

# **Butterscotch Pudding**

**2200 words**

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Robbins is in a night class at the community college. No way he wants to be there but his company made him go. They told him in a memo, that periodically they require employees to sharpen their communication skills in a classroom setting.

Which fine, makes sense. Though in his case he suspects it's because of the press release he wrote for an outdoor meet-and-greet, where he butchered a few of the details.

The professor is giving an in-class assignment. He is saying be honest, don't overthink how your sentiments might come across. The professor is a young guy, younger than Robbins. Robbins is hearing a squeaky voice and the guy clearing his throat too much and is thinking this is bullshit.

The professor says to tell us about your best friend, what strikes you about them most, and to keep it at 200 words or less, and you have 15 minutes. The guy leaves the room.

Everyone starts right in, except for Robbins and one guy up front rubbing his chin and staring out the window. Robbins has no idea what to write. He can only think of one friend who might have qualified as a best friend, but that fell apart years ago. Someone rented a cabin at Tahoe and some idiots crashed a party, and Robbins got punched and the friend laughed about it later, so that was it.

The professor is back in the room, two minutes to go. A little kitchen-timer buzzer goes off and the professor says we'll be going around hearing from students at random. Robbins hates this idea, he assumed you'd just turn it in.

A half dozen people read their blurbs, all of them boring and sentimental, and then Robbins gets called on.

He says he'd prefer to opt out, since he's got nothing. The professor says nothing at all? And Robbins says nothing that pertains to the assignment, that's for sure, and someone groans like give us a break and the professor says this is simply an exercise and to please express what you do have.

So Robbins reads: *'My wife has gained around a hundred pounds. That'd be the first thing you notice if*

*you knew her back in high school. She gained 25 when we were dating, another 30 after we got married, and now another 40 easily, since Covid . . . She's my best friend by default. So there you have it.'*

There are a couple beats, and then the professor responds with a well we thank you for your contribution, and he calls on the next person and two more before time runs out. The final one is the only one mildly interesting, a woman's best friend is her cat and the cat is old and walks into walls.

Robbins gets out of there and is hungry tonight, and he looks for a snack bar on the way to the student parking lot, but the only thing open is a cluster of vending machines.

He figures what the hay and tries a white chocolate mocha out of one of them and it's actually decent, and they have a few tables and he sits down.

A woman says, 'That was some essay. You don't mind my saying.'

She's about 40. She's sort of smiling. Robbins says, 'Calling it an essay, now that is generous.'

'I'm glad I didn't have to go,' she says.

'Why? Yours was worse?'

‘My best friend,’ she says, ‘she stole my boyfriend. Sophomore year.’

Robbins wonders high school or college, but what difference does it make, and he asks the woman to please join him, even though it might be a mistake. He says, ‘You obviously set it aside then. Since she’s still in the equation.’

‘They were together a long time,’ she says, ‘and even got married, though that didn’t last.’

‘Those never do,’ Robbins says.

‘You’re not asking what strikes me about her most.’

‘Right, the assignment.’

‘You still didn’t ask but I’ll tell you anyway. She’s had work done. What you notice right away, ahead of the boobs and all, her mouth doesn’t move properly.’

‘I’ve seen that,’ Robbins says. ‘You scratch your head.’

‘Scratch your head what’s going on with her motor skills? Or how could she do that? Or how could the plastic surgeon mess up?’

‘Whichever,’ he says.

‘Meanwhile, not to be forward,’ she says . . .

‘That’s fine, no offense taken. Guessing you’re gonna tie it into . . . what’s that called, they suck out the fat?’

'Liposuction?'

'Yeah. My gig?'

'Gee, I hadn't thought of that. My line was more, has your relationship changed entirely for the worse?'

He says, 'Let's get one thing out of the way, full disclosure. If it's *bedroom* relations--since that's where you're going, how could you not be--those are limited.'

'O-kay,' she says. 'I guess I meant more, are you mad at her, plain and simple.'

'Can we sit on the couch at night and watch a fresh season of *The Restaurant*? Sure. We even make buttered popcorn.'

'I apologize, I'm not familiar with that one.'

'It's Swedish. You gotta be down with subtitles . . . What's tough, is the 40-plus since Covid.'

'Up to that point, you're saying, you were okay with it.'

'You're going to think I'm weird,' he says, 'but I was actually *good* with it. She was more voluptuous. When I met her she was on the frail side, too bony.'

'Well, was there like . . . a threshold?'

'You mean, going to the well once too many times, and the bucket broke? I don't think so. I just come home one day, I'm bowling with my friend Oscar, she's getting

out of the portable hot tub thing we have, and I go to myself: I have an obese situation on my hands.'

The woman took a minute. 'I don't think you're weird.'

'You don't.'

'Is she a closet eater?'

'Or you mean does she stuff her face in front of me? Little of both . . . Something I forgot to mention, nothing to do with where we're at now, but I hospitalized her once, and that may have jumpstarted the original weight gain.'

'Okay now you're scaring me,' she says.

'Oh no, nothing like that. We were riding bikes and I wasn't paying attention and I ran into her rear wheel. She flipped off and kinda wrecked her shoulder, required some surgery. She was fond of telling people after, that that's when it started with the poundage.'

'I see. Well does she exercise? I mean at least move around much?'

'What, that'd be your recommendation?'

'I'm sorry. I don't know *what* I'm saying.'

'Nah that's fine, I'm jiving with you. One other question you probably have, so I'll answer it for you. No

I'm not relieved that other men don't eyeball her anymore.'

She said, 'Now that's interesting. But are you sure? There's a logic to it, men encouraging their wives to put on weight.'

'Probably. Minimizes the field. That's not me. I used to like it when she wore something low cut and swung her hips and guys checked her out. It fired me up in fact.'

'Oh.'

'One time we're on vacation? Warm weather, and it's happening a bit. So I ask her does she enjoy it, other normal red-blooded guys wanting to fuck her. And she gets all bent outa shape. Burst the bubble there for sure.'

'I would side with your wife.'

'Figured you would. At any rate . . . maybe you want to observe her.'

'Excuse me?'

'There's different ways . . . but I'm thinking the simplest, Thursday nights we do the big shopping at WinCo. We leave the house around 7. If you like, show up.'

'You're suggesting I secretly observe you and your wife. And then what?'

‘See now, you *asking* that tells me you’re okay with the first part.’

‘This is ridiculous.’

‘Right, and you’re curious. It’s the WinCo by the fairgrounds, not the one by Target . . . and sorry, what’s your name, I didn’t catch it in class.’

‘Bonnie.’

‘You say that with an edge, but who knows, maybe you pick up some fodder for the next essay.’

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Robbins and his wife Hilda have a pretty organized routine, but Thursday night they’re thrown off on account of a neighbor needing help with a sewer line gone haywire under his bedroom floor.

When Robbins is back and gets cleaned up it’s after 7:30. They start getting into the car and Hilda remembers her pillow, one of those donut jobs that supposedly pad your ass, and Robbins runs inside for it.

The shopping at WinCo is uneventful. They start as usual in the produce aisle, then take care of their meats and dairy, then their canned goods and pasta, and then the ice cream and a few odds and ends.



No sign of that woman Bonnie from class, though Robbins gave it about 20 percent, and that's with them being on time.

Saturday evening they're home having dinner and the doorbell rings and Robbins opens the door and Holy Shit, it's her.

She asks, 'Is the woman of the house available please?'

Robbins clenches his teeth and says, 'She's not, actually.'

They can hear Hilda from the kitchen with the *Hun, who is it?*

Robbins lowers his voice and says to Bonnie, 'Look I don't know what you're trying to pull here, but you need to do an about face . . .now. This is not a game.'

'Of course it's not,' Bonnie says. 'I have some design ideas. If I could just grab even five minutes of your wife's time.' She's holding a briefcase.

Robbins stares at her a minute, shakes his head and says fine, and calls Hilda, and Bonnie steps inside.

The two of them start talking and there's some laughing and Robbins is almost expecting Bonnie to pull out a bullshit home decorating brochure.

Hilda is wearing a huge flowery blouse that looks like a protective smock, and green stretch pants with a lot of loose threads sticking up.

Bonnie is pointing to one of the crown moldings in the living room and Robbins takes a little inventory. Hilda at least is freshly showered and her hair is down and she has on some jewelry. But dang, no exaggeration, she's three times the size of Bonnie, who admittedly doesn't look bad, the living room lighting her more favorably than the vending machine alcove at the college.

And Jeez, more laughing, and Bonnie writes something down and hands it to Hilda. Bonnie says, 'Well folks, I won't take up any more of your time, and I apologize if I interrupted your meal. Which sure smells good, and what is the menu if I might ask?'

Hilda says well tonight we went with an artichoke dip appetizer, a small gnocchi al pesto first course--adding that the recipe came from her sister's boyfriend, who played piano at an Italian restaurant--and then Swedish meatballs with lingonberry sauce.

'Amazing,' Bonnie says. 'Any dessert?'

'Well I was thinking butterscotch pudding with fresh whipped cream--if we have any room left.' Hilda

rubs her midsection and laughs. ‘Would you care to join us?’

‘You’re very sweet,’ Bonnie says, and she says goodnight.

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‘You mind telling me what the *fuck* was that?’ Robbins says.

They’re in the hallway outside class, students showing up, the professor inside getting organized for tonight.

‘You’re a lucky man, is my evaluation,’ Bonnie says.

‘Is that right,’ Robbins says. ‘And of course you cringed at the thought of observing us . . . and meanwhile you’re in our goddamn house.’

‘Well that part, you were late with your shopping. I hung out in the parking lot and thought why not follow you home. I was going to ring the bell and say hello then, but I chickened out.’

‘Whatever,’ Robbins says. ‘Cutting to the chase, since you did go off the deep end . . . What’d you think?’

‘Well, as you pointed out, I may have an essay out of it, if I can connect it to an assignment.’

‘She says you gave her your number.’

‘I did. We’re going to go bowling.’

‘Give me a break. Now you’re jerking me around worse, using *my* bowling story.’

‘Right, but that’s what made me think of it, and suggest it to Hilda.’

Robbins considers it. ‘I mean, do you think you actually *do* get some exercise bowling? . . . I guess lifting the ball, and the bending and rotating, not the all-time worst thing.’

‘Sure. And the 5-step approach at the top of the lane. You need to be nimble. Do you want to come?’

‘The bigger question, which I’ll repeat: What’s your deal?’

‘*I* don’t know,’ she says, her tone a little different.

Robbins says, ‘As in, you tell *me*?’

She doesn’t say anything, and the bell rings and they file into class.