

AUSTIN

# IT'S NICE TO BE ALONE

Austin cuts into his chicken and brings it up to his mouth. He sniffs it before he eats: catered food makes him nervous. He hates having to select lukewarm meat out of a big steel bin that's practically a swimming pool for bacteria. He reminds himself, *next wedding, choose the vegetarian entrée.*

He takes a few bites and pushes it aside. If Lydia was here she'd probably pester him to eat more. *I'm glad she's gone, he tells himself. It's nice, not to have someone nagging me about stupid shit like that. It's nice to be alone at a wedding.*

Actually, when it became apparent that Lydia was not going to start returning his calls, he'd asked Rose to drive down from Minneapolis for a weekend, come with him as his date.

—It's a bit late notice, she'd said.

—I know, I know, he said. —My original date fell through. The second the words came out of his mouth he realized how they'd sound. —I mean—

But he didn't want to go into it. When Rose said *I just don't think I can do it that weekend* he just said *OK* and left it at that. Going into it would have meant telling Rose about Lydia and that would mean explaining why he hadn't mentioned Lydia earlier, and he's not sure he has a good answer. A good reason for his dishonesty. *You weren't dishonest, he tells himself for the thousandth time. It's not dishonest if she never asked, he tells himself. You never lied to her.* No, he never lied to her, he merely *selectively omitted*, for a long time.

But now he is free. Free to tell the whole and complete truth. Free to be with Rose if that's what he wants (is it? He wonders). He could quit his job, move up to Minneapolis and just *be with her*. (He needs to move anyway: now that Craig is married he is officially no longer Austin's roommate, and Austin can make the rent by himself for a month, maybe two, and that's it.) He tries to imagine it, leaving Chicago, life in Minneapolis with Rose. He sees the two of them, on a Sunday morning, eating rolls in kitchen sunlight, reading the paper. The image is not a bad

one. Better than sitting here, next to an empty chair, pushing a piece of chicken around in a pool of its own vile slime, suffering the chitchat of happy couples and morons.

Maybe he should go up there for a weekend and see how it goes.

Maybe he should have a beer and then get the fuck out of here.

Motion approved. He rises and heads towards the bar. On his way there he passes the head table, watches Craig and Debra lean towards one another to fit within the frame of a photograph. They smile hopefully into the white glare of the flash. People applaud.