

Who's at the Party

by H. W. Moss

Drama followed Shandon wherever she went. It didn't matter if it was the slightest incident, there would be histrionics. There would be strained dialogue and misunderstanding, failed communication, the wrong signals sent. What was worse, corrective responses were almost always misinterpreted.

Getting to the party, for example.

Henry was supposed to pick her up at 8:00, but when he called and got her voice mail one more time, he did not leave a message nor let it bother him that she did not pick up. He parked on the corner and walked down the block to the new address she had given him.

Loud Mexican music sounded like a band was playing in the yard next door. He rang the doorbell. Waited. Rang again.

At last the front door opened and a young man with black hair and short black beard and moustache said, "Yes? Can I help you?" He stood behind the security gate and made no attempt to open it. The loud Mexican music was coming from this apartment.

"Shandon in?"

"No. She's not."

"Well, do you know where she is? I'm supposed to pick her up."

"No idea."

Henry pulled out his cell phone, began dialing Shandon, turned to the man behind the gate. "What's your name?"

"Why? Who are you?"

“I’m Henry. I want to be able to tell Shandon I was here and spoke with someone.

Your name?”

“Brian.”

“Thanks.” Henry returned to his car and was pulling away from the curb when Shandon ran up with cell phone in hand and knocked on the car window.

Henry lowered it. She said, “My roommate lied to you. I’m here. I’ll be right back.”

She ran back to the apartment and Henry sat at the curb and waited. Several minutes elapsed before she was at the car door again, this time with coat and purse.

They were a block away when he said, “So. You’re getting married. Congrats.”

She gave a girlish giggle. “Right. Mind if I smoke in your car?” He said no and punched the button to roll down her window. “It’s next week. You’ll come to the ceremony, won’t you?” He said he would. “It’s in Dolores Park at eleven. Hope that’s not too early on a Sunday. But I have to tell you, it’s not for love.” She turned her head and exhaled out the open window. “I met him at AA actually. A really nice guy. But I’m not in love with him or anything.”

Henry had to ask, “So why are you getting married?”

“Well, he’s in this really bad position where his mother is being treated for cancer but he can’t go visit her because if he leaves the country he can’t come back. I just thought it was so unfair I offered to help. I mean, he’s got a good job and earns good money but his work visa ran out and his first wife left him just before he got his green card. They went through all this paperwork and everything and then she didn’t show up at the interview. His attorney felt so bad for him she didn’t even charge him.”

They were almost to Mission Street when Shandon said, “Mind if we stop at a liquor store? I need some fortification.”

He had no particular issue with that, but when she asked if he had a problem with her drinking alcohol in the car, he said, “Well yes. It’s against the law to have an open container of alcohol in a vehicle in this state. So yes, I have a problem with an open container. And aren’t you in AA?”

“Oh, I have it under control,” she said whittling the cigarette down and exhaling into the outside air. “Right there, if that’s okay,” she pointed at a corner market and he found a parking space on the opposite side of the street. She ran in carrying her purse, but left her leather coat behind. It was several minutes before she jumped back in with a small brown paper bag. She pulled a half pint of Maker’s Mark out of the bag, broke the dipped red wax seal covering the cap which she twisted off. He did not start the engine as she took a long pull on the bourbon. Then a second sip. She removed a diet Coke from the sack and twisted the cap off that as well, drank a chaser.

She consumed nearly half the bottle before it appeared to be enough. He took it from her which she was perfectly willing to give up now that she had a few ounces in her. He got out and popped the trunk. He made sure the cap was on tight, laid the bottle on his gym bag.

“So why didn’t you call me?” She asked. “I thought you were going to call before you came over.”

Henry was patient, not at all annoyed with the question. He said, “I did. I called and left voice messages on your phone. Three times. In fact, I was calling you for the fourth time today when you showed up.”

“What?” She was incredulous. “I didn’t get any calls from you. Wait a minute. What number were you dialing?” He punched up her stored number, handed his phone to her while he drove. She said, “That’s my old number. No wonder I never hear from you. You’ve been calling my old number.”

He paid attention to traffic and allowed her to change the number in his phone. All he kept thinking was, so whose number is it now and have they listened to all the messages he left?

They still had to cross town. The party was a housewarming across the street from the zoo and Henry was bringing two plants, cuttings from his diffenbachia, which lay at Shandon’s feet in the passenger seat. She did not seem to notice the two earth filled pots.

“You do know there are legal consequences to getting married?”

“We’ve seen an attorney,” she lit another cigarette. “And we asked questions and are getting all the paper work set up in advance.”

During the next fifteen minutes she explained how she felt so sorry for John she would have done it for free, but he gave her money. She quite candid about it and told her mother who started crying on the phone. Her sister refused to talk about it. Only her father seemed to understand, Shandon said, and he told her she can do what she likes, she’s a grown woman.

Henry was silent. If he told her what he really thought, it would be something like that’s the stupidest fucking thing in the world you could do. Instead he only spoke when she took a break from explaining; or was she rationalizing? He said: “Once you’re married you can’t get out of it that easy. You know that, right?”

She was glib and shrugged his concerns off. “Oh, yah, but it’s okay. I mean, it’s not like I love him or anything.”

They drove down Sloat to the zoo which was on the left. Henry turned right onto 41st Avenue and found a parking space almost immediately. He got the bottle out of the trunk and the plants from the passenger side floorboard. He carried a paper shopping bag with a two liter container of diet soda; she cradled her own drinks in their paper bag.

They walked up three steps to the front door. He punched the doorbell, tried the handle and the door popped open. The ground floor garage was on their right and Henry noticed a picnic table set with plastic cups, an ice chest, bottles of drinks, but he could tell the party was upstairs because the music originated from there.

He escorted Shandon up and was greeted by a couple he did not know, then the hostess whom he did know came up and gave him a hug. Ken washing dishes, said hey.

The room smelled of cooking, a mixed odor that included baked and boiled and stove top food preparation.

“Joyce, this is Shandon. Shandon, Joyce. She’s our hostess for this gathering and here’s a house warming gift,” he said holding both plants out in front of him. “One for you and one for Ken. I named them Fifo and Lifo.”

“That’s funny,” the woman Henry did not know said as she stood nearby with drink in hand. “Last in, first out. I try and tell my people that. We want to sell the old merchandise first so put that up front on display.” She held out her hand. “Hi. I’m Laura.”

Joyce introduced Henry and Henry introduced Shandon. A young man in front of the stove turned from stirring a pot to shake with Henry saying, “I’m Ganesh.”

Henry was fast enough to respond, “Any relation to Shiva?”

“Yes,” brightly. “That’s my Dad.”

Joyce said, “That’s an interesting name, Shandon. Sounds Egyptian. Family name or what?”

Shandon did have exotic features with dark eyes and long black hair. Slender with a good figure, it was possible her name had some familial history attached. Her parents were from Tehran, but they long ago assumed Western names and became U. S. citizens. Shandon and her sisters were born in Maryland.

She laughed and said, “No. More Baltimore artsy-fartsy 80’s. My mother is named Shannon and Dad’s name is Donald. Shan Don. That’s me. Here. Want a shot of bourbon?”

She hefted the bottle in the air tantalizingly, but everyone already had drinks. No one took her up on the offer.

Joyce took the plants and walked away. Henry later found them on a hall table where they would remain until Joyce decided on a suitable location for them. He turned to Laura.

“You must be in business if you know accounting practices.” She smiled, nodded assent. He asked, “What kind of business?”

“Marijuana sales.”

Henry took a second longer than necessary to respond. He needed to take this rather startling information in and assess it. He decided on what he hoped was an innocuous response: “Legally, I assume?”

“Oh yes. Following all state and county guidelines. I live in Oakland. It’s a pot friendly city. Of course, it’s not federally sanctioned, but that’s going to change.”

Henry asked, "Making any money?"

Laura said brightly, "Yes. Finally."

Henry saw food on a table in the other room. He placed his un-open soda bottle on the kitchen counter and wandered into the dining room where the table was artfully laid out with a variety of finger food. Ken came out of the kitchen with a larger platter filled to overflowing with brown round food sticks.

Someone asked, "What's that?"

"Lumpia," Ken said triumphantly. "Filipino egg rolls only they're filled with pork."

As soon as the plate was settled on the table a hand reached in and grabbed several.

"Roach is here," Henry said loudly. "How you doing Cockroach? Feeding your face I see."

The Cockroach was a sideshow character who dressed himself in a cape, flared at the hip pants and tee shirt. He affected the appearance of a bug with two antennae twisted out of his own hair bound at the base with rubber bands, stiffened with mousse, extending from his close cropped scalp eight inches into the air from the forehead.

Roach's hair was black, but curiously there was a white crop circle about the size of a quarter in the exact center of the back of his head. Protruding from the rear of his cranium was a knot of hair also stiff with mousse. This short tuft resembled a pig's corkscrew tail hovering over a white anus.

The Cockroach did not like Henry. They were once friends, but after Henry and Ranny made a film, "Roach: The Movie" (<http://www.netnovels.com/media/video/ant>),

The Cockroach began to shun him. Roach no longer spoke to him and when in the same room, Roach made it a point to back away, to leave whenever Henry came near.

Now he backed away from the food filled table without packing anything more on his already overflowing paper plate.

Henry thought, “Imagine the size of his eye. That’s how big his brain is.”

Roach lived on general assistance, the goodness of the City’s subsidized housing. He had one room on the third floor of a transient hotel in the Tenderloin with toilet and shower down the hall. He peed in the sink in his room rather than walk the ten yards to the communal toilet.

Henry took advantage of Roach’s aversion to him and followed Roach around the room never allowing him to alight. Roach backed into the living room, then was forced to back his way into the hallway. At the top of the stairs Henry approached and Roach backed down toward the garage and front door. Henry quit the game and returned to the food.

Neal approached Henry as Roach continued backing away. Neal was tall and towered over Henry with a wide smile and an outstretched hand.

“Nice to see you, Neal. You still making robots?” Henry asked.

“As a matter of fact, yes. We just completed Burning Man.” He turned to Shandon saying, “I think we met a couple years ago.”

She said, “Yes. Hi. I’m Shandon,” just as the music picked up.

Two professional looking turntables were positioned on a sturdy folding table at the front room picture window. There was an eight pot board between them and two speakers stood seven feet high on poles to either side. The disc jockey wore headphones and bobbed and weaved as she lowered a tone arm onto one of the platters. She carefully queued the next record and looked up at Henry.

It was suddenly necessary to shout if a conversation was to take place. Henry retreated to the kitchen with his plate of food where several other guests had arrived.

Teri had red hair. Henry heard her telling the person next to her that she was of Irish descent and the hair on all the girls in the family went white when still quite young.

“So, no, this isn’t my natural hair color.” The music suddenly dropped as the lead-in to the next cut began quietly. Teri was practically shouting to be heard above the din when quiet surrounded her in the kitchen as she said, “And before you ask, no. It doesn’t match my snatch.”

There was an instant of surprised silence before the music rose to cover the comment.

Shandon moved toward the music. She shimmied and wove her way toward the DJ, set her plate on a sofa armrest and began to dance seriously. She was immediately joined by one of the male guests whom Henry did not recognize. Henry set his own plate on the kitchen counter and opened the bottle of diet soda he brought.

It was still chilled as he took a sip. No need to refrigerate it. He would be refilling his cup frequently. He looked around and found a bowl of ice, dropped a few cubes in his glass.

Joyce entered the kitchen from the hall. She stood for a few seconds, put hands on hips, surveyed the group and said, “Out! You’re not allowed to congregate in the kitchen. Go out and dance, but get out of the kitchen!”

Everyone obeyed and Henry found himself with glass and plate in hand standing at the top of the stairs. He glanced toward the now lively living room with its numerous

dancers and decided to head downstairs into the world where other guests had disappeared.

The garage held no car and was given over to being the source of all drink. Open bottles of wine, white and red, covered a section of the large picnic table. A huge glass sphere with a sign taped to it read “lemonade.” Floating in the lemony liquid inside the sphere were frozen fruit slices inside ice cubes. A silver spigot dispensed the mixture which was within easy reach of liter containers of Vodka, two bottles of brown alcohol in 750 milliliter bottles as well as Shandon’s half empty bourbon bottle. An open ice chest stood atop the table with a silver scoop waiting to be employed.

The garage was storage on one side with cardboard boxes neatly stacked against the wall. It was devoid of vehicles with one exception: a black motorcycle with a for sale sign resting on the faring below the windscreen.

Right, Henry thought. Ken’s a biker.

He continued into the back yard where a fire pit was spewing warm smoke and flames. The early night air was not yet cold, but the fire was welcome. A dozen people occupied chairs around the pit, several on a bench. All commented on the burning logs. Movement on the back wall caught Henry’s eye and when he looked up he realized a movie was in progress soundlessly playing on the side of the neighbor’s garage.

It was Japanese animation. He did not recognize it.

The projector was mounted on a table on the other side of which rested a number of plastic squeeze bottles that resembled ketchup dispensers at a burger joint. A clear mixing bowl was filled with tiny glass jugs plugged with miniature corks. Henry set his plate down and nibbled on the food.

He was introduced to Von, short for von Richtoven, who moped and said, “I’m so depressed.”

Athena wore a set of wings on her back which got in the way when she brushed past people in the upstairs hallway, but gave her a charmed presence out of doors. “Don’t mind him. He enjoys being a downer.”

Natalie wore a green fishnet shawl over her shoulders and green grease paint on her face. An odd object dangled on a string around her neck. What are you? She put the object, which turned out to be the cut off top of a plastic soda bottle, up over her face. “I’m a bottle nose dolphin.”

Celia was in a harlequin outfit complete with bells at the end of colored strands of cloth. In her right hand she held a star wand and in her left a harlequin puppet that was an almost exact miniature of her self. The puppet was a glove and its arms held the drink from which she sipped.

“I love those boots,” Roberto said. “What are they made of?”

Celia’s cowboy boots were sharply pointed and colored a bright red. “Your ordinary old red alligator, I suspect.” She added, “But they’re hell on open steps. The toe keeps getting caught in the top tread.”

Daniel showed up in bicycle racing shorts, shoes and shirt, shoulders bearing a stuffed back pack. He was winded and said he rode his bike to the party from very near where Shandon lived.

Henry said, “This is a costume party? I didn’t get the memo. Besides, Hallowe’en was last week.”

Mark asked, “What did you go as?”

“A bathroom wall.” Henry said this with a straight face knowing it would prompt the question which Beth asked.

“How do you dress as a bathroom wall?”

“White shirt, white pants, white belt, white shoes. I carried colored pens and offered them to people. ‘I’m graffiti. Write on me.’”

“You went as graffiti?”

“Yes. I wore an empty toilet paper roll around my neck and gave out copies of a poem called ‘Poem ‘Pon a Bathroom Wall.’ I wrote it many years ago. Here, let me recite it for you.” Henry launched into this work with relish.

“I am Graffiti.

The words I speak are those you’ve writ

On bathroom walls and toilet stalls.

Once pure and clean, sanitary, protected;

Now soiled, impure, my touch infected.

Let no man say ill of me

For I am ALL man’s conscience

And though you may hope to have shat of me,

Though your bowels empty, your bladder free,

Still will I haunt and trouble thee as,

With pen or pin in hand you scratch out your destiny.

Dumb, you marvel at this speech –

Your own and well you know it!

Thus do I confute, confront, confine,

Exhort, presume, define within four walls

All your homilies, parables, first writ

Unsigned sayings of toothless sayers . . .

Memories of moments wasted on a stool.”

There was a moment of silence. Then someone applauded. Others joined the clapping which tapered off amid amused smiles.

Henry retreated back upstairs to the hall, poked his head in the bathroom, opened a door that turned out to be a closet, then entered the kitchen again as he continued his peripatetic tour

He walked in on a woman who was telling her friend, “When I came out and told my family I was gay, everyone told me the same Woody Allen joke. My own father, for crying out loud.”

Two bees stood in the corner where the refrigerator met the sink and sipped and nodded and made the feelers on their heads – yellow pom-poms on springs – wriggle and bounce. Joyce approached the two bees and said politely, “Hello. My name is Joyce and I’m the hostess. Who are you and who do you know here?”

The male smiled behind his yellow and black mask, took a sip. “Oh, hi. I’m Billy and this is Trudy and really, we don’t know anyone except you now. We live on 40th and

we were walking past, heard the music and saw people in costumes, so we decided to run home and change into our Hallowe'en costumes and join you."

Daniel reappeared this time wearing a one button black tailed tuxedo top with a white vest and colorful silk cravat. A gray top hat announced his presence as he ducked to enter the room. He still wore bicycle riding shorts.

"That's what was in your back pack?"

"It is a costume party after all."

"Well," Joyce explained, "It is and it isn't. I told everyone they could wear a costume if they want, but you don't have to. See? I'm not in a costume." She did a quick Pirouette, elbow bent and finger pointed at her head, left leg lifted and bent, toe touching the right leg at the knee.

"Thumbelina the Ballerina!"

Ken was rinsing utensils before putting them in the dishwasher. Henry was next to the sideboard and said, "I like your bowls. Like Fabergé eggs. They're nested like Russian dolls."

Small, not large enough to hold a cracked egg, the bowls were colorful and intricate and delicate. They were clearly hand painted with many points of tiny white highlight dots arranged around the lip and in the intricate recurring design. Touching one of these dots was like reading Braille. From one perspective, the miniature painting on the bottom inside was a filigreed fuchsia flower with feather thin pedals and a pale center. From another view, tilting the bowl and turning it, the design was a human face in profile, Aztec in silhouette wearing an extravagant head dress.

"Yah. We got them in Spain. Seville, I think it was."

“Very nice.”

“Yah, but the story isn’t so nice,” Ken explained as he continued to fill the dishwasher. “We saw them and Joyce just had to have them and I was, you know, we have to pack these and we have a couple weeks of travel, but she wanted them, especially when we were told the design is taken from the inside of the chapel nearby. And they were not cheap. Not expensive, but they were pricy enough, so she paid and we packed them carefully and everywhere we went, whether by train or plane or taxi in whatever hotel we had to be careful carrying them and keeping them from chipping or getting crushed. And when we got home we unpacked them and they were lovely only then we went to the Haight Street Fair and there they were being sold in a booth for, like, maybe ten dollars. And we asked because they looked exactly the same as the ones we got in Spain and we were told they come from Mexico.”

The living room music was Donna Summer. Henry stood listening from the kitchen doorway, then moved closer to the DJ who picked up a microphone Henry had not noticed until then. He was surprised when her voice came clear and distinct above the muted music which automatically turned down as she spoke.

“Misses Petronio. Your pizza’s ready.”

The queen of disco segued into the Stones doing “Satisfaction.”

“Is anyone missing a five year old boy named Timmy.” Pause. Turning toward the imaginary child the DJ said, “Don’t worry Timmy. If no one claims you, you can come home with me.”

Henry walked past the food laden table and shouted toward the DJ, “Don’t eat the brown acid.”

“Unless you want to,” came her response.

“You guys leave those bills on the stage. That’s for the girls.” The catcaller was unidentifiable.

Dan was a psychologist by day and drummer for Tiny Television nights. Henry remembered some months ago emailing him the link to watch “Roach: The Movie.”

“Because I know him, I’m too close to judge. So I showed your film to a colleague and he concurred with my assessment. Obviously, Roach suffers from a personality disorder. It’s not described in DSM Four. Let’s try and get it into Five.”

Various deserts were brought out and Henry’s hand hovered over a white powdered sugar dusted donut. “I like donuts with big holes, not small,” he said to no one in particular.

“Yah? Why is that?”

“Cuz you get more dough. I mean, it takes more dough to make a big hole than a small hole.”

The hour was getting late and several guests had already said goodbye when Henry took Shandon’s elbow and asked, “Ready? I’d like to make like a doctor and cut out.”

She was reluctant, but agreed. They picked up their coats, sought out Joyce to thank her.

“Leaving? So soon? Well, come on outside and do some sand art.”

Henry did not understand the term. “Sand dart?”

“Follow me,” Joyce said heading down toward the garage and leading them into the back yard where the fire had burned through the logs Henry sat in front of a few hours ago.

“Over here,” she said as she approached the table with the projector, the bowl filled with tiny jugs and six or seven ketchup bottles.

The silent Japanese animated film was still playing. Henry recognized the scene he had watched before and realized someone had restarted it.

“Look. This is called sand art. You take a jug and put some colored sand in it, then you put a different color on top of that, and a different color.” As she talked she squeezed various plastic bottles into a tiny jar she plucked from the bowl. “You can tilt it and get it to go in one direction, maybe roll it, add more sand. It’s really fun.”

Henry and Shandon followed Joyce’s directions, began filling their jars. Henry picked up one dispenser but it was so dark away from the fire he could not tell what color it was. Still, he persevered in order to keep Joyce from being disappointed. He squirted and saw something cover the bottom of the jug. He picked up a different plastic bottle and tilted its snout. It was impossible to discern a color even as some of the contents settled on top of the first layer. He selected as many plastic squeeze bottles as he could until the jug was very nearly filled. He stuck the pea sized cork in the top.

Shandon filled her bottle and they took their party favors inside the garage where it was lighted and, surprised, Henry was rather pleased with what he had accomplished. He marveled that something that seemed difficult, was, in fact so easy. And it had been achieved in near darkness.



The layers began with black at the bottom, a thin misting of turquoise on top of that, then orange, blue above that with a capping off of again turquoise. He had seen large decorative displays like this in homes and hotels and, come to think of it, on the stand beside the upstairs dinner table. Obviously, that was one of Joyce's creations.

He thanked Joyce for the party, most especially the sand art, said goodbye and drove Shandon home., In his own apartment he placed the colorful jug on the kitchen table where it remains to this day.

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(12-10-12)