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On Florida Time

by Helen Rafferty

It's four a.m. in Ft. Lauderdale. All but one of the air conditioners at the Sea Haven purr white noise into the darkness. The hold-out is wedged into a bedroom window in a corner of the sprawling, one-story complex. The apartment's remaining windows are open, an invitation to any passing breeze to wander in and cool off the three rooms and their lone occupant. But the welcome is ignored; the curtains never stir.

Breezy or not, the apartment is a haven for Joan Egan, not long off the late shift at the Red Parrot. Joan works the dance floor of the multi-level night club, expertly handling a tray full of drinks and a club full of vacationing college kids. One hand balances glasses and tips, the other fends off men who drink away whatever manners they possess as they pinch, grab, even pull hair to express their admiration for whichever waitress comes within range. The hour before closing is the worst, although the tips escalate as the behavior of the remaining revelers deteriorates under the onslaught of drinks, drugs, and mind-numbing music.

Joan knows how to collect maximum tips with minimum bruising. She has worked at the club for four years, a record among the female staff.

Earlier on this particular night, Joan had taken time out to comfort a new waitress. Carly had come to her in tears after unsuccessfully running a gauntlet of rugby players from some mid-Atlantic Catholic college. Just turned 21, Carly was barely old enough to even *be* at the club. Joan poured the nearly hysterical girl a ginger ale, blotting her tears with a cocktail napkin from the bar.

"Look at this," Joan said, holding Carly's overflowing tip jar close to the crying girl's face. "Twenties—probably all the money they had. Tomorrow morning, you're going to wake up, and you're going to be fine. They're going to wake up and be hungover and broke and miserable."

This was enough to stop Carly's crying.

"Tomorrow, they'll have to crawl home, crying to their mommies. Step right over them when you head out to spend their cash."

Carly was smiling again as she picked up her tray. She carefully tucked her tips into her shirt pocket, ready to do a round for last call. Before heading off, she wrapped her free arm around Joan's neck, shouting in her ear, "Oh Joannie, I want to grow up and be just like you!"

Joan watched Carly disappear into the darkness of the club. She rubbed her left shoulder, feeling aches in just about every inch of her 36-year-old body. "Yeah," she says softly to herself, "just stick around."

The next morning, the phone rings. It is far too early to be anyone who is familiar with Joan's schedule. She takes a deep breath and exhales a shaky "Hello?" into the receiver.

"Hi, Joan, it's Kate—Kate Morrison. Am I calling too early? God, I'm sorry!"

"S'okay, I'm working nights."

"You're still at the nightclub? God! You're amazing!"

Joan rubs her eyes with her free hand and tries to read the time on her bedside clock.

"...so, I just thought you'd definitely want to know; I mean, maybe you could call her or..."

Joan sits up, shakes her head. "Sorry, Kate—who's sick?"

Kate misses a beat. "Sick? No, no, it's Maureen. Mo's finally pregnant—she's going to have a baby!"

Joan still has the feeling that she's woken up to bad news as Kate plows on.

"Well, I just thought you'd want to know. She'd want you to know. I mean, if it was me, I'd be telling everyone..."

"You are telling everyone."

Joan is awake now. She glances at her bedside clock—almost ten. Through her bedroom window



she can see a slice of blue sky. Someone's grandchildren are already playing and yelling in the community pool. She wonders how cold it is in New York.

"We're having a shower next weekend. The whole gang is coming. No one expects you to come all this way, of course."

"Next weekend? I could be there, I think."

"What?"

"I said I'll be there, I'll fly up, what the hell."

No response for perhaps a minute too long, then, "Oh, Joannie, that would be great! You can stay with Martin and me. Come stay for a real visit. It will be fabulous!"

"Where's the party?"

"The shower? At a place near Mo's house in Port Jefferson called Swizzles. It's really swank."

Joan thinks that a place called Swizzles couldn't be all that swank—it sounds like the kind of place the Red Parrot crowd graduates to when they're too old for spring break.

"Swizzles—great."

"But Joan, come to our house. We'll organize..."

"I'll call you. And Kate? Thanks for letting me know."

Five minutes later, Joan is in the shower, contemplating the consequences of her grand gesture. Taking a week off from work—Carl will flip. The airfare will be huge this time of year. And she'll have to scrounge through her closet for something warm enough to wear to damn New York in March. The hot water courses down her body as she works the soap over her aching shoulders, her slim, strong arms. Joan's hands move down to her flat stom-

ach, her soap-slick fingers running over the bands of muscle built by sit-ups and runs along the beach. She thinks of Maureen, imagines her already substantial curves expanding in the coming months: months of a baby growing inside her. Joan finds it impossible to imagine her body, any body, making that kind of room.

It's high noon in the Sunshine State, but the lounge of the windowless club is defiantly dark. Joan finds her boss behind the bar, trying to fix a clogged beer tap. With the crowd gone and the music off, Joan can hear the wheeze in Carl's breathing—too many cubanos, too many nights losing sleep in clubs like this one. She listens patiently as Carl tries to talk her out of going to New York.

"Gorgeous girl, don't leave me now. It's crazy here, and these kids are clueless. And do you remember wintertime in the Bad Apple?"

"The old college gang is going to be there, Carl—I want to see them, I think. Call in an extra girl or two 'til I get back."

"And when will that be, can I at least ask?"

"Don't know—I have to see how good a time I'm having. I haven't been up north in a few years."

It's been almost three years. Joan flew up to New York for Maureen's wedding. Maureen was the last of Joan's college crowd to get married (besides Joan, that is), and her parents had sprung for a lavish, three-day extravaganza of dinners, golf, and spa visits. The reception was an elegant affair for three hundred. Joan's fellow bridesmaids had been expecting her Bo Derek braids, her tube-tops, and her tattoos. The groom and his family had not. Joan had a good time, anyway, flirting with the



waiters and sipping premium-grade tequila at the open bar. The bride looked beautiful, and the groom looked down the bridesmaids' dresses. No one asked Joan when *she'd* be heading down the aisle.

Carl is at a loss. "Don't leave me hanging, Joan." He edges closer to her and rests a huge, battle-scarred hand on her bare arm. "Or take me with you—add a little class to your act."

Joan looks at Carl's shaved head and tattooed knuckles and laughs. "Oh, you'd be just what my act needed." Carl lets go of her arm. Joan grabs his hand back, cups it in both of hers. "I'll just stay long enough to catch up with everybody. I'll be very happy to get back. And to get back to work."

Carl breaks into a grin, flashing a mouthful of gold teeth. "You'll freeze your ass off up there." Joan smiles and gives his hand one more squeeze, then heads home to pack.

Saturday afternoon and the shower is almost over. Joan picks at her dessert, watches Maureen open presents. There are so many pink, blue, and green gifts that four of the guests have to help the mother-to-be haul them to her car in the parking lot. The women squeeze past tables, saying good-bye as they make their awkward way through the restaurant; Maureen's walk is already more of a waddle. Joan sits there, watches them leave, tries to conjure up a memory from years ago: Maureen, riding on the back of some boy's motorcycle down Ocean Drive, laughing and yelling at cars. Joan can't remember that boy; she can't even remember that Maureen.

Exactly twenty-seven hours after she'd left, Joan walks back into the Red Parrot. It's Sunday

night and just as crowded and crazy as she expected. She is wearing her work uniform—white short-shorts and a tank top. Joan rocks back and forth to the music as she waits for Carl to open his office door and set her up with a tray and petty cash.

"Hey, gorgeous! What are you doing back so soon?" Carl looks her up and down, noticing that she has gotten just a little paler up in the Bad Apple.

"You said to come back before I froze my ass off—I got out just in time." Joan reaches around and gives her rear end a loud slap. Carl laughs and hands her down her drinks tray.

"We missed you, Joannie baby. You are the queen around here, ya know."

Joan just smiles, holds out her hands for the tray.

"So—is it gonna be a boy or a girl?"

"What?"

"The baby—your friends' baby. I hope they have a girl. I love little girls, ya know."

Joan takes the tray from Carl. She grabs her pen out of the tip jar and raps him gently on the nose with it.

"You've got to love them all, Carl—all the boys, all the girls."

Joan turns and heads toward the dance floor. Carl watches her walk away. Her white shorts and shirt seem to glow in the dark, reflecting blue, then green, then purple as the strobe lights travel over her body. She moves slowly, her tray held high and her back straight, and to Carl she really does look like a queen; she is cool and strong and beautiful, and even the drunkest dancers make way for her as she disappears into the crowd.

