

Peepin' Joel

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Peepin' Joel

by [Disaster_Lady](#)

Summary

Summer 1962 at Steiner. Joel thinks his friendship with Midge is going well. Well enough he wants to ask her out. Then she gets some mysterious flowers. He can sneak into her room to find the note and not get caught. Right? Right?

Notes

I decided to try my hand at writing a one shot MidgeLenny story and it still ended up being over 5k words. This was inspired by boleyynns' "blue things in a green room." I love the idea of Joel being a peeping tom to Midge and Lenny.

But I wanted him to get caught.

- Inspired by [blue things in a green room](#) by [boleyynns](#)

Mei has an abortion, and it all falls apart.

It's not as if Joel is mad at her for the decision. A new baby would have complicated their lives. Granted, Joel probably should not have told his father about the pregnancy until after he and Mei worked out the details. *That* was an awkward conversation.

But all of the little differences he and Mei had ignored became big ones. She was going to go through the rigors of medical school. He had the Button Club and Ethan and Esther. Joel hadn't expected Mei to mother his children, but she would've had to interact with them more as his wife. More than she was probably comfortable with.

A difficult conversation became a debate, and a debate an argument. Mei walked out the door and that was it. Joel alone. He had loved her, or at least believed himself to. He tried not to drown himself in alcohol or pointless sex, he was a different man now. A man with real responsibilities.

And there was Midge. She had offered a shoulder to cry on about Mei, cooked him some brisket, and let him eat dinner with her, Abe, Rose, and the children. He had been so fucking stupid to think there could be any other woman. It was Midge. *Always* Midge. The love of his life. Joel was smarter than he was years ago, especially when it came to her. Once this revelation was understood and processed, he did not run out the door and tell her they should be together again. To do so would be another one of his many mistakes in regard to her. So, he does the smart thing and lets the relationship happen naturally.

He and Midge are friends. Good friends. He watches her on Gordon Ford without fail. One time she even invited him to a taping. Joel met Ford afterwards, and it took several sentences of Midge's introduction to mention he was her ex-husband. Joel always pays Midge for her shows at the Button Club because you pay your artists. Not because her appearances cause an uptick in happy customers.

They even go out together. As friends. They see Mort Stahl. Bob Newhart. He tells Midge afterwards that neither of them are as funny as she is. She rolls her eyes. He and Midge laugh over Gordon Ford's awkward attempt at kissing her. And Joel doesn't get jealous. Because what chance does Ford have over him?

Time keeps moving, but no moment has been the right one to tell Midge about his feelings. He's simply a good friend. When they do get back together, it will be different. He was so arrogant when he told her she couldn't do standup if they were together. Too sensitive. Too controlling. He'll let her talk about him in her act. *I remarried my ex-husband for the second time! You know what they say, third times the charm!* He can imagine her saying that, but funnier. Just no jokes about his dick (and balls), which he thinks is a reasonable request.

He does want Midge to be best, to be as supportive of her as possible. Not the idiot Susie predicted he'd be that night at the Gaslight. Joel watches the kids without protest when she goes on short tours. He doesn't complain when a summer visit to California goes from two weeks to four. Midge is accommodating. She gives him a phone number and an address

for a Sally Marr, a woman Midge insists is a mutual friend of hers. The old Joel would've demanded more information. The new Joel simply accepts this.

They stay up late talking once she comes back from California. She says she performed a few shows around Los Angeles. Met up with Shy Baldwin and opened for him. Joel knows Midge well enough to see there's a hidden weariness under her unflappable poise. He gently asks if she's okay and Midge bursts into tears. He holds her for a minute as she cries.

"Thank you." She sits up and wipes away her tears. "I needed that."

"I wanna make sure you are okay," he says. "I love you, you know." He lets the sentiment speak for itself.

"I love you too," she says. "I'm glad we can sit here and talk like this."

"Me too." It would be wrong to push further.

That was a year ago. And Joel has not broached things again.

It's summer at Steiner and the 1962 season is going smoothly. Midge has rented a larger cabin fit to all of her guests. The kids, her parents, Susie, and Joel is welcome to stay with them as well.

"It will be nicer for the kids," says Midge. "We can spend time together as a family."

She tours around some of the other resorts in the area, but for the most part these weeks are a vacation. And at some point Joel is going to ask Midge out. The visit to Steiner feels like a new beginning. She's been spending a lot of time with him. He knows it's partially because Midge has been turned into an object of fascination, or worse, an outcast to many of the other guests.

"They're afraid I'll put them in my act," Midge says over breakfast one day. "Mrs. Ettenburg shot me a look at dinner last night."

"She can't still be mad about Benjamin," says Joel. He barely thinks about Midge's almost fiancé anymore. Benjamin had been fine, but not interesting enough for her. He represented a life she no longer had or wanted. Joel considered Mei in the same way.

Midge snorts. "I was *appalling* to her son. I think she gets to hold a grudge as long as she wants."

He and Midge go out on a rowboat, his suggestion. She pretends to Katherine Hepburn in *Bringing Up Baby* and makes fun of his rowing. Joel laughs at the bit. He almost tentatively brings up relationships, but the sky opens up and pours. He gets them back to the shore and indoors. The opportunity is lost. But Joel isn't worried. He's taking his time. He's got to do this right. Midge deserves that.

Then the flowers show up.

They are all eating at breakfast together. His father and Abe argue over the resort's plans for Polynesian night. Joel is glad the old men don't bicker the way they used to. There is an underlying affection between the barbs that wasn't there before. His mother is waving her fork around, telling Rose about suitable husbands for her clients. Joel recognizes names of high school classmates. Rose, to her credit, is listening, saying "I'll consider him Shirley."

Susie entertains Ethan and Esther.

"I wanna hear the plunger story, Susie," says Ethan.

"Me too," adds Esther.

"Hush! Not at the breakfast table. Do you want your grandmother to kick me out," says Susie.

The kids giggle.

Midge is eating a grapefruit, her pink summer dress complimenting it. Joel never paid much attention to her clothes during their marriage. Only that Midge always looked nice. Now he could appreciate how much effort went into her beauty routine.

Her sandals were a slightly darker pink, the shade appearing again in her lipstick. How long did it take her to match everything?

"Do you have any plans today?" Joel asks her.

"Hmm, haven't decided. I might get my hair done. I want to look good for Polynesian night."

Joel is about to ask if she wanted to do something before her appointment, but a staff member approaches the table with bouquet of flowers.

"These arrived for you, Ms. Weissman," she places them before Midge. The flowers are pink. There are enough of them that this is special, not so many to make the gesture ostentatious.

"Oh," Midge touches a petal, and she glows. She reads the card, smiling, her nose wrinkling in happiness.

The breakfast in Joel's stomach starts to rebel. He *knows* that smile. Midge once looked at him like that, before Penny Pan, before that night at the Gaslight, before he fucked it all up.

He swallows. "Who sent you the flowers?" His tone is so careful. He's just curious, no jealousy here.

“A friend,” says Midge, and Joel wishes he hadn’t drunk so much coffee.

“That’s lovely,” says his mother. “Your friend knows your favorite color!”

Joel spends the whole day fretting about the flowers. If they came from Gordon Ford, Midge would have said so. She wouldn’t have smiled like that either. Benjamin? He was old news. Joel had heard nothing about Midge’s dating life. Other than a joke during a set about her being her mother’s worst matchmaking client.

He wanders the resort trying to think his way out of the situation. Asking Midge directly would make him look like an asshole. To ask once is acceptable. Twice? No way. Rose? Abe? Ruin his good standing with them more likely. The kids haven’t muttered anything about Midge having a “new friend.” If his parents knew his mother would have gossiped already. Susie? She’d tell him to fuck off.

Joel goes for a swim to try and clear his head. All he does is zone out and cause some of the faster swimmers to complain about him being in the way. He plays with Ethan, but all his son wants to do is stare at his Lionel trains going around the track. Not exactly a big distraction. Esther has her Barbies. The little girl’s complex plotlines for her dolls leave both her and her father frustrated.

Midge comes back from the appointment with perfect hair.

Getting ready for Polynesian night becomes a whole to-do. Esther loses one of her stuffed bears on a walk with her grandmothers and the entire Maisel-Weissman clan (plus Susie) is recruited into searching all over the resort for it. There are tears and an announcement for the missing teddy. Although there is a slight confusion because Joel overhears several guests wondering if they should be concerned about the missing young man.

“I didn’t think we’ve had a Teddy here!” says one woman.

The yellow bear is thankfully found by Abe, no worse for wear, behind a tree. It’s getting dark and everyone is anxious to get ready for dinner.

“The Pu Pu platter!” says Moishe, waving his hands. Abe sighs.

Joel carries both Esther and the bear back to the cabin. Esther brushes its yellow fur, picking off twigs.

“He needs a bath, Daddy! Teddy needs to look good for dinner.”

In the bathroom, Joel pretends to be a barber and mines putting aftershave on the teddy.

“See, now he’s gonna be handsome for his special lady bear.”

At last, they are all ready to go. The kids are dressed and listening to Susie's plunger story. Abe drinks a tomato juice and Rose has come downstairs in a new outfit. A green ensemble with flowers on it. Midge is still wearing her pink summer dress from earlier.

"Why Miriam, aren't you going to dress for dinner," asks Rose.

Midge is kneeling and fixing Ethan's collar while the boy squirms. "No time for that, Mama. Besides, once they give me a lei it will be a completely different look."

"Can we go now," says Abe. "I'm running out of juice."

Midge picks up Esther, "Yes Papa, you're fussier than my children."

They are ten feet from the cabin when Esther shrieks that she left Teddy on her bed.

Abe groans. "Twice in one day!"

"I think we need to learn to eat without toys at the dinner table," says Rose with a suggestive tilt of her head.

"Mama!" Midge adjusts Esther on her hip. "Joel, could you please go rescue Teddy?"

"I will go get the bear."

The cabin is almost uneasy in silence. Joel flicks the downstairs light on to make the place less uninviting. He heads upstairs. The kids' room is at the far end of the hallway. He will grab the teddy bear and return to dinner. Just another funny day in the lives of the Maisel-Weissmans. Joel finds the bear on the floor.

"You've caused a lot of trouble today," Joel says and tucks the bear under his arm.

In returning down the hallway Joel sees Midge's door is open. Out of perhaps consideration, he puts his hand on the knob to close it. He pauses. Joel inhales and leans against the wood. He shouldn't. *He shouldn't*. Midge's room is private. He doesn't go into her apartment without warning her, even though he has a key. He did what he was supposed to. He got the Teddy. He needs to turn around and rejoin his family. But it would be so easy. Midge would have kept the note. She had her bulletin board of mementos.

He pushes the door open a crack, yet does not step in. Midge would be upset if she knew he did this. But Joel feels another roll of jealousy. He has to know who sent the flowers. How could he have missed this change in Midge's life? Weren't they friends?

Joel opens the door. Find the note, in and out. It's not like he's stealing her underwear.

He starts with her bed. Under the pillow. Her nightstand. Nothing. The flowers are on her dresser in a vase. Again, nothing. He's wasting time, it should not take thing long to fetch a teddy bear. He goes through her drawer, trying not to touch her clothes. Nothing. He swears under his breath. This was supposed to be easy.

Joel is checking Midge's handbags when he hears footsteps on the stairs. He freezes, sweat at his hairline. A woman laughs, it's Midge and Joel panics. She can't find him in here. The stairs are blocked. Joel silently rushes to hide his visit and conceals himself in the closet.

As soon as he gets the closet door secured, Midge steps into her bedroom hand in hand with a tall man with dark hair. Joel can see them both through the door's slats. The stranger is dressed casually, summer trousers and a short sleeved button down.

"You're in big trouble for this," says Midge. Her expression says otherwise. She beams up at this *invader*. "I wasn't expecting you for two more days!"

"Well, I could either see you or sulk in Florida. I picked you. I'm sure you can think of an appropriate punishment."

It's not until the man speaks that Joel recognizes him. Lenny *Fucking* Bruce is in Midge's bedroom. Considering the look in his eyes it isn't the first time. Joel was aware Midge knew him. Joel still has the painful memories of his humiliation in the Gaslight. Lenny Bruce laughing along with everyone else as Midge verbally carved her ex-husband up, failing by failing.

Midge continues to back up into the bed, Lenny Bruce following. Jealousy pulls on Joel's chest, rage eating up his heart.

Midge wraps her hands around Lenny Bruce's neck, his own resting lowly on her hips. "Then I demand you fuck me into the bed."

Lenny Bruce laughs. Joel think's he's going to vomit hidden here among Midge's dresses, scented by her perfume. His (former now) comedy idol leans down and kisses his ex-wife.

"I have been up for thirty-six hours," says Lenny Bruce when he breaks away. Midge pouts, disappointed. "However..."

He whispers something in Midge's ear. Joel lessens his grip on Esther's teddy bear. He's not going to watch to them have sex. He just has to wait until they leave. Then he can wash his eyeballs in bleach.

"I've never been with a man who enjoys doing that as much as you," says Midge.

"All those other men are idiots." Lenny Bruce picks up Midge and places her on the bed.

Joel's mouth goes dry. Midge lays down with her legs dangling off the end while Lenny Bruce kneels in front of her. Joel fears he knows where this is going and hopes he's

wrong.

“Pillow,” says Midge and she passes one to Lenny Bruce. He puts it under her hips.

“You’re ridiculously beautiful, you know that?”

Midge pokes him in the shoulder with one of her bare feet, the sandals long kicked off. “You haven’t even bought me dinner yet.”

Joel watches in growing horror as Lenny Bruce tenderly and deftly slides his hands up Midge’s legs and into her skirts. She moves her hips as he takes her underwear off.

“Your panties match your dress?” says Lenny Bruce, eyebrow raised.

“It’s a good color,” says Midge.

“Just when I think I’ve observed all the feminine mysteries, there’s another one.”

Joel wants to laugh. He solved the mystery of who sent the flowers. Sherlock Holmes never had to deal with seeing his ex-wife and her new boyfriend together. How could Midge have chosen a man like this? He was a criminal! And if the rumors were truth, addicted to dope. He tries to spot track marks on Lenny Bruce’s arms, finding none. But answering that question soon becomes unimportant as the man is going down on Midge.

Midge sighs, she runs her fingers through Lenny Bruce’s hair. He holds her in place with a hand on her pale thigh. And the noises... Joel wants to close his eyes. He wants to fall through the floor. But he can’t do either. He has to believe this isn’t a nightmare.

Midge is enjoying herself which just makes Joel angrier. They’d had a lot of great sex during their marriage. Even the excitement of Penny Pan was never as satisfying as being with Midge. She’d always told him she didn’t like being eaten out. That it felt “weird.” And now she’s twisting the blankets with her fist, giving Lenny *Fucking* Bruce instructions on how to move his tongue.

“Don’t stop,” she pants.

Maybe, says the voice in Joel’s head, and it sounds like Mei, *Midge said she didn’t like oral sex because you were bad at it*. Of fucking course. Midge always made things easy for him. The old Midge would never have corrected anything he’d done sexually, and the old Joel would’ve taken it as an attack on his masculinity. He’d gone down on women. Listened to what they wanted. But never with Midge.

The sounds are getting worse. Mouth on wet skin and Midge is keening. Her back is arched. It would’ve been better if she were on her knees blowing Lenny Bruce. That just would’ve been obscene. This is agony in its intimacy. Lenny Bruce face first in Midge, her legs over his shoulders, her gripping his curls.

Finally, Joel closes his eyes. But it doesn’t matter because he hears her come a minute later. Midge would always orgasm with breathless, pleasant little sighs. An affectation Joel

now knows was for his benefit. Lenny Bruce gets her off, and Midge makes an unflattering guttural gasp.

Joel returns to watching the trainwreck. Lenny Bruce deeply kisses the inside of her thigh as she comes down.

“Hey,” she says.

“Hello.”

“I’ve really missed you.”

Lenny Bruce crawls onto the bed with her. “You say that after I eat you out.”

Midge laughs and kisses him. “You just gave me a big reminder.”

He raises an eyebrow. “A big one? Not an okay one? So-So?”

“Sensational.”

They both laugh, the word some sort of inside joke. Joel’s mouth is sandpaper, all the liquid in his body is being sweat down his back.

“I need to go back to dinner,” says Midge. “They’ll be wondering where I am. You can stay here if you’d like?”

“I could use a shower.”

“The downstairs bedroom is ready for you—”

Midge stops speaking as the cabin’s first floor is filled with noise. Abe is complaining, the children chattering, and Rose is telling them all to calm down.

“Oh shit,” says Midge. “They weren’t supposed to come back.” She hops off the bed and pulls Lenny Bruce to his feet.

“I guess we can go say hi.”

Midge steps back into her underwear and fluffs at her hair. “My parents can’t find you in here. Especially my mother!”

“But they know about me.”

“Yes,” says Midge, starting to steer Lenny Bruce. “But not that I’d be spending unchaperoned time with you!”

The stairs creak. “Miriam?” says Rose.

“Coming, Mama! Hide!” she adds in a hiss.

Joel tries to sink deeper into the clothes. Midge gets closer anyway. The door is opened, and Lenny Bruce is shoved bodily inside. He collides with Joel almost immediately.

“What the fuck!” Lenny Bruce says. Joel can’t respond as he is gripped around the shirt and hauled into the light, his daughter’s teddy bear in his hands.

“Joel!” Midge stares at him, horrified.

“Joel?” says Lenny Bruce, letting go. “This is the schmuck?”

He could dine out forever on being called a schmuck by none other than Lenny Bruce. But Joel would have to admit the reason why.

“What! You-you, were you in there the entire time?” Midge is angrier than he’s ever seen her before. She’s almost calm. It’s unnerving. Her eyes start to fill.

“...Midge,” is all Joel can say. This wasn’t mean to happen.

Someone knocks on the door, “Miriam?” says Rose, “is something going on in there.”

Midge brushes tears away. “One moment, Mama.”

She sticks her head out the door and Joel hears her ask for Susie. Midge speaks in a murmur to her manager. Joel is left to share the repressively small space with Lenny Bruce. The man is staring at him in unclear examination, his hand over his mouth. *Don’t touch your mouth*. Joel knows where it just was.

Midge steps back into the room. She walks over to Joel and yanks Teddy from him.

“We are all going to separately go downstairs.” Lenny Bruce reaches over and holds her hand. Midge points at Joel, most of the gesture blocked by yellow fur. “Don’t you fucking ruin this for me.”

Joel nods along as Abe explains there as a fire in Steiner’s kitchen. No more Polynesian Night.

“Nothing like this has happened in all my thirty-five years of coming here!” he says.

Ethan and Esther don’t seem to mind. The resort has moved up the fireworks in compensation, and the children babble excitedly. His parents come over and join Abe in his complaining. Joel tries to join Susie on the settee.

“Hey Susie.”

“Uh uh, no! You don’t get to talk to me, mister.” Susie swings her legs up, blocking his seat. Rose should tell her not to put her feet on the furniture. “You are on thin ice.”

“You don’t understand.”

“I sure do! You’re lucky I don’t have to be arrested for being a creep!” she whispers.

Midge comes downstairs with Lenny Bruce. Everyone in the living room takes in this unexpected arrival. Midge looks less like she’s just had sex, and Joel hopes Lenny Bruce washed his fucking face.

“Hi, I know this is a little unexpected—”

“Which is entirely my fault,” says Lenny Bruce.

“But I’d like to introduce my boyfriend, Lenny.”

“I thought he wasn’t coming for a few more days,” says Abe. “Not that I’m complaining. In fact, I’d love to ask for your advice on an article I’m working on.”

“Abe, let Leonard relax,” says Rose. “He just arrived.”

Leonard? The night gets weirder. Abe and Rose already knew about *him*. Joel could’ve just asked. Bothering Midge’s parents would’ve been less of a mistake than searching her room.

“He looks familiar?” says Shirley. “Were you on television?”

“Are you a comedian?” asks Moishe. “Is he funny Miriam?”

“Yes and yes,” says Lenny Bruce.

“And yes, he’s very funny,” says Midge.

“Almost as funny as her,” and Lenny Bruce sounds like any other enamored boyfriend.

Joel remembered too late that the kids are in the living room. Ethan is staring at Lenny Bruce, but Esther has no problem running up to him and showing off her doll.

“Hi Lenny, this is Barbie!”

He leans over to get on Esther’s level. “I love Barbie!”

Why, cause she looks like a stripper? “Hey Midge, don’t you think you should’ve talked to me before introducing anyone to my kids?” Joel can be angry at this. Ethan and Esther are separate from whatever problem Midge has with him.

“I don’t know, Joel,” says Midge sharply, “I don’t know if I can trust your judgment right now.”

Joel turns and walks out of the cabin.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” asks his mother.

Joel doesn't know what he's doing. If he's going to have to put up with this, he might as well return to the city.

"Hey Joel!"

He turns and finds Lenny Bruce behind him.

"What the fuck do you want?" says Joel.

"Look, I thought we could talk, man to man. I figure you have questions."

"I do." *How fast can you get away from Midge?*

"I'm going to be gracious about... all this. I'll answer whatever you want."

The question is out of Joel's mouth before he can process it. "Did Midge sleep with you so you'd perform as the Gaslight?"

Lenny stares at him like Ethan does, eyebrows raised and mouth wide open. "Wow, you really are King of Schmucks! You know what? You're Midge's problem."

He heads back to the cabin.

"You didn't answer my question!" demands Joel.

Joel does a quick walk around the resort. Lots of other guests are complaining about the lack of Polynesian night. He learns what's left of the kitchen is being used for making sandwiches before the fireworks. He turns towards the cabin, his parents can't think there's something wrong.

Joel finds a terrible little domestic scene. Lenny is sitting on the floor watching the trains with Ethan. In his lap is a pile of dolls and stuffed animals. Esther brings another toy to add to the collection. All the other adults observe this. Midge crosses her arms once she sees him.

"I heard the kitchen is making sandwiches," he says by way of a hello.

"The poor pu pu platter," says his father.

"You know, Moishe, I'd never thought I'd miss hearing you say that," says Abe.

"I like sandwiches," says Ethan.

"They're pretty good," says Lenny. "Oh!" He accepts Esther's next delivery.

“You’re so good with the kids,” says Shirley.

Joel bites his tongue to stop himself from shouting at his mother. She doesn’t know anything about this man! What he really is.

“Thanks,” says Lenny. “I got a little girl of my own at home.”

“How delightful!”

And that is the last straw. Joel starts to laugh bitterly. Lenny Bruce has been turned from a sick comedian and into some guy who plays with children. How normal. How harmless. How *wrong*.

“Joel,” warns Midge.

“Why are we pretending this is okay!” he snaps.

“Okay,” says Midge, “You and me, outside. Now!”

Midge brings him to the start of the trails. She moves fast on those short legs, almost too fast for Joel.

She turns on him, red faced. “What the *fuck* is wrong with you!”

“I don’t want him around my kids!” says Joel, one last attempt to get control of the situation.

“You don’t get to dictate that anymore! Lenny will be around the kids whether you like it or not!”

He sees it in a flash, Joel in front of the judge asking for full custody. To have someone so unsuitable around his children. “He’s a junkie!”

Midge sighs, hand on her forehead. “Lenny has been sober for fourteen months.”

“And you believe him?”

“I was there, Joel. That’s why I was in California for a month. I was there to take pressure off his mother.”

“Why didn’t you tell me that!” Midge was in his arms again, crying after her trip.

“Because it was none of your business! I wasn’t going to betray Lenny’s confidences.”

“So you’ve been dating him all this time?”

“Three months. They don’t want you to make any big changes in your first sober year, so we’ve just been friends.”

“When were you going to tell me?” asks Joel. She’d had all this time to but hadn’t. What had she been waiting for?

“After Polynesian night.”

“Why?”

“Because I didn’t want to ruin it. I knew you were going to take this badly.”

“Midge, I’m in love with you.” He’s already dug his grave, what’s the point if it’s a little deeper.

“I know. But I can’t be with you again.”

“Why not? It was going to be different!”

“I might have believed you if I hadn’t found you in my closet!” Midge is steaming. “Do you know how fucking violating that felt?”

“I wanted to know who sent the flowers...”

“Lenny did, happy?” Midge shakes her head. “You didn’t even have the balls to reveal yourself before we had sex. I thought we were friends.”

“We are,” Joel pleads.

“We aren’t. No friend would ever do that to me. You’re just some asshole I used to be married to. And you know what? You and Lenny might have gotten along before this.” She brushes past him.

“Midge wait!”

She never turns back.

Joel sits at the bottom of a tree and cries into his hands.

“There you are Joel,” his father says upon approach. “Your mother was starting to get worried.

Joel is still sitting under the tree, wondering if the bark will be comfortable to sleep against. “I’m fine, Pop. I just don’t want to be around people right now.”

“Too bad, because you and I need to have a little chat.” Moishe starts to lower himself to the ground.

“You won’t be able to get back up!”

“Eh, I’ll be fine. But listen—”

“I don’t wanna talk.”

“That’s not an option. Rose got the story from Susie, who told Abe, and Abe told me. Now if you want the chain to stop before it gets to your mother, we need to talk.”

His father has him there. “I fucked it up big time,” says Joel.

“Like a real putz. You need to apologize to her, truly.”

“I know. I just thought there was a chance for us to be happy.”

“Son, that ship sailed long ago,” Moishe says, not unkindly.

“So what? I’m supposed to be punished for Penny Pan for the rest of my life?”

“I think that’s part of the problem. If you’d made your peace with the damage you did, I don’t think you’d be peeping on your ex-wife and her boyfriend.”

In the distance, the fireworks start. Bright bursts of red, blue, and green that offer Joel no illumination.

“I wish I never done it,” says Joel. There would be no Button Club. He’d still be in the office. But in that millisecond, he means it.

“So do I, but you did. Now you gotta live with it.” Moishe gets to his feet. “Come on, let’s watch the fireworks.”

With his father’s hand on his shoulder, Joel walks back.

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