

Happy New Year

2200 words

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Hugh pulled the last of the ribeyes and chicken skewers off the outside grill, plattered it all up and set it in the middle of the dining room table, where everything got snatched pretty quick.

Hugh raised a toast. ‘Chilly out there, but nice and cozy in here. This’s good people.’

‘And you’re right away taking a shot at us,’ his brother Martin said.

‘Of course,’ Hugh’s wife Sissy said. ‘Big Boy needs us to know how difficult the elements are.’

‘And the glove and tongs,’ Martin said.

‘They mean it, they’re not trying to be funny,’ Hugh’s 16-year-old son Grant explained to his girlfriend Elke.

Hugh said, still raising his glass, ‘Be sarcastic all you want, but this points to my New Year’s resolution, which I’m proud to disclose. Anyone care to hazard a guess?’

‘Sure, I’ll go,’ Martin said. ‘You’re not going to baseball-bat the neighbor.’

‘Whoa now,’ Joel said. He and his wife Jennifer were college friends of Hugh and Sissy. They played cards together. They used to vacation together until the mosquitos went wild one year and Jennifer blamed Hugh.

‘I mean what is *that*,’ Martin’s wife Lily said.

‘Right?’ Steve said. Steve used to live around the corner, still came over a lot even though he was up in Sacramento now.

‘That’s stupid,’ Hugh said, ‘enough with the joking around. I make one comment--like 5 years ago--and you people don’t let it go.’

‘Not accurate Dad, you brought it up again just a couple months ago,’ Grant said.

‘Oh yes he did,’ Sissy said. ‘You said if you had a bazooka handy you’d shoot it off up his ass.’

‘You know something, you’re taking a frivolous comment, obviously made in jest, and twisting it for your own benefit.’ Hugh said. ‘This is what she does,’ he said.

‘For her own benefit how?’ Jennifer said.

‘Will you please just listen to the man?’ Joel said, ‘there’s nothing there . . . is there Hugh?’

‘Ah I let this guy get to me,’ Hugh said. ‘Popped off out of frustration--like I say, few years back. Not the guy on this side, the guy in back.’ Pointing. ‘Neighbor stuff people go through, not exciting, not going to go into it.’

‘So it’s all cleared up now?’ Jennifer said. ‘Since your wife and son indicate it’s not.’

Hugh said, ‘What are you, trying to stick a needle in here? What’s it to you?’

‘Hey, easy,’ Joel said.

‘I used to *like* your wife,’ Hugh said. ‘I mean this is before Sissy was seriously in play. I was kinda hoping your gig would fall through, maybe I’d make a move. Crazy to think that now.’

‘Jesus *Dad.*’

‘Bud we’re just having a little fun, shoveling the shift. All in good spirit. You’ll be more on board when you start your own drinking.’

‘You said shoveling the shift,’ Martin said.

‘And why don’t you zip uppa your mouth,’ Hugh said.

‘Hoh,’ Lily said.

Steve said, ‘Hows about we circle back? I know I was interested in trying to guess your New Year’s resolution.’

‘Good point,’ Hugh said.

Sissy said, 'You were *hoping* their *gig* would fall *through*.'

'For *pretend's* sake, not literally,' Hugh said. 'Holy Smokes here.'

'Might you be aiming to get rid of a bad habit?' Elke said. 'Or set a fresh goal? Your resolution?'

'Honey thank you,' Hugh said, 'good of you to speak up, you're one of a select few tonight not in the toilet.'

'God *damn* it Dad,' Grant said.

'Just a wild guess from the cheap seats,' Lily said. 'Lose 25 pounds.'

'Ha!' Sissy said, 'you clearly haven't seen him naked.'

'Come on I'm serious,' Joel said, 'how's a comment like that supposed to benefit the evening?'

'I'll take a crack at it,' Jennifer said. 'Argue with people less?'

'You're a riot,' Hugh said, though yep, that was *exactly* it, she nailed it. He even typed it into his phone this morning:

Be more receptive to the points of view of others.

So of course he breaks it 12 hours in. Which you weren't going to tell anyone about now.

‘I can’t stand it when people disagree with me,’ Hugh said, ‘so you’re out of your mind I’d consent to something like that.’

‘Funny way to put it,’ Martin said, ‘consenting with your self.’

‘You *like* it when people disagree with you,’ Grant said.

‘That too, so I can straighten ‘em out,’ Hugh said. ‘But let’s shift gears--forget me--what are everyone else’s?’

‘I made one,’ Ruthanne said. Martin and Lily’s daughter, speaking up for the first time.

‘Wonderful Sweetie, by all means,’ Hugh said.

‘I’m not going to sneak boyfriends over as much,’ she said. ‘It doesn’t seem fair, probably.’

People dug into the food a little more, drinks got refilled.

‘Ooh-kay,’ Sissy said. ‘Mine is read all the Oprah book club selections going forward.’

‘Kinda tame, that one,’ Joel said.

‘Too many minority authors,’ Martin said.

‘Listen to yourself,’ Sissy said, ‘are you folks hearing this?’

‘Nothing wrong with honesty,’ Jennifer said.

‘Heard an author one time,’ Hugh said, ‘and not saying I agree--so let’s don’t be going World War 3 on me--said he uses the word Negro in his stories because that’s what people still say in the South.’

‘I know who you’re referring to,’ Lily said, ‘Richard Ford. But I believe that’s not exactly what he said.’

‘How come everything out of my mouth,’ Hugh said, ‘I get challenged?’

‘We had to read *Independence Day* in AP English,’ Grant said, Elke nodding. ‘That guy’s a full of himself narrator.’

‘Would agree,’ Lily said, ‘his short stories are better. ‘Anyone read the one where the wife tells him, on the way to the party, that she once had an affair with the party host?’

No one reacts.

‘The man processes it and then smacks her, but she gets the last laugh by running him over with the car.’

‘See that’s what I’m talking about,’ Grant said.

‘Mine is to visit 8 major league ballparks this summer,’ Joel said.

‘Oh Criminy . . . you *cannot* be serious,’ Jennifer said. ‘So that clears it up, you’ll never get all the crap out of the garage.’

‘Garage takes all summer?’ Joel said.

‘He won’t,’ Sissy said.

Steve said, ‘I want to take a ride on a tugboat. My buddy’s a deck hand.’

‘See now that type resolution,’ Hugh said, ‘you’re good. Brings it back to some normalcy.’

‘I’d like to help out in Ukraine,’ Elke said.

‘Sheezus,’ Grant said. ‘Like when?’

‘As soon as possible when school’s out, or even before,’ Elke said. ‘I’ve begun the paperwork.’

‘Sounds amazing,’ Ruthanne said, ‘though for sure Grant didn’t see *that* one coming.’

‘I know, right?’ Jennifer said. ‘I’d like to learn to drive a stick shift. But what I’d really like is take a few things back, from the past, like they never happened.’

‘A catharsis then,’ Lily said. ‘A healthy one?’

‘Healthy or not,’ Jennifer said, ‘it’s easier to keep my mouth closed.’

‘Well thank you,’ Joel said. ‘I mean I guess.’

They moved to the living room, Hugh stoked the fire, more booze flowed.

‘I’m going to start getting up at 5am,’ Lily said.

‘That shit never works,’ Martin said.

‘Then how about this one,’ she said, ‘do stand-up comedy at one of those open mics.’

‘Really. What would you joke about?’ Martin said.

‘Don’t you want to know,’ Lily said.

Ruthanne said, ‘Could anyone here commit a crime?’

‘Fair question,’ Hugh said. ‘We’ve all no doubt had opportunity and motive along the way. The *adults*, I’m talking about.’

‘What a horribly disturbed thing to say,’ Sissy said.

Everyone shook their head or said nah they couldn’t commit a crime.

‘How bout hypothetically?’ Hugh said. ‘That way you can let it all hang out. No one’s going to judge you for imaginary speculation.’

‘Fine,’ Joel said. ‘I could take an ax to you for that disclosure about my wife.’

‘Fair enough,’ Hugh said, ‘anyone else?’

Grant said, ‘I feel like mom’s tennis pro guy, I’d like to do something to.’

‘Sebastian?’ Sissy said.

‘Mom don’t fake being naive. He puts his hands all over you, showing you how to serve.’

‘You witnessed this how?’ Hugh said.

‘She made me take a lesson from the guy. After one of hers.’

‘Son of a *bitch*,’ Hugh said.

‘Yeah well like I said,’ Joel said, ‘the *other* thing. You’d best be keeping your thoughts to yourself.’

‘Okay, fellas,’ Jennifer said. ‘Honey, you are way over-reacting.’

‘Oh. So you’re interested in *him* now too?’ Joel said. ‘In that special way?’

‘Don’t waste your energy there,’ Sissy said. ‘One time we were walking up Bancroft? These fraternity guys are throwing a football around and acting goofy, and I laughed and said I love frat guys.’

‘Uh-oh,’ Lily said.

‘Yeah. He wouldn’t let it go for days. He kept bringing it up, imitating me, like a jack in the box.’

‘This is Dad?’ Grant said.

‘Sure,’ Hugh said. ‘Why would you be in love with frat guys? That still kind of burns me.’

‘I might have lost a guy an eye once,’ Martin said.

Everyone looked at Martin and he seemed serious.

‘Huh?’ Hugh said. ‘I never heard *that* one.’

‘You were out of the house by then. No reason to fill you in,’ Martin said.

Lily said, 'Baby you're kidding aren't you?'

'Being totally truthful?' Martin said. 'I don't know the outcome. We didn't stick around to find out.'

'We is who?' Hugh said.

'That kid Rex I used to hang with. We were up at the river, this is like 11th grade. We're with these two girls. They told us they were twins but they didn't resemble each other.'

Hugh said, 'You knew 'em down here, or met 'em up there?'

'There.'

'River's not bad for that actually,' Hugh said. 'Always had a decent social vibe.'

'Dad stop interrupting,' Grant said.

'So we're paddling these canoes,' Martin said. 'These two chumps on the bank, one of the pull-outs, they start commenting on our twins. Mine was overweight--and I'll admit she shouldn't have been wearing a bikini--but's neither here nor there. She's in tears.'

'I'm not liking the sound of this,' Lily said.

'Yeah well your instincts are good,' Martin said, 'but too late. We pull over, a ways up ahead, and Rex insists we talk to the bozos, so we tell the twins hang on we'll be back . . . Long story short, those guys got a little fire

going and I pick up this metal thing they're tending it with, and I hit one guy in the face.'

Ruthanne started crying and held onto Lily who looked pretty white.

After a minute Hugh said, 'Okay fine, you did what you had to do . . . apparently . . . I'm sure you had your reasons.'

'In the heat of the moment,' Steve said.

Sissy said she was bringing out ice cream and who *didn't* want carmel sauce.

'Why do you think he may have lost an eye?' Elke said.

'I don't know,' Martin said. 'Just a feeling I had . . . the way the implement connected with him. The softness of it. Like a perfect storm.'

'Come on, Jesus Christ,' Joel said.

'But you didn't, like, check on the individual?' Sissy said. 'Follow up in any manner?'

'No. We went back to the twins, gave it a few minutes, assumed those guys took off for a hospital and wouldn't spot us again, and we paddled back to the rental place.'

'Did the twins see what happened?' Grant said.

‘Couldn't. Too much growth in the way, plus it was around a bend.’

‘Well did the twins suspect anything?’ Elke said.

‘Good point,’ Grant said. ‘Did you or Rex have blood on yourselves? Or it wasn't like that.’

‘Or were you acting strangely,’ Elke said, ‘to where the twins could have put two and two together later.’

‘Honey that’s clear thinking,’ Hugh said.

‘I suppose that’s entirely possible,’ Martin said. ‘Alls I know, me and Rex get back to the city and who would guess but we didn’t have the toll for the bridge. This is when they still had humans.’

‘Happened to me a couple times too,’ Steve said, ‘they sent you a bill.’

‘Exactly,’ Martin said. ‘Meaning they asked for our ID, to get the mailing address.’

‘Not good,’ Hugh said.

‘No. We were freaking out for a couple weeks, then nothing happened.’

‘So do you think your mind was running away from you all along?’ Jennifer said. ‘As to the extent of the injury?’

‘Or,’ Joel said, ‘*did* you really put his eye out but get lucky.’

‘Something I wrestle with,’ Martin said.

Sissy said who wants coffee and a couple hands fluttered.

‘So let me ask you something,’ Hugh said. ‘Why’d you tell us this?’

‘You kind of asked,’ Martin said.

‘If I did,’ Hugh said, ‘I didn’t *mean* to ask. You need to read the room better.’

‘Come on Dad, it’s New Year’s,’ Grant said. ‘Uncle Martin it’s okay.’

‘Yeah it’s okay,’ Hugh said, ‘don’t worry about it.’ And he got up and gave his brother a hug--and he was thinking this is a better resolution, hug more people--but dang, some guy walking around with an eye-socket, Holy Shit.