



# Cheese, Crackers, And Passive-Aggressive Warfare

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*FLYMF* November 2006, The Fingers Crossed Issue, Volume 3 Issue 11

I often feel awkward at weddings, but this one was worse than normal, as I'd never even met the bride or groom. If I had known it was going to be a war, I would have worn my wedges instead of my stilettos.

The bride's mother had invited me in a post-workout euphoria. She had mastered the plank in my Pilates class, and when I congratulated her on her good form after class, she blurted out that I ought to come, it would be a classy affair with an open bar at a hotel within walking distance of my house. As soon as the words were out, I could see a shadow of regret pass over her face, as if she realized how awkward it was to extend an invitation to a fifty-dollar-a-plate function to a woman twenty years her junior with whom she sweated with once a week and who might or might not know her name.

In fact I did know her name. It was Doris. Or at least I thought it was Doris. Either that or the other short woman with bleached blonde hair who always came late was named Doris and this one was Sarah.

Whatever her name, before she had a chance to formulate a polite retraction of the invitation, I told her I would be there ready to shake my moneymaker with her new in-laws. I really did use the word moneymaker. It intensified the horror on her face even more, but regardless of the awkward vibe, there was no chance I was going to miss a night of free food and drinks so close to my home.

Like any smart peripheral wedding guest, I skipped the ceremony and showed up a fashionable hour late to the reception, enough time to allow Doris or Sarah to scrape together a makeshift place card, sitting me in the seat of whatever relative had fallen ill in the past twenty-four hours. When I entered the party, I tried to look natural, busying myself with signing the guest book and locating my table. Sarah or Doris had seated me with the awkward cousins, most of which were under the age of fourteen. I chucked back two glasses of cheep chardonnay at the bar and walked around the room in search of food.

By the time I made it to the appetizer buffet, it had been decimated. A few pieces of tooth-picked cantaloupe and honeydew, along with grapes too soft for consumption, were all that was left of the fruit cascade. The cheese table was almost just as bad. Squares of cheddar were available en masse, but there was one cube of gorgeous white cheese left. From across the table I couldn't tell what type of cheese it was, but I wanted it. I hadn't dragged my foundation kit out from under the sink and shoved my body into this skin-tight leopard print dress to eat a piece of cheddar.

I circled the table, selecting a cracker from the half-broken scraps that remained. On the other side, a woman stood close to the lone white cube. She was in conversation with a Colonel Sanders-looking man who could have been her husband or perhaps just a passing flirtation. When he talked, her hand moved in to grab my cheese, but then she would think of something to add, and seem to forget what she'd been after, keeping her hand hovering just above as she spoke.

I lingered nearby, my eye on the cheese, ready to lunge if she retracted her hand even an inch further. She laughed and patted the man on the arm. It was my chance. I darted in for the grab. At the same moment, the man walked away, and the woman reached for the cheese. Our hands collided, both pushing the other away, as if we were goaltenders blocking a kick.

"Oh, dear," she said, massaging her fingertips.

I smiled sheepishly, glancing hungrily down at the cheese. "It's the last piece."

The woman was a frail bird, gray hair pulled into a bun, wild pieces escaping at strange angles from her scalp, like a mass of old electrical wire. "There is quite a lot of cheddar," she said, her tone huffy.

"Yes, quite," I said. "Shall I get you a cube?"

"Well, I suppose. I wouldn't dream of taking the last piece of good cheese. I would never have the gall to try to deny someone who was here first and who rightfully deserved the last piece. That would be..." She struggled to think of a word. "It would be unthinkable."

My hand withdrew from the table. If she thought I was going to take the last piece now, she was crazy, but it wasn't going to come cheap for her.

"Well, I was raised to respect my elders. I insist. You take the last piece of—what is that, jack?"

"Gouda, I believe." She straightened her collar and raised her nose. "I really shouldn't anyhow. One can never be too careful with what they eat. You know what they say? A moment on the lips, a lifetime on the hips." She patted her brittle hand on her emaciated stomach. I thought I could make out a hip bone jutting through the wool of her pleated pants. She looked me up and down, her eyes lingering on every curve outlined by the spandex of my dress.

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Her eyes stopped on my face, our gazes leveling across the cheese table. Although we had never met, I knew her. I had grown up with her. Passive-aggressive warfare was my specialty.

We looked away from each other in obedience of the first law of war. Never, ever directly acknowledge the person you are fighting with. If we were in a home, this would be the time to go into another room or start a load of laundry while yelling quips and lobbing biting comments over a shoulder.

The woman turned to look out into the room. I opened my purse, pretending to rifle through in search of a breath mint.

"I understand it must be hard to find things to eat. Don't dentures tend to eliminate anything but soft foods? I insist you take the last piece, but please don't risk eating one of these crackers." I looked up at her with a full smile and batted my eyelashes. Rule number two: a sweet voice can add poison to even the most deadly of words.

The woman laughed, obeying the third rule of combat. Never acknowledge a wound. "You really are quite thoughtful; it must afford you quite a social life." She searched my hands. "One of those women who believes they don't need a man, more fun to have friends and one-night stands. My neighbor thinks it's a tragedy, all these women who can't keep a man happy. She says they're all too self-centered to sustain a relationship. I'm sure you're right though, have fun while you can, even in your late thirties, there's plenty of time."

I coughed. She was good. "Late twenties really," I said. "I can see how it would be hard for you to tell, the dim lighting and all. There have been so many developments in ophthalmology since the 1970s when you picked out those frames. But it must be hard to keep up on things like yearly check ups, what with your many great-grandchildren."

Her hard, thin mouth pinched tight. She looked down at the cheese.

"Eat it," I said. "It's important to get your calcium. Hip fractures are devastating for women your age."

She blinked twice, but didn't lob back. Her lip quivered, and she turned even further away, now facing the dance floor.

"What?" I asked.

She sniffed. "My husband died three months ago. He had heart failure while he was in the hospital with a broken hip."

Every ounce of blood in my body rushed to my feet. My knees felt spongy. "I'm so sorry." The words were quiet, the fight gone.

The woman touched the tip of her finger to the corner of her eye.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"Fine. I'm fine," she said, forcing strength into her words.

"Look, I didn't mean to bring up anything sensitive. I'm so sorry for your loss. Here, let me get you a plate and a cracker. I think there's one left here that's whole."

I held out the flimsy plate, the sad-looking chipped cracker shimmying around the center in my shaky grip.

She took the plate, set the cube of Gouda on the cracker, hefted the appetizer to her mouth and set it on her tongue as if it were a communion wafer, consuming the whole thing in one bite. She seemed to relish the cheese a bit too much as she chewed, sucking a few crumbs from the tip of her thumb. Setting the paper plate down, she looked at me for only the second time since we began our conversation.

"You would be a used car salesman's dream." She smiled and turned to walk away.

The heat rose in my cheeks. That old frail old bird had won. She was the master, and I was a sucker.

I rearranged my coat on my arm and headed for the door, bequeathing to her the territory. She'd earned it.