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## Friends' Night Out

**by Norbert Kovacs**

Irene McNulty had not really cared when Roger Truman, her colleague at the insurance company, told her he was gay. She thought being gay an interesting way to be, nothing else, and, when Roger mentioned breaking up with his boyfriend, Daniel, she had only a casual thought about gays having trouble to commit to serious relationships. No, the real reason Irene was interested in Roger was that he had proven so funny poking fun at the dysfunctions of their workplace. It was refreshing to hear Roger spin his humor on break at the water cooler after facing a long, drawn out meeting with the stuffy, highbrow managers of their department. She liked Roger's wit enough that one day, after hearing him ridicule their boss's unreal expectations for them, she invited him to go on a friendly night out together.

"It'd be fun," she said. "Neither of us has a partner. There's no one to fear making jealous."



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Roger smiled. "I'd have no problem with going out as your friend."

So, the two went to a busy bar downtown on Thursday the same week. The two took a tall corner table and, after a drink a piece, Roger gently held forth on their co-workers as Irene listened gleefully.

"Poor Marjorie!" he began. "You should have seen her the other day. 'Oh, my goodness! How can the boss ask that all these letters be typed at once?'" Roger rolled his eyes and warbled like the woman in question. He was a boyish man, who had a light brown crewcut, dark, happy eyes, and an attractively thin body.

Irene laughed through her red glossy lips. Her dark clusters of curls and fine blue eyes danced at him.

"I don't think she gets that her voice becomes old maid-like when she's excited," Roger continued. He put a quaver in his voice as he tried to imitate her. "Leave that file there on the shelf! Make these copies!"

"She can be a hoot."

"She may not suspect anyone thinks it."

Irene laughed. How ridiculous Roger made Marjorie out! She encouraged her friend to new humor.

"What do you think of our boss, Mr. Turley?" she asked.

"I have to say he sadly overestimates his leadership. He claims we're doing well when our morale is poor."

"An oversight by any means. Do you feel encouraged by our department because of it?"

"I see my limits staying with our unit. I can never become chief like Mr. Turley, for one. I usually understand how things go really."

Irene shook her head with a expression of mischief.

"What do you think, generally, of the other people in our department?" she asked.

Roger took a sip from his water and reflected. "Well, do you ever notice how most of them are uneasy when someone is promoted? They immediately start hoping they had been instead. And the person who was hired up becomes guarded, dropping doubts about anyone paid less than him." Roger shook his head. "Our co-workers might stand being a little more relaxed. "

"I agree."

"Of course, I would never accuse you of being too tight, Irene."

Irene smiled, so that a light came into her eye. "I may be ambitious all the same."

"How so?"

"I'm not aspiring very high. I only heard our chief is hunting for a new liaison. I thought to try for it. I might like the role, helping connect our company's departments."

"The job would challenge you. The departments in our company communicate too little. They each follow their own track without mind for much else."

"What if I got them to communicate and to mind?"

"They'd scoff at and spit at you for it."

Roger knew how to kid her, Irene felt.

Roger moved his glass of water to a side. "How is your friend Amy doing at the firm around the block? Still seeing that boyfriend of hers?"

"Oh, yes. He calls to talk with her three or four times a day. Sometimes it gets a little much for her."

Roger's eyes widened with surprise. "I don't see how."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that if someone has a problem with a boyfriend, it should be for hearing too *little* from him. Isn't it easy to forgive someone else for doting on you too much?"

"Maybe, maybe."

"I think many people would like a boyfriend who gave them that problem. If she doesn't like him for it, I might be happy for his attention..."

"There you go talking."

The waiter came over. He set a diet Coke before Irene and an orange soda before Roger, the second round of drinks they had ordered. Irene took a long swallow of her soda as she looked warmly at Roger.

"How is your friend Shirley?" Roger asked after putting down his own drink. "Is she still seeing that guy whom they say is so possessive?"

"She is, and he *is*. He wants her only to talk to him, nobody else. The other day he called her out because she phoned her friend, Carl, whom she has not seen in an age."

"Wow."

"Her boyfriend watches her like a hawk around other guys. He asked once what she meant bumping into this guy's seat at the club."

Roger shook his head. "If you love someone, you don't mistrust her like that."

Irene nodded. "I think so too."

"Or else be suspicious back to show him a lesson."

"Shirley brought up the idea. She might."

"I tell you there'll be fireworks."

"We will see. So what has been going on with you? I don't remember hearing that much of your gracious life this evening."

"Oh, I'm blue. Still getting over Daniel."

"Oh?"

"He'd been seeing someone behind my back. I didn't learn until he said he was going. He might have been more honest with me. I mean, I always was up front with him. He should have done the same."

Irene studied the bubbles rising in her soft drink. "It is terrible when two can't get along like that."

"I'd been with him over two years. I don't like to think of what he did without telling me. Or what our



relationship really meant to him."

"I bet you second guess everything about him now."

"Sometimes it feels I will, you are right."

"Well, Daniel doesn't sound the most fun topic to talk about. How about your friend, Barbra? What's she up to?"

"She told me she's on a diet. She means to become more attractive."

"How do you think she'll manage?"

"She will. But the diet's given her a new problem: she thinks too much about her weight. If anyone ever glances at her a little too long now, seems needlessly amused, or avoids her, she blames it on her weight. It's made her irritable and depressed. I'm trying to get her to be more reasonable."

"Good luck to you." Irene was impressed by Roger's consideration for the second time that night.

"And what about you, Irene? What have you done of interest lately?"

Irene reflected. "Would you believe I'm taking dance lessons?"

"Wow. How are they going?"

"Worse than hoped. I step a lot on the other people's feet."

"You're not thinking to quit because of it, are you?"

"Not yet. I like dancing too much."

"I bet then you'll keep at your lessons. You'll get better. One day, you'll dance without crippling anyone. When you make it onto *Dancing with the Stars*, you will say, 'How many feet I broke to get here!'"

Irene laughed. Roger's joke was too funny. He has a very friendly sense of humor, she reflected. And a wonderful smile. He's always happy to see a person in a good mood; he's never really mean. He's very nice.

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The two emerged from the bar into a warm, clear August night with Irene leaning on her friend as she tried to contain her latest burst of laughter. There were many people out enjoying the warm night on the long, busy street by the bar.

"How about our having a stroll along the street like everyone else?" Irene asked. "I know some nice cafés around here we ought to peek inside."

"I'm game." The two started to walk down, Irene sticking close to Roger. She thought it a wonderful way to be ending their night together.

They had gone about a half block when Roger called suddenly to a young man walking in their direction, "Sam Sanchez, is that you?" The fellow came up smiling. He was a handsome man with a fit, thin body and glossy, black hair. He had taken some care to dress well that night as was clear from his sharp, black shirt and well-fitting, blue jeans. When the fellow reached them, Roger stepped over and without hesitating gave him a kiss on the cheek. Irene realized at once that Sam, like Roger, had to be gay. She had heard gay guys greeted each other that way sometimes. She knew also that the kiss was only a friendly greeting. They had not touched lips. However, the kiss unsettled her all the same. How can Roger do that to another man when I'm standing by him?, she asked herself and felt something like worry.

"How is it you're here?" Roger asked his friend Sam.

"I checked out Tony's, the new bar they have down the street. It turned out pretty decent."

"Well, this is a lucky meeting. Here, Irene, this is Sam Sanchez, an old friend. Sam, this is Irene McNulty. She's my friend from work. We're having a friends' night out."

Sam nodded to her. Irene smiled back quietly.

"So, how are you doing?" Roger asked Sam.

"Super busy. Arranging for Derek's party."

"The crew knows how to abuse you."

"I know how to abuse *them* back. But are you doing alright?"

"So-so. I broke up with Daniel."

Roger re-told his recent history with his old boyfriend. Irene thought he seemed as eager to talk about it with their sudden guest as he had been with her at the office and the bar. It troubled her and she fidgeted a little beside Sam's well-made, handsome form.

"Well, I'm glad we had this chance to run into each other, Sam," Roger said finally.

"I'll look you up again soon."

Roger and Irene started again down the street. As Roger pointed out a well-lit pub they were passing, the first real attraction on their way, Irene said, "Here, Roger, why don't we go to the park instead?" She meant the large park across the street. It was one of the largest in the city and a well-known oasis from the summer heat.

"O-kay. But might I ask why the change of plan?"

"It'll be less busy and quieter than here."

"Alright."

The two crossed the street and went into the park. They found it very quiet. The wide-headed maples by the road buffered the sound of the people passing by the cafes at the street as they took a short path and arrived at the lake that formed the main attraction of the park. The lake was a large, freeform blotch rimmed by a grassy bank. A few black ripples moved over its silver surface. Tall trees like a barricade stood on its opposite shore.

"I think," Irene said, "I could watch the ripples spread on this lake all night. Unless I was watching the stars overhead. Or the dark trees in the moonlight."

"You've become poetic suddenly."

"It's the place that makes me."

"It's a very nice lake."

"They rent out boats for people to row across it in good weather. Wouldn't that be fun to try?"

"Rowing a boat?"

"Sure. The two of us together in a boat. How might we arrange it?...I know. You could man the oars, and I—I'd sit in the end seat, lazy and comfortable, as you rowed us across."

"I'd make you row part way whether you liked it or not."

"I'd laugh if you did. I'd say 'Always so funny, Roger!'."

"I wouldn't laugh." He smiled with a friendly tilt of his head.

Irene's eyes lit. "Here, I have to show you my special spot. It's off the path around the lake." She tugged on his hand.

"What spot?"

"I'll show you. Come."

The two walked the path that followed the dark trees alongside the lake. The moonlight dimmed by the trees and the path fell into shadow. The lake itself darkened so only some grey showed at its center. The very tall trees on the other shore had nearly fused with the night.

"Let's stay close," Irene said. "I don't want us to get separated here."

"This place is pretty dark. There hasn't been anyone else on the path really, either."

"It's not that lonely. I knew someone who walked here with her boyfriend at night sometimes." Irene stopped and turned to the sky beyond the trees on the lake's far shore. "How nice are the stars beyond the city! I think a poet said once that gazing on a star takes us from ourselves. Stars inspire us to become different." She studied Roger when she said this.

"Did your couple like to watch the stars when they walked here?"

"They did."

"And they never caught cold? This walk is making me chilly. I wish I had on a coat."

"We're almost to my spot. Think warm thoughts."

The two walked another couple of minutes when Irene exclaimed, "There it is." She pointed to a small patch of grass and flowers among the trees a short distance ahead; in the middle of it was a stone bench that faced the lake. Irene led Roger there and motioned for him to sit. He did but with a question on his brow. Irene took a seat beside him. For a moment, they surveyed the trees and the daisies nearby without speaking. Then Roger asked, "Well, what did you want here, Irene?"

"Don't you think this place beautiful? Don't you like being here with me?"

"Sure, but is this so special to have come here?"

Irene moved so her leg touched against his. "You know, I've thought you a very nice guy. This evening especially."

"What are you talking about?"

"I hope you take it the right way but I never realized you were so attractive until tonight."

"Um, Irene...."

She craned her face toward his. "I do like you, Roger."

"But I can't love you."

"I'd be happy with you if you did."

Roger turned aside. "Irene, please!"

"Why not?"

Roger stood and walked from the bench. Then he halted.

"You know why, Irene."

"Roger?"

"You know why."

Irene stared at Roger's back, then dropped her face. She remembered how Roger had gone to kiss Sam by the cafe. She understood then and lowered her head, abashed. She had hoped very much, too.

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