

# **I Learned Something Interesting**

**2000 words**

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Jonas is at a party. He's brought a date. They're in the kitchen standing with a bunch of people around the center island. Someone fills their glasses with something lime-green and icy.

It's crowded, hard to navigate the first floor without bumping into people or having to say pardon me. They're in the hills above the college, someone is renting a nice house.

A guy comes up to them. He's pretty drunk, and Jonas doesn't introduce him to Eliana. The guy says to Jonas, 'No big deal Bud, but Jackie's here. Case that amuses you.'

Jonas looks at the guy like what's your problem and the guy moves along. 'Sorry about that,' he says to Eliana. 'Always a wise guy at these things, like clockwork.'

'And Jackie,' Eliana says, 'is who now?' She has a bit of a Venezuelan accent and Jonas figures you're

supposed to embrace that, a little seasoning in the mix, but he's not sure he does.

'I mean you can guess, not rocket science,' Jonas says, 'but Jackie is way in the past.'

'Well where is she?' Eliana says. 'Can you point her out?'

Admittedly Jonas is curious himself and scans what he can see of the living room and rest of the first floor. 'Nah, not picking up anything,' he says. 'Unless she did a major number on her appearance, which I guess you never rule out.'

'How long were you together?' Eliana says.

'I dunno. More important, it's been a while since. Like three years.' It was closer to six months, but why complicate it.

'Running into an ex, it's always tricky,' Eliana is saying. 'You know Proveencetahn?'

'What's that now?'

'On *Capecud*,' she says.

'Oh. *Provincetown*? Cape Cod? No sorry, never been there, I didn't even know that's where it was . . . You have a history there obviously.'

Eliana nods, and doesn't add anything, which is kind of weird. 'You're either reliving something in your

brain,' he says, 'or you're the type person who can't complete a thought.'

'Let's don't be rude,' she says.

'My bad,' he says, and touches her hand and she smiles. She's a good sport. She's shown that, couple other situations. One was last weekend playing mini golf. On the final hole, the *win free game* one, he talked her into cheating by reaching the ball under the metal grate, like he just had, and she scraped up her elbow. She handled it okay and didn't bring it up later.

'All I was going to mention,' she says, 'is running into an ex *can* affect your day. Even if you are past it and it shouldn't.'

'Right? But you gotta know when to fold 'em and move on. Nothing you can undo, so why waste time being stupid?'

'I agree,' she says, except right then he does spot Jackie, coming around the corner by the fern at the bottom of the staircase . . . and Jesus Christ, she's holding some guy's arm and now they're headed *up* the stairs.

'Is everything okay?' Eliana says, the *is* coming out *ees* really starting to piss him off.

He says, 'Should be, yeah.' Trying to keep it steady. 'Listen, you want to get going?'

'If you *like*.' Looking at him kind of funny.

'I mean, my roommate's got something, so we have the place to ourselves. Find some Netflix, or maybe dial up some porn.' He tried that once before on her, she wasn't interested--just like now. But she says Netflix is fine, but so is staying here a little longer, since didn't they just get here twenty minutes ago?

Jonas thinks about it. Hard to argue with the woman. And cut her some slack, anyone being unreasonable it's him obviously.

'I didn't even ask *you*,' he says. 'See anyone you know?'

'Not really. There's one girl I recognize, I can't place it, I'm tempted to say she works the drive-through coffee window.'

'Well here's the deal,' he says, 'I'm going to introduce you to this guy Reid. He's a good man, ask him to tell you about when he parked a car for Adam Levine once.'

'Who?'

‘You know. Guy was in Green Day, Maroon 5, one of those. Reid did valet parking for a while . . . and then I’m going upstairs for a sec.’

Jonas taps Reid on the shoulder, points him in the direction of Eliana, and Reid is a good guy, he goes right over there. Gay guy too, so less to worry about abandoning Eliana for a few minutes, who let’s face it he is still getting to know and might surprise you.

There are three bedrooms upstairs, and also another flight to what might be a dormer set-up, but don’t worry about that right now.

All three bedroom doors are closed, and there are various sounds.

Jonas stands in hallway trying to get a handle on this. Is this where we’re at these days? Sure, he had a few of his own occasions where something unexpected developed, but you at least took it down to the basement, or a laundry room, or the backseat of someone’s vehicle. Jesus.

It becomes clear which room Jackie is in. The giveaway, more than the muffled tone of her voice, is the couple catchphrases he is picking up now that she used when things were not fully down to business but headed that way.

Jonas gives it about ten seconds and knocks.

‘Hi there,’ a male voice says. ‘Can we help you?’

‘Yeah,’ Jonas says. ‘They sent me to clear the floor. You’re off-limits, needless to say.’

‘*Babe?*’

Jackie’s voice, tentative. Some scrambling and the door opens.

‘Babe *who?*’ the guy says. ‘Babe Ruth? . . . Or Momma’s boy Babe, that one.’

The guy gives it a sneer. Jonas can’t tell if it’s an act or the guy really is a tough customer. Fuck, he might be. He’s about the same size as Jonas but more muscular. Still has his shirt off, and a small dragon tat winds around his mid-section.

Jonas can’t help it, he asks Jackie, ‘That how you still think of it? Those terms?’

Jackie is dressed, mostly, but she’s holding a blanket up in front of herself. She doesn’t say anything.

‘Well if there’s nothing else my friend,’ the guy says, ‘her and me, we have some business to take care of. Before we were rudely interrupted.’

Jackie says, ‘Well what about . . . I mean they *do* want the floor cleared?’

‘Nah,’ Jonas says, and goes back downstairs.

Eliana is by herself. ‘I’m happy you’re here,’ she says. ‘I learned something interesting from Reid, I want to share it with you.’

She starts telling him about the house at the end of the cul-de-sac, that what everyone thought was a revenge murder-suicide twenty years ago--it even got a segment on *Dateline*--has been turned upside down by new DNA.

She’s rambling a bit, the pieces aren’t quite together, and Jonas is trying to understand it--meanwhile there’s some commotion, and the dude from upstairs is angry at Jackie and Jackie is hurrying across the living room and out the front door.

The guy follows her, the door slams, and the party is pretty silent.

‘Gosh,’ Eliana says.

‘I know . . . Happened to be Jackie actually, the one hustling out of here.’

‘You must be kidding,’ she says. ‘So go do something about it!’

‘Me? I mean . . .’

‘Yes *you*. Asshole. How can you stand there?’ And something flies out of her mouth in Spanish.

Jonas says all right, Jeez, and heads to the door. He's hoping someone else beats him to it and he doesn't have to confront the guy. But no. There are plenty of folks looking out the window, Jackie leaning up against her car and the guy continuing to jaw at her and point a finger, but no one else goes outside. Like they expect it to naturally resolve, and it's none of their business . . . which is what Jonas is hoping too.

He starts down the front steps, calling to them to *take it easy*.

Maybe you get lucky and deflect it from a distance.

The guy looks up at him, and it's pretty clear this may be backfiring. Jackie's looking at him too, like *what are you doing here?*

'You okay?' Jonas asks her, reaching the bottom of the steps.

The guy now doing the answering, telling Jonas the adults have it under control, and he has about two seconds to get the fuck out of here.

'When you go mute on me,' Jonas says to Jackie, 'I got nothing to work with. Don't do that.' Approaching the car.

'Babe I'm sorry,' she says. 'I made my own bed here, I can take care of myself. Please.'



The guy has assumed a combat stance. An awkward one, but he's looking pretty dang rigid. Jonas had an uncle, who claimed he did a little boxing in the army. The uncle explained to Jonas, you find yourself in a situation you can't avoid, aim for the solar plexus.

Short blow, the uncle advised, turn the hips into it if you can. You land it good, it should redirect the guy's priorities.

So Jonas pictures it first, in slow motion, and unloads on the guy.

Except he comes in a little high, feels some knuckle on bone, the bottom of the ribs probably, definitely not where you want to be . . . and the guy watches Jonas rubbing his hand, and delivers a solid shot to the jaw, and Jonas's world starts closing off and he goes down hard.

Someone calls 911 and the police get there pretty quick, along with a fire truck. Jonas sort of remembers where he is by now, and one of the firemen gives him a whiff of old-fashioned smelling salts, and ooh baby that does the trick.

A cop with a notebook asks him what happened, his version, and Jonas says don't worry about it, little family feud type-deal, nothing we can't handle in-house.

The cop says others see it differently and don't you want to charge this asshole, and Jonas says thanks but I'm good.

When the police and firemen leave, someone comes down the stairs with some lemonade and a fresh plate of food for Jonas, which looks like barbeque stuff, ribs and chicken and corn. He doesn't think he can chew and his head is pounding like a mother, but he appreciates it, what can you do.

It took a while, Jonas is thinking, but Eliana is there now, dabbing his face with a tissue. Jackie's guy gets in a car and without fanfare drives off.

Jackie comes over and Jonas says this is awkward but whatever . . . you can introduce yourselves.

There's some small talk and Eliana and Jackie are getting on okay, even a couple laughs in there.

'Come on, let's go inside,' Eliana says, and Jackie says that sounds good, and they wait for Jonas, and he says you guys go, I'm gonna kind of unwind out here.

'Suit yourself,' Jackie says, and they're gone.

Jonas wonders if he can drive but doesn't think so, he's worried he might not recognize a red light, or a pedestrian.

So he decides to walk it, at least start off, call an Uber if he needs to. His upper arm starts aching like hell, the one he tried to punch the guy with, which is surprising, unless he hairline-fractured it or some shit when the guy clocked him and he hit the asphalt.

He phones Eliana, it goes to voice mail. He still has Jackie dialed in and she picks up.

‘We were wondering about you,’ she says.

‘Huh?’

‘Yeah. Is he manly enough to defend a woman . . . that was pretty weak, Jone.’

‘You’re kidding.’

‘And that bedroom scene. Like something out of a B-grade movie. What on earth were you trying to pull there?’

Jonas has to think about it. ‘Trying to embarrass you? Does that work?’

‘You’re a jerk,’ she says.

‘Hmm. Eliana, she concur?’

‘She’s busy at the moment. I’m not going to interrupt her to ask.’

‘Nah yeah right don't,’ he says.

