

A True Host Leaves Nothing to Chance

Maybe Leeza wouldn't bring her two brats. Moments ago, while his sister cursed over the phone, Curtis asked her plans. Might she take the children to their mother's condo in Arlington? There, they could spit and puke with impunity. Leeza, though, never answered. She simply ranted about that bastard, that horndog motherfucker, and how she was absolutely done, done, *done*.

"Oh, hell, baby," she moaned. "I'm a mess, just a fucking mess."

"Take your time, Leeza. I'll be here all afternoon."

"I know you've got your own life."

Curtis exhaled, gazed at the slowly spinning ceiling fan. He dropped into the plush recliner his last live-in lover had helped him pick. He tried to remember how long ago Patrick had packed his things and stormed out. Three years? Maybe four?

He and Marcel hadn't been together long enough to shop for furniture or do anything that might give the illusion of *permanence*. Marcel was still a weekend diversion. How would Curtis accommodate his deeply unhappy sister and, at the same time, keep his much-younger lover entertained? He had just one day to figure this out.

"There's something I need to tell you." She cleared her throat. "I think that bastard has your number. The landline, at least."

"Shit. Leeza..."

"No matter what he says, I'm not there."

"You have to talk to him eventually."

She sighed. "I know that, Bubba, I know."

Bubba. Whenever she called him that, Curtis knew she needed him. He was already in junior high when Leeza was born. By the time she entered kindergarten, she weighed twice what her classmates did. Their mother tried to camouflage the swells and curves of her figure, but the peasant blouses and stretch pants only made the girl appear like a bloated hippie. Curtis escorted her to school, barking at the children who shouted insults from the playground, the passing buses. Every morning, before Leeza departed for campus, she wrapped her plump arms around his waist and shouted, “I love you, Bubba!”

Curtis heard only crunches and smacks over the line. Surely, she was attacking the junk food again, a vulture violating preservative-filled prey. During her visits, he simply checked the pilfered pantry to learn how upset she might be. He asked again, a bit more forcefully, what she planned to do. Her escape, she said, was nearly executed in full. Strap in the kids and she’d be on her way.

So, the children would be coming. Fuck. He felt like shit. His one consolation was that his sister lacked the cunning to use him solely for babysitting. They simply went where she went—be it to Kroger’s or the seventh circle of hell.

“I have a surprise.” He sounded uncertain, like she might not understand the statement.

“Really? Ooh, ooh, I love surprises. Tell me, tell me, tell me!”

“You get to meet Marcel.”

“You mean that college kid you’re fucking?”

Curtis’s grimaced. Of course, he’d told Leeza about Marcel, his college-aged distraction at the moment. He told his little sister everything. It disconcerted him, however, to consider her opinion on his affair. To be blunt, he worried that she had no opinion on the matter. It had no bearing on Leeza’s universe and was therefore too taxing to consider.

“I might be in love with him.” He stumbled over the words.

“Well, that’s wonderful, Bubba,” she said. “Don’t worry, I’ll give you plenty of privacy.”

“What about your kids?”

“A few coloring books and some Legos, and they’ll forget the world exists.”

Curtis looked out his glass patio door into the neighborhood. On this block, the plantation-inspired homes were placed perilously close to one another, leaving Curtis with a “view” that was little more than the brick wall of his neighbor’s house. He drew a vinyl curtain across the glass, shrouding the room in darkness. The conversation was reaching its end. Nothing left to do but pace the rooms until Leeza and the children arrived.

Curtis hung up and stood in the middle of his cavernous, smartly furnished living room, a land baron admiring his newest development. He’d proudly admit to anyone that everything in this house—every piece of furniture, every stitch of clothing, every obscure wire of electronics—was his and his alone. Negotiation with Patrick had been treacherous. Curtis had *earned* his homestead; even the mediator had agreed. Why not share it with those he loved: his sister and his boyfriend? There was certainly enough room for all five.

Even with the semester almost over, Curtis had failed to memorize Marcel’s class schedule, never knowing when to call or text. He grinned while listening to the rings. How eagerly he anticipated the boy’s voice.

“Hey, sexy, perfect timing,” Marcel said. “I just got done with my calculus exam.”

“You should let me help you study next time. I was excellent at math.”

“We wouldn’t get much done naked.”

Curtis laughed, totally at ease. Marcel wasn’t the first younger man he’d dated. This was, however, the longest such a relationship had lasted. Marcel was willing to explore any corridor

of sexuality through which Curtis led him. He was insatiable, and his prowess was steadily improving. True, Curtis occasionally felt odd, more instructor than lover. The boy, however, enjoyed learning all things carnal. Wasn't that a cornerstone of romance: two people benefiting from each other's experiences?

"There's something I have to tell you about this weekend," Curtis said, dropping his tone. "I'm afraid we won't be alone."

The rundown: Leeza. Her rocky marriage. Her refusal to suffer quietly, like other adults. And, of course, the brats.

"She has *kids*?" Marcel spit out the word as if someone had belched.

"A two-year-old and a five-year-old."

Curtis waited for his boyfriend to respond. His other hand bunched into a fist, fingernails digging into his palm. Startled, he relaxed his hand, shook it out.

"Maybe I should stay up here this weekend."

"Why do you say that?"

"We'd have to be quiet."

"Yeah, I guess so."

"I like it when you make me scream."

Curtis laughed despite himself. In his two decades of dating men, this liaison held the record for the longest stretch of the sex remaining as vibrant and purely enjoyable as it was in the beginning. No sad, desperate "schedules," executed in fear that, without them, sex would cease completely. Marcel stirred within him an excitement and enthusiasm he never imagined possible at age thirty-seven. His slow slide into addiction hardly seemed a deal-breaker. Curtis just had to make sure that the brats didn't get too curious about the wrong thing at the wrong time.

* * *

Two hours later, as the neighborhood pulsed with kids returning home from school, Curtis knelt before a hedge that bordered his house. He clipped the leaves, aware that the snips and snaps of his shears weren't changing the shape of hedge. He'd needed to occupy himself while he waited for Leeza to arrive.

He didn't notice her BMW approach. The horndog motherfucker would've been humiliated, she'd once told her brother, if his wife were seen in a clunker. Looking over his shoulder, he saw her waving madly from behind the windshield. Always, she greeted him this way, a doting child reunited with a long-lost parent. Tossing his shears to the ground, he strode over to the car.

"Hey there, Bubba! Good to see ya!"

Curtis smiled and reached for her hand. His sister had steadily put on yet more weight since having the children. The black velour stretch slacks and shapeless zebra-print blouse only accentuated what she likely wished to conceal.

"Hurry, mom!" a boy cried from the backseat. "My show's about to start!" Curtis knew that piercing wail. It belonged to Leeza's five-year-old son, Grayson. He kicked the driver's seat, waiting for someone to open the door. He was an ugly child: a disconcerting under bite, long hooked nose, pale blue eyes that crossed whenever he glared at someone. No doubt, Curtis feared, his hands were sticky with whatever ill-advised treat Leeza had bought to buy his silence.

"Mom! Chelsey just threw up!"

Leeza attempted a weary half-smile. "Honey, use the towel from the floorboard."

"Mom, it's gross!"

"For fuck's sake, Grayson, it's just a little spit-up!"

Grayson scowled, dug his shoulders deep into the seat and crossed his arms. Leeza gazed at him, pleading with her eyes, but her son was unmoved.

Unlike her brother, the toddler had a sweet, welcoming smile, cheeks that flushed a pale pink, and bright, inquisitive hazel eyes. The vomit coating her chin and the jumper diluted her charms only slightly.

“I’ve got one of the spare bedrooms all ready,” Curtis told Leeza.

“Oh, Bubba, I don’t deserve you.” She planted a sloppy kiss on his cheek. When she turned away, Curtis wiped away a smear of Leeza’s infamous hot pink lipstick. She had worn the same shade every day since her wedding day, just months after finishing high school.

Curtis watched Leeza cajole Grayson while cleaning Chelsey. All the beds in his home were king-sized luxury pieces, complete with silk sheets and down-filled pillows. Grayson and Chelsey would have to share one bed downstairs while Leeza took the other down the hall. Placing a toddler and an older child in the same bed was strange, but Curtis couldn’t think of a more tenable solution. Fortunately, Leeza wouldn’t give it enough thought to complain.

After a half-hour of unpacking and devising suitable distractions for the children, Curtis and Leeza migrated to the patio. Though the afternoon sun still had hours of light left, she insisted they indulge in a glass of red wine. “The good shit,” she said. “The stuff you save for you and Boy Wonder.” The two siblings sat at a quaint wooden table, one Patrick had picked out during a long-ago trip to Home Depot. Leeza fired up an ultra-slim cigarette, the kind advertised in women’s magazines. She’d come a long way, baby.

“Will the kids be all right?” Curtis asked.

“What—they? Hell, yeah. They’re couch potatoes, just like their bastard father.”

“Does he even know you’ve left?”

Leeza smirked and took a drag. “He’ll know when he comes home and no one’s there.”

“Christ, Leeza, call him” He gripped her shoulder. “What if he calls the police?”

“Why would he? He’ll probably invite that whore for some cheap, nasty whore fuck.”

Leeza’s husband rarely visited. He feared catching “faggot germs.” True story, she’d insisted. On occasion, Curtis went to visit Leeza and found her husband to be crude, demeaning, vulgar and wholly unfit for even basic human interaction. Once, Curtis caught the man picking his teeth with a cut toenail. He liked to refer to his marriage at a two-for-one deal: he’d married one woman, and now she was the size of two.

“Promise you’ll call him tonight,” Curtis said.

“I bet that damn whore answers the phone.”

“You know you have to.”

She knocked back a half-empty glass in one swallow. “For you, Bubba. Not for him.”

* * *

Curtis waited until the kids were safely asleep and Leeza had shuffled to her guest room, fifth or sixth glass of wine in hand. All through the afternoon and evening, he thought about Marcel. His mind clouded with unpleasant scenarios in which Leeza and the children stymied their attempts at seclusion.

It was now well past sundown, however, and Curtis had the second story to himself. He locked his bedroom door and powered on his laptop. Moments later, after a flurry of keystrokes, an image appeared on the screen. Marcel grinned at Curtis. He, too, was seated behind a desk. His bare torso gleamed in the glare of his table lamp. Already, Curtis stiffened.

“Dude, this webcam is my religion,” Marcel said. “Facetime just can’t compare.”

“Isn’t technology a wonderful, terrible thing?”

“So where’s the family tree?”

Curtis playfully placed a finger upon his puckered lips. “Fast asleep. Just you and me.”

“Want me to go first?” Marcel asked.

“Let’s see what my boy has to show me.”

“Yes, sir,” Marcel purred. He stood up. Now only his hips and upper thighs were visible. He lowered his gym shorts in one swift motion. He wore no underwear. Marcel stood with his desire between his legs, not yet ignited. He’d trimmed his unruly pubic hair since their last online encounter.

“What kind of lube you using?” Curtis asked.

“I didn’t wanna waste the nice stuff you gave me.”

Marcel coated his hand with lubricant off-screen and started the show. Curtis’s hand shot down to his own crotch. Moments later, he sprung from his seat and whipped off his sweatpants. Doing this took his gaze away from Marcel for only a moment, but even that was too long. Undressed, Curtis draped upon his seat, elated to watch the boy he loved.

While he wasn’t devoting too much attention to Marcel’s eyes, he couldn’t help noticing the pupils’ dilation. Also, his boyfriend’s clenched jaw migrated left to right beneath his upper lip. He was high. Curtis wasn’t. Marcel was getting high without him. Once he reached full arousal, however, Curtis could disregard each and every clue.

The two men continued stimulating themselves. The steady *fwick-fwick* sounds squishing over speaker, the rhythm of Marcel stroking himself, entranced Curtis. He marveled at how this boy so completely stunned him, after all these months. He only thought of Patrick in regards to the high-end, unsuccessfully disputed pieces of furniture and décor that lingered within every room, insisted they had uses that transcended that failed romance.

The loud, sudden knock on his bedroom door startled him.

“Uncle Curtis!” Grayson called out. “Uncle Curtis, are you asleep?”

On the screen, Marcel instantly dropped back into his seat, his face visible once again. “What the fuck was that?”

Curtis waved frantically. “Quiet!” he cried in a hoarse whisper. “Don’t let him hear you!”

“Who the hell is that?” Marcel asked, now whispering.

“What is it, Grayson?” Curtis called out over his shoulder.

“You’re out of real Pepsi, and I’m thirsty, but Mom said I have to ask you before I take a Diet Pepsi. Is it okay if I drink a Diet Pepsi?” The child spoke these words in a rambling monotone, as if they were lines in a grade-school play.

“Yeah, buddy, sure,” Curtis called out. “Take whatever you want.” He waited. And waited some more. Throughout this, Marcel leaned forward, his fine-angled, pale face taking up the entire screen. He, too, listened closely for anymore signs of Curtis’s nephew.

Curtis nodded, let go of his breath. His broad shoulders fell. “Sorry about that.”

“Maybe we should pick this up tomorrow,” Marcel suggested.

* * *

Amazingly, Curtis managed to forget all about Leeza and the children the next day. He retired to his roomy upstairs office to work. He simplified account reports for businesspeople who must’ve cheated their way through college algebra. He paused every so often to fantasize about what he might make Marcel do that night. Shortly before five that afternoon, he called Marcel to confirm the boy’s arrival. He then instructed Leeza to have both children fed and bathed before Marcel arrived at eight that evening..

”I suppose you want me in bed with lights out, too.”

“Of course not, sweetie. I’d love for you to meet Marcel.”

“Maybe I should cook something.”

“Leeza, your food is terrible.”

“Suck my tit, big brother.”

“You haven’t called him, have you?”

Leeza sighed and rolled her eyes. “No, not yet,” she said petulantly. Then she wrapped her arms around him with a force that knocked the breath from him. She dug her chin into his shoulder. “But I will tonight. I promise, Bubba. Promise.”

* * *

Marcel smiled in sweet surprise to find Curtis waiting for him on the driveway. The older man wrapped Marcel in his arms. He held the embrace so long that Marcel tried to wriggle free, his duffle bag slapping against his calves. The man finally released Marcel only to place both hands firmly on his shoulders. “I’m so thrilled you’re here,” he said.

“I’m the same guy you saw last night,” Marcel replied.

“Not quite. You’re far less naked.”

Marcel chuckled and slipped around Curtis toward the front door. “C’mon, sexy, I wanna meet this infamous sister.” He threw open the door and strolled inside. Curtis scurried after him. He didn’t know where Leeza waited, and he wished to supervise his sister meeting his lover. If she said something embarrassing, he’d have to do his best not to look the part. More troubling, what if Marcel was repulsed by her? What if the children sprang forth from the depths?

Curtis entered the living room only to hear footsteps quickly climbing the staircase. Marcel had gone straight to the master bedroom to drop off his duffle bag. Splendid, Curtis thought, I have one last moment to corral her.

He spied her on the patio, puffing away on an ultra-slim cigarette. He watched as she tilted her head back and exhaled an impressive cloud of smoke. She appeared calm, relaxed. Perhaps she expected Marcel to present himself to her, a feared queen holding court. Curtis slipped through the glass door.

“Marcel’s here.”

“I heard him,” she said. “Cute little ass. I bet you enjoy banging that bubble butt.”

“Have you called him, yet?”

“I can’t think of anything to say.”

“Leeza…”

His sister turned away. Curtis looked over his shoulder and saw Marcel stomping through the living room, headed their way. “Behave yourself,” he said quietly.

Leeza said nothing, merely crushed her cigarette butt and neatly folded her hands in her lap. Marcel closed the patio door behind him. Curtis took a moment to observe his lover, perhaps wondering how Leeza, herself, regarded him. Marcel was tall and slim, but plump muscle wrapped his biceps and thighs. His near-black hair was cut short and spiked. His generous mouth was slightly parted in a way that Curtis found innately erotic.

Marcel introduced himself, stepping around Curtis and offered his hand.

She took his long, graceful fingers into her grip. “You must be Curtis’s sweet young thing.”

Marcel broke into a grin, his cheeks flushing. “I guess you could say that.”

“Sit, my boy.” She gestured grandly. “Curtis, baby, fetch us some wine, would you?” Curtis gaped at her, confused. She obviously planned to commandeer this bizarre family gathering. “I hope you don’t mind,” she said to Marcel, leaning over the table. “I’ve been stealing the wine Curtis buys for you. You should taste the cheap crap he serves me.”

Marcel laughed and produced a pack of menthol cigarettes. He asked Leeza for a light.

“I thought you were quitting,” Curtis said, suddenly feeling like a third wheel.

“Fucking calculus exam,” Marcel muttered.

“Hey, Bubba.” Her voice was now stern. Curtis snapped to attention. “The wine?”

Curtis dropped his head dutifully and left. While he made his way toward the kitchen, he heard two distinct laughs echo through the house: Leeza’s loud, honking bray joined by Marcel’s airy, rapid giggle. As he searched the refrigerator for the wine he and Leeza shared the night before, Curtis realized that part of him *wanted* her and Marcel to remain strangers. He harbored a brief image of them strolling side by side down a stone path, passing tacky tourist shops and fast-food stands. She knew so much about his relationship with Marcel, yet Marcel knew very little about her. Bringing the wine back to the patio, it struck Curtis that he discussed his sister’s life with no one, really, not even their mother. He never saw the point of spreading unfortunate news.

From the living room, Curtis clearly heard her regaling his boyfriend before either one had come back into view. “Oh, the kids. Let me tell you about my wonderful fucking kids.” Curtis froze in place, his grip so tight around the wine bottle that his muscles throbbed. She continued as he stood silent. “Me and the bastard wanted kids right away. Hell, he wouldn’t mind if I popped out a goddamn litter. I’m only twenty-five years old. My plumbing works just fine.”

Curtis watched, through the glass door, these two new friends converse. The moment Leeza paused, Curtis sprang into action. He appeared on the patio before either she or Marcel noticed.

“Sweetie, I don’t think Marcel wants to hear all that.”

“It’s all right,” Marcel said. “I asked about her kids.”

“Hey, hot stuff,” she asked, “can I bum one of those menthols?”

“Absolutely,” Marcel replied, holding out the pack. He flicked his hand, shaking a cigarette free from its comrades. “It’s way better than those princess cigarettes of yours.”

“Don’t knock my Capris. Those babies reek of class.”

“You’ve come a long way, baby.” Marcel erupted with laughter. Curtis, still apart from the twosome, swooned to hear that delightful sound.

“Bullshit. Those are Virginia Slims you’re thinking of. Only trash smokes those.”

For the next two hours, the conversation between Leeza and Marcel flowed with only occasional input from Curtis. More often, he simply gazed in awe at these two people he adored cackling together like kindling beneath a fresh flame. When the three of them had drained the last drop from the wine bottle, Leeza demanded that Curtis open another. By the time the grandfather clock chimed ten, all three of them wavered and slurred under the spell of a shimmering intoxication.

“Oh, good God.” Leeza slapped the table. “We never ate fucking dinner. Goddamn, I meant to fix you boys something.”

“It’s okay, sweetie,” Curtis placed his hand upon her shoulder. “There’s the whole weekend.”

“Nonsense. There’s plenty of time right now to stuff our faces.”

“I’m exhausted,” Marcel’s head propped lazily upon his open hand. “Long drive. Plus,” he added, allowing a sneaky smile, “I do believe I am drunk.”

Curtis interjected, collecting the wine glasses, “I think we all are. Time for bed.”

Curtis stepped into the kitchen. As he washed out the glasses, the phone attached to the wall rang. Odd, he thought. Everyone he knew always contacted him on his cell. As it continued to ring, he questioned whether he should answer. It had to be for Leeza. He sincerely regretted

tossing out his answering machine three or four years ago. Or did he toss it out? Was that a particular battle from which Patrick emerged victorious?

I'm not leaving you, he'd said, because I don't love you anymore. I'm leaving you because you never noticed. At least he'd retained most of their possessions, Curtis reminded himself. He truly did have a beautiful home.

He grabbed the receiver and cleared his throat. "Hello?" He waited. Outside, Leeza hooted with laughter. "Hello?" He heard nothing, not even breath. Finally, he hung up. Neither she nor Marcel mentioned having heard the ringing. That didn't, however, mean they hadn't heard it.

* * *

Marcel wanted a few hits off the pipe before letting Curtis fuck him. The two men sat atop the unmade bed in the master bedroom, both naked. Curtis warned his lover that smoking crystal while drunk was not a good idea, but Marcel insisted. It was at these moments that he suspected Marcel was developing a nasty drug habit, something above and beyond typical weekend usage. But, as he always did, Curtis dismissed the concern, sent it away a child whining about his bedtime. The marvelous boy was here now, naked and lustful beside him, and most men his age would sacrifice a great deal to say the same.

"Promise me you won't overdo it."

"Scout's honor," Marcel held up his middle three fingers in a gesture that looked vaguely familiar. "You recognize this?" he asked. "It's some Boy Scout salute-thing. Fuck, I can't believe I still remember it."

"You were a Boy Scout?"

"Hell, yes. You should've seen me at the big jamboree they held each year. I got so many guys to suck my dick, it was unreal."

Curtis laughed, loading the pipe with the small, clear crystals. Everything would be all right, he told himself. Leeza was passed out downstairs after a night of good cheer, and Marcel sat just inches away, waiting to give him whatever pleasure he required. He and Marcel passed the pipe back and forth, each exhaling immense, bright clouds toward the ceiling. Afterward, they made love—quietly, so quietly. As Curtis surged inside his lover, Marcel gritted his teeth, jerked his head back and forth. As much as Curtis wanted to hear the boy scream in surrender, thoughts of poor Leeza, drunk and alone, kept his desire from overwhelming him.

When the two men were done, exhausted and drenched with sweat, they fell into a light, unsatisfying sleep. Curtis wasn't surprised when he blinked awake at some obscure hour. He gazed at the bedside clock: not long till four. What did surprise him was that he was alone. He snapped up, scanned the room for any sign of Marcel. Worried, he slipped into his boxers and made his way for the door. Remembering Leeza and the children downstairs, he put on his Oriental-print dressing gown. He crept down the stairs.

It didn't take long to find Marcel. The boy stood looking through the patio door. Curtis couldn't at first discern what his lover saw. He joined Marcel at the glass and all became clear.

Leeza—his funny, loving, deeply unhappy sister—sat at the table where they'd laughed and drank just a handful of hours earlier. An open bottle of wine stood beside her. No glass joined it. She took a drag from her ultra-slim cigarette, belted back a slug of wine. Curtis couldn't see her face, but he knew she was crying. He'd caught her alone, in the dead of night, many times before.

“What's wrong with her?”

“I told you. Her marriage is in the shitter.”

“But she was so happy tonight.”

Neither man moved when they heard the landline ring. If Leeza heard it, she gave no sign. It rang again. Marcel narrowed his gaze, his mouth drawn tight. “Who’s calling so late?”

Curtis’s chest seized. He felt, in that moment, very old. Marcel didn’t convince as a passing acquaintance, let alone his lover. Who was he fooling? Why was Marcel stepping toward the phone...?

“Baby, don’t answer that!”

Marcel’s tone had switched to hard and merciless. “I’m gonna tell this asshole to stop.”

“Marcel, please—”

Curtis’s young lover, a college boy quite possibly sliding into drug addiction, answered. In that moment, it appeared the only light in the room shone upon him. He asked who it was and then paused. Presumably, the caller was willing to answer. Next, Marcel replied that “he” was there but insisted on getting a name before handing over the receiver to...Curtis? Who else?

His young lover gazed at him, his eyes so unclouded by comprehension, that Curtis allowed himself to pretend that no possible caller could endanger his happy home. It was just Leeza’s soon-to-be ex-husband. Didn’t he have a little crystal left that he and Marcel could smoke?

Marcel took a few steps toward him, receiver still held to his face. He hadn’t thought to put a hand over the mouthpiece. “Who’s Patrick?” he asked. “He says he used to live here.”