

NAOMI HART

MULTI-PURPOSE CLINGWRAP

A man and woman walk into the restaurant and instead of using the most common form of human communication – the spoken word – the man chooses instead to raise two fingers and stare at me. Those two fingers, I assume, mean “Good evening dear Maitre d’. I was wondering if you could help us. We don’t have a reservation and I can see you’re extremely busy at this time - seven thirty – on a Saturday night. Would there be any chance of a table for two within the next hour or so? We don’t mind waiting patiently at the bar.” The thing is, not only is he rude, but he has also interrupted a cracking good story my hostess is right in the middle of telling me. She has just started dating one of the cooks - not an uncommon practice and certainly not one I would frown upon since it is how I met my husband - and she had just gotten to the part where the egg and the sausage were about to combine.

You see, seating the people is an inherently boring job. You stand around waiting for the guests to arrive and enjoy their night while you toil around them. Too often you get dragged into their lives while they lean on the host stand and bore you with stories about the traffic they battled to get there on time, only to discover (to your great misfortune) that their dining partners are running late. And so you while away the hours engaging in that age-old pastime...gossip. I am a great person to gossip to, because although I may remember the name of almost every guest that walks in the door, when it comes to scuttlebutt I am a goldfish. I tend to forget the important parts of the story shortly after it is told to me and it is only upon hearing it again that I get a curious sense of de ja vu.

Unfortunately, there is no way for me to avoid talking to the mute and his sidekick, so I inform them that their wait will be at least an hour and if they are still around then I will take them through. I can see he is unimpressed (not speaking usually means you think you’re important enough to get whatever it is you didn’t ask for) and he and her take their positions opposite me, planning, I assume to stare me down. Sometimes this works, but tonight I’m feeling perverse so I ignore them and return my attention to the hostess’ tale.

Patty, it seems, contracted herpes when her ex-husband cheated on her with a man. An unfortunate circumstance to be sure, which has left her with the even less desirable task of having to notify every subsequent lover of her disease. She is very informed about the ailment, happily sharing the particulars with me and I am vaguely aware that the mutes are listening in.

“Can you tell when you’re having an outbreak?” I ask.

“Oh yeah. I get itchy and it burns a bit. They’re like little blisters.”

“Oh.” I pause. “And what did the cook say when you told him?”

“Well he has cold sores anyway, so he wasn’t that fazed.”

“That’s nice of him...aren’t they different strains though?” I ask, vaguely remembering something

I learned in Sex Ed when I was thirteen and far too immature to take it seriously. Each class was assigned a teacher to drag them through the fundamentals of sex education. We got the art teacher, a flamboyant, excitable woman who decorated a

shoebox and placed it on her desk saying she would answer any anonymous questions we may have. In hindsight I realise this must have made fabulous material for the staffroom on lunch-break and I don't doubt they went through our schoolbooks matching our questions to our handwriting.

"Can you believe Melanie thought tampons stopped you from getting pregnant!"

I could hear them laughing now.

She took us through the contraception box – we popped all the pills out of their boxes and smeared spermicidal jelly all over our desks - but when she handed us a plastic banana that peeled to reveal a penis we really lost it. What were they thinking! Thirty pubescent girls, still grappling with bras that do up in the back, half of us not even sure if it was penis we were into, and we spent the morning trying to cover the plastic fruit with sticky, tricky condoms.

Herpes, I seem to recall, comes in two varieties; type one, typically above the waist as in cold sores like the cook has, and type two, typically below the waist as in what Patty has. Though I can't be sure, as I was far more interested in trying to work out which one of my classmates needed to know such information than I was in the science behind it.

"That's why we're going to be careful," Patty says, "no sense both of us getting both strains."

"That should work out nicely then," I say diplomatically. "There'll be times when you can't kiss his lips and other times when he can't kiss...parts of you I guess."

"Oh no, he came up with a way around that, just last night as a matter of fact."

I sensed the story was about to get so much better and deliberately ignored the outraged looks from the ear wiggling mutes.

"He wanted to go down on me, but I told him I didn't think that was a very good idea. I'm in the middle of an outbreak and particularly contagious right now. So he stands up, dashes off to the kitchen and returns with a roll of cling wrap."

"He didn't," I gasp, not sure whether laughter or shock is my greatest response.

"He certainly did, and it works quite well I'll have you know," said Patty, clearly proud of her man's ingenuity. "I couldn't even tell the difference."

With the image of a turtle suffocating on a plastic bag fixed in my mind, I decide now was the perfect time to give the mutes their table.

"We have something available now, Patty will take you through," I say, reading their thoughts as clearly as Patty does her outbreaks.

"Is the cook working tonight...was that his cling wrap or the kitchen's...she's touching my menu...what if he touches my food?"

"Enjoy your meal," I say cheerily, and turn my attention to the new guests, confident that next time the mutes come in they will have learned to use their words or suffer the side effects.

