

# Bill Gaston

## Four Corners

Jack decides, again. Tonight's the night.

He drains his wine, a favourite pinot noir that tastes thin this evening, gets up to pour another and brings the bottle back to the couch with him. This doesn't have to be painful, Cheryl won't necessarily make a scene. She is reasonable. Which is maybe part of the problem. But you never know with reasonable types. And hell hath no fury like. He *can* conceive of Cheryl throwing something. He can also see a lolling sadness, and he wonders if that wouldn't be harder to take.

She's in her bathroom standing in front of the mirror and he can see parts of her only when an elbow shoots out or she tosses that beautiful hair of hers. She's using a very throwable brush to pull through it, the one vanity she indulges, despite or perhaps because she's not far from getting too old for long hair. She's what, 32? Something about the brush, maybe a hollow core, amplifies each stroke so it's throaty and attention-seeking. Cheryl would have been pretty in the 1940s, that pie-face thing that for some reason rubs him wrong. Tonight she's wearing some makeup as well. Though she always applies it tastefully it has the effect of making her look slutty. Like a librarian can look slutty. No, not the librarian, the *library*, like a library can look slutty.

He should slow down. He had a couple before he came over, and this watery wine is too easy to swallow.

'Some more?' He hoists the bottle, waggles it at her back. Cheryl meets his eye in the mirror, shakes her head and instructively glances to her full glass on the counter beside her.

He's tired of this. All of it. Waiting, here on her couch. Waiting as she gets dressed for work if he slept over; waiting while she sautés pine nuts in her special stupid pine nut pan as she makes them one of what he calls her adventure salads, often showing off with weird fruit in it, or quail, even goose. Waiting, like tonight, as she pretties herself to go out. She has no TV, so he has three choices while he waits. He can watch her leaning at herself in the mirror. He can

thumb through her coffee table scatter of *National Geographic*, an annual gift subscription from her father. The latest cover is a whale in blue depths, with articles inside on Kathmandu and 'The Friendly Bacterium.'

Or, strike three, he can gaze beyond her living room, through the picture window, to a block away and the dire luminescence of that intersection. Four Corners. There's a Four Corners Café across the street, down the road a No Corners Pizza—ha, ha—and a 4 Korner's Kutters hair salon in the base of her building. Surrounded by miles of farms and fields, here two small highways happen to cross, so a collection of high-rise condos and strip malls have gathered for no reason except this meaningless intersection. The worst thing about it: four kitty-corner gas stations fight for business. Gas stations should locate for convenience, not competition, but here you have the only four gas stations for miles glowing hard at each other. During a price war two months ago, no matter how often the price changed per day it was somehow instantly displayed by all four—the new corporate magic. Cheryl has lived at Four Corners for years, and it is maybe the worst thing about her. Choosing a location whose main feature, whose only feature, is an intersection.

58 Cheryl claims to hate the gas stations, and Four Corners itself, but at the same time it had carried a good part of their early conversations here. 'I have this nice huge window,' she'd said, smiling, the first time he came over, 'but look what I have to look at!'

'Wow,' Jack had said, shaking his head for her. One time he actually saw the Four Corners' garish flare reflected on the saliva of her teeth. He saw that in some moods, the primary colours down there might scare him.

He'd added, 'I bet you can see that intersection from space.'

'Well, exactly. I hate it!' But chirpy, smiling. When he asked her why she'd picked this spot, she hesitated, then said, merely, 'It was convenient.'

She told him once that 'this awful view from my wonderful window' was a contradiction which summed up her life. For three years she's been a secretary in the building where Jack works, but she claims she's saving to go to grad school, some sort of archaeology. She says she's out of place at Four Corners, even suggests that it's a display of everything North America *lacks*. But Jack's recurring thought is that she doesn't seem out of place here at all, even though a few times she called this apartment 'my aerie,' like she owned some special, eagle-eye perspective the rest of them didn't.

'Sorry!' she says, pivoting from the mirror to roll her eyes for him. She takes a polite sip of her wine, as if to stay on the same page.

Cheryl all smiles, always.

He feels bad piling up evidence against her. He knows he's preparing for later, stoking his resolve with everything negative. He watches her, fingers teasing, elbows working. Her bathroom sounds of tubes clicking shut and water rushing on and off comes to him now as irritation, though there had been a time, not so long ago, when such sounds were alluring, a big part of *la difference*.

He drains his wine and puts his feet up, kicking aside the yellow-framed whale. Even as he does so he feels in the gesture the chickenshit insolence that lately has been creeping into his way with her. (Hadn't Shannon done exactly that to him? Before dumping him?) Tonight he will be forthright and honest. Cheryl deserves that much.

Their first night together, Jack thought he might love her. There was that moment. They worked on different floors but had been vaguely aware of each other (they agreed) for a couple of years and then, six months ago, against all common sense, linked up in the bar after an office party. Later they came back here and had sex and then he was leaving, leaning against her bedroom door sill, looking back down at her. He had nothing to say and maybe he blew her a kiss. She was drowsy and snug in bundled clouds of beige comforter, her face cute in its frame of tousled hair and billowing pillows. She smiled with one side of her mouth, a smirk really, a slightly saucy look signalling a particular and private contentment. Then out of their silence she whispered, looking up at him sleepy-eyed from her bed, that loveliest smirk, 'I'm the Mayor of Blanketville.' That's all she said, waiting for him to leave. He had never heard anyone say anything like this. I am the Mayor of Blanketville. He could think of nothing good enough to say back.

'What you smiling at, Jack?'

She's watching, bemused, from the bathroom. A hint of that same smirk. How do these things happen?

'Nothing.'

'You're awfully patient with me. How's the wine?'

'Thin.'

'That's one reason to gulp it, I suppose.' Smiling, having checked out his empty glass and nearly empty bottle.

'Well, glug glug, then,' he says, and pours some more.

It has to be tonight. He decided this morning after her call and her coy announcement that tonight was special and she'd made reservations at Mister Mario's. He said okay warily. Special night? They'd met about a half-year ago. Conceivably, to her tonight was some sort of girly anniversary. Was that it? At the start they went out a month

after that first time, then it was every second week or so for a while, and now weekends together are assumed. Cheryl is thirty-two, he is thirty-six, a dangerous age for single people, who too often settle for less. He'd warned her right off that, ever since his marriage to Shannon ended, casual was all he could do until further notice. To her credit she never pushed, never spoke of a future together, but how can her future not be in her thoughts? Once you are in one of these assumed-weekend things, some notion of forever *has* to—

'Just about!' she sings from the bathroom. Something clicks shut.

'No hurry.' As if for ammunition, he eyes the gas stations. She's a goddamn secretary and he's an executive, what the hell, how is that not an embarrassing cliché? Maybe that's all he really hates here, appearances, so of course he's a shallow shit for seeing it in these terms, but what can you do?

Out the window, in a symmetry that mocks him, exactly one car sits at each of the four gas stations. Life unfolds here on rails. It is so boring. He can't help himself. 'Maybe one of them will clean their windshield.'

'Tonight I especially.... One of who?'

60 It's her forcing an anniversary on him that's made him this angry, he decides. Maybe he feels some panic, that typically male thing. Tonight is the sound of tires screeching to a halt, so it's all kind of funny, forgivable. Okay, how much *does* he like her? Sex is good, always for him, usually for her, check. There's familiarity with its contempt but not too much, check. Maybe there's some love, too, who knows about that? Her face is always pleasant, even sparky, check. And there's maybe a bit of something, let's call it beauty, that's more than skin deep. She has that quirky humour he lacks, maybe that's one area where she's superior, if that's the word. There's her coltishness in bed that makes him shy of his own inability to make any noise. He remembers, those first times, seeing her as a young dragon when she breathed in that rough way through her widened nostrils just before she came, check. Despite her neat-as-a-pin secretary look, and her apartment here in geometric hell, she does have a bohemian spirit, and maybe a worldliness, one that came from her travels with her father, who is a professor of something. Her place has primitive oddities, carved or kilned, scattered on window sills. Some look truly fierce, scrunched faces that had survived fire, lips sticking out to make a fart-noise, to maybe lure another crazy, fire-hardened lover. He enjoyed that one evening going through her photo albums, and probably should have told her so. The young Cheryl on a camel, in an outrigger canoe. In one glorious shot she was maybe

seventeen, brow-knit but tanned and bare-breasted, wearing a grass skirt, surrounded by scowling black kids with bellies that—

‘Here we go!’ she sings, and water rushes on.

The fact is, he’s never been sure about her. He is nervous now. His desires knock and lurch, fighting each other.

‘Ready!’ she sings again, and water shuts off.

Out the window it looked windy and cold so they walk coatless through the underground parking, at the distant end of which is a back entrance to Mister Mario’s. He finds it incongruous that Four Corners not only has a high-end restaurant but that it can be accessed without going outside, and through Cheryl’s garage. Jesus, he can hear a sleazy realtor assuring her, ‘All you need is right here in Four Corners.’ But the ‘Mario’s Lasagne’ is just maybe his favourite meal of all time—plus the waiters know him now and come unasked to douse his with the spiced-oil bottle, smiling patiently because the oil is really for the gourmet pizzas.

The underground garage smells like they all do, and the cars are pathetically of-a-sort; her little Ford fits right in, but that’s not the point. Cheryl has him gently by the right biceps, the way she likes to walk when they go out. Early on she joked how she enjoys ‘playing executive girlfriend.’

‘So I have this surprise for you tonight.’ Her eyes are brown, and they go in and in.

‘I’ve gathered.’

‘I was afraid you might not come if I told you what. You’re such a bachelor.’ She tosses her hair and smiles at him, vixen of surprises.

Jesus, he was right. He should announce himself now, here in underground parking, do away with dinner altogether, but she holds open Mister Mario’s door and waits for him, seeing his hesitation.

‘Cheryl? Maybe—’

‘Let’s just go!’ Mischief in her eyes, her smile is eager. ‘He could be here already.’

‘He?’

‘My dad.’ She scowls at him. ‘Darling?’ she mocks, cutesy, from the forties. ‘Tonight I’m taking you to meet my parent.’

Jack’s lasagne is on its way, as is her seafood cannelloni. They’ve ordered already because apparently her dad is ‘chronically unpredictable.’ She announced this proudly, like he was an artist of some sort.

‘He’ll be here soon.’

‘Why didn’t we pick him up?’ They’re barely 30 miles from the airport.

'He actually doesn't like that. Then he'd have to worry about actually *being* there.'

'Which would ruin his chronic unpredictability.'

'Well, yeah. He'll take a cab.' Cheryl looks away fondly. 'He came home once in a helicopter. Mom was alive. We were in Montreal, the outskirts. Big loud helicopter landed in the field across the road. Highly illegal I think.'

Cheryl explains what it is her father does. Jack knows most of it. Engineer, consultant for Third World projects, helping natives do most with the least, etcetera. He won a U.N. award. He should by rights be filthy rich but isn't. Some projects he seeded with his own money. Countries Jack had hardly heard of. Always traveling. Tonight he had a five-hour stopover and phoned Cheryl to see if they could visit.

Clearly, her father is her hero. Jack will wait and see.

They eat their salads and Cheryl mentions a few of the trips she's taken with him. Borneo, Ivory Coast, Costa Rica several times. Jack drinks a slightly more robust pinot.

'I was really *surprised* at first,' Cheryl says, remembering, chewing, 'how unbelievably polluted these places are. Wherever there's lots of poor people. Dad says it's that they aren't as good as us at hiding shit.' At which point she adds, as a warning, 'Don't be too put off with my dad, Jack. He's not good at small talk.'

'I can do more than small talk.'

'No, I know, but he's—he can be direct.'

'That's fine,' Jack says, ruffled by implications that he isn't. Which, given his evening's plan, is maybe sort of true.

She raises her eyebrows and looks toward the door. She's been watching the door all along. She doesn't see her father much.

'You're drinking more than usual,' she offers, hearing him pour.

'So?'

He plays quiet drums with two bread sticks. Cheryl says nothing, watching the door. His insolence sounded childish, but how else to respond to a comment like that? So what if he gets a bit drunk? Whenever Shannon's mother came to lurk at their place, Shannon turned prude too, went as cruel as her mother did at the faintest whiff of—

Cheryl's father is standing over him, offering his hand.

'Jack?' Cheryl stands, bubbling. She looks suddenly sixteen. 'This is Simon Hodgins. Dad, this is my friend Jack Davies.'

Cheryl's father nods blankly as they shake hands. He's shorter than Jack imaged, has thinning rusty hair tied back in a pony-tail, and his lined face is weathered red. A rounder face even than

Cheryl's, a true pie. Simon sits and turns to wave broadly at the waiter, grunting in comic desperation as he does, mumbling that he's been in fucking India for Chrissake, he needs a drink.

'Jack always gets the lasagne,' Cheryl says when the waiter comes. 'He says it's fantastic.'

'Do you have a vegetarian version?' Simon asks the waiter.

'You've gone veggie?' Cheryl laughs and turns to Jack, though she keeps looking at her father. 'This is a man who eats moose brains.'

'Goat brains, please.' He looks up to explain loudly to the waiter, 'It was moose *nose*.' Turning to Jack, he announces, one hand placed gently on his chest as if in contrition, 'I have eaten a moose's *nose*. Which means I've eaten beef-flavored sponge.' He looks back up to the waiter. 'Do you? Maybe a meatless lasagna? A *mooseless* lasagna?'

The waiter says the chef can probably make one up and Simon smiles his thanks, nodding quickly. Jack orders a bottle of Chianti, wanting a wine that's thick and savoury. So Cheryl's father is a loud old hippie.

'No, I'm not veggie, not yet,' Simon continues, as if to a general audience. 'Just weaning myself off India. If I had roast beef or something tonight my gall bladder would probably blow through my rib cage. Which might get all over, ah—'

'Jack.'

'—Jack.'

'What were you doing in India, Dad?'

Jack eyes Cheryl, who's grinning, proud as punch of her colourful dad. Okay, well, of course. Dad is charming and funny like award-winning humanitarians could afford to be. And, as per all fathers, he thinks daughter is perfect and deserves the best and therefore doesn't like the suitor named, Ah—Jack.

Simon explains that he had been barging down a section of the middle Ganges with a frightened doctor and boxes of vaccines, checking water quality and exploring possible sites for a new kind of extremely effective ground-water pump.

Cheryl announces that, speaking of the Ganges, she has to go to the bathroom. Equally deadpan, her father adopts an English accent to warn her to mind the corpses. Jack understands where Cheryl got her humour and sees how easily she rises to it. He feels his jealousy; he's out of their league in this department. Though who needs that department? Or their league?

Apropos of Cheryl being gone, Simon says, 'So you're the new one.'

'Well, it's been six months.'

‘Oh, hmm. Cheryl said there was a brand new—’ He stops. He looks at Jack steadily, eyes bright. ‘So, that would be you. Otherwise I am eating my foot.’

Over a hollowing stomach, Jack makes himself smile. He instantly tops up Simon’s wine and then his own, showing nothing but confidence on his face. A joke occurs to him, perhaps in their league, about the foot eating—You better watch the gall bladder, there, Simon—but now he has waited too long.

‘Well, I can’t keep up with her,’ her father says, blushing at the throat. ‘She’s quite something.’

‘She is.’

‘Living up there in her aerie, keeping an eye on Mammon for me.’

So that’s where she got the aerie bit. And the opinion of herself. An adoring father.

‘Jack. So what do you—ah—?’

‘Do?’ Cheryl hadn’t bothered telling her father what the new one did. In fact the new one was him. ‘I sell mutual funds.’ He meets Simon’s eye. ‘I sell Mammon.’

‘Aha!’

Jack watches Simon do a good job hiding whatever contempt he feels, and this involves a scrunching of brow and a distant look. But then Simon asks, ‘Is it too late to buy in now, do you think?’

‘Mutual funds?’

‘Yes.’

‘Not at all.’

‘It’s hard to know what to believe.’

‘Belief has nothing to do with it.’

‘Perhaps, yes, but let’s just say, for the sake of argument, that the world economy is heading to hell in a bucket, *again*. Mutual funds?’

‘It’s not.’

‘Well let’s just say it is.’ Simon dons a theatrically perplexed face, spreading his hands out to span the table. ‘Mutual funds, or gold?’ Now he relaxes into the professorial, even raises a single finger. ‘Gold seems to be the thing, no? If history’s any proof.’

‘History doesn’t count anymore. Everything’s new.’ He can be crazy and poetic too. ‘Gold is an old Volvo. Funds are a Formula One race—’

‘I *own* a Volvo!’

Jack briefly lifts his eyebrows as if to say, Of course you do.

‘Dad! The *jimmy!*’ Back from the bathroom, Cheryl stands over them, excited about something. She looks and acts younger still.

‘The *jimmy!*’ Simon echoes her. ‘Oh God, yes!’

‘I’ll go get it!’

'Yes! Go!'

Cheryl turns and almost runs out of Mister Mario's, out the door in which they'd come, not even looking back at Jack, like he isn't worth the time to explain.

Simon beams at something remembered, shaking his head, then notices Jack. 'Has she told you about, about—'

'The "jimmy?" Um, nope.'

'Jack.' Simon shakes his head some more, chuckling soundlessly, watching where his daughter had gone. 'Cheryl has this, this "little artefact" I brought back from Indonesia years ago. Little island pronounced "toot." Practical-joke kind of gift. You've seen how Cheryl and I, um—She hasn't shown you the jimmy?'

'Maybe. I don't think so.'

'You'd know. Anyway it's something we've come to feel bad about, about her *having*, and so, and so, since I'm going back next month, back to *Toot*, we thought I should take it back and *give* it back. I've organized a burial ceremony, actually.'

Jack sits nodding. He listens to Cheryl's father go on about a people's cherished remains being looted and defiled through the centuries—Jack wants to shout, *You looted Toot?*—and how it is a crime only now being rectified.

'Even Egypt. Where did we get off robbing graveyards? No matter how grand. It's like the *more* a people revere their dead, the more we get all *horny* to find it and take it and... '

Jack can think only of Cheryl and how abandoned he felt as she left, how he wanted to follow her up to her apartment, not stay down here with this effervescent man who makes him feel his own dullness, who speaks to him as though to a student.

Their main courses arrive and Simon groans in appreciation of 'this absolute feast,' a subtle attempt to remind Jack how guilty he should feel about his country's wealth and privilege. Jack says, wryly, 'Hey, all you want is here in Four Corners,' but Simon misses the joke, if that's what it is, and Jack knows he may have slurred a bit. Both men hover over their steaming plates waiting for Cheryl. Jack butters a bread slice, figuring to soak up some of the wine that has gotten the better of him. He watches the back door.

'I mean, Jack, what would you do if some archaeologist went to your—'

'Cheryl says she wants to be an archaeologist.'

'Well, yes. Ethno. And she will be. Has she decided yet?'

'About... '

'If it's Dalhousie, or L.A. Please tell me it's Dalhousie.'

'I think it's Dalhousie.'

'Good. Anyway, so what if some archaeologist in, in Wales, went to your great great grandsomebody's grave and said, I'll just have a scrape of *this* guy's DNA so I can see if—'

'Did Cheryl tell you I was Welsh?'

'“Davies—” I guessed. So I can see if...'

Jack caught how he'd asked his question so hopefully. Does Cheryl even know he's Welsh? How much has he ever told her about anything? Did she tell him about going off to either L.A. or Dalhousie? Maybe.

Jack takes sips now, putting the brakes on. He chews bread. He's on the verge of making a fool of himself. He hates that he wants this man to like him. Where he wants to be is upstairs in her apartment, flipping through some pages with her, the pictures of distant shores, which would be her ethno-books of course; their shoulders are pressing, her hair draped so deliciously over them both, he can see why women are made to hide their hair in so many of those countries of hers, then she flips it all away to expose her neck to him. Mayor of Blanketville, yes. He should have asked her more questions about herself, not let her get away with being so private. And he should have told her more about himself. And about Shannon, about how another new layer of skin grows to protect from each mean flick of the tongue. About how never really listening to Cheryl is part of that thickened skin of his. He really needs most of all to tell her that his ears, and his heart, are full of skin.

'...anyway, I see I'm ranting and rambling. The thing is, it's a treat not to need a translator.' Old school, Simon rises from his chair a half a foot to greet his returning daughter. 'And here she is.'

Holding a hand reverently before her, Cheryl approaches the table carrying something small, wrapped in sky-blue cloth. With a serious air she gently places the cloth on the table, near her father's plate, then carefully seats herself. Father and daughter incline their heads together and murmur something. He hears Simon say something about needing a cooler, and getting it back through customs.

'If we, if we ever get serious, ever get married,' Jack is suddenly saying, smiling like it's a joke, looking at neither of them but at the far wall and its plaster frieze of gondolas, 'I could pay your, your archaeology. You know. School.'

He hears his drunken rhythmlessness even as he speaks, then their silence. His urge had been to mischief perhaps, maybe to invade their rude intimacy. He finds himself grinning at the father. He sees the quick look Cheryl and the father share.

'Jack's been into the wine a bit, Dad,' Cheryl says, blushing beautifully, eyeing her cannelloni for the first time. 'You've been into

the plonk, my darling,' she says flatly to Jack, not looking at him. It's the second time tonight she's called him 'darling,' and she is being nasty.

'Yes, I *have!*' Jack sings, grinning.

'Fine, Jack,' Cheryl says.

'Your stupid mammony-man. The *new* one.' He doesn't quite yell. A passing waiter, a young possibly gay dude with gleaming shaven head, smiles back over his shoulder at them like he understands their table completely.

Ignoring Jack further, Cheryl turns to her father and nods to the blue cloth. 'Anyway.'

He can be direct too. He says, sternly, 'Cheryl.' He waits till she looks at him before he tells her, 'I was going to break up with you tonight.'

She stops, waits until she sees that nothing more is coming, then whispers, '*Really?*' Her father pretends to be examining the artefact now, the jimmy, but Cheryl's smiling at him, only on the one side like that, lovely, meeting his eye, not afraid of him in the slightest, never had been. Her face is aflame in humour, even delight.

So it wasn't just him being private.

Her eyes on him, he can no longer see. He loves her now, but things are probably done.