

DATE NIGHT

a “Zero at the Bone” short fiction by Jane Seville

Author’s Note: This short story takes place right after the epilogue of “Zero at the Bone.” During that epilogue, Jack referred to a going-away party for a colleague that he had to attend, and D volunteered to accompany him to the party.

“Jack, come on! We gonna be late!”

Jack came out of the master bathroom, teeth brushed and hair combed. D was putting on a jacket and fidgeting with himself. “Relax, it’s a party, we don’t have to be there at nine on the dot.”

D nodded. He looked a little nervous. “Uh...I look all right?” he muttered.

Jack grinned. D had on Jack’s personal favorite of his jeans, dark blue denim with just the right amount of wear, and they fit him like they’d been sculpted to his ass. He’d paired them with a white button-down and a dark gray jacket. Jack stepped up and straightened the lapels, mostly just for an excuse to touch him. “You look hot.”

D grumbled. “Don’t wanna look *hot*. Jus...ain’t met most a these folks before, don’t wanna be no embarrassment.”

“You could never be an embarrassment. I wish I could get you to wear some color, though.”

“You the colorful one,” D said, nodding towards Jack’s red turtleneck.

Jack took a step back. “You’re all jittery. Relax, huh? It was your idea to come with me. It isn’t too late to back out, you know. I can go alone, I don’t mind.”

D seemed to consider this, then flapped a hand. “Nah. Lot a yer friends gonna be there...guess I oughta show my face once in awhile, huh?”

Jack’s chest swelled with absurd emotion as he watched D putting on his watch, patting his pockets to check for wallet and cell phone. He had no illusions. D wasn’t coming to Abe Avendale’s goodbye party because he was dying to meet Jack’s colleagues. He was doing it for Jack, because he knew Jack liked to be social and he was getting shit from some of his co-workers about having an imaginary friend for a partner. Only Portia and her husband had met D, and he’d been physically glimpsed by a couple of nurses, but other than that, the only way Jack could prove that he *didn’t* live with Harvey the Rabbit was the photo of D he kept on his desk.

Jack smiled. “Maybe I ought to help you take the edge off before we leave,” he said, reaching for D’s belt buckle.

“Hey!” D said, shoving at Jack’s hands. “We gotta get goin!”

“We’ll be fashionably late,” Jack said, dropping to his knees.

“C’mon, Jack,” D said, but his protests were rapidly weakening at the prospect of a spontaneous blowjob. “Ain’t the time...” He sucked in a breath as Jack grabbed his hips and abruptly swallowed him to the root. “Fuck,” he hissed.

“Don’t have *that* much time,” Jack muttered, getting back to it fast. D’s hand was in his hair, his hips making shallow thrusts into Jack’s mouth. D was right about one thing tonight; they didn’t really have a lot of time.

Luckily, it didn't take long. Jack went at D hard and fast, smiling to himself at the groans he was able to pull from him, until D grabbed his head and came into his mouth, gasping.

Jack stood up. "Feel better?"

"Shit," D muttered, blinking. He tucked himself back in and zipped up. "Goddamn, doc. A little warnin maybe, huh?"

"We better go."

"We ain't goin nowhere," D said, grabbing Jack's arm as he passed.

"We aren't?"

D smirked. "Not until you brush your teeth."

The party was at Portia's house, since Abe and his wife had already shipped half their house to Tucson. Jack pulled up behind a Pathfinder with the license plate "BRAINDOC."

"How come you don't have one a those?" D asked, nodding at the license plate as they got out of the car.

"Because I'm not an arrogant asshole," Jack grumbled.

"O-kay. Sorry I asked."

"No, it's just...that's Kyle McNerney's car and I can't stand him."

D sighed as they walked up the sidewalk to Portia's house. "I ain't gonna know nobody in there cept Portia and Andy, am I?"

"I doubt it." Jack stopped walking. "You don't have to do this," he said, turning to face D.

He shook his head. "I know. I get that yer givin me an out, Jack, but come on. I can face down armed hitmen but a party's too much? My manly honor's at stake, here."

Jack smiled. "Okay." He leaned in and kissed him. D was blushing a little when he drew back. "Come on, let's get it over with."

Portia answered the door, smiling widely. "Here you are," she said, leaning forward to kiss his cheek. "Everyone's been asking if you were bringing him," she murmured in his ear.

"Well, here he is, but go easy on him," Jack whispered back, stepping past her into the house.

"So glad you could come, D," Portia said, giving him a welcoming smile. "Jack's friends are dying to meet you."

"Uh...thanks, I guess," D said, as he and Jack moved past her into the house. Portia and Andy had a big house, contemporary and quirky, that showcased Portia's affinity for big, bold colors. There were at least thirty people milling about in the great room and kitchen. Jack heard his name called a few times as colleagues hailed his arrival.

"That's Abe over there," he muttered to D, nodding toward Dr. Avendale, a tall man with a bushy salt-and-pepper beard.

D smirked. "My. Ain't he right out of a Normal Rockwell painting?"

Jack chuckled. "I've always thought that. All he needs is a bow tie."

"Should we, uh...go say hi? Y'know, bein it's his party n all."

"Let's get a drink first," Jack said, spotting Andy over at the kitchen island, pouring drinks.

"Oh, dear fuckin Lord yes," D muttered.

Jack led the way through the pack of people, nodding at colleagues and breaking a path in front of D, who was practically imploding, he was hunched into himself so much.

"Hey, Jack!" Andy exclaimed as they approached, tossing out his hand for a quick grip-and-grin. "And D, holy cow, never thought I'd catch you at a party like this," he said.

D shrugged, relaxing a bit in the company of someone he knew. "Well, ya know...gotta show my face once in awhile, guess."

"You want a beer?"

"Oh, you bet." D took the beer from Andy's hand while Jack poured himself a gin and tonic.

"Hey, Jack!" exclaimed a slick-looking man, sidling up to the island.

Jack smiled and shook the man's hand. "Hey, Rob." He nodded at D. "I don't think you've met my partner, Anson."

Rob, whoever he was, extended a hand and grinned, his eyes wide and surprised. "Whoa, so you exist after all! Well, hell! I guess I owe Stefan twenty bucks!" He laughed a kind of good-natured-guy-at-party laugh. It made D's skin crawl.

"Nice ta meet you," he managed.

"We were starting to think Jack made you up!"

"Uh-huh. Got that impression."

"Thought maybe that picture on his desk came with the frame!" More guy-at-party laughter.

D's tight smile was starting to hurt. *I get the drift, buddy. Move on.* Jack stepped in just before D could pop off with a rude remark. For example, "Let see how made-up my fist feels in yer face."

"So, Rob, we're going to go say hi to Abe. Nice seeing you."

"You bet, Jack. Nice to meet you, Adam."

"Anson," D muttered under his breath as Jack pulled him away by the upper arm.

"Sorry," Jack murmured. "He's actually a pretty nice guy."

D grumbled. "If you say so."

Having met everyone he was supposed to meet and endured more “we were starting to wonder if you existed” jibes than he thought was reasonable for one man to endure, D slipped away to get another drink, leaving Jack talking to one of his colleagues.

They were nice people, most of them. But they weren't *his* people.

But Jack's your people. And he's...well, kinda like them. What's that tell ya?

D sighed and swigged half his beer. He didn't know if he'd ever be comfortable in this world, Jack's world. He wanted to be, for Jack's sake, and he couldn't very well ask for the same effort from Jack. Jack couldn't be comfortable in his world when he didn't *have* a world anymore. The whole idea of all of this had been to get away from the world he'd been trapped in and make a new life.

He leaned in a doorway that led off toward the bedrooms, tucked off in the shadows, happily sequestering himself from the conversation all around him. He watched them, unable to shake the predator's instincts that catalogued each of their heights and weights, which hand was their dominant hand, who would be a challenge in a fight, who would lay down and surrender.

Jack stood out like a spotlight was shining on him, at least he did to D's eyes. He had an easy sincerity about him that made everyone else look forced and ill-rehearsed. His smile was...well, what it always was, namely D's light in the window.

He didn't know how long he stood there mooning over his fella, but his reverie was interrupted by a tug on his trouser leg. He looked down to see Portia and Andy's six-year-old daughter, Ellen, standing there looking up at him with a serious expression. He'd met her a couple of times when he and Jack had been over here. “Well, hey there,” he said.

“Hi, Mr. D,” she said.

“Ain't you s'posed ta be in bed?”

“Yeah. Don't tell, okay?”

“Okay.”

She grabbed his hand. “Come to my room and play. I wanna show you my Lego building.”

D let himself be dragged off. Legos sounded like more fun than the party, that was for sure.

Ellen's room was a primary-colored, cheerfully disorderly little girl's Fortress of Solitude, filled with books and stuffed animals and hand-drawn pictures on the walls. He saw Portia's red braids jutting wildly from her head in Ellen's crayon-rendered family portraits.

She looked to be in the midst of a Lego engineering project on a par with the Great Wall of China. D sat cross-legged on her fluffy yellow rug. “So whatcha got goin on here?” he asked, cocking his head at her Escher-like confabulation of rooms and openings.

“It's the castle for Miss Pattycake,” she said, holding up a troll doll with bright neon pink hair and a dress that looked like Ellen had made it from a scrap of her drapery fabric.

“Oh, Miss Pattycake, huh?” D said. He took his cue from Ellen and started putting more blocks on the castle, wherever he saw a spot. “This all right?”

“I'm just making it bigger now,” she said. They continued their construction in silence for a few moments. “You go with Uncle Jack, right?” she said.

“What you mean, go with?”

Ellen rolled her eyes theatrically. “You know. Like Mommy goes with Daddy. And, uh...like cereal goes with milk. You know.”

D smirked. “Oh. Yeah, I s’pose I do.”

“How come you don’t come over with him?”

“I did tonight.”

“But not the other times.”

“What other times?”

“When he comes for dinner. He’s by himself then.”

“Oh.” D looked down at the little Lego cubes in his hands. He knew Jack was over here a couple of times a week, naturally Ellen would have gotten used to seeing him alone. “Well, I got a job that means I gotta be away a lot.”

“My mommy’s a doctor,” Ellen said. “She fixes kids’ bones when they fall down or get broken, and if I don’t wanna get broken, I have to be careful when I ride my bike and I have to wear a helmet.”

D nodded. “That sounds like real good advice,” he said, his tone serious. “Y’know, Uncle Jack’s a doctor, too.”

“I know. He fixes people’s faces. Sometimes little kids are born with faces that didn’t get made quite right and he fixes them.”

“Yep, he sure does.”

“And then my dad stays home to take care of me but when he’s typing fast I’m s’posed to be quiet as I can and only go get him if I need to reach something high or I hurt myself.”

D grinned. Andy was a stay-at-home dad, but he did some freelance translation work for the UN. “That so?”

“Uh-huh. But if he’s only clicking and not typing fast it’s okay if I talk to him or ask him to play Lego.” She passed him an action figure that was some kind of elf guy. “What’s your job?”

“Well...guess you’d say I catch bad guys.”

“Like a policeman?”

“Yeah, kinda. Do you know who the FBI are?”

Ellen’s eyes got big. “Like Mulder and Scully!”

D frowned. “How you know them? That show’s way too grown-up for you.”

“My daddy likes it and he has a poster on his wall in the office. Do you catch aliens?”

“That’s all made up, you know. Ain’t no such thing as aliens. But there are bad guys and I help catch them.”

She nodded, so serious like she was conducting a job interview. “I hope you’re careful,” she said.

D looked at her little face and suddenly felt like crying. If he shut his eyes he could see Jill, his own little girl, and how she used to say that to him when he was leaving for duty. He blinked fast and pretended to be enthralled by the elf figure he was holding.

“Did you get sad?” Ellen asked.

“Huh?”

“Your eyes look all shiny.”

“Oh. No, I’m okay, honey. Just…” He smiled. “I had a little girl once, myself.”

“Where is she?” Ellen asked, excited, maybe hoping for a playmate.

D regretted bringing it up. Surely he shouldn’t tell a six-year-old about his daughter’s death, that could scare her. And he didn’t know how much Portia and Andy had told her about death, it wasn’t his place to tell her things she wasn’t ready for. “She, uh…lives far away,” he stammered.

“Oh. With her mom? You got divorced, huh?” Ellen said, nodding.

“Yeah,” D said. At least that was the truth.

“And then you met Uncle Jack?”

“Yep, that’s right.”

“Are you married?”

D flushed. “Uh…kinda, I guess. Might as well be.”

“My mom says boys can marry boys and girls can marry girls but some people don’t think they can.”

“What do you think?”

She shrugged, absorbed in her Lego metropolis. “Boys are icky, I wouldn’t wanna marry one. But that’s just me,” she said.

D burst out laughing. “Oh, that’s jus you, is it?” he said.

Ellen giggled. “Yeah! But Uncle Jack is nice. He’s not as icky. He smells good and he doesn’t pick his nose.”

“Two of his better qualities, yeah.”

“So it’s okay if you wanna marry him, I guess.”

“Well, I appreciate the support.”

Ellen jumped up. “Uncle Jack!” she yelled. D turned around to see Jack leaning in the doorway, grinning. Ellen waved at him. “We’re playing Legos!”

“I see,” Jack said, crossing his arms, his eyes twinkling. “So this is where you’ve been hiding.”

“The, uh…the lady needed some Lego assistance,” D intoned.

Portia appeared at Jack’s side. “Ellen Marie! You are supposed to be in bed, young lady!” she scolded.

D got up. "Nice talking to you, Ellen."

"Night, Mr. D," Ellen said, allowing herself to be bundled back into bed.

D followed Jack back out into the hallway, but instead of heading back to the great room, Jack buttonholed him into a side corridor that led to the guest room. He turned D's back to the wall and stood close before him. "You making new friends?" he murmured.

D's hands wandered to Jack's hips. "I bailed. Sorry."

"It's okay. I know you hate parties. You met everybody, made some small talk. More than I expected, even."

"It ain't the people. Most of em seem nice enough. It's just..."

"I know what it is," Jack said, ducking his head to grab D's lowered eyes with his own. "You think you can't be one of them because of who you used to be. You think there's nothing you can have in common with them. But it isn't true, you know. You must have thought the same thing about me at one point."

"Yeah, I did. But somehow I don't think most of them are gonna respond to our technique of getting ta know each other," D said, smirking.

"Oh, I wouldn't be so sure. I swear I caught Evan Gennarro eyeballing your ass," Jack said, sliding one hand down to the body part in question.

D snorted and flapped a hand. "I saw that guy eyeballing everyone with a pulse."

"Regardless. He can't have you."

"No, he cain't." D smiled at Jack. "Let's get outta here."

"You want to go home?"

"Nah. Just wanna go somewhere else. Little more...private, maybe."

A slow smile crept over Jack's face. "Oh, it's like that, is it?"

"You bet it's like that," D said, answering Jack's smile.

They made their goodbyes, Jack bidding Dr. Avendale good luck in Tucson. Portia walked them to the door, and for the first time in his memory D didn't feel awkward accepting her kiss on the cheek, to the point of giving her one back. He certainly owed Portia some consideration, since he was well aware of how much support Jack got from her and her family during D's long absences. He saw Jack smile at this gesture, and then they were out the door.

Jack drove, not speaking. He seemed to know where he was going. D's hand rested on the back of Jack's neck, his fingers riffling through his hair.

They ended up at an out-of-the-way club in the Short North, a quiet hideaway with a couple of musicians noodling on their instruments and somehow generating music. This neighborhood was heavily gay and there were about equal numbers of same and opposite sex couples at the tables, on the dance floor, at the bar, tucked away in the shadowed semicircular booths.

D went to the bar and got them drinks, then joined Jack at a corner booth, sliding in next to him. Jack sat close, his hand resuming its place on the inside of D's knee. They didn't talk, just sipped their drinks, watched the other people in the bar, and let their hands and eyes do the conversing.

Jack seemed lost in thought, turning his glass around on the tabletop, a vague smile lurking at the corners of his mouth as D brushed his nose through the dark hair at Jack's temple, smelling his shampoo and the sweet/salty scent of his skin. "You mean what you said to Ellen?" he finally murmured, turning toward D, which left them practically bumping noses.

"What'd I say?"

"That we were more or less married."

"Hmm. You makin a suggestion?"

"No." Jack turned his head back to the front.

D watched Jack's profile. "Maybe I was."

"I don't need that from you."

"What, a proposal?"

"Yeah." Jack faced him again. "I don't need it."

"What if I wanna make it?"

"That's up to you. But we can't be more honest than we are already."

D lifted one hand and smoothed it over Jack's hair, feeling a tug deep in his belly. "It ain't about needin somethin," he said. "It's about bein somethin."

Jack sighed, then slid away from D. "C'mon," he said. "Dance with me."

D watched him get up and face him. "Huh?"

"Dance. You know, like that?" he said, nodding over his shoulder to the half-dozen couples who were moving slowly to the lazy music.

D wanted to protest, to decline, but he knew he didn't have grounds. Nobody here would bat an eye over two guys dancing. It was dark and smoky and nobody would even notice them, like as not. So he just nodded, and got to his feet. Jack led him to the small open area where the other couples were dancing; he turned around and they folded against each other, neither one really leading or following, hands on shoulders and waists without form. D shut his eyes as they swayed together, Jack's temple pressed against his and his body warm against D's.

After a time everything else faded away, and it was just him and Jack, moving together naturally, holding each other with gentle restraint that they wouldn't have had at home, just enjoying the closeness without rushing ahead to a more intimate embrace. Jack felt strong and relaxed, and it wasn't long before D was too, Jack leading him into easy contentment here just as he had always done.

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