

Singles' Night

by Claire Dietz

As Clementine sat with her girlfriend, hiding in a restaurant on the far side of town, celebrating their three-month anniversary, she wondered how long their relationship would last. It wasn't that she wanted things to end; Clementine was more smitten than she had been in years. Still, she couldn't help feeling that they would end exactly where they had started: with Singles' Night.

"Did you hear about Jamal and Fran?" Meredith asked Clementine. The candle between them cast shadows across her face, deepening the grooves in her skin and glinting off the gray in her hair. Clementine had been studying those grooves for weeks now and still felt she would never map them all.

But at the mention of Jamal and Fran, Clementine flinched and looked around, wondering if Meredith had read her mind. The two of them sat in the darkened corner of an old Italian restaurant. Clementine kept an eye on both entrances, even though it was late on a Monday evening. No one they knew would eat at nine o'clock, let alone somewhere this far away from their homes.

Still, Clementine's neck prickled, feeling as though speaking of the ill-fated couple would curse their own relationship. "Yeah, I heard." She pressed a kiss to Meredith's weathered brown knuckles. "It's a real tragedy."

A tragedy, but an almost inevitable one. The problem with Singles' Night was that when you got single people together, some of them were bound to end up seeing each other. It doesn't matter the location, circumstance, or demographic. Love abounded, especially where love had been lost.

Despite the risk of falling in love, Singles' Night was the talk of their neighborhood. If you received an invitation (for not every single person did), you tried your best to keep it. Singles' Nights were the rowdiest and longest-lasting parties in the neighborhood, ending sometimes as late as ten o'clock. More than that, an invitation to Singles' Night meant the best time slots on the shuffleboard court and the use of Sue Carol's private golf cart—the only one whose seats weren't peeling. It meant guaranteed company at a time in your life when funerals were found around every corner. When that kind of opportunity appeared, you gripped it with both hands.

In the restaurant, across from Clementine, Meredith sighed, taking a sip of her wine. "I'm going to miss Fran's jokes. They're crude, but well timed. And Jamal had the best playlists. None of that opera shit Sue Carol plays."

Clementine tried to lighten the mood, wishing there wasn't a table between them so she could pull Meredith close, hide them both from the world and Sue Carol's prying eyes. "Crude jokes, are you kidding me? That Fran is a female Shakespeare—and the way Sue Carol's mouth always twists like she swallowed a lemon? Priceless!"

To Sue Carol, relationships were a deadly offense, especially amongst her guests. Privately, Clementine guessed the snide woman hadn't gotten *it* in years, so she had to surround herself with similar people. Regardless of the reason, once you were a regular guest at singles'

Night, you needed to *stay* single to maintain your spot. But when surrounded by other single old folk, people were bound to get attached. And if that attachment was found out, well... you could kiss your seat with the other singles goodbye.

That was the fate of Jamal and Fran.

That was the fate that awaited Meredith and Clementine. If they weren't careful.

"Discovered while on vacation..." Meredith shook her head. "Just because their granddaughter posted to Facebook, and Sue Carol's goddaughter happened to mention it. Halfway across the country and they couldn't escape her notice. I didn't even realize Sue Carol knew what Facebook was."

Clementine ran her thumb over Meredith's knuckles as the waiter set down their meals: half an order of spaghetti Bolognese for them both. Beneath the table, Clementine pressed her bare knee against Meredith's, trying to force comfort into her anxious date's body.

Meredith was introverted where Clementine was extroverted, quiet where Clementine was gruff, calculating where Clementine was brash. But they both had spent part of their youth along North Carolina's coast, which gave them a common foundation to build on, and Meredith had been the only one in the neighborhood who visited after Clementine's knee surgery—had been the only one to bring her flowers. Nobody had brought her flowers since Bill.

"They were found out through Facebook? I thought it was that new app...what's it called?" Clementine dropped Meredith's hand and snapped her fingers. "Instagram. That's it. Nobody uses Facebook anymore. Stay with the times, Mer." Clementine smiled to soften her joke, letting one corner of her mouth quirk higher than the other. Meredith always said she loved that smile—that it made mischief shine in Clementine's eyes.

But Meredith didn't notice—only twirled her spaghetti, eyes over Clementine's shoulder. "Well, whatever it was, Fran and Jamal are gone."

Clementine massaged a gentle circle into her aching knee. She wished she'd brought her cane with her tonight, but she hadn't felt it matched her outfit.

While she understood the loss Meredith felt, she couldn't help being a little thrilled by the romance of it all—a secret love revealed and consequences suffered. Through it all Fran and Jamal stayed together. They didn't give each other up for a seat at the table, as some people in the past had. They had been ostracized together. It was all very dramatic and romantic.

Clementine had believed she was through with romance, had been content to watch her children and grandchildren from the sidelines. That was before Meredith caught her eye across the flickering candles of the Singles' Night dinners, before Clementine noticed her quiet and sharp humor and the gentle steadiness of her mind. With Meredith, Clementine once again had someone whose hand she longed to hold. Someone who didn't mind if their date was at a professional opera, or at another oboe recital for Clementine's granddaughter. Meredith had reminded Clementine what it was to fear a breakup. To fear an end.

In the quiet din of the restaurant, Clementine worried about that end as Meredith continued to look through her—probably imagining the two new empty seats at Singles' Night: Fran and Jamal's vacancies. The question was how soon Sue Carol would fill those seats. Would she leave them empty as a warning to other potential couples? Or would they be filled by next week?

The candle flickered between the two, and their forks clacked, the sound forlorn in their darkened corner. Clementine had thought it a romantic setting at first, but now the walls leaned in on them. She found herself pulling at the pearls around her neck.

She swallowed, wishing for the nerves she'd had in her youth, the ones that allowed her to skydive and punch perverts in the face. She tried to summon them now, rather than suffer through a slow and quiet end, like with Bill.

"So, what are you trying to say?" She set her fork down and dabbed at her mouth, wondering if her lipstick was messed up. She hoped it wasn't. She wanted to look as perfect and unbothered as she could, even as her mind begged her to keep her next words to herself. Word games and evasions were for the young. "Is it too much? Are we done?"

Meredith dropped her fork, her hair bobbing as she swung her gaze to Clementine. The shock and fear in her dark brown eyes soothed the chill in Clementine's chest.

"Oh no! Clem." Meredith pushed the plates and candle aside, taking both of Clementine's hands in hers. "Never—I couldn't imagine—no." Meredith's knee pressed back against Clementine's.

Clementine looked at their wrinkled hands folded between them. When had she gotten so old? She didn't know. Maybe it was when her kids moved out for college, or when her youngest had kids of her own. Maybe it was when her husband Bill died all those years ago. Maybe it was this morning when her back hurt too much to get out of bed until noon. She didn't know, but with Meredith, those things mattered less. She didn't want to give that up just yet.

An invite to Singles' Night had been her greatest desire for years. Now sitting here with Meredith, she wondered if it had all been the universe's ploy to introduce the two of them. She would do anything to keep this woman by her side, even give up Singles' Night and all its perks. But she didn't know if Meredith would do the same, and it was too soon to ask. Three months was nothing, barely a breath, in the grand scheme of their lives.

She smiled. "Then we'll just be more clever than Fran and Jamal."

Meredith smiled and leaned across the table, only to find Clementine halfway, their lips meeting above the open flame.

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Over the general din of Singles' Night dinner, Rudy shouted at Clementine, "...and little George took his first steps yesterday!" Rudy shoved his phone at her, nearly upsetting her pea soup in the process. His eyeglasses, perched on the end of his nose, magnified his eyes. He looked like an eager bug and Clementine stifled a chuckle. She darted a quick glance toward Meredith across the table, wondering if her girlfriend saw it too.

Meredith was in deep conversation with Sue Carol, their heads bent low and close. If Clementine hadn't known how much Meredith hated Sue Carol, she would have been jealous. But she was too old for such things. The pea soup didn't agree with her. That was all.

"You're not even looking," Rudy whined.

Clementine turned, forcing a smile. Rudy may have been a goofy man, but he didn't deserve to be neglected. "Sorry, Rudy, I just thought I saw something over there."

Rudy pursed his narrow lips. He lifted his glasses and his gaze drifted from Clementine to Meredith. "Must be a pretty important something. It's not every day your fifth grandchild takes his first steps."

Clementine tensed. "What are you saying?"

Rudy took a sip of his own soup, side-eyeing Clementine. "You know, my eldest grandchild got his first job last week. Some old Italian place. Not where I would have wanted to see him working, especially not on Monday nights when he should be studying for exams—you know he's going to be a brain surgeon—but he sees the most interesting people there. Just the other day, he was telling me the most outrageous tale..." Rudy coughed, taking obvious pleasure in having Clementine's full attention. "But it's too ridiculous to repeat—or so I thought. Now I'm not so sure."

Clementine couldn't bring herself to say anything. She was intimately aware of the other seven people in the room. Any one of them could overhear their conversation, yet her throat wouldn't work. It was like that summer out in Utah when her horse threw her and there had been nothing but air around her and the ground rushing up to meet her. She could see the crash coming, but there wasn't anything she could do to stop it.

Rudy tapped his chin with his spoon, leaving a glob of soup under his bottom lip. "I wonder what Sue Carol would say if she heard what my grandson saw. The scandal it would cause in the neighborhood. Two illicit couples in two weeks—"

Clementine jerked. Her elbow knocked her water glass. It tipped, tumbled, fell. Water splashed, and Rudy's pants were soaked.

"Oh my, dear me. I am so sorry!" Clementine tossed her napkin at him, righting the glass as quickly as possible. The room fell silent. All eyes landed on her and Rudy. No one ever dared spill at Singles' Night. Sue Carol's wrath was legendary. Adrenaline rushed through Clementine, and if fear hadn't already taken root, she would have laughed.

She pushed back her chair and grabbed Rudy by the elbow, taking up her cane in her other hand. "Come on, let's go get you cleaned up."

Rudy was too busy spluttering to object, and he let her lead them into Sue Carol's empty kitchen. The door swung shut behind them. Conversation started back up in the other room. Its soft murmur filtered through the door and Clementine helped Rudy over to the sink. A stack of fresh towels lay next to drying dishes. Rudy helped himself.

"Watch what you're doing next—"

Clementine tapped her cane against Rudy's shin. Not hard, but enough to sting. He yelped.

"What was that for?" Rudy glowered. He'd always had more frown lines than anyone Clementine knew.

Clementine leaned against her cane, stepping into his personal space, forcing him to back into the sink. "What are you on about?"

Rudy's eyes flicked to the dining room door and Clementine watched understanding burst upon his face. "If this is about Mer—"

Clementine hit his shin again. "Keep her name out of your mouth. This is between you and me."

"Okay, okay," Rudy whined, holding up his hands in surrender, "just stop doing that."

"What's your goal? Are you going to tell Sue Carol?"

"No!" Rudy shook his head. "I would never."

Clementine rested both hands on her cane and bobbed her chin. "Good. I should expect not."

She took a step back toward the dining room, but Rudy's reedy voice stopped her.

"Yet, I've always thought we might make a handsome couple. Rudy and Clementine. Our names just sound right together. I wonder, why would you go on a date with her, and not me..."

Clementine's cane squeaked as she turned back around. "Excuse me?"

"It might incentivize me, that's all. If I were keeping *our* secret instead of just yours."

Clementine clenched her jaw and spoke her next words carefully. "Rudy. I am dating Meredith. I am not going out with you."

His glasses were back on his nose. He no longer looked like a bug, but a leering spider watching a fly squirm in its web. "It wouldn't bother me. My wife and I used to have something quite similar. Besides, you're already bending one rule. What's another?"

Clementine closed her eyes, feeling her age—the way her joints ached at the weight of the anger surging through her. Her collarbone groaned where that horse riding accident had cracked it. There was a time when she would have...well, she didn't know what she would have done to a man like Rudy, but it didn't matter. She knew what she would do now.

Though not as agile as she had once been, Clementine still had the advantage of speed and surprise over Rudy. She pulled the sink nozzle from its holder, the metal tubing slithering free. She twisted the knob. Water sprayed, arcing through the air like the sprinklers of her youth. If she hadn't been so furious, she would have laughed at the open-mouthed horror that dawned across Rudy's face.

"Piss off, Rudy. Tell whoever you like."

Clementine marched back into the dining room, leaving Rudy gasping behind her, hacking like a dying fish. She took her seat, heart fluttering. She gripped her cane as tightly as her fingers would allow. Bracing herself, she caught Meredith's questioning gaze. *I'm sorry*, she mouthed. Meredith's eyebrows dipped, but she and Clementine were too far apart from each other for any explanation. If the situation were reversed, Meredith would have had a plan, a way to recover themselves and the night, but it wasn't Meredith Rudy had approached. It had been Clementine, and now she had made everything worse.

The kitchen door burst open, slamming against the far wall. Rudy stood dripping, glasses speckled with water, bushy white eyebrows pulled down into a glower.

"Rudy!" Sue Carol exclaimed, somewhere between indignation and horror. "I don't care how you treat your own house, but here you will respect my belongings."

Rudy seemed not to hear her. He raised a twiggy finger at Clementine before tracing a line to Meredith. "Those...those two...*lesbians*...are dating." The effect would have been comical, if he hadn't been actively tearing apart Clementine's life.

Clementine wished she'd smacked him harder with her cane.

The room gasped. Chairs pushed away from the table as if romance were contagious. Meredith's eyes widened. Clementine shrank in her seat at the betrayal in her partner's eyes.

"You filthy liars!" Sue Carol's mouth twisted and she splayed her hands across the table, nose turned up at Clementine and Meredith, a queen about to issue a final decree. Clementine wouldn't give her the chance.

Her chair screeched as she stood. She met Sue Carol's gaze unflinching. "Your chicken cacciatore was never good anyways." She threw her napkin down and held out a hand for Meredith.

No one moved. Rudy stood in the doorway, too smug for someone who was dripping water across the wood. Sue Carol's eyes breathed murder and disgust. Clementine's hand hung in the air.

It hung. And hung. And hung.

She looked to Meredith, but Meredith stared at her soup, worrying her earlobe as she always did when she tried to find a solution to a particularly difficult situation.

"Mer?..." Clementine couldn't hide the plea in her voice.

Sue Carol grinned. "Meredith Conwell, do you end your relationship in order to maintain your invitation?"

Meredith looked up. She met Clementine's eyes. A lifetime of unmet promise swam in their depths. Slowly she tucked her hair behind both of her ears and Clementine knew she'd made a decision.

Meredith nodded, the barest bob of her head. "I do."

Clementine wondered if she was about to learn what a heart attack felt like, even as she held onto one tiny kernel of hope.

"Clementine McDonald," Sue Carol continued, "it is my unfortunate pleasure to revoke your invite to Singles' Night for having an illicit relationship, despite its recent demise, and for mistreatment of fellow guests." In the doorway, Rudy puffed out his chest. "Given the evidence against you, do you plead guilty?"

Clementine readjusted her cane, straightened her spine, and raised her chin. "I do. I'm guilty as charged," she said, as the words *recent demise* echoed in her head.

Her cane creaked as she left, loud in the quiet of the dining room. Still Meredith didn't look at her.

The walk back to her house was a long and painful one. She didn't normally mind it—though her kids begged her not to walk so often. She may not have been able to do much unaided these days, but the day she couldn't walk three blocks on her own (cane or no cane) was the day she would move in with her kids.

Tonight, though, the walk only made her feel her age. The Florida air was hot and muggy. It mixed with the acrid scent of the golf course's fertilizer. The drone of frogs in the neighboring pond grated against her frazzled temper. Her knee protested the whole way. Even her orthopedic shoes couldn't save the bunions on her feet.

She leaned against a streetlight and took a deep breath, wondering if she had imagined the way Meredith had pushed the hair out of her face, the way she had put it behind her ears. A gentle tuck. A reminder. A promise. A ruse.

Who was she kidding? Meredith didn't remember that drunken Bingo night. Didn't remember the scam they'd pulled to win all those bottles of wine. And even if she did, Clementine had pressured Meredith into the trick, and her girlfriend had felt guilty ever since. She wouldn't use the same code now. And what signal would she be trying to send anyways? What plan could she have had that would involve puncturing Clementine's love beneath her heel. No. It would be better to accept the truth now, that Clementine had, once again, loved and lost.

She'd thought she was too old for heartbreak—that this particular pain had died with her husband. She should have known better when she saw Meredith standing on the beach that first night—the definition of a beautiful heartbreak—clutching Clementine's note in one hand.

"I wasn't sure you would come," Clementine had said, as the wind tousled them both, pushing Clementine toward the other woman.

Meredith's sundress whipped around her ankles as she answered. "Neither was I." She had been focused on the ocean, but at those words she turned to Clementine. "I don't want to go back in the closet. I don't want to hide a relationship. I haven't had to do that since I was sixteen, but I don't want to give up Singles' Night for what might just be an experiment for you—or an impulse."

Clementine had tried to argue that it wasn't an experiment—that she'd always had an eye on the women alongside the men, but the impulsivity was harder to negate. Her life had just been one long string of impulses, and she couldn't say tucking a piece of paper with a date, time, and location into Meredith's purse hadn't been an impulse either. She'd had to write on a receipt after all. She'd only known that Meredith had become the center of her evenings at Sue Carol's, her reason for going to Singles' Night, and she wanted to see what came next.

Since Clementine hadn't been able to explain (Meredith was always better with words), she'd tried to show her instead. They rented a rowboat and Clementine rowed them out to the center of the canal. Her back didn't appreciate it the next day, but when the college kids she'd hired finally set off the fireworks, they lit up Meredith's face in the pinks and oranges of Clementine's heart, reflecting off of her crooked grin. Clementine had tried to explain that those lights bursting above their heads were what her chest felt like sitting in that boat with Meredith. Meredith hadn't let her finish. Clementine was in Meredith's lap before the first few sparks faded, Meredith's arms around her, and their breath on each other's lips. The rest was history. An especially painful history, given that there seemed to be no more future for them.

Clementine slammed the door to her one-story walk up and collapsed into her bed, knowing her lipstick would smear against the pillow. She groaned, clenching her fists in the bedspread, curling her arms around her bruised heart. In her mind's-eye, Meredith tucked and untucked her hair behind her ears.

She was being ridiculous. They were over. Done. There was no more Meredith and Clementine.

The sleeves on her dress constricted her arms. Its buttons pulled at her chest. She pushed herself to her feet, forcing her shaking fingers to her collar. A tear slipped down her cheek, and then another. Tonight, she would cry. Tomorrow, she would show up to Sue Carol's luncheon, the one she was uninvited to. She would sit right beside their table at the club, wear her best dress, and toast the happy singles. She would...

A knock at the door had her turning, hands paused at her throat. She waited, hoping...no, she couldn't hope that. Only that whoever it was would go away and leave her be.

The knock came again, soft and hesitant. She stooped for her cane, adjusted her grip on its handle. At the door, she swallowed, put her hand on the knob, allowed herself an aggressive sniffle and brushed her wrinkled hands across her wet cheeks. She would not let her imagination run wild over any hair tucked behind any ears. She was only an old woman answering a door

before bed. Whoever was on the other side wouldn't see her fall apart when their face wasn't the one she wanted to see. The neighborhood wouldn't see her fall apart.

But it wasn't the neighborhood on the other side of the door. It was Meredith.

At the sight of Clementine, Meredith burst into tears, great big crocodile tears that made Clementine's look dainty in comparison—tears that put Clementine's two-year-old grandchild to shame. Clementine had never seen anything so heartbreakingly beautiful.

Clementine surged across the threshold, dropping her cane and taking up Meredith's hands. Something metal bit into her palm, but she had eyes only for Meredith. For the softness of her face, the regret on her lips, the warmth in her eyes.

In between sobs, Meredith choked out an apology and an explanation: she'd tried to warn Clementine it was all fake—that she hadn't meant it—but she was sure she'd botched the message and forgotten the signal they'd used for bingo. After all, they'd had so much wine that evening. She couldn't trust her memory. She'd hated pretending to ignore Clementine. It made her feel utterly ashamed and horrible, but she hadn't been able to speak up. She had needed to stay at Sue Carol's house. To keep that vile woman's trust.

Clementine dropped Meredith's hands and leaned against the door frame—leaned away from Meredith. "So you plan to stay then? To continue with Single's Night? This is just some sort of excuse for an apology, and we're supposed to continue on in hiding? Thought you hated that."

Meredith took a watery gasp. "No...I just...I wanted to make Sue Carol pay."

Clementine blinked, cocked her head, and wondered if her hearing was finally going. Sweet Meredith wanted revenge? The same Meredith who insisted her son-in-law set all the spiders in her house free, who wouldn't set a single lethal mouse trap?

"Make Sue Carol pay how?"

Meredith gave a wobbly, nervous smile and held up a set of keys. A small plastic flamingo dangled from the ring. Clementine gasped and stepped forward for a closer look. Her knee gave out and she fell, the world swirling around her. Meredith, always the stronger of the two, caught her. Meredith's warm, solid hands cupped her elbows and raised Clementine back to her feet, but she didn't let go.

Leaning into Meredith, Clementine asked, "Is that really..."

Pride crept into Meredith's voice. "Sue Carol's golf cart keys. I've read the club rules, you know. Members aren't supposed to have their own golf carts. We need to use club property." She wiggled her eyebrows.

If Clementine hadn't already been in Meredith's arms, she would have hugged her. As it was, Clementine laughed. "So she can't report it as missing to management, can she?"

Meredith shook her head. Clementine cackled, but Meredith's fingers on her chin stopped her. She returned her gaze to Meredith's steady eyes.

"I don't want to leave you, and especially not for shit company like Rudy and Sue Carol."

"I don't know, Rudy's pretty handsome..."

Meredith laughed and to Clementine it was the most gorgeous sound in the world, but that didn't stop her from silencing it with a kiss. She held Meredith in her arms, or maybe

"Singles' Night" by Claire Dietz

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Meredith held her, but it didn't matter because the night was warm and the stars were out. The frogs croaked, and a few stray fireflies blinked to life.

After an eternity. After a breath, Meredith pulled away, but only far enough to rest her forehead against Clementine's. "We should probably return the golf cart in the morning."

Clementine let out a soft chuckle. "Yeah, I can promise that you would not like being arrested, and twice in my life is enough for me."

"Then we should enjoy it while we can."

With Meredith's help, Clementine walked back down her front path and settled into the waiting golf cart. A picture of Sue Carol with her grandkids was stuck to the dash. Clementine pulled it off and let it flutter to the pavement. Meredith started the engine and wrapped an arm around Clementine. Together, in the quiet of the golf course community, far away from the drama of Singles' Night, they trundled down the road.