

The First Thing I Give Her

by Bill Cheng

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Paxton bought himself a wife and invited Jesse and me over for dinner. "Tell me what you think," he said. "If you don't like it, we can take it back, get a new one." He laughed and nudged me with his elbow till I laughed too. When we got to the door Jesse said, "I don't like him. He thinks he's funny but you never know where to put a man like that." She was holding the pudding she spent the afternoon making. Jesse and Paxton's ex-wife Dolly were good friends before she ran off to Arizona. The pudding was something Dolly taught her; she figured she was making some kind of point. "Damn it," I said. I was going to say more but Paxton opened the door.

He kissed Jesse on the cheek. "How are ya, darlin'?" he said and laughed like it was all some big joke.

"Where can I put this?" asked Jesse.

"Here, give me that," he said. "Bernice!" he called out. "Bernice! Get your butt out here. My friends are here."

He went into the kitchen with the pudding under his arm. From the hallway, a plump Asian woman came out in a robe. She had a plain face and long hair that she kept together with a rubber band. "Hello," I said.

She nodded her head slightly.

Jesse shook her hand and she folded one palm over the other almost like a prayer.

"Ah, there you are." Paxton came back into the room. "Well, here she is folks, what do you think?"

"It's nice to meet you," Jesse said. I didn't say anything. What was there to say?

Paxton popped open a bottle of wine and poured four glasses. "Bernice isn't her real name of course. Her real name has got a bunch of x's and z's. I was the one who gave her Bernice. It was my mother's middle name," he said. We all said cheers, clinked the glasses and drank. "Anyways, that's the first thing I give her. I give her the name."

"Bernice Paxton," I said.

"Mrs. Bernice Paxton," he said. He put his arm around her and tugged her close till her shoulder went up against her face.

"Well, what's the second thing?" I said.

He took Bernice's hand and held it up to the light.

"That looks familiar," Jesse said. She tilted the glass into her mouth. She licked her purple lips a few times.

"Jesse," I said.

"No, no. It's all right." He kissed Bernice's hand and folded it into his lap. "It's the same jeweler, that's all. The guy behind the counter even remembered my face."

"You definitely have a style," Jesse said. She lifted the empty glass lightly into the air and then set it back down. We all stared at Bernice for a little bit and she looked at the floor. "Where are you from?" Jesse asked.

"Some island in the South Pacific," Paxton said. "Or China or something. I don't remember." He took a deep gulp and then wiped his lips.

"Does she speak any English?" I asked.

"A little. All the basic stuff-- yes, no, hello, good morning. Not bad for twenty thousand, I don't think."

Jesse coughed a little of her wine out. It spilled on her blouse.

"Oh," Bernice said. She got up and went into the kitchen.

"No no please. It's all right," Jesse said.

Bernice came back out with a rag. She took an inch of Jesse's blouse between her fingers and pressed the rag against the stain.

"Please. It's old. It's okay."

"She knows all sorts of tricks," Paxton said. He laughed and slapped Bernice's behind. She cleared her throat and pressed harder on the stain. "Hon, don't you think you ought to get started on dinner?"

Bernice looked at him and then smoothed out the blouse. The stain was still there, but pink and faint. She smiled and went into the kitchen.

"I'll go help," Jesse said. She got up and went with her.

"She's not the greatest cook," Paxton said. "Bernice cooks all this oriental crap. Stuff wrapped in other stuff. All these sauces. I can't stand it. It took me a month to teach her how to grill a steak."

"She seems nice," I said.

He drained his glass and then filled it up again. "Let's go have a cigar." He went into a cabinet and clipped off two Havana Souls. "Not in here," he said. "Bernice gets asthmatic when I smoke inside."

We headed over to the back of house and puffed on our cigars. The yard looked like it hadn't been dealt with in years. The grass was slumped over and the weeds had gotten thick. Past the weeds, I could make out the faint outline of a flower box. The mosquito lamp zapped a few times as a pair of moths flicked towards and away.

"You know, when I first moved in here, I always thought about having a pool put in." He spread his hand out over a stretch of grass and made a frame with his fingers. "An in-ground pool, right there. Go out in the summer, strip down and just lay there all day with the radio going. Hire someone to take care of it. Scoop out the leaves and bugs and things."

"That sounds like something," I said. I blew out a puff of smoke and watched it fall apart.

"Dolly and me, after we saved up enough, we were going to do it in installments. We even had a guy come in. He took a dirt sample, stuck it in an envelope, ran a big yellow tape measure across this way. Gave us a real good deal too. But we told him we needed time. We'll talk it over and in a week or two we'll get back to you. Boy, to hear us, that pool was practically ours. Dolly went out and got herself a new bathing suit and I got me one of them inflatable rafts, so I can sit in and drink my beer." He let out a laugh. "Shit," he said.

I let the cigar burn in my hand for a while before putting it back in my mouth. "Well, you've got Bernice now."

He shook his head. "She can't swim. She's practically a stone." He sighed through his cigar. A big chunk of ash fell on his shirt. "Jesse's been giving me the daggers all night." He looked at me as if he was trying to read something on my face.

"She's just..."

"Hey, it's all right. I can live in a world where Jesse doesn't like me."

"Her and Dolly were just real close."

He laughed up a gray cloud. "Sure sure," he said. He twisted his cigar into the wall. "Me too."

Jesse came out of the kitchen with a tray full of hamburgers.

Paxton looked at the tray. "Where's Bernice?"

"She's washing up," Jesse said.

"Well, don't bother waiting," he said. He grabbed a burger from the center of the table. "She's getting better with the burgers, but she makes them bland as hell. I tell her she's got to salt the damn things, but I don't think she understands. I think it's cause all they eat is rice over there."

Bernice came in with a change of clothes, with her face done up with make-up. It made her look puffy and swollen.

"This is really good," Jesse said. "I have to get your recipe."

Bernice smiled and looked down at her lap.

"Yeah, it's very good. Never had a burger like this before," I said.

She nodded again at me.

Paxton turned over a big chunk in his mouth. "Hmm," he said. He chewed for a little while more, moving the bulge against his cheek. After he swallowed it down, he said "Baby, this tastes like shit." He put his burger down and flicked his fingers over his plate. "But I love you anyway."

Nobody talked much during dinner. After Bernice had cleared away the plates, Paxton suggested we all go out for a drink. "Something to wash down these patties," he said right before he planted a loud kiss on Bernice's cheek.

We got into Paxton's van and took it down to Bobby Porcelain's on seventh. We ordered up a round and we toasted the two of them: "To Max and Bernice. To a long and happy marriage," I said. Jesse took my hand under the table and squeezed it. We finished our beer and Paxton went and bought us all another round.

A few drinks in, a song kicked on in the jukebox and Jesse said, "I love this song." She hummed a little to it and sang a few lines from the verse. "Dance with me," she said.

We slid out of the booth and I danced her on the aisle. I could feel the bones of her hips swaying to the music. Her fingers started pulling on the buttons of my shirt. Paxton and Bernice came out and started dancing too. Bernice danced stiff and out of rhythm, stepping from side to side. Paxton slid his body down and hugged her around the waist and her face flushed a deep red. "Come on, baby," he said. "Show me what you can do."

Jesse put her lips to my ears and said, "I'm tired, Jim."

I nodded into her shoulder. "You want to stop dancing?"

"Let's get out of here."

"Now?" I said.

"Now," she said. "We can leave all these crazy people behind. I'm done with them."

"We came in Max's car."

"To hell with Max," she said. "We'll go to bed early and sleep in late. I'm so tired, Jim."

"You're just a little drunk is all."

She looked at me when I said that like she didn't understand it. Then she put her head on my shoulder and just left it there for a while. "How did we get here?" she said.

"We took Max's car," I said.

"That's not what I mean," she said. She leaned into me and muttered, "...stupid."

Bernice shrieked and I could see that Paxton had tried to dip her. He looked over at me and said, "Let's switch."

I looked into Jesse's pleading eyes. "Oh what the hell," I said and handed her over.

I danced with Bernice for a while. Her fingers were cold and strong. They went tight against my palms. She kept glancing up at my face and then away, as if she were embarrassed by something. It wasn't long before I gave it up and we sat back down.

"You dance lovely," I said.

She nodded and a few hairs fell across her face. She tucked it back behind her ear and looked into the bottom of her cup. Paxton and Jesse were still dancing. He said something to her and then laughed. They danced through the whole song.

"You're a lucky man," Paxton said when it was over.

Jesse slid back into the booth. She leaned into my ear and said, "I need to use the bathroom."

She looked at Bernice and the both of them headed to the bathroom.

"They're getting to be quite a pair," I said.

Paxton smiled and drank his beer. "This is fun," he said. "We don't do this often enough."

I nodded. "It has been a long while."

"Do you remember the last time? The last time we were here?"

"Sure, sure."

"Dolly threw that beer all over that poor kid's face. She was going to rip his eyes out."

I smiled and sucked the taste of beer off my teeth. "The first Mrs. Paxton," I said. I felt like raising up my glass but I was too tired to do it.

"You know I wrote her. This was months back. I was trying to explain things, you know? Just really piece it all together and show her that I figured it all out." He leaned away from the table and pulled his cheeks down. "I met her lawyer outside his building and I almost broke his fucking arm getting the address. But I got it." His fingers went tight into a fist and he rubbed at the knuckles.

"So what happened?" I said.

He shrugged his shoulders. "Nothing. She never wrote back."

"Forget about it," I said. "It doesn't matter now."

"I talk too much," he said.

We sat quiet for a while. He was rubbing the tips of his fingers like there was an itch he couldn't get at. I went ahead and said it. "This is a green card thing."

He looked up at me as if he were trying to put together what I had just said. Then he smiled and shook his head. "For her, maybe."

"And you're okay with that?"

He shrugged. He traced a shape against the side of his head and rubbed at his hair. "You see this? Not so long ago, it used to be all brown. And I had a lot more of it too. I got out of the shower one morning, and I cleared the steam off the mirror and I thought, that man ought to be married." He rubbed something between his fingers and looked down at the tips. "I don't know. What's it matter, anyway?"

"What kind of way is that to talk?" I said.

"I remember when she showed up at my door, we got into the van and I took her up to the mountain. She had these short-sleeves on and these big sunglasses and I had to give her my coat cause she was shaking the whole time. She looked so tiny in it and I thought, hell, I could pitch her off this ledge here and no one would even know. We hiked along the Eastern Trail till we got to this cliff. She was so afraid to go near it. But it looked out over the town, and you could see the saw mill and the water plant-- and I said, Welcome to America. I don't know if she knew what I was saying, but she walked up right next to me, right on the edge of it and we stood there for a while just looking at the whole damn place."

I nodded. "It sounds like a good start," I said.

Jesse and Bernice came back from the bathroom. "Those guys over there are creeps."

"Where?" I asked.

She pointed towards the bar. There were two young guys slouched up against the counter. They had their hair tucked into baseball caps and there were marks all up their arms.

Paxton's face went flat. He said, "Excuse me," and walked over. He was a good foot taller than them and he put his arm around one of the guys. They were saying something to each other but I couldn't hear what. After a few minutes, he came back to the table.

"What happened?" I said.

He looked at me and shook his head. "Not a damn thing."

On the ride back to the house, Jesse had fallen asleep at my neck. "We forgot to have dessert," Paxton said.

"That's all right," he said. "I'm too far gone."

"You guys brought dessert and we didn't have it."

"You keep it," I said.

"We should have a little before you go," he said.

When we got there, we sat around the table with our eyes half-open and our bodies slumped over. Bernice went into the kitchen to get the pudding.

"You guys can stay over if you like. We can clear off some space," Paxton said.

"We should be getting back," Jesse said.

Paxton laughed. "If Dolly had asked you, it would be a different story wouldn't it?"

Jesse picked her head up and tightened her eyes together. She was about to say something but Bernice came into the room with bowls of pudding.

"Looks good," Paxton said. He rubbed his hands together.

We all started eating. Bernice took a spoonful and slipped it into her mouth. Then she set the spoon down and folded her hands together.

"What's the matter, you don't like it?" Paxton wiped his lips.

She said something low and foreign.

"It's fine," Jesse said. "I used too much vanilla."

"It's delicious," Paxton said. He looked at Jesse and then at Bernice. "It's delicious. Say it."

Bernice stared at him, confused.

"Say it's delicious."

Her lips opened a little.

"It's delicious. Say it."

"Max," I said.

She picked up her spoon and he smacked it away. "Now you listen," he said. "It's delicious."

She squeaked out the words.

"Again!"

"Max," I said. He picked up his bowl and pitched it against the wall. The bowl came apart in pieces and Bernice let out a sharp yell. I stared at the yellow stain where the bowl had landed. I couldn't take my eyes off it.

ABOUT BILL CHENG

Bill Cheng lives in Queens and has a lot of problems.

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