

The Expiration Date

It was a busy night at Gibson's Steakhouse, and Elaine disliked every bit of it. She sat alone at her round table and listened as families came and went, always exchanging pleasant words with the hostess at the door. She kept seeing couples at other tables smile at each other as they ate their delicious meals, basking in the glow of their perfect evenings spent together.

Elaine sighed, her head resting on one hand. It wasn't even Valentine's Day for five more days, yet these lovey-dovey people were already getting a jump on the festivities. Theoretically, she could be doing the same thing before long, but she doubted she would be so lucky.

She brushed a stray piece of string off of her blouse, then checked her phone for the fifth time. As she put it back in her purse and proceeded to fiddle with the strap, she watched as waiters strode through the dimly lit area to present customers with their long-awaited appetizers and entrées, all with that kind of workplace smile that one assumes will earn them a bigger tip. One waitress had already come up to Elaine, and she had asked for a glass of water, in tandem with explaining that she was still waiting for a certain someone to show up. That had been twenty minutes and two glasses of water ago.

She was about to pull her phone out again when she saw him walk through the door. The man said something to the hostess, who then pointed to Elaine's lonely little table in the middle of the restaurant. He nodded his thanks before walking over.

“Hi, sorry I’m late,” said Michael. He took his jacket off and laid it over the back of his chair. “Work was...well, you know how it can get.”

She did now, apparently. “Oh, Michael, it’s okay,” she said. “I’m just glad you’re here.”

Michael stepped around the table and bent down to give Elaine a quick kiss on the forehead. “I’m glad to be here,” he said. “Here with you.”

“Aw, Michael.”

Michael went back to his seat and picked up one of the menus. “Have you ordered anything yet?”

“Of course not, that would be rude.”

“Well, you must be hungry now though, right?”

Elaine folded the corner of her menu back and forth. “Yes, I guess so,” she said. But really, how could she not be? She didn’t even need to look at the menu—she had already decided on her order *twenty minutes ago*.

“All right, then let’s get started.” Michael waved down a waitress. Elaine cringed as she recognized her as the woman who gave her the waters and tried to avoid eye contact.

“Hello,” the waitress said, “I’m Amy, and I’ll be your server tonight. What can I get for you?” Elaine dared to glance up; the waitress was looking down as she pulled out her notepad, thank goodness.

“Hi, Amy,” said Michael with a smile. Elaine twitched, but nobody noticed. “Let’s see, I will have a New York Strip and a Bud Light. The perfect end to a long day, if I do say so myself. What’ll you have, babe?”

The waitress turned towards Elaine. She could feel her face turning red as she focused intently on her closed menu. “The chicken and strawberry salad, please.”

“Okay, got it.” The waitress pocketed the notepad and picked up the two menus. “We’ll get right on those for you,” she said, and she walked away.

Elaine took a deep breath with her eyes closed, composing herself.

Michael leaned back in his chair. “So, how was your day? Did you go shopping? Hang out with friends?”

Elaine looked up at him distractedly. She shook her head. “I’m afraid nothing fancy,” she said, “I was just at home most of the day. Working on an article,” she made sure to add.

“I see. Glad to see that ol’ newspaper hasn’t shut down since I last saw you,” Michael said with a grin.

“That would’ve been yesterday, Michael.”

“I know, I know,” he said, laughing. “I’m just kidding. Long live paper media and all that, right?”

“You can’t shut down a newspaper company in a day.”

“True, but I’ve heard you can build Rome just as fast.”

Elaine looked toward the doors to the kitchen. She didn’t necessarily want to her food to show up right now, but rather hoped that some sort of fiery explosion could divert her attention from her current situation.

“Anyways,” Michael spoke up, “like I said, my day was a *long* one, that’s for sure. The boss man put me on this one engineering project, and let me tell you—”

“I’m sorry, but do you mind if I go to the restroom real quick?” Elaine pursed her lips. She needed a quick self pep talk if she was going to do this, and it would work much better without this man sitting across from her.

Michael blinked a couple times. “Sure,” he said, “I guess. Hopefully the food will be here when you get back.”

“Yes, that would be nice.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t touch your salad. Not that I don’t appreciate salads, it’s just—”

“That’s great. If you’ll excuse me.”

Elaine pushed her chair out and stood up, hoisting her purse up onto her shoulder. She gave a quick smile in response to Michael’s, then weaved her way around tables and outstretched legs to get to the women’s restroom.

She opened the door to find one of those cramped one-toilet bathrooms with a lock on the main door, but she didn’t really care. She walked in, clicking the lock button after the door creaked to a close. No, she did not have to actually go. She just needed to take a breather, and this seemed a more reasonable alternative than stepping out the restaurant’s front door for a smoke—especially considering that she didn’t smoke. Still, tonight could very well be the night to start.

Elaine turned the faucet on, idly running her hands under the cold water. She needed something to boost her determination, so she willed herself to remember one of the latest inciting incidents that had driven her to question her man’s devotion. She remembered strolling through the automatic doorway of his office building two months ago, a cold breeze flying all around her. The door slid shut, and

she sighed as the warmth of the building engulfed her. There was nothing like winter to make one forsake the environment and relish the artificial heat of the city. That day was going to be especially nice for Elaine, for she was pulling a surprise visit on her then-wonderful boyfriend.

She had a small bag cradled in her hands—a gift for him, as an apology for the fight she had started with him the night before. Sure, he hadn't wanted to visit her family over the holidays for the second year in a row, but that was no reason to treat him the way she had. So what better way to apologize than to take the time to visit him at work and brighten his day a little bit? No, surely a lot!

A short trip to the elevator, with a polite nod to the pretty little secretary at the front desk, who was picking at her nails and not paying any attention to her—that shouldn't have mattered, though she recalled last time she was here, Michael was down here and had called the woman "Penny." The woman had been all smiles back then. Perhaps she had a trying boyfriend she was dealing with, too.

Anyways, she had gone up to the third floor. She had stopped by his cubicle, to which he hastily wrapped up a phone call to greet her. She showed him the gift: a small red vase with a single daisy in it, just like the one he had given her on their second date, though regardless of whether he remembered that or not, she was proud of it.

And he took it. And he gave her a kiss. And he set it on the desk as he thoughtfully mused out loud, "Don't flowers die out pretty fast, though?"

To which she replied, "Um, I suppose. I just thought it'd look nice. On your desk. Doesn't it look nice?"

“Oh, for sure,” he had said, setting it on top of a stack of papers. “I mean, Penny’s been teasing me about how boring my office space looks anyways, so she’ll probably think it looks nice, too.”

She asked him what he meant. He only patted her on the back as he laughed it off. Needless to say, their little meeting didn’t last much longer after that.

And now here she was, in a restaurant bathroom a few days before Valentine’s Day, questioning all the things about her relationship that she’d once brushed off so easily. A glance at someone here, a smile at someone there—she was going to have to bring it up with Michael eventually. The question was, how to go about it delicately, and without making a scene? Because this sort of relationship problem always leads to some kind of scene. Movies had at least gotten that aspect of love down accurately.

She shut the faucet off and wiped her hands dry. Maybe she could wait a bit, hold off on such accusations. Valentine’s Day was right around the corner. Why ruin such a special occasion?

A knock on the door took her out of her reverie. She shook her hands once more and opened the door. The middle-aged woman on the other side thanked her, shuffling in with a little girl holding her hand. The girl looked up at her, bits of smeared ketchup still around her mouth. She smiled and waved, and Elaine couldn’t help but wave back as the bathroom door swung shut.

Straightening up, she turned back toward the sea of talking heads. She spotted her table in the middle of everything, and there was Michael—eating food. There were two plates and a bowl of bread rolls sitting amongst the drinks.

Elaine narrowed her eyes. Any doubts she had had before were wiped away. She could—she had to—take care of this tonight.

Elaine calmly made her way back to the table. No scene. Don't make a scene.

"Oh, hey," said Michael, around a mouthful of food. "It's not the main course yet, but we got some sides. And some rolls."

"Excellent," Elaine said as she sat down.

"You want one?" Michael pushed the bread bowl towards her.

"You know, I think I can wait for my salad, thanks."

"Aren't you hungry?"

"For my salad, yes."

"Your loss, then," he said. "'Cause they're pretty freakin' delicious. Oh, and check this out." He gestured to the plate in front of him, where there was a lone baked potato. "I forgot," he started, bringing his fork down for another bite, "that the steaks at this place come with one of these. That's something, right?"

"Hm," said Elaine.

Michael looked at her, tilting his head as he chewed. "Hey, are you all right?"

"Mm?" she said. "Oh, yes, I'm fine. Just thinking."

"Thinking? About what?"

"About...things."

"Oh. Well, okay. Won't disturb a journalist's mind at work." He stared down at his potatoes, prodding them with his fork. "I do hope you get your salad soon."

Elaine said nothing. She turned to glance at the couple two tables over. The man held the woman's hands in his, meeting halfway across the table. She watched the woman's face light up as she laughed at something her man said. How delightful.

"Hey, could you pass the salt?"

Elaine looked back at the guy sitting on the other side of the table. He was now fully absorbed in his plate of potato. She reached for the saltshaker, then frowned. Maybe she had a better idea. This might be her best chance to be the strong woman she always wanted to be. Yes, the strong, independent journalist woman. Take that, all you smarmy couples! Tonight was Elaine's night after all!

She grabbed the peppershaker and placed it in front of Michael's plate.

As expected, Michael was already on autopilot, shaking the small bottle over his plate. Elaine started counting. It took him a full fifteen seconds to spot the problem.

"Hey, babe," he said, staring at the shaker in his hand.

"Yes?" Elaine replied, her eyes closed as she sipped her water. "What is it?"

"I asked for salt, didn't I?"

"Did you?" She must've looked really thirsty.

"Yes, I did. This isn't the salt."

"Oh," she said, setting her glass down half-empty. "I'm so sorry. I must've assumed wrong."

Michael set his fork down. "Assumed what wrong?"



Elaine picked up a bread roll from the bowl, and slowly sliced it open with a knife. "I don't know," she said as she reached for the butter. "I just thought you were into...trying new things, lately."

"Ah...huh. Wait, what?"

"Well, you know," she went on, "you're probably tired of always putting salt on your potatoes, even though I know that's the way you like it. Even though you *say* salt is your favorite. I thought you might want a change."

"A change?"

"Sure. Tonight just feels like a good night for change, right?"

Michael swallowed another bite. "Does it?"

"Look, I'm sorry then. I only wanted to help. Trying to be fun."

"I just want the salt."

Go time. Elaine set her knife down with a distinct clack on the table. She looked straight across the table at Michael. "Do you? Do you really?"

Michael raised his eyebrows, a forkful of potato halfway to his mouth. "Um, okay. Hey, you sure you're all right? What's going on here?"

"Calm down, Michael," Elaine hissed. No scene. NO SCENE.

"I am calm," he said. "You're the one that's freaking out. What's the deal?"

Elaine looked around the room. Everyone else was concentrating on his or her own little table worlds. Not a waitress in sight.

"Look, we need to talk," she said, "and I'm not quite sure how to start out."

"Is there a problem? What do you want to talk about?"

"I...I don't know. It's a little embarrassing."

“Well, if there’s something wrong, let’s try to talk it out.”

Elaine raised her eyebrows. Did he not get what was happening right now? Or was his capacity for denial deeper than she had expected?

“All right, Michael,” she said, grabbing a napkin to wipe her hands. “Here is the deal. It seems to me that maybe you don’t think salt is good enough for you anymore.”

Michael gulped down another mouthful. “What? Salt isn’t...*good* enough for me?”

“Right,” she said hesitantly. “Like, maybe you’d rather have pepper instead.”

“No, I wanted the salt.”

“You know, because it has that special *zing* that salt doesn’t—at least, not anymore. Is that it?”

“Okay, really, what is going on with y—”

“I *know* about—!” She stopped, scrunching her face as she clutched her napkin. She tried to imagine that the people at nearby tables were not staring at her, judging her for her short outburst. She went back to whispering. “Look, I know about...we both know what I know about, okay? Just tell me if it’s true, and we can drop it.”

Michael sat like a statue, eyes fixed on his plate. She stared him down, not knowing what to expect, or at least hoping she didn’t.

He set his fork down on his plate, slowly so as not to make a sound. He picked up his own napkin and dabbed at his mouth. “Babe,” he said, “what exactly do you know?”

She opened her mouth, then closed it. “I don’t know,” she said finally. “What should I know?”

“What?”

“What is it you think I should or should not know?”

“Oh, boy,” he said, scooting his chair back as he leaned into it. Then he pulled forward and leaned across the table. “Look,” he muttered, “I get what you’re doing here.”

“Do you?”

“Yes, I do. And I get that there are other...I don’t know, *spices* or whatever, out there. That doesn’t mean I’m not content with plain ol’ salt, okay?”

“*Plain?*”

“Good. I meant good. Good old...salt.”

“Oh, well that’s great, dear.”

Michael put a hand up to his face. “Oh, for—look, fine, you want me to use the pepper?” he shot back, grabbing the bottle and shaking furiously over the last bit of potato left on his plate. “Look, I’m doing it. Change made. Best change I ever made. Can we just wait for the rest of the food now?”

Elaine’s eyes widened. “Are you...are you admitting that...did you...?”

“Come on, stop it!” Michael took one last bite of his food and made a face. He coughed, grabbing his beer to take a sip. “Man, that’s hot,” he said, eyes watering. “Maybe if I could just have the salt, I wouldn’t be having this problem.”

“You wouldn’t—now you wait one minute!” Elaine stood up, pushing her chair back with a loud screech. That guaranteed a whole bunch of eyes staring at

them, but she was done caring about them. They just ate this kind of thing right up. Let them have their fun—she had a scene to deal with.

“So you’re telling me it’s true?” she said, louder than she meant to. “You have been...with that lady at work? How long have you been *lying* to me? After two whole years, you’re just going to jump ship, just like that? Is that it?”

Michael grabbed for one of the bread rolls and took a bite. He grimaced again, holding the roll up to examine it. “Ugh,” he said, “I didn’t know bread could go stale so quickly.”

Elaine shook her head. “So that’s it. That’s all I get.” She looked around the restaurant—even the waiters were frozen in their tracks, balancing plates and cups on their trays like the pros they were.

She looked back down at Michael, who looked pretty much done with her. The feeling was mutual. Happy pre-Valentine’s Day.

“All right, then. But I am taking *this*,” she said, snatching the saltshaker off the table at a whim. “Since you don’t want to see it anymore, got it? Have fun playing around with all the other spices around here. Maybe you can fall in love with one of those instead. But you and *salt* are *over!*”

She shook the shaker in his face, then threw it in her purse and marched away from the table. She hoped Michael was wearing some form of saddened expression, but she didn’t have the heart to turn around and look back.

Halfway to the door, she spotted their waitress, who had of course just come out the door with their food. Elaine could tell from her stunned silence that she had

probably witnessed the entire incident. If she had been expecting something like this all along, it would have been nice for her to say so earlier.

“I’m sorry, I have to go,” Elaine said to her. “He’s paying, okay?”

The waitress’s expression softened as she nodded. “Okay.”

And that was that. Elaine walked past her and out the front door.

She felt the burst of cool breeze on her neck as the door shut slowly behind her. She looked up at the dark cloudy sky above her; she would be watching that very same sky from her apartment tonight, replaying tonight over and over again before she slept. That same sky was watching her now, just like all those couples had been in Gibson’s Steakhouse a minute ago.

She opened her purse and looked inside. There it was, that blasted saltshaker, lying there like a fallen chess piece. She pulled it out and shook some salt onto the ground. After watching the grains fall, she raised her arm to toss the bottle, as far as she could. She bit her lip, then brought her arm back down. No point in making the night crazier than it had already been. But what was she going to do with a saltshaker? Bronze it?

Elaine looked up to see a man walking up to the door. She noticed that he was alone. He was hunched up in his jacket, bracing against the cold air.

As he reached for the door handle, she said to him, “Excuse me.”

The man looked over at her, then looked around. “I’m sorry, are you going in?”

“Could you please take this?” She held out the saltshaker.

The man stared down at her hand. “You want me to take this?”

“Please. I’d like you to have it.”

“You’re giving me a saltshaker? I’m sorry, who are...?”

“Look, you like salt, right?”

“I guess so.”

“Exactly, who doesn’t like salt? Then you can use it. Here.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Please? I just need someone to take it. I need to give it to someone. I promise, I’m not crazy. It’s been a long day for me.”

The man stared quizzically at into her face. After a few moments of silence, the man held his palm up. Elaine dropped the shaker into his hand, which closed around it.

“Thank you,” she said with a sigh. She spun around, and started walking down the sidewalk. It was ridiculous to think so, but she felt like she’d done something right. At least someone had gotten something good out of salt tonight.

Elaine felt something cold on her nose and looked up. It had started to snow. She smiled up at the sky. The snow looked a lot like salt, shaking down from the heavens, which made it all the more beautiful.