

# L'Chaim

HARVEY JACOBS

*A short, deft tale that came about as a result of a lunch I had with Harvey. I mentioned the anthology and he was inspired ... he says it's about yuppies.*

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Delmore Grobit, who looked like a sponge with his cratered face and yellow suntan, came early to the Tentacle Club. He settled into his favorite chair, a leather throne near the window, found a *National Geographic*, examined photographs of round Polynesian women, and waited for James Guard. He looked up from time to time, observing other members of the club who congregated around the fireplace under the hanging gold symbol of the fraternity, a huge octopus. The same octopus symbol appeared on drinking glasses, match book covers, napkins and on the blazers of more dedicated souls. Delmore Grobit thought the octopus icon pretentious, ugly, and bizarre.

Today was his birthday. The Tentacles would expect him to host a dinner party later in the evening. The tradition bothered Delmore, not because of the expense, which would come back to him in useless gifts, but because the idea of marking the day one came wriggling and screaming into the world made no sense. It was an occasion to forget, not sanctify.

Delmore looked forward to seeing James Guard. He didn't know if James really liked him or if his young friend's affection over the years was feigned. It could be merely gratitude. James had much to be grateful for.

Still, he did send thoughtful presents at Christmas and he surely would bring some token tonight. He never forgot his benefactor's birthday.

The Tentacles' reading room seemed claustrophobic, a sure sign of impending spring. It was a winter room without question, ideal sanctuary on nights when the wind was a scream from a toothless mouth. In warmer months that room became oppressive.

As always, James Guard arrived on time and brought his own special energy. He radiated health and optimism. His assurance stopped just short of arrogance. Delmore appreciated his entrances. He saw a lot of himself in the young man.

"Happy birthday, Delmore," James said. "I brought you this small token."

"You shouldn't have, Jim. But thank you." Delmore's arthritic fingers had trouble but he managed to undo the green ribbon. He tore silver paper off a simple white box. Inside, lying on a bed of cotton, was a pair of cufflinks made from ancient Greek coins.

"Do you like them? They're authentic."

"They are very fine, Jim. Splendid."

"The least I could do."

"Ours has been a satisfying association," Delmore said. "I hope you feel the same."

"How else could I feel? You've given me everything. You've allowed me the best kind of life. I owe you more than I could ever think to repay."

"I'll never forget your face when I made you my offer."

"What could you expect? I was at rock bottom, miserable. I fit nowhere. Nobody wanted my paintings. I couldn't hold a job. I couldn't even afford the razor for suicide."

"Don't talk like that."

"Well, what's true is true. You found a loser and turned up a winner. Does that sound immodest?"

"Why be modest?"

"All that faith. All that money. Delmore, I've asked you many times. Why me?"

"Why indeed?"

"How did you find me? I know you said you'd heard about me. But looking back, I know that's impossible. My talent hadn't even begun to show. I was painting like a schoolboy. It had to be something else."

"Questions, questions. You could never just accept your luck."

"Do you know what I used to think? That you were my father. That my nun of a mother had one lapse."

"That's terrible."

"Why so terrible? At least it explained you."

"Nothing like that, Jim."

"What, then?"

Zachary, the perennial maître de of the Tentacles Club, shuffled to where they sat. He attempted a smile.

"Yes, Zachary?"

"I want to wish you felicitations, Mr. Grobit. Happy birthday and many, many more."

"Thank you."

"I've taken the liberty of arranging a small dinner party."

"Of course. Take care of the details."

"And the midnight toast?"

"Ah, yes. We must have the midnight toast."

"Certainly. As you know, it is expected..."

"I know the rules," Delmore said.

"I will bring the glasses, the Waterford crystal. As for the wine..."

"Zachary, we have time. I'm in conversation."

"Excuse me, sir. Forgive me."

"Excused. Forgiven."

Zachary turned slowly and walked toward the fireplace.

"Jim, I want to tell you a story. Many, many long years go, when I was your age, strange as it seems, my life was full of futures. I had begun my business career and I was about to marry a lovely girl of some means."

"I didn't even know you had a wife, Delmore."

"I did. A wife, a daughter, a house. And plans, dreams, goals. Like you, Jim. I bought a bottle of champagne on the day of my wedding. LaTourer '09, the finest wine I could find. I had planned to drink it on my wedding night, sharing the glorious vintage with my bride. But I didn't."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. I decided to save it for an even more special occasion. The birth of a child. Some triumph. I had nothing specific in mind, you see. A future special occasion. Well, there was a child and there were triumphs. But I saved the wine. Each time I decided to save the wine for future celebration. Even when my daughter gave birth to her first son I postponed opening that wine."

"I can understand. That bottle of wine was a guarantee for you, Delmore. As long as it remained unopened there would be a future."

"Exactly. Do you know when I finally opened it? On impulse. On a rainy night in the autumn of the year. I felt thirst. I uncorked the champagne. No special occasion. None were left. My wife was taken by the plague. My daughter and her child were random victims of some war. Do you know what I discovered when I opened the bottle? The wine had turned. It was syrupy and sour. The lovely bubbles were sludge. And I began to laugh. I laughed at the cosmic joke, Jim. I had the last laugh."

"The last laugh?"

"They found me dead in the morning."

"Beg pardon, Delmore?"

"It's rather complicated. A mere technicality. Besides, I had made provision."

"Provision for what?"

"Always questions, Jim. You have such a rapid mind. Provision for an ongoing. Lord knows, it didn't come cheap. They took the better part of my fortune."

"Who did?"

"The Tentacles, of course. They called it my initiation fee."

"I'm afraid I'm lost, Delmore."

"Wine has always interested me. I'm sure it's because of that cursed bottle of champagne. I'm quite an expert on the fruits of the grape, as they say. In fact, most of the Tentacles share that passion, or obsession. It's one of the few blessings of membership here. We spend countless hours talking of years, months, days, splendid crops, ecstatic harvests, orgasmic testings. I know it is an indulgence but I haven't many."

"Delmore, you don't need to apologize to me. If you enjoy a good wine, so be it. What harm done?"

"Which brings us to the toast. On midnight of one's birthday, it is customary that the birthday boy provide a decanter of the finest wine for all the Tentacles to share. Tonight is my night."

"And I am very pleased that you asked me to join you here."

"I thought about my choice, Jim. And don't you know, I found myself thinking of a future special occasion. That is, I had a wine in mind but I decided to save it. Do we ever change? I realized that I'd already learned my lesson. No more waiting."

"Good. Live for the moment, Delmore."

"It's not only that. I was displaying selfishness. Frankly, Jim, I don't much enjoy this club. But it has become my family. It would be wrong to hold back on the membership. They demand the best one can offer."

"Then give it to them. There's always another bottle of wine. Think positively, Delmore. At this very moment, somewhere, new grapes are maturing. Maybe this will be a vintage year."

"I'm glad you share my feelings. Jim, you've had ten marvelous years."

"Because of you, Delmore. More than I could have expected of a lifetime."

"Yes. And the best thing is, you *know* it. You *appreciate*. So many of the youth are indifferent."

"I do appreciate."

Delmore reached over to embrace James Guard. The young man hugged him. They had never touched like that. Delmore felt a delicious warmth that reminded him of other embraces. He began to weep even as he cut the young man's throat with a quick slash of his silver pocket knife. Blood erupted from the violated neck. Delmore clapped his hands sharply. Zachary came toward them with the decanter but the waiter took forever. Delmore could not abide waste on such a scale.

"Hurry, hurry, for God's sake," Delmore yelled. "It is a minute to midnight. And what we have here is vintage 1955. December of 1955."

"Did you actually find a '55?" said one of the Tentacles. "A December?"

"I did," Delmore said. "I've kept it for a decade."

"This must be a very special occasion," the member said.

Zachary filled the decanter and corked the wound in James Guard's quivering corpse. Glasses were passed to the Tentacles who came to surround Delmore's chair.

"Actually," Delmore said, "it is just another birthday. Not a thousandth or ten thousandth. Just a birthday."

"Cheers," said Zachary, pouring fresh blood. "To Mr. Grobit."

"Drink hearty," Delmore said.

"I have a March, 1962," said another member. "I've kept her practically from birth. She's a social worker. Charming. I was going to save her for a while longer. But why? You've taught me something, Delmore. An occasion is made special if it is specially recognized."

Delmore had another sip. He felt better than he had in ages. The right wine is full of mystery. He could taste elusive ghosts. Tomorrow he would look for another bottle. And he would find it.

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Ellen Datlow and I were lunching at a trendy bistro, and we began to speculate on the possibility of a new breed—the Yuppie Vampire. This upscale American vampire would need a whole new life-style (if that is the word) and a new literature to celebrate new standards of taste. To expect such a creature to be satisfied with old, established blood types was obviously wrong. *You eat what you are*. Or, in this case, drink. This insight caused a vessel to throb in Ms. Datlow's tempting neck and she said, "Write it, writer." Hence, *L'Chaim!*, a toast to the nouvelle cuisine of the dark.

*Harvey Jacobs*