

Bard: Guests

I was waiting for Vegard to come over and leave his kids for their stay at my place, while he and Mary would be enjoying the trip he managed to arrange within only two days. He was enthusiastic about it as if he were a teenager once again, taking a girl on their very first date. It seemed that he couldn't wait to be alone with his wife for the first time since their kids came into this world. To speak the truth I understood his feelings completely.

And while I was drinking on the sofa trying to just pass the time, awaiting for the doorbell to ring, my thoughts ran back to the previous Monday. Out of all the possible moments and situations I could have recalled upon, my mind went back to the moment when I turned my head again to look at her as she was exiting the amphitheater.

My thoughts at that moment were limited to her beauty and her shyness, that combined were making a lethal combination. And now that I was going back to that moment, I once again found myself thinking about those exact things. It was strange, considering that it was nearly impossible to get to a PhD with that sort of behavior. Shyness was not one of the qualities when fighting with a stubborn professor who wants to fail you. I was confused and incapable of deciphering anything about her.

Everything about her was puzzling. Full of contradictions. And it was exactly that what seemed to be drawing me in. So serious even though young. And although calm while following the lecture, every other move – her hand finding its way to her neck and her teeth biting her lips – they all indicated of her nervousness. It was that same behavior I had encountered at the stranger, even though at the time I didn't give it much thought. This time it was different. I was returning in on repeat. It was just so captivating that I couldn't make myself stop. Whenever I tried to get it out of my head, the thought would find its way back in, sneaking up from the back of my head and completely capturing my attention. So, I simply gave up on trying to ignore it and actually dedicated my entire interest, in focusing on resolving the thought and in that way just putting it behind me.

And yet another thing I couldn't get out of my head was why the name of Christ I thought so much about that. What was it about this girl that was so enthralling? Why was I so puzzled by her appearance and behavior? It seemed that the fact that she was different from all the people I had previously met had to do quite a lot with my apparent interest in her. It was that mix of honesty and restraint she had about her that was drawing me closer. I rarely had that sort of behavior in my presence. Usually, given my life, people I didn't know would just throw information about their private lives hiding nothing. She was different. She didn't even seem to know who I actually was and I liked it. Someone normal at last. Or rather, someone to be normal with.

Just as I was beginning my analysis, the doorbell rang. I reluctantly got off the couch and I was so annoyed that it happened just as I was beginning to feel comfortable. I knew it was Vegard, since I expected no one else. Besides, it was not as if many people actually paid me a visit. I ran my hand through my hair and the next moment I grabbed ahold of the doorknob opening the door for them. Vegard and Mary, along with Jane and Matthew, were standing at the porch.

Vegard was dressed in black trousers and a blue t-shirt. Even though the weather was sunny, it was in no way for short sleeves. Therefore I just assumed that he left his jacket back in the car, which was parked on my driveway. Mary, on the other hand was dressed more for a winter rather than autumn. A complete contradiction to her brother in that way. She was tucked in a coat, with a scarf around her neck.

The kids didn't wait a second as I opened the door and ran past me entering the house without so much as a "hello". They were that enthusiastic apparently. They were even late for a stay over. But whenever Vegard and Mary wouldn't have time to take care of them, but it was always for a day or two. This would be the first time for them to be separated from their parents for more than a week. And I was kind of nervous and afraid, but their entrance and the smiles on their faces was a good suggestion that we were going to have a great time.

I smiled as I followed them with my look until they were lost from my sight. A er that I looked back at Vegard and Mary greeting them, with a smile on my face. They were still out in front of the door, so I jokingly encouraged them:

"Come on in, by all means. Don't stand there. The kids showed themselves in, on their own. If they could do it, then you are also capable of doing it as well."

Vegard tapped me on the shoulder as he walked past me, his gaze fixed on mine and a smile on his face. He was happy. And in a mode of anticipation, Mary knew that they were going on a trip, but still she had no idea where, because he took care of everything – the plan, the organization and even the packing. She wasn't even allowed to enter the room at that time, as he informed me. It was a long time since I had seen him smile like that. We were mostly busy with the show and other things amongst it that he barely got enough time to spend some quality time with his family. Mary's job didn't make things easier either. I was glad that I was doing this for my brother. He deserved it.

Mary entered the house right after him, her smile a bit shyer than his. And as she was walking by she greeted me:

"Hi, Bard."

"Hey, Mary, how are you?"

"I'm good, you?"

"Good."

They passed through the hallway and entered into the living room. I followed them, a er closing the door shut. The first look inside the room and I saw the kids were running a marathon in my living room. Vegard didn't seem to even notice it, since he just sat down on the couch without saying anything. Mary on the other hand, didn't seem to be okay with them going wild around the room.

"Matthew, Jane, stop that right away." – She said, a tiny hint of anger in her voice.

I didn't mind it, in fact I was actually hoping for that. Their jolly spirited countenance was going to pass on me eventually. And they were kids, it was their job to run wild. But at their mother's voice they stopped their enthusiastic race and turned towards her. One look from her was enough to prove them that a behavior like that wouldn't be tolerated. She then in a more mild way said:

"You can't behave like that. You are not at home now. So, behave."

I smiled realizing where the problem lay. I knew she wasn't strict as to forbid them to have fun. But this time around she was worried as to whether it would bother me. She was trying to just make sure that they would cause me trouble during their stay. Thoughtful and considerate all the way. That was always Mary, so this was no surprise.

However, since I had no problems with them doing whatever was their wish, I said:

"Mary it is okay. I don't mind it."

She looked at me, her look wondering whether I was saying it out of pure courtesy, so I insisted:

"Really, I don't."

Vegard was only observing us throughout the entire situation, not saying a word. Mary took her jacket lying in on the sofa. Following her example both Matthew and Jane did the same thing. Now that they were comfortable, settling into their seats, I said:

"What are you going to drink? Do you...?"

"No, Bard, we have to get going soon." – Vegard interrupted me swiftly.

"Vegard, it is only a cup of coffee. You can spare thirty minutes." – I said.

I knew he was more than eager to finally go to that trip. A er all it was written all over his face. However, they visited so rarely that I thought it would be nice to sit down for a while and I wanted to do it. It was lucky that Vegard was in good mood and had no wish of arguing. He went along, contemplating to my wish, with the words:

"Okay, fine. Coffee would be nice. For me, the kids are too young for that."

I smiled at that. Not because it was particularly funny. I did it because of the reactions in the room. Mary smirked at the comment and the kids looked at Vegard, asking him whether they could try the coffee as well. So instead of making a joke, Vegard managed to make a problem out of his witty comment. I knew it would be a hard job to convince the kids to give up on the idea unless he managed to find another source that could prove to be a distraction and provide him with a way out of this situation. My gaze and Mary's as well, were both fixed on him, as he tried to pull himself out of the situation he so thoughtfully caused.

"No, no coffee for you. That is only for adults. Kids shouldn't drink it or they will grow a tail."

At that Matthew reacted enthusiastically: "Yeah, a tail. Awesome. I want coffee." And a er those words, no way Jane was staying behind with that, so she joined in the plea.

"It is only for adults." – Vegard insisted.

"But, daddy, we are adults." – Jane said, sadness traceable all over her voice. She really seemed to get to Vegard.

"Yeah." – Matthew was quick to confirm his sister's words with a decisiveness that couldn't be easily broken.

Trying to avoid tears on his daughter's eyes, Vegard went on: "Yeah, but not... I meant... Just..."

As entertaining as it all seemed, I couldn't watch Vegard stumble and sweat anymore so I said: "Well, I tell you what. I will give you an option now. And then you get to choose. It is either a bar of chocolate for each of you or you get to drink a small cup of coffee. But mind you it is very small."

It was an offer that they couldn't resist. As much as they wished to try and find out what coffee is, chocolate sounded more attractive. And even if they had chosen the coffee, there was no way I'd give them that. It would end up to be a cup of hot chocolate. It was a scam, to rescue Vegard who was drowning more and more with each new word. That however had nothing to do with the way he always was, it was the distraction that played tricks on him now.

Both Vegard and Mary looked at me. They were kind of crossed at those words. I imagined it was something to do with the fact that they both thought that I was irresponsible enough to actually give the kids coffee. I had to point out what I thought, without the kids actually catching up on that.

"It is not something that will actually happen. Mary, what are you having? And Matthew, Jane... Have you made up your mind? Chocolate or coffee?"

They both made a grimace as if they were still trying to make up their minds and then turned towards one another, whispering something to one another deciding what to do. In the meantime, Mary asked for a cup of coffee as well. I wanted to get the answer from the kids, before turning my way into the kitchen. And, they soon enough reached a conclusion that Matthew would like to have the bar of chocolate and Jane was in for the cup of coffee. Oh, they were good – getting both the things and most likely splitting them a ways. I looked at Mary and then I turned towards Vegard. Through a smirk, I said:

"We tried to avoid one discussion and now landed into another, completely different from the first. Apparently, Matthew and Jane just signed a treaty. The "Atlanta" pact. I get the chocolate and you get the coffee and then we share."

As I said that a mischievous smile appeared on their faces, even though their plan was revealed. Both Mary and Vegard were smiling along with me, and then Mary said:

"I knew they were smart, but this is beyond any expectation."

"Yeah, but I am smarter." – I said, as if my ego was bruised.

I looked at Matthew and Jane, with a sad face. I kept in front of them and said: "But, I told you that you can't have both. Remember? Either you both take the chocolate or both get the coffee."

Jane seemed somewhat puzzled, as she was most likely rereading what I said, trying to recall what was actually mentioned previously. Matthew, however, being the older one right away fired: "You said no such thing."

"I didn't? Hmmm. Let me think." – I furrowed my eyebrows, placing my hand on my chin, pretending to be puzzled. I didn't on accepting that I was caught in the lie: "Yeah, I didn't say it. But I said it now. So, it still counts. So, once again, which one are you choosing?"

In a matter of seconds everything was decided once again and chocolate was chosen as the wished pleasure. I asked them to follow me to the kitchen so that I give them the promised treat. As soon as they got it, they ran out towards the living room and remained in the kitchen to make the coffee.

Upon my returning in the living room, I was met by Vegard and Mary sitting in silence. The kids were out of sight. Nowhere to be seen, probably to play one of their self-invented games. I let the tray on the table, placing one cup of coffee in front of Mary and the next to Vegard. They both received it with a "Thank you". While doing so, I asked:

"Where are the kids?"

"Taking a tour around the house. I think they went upstairs." – Vegard commented.

"Okay. So, Mary, did I pass the test?" – I looked directly at Mary, as I took a seat as well. She returned the look, appearing to be puzzled.

"What test, Bard?"

"Well, with the kids. Are you going to be okay with leaving them with me for a week?"

"Oh, that..." – she whispered, when she saw my point.

Vegard cut in the conversation, saying: "We had a talk about that. Mary was reluctant to let them stay with you, but a er while we agreed it was going to be just fine."

"I was not reluctant..." – Mary defended herself strongly.

"No, okay not reluctant. Unwilling is more precise." – Vegard teased his wife. She looked at him, her look seeming as she landed her eyes on him. With a smile on her face, she mumbled one "Whatever" towards him and turning to face me, answered my question: "I think you will manage. But that doesn't mean that I won't be constantly calling to check in on you. So, think about what you are doing. Agreed?" – She said, pointing her finger at me.

"Oh, no life threats, I beg you. I will do everything as you say." – Mary kept good meals and enough bed time. You will manage right? – Mary went on.

"I'll find a way. Don't you worry about it. You two just have a great time."

Vegard jumped on his feet at my words, saying: "Speaking of which, since we are finishing the coffee, I will go to the car and get the stuff for the kids. And then we must get going, for real this time."

He left the room and when the sound of the front door closing behind him reached the living room, Mary addressed me – her voice lowered to a did of a whisper: "I have to ask you something. But, don't tell Vegard I said it. Okay?"

"Okay..." – I doubtfully said, hoping it was not something that I couldn't keep away from my brother. – "Why are we whispering?"

"Cause, I don't want Vegard to hear us." – She continued in the same way.

"But, he is outside." – I said, still not lowering my voice.

"Still, he could come back any minute now."

"Which is why you should ask me right away."

Not taking any other pauses, Mary rushed in to ask me right as I finished my line.

"So where is he taking me anyway? You must know." – She started raising her eyebrow quizzically and a er an instant, seeing that I am not responding to her question, continued: "He told you, didn't he?"

"Actually, no I don't know exactly. He was on and on about it the last couple of days, making a fuss out of the entire matter, but he never actually mentioned the location."

"Oh, come on. He shares everything with you. Don't tell me that he didn't tell you about this, please."

"No, seriously, I have absolutely no idea. Everything I know on this subject is pretty much the same thing you know."

"On what subject?" – Vegard's voice made us jump. He has entered the room and was now leaning on the wall, staring at us. I didn't want to tell him, since Mary asked me not to; but I also didn't want to lie to my brother. That was the thing I would ever do. But I couldn't simply avoid the answer and shift it to Mary. Which I did only by looking at her. Trying to get her way out of it she said:

"Density of materials. Nothing you need to know. You got the things?" She changed the subject like a professional, although she was far from being one. Without actually getting in too deep with explanations and simply making Vegard uninterested in the topic. If it were a normal situation he would get all nerdy and devoted to the subject in hand, but now he was all distracted and that played in Mary's advantage. Still, knowing her and the fact she she was a horrible liar, I was almost convinced that she would admit the truth as soon as they are alone.

"Yeah, I left them in the hallway. Bard will take care of them." – At which point he shifted the look from his wife to my face, giving me a provocative smile as she could. Then raising his voice he called on the children: "Matthew, Jane we are leaving!"

That was a stimulation enough for them both to come running down the stairs, leaving their hiding place, wherever it was. The pain of that thought hit me immediately, since I knew that it would be on me to figure out the hiding place.

When they got down, joining us, Vegard gave them a tight hug and kissed them on the forehead, a er which it was Mary's turn. Along the hugs and kisses she said:

"Okay, be good and listen to your uncle. Don't cause too much trouble. We will be in touch. Okay?"

"Yeah, mum." – They unanimously said. A er another hug, Mary parted from them and took her jacket heading to the hallway. She got to the door, at which point she turned towards me saying: "Take care of them Bard. Make sure they go to bed early and just tuck them in nicely. Check in on them during the night, because they sometimes throw away the covers. Make sure they eat enough. Pay attention on fruits and vegetables. And don't let them eat chocolate. Also, don't let them run wild. They can get hurt. Just so you know I threw in a baggie of medicine. Also, the homework and..."

At that point Vegard interrupted her, placing his hands on her shoulders pulling her towards the door, saying: "Come on, Mary. Let's go. Come on. He can take care of them."

I could partially understand that spill out of words. She was a mother and it was the first time she was parting with them for that amount of time. She was just trying to establish my capability of being well informed as to be able to go through this week. Vegard's words and nudges weren't helping, since Mary was still standing at the same spot.

"Mary, I believe we entrenched that. I can do it."

Now I laid my hand on her shoulder, below Vegard's giving her a little push as I said: "We will be okay. We will stay in touch. And you go and have a wonderful time, for goodness sake. You deserve it. And you owe yourself to relax for a little while. So you two do that and I will have everything under control."

As soon as they walked out of the house, I followed them closing the door behind my back. I planned of walking them to the car, but I feared that if the kids came along, Mary was going to give one of those long speeches and Vegard was already growing impatient.

He ran to the car opening the door of the passenger's seat for Mary. She was following him and at that she sat down in the car, addressing him a light smile. She seemed fine when they arrived, but that motherly worrying instinct was now kicking in and her mood was falling down. But, I was sure that Vegard will find a way to cheer her up soon enough. He ran to the other side where I stood waiting to say "Goodbye" and when he did, he gave me a hug, while saying: "Thanks for this, Bard. I appreciate it. And the help as well. I owe you one."

I smiled at that, I had heard it before. That expression. Only whenever I tried to remind him that he actually said it at one point he never believed my words. I had to tease him, he just let the words fly right on the spot.

"Mind you, you just said you owe me one. So, next time I come asking for whatever it is that I need and I remind you of this promise you better remember it."

"Very well, brother." – He said, while opening the door and sitting inside the car, behind the wheel. – "I will remember it. Have a great time with the kids. And practice a little."

"Yeah, thanks Vegard. You both have a great time."

"Call us if there is trouble. Bye." – He said, starting the engine in a roar.

"There won't be any trouble. Call me when you get there."

He drove back, exiting the driveway and then he drove away. I had my eyes fixed on the car right until it was lost from my sight and at that point I headed back in the house. I locked the door behind me, inhaling a deep breath. This was bound to be a difficult, though surely an interesting week.

The silence was prodigiously present as I moved through the hallway. When I stepped into the living room, I realized why. The kids weren't where we had left them. In fact, I couldn't see them anywhere. Or hear them for that matter.

"Matthew, Jane..." – I pitched my voice, holding my breath in hope that they will reply. I called them out once again, but I heard no movement, no whispers, no laughs... Nothing, which meant that I had to find them on my own.

I groaned, sinking my face into my palms. I had no idea where to begin, which was a huge discomfort at that point. I ran my right hand through my hair, placing the other on my waist. I helplessly looked around, still hoping that they would come out running out of some nook, despite being absolutely sure that it wasn't going to happen.

I began thinking as to where they would hide. Kids would like it to be comfortable, yet hidden enough. Must be somewhere... At which point I simply stopped. Even with that I wouldn't be able to think like them, which I was sure I wasn't capable of. I would still be looking for a needle in a haystack. My house wasn't a palace, but it wasn't small either. And there were a lot of corners where they could sneak.

I didn't want to let go and wait for them to come out. It would be certainly something I couldn't do, but even if I could it would still be disrespectful towards Mary and Vegard. Particularly Mary. She would kill me at the thought of doing that, let alone actually contemplating to such a thought.

So, I began with the quest, since it truly seemed to be one. I focused on all the secret places they had used before, checking each and one of them. A er frustrating half an hour, I was growing impatient and was close to screaming like mad, but then I recalled Matthew saying once that my room had the best hiding places in the house. And I hadn't checked there.

My hope invigorated again, as I headed towards the bedroom. I slowly opened the door and closed it behind me. I didn't want them to sneak out behind my back. No way was I letting that happen, in case they were here. I looked around, even threw a glance under the bed, checked the bathroom and when I was done with everything I could think of I began giving up entirely. I was in mild desperation. This was as not funny. And I would have been truly worried to death, had not have I known that they were definitely in the house.

I sat down on the edge of the bed, exhaling in discomfort and I faced the wardrobe that was in front of me. And then I saw a pink material caught in between the two wings. Jane was wearing a pink tutu when they got here and I had nothing pink that could be pinned there, as far as I could recall.

"Christ they hid in the bloody closet. How did they even know that the section there was empty?" – I thought to myself, as I got up, heading to open it and get them out of there for a nice dinner.

I meant to put on an angry face, but as soon as I saw them tucked inside, my lips widened in a smile. I couldn't be angry at them even if I wanted to. So, I just said:

"There you are. Get out of there. It is dinner time."

Almost too obligingly, they both left their hiding place, slightly disappointed that I managed to find them. We headed towards the living room, and then I asked them whether they would like me to order pizza. I had food at home, but I figured that they would categorize most of it as inedible. I made a mental note to remember to do some shopping tomorrow and get what they want.

"Pizza. Yeah!" – Matthew exclaimed almost immediately and Jane had nothing against it either.

The thought of dinner soon overlapped the disappointment of the spoiled game. As soon as we got down I ordered the pizza and in matter of few minutes it was delivered.

I tipped the guy and we eagerly unpacked the pizza, digging in deep. My hunger surprised me. It seemed as if it had blown out of proportion, beyond explanation. It was only when I gave a little thought that I recalled that this meal was technically my breakfast. I have been so lost in various different things this entire day that I even forgot that my body required food to operate.

I was only thankful, that I ordered three boxes instead of the planned two. It was supposed to be our breakfast as well, since I had to go to university the next day. Still, a er taking the kids to school I would still have time to do the shopping and then have more than enough time to get ready for my next class. I now regretted that I spent the entire day without bothering to prepare the lecture, postponing it until the last moment. It was a lament, but it was too late to change it.

I was compelled to leave it for the next day, the kids required attention. Unless, I could find something that they would both like to do, so that I could work on the lecture tonight. Those thoughts remained along with me during dinner. A er I was stupefied and the kids said they were no longer hungry, I put aside the remaining food and cleaned up the table.

While I was doing that, Jane took out a notebook out of her backpack and set herself on the sofa. Matthew took the remote control and switched on the TV, placing the channel on some documentary about computer games. They both seemed to be happy with their location and I smiled that they fixed that for themselves and that way made sure I had the availability to work in peace. I still had to check in whether they required something.

"Jane, Matthew, what are we gonna do now?" – I asked.

"I will write in my diary now." – Jane enthusiastically said. Matthew, with the remote control still in his hand, said: "I am gonna watch TV, if it is okay."

"No problem. You guys do that. I have some work to do. Do you want me to get something for you? Drinks, any refreshments?"

"Nope, I am fine. I will get something myself if I need to." – Matthew answered a er what he addressed all his focus on the TV screen. I wasn't going to insist, he has been here and knew where everything was, so he could take care of that by himself. Jane, however, looked at me and so I asked: "Uncle Bard, is there apple juice?"

"Of course, princess. I'll get some for you."

I brought her the drink, for which she thanked me with a charming smile on her face and lowered her look in the diary, once again furrowing her eyebrows and continuing with the writing. I took my books and went on planning the lecture. The kids were in the living room all through. They were enjoying their activities and dedicated my entire focus to the thing in hand with a plan to finish it by the end of the night. I was nearly to the end, when the ringtone of my phone woke me up from the trance.

I looked at the clock on the wall and it said it was ten past eight, which confused me. I hadn't even noticed that hours have gone by. I checked out the callers ID and it was Vegard, however when I picked up the phone it was Mary's voice that reached my ears.

"Hi, Bard, is everything okay?"

"Yeah, it is all fine. This is written in her diary and Matthew is watching TV. Did you answer?"

"Yeah, we did. Did they have dinner? You didn't let them eat too much sweets?"

"We ordered pizza for dinner and I gave them nothing sugary apart from the chocolate I gave them while you were still here. Relax, it is fine. So, Vegard's surprise. Now that you know where he arranged it all, what do you think?"

"It is amazing, but I can't stop worrying about..."

I cut her in the middle of the sentence, because I knew exactly what she wanted to say: "The kids and I are fine. We will manage. Jesus, woman, just relax..."

I heard a nervous laugh at the other side of the line. It was a good sign, so I went on: "Would you like to talk to them?"

"Yeah..." – I heard an enthusiastic eager shout. It was now ringing in my ears, as I passed the phone to Jane with the words: "Mum is on the phone."

She spoke for a while, a er which the phone was passed over to Matthew. He was less interested in conversing and passed me the phone soon a er he received it.

"Mary..." – I said expecting her to reply to me. But to my surprise it was Vegard on the other side of the line: "She passed me the phone a er finishing the talk with Matthew. Is everything okay there?"

"Yep, absolutely. Did she like the surprise? You calm now?" – I asked, at which he answered: "Yeah, so far so good. I will tell you tomorrow, when I see you know..."

"Okay, you lovebirds have fun." – I teasingly said, just before adding a simple "Talk tomorrow". We ended the conversation there. I went on with my work and a er an hour or so later I was satisfied because of a job well done. I could sleep without worries tonight.

Soon a er I packed my folder for the next day, Jane started yawning and Matthew followed right behind. So, I sent them to bed in their rooms giving them time to get dressed and brush their teeth. The I checked in on them, tucking them in – first on Matthew and then I checked on Jane. A er closing the door on her room, I smiled at the thought that crossed my mind. It was meant to be a long crazy fun week. And I truly was glad to have them over.

Continue reading next part \square