

# SIEGFRIED

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A MIDDLE-AGED COUPLE WAS eating breakfast in the hotel restaurant. The woman was trim and ironed, her hair an auburn wedge. She wore black slacks and a black V-neck sweater over a white cotton blouse. She looked like the type of woman who taught Home Economics and knew how to make her own Christmas wreaths, hot-gluing silver balls and seasonal flora.

Her husband was a glutton.

A fat man with a grey beard, he was shoving food into his mouth with both hands as though he was in a hotdog-eating contest on Coney Island, although no one here was keeping score. He blotted his face with a napkin. Licked two fingers clean of grease. He ate so ferociously that his wire-rimmed glasses looked in danger of falling from his face, and all the while, his wife sat still, impassive, while the restaurant played music by Michael Buble.

The glutton said something to a man at the adjacent table—something about Sidney Crosby—and it was, at that moment, impossible to tell if his ironed wife loathed him or if he had other qualities that made him endearing. Had he, when they first met, been generous and funny? Had a personal trauma—the death of a child or the loss of a family business—driven him into this gluttonous state, nursing his wounds with overflowing plates of Eggs Benedict and sausage?

“Would you like some more coffee?” inquired the waitress.

The glutton patted his greasy lips with a napkin and tried to sound demure: “Yes, please.”

Steven Malcolm, aged fifty-six, worked in the Sears Portrait Studio, which was buried in the back of the store near the travel agency and the hair salon. To reach it, customers had to walk past snow blowers, refrigerators, and garage-door openers, and during the holiday season, a display of Lindt chocolates. The air smelled like rubber.

Steven sprayed a teddy bear with disinfectant. He was wearing a green pullover his wife had bought him for his birthday. XXL. His eyes looked less watery—less desperate—than they had in the restaurant. His beard was no longer covered with grease.

Two young women with baby strollers arrived. They had spent the day taking public transit, feeding their children McDonald's fries, popping them into their mouths as though the babies were little birds. One of the mothers was more outgoing than the other and had, during the ride, shouted over passengers' heads at a man in a white puffy jacket.

"She lookin at you cuz you so sexy." She pointed at her friend.

"I born like that," shrugged the man.

The outgoing mother told Steven that she was entering her child in The Most Beautiful Baby in the World Contest, which she had seen online. She decided to pose her child with the teddy bear prop, which made Steven pleased that he had sprayed it. The boy's name was Lamar and he was, Steven conceded, a very pretty child.

"All of our photos can be customized," Steven explained. "To enhance your pleasure. Each is a timeless treasure."

"That cool."

Before he lost his job, Steven had been a traveling salesman, a "manufacturer's representative," as people called them today. As much as he loved a buffet breakfast—there was one in Charlottetown that offered Japanese food—Steven loved that job; he loved pulling out of his driveway, sliding Bruce Springsteen in the stereo and driving for six hours straight. He loved checking into hotels where people knew his name. He loved the sound of a knock on his door, knowing it was the night staff with a single wrapped chocolate. He loved watching West Coast hockey on TV, undisturbed.

"Steven," his wife shouted from their living room. "When you take Blinky for a walk, make sure you put his sweater on him."

"Sure," responded Steven vaguely. Bernice owned three poodles that she insisted Steven dress for walks. The dogs were named Blinky, Winky and Nod.

"And take the stick in case you see other dogs."

Sometimes, Steven noticed, Bernice's auburn hair looked so sharp that he could imagine it slicing cheese, her clothes so stiff that he could see them sitting upright by themselves.

“Hit them if they come near Blinky. Hit them!”

A customer was standing at the Portrait Studio counter. The man had a brush cut, and his face was lean and weathered, the kind of face that, after a lifetime of ups and downs, had gone into neutral, unwilling to react too strongly to anything. Steven took him for a military man.

Despite his neutrality the man seemed content, Steven decided, one of those people who live within his own orbit, who take satisfaction in the small things in life: his team making the playoffs, getting a good deal on a set of tires. Men like that were married to women who knew how to keep things running during long deployments at sea or in Afghanistan, women who cheerfully arranged high-school graduation photos on the walls.

When Steven’s son Simon graduated from high school, Bernice declared: “That’s fine, Simon, but what’s next?”

Bernice was an asterisk person, one of those people who spoiled every pleasure, every minor accomplishment, with an asterisk. If Simon came home with a 75 on a math exam, Bernice, the asterisk person, would ask—before the boy had a chance to down a can of celebratory Coke: “What was the highest mark?”

“Somebody got a 98.”

“Hmmm, I see.”

If Steven got a promotion, she would ask: “Did anyone else apply for it?”

Steven believed that content people, happy people, graciously accepted each gift in life, each minor blessing, for what it was. The context didn’t matter because life was not a level playing field, with wealth, brains and beauty distributed equally at the start.

Bernice was also— like Steven’s mother—an interrogator, who didn’t seem to understand that some questions did not need to be asked, and that sometimes kindness was more important than her right to know.

“Who won that prize at Simon’s school?” Steven’s mother would demand.

“I don’t know.”

“Why don’t you know? Wasn’t there a list? There had to be a list.”

Steven showed the man the available backdrops and the customer, without a moment’s hesitation, chose *Starry Nights*. Most customers automatically chose blue: cerulean blue, sky blue, baby blue, and Steven was unexplainably tickled when someone chose *Starry Nights*.

“Great choice,” he smiled.

“Yep,” replied the man.

On his break that night, Steven bought a box of chocolates.

Sometimes, while hunkered over a side of ribs or a box of chocolates, Steven would slip into an alternate state, and once, without knowing it, he growled. By the time the eating frenzy was over, Steven would shake his head as if to say: “What just happened?” There was no single trauma that had turned Steven into a glutton. He had not, as a child, feared for his next meal; he had not survived a potentially fatal illness. The change had come upon Steven slowly, gradually, as some part of his being—a part that did not fully communicate with the other parts—realized that Steven’s chances were running out, his options were limited, his life was never going to become grander than this.

The day that he became truly aware of his gluttony was the day of the buffet breakfast. Steven was in his element, having enjoyed countless breakfast buffets during his twenty-four years as a traveling salesman. Bernice was recovering from pneumonia. Always thin, she looked wan and weak. Bernice stared longingly at the station where a cook in a chef’s hat was making omelets, allowing you to choose your own fillings: peppers, ham, mushrooms or smoked salmon.

“Why don’t you get one?” suggested Steven. “You like omelets.”

“I’m just too tired,” Bernice sighed.

Steven, who should have offered to get his wife her omelet, blurted: “Well, I have to get my breakfast,” and loaded his plate with eggs benedict, sausages, smoked salmon, devilled eggs, French toast and, for good measure, a slice of strata. When he sat down across from Bernice, with her scrambled eggs and orange, his own plate heaped with greasy bounty, he did, for a moment, feel ashamed.

A woman was at the Portrait Studio counter.

She was a faded beauty in her late fifties, wearing a sparkly pink scarf. Her blonde hair looked freshly coloured, and she smelled of perfume. The woman wanted the photos to look nice, she told Steven, because she was sending them to an old beau from high school. The old beau lived in Alberta, was separated from his wife, and had a camper that he might drive East. Her eyebrows were painted on too thickly, Steven noticed, and her concealer did not quite hide the brown age spots on her forehead.

Steven showed her the choice of backdrops and, for a moment, she lingered at a field of wildflowers before deciding, to Steven's relief, on *Starry Nights*.

"Would you like the designer montage?"

"Why, yes," she replied.

Later that night, on his break, Steven made his way to the liquor store and bought a bottle of wine.

On his walks with the dogs, Steven had started to frequent a seedy neighbourhood of drug dealers and prostitutes where he sometimes met an old guy named Frankie who liked to talk hockey. Frankie lived in a low brick building with boarded-up windows. People sat on lawn chairs on their front lawns. Someone had a cat tied to a pole. One night Steven and Frankie debated for forty minutes whether Sid the Kid should be getting into fights.

Steven had abandoned his old route, the one closer to home, because it was a minefield of busybodies. There was one woman in particular, a pinched-face woman, the kind of woman who wore rubber boots whether she needed them or not, the kind of woman who let her children play in the street and then gave cars dirty looks.

One day, the woman was walking her baby and a car pulled into a parking lot. The young couple inside was having a spat. Over God knows what, Steven thought. Money. In laws. Maybe the man had lost his job, which made Steven think about the day that he had told Bernice he was being "laid off" from the job that had kept him from home for twenty-four years—during birthdays, anniversaries, and croup, during the problems that Simon had started having.

Reeling, the woman reached for the door handle and bolted from the car. The man lowered his head, and Steven could not bear to watch.

The woman walked away from her boyfriend, from the car, from everything in her immediate existence. "Fuck off," she shouted back, crying.

After five hundred metres, she turned, her frustration spent.

The pinched-face woman met her on the sidewalk. "Are you okay?" she asked. And then before the young woman could answer, the busybody blurted, her eyes strangely bright: "I took his license number and I phoned the police. They're coming now."

Steven considered not answering the phone, but he knew—in the same way he knew that cold sores returned during times of stress—that the ringing would continue at five-minute intervals.

“Hello, Steven.”

“Hello, Mother.”

“We’ve got a nice piece of pork here that we cooked. We can’t eat it all. Come down and get it.” She made it sound like an order.

“Yeah, sure.”

“It’s a good piece of pork. It would be a shame to waste it.”

“I’ll get it after I walk the dogs.”

“Well, make sure you get it.”

“Yeah, okay.”

As much as Steven enjoyed a nice piece of pork, he wanted to get off the phone.

Ten minutes later, the phone rang again.

“Steven, are you coming to get that pork?”

“Yeah, sure; I’m kind of busy.”

“Doesn’t Bernice like pork?”

“Hmmm, yeah.”

And then, accusatory: “Don’t you want it? Your father and I can’t eat it all.”

Steven looked at Bernice and tried to be defiant. “How is any of this my fault?” At the same time he was telling Bernice that none of this was his fault, he was thinking about the fact that he still had frequent traveler points. He was thinking about the bottle of wine. When Steven bought a bottle of wine, he would, with great ceremony, pour Bernice a half glass and, while she nursed it, guzzle two or three until the bottle was empty. Bernice’s unwillingness to fight him for the bottle was a statement: she would rather not get her share than be like him.

The phone rang again, and this time his mother was using her low voice, the one filled with mock concern.

“Steven, I am afraid that this pork is going to go bad. I thought you were coming to get it.”

“Yeah.”

“I’m going out soon so you’ll have to get it before I leave.”

“Okay.”

“Have you talked to Simon?”

“No.”

“Why not? Did he get a job? Why doesn’t he have a girlfriend?”

It was Sunday. Bernice sat the kitchen table, waiting to go to the farmers’ market. Steven proceeded to take out a frying pan and cook three eggs and a large slice of ham, to which he added toast with peanut butter and an eight-ounce glass of orange juice. He ate the food standing, his back to Bernice.

“What?” he demanded when Bernice cast a look at the clock. “What?”

“Nothing,” she spat through tight lips.

“I Am Having My Breakfast,” Steven announced, as though this was a highly important event, as though someone, perhaps a doctor, had insisted that he consume copious quantities of fried eggs, ham and toast. Fifteen minutes later, he asked: “When do you want to leave?” and Bernice told him: “It’s too late now.”

Steven put sweaters on the dogs. He was thinking about a car he had seen in New Glasgow; it was a two-door Plymouth Valiant 1964, and it was sweet—white with a red interior—with windows so big and uninterrupted that it looked like it a rolling solarium, and when you drove it, people would point at the wedge-shaped car and smile because it would make them happy; it would make them think of flowered dresses and skinny ties and Beach Blanket Bingo.

Steven knew that Bernice was watching so he picked up the stick, which he would discard as soon as he left her sight. One night, before he had changed his route, the busybody had phoned Bernice after Steven had passed her house with the dogs. How, Steven wondered, did she find their number? How did she know his name? The busybody told Bernice that when Steven had gone by with Blinky, Winky and Nod, one of the dogs had, unbeknownst to Steven, passed out. “He was dragging it by the neck,” the busybody screamed. “It was unconscious.”

Steven saw someone he thought he recognized in the pile of passport photos, someone from high school, but then he was not sure. People’s faces could be tricky, you know. Two months ago, Steven and Bernice had attended a wedding, and when the crowd shots came back, he saw a man who was not him standing with her, a fat sloppy man hiding behind a grey beard and wire-rimmed glasses, a man whose life was built on lies. How could his

essence, his self, be so disfigured, mutated to the point where he knew that it was not him?

Steven looked up. A teenage boy was at the Portrait Studio counter.

“Oh my Lord!” shouted someone from the hair salon.

“Is it real?”

The boy was long and lanky, and his hair fell over one eye, and he was carrying in his arms a giant rabbit, the biggest rabbit Steven had ever seen, a creature so improbable that it should not have called itself a rabbit. The bunny, a soft brown, looked four feet long, Steven decided: taller than a grade 3 student and only inches shorter than one of his favourite actors, Danny Devito.

A woman at the catalogue centre removed her glasses, cleaned them and put them back on.

“Is it real?” someone asked a second time.

Someone else squealed.

The rabbit, whose name, it was later revealed, was Siegfried, did not react to the commotion. The boy’s arms were around the rabbit’s waist in a bear hug, and Siegfried seemed content to be carried in that position, feet in the air. His face was deadpan.

And at that moment, Stephen was thinking about those years, the years when everything seemed as bright and hopeful as the ’64 Valiant, when there were photos of round-faced children whose features had not yet formed, and no one had yet been told that he was dyslexic or ADHD, and kids still believed they would be soccer superstars or ballet dancers or veterinarians, and no one had had kidney failure or a nervous breakdown, no one was bulimic, no one had moved to Fort Mac and been stabbed, and everyone still showed up for Christmas dinner and all of the grandchildren sat on a couch and posed for a group shot in the same order every year. And someone had a birthday party at a pool. And someone rented a pony. And you believed that you were you were so clever, so lucky, that you would be spared, that heartbreak would miss you, when it never ever did.

Christmas songs were playing; before he thought about what he was doing, Steven playfully waved the bunny’s front paw along with the music as though the rabbit were a conductor. *It’s beginning to look a lot like Christmas.* Back and forth like Leonard Bernstein. Everyone laughed. The bunny was wearing a blue homemade visor, and he did not seem to mind.