

## GUILT

February 6, 1971

It was his first invitation since he moved to the new city. The card was formal and anonymous, and he didn't feel much like going. He didn't usually enjoy parties - he assumed that the invitation was for a party - least of all those superficial social events organized by some club, and judging from the invitation they had sent him, it was bound to be one of those boring, non-alcoholic affairs. However he was not in a position to be selective. He had no friends in the new city, and this might be the occasion to meet some new people. Indifferently, he decided to go, just to see what it would be like.

As usual, driving to the party he couldn't prevent himself from building expectations, and soon he was submerged in his usual fantasies, pictures of wild happenings with luscious girls, one of whom would go home with him long before the end of the party.

This trend of thought was dysfunctional, he realized, for not only was it bound to lead to disappointment, but it also caused him to lose his way. Absorbed in his imagery he ended up in a totally unfamiliar section of town. After several errors and a number of consultations with gas station attendants and policemen, he reached the given address.

He was late by several hours and wondered whether the thing might be over by now. Judging from outside - the old wooden building was barely lit up, and there was no concentration of cars in front - the party was either over or not very successful.

He went in - the outside door was unlocked - and followed signs with arrows and the words, COME UP; YOU ARE LATE! It occurred to him how badly he had misjudged the size of the building from the outside. He walked past half a dozen such signs, down a number of hallways and up and down several flights of stairs before finally finding himself in front of a closed door, the entrance to the party proper, he assumed. At this point he couldn't remember in what part of the building he was. He hadn't passed any windows and for all he knew, this could well be underground.

He knocked on the door and it was opened immediately by...Mack! This was truly incredible. He hadn't seen Mack in at least eight years, and he had no idea that the guy was in town, in the very same city where he had just moved himself. Frankly, he never liked Mack very much. They had gone to school together, Mack was about four years older. He had introduced him to certain aspects of the big life - women, smoking, drinking - but he had also cheated him on several occasions. No, he certainly wasn't happy to see this so-called friend. Confused and somewhat anxious he asked, "Mack!...why...what the devil are you doing here?"

Mack's physiognomy hadn't changed. His rotund face still seemed ageless and sarcasm was still a permanent feature of his expression. He replied, smiling, "We'll discuss that later, Matt. Right now, let's concentrate on you. Come on in, make yourself comfortable.."

Still baffled by this unexpected encounter, Matt apologized for being late, to which Mack answered, "That's alright, we knew you would be late..."

"We?" Matt asked, "are you giving this party?"

"Yes, me and all these other people. Go meet some of them, you'll find them quite interesting I'm sure."

Matt walked into the next room, which was darker and more crowded. The light was reddish, like in a darkroom, and the background music consisted of a soft drumbeat

undergirding a jazzed-up electronic rendition of Chostakovitch's second waltz. He approached a small group gathered in a corner. They turned toward him and one of them - he couldn't see whether it was a he or a she - said, "Ah. Mr. Matthew! We have been waiting for you; you are late."

Surprised and somewhat taken aback, Matt said that he was sorry to arrive so late. Who were these people, anyway? he wondered. They seemed to know him but he didn't recognize them. And why did they say that they had been waiting for him?

"You see," he explained, "I got lost on my way over. I am not very familiar with the city..."

"I see," one of them said, "you are new to the city?"

"Yes, I have only been here for a few months..."

"A few months?" another one chimed in, "Surely you should be familiar with the city by now..."

Ignoring the somewhat rude remark, Matt countered that some of the neighborhoods still confused him, especially at night.

"He gets confused at night," said the transgendered person who had initiated the conversation. The whole group snickered.

What is this? Matt wondered. Why are these people mocking me? He felt like going back home, but instead he excused himself, walked to the bar and poured himself a glass of Cabernet.

(Fortunately the party was not "dry," as he had feared).

As he was pouring the wine into his glass, a woman approached him. She looked and acted like the hostess, or at least as someone important. She wore a shiny embroidered dress and lavish jewelry. Her graying hair was made up in an elaborate and convoluted chignon. She was middle-aged and middle-weight.

"I see that you are making abundant use of our resources, Mr. Matthew," she said in a sarcastic and accusatory tone.

Once more Matt was flabbergasted. Does everyone here know who I am? He wondered. And is everyone equally rude? His true desire was to tell her to go to hell, but instead he apologized again and said, "Oh, yes, well... forgive me, I didn't think of bringing my own. However, I'll be glad to reimburse you, if this is a no-host bar..."

"Never mind," she said dismissively, "next time you should request to purchase a drink, and please do not serve yourself..."

"I understand," Matt replied, trying to smile, "and I thank you for your generosity. I really can use a glass of wine. You know what they say about alcohol being a social lubricant..."

"A WHAT?" the matronly lady said, disgust permeating her face. "Are you some sort of pervert? I will not condone such language in my house!"

Jees! Matt thought. Must everything go wrong tonight? Now what did I do wrong?

“Alright,” he admitted, “I am not sure my choice of words was judicious, but listen: I’m terribly sorry about the wine, and I am now returning your wine to you,” whereupon he replaced his untouched glass on the bar.

This did not placate the hostess. She said, “no point in back-pedaling, sir. The damage is done. Others will suffer the consequences of your thoughtlessness, as they always have. By returning the wine you poured into your glass, you are signaling that you do not like what we serve.”

Confused, Matt replied, “I am sure that this is an exquisite wine, but I don’t wish to abuse your hospitality...”

“Exquisite, you say?” she asked aggressively, “yet you have not even tasted it. Who do you take us for, Mr. Matthew?”

Every word Matt uttered seemed to work against him. He felt more and more confused. Because he was a guest after all, he bit his tongue once more and instead of telling the woman to go fuck herself, he said, “Well, what I mean is.... I am sure that you serve fine wines, however, since you indicated that the supply is limited, I thought...”

“Limited?” she exclaimed in a shrill voice. “Are you accusing us of being limited?”

“No, not at all,” Matt replied nervously, “I merely meant...”

Meanwhile, Matt’s “conversation” with this woman had become somewhat loud and it had attracted a crowd. Turning to some of the bystanders, the matron said, “hey guys, you know what Matt here thinks of us? he feels that we are limited!”

“Is that so?” somebody said. “We were under the impression that tonight’s focus would be upon *his own* limitations...”

“Yes,” continued the hostess, “and we are certainly aware of your limitations, Mr. Matthew, as well as your *motives*...”

My motives? Matt thought. What on earth are they talking about? What do they know about me?

The growing group surrounding Matt now also included the first people with whom he had tangled, right after his arrival. For a moment there was an ominous silence, and then the metrosexual person who had berated Matt for being late said, “We know much about you, young man. Do not try to deceive us.”

“Yes,” added someone, he has admitted that he gets confused at night - *timor nocturnia!*”

“Confused?” another person shouted. “It may be a case of *malingering*, not confusion!”

“You may be right,” said the group’s ringleader, adding as he turned towards Matt, “Admit what *really* happened, Mr. Matthew. Do not try to evade the issue.”

The group stood around him in silence, with a sinister smile on its collective face. Matt's embarrassment was turning into fear and anger. Who are these bozos? he wondered. What right do they have to treat him like this? He wanted to leave. However, he didn't want to create a scene. After all, they had been kind enough to invite him. So he tried to put his best foot forward and to be accommodating.

"Well, it's true that I was distracted while driving over, which caused me to lose my way..." he admitted...

"Aha!" said the transsexual-looking person, "I knew it!" And then, pressing on the attack, she/he asked: "What were you thinking about?"

"I don't remember," Matt replied.

"You're lying, Mr. Matthew," she countered. "You are not doing your best. Try harder to remember! We have a pretty good idea what your thoughts were!"

Matt was getting angry. "What are you insinuating?" He demanded, "what right do you have to treat me like this?"

"What right? You came to us, did you not?" he-she retorted. "We know why you came, and it is too late to turn back."

Matt's anger made place for fear. What did they know about him? He wondered. And who had told them? How had they found out what they knew about him?

"Yes," the ringleader continued, "we know the truth. This is your last chance."

"Last chance for what?" Matt asked, approaching panic.

"The last chance for you to face the truth."

"I see," Matt replied. But he did not see. What did they mean by the truth? Did they know some deep dark secret in his subconscious? Some skeleton in the closet that even he was unaware of? What "truth" did they have in mind? What is *the* truth anyway? Aren't there many truths?

"The truth, you say." he equivocated. "But is there an absolute truth? Aren't there many truths? Have you read Baudrillard, or Derrida? Postmodernists stress the multiplicity of narratives, which you folks seem to equate with truths. Similarly, post-Einsteinian cosmology teaches us that..."

This only made things worse. Someone in the group interrupted him, lashing out forcefully, "Stop your mystifications, Mr. Matthew. We are all aware of your stratagems. Solipsism will not save you! (The others laughed). Truth is in the *mind!*"

This triggered a flood of thoughts in Matt's mind - *mauvaise foie*, false consciousness, *mental* dishonesty. Was that what they were talking about? He wondered. Was that what angered them? Maybe they had a point, and in a sense he was guilty. He certainly *felt* increasingly guilty.

After all, they all appeared to agree about his guilt, and surely they couldn't all be wrong, could they?

He wanted to convince them that he was not bad. His greatest desire was no longer to leave, but to regain their friendship and their acceptance. If I only could make them like me again, he thought. If I confess, they will be nice to me again.

“Okay,” he admitted, “maybe I have made some mistakes. Maybe we started on the wrong foot, but I am willing to learn....”

The woman who had reprimanded him earlier spoke: “Only Schmul can help him now. He is too far gone!” Whereupon she told Mack to go fetch Schmul - whoever that was.

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The wait for Schmul was intense. When he arrived, it was in the company of a retinue that included Mack, Matt's old semi-friend who wore his usual smile, plus a couple of others, indicating that Schmul was the big kahuna. He was a mid-sized middle-aged man with a balding cranium, a mustache and a heavy black beard. He wore a long light-colored mantle. As he approached Matt, he said, solemnly, “I hear that you are in trouble. We will help you.”

“Yes Schmul,” said Mack reverently, “he is *mens improbum*. The curriculum applies.”

Matt felt the last remnant of self-control slipping away from him. His own mind was turning against him. Who was this Schmul? And what was Mack saying? In a supreme effort at rationality, he turned toward Schmul and said, “what are you going to do to me? I only came here because I was invited - I guess by my old friend Mack....”

“I am not his friend,” Mack shouted to the group, “*Men improbum* lies.”

“Yes,” someone added. “And his answers are wrong.”

“His lacks *voluntas*” another explained.

Schmul held up his hand solemnly, and total silence descended on the group. Then, he pronounced his plan of action: “We shall help him.”

Thereupon he grabbed Matt by the arm and pulled him into a large adjacent room which Matt had not yet seen. The crowd followed. The room was a huge round hall with an extremely high ceiling. It contained a big crowd, more numerous than the rest of the party altogether. After entering this hall, Matt began to recognize some familiar faces, many of which he had not seen in years. However, most faces were unknown. Everybody looked melancholic, and one only heard occasional whispers, no loud festive talk. But even that little bit of talk stopped once Matt had been forcefully shoved to the middle of the room. The crowd turned toward him and receded silently towards the wall, forming a threatening circle.

Matt had stumbled to the floor and he had difficulty getting up. Looking at the hundred faces surrounding him, he realized that escape was impossible. Schmul walked around him a few times and then broke the silence, addressing the crowd in a loud, commanding voice: “Here he is, my friends. We have all been waiting for him. We forgave him and offered him reconciliation.

We warned him and gave him his chances. Yet, as you can see, he has not repented. He is still in *selfstasis*. He cannot fuse....”

“Please, “ Matt interrupted in a final fumbling effort, “I repent, I swear it. I thank you for discovering my guilt, I confess and I apologize. I will leave in shame and I will never return...”

A gasp of indignation rose from the multitude at this remark. “You see, friends, Schmul continued, “Even now the disease progresses. What is your verdict?”

“Help him! Help him! Help him! Help him!” the crowd roared unanimously.

Presently, Schmul turned to Matt and spoke solemnly: “Matt, it is our unanimous decision that we shall help you. Come with me.”

As Schmul and two of his acolytes pulled Matt away towards one of the round room’s dark exits, Matt began to feel the horror of what was about to happen. It was the horror of rejection, the terror of being alone. He turned to the crowd and started to beg, to scream and to cry, “ Please don’t put me out! Please let me stay! I love you! I want to be your friend, I want to be with you, I want to be like you!”

Schmul ordered his men to stop and to bring Matt back to the middle of the room. There, he ordered Matt to undress. Matt obeyed. As he stood naked and shivering, surrounded by hundred people, the crowd exploded in laughter. Matt looked down, in silence. Finally Schmul tossed some clothes to him and told him to get dressed.

“Oh, thank you!” Matt exclaimed, tears pouring down his cheeks, “Thank you so much! You have saved me!”

Next, Schmul signaled a large hirsute man to walk over to Matt and give him a big bear hug. Matt accepted this passively. Buried in the huge man’s embrace, he could smell the stench of his breath, his sweat and his body. Then a wrinkled and toothless old woman joined them in their embrace and began to kiss Matt all over his face. Soon another ten members joined in, forming a mountain of people hugging and caressing Matt and each other, with Matt buried at the core.

Schmul was sitting away from the human pile, lotus position in his light beige mantle. “Do we love him?” he exclaimed.

The entire group responded in a loud, unison monosyllable: “LOVE! Whereupon everyone began a chant consisting of that single word.

Then, little by little, people began to fall away. Some left the room, and some lied down on a couple of couches or on the floor. Slowly people began to fall asleep, some in sleeping bags, some just as they were. The chanting had a curiously soporific effect on Matt as well. He could no longer keep his eyes open. Just before he fell asleep, his last thoughts were: “They love me now. They have forgiven me. I am saved. I will never be alone again.”