didn’t even get his name.

Jessica was home when I got back to our dorm. We were two of the only sophomores on the entirety of USC’s campus who still lived in university housing. But it came out to be cheaper, and neither one of us could afford to move. We didn’t have Orange County or Hollywood money like so many of our fellow students.

Back then Jessica had long brown hair and big glasses and she wore long flowy dresses nearly every day, even in winter. Although the coldest it ever got was in the fifties.

“How was the exhibit?” she asked. “Do you want to go to Pi Kapp tonight? Sumir said they’re throwing a beach-themed party but we don’t have to dress up.”

I tossed my bag down and slumped in the living room chair. There wasn’t room for a couch. Jessica was on the floor.

“Maybe,” I said.

“Call Anthony,” she said, getting up to turn off the ringing teakettle.

“I don’t think I want to be with him anymore,” I said.

I could hear her pouring the hot water, ripping open a teabag. “What do you mean you *think*?”

I picked at the hem of my denim shorts. “There was this guy at the exhibit today.”

Jessica came back holding a steaming cup. She offered me some. I shook my head. “Tell me,” she said. “From class?”

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“No, he was just there.”

“What’s his deal?”

“He’s a photographer; he goes to UCLA.”

Jessica blew on her tea and settled back down on the floor. “So are you going to see him?”

“No,” I said. “I don’t even know his name.”

Jessica frowned at me. She’d had exactly one boyfriend in her entire life—Sumir Bedi, the man who would a few years later become her husband. Their relationship didn’t strike me as being particularly romantic; it still doesn’t. They were both in the same dorm freshman year. He asked her to his fraternity invite, she said yes, and they started dating. They slept together a year later. It was both of their first times. She didn’t talk about him and get mushy, but they also rarely fought. I suspected it was because neither one of them drank much. She was a romantic person, though, and deeply invested in my love life. She wanted every detail. Sometimes I found myself embellishing just to give her something more to hear.

“I just don’t think I want to be with Anthony anymore.” How could I explain what had happened? That in a moment I’d given my heart to a stranger I’d probably never see again?

She set her teacup down on the coffee table. “All right,” she said. “We’ll just have to find this guy.”

My heart bloomed with affection for her. That was Jessica—she didn’t need a way, just a why. “You’re crazy,” I told her. I stood up and glanced out our twentieth-story window. Outside students were walking back and forth across campus like tiny tin soldiers sent on a mission. It all looked so orderly and intentioned from up here. “He doesn’t even go USC. It’s impossible.”

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“Have a little faith,” she told me. “I think your problem is you don’t believe in fate.”

Jessica came from a conservative family in Michigan. I would watch her evolution slowly, from Christian Midwesterner to full-blown liberal hippie, and then—many years later—a sharp right into East Coast conservative.

The week before she had come home with a stack of magazines, paper, and colored pencils. “We’re making dream boards,” she had announced.

I looked at the supplies and turned back to my book. “No thanks.”

Jessica had been taking this course in spirituality—some kind of “Unleash the Power Within” Tony Robbins stepchild led by a woman with a self-ascribed Hindu name.

“You haven’t done a single exercise with me,” Jessica had said, plopping herself down onto a pillow on our floor.

I surveyed her. “You have anything with a little less glitter?”

Her eyes brightened. “Swani asked us to make a list of the five people living or dead we’d like to have dinner with.” She rummaged in her supply bag and pulled out a stack of yellow Post-its. “No glitter.”

“Will this make you happy?” I asked, closing my book, already resigned.

“For about an hour,” she said, but I could see the spark in her eye. I never said yes to stuff like this, even though she always kept asking.

She started talking a lot then. About the exercise, about what it meant, about how the imagined fictional dinner was like a reckoning between parts of yourself you needed to come to terms with—yadda yadda. I wasn’t really listening; I just started drafting.

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The first few were easy: Audrey Hepburn, because I was a nineteen-year-old girl. Plato, because I had read *The Republic* four times since high school and was riveted—and because Professor Conrad spoke of his contributions often. I wrote Robert’s name down without even thinking. As soon as I saw it I wanted to cross it out, but I didn’t. He was still my father, even if I could barely remember ever knowing him.

Two more.

I loved my mom’s mom. Her name was Sylvia, and she had passed away the year before. I missed her. I wrote her name down. I couldn’t think of a fifth.

I looked over at Jessica, intently making a list on a giant piece of parchment paper in red and gold pencil.

I handed the note to her. She looked it over, nodded, and handed it back to me. I stuck it in my pocket and went back to my book. She seemed placated.

But now, about Tobias, she was not. “I do believe in fate,” I told her. I hadn’t, but I did now. It was hard to explain. How big ideas about life and love had solidified in ten minutes of standing next to him. “I shouldn’t have said anything. It was stupid. It was a moment.”

But it was a moment I wanted to make more of, and we went looking. We couldn’t find him online (searching “green eyes” and “UCLA” on Facebook did not give us very positive results—and something told me he wasn’t the sort of guy who had a profile), so we drove up to the UCLA campus in Sumir’s Toyota Corolla, which wouldn’t go more than forty on the freeway.

“What’s your plan when we get there?” I asked Jessica. “Start yelling ‘boy with brown hair’ loudly?”

“Relax,” she told me. “*I’m* not yelling anything.”

She parked in Westwood and we walked to the north side of campus, where the row houses and student apartments were. They all sat on tree-lined streets that poured out onto Sunset and up into the impeccable hills of Bel Air. Unlike USC, the campus breathed money. I followed behind, grateful that it was a sunny day, there were a lot of people around, and we were blending in well.

“I know we’re not supposed to say this,” I said. “But UCLA is way nicer than USC.”

“In location only,” Jessica said. She stopped in front of a bulletin board posted outside a campus building—library? I wasn’t sure.

“Aha,” she said. “As I’d hoped.”

I peered closer. It was a club board. The Food Club, Poetry Club. I followed Jessica’s finger. It tapped a yellow flyer lightly. “The Photography Club,” I read.

Jessica beamed. “You’re welcome.”

“I’m impressed,” I said. “But this doesn’t mean anything. He probably doesn’t belong to it. He didn’t really seem like a club kind of a guy. And what would we do, crash their meeting?”

Jessica rolled her eyes. “As charming as I find your negativity, they’re holding an open house next Tuesday, so you can just go to that.”

I shook my head. “If he was there, I’d seem crazy.”

Jessica shrugged. “Or you’d live happily ever after.”

“Right,” I said. “One of the two.” But I felt excitement spring a leak in me. What if I saw him again? What would I say?

My stomach growled then.

“Want to go to In-N-Out?” Jessica asked.

“Definitely.”

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We started to wander back to the Corolla, but before we did I snatched the flyer and stuffed it into my bag.

“I saw nothing,” Jessica said, looping her arm through mine.

When we got home I took out the Post-it and added a fifth. *Him.*

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