

SIMHA HADDAD

Fun and Games

We are pretty, aren't we? Beautiful, in fact. Stunning, ethereal swans. We are real life, no-filter-needed masterpieces like in the painting that hangs over James' foyer where the swans gaze at themselves in the lake where their upside down reflections look like elephants. Dali daydreams on Louboutin stilts.

The snaking line of waiting diners, chic in their expensively effortless Los Angeleno finest does not protest when we are ushered in before them. There is a hierarchy of these things here. Like in heaven. Like in hell. First are gods then come angels then righteous mortals and then mortal sinners. In LA, our status falls somewhere in the angel category, and the others in the line, well, we try not to think about them.

Our status is evident even through our face masks, which are made of sparkly sheer mesh so that you can still see our mouths. That's why the seating host tells the busboys to set up a brand new table for us 'right away' in the middle of the packed rooftop restaurant when we realize I accidentally made our reservation for three days from now instead of for today like I was supposed to do. Yet another inconvenience of the pandemic besides the face masks is that businesses never seem to answer the phone anymore, so I had to make the reservations online. I was a little drunk when I did it, and Fleur and I were dancing by the pool, so I wasn't really paying attention to the date on my phone screen. It doesn't matter, though. It's actually funny.

We are seated and we strip off our sheer masks to reapply lipstick

and take our selfies before we look at the menus. Soft natural light is the best lighting for photos, even better than ring lights. We are moments away from sunset, a time that photographers call the golden hour. A photo taken during the golden hour will yield an image of us with flawless skin, romantic color tones, and, if taken at just the right angle, an eye twinkle that creates the illusion that our skulls are filled with diamonds. The sunlight photo light drenches the rooftop patio, and we know we have to act fast before it ends in a few minutes.

The restaurant manager offers to take a group shot of the five of us, only it is more like a plea than an offer. We accept, of course. We never refuse content for our channels and pages. This is the other reason the host did not care whether we had a reservation or not. It pays to be famous. Not very famous. Not God famous. Not Marilyn Monroe can't step out of the house without being attacked by a mob of fans famous. But a little famous. Famous enough for hundreds of thousands of people to watch our channels to see how we did our makeup tonight. Famous enough to make sundrenched tables appear out of thin air. Famous enough to always be surrounded by a room full of whispers. Famous enough to matter.

Diners secretly take photos of us from behind their menus. We flash smiles at each other for their benefit. Lovely fifty-thousand-dollar white veneered smiles that glisten under the last dregs of golden hour sunlight. As we smile and laugh and joke and perform we can see ourselves through the phone lenses of these strangers because we have seen ourselves from every angle thousands of times and so we are always aware of ourselves as if we are watching us with prism eyes, our millions of rainbow refractions forever dancing before us wherever we go, so we know that the secret photos they take of us will come out great.

To everyone in the restaurant, it looks like we are having fun, but right now the fun is still work. Our work is make-believe. To make them believe. We are acting for them, and a little for us too. For them, this moment as we glisten under the fading sun is a small taste of what our real playtime looks like. It is a polished imitation for their benefit of the life they wish they had so that for a small moment they can feel that they too are living it, this life of forever-

playtime. It is our job to show them a truth that is only a half-truth, to keep up the facade of a lifetime of fun and games when really the real fun and games happen when no one else is looking. The pretend play is work, and we work hard. Very hard. Soon we will play for real, and the real playtime will be for us, not for them.

James runs his hand through his long pink-blond wig and his wrist begins to twitch. Leanna keeps her hands in her lap, and I know they are shaking too. As are Fleur's. As are Harriet's. As are mine. Golden hour is waning.

This is good because shielded by the night-time darkness we will be able to let loose. To reveal ourselves to ourselves. To play. In the dark, our other masks will come off and we will be able to sink our fangs into the flesh of the real playtime we have lusted after all day long. Our bodies vibrate in the anticipation of our evening, but also with an undercurrent of fear because soon the strangers will ask if they can have photos with us. They won't be able to sneak them anymore. Without the sun, they will need to use flash.

Flash is harsher than sunlight. Much harsher. Flash turns our colored contact lenses into devil-red embers in our eye sockets. Flash produces photos with white-hot flares on our faces. Flash accentuates the bumpy blemishes and reveals the rough skin under our generously applied layers of foundation. We hate these photos. They intrude on our fun, exposing us from under the security of our night blanket turning us from swans to elephants in the time it takes to say, 'I'm a big fan'. We hate these photos, but we will always say yes to taking them because we are not famous enough to say no to more content because all content, even bad content, is what keeps us relevant.

We take fifteen-second videos of the pink sunset for our Instagram stories as the dangerous, sexy whisper of darkness caresses the makeup on our cheeks, the glitter on our bare shoulders, the skin on our thighs. Night is here.

Are you ready to order?

Drinks. We need drinks first. Bubbles. Bottles and bottles of pink bubbles. Bubbles to give us night vision. Bubbles to tickle our brains.

Bubbles to stop the shakes.

“Is this a special occasion?”

Fleur shrugs. “Tuesday.”

We all laugh.

Bubbles are the elixir, the magic, the cure. We sip and sip and sip and finally, our hands have steadied and the flash photos that momentarily blind us are fun to take and the darkness that embraces us now is an old friend and we are happy, so happy as the jokes come faster and the laughter gets louder and the food towers in front of us look great in the photos, and it is as if we have soaked up the sun from golden hour like solar-powered lights that are now activated in the darkness to shine our very own spotlight on us, only us, and we are illuminated again in a flattering way and the rest of the restaurant is just a room of moths fluttering around us, and we can let loose because we don't care about the opinions of moths, all thanks to the champagne.

We make potions adding shots of tequila and little pink pills into our bubbling glasses, and the restaurant glows brighter and words get said but no one hears them, really, and it is funny, all so funny, so incredibly hilarious and wonderful and it is such a relief to be able to see in the dark and for everything not to matter.

I am so relieved that I am almost crying with laughter while reaching for a shrimp from one of the food towers in the middle of the table, so I barely notice a chair being pulled up in the space between my chair and Leanna's, but when I turn to my left he is there, a stranger who is not strange to us because we have seen him many times on TV so we know it is OK. He belongs. He orders more potion, and we sip more together, and he fits so perfectly that introductions are not needed. They never are. No one ever introduces themselves in the middle of a game. It would ruin the flow.

When the bill comes, we are floating high so I barely notice it, just like I had barely noticed the Unstrange Stranger joining us unannounced. Just like I barely notice Leanna's face when she sees the total on the bill and asks if she can Venmo me for the rest later because she did not bring enough cash and her credit cards are maxed out. Just like I barely notice the relief in her body when the Unstrange Stranger hands the waiter his credit card and says, 'it's on me', or that he pulls my chair out for me and no one else, or that he

walks close enough for his shirtsleeve to always be grazing my bare arm, or that he stands with his electric-hot hand on the small of my back when the seating host takes one last flash photo of all of us as a group outside the restaurant that we will have to edit later but will definitely post because our new friend is more famous than us and it will look amazing.

None of us bothers with our masks now and no one told us to put them back on and even if they had, we wouldn't have heard them and it doesn't matter because what good is a mesh mask, really?

Someone ordered an SUV and it is waiting across the street. We call the driver to tell him to turn around and meet us in front of the restaurant but he does not answer, so I jump into the street to call out to him and wave him over so that he will see us, but really it is because Fleur is filming a story for her Instagram and I want my ass to be in it in because it looks great in this dress. Someone gasps and a car honks and five hot fingers wrap themselves around my wrist and the Unstrange Stranger pulls me back just in time for the black Mercedes racing towards me to just miss me.

Careful. His voice is smooth with a bite like chili chocolate. A man handling a foolish woman. We both laugh. He holds me facing him with his arms unyielding around my waist. He looks almost as good as he does on TV. I ignore the painful prickle in my nose from his acid sweat and focus instead on the layer of his sweet cologne and let that work its way to a shiver in between my legs.

Fleur gets a photo of us like this, holding each other like true lovers in the middle of the road with blurry car lights all around us. We all take turns looking at it and applauding and cheering because it is perfect, and I can't wait to post it later. He lets me go but keeps hold of my wrist.

The SUV pulls around to us and the Unstrange Stranger and I sit in the back, back row while everyone files in, and then we are all dancing and maybe something goes up my nose, but I don't really know, and Fleur and Harriet kiss, and then we are at the house high up in the hills and the restaurant we just came from is a little twinkling star-diamond way down there at the bottom of the hill amidst all the other twinkling star-diamond buildings. It feels so good to be home and to kick off my heels by the marble

double staircase under the expensive copy of Dali's *Swans Reflecting Elephants*.

The house is technically James' but we all kind of live here because we never really leave and when we do it is almost always together. It is so natural for us to be here that no one asked where we were going next after dinner. The clubs are closed because of the virus, so this is the only place we would naturally go.

Music comes on through the Bluetooth by the limestone fireplace outside by the pool, so we make sloppy drinks in the kitchen that someone else will clean up tomorrow and dance our way through the house to the music in the garden like children following the Pied Piper's song, only in our case the Pied Piper is Lady Gaga. We dance, and sing along, and undress in unison, and when we jump naked into the pool that has scum on the top because no one remembered to hire a new pool cleaner after Harriet fired the last one over something to do with olives, no one really remembers but she is James' sister so she can fire whomever she pleases. It is the hundredth time we have done this so that no one is actually interested in anyone's nudity but rather focused on their own, sucking in stomachs to impress our new guest who is not really new because he is the hundredth guest just like him who has come to this house and jumped naked into the scum-lined pool with us.

I touch the pool's black bottom with the ball of my foot and linger there for a moment in the quiet water that is probably cold but I am too drunk to feel, letting puffs of air escape my mouth in globes that travel up through the pool's blackness to the surface of the water where it is too dark for us to see the scum rim properly. I wonder whether these air globes will pop right away when they get to the top, or if they will stay there for a while, trapped under the scum, waiting to die.

I push off with my foot and come up for air when Fleur pushes my head under again. She is freakishly strong. She lets go and I bob for a moment, just for show, and then come up again, laughing with everyone. While I'm still laughing, she pushes me down again and everyone's laughter is muffled with my ears underwater.

She holds me for a long time and my lungs start to burn white-hot like the flares on our faces from the flash photos the fans take of

us and I think how cooling the water would feel if I breathed it in deep into my hot lungs and I am going dizzy and I am about to open my mouth to let in the cold water to put out the fire in my lungs when Fleur wraps her fingers around my hair and pulls me up out of the water gasping. Everyone is laughing and applauding and when I stop coughing my heart is racing and I am laughing too and taking another long sip of my drink from the side of the pool.

Time skips now between point A and point B, the tape of film that is my memory snipped in random places by the substance in my blood so that I go from naked in the pool to naked in Leanna's bedroom with the Unstrange Stranger, wet and dripping on the two-inch carpet floor and on each other as we push and pull and tease and laugh and kiss. He throws me on the bed, and I kick him off of me. I jump on his back and he smashes me against the wall. A framed photo falls and breaks and we laugh hysterically. Nothing hurts, thanks to the potions.

In a moment of brute tenderness, he comes up behind me and runs his hands over my breasts and I suddenly am desperate for a glass of water.

I go towards the door, still laughing uncontrollably so that I can't even speak, and he grabs me from behind again, but this time he wraps his big arm around my throat. He asks me where I'm going and I can't answer because he is choking me and I try to move but he calls me feisty and thinks it's fun and he doesn't know, I think he doesn't know, that he is killing me. For no reason at all, I zero in on the shit stain on the tufted headboard from when one of us had anal and wiped it there but then never cleaned it even though Leanna sleeps there every night.

Images take over my mind's eye without my consent, flashing clips of moments not forgotten but long pushed down, way down, to where the bubbles cannot reach. I am thinking of people I have not spoken to in years. My family. My mother warning my sister and me not to play too roughly. "It's all fun and games until someone loses an eye," she would say. Ridiculous, I would think. How could a plastic fairy wand accidentally take out an eye? So, I carried on playing even harder than before our mother's warning, and I never lost an eye and my sister never lost an eye but maybe, I think, maybe

I lost the ability to see. To see the shit stain on the tufted headboard, to see the scum on the surface of the pool, to see the look on Leanna's face when the bill approaches the table. Or maybe I saw it all along and chose not to see, which is its own kind of blindness.

I try to gasp for air, but I can't and I can see what it will be like tomorrow after I am dead. I can see it crystal clear like the blue California sky over the sparkling sea tomorrow when they dump my body somewhere off the side of someone's yacht, maybe James' or Harriet's. I can see Fleur with one hand on her champagne glass and one on my body that will be zipped up tight in a Balenciaga gown bag. She will need help pushing me over the edge so they will all help her and I know they won't really notice what they are doing because the potions will have kicked in and there will be the splash of my body hitting the choppy ocean surface, but they won't hear the splash over the yacht's motor and then they will all start laughing at the unheard jokes and I know their asses will look so good in the photos that they will take as their bubbly, manic laughter rises higher and higher into the setting sun.