

You Were Perfectly Fine by Dorothy Parker

The pale young man eased himself carefully into the low chair, and rolled his head to the side, so that the cool chintz comforted his cheek and temple.

“Oh, dear,” he said. “Oh, dear, oh, dear, oh, dear. Oh.”

The clear-eyed girl, sitting light and erect on the couch, smiled brightly at him.

“Not feeling so well today?” she said.

“Oh, I’m great,” he said. “Corking, I am. Know what time I got up? Four o’clock this afternoon, sharp. I kept trying to make it, and every time I took my head off the pillow, it would roll under the bed. This isn’t my head I’ve got on now. I think this is something that used to belong to Walt Whitman. Oh, dear, oh, dear, oh, dear.”

“Do you think maybe a drink would make you feel better?” she said.

“The hair of the mastiff that bit me?” he said. “Oh, no, thank you. Please never speak of anything like that again. I’m through. I’m all, all through. Look at that hand; steady as a humming-bird. Tell me, was I very terrible last night?”

“Oh, goodness,” she said, “everybody was feeling pretty high. You were all right.”

“Yeah,” he said. “I must have been dandy. Is everybody sore at me?”

“Good heavens, no,” she said. “Everybody thought you were terribly funny. Of course, Jim Pierson was a little stuffy, there, for a minute at dinner. But people sort of held him back in his chair, and got him calmed down. I don’t think anybody at the other tables noticed it at all. Hardly anybody.”

“He was going to sock me?” he said. “Oh, Lord. What did I do to him?”

“Why, you didn’t do a thing,” she said. “You were perfectly fine. But you know how silly Jim gets, when he thinks anybody is making too much fuss over Elinor.”

“Was I making a pass at Elinor?” he said, “Did I do that?”

“Of course you didn’t.” she said. “You were only fooling that’s all. She thought you were awfully amusing. She was having a marvelous time. She only got a little tiny bit annoyed just once, when you poured the clam-juice down her back.”

“My God,” he said. “Clam-juice down that back. And every vertebra a little Cabot. Dear God. What’ll I ever do?”

“Oh, she’ll be all right,” she said. “Just send her some flowers, or something. Don’t worry about it. It isn’t anything.”

“No I won’t worry,” he said. “I haven’t got a care in the world. I’m sitting pretty. Oh, dear, oh, dear. Did I do any other fascinating tricks at dinner?”

“You were fine,” she said. “Don’t be so foolish about it. Everybody was crazy about you. The maître d’hôtel was a little worried because you wouldn’t stop singing, but he really didn’t mind. All he said was, he was afraid they’d close the place again, if there was so much noise. But he didn’t care a bit, himself. I think he loved seeing you have such a good time. Oh, you were just singing away, there, for about an hour. It wasn’t so terribly loud, at all.”

“So I sang,” he said. “That must have been a treat. I sang.”

“Don’t you remember?” she said. “You just sang one song after another. Everybody in the place was listening. They loved it. Only you kept insisting that you wanted to sing some song about some kind of fusiliers or other, and everybody kept shushing you, and you’d keep trying to start it again. You were wonderful. We were all trying to make you stop singing for a minute, and eat something, but you wouldn’t hear of it. My, you were funny.”

“Didn’t I eat any dinner?” he said.

“Oh, not a thing,” she said. “Every time the waiter would offer you something, you’d give it right back to him, because you said that he was your long-lost brother, changed in the cradle by a gypsy band, and that everything you had was his. You had him simply roaring at you.”

“I bet I did,” he said, “I bet I was comical. Society’s Pet, I must have been. And what happened then, after my overwhelming success with the waiter?”

“Why, nothing much,” she said. “You took a sort of dislike to some old man with white hair, sitting across the room, because you didn’t like his necktie and you wanted to tell him about it. But we got you out, before he got really mad.”

“Oh, we got out,” he said. “Did I walk?”

“Walk! Of course you did,” she said. “You were absolutely all right. There was that nasty stretch of ice on the sidewalk, and you did sit down awfully hard, you poor dear. But good heavens, that might have happened to anybody.”

“Oh, sure,” he said. “Louisa Alcott or anybody. So I fell down on sidewalk. That would explain what’s the matter with my—Yes. I see. And then what, if you don’t mind?”

“Ah, now, Peter!” she said. “You can’t sit there and say you don’t remember what happened after that! I did think that maybe you were a little tight at dinner—oh, you were perfectly all right, and all that, but I did know you were feeling pretty gay. But you were so serious, from the time you fell down—I never knew you to be that way. Don’t you know how you told me I had never seen your real self before? Oh, Peter, I just couldn’t bear it, if you didn’t remember that lovely long ride we took together in the taxi! Please, you do remember that, don’t you? I think it would simply kill me, if you didn’t.”

“Oh, yes,” he said. “Riding in the taxi. Oh, yes, sure. Pretty long ride, hmm?”

“Round and round and round the park,” she said. “Oh, and the trees were shining so in the moonlight. And you said you never knew before that you really had a soul.”

“Yes,” he said. “I said that. That was me.”

“You said such lovely, lovely things,” she said. “And I’d never known, all this time, how you had been feeling about me, and I’d never dared to let you see how I felt about you. And then last night—oh, Peter dear, think that taxi ride was the most important thing that ever happened to us in our lives.”

“Yes,” he said. “I guess it must have been.”

“And we’re going to be so happy,” she said. “Oh, I just want to tell everybody! But I don’t know—I think maybe it would be sweeter to keep it all to ourselves.”

“I think it would be,” he said.

“Isn’t it lovely?” she said.

“Yes,” he said. “Great.”

“Lovely!” she said.

“Look here,” he said, “do you mind if I have a drink? I mean, just medicinally, you know. I’m off the stuff for life, so help me. But I think I feel a collapse coming on.”

“Oh, I think it would do you good,” she said. “You poor boy, it’s a shame you feel so awful. I’ll go make you a whisky and soda.”

“Honestly,” he said, “I don’t see how you could ever want to speak to me again, after I made such a fool of myself, last night. I think I’d better go join a monastery in Tibet.”

“You crazy idiot!” she said. “As if I could ever let you go away now! Stop talking like that. You were perfectly fine.”

She jumped up from the couch, kissed him quickly on the forehead, and ran out of the room.

The pale young man looked after her and shook his head long and slowly, then dropped it in his damp and trembling hands.

“Oh, dear,” he said. “Oh, dear, oh, dear, oh, dear.”