

(Honorable mention, NYC Midnight short story contest)

STICKY TOFFEE PUDDING

Four friends, stuck for the remainder of their lives in the monotony of a retirement home, attempt to sweeten up their lives with the biggest heist of their careers.

The dining room is lit just enough for one to reluctantly make out the food on their plates, but dim enough not to wake up an impromptu napper. Residents of the *Woodland Shadows Retirement Park* move throughout their evening meal routines as soft, adult contemporary plays out of crackling, ceiling speakers.

The dessert table in the corner of the dining room, however, seems more harshly covered in shadows today: only one pre-packaged, sticky toffee pudding remains.

Two elderly men and two elderly women aggressively squish over the dessert table, sly, side eyed glances abundant. Bette scratches Ruth's arm as Ruth reaches for the last, prized dessert, and Leonard howls into Peter's face as Peter elbows Leonard in the ribs yet again.

Just as Bette is about to use her walker as a weapon, another resident, Lou, shuffles up to the table and swoops up the pudding. The four, aggressive residents pause their fighting limbs in unison and watch Lou shuffle back to his table, seemingly aloof yet victorious.

Three of the fighting retirees slowly shuffle away from the dessert table, leaving Leonard alone, saddened and defeated. He sighs and closes his eyes as the end of some *Matchbox Twenty* song crackles.

The next morning Leonard is in the retirement home's entertainment room. *The Price is Right* is blaring in the corner. Leonard scans the room. The room is scattered with 15-20 residents throughout the television, board games and reading areas. Leonard's gaze meets Bette's from the reading nook. After a few moments of staring each other down, she mouths the words "fuck you." Leonard shakes his head and looks away.

Leonard scans the room again to redeem himself. He sees old, shuffling Lou move a chess piece while his opponent's back is turned. Leonard exhales a deep sigh and shakes his head.

His gaze slowly makes its way back to the television area, he notices that Peter has taken a seat at a chair facing his couch. He coughs "What do you want, Pete? Didn't get to crush enough of the good ribs that I've got left last night?"

Peter and Leonard laugh, and then Peter says seriously "Leonard, we need to get the team back together. I've got an idea."

Leonard looks at Pete with a suspicious stare, yet he starts to shake with a longing excitement. The men grin at each other and then look over to the reading nook where Bette is now arguing with Ruth over who gets the good rocking chair.

The four meet in Peter's small cottage that afternoon for some privacy. Ruth and Leonard sit in the living room, Bette at the dining table and Peter circling the kitchen.

"Okay, okay Pete. Take a breath," Bette puts her hand on Peter's as he walks passed the table. "You've got a great plan there but we need to talk about something else first. Before I'll work with those sluts over there again, I need to know something." Leonard and Bette quickly glance at each other and then look towards the floor. Leonard gulps. "Which one of you gave me the clap?"

"Now, Bette, that was two years ago!" scoffs Leonard.

"How can I work with either of you again if I can't trust you?!" Bette shoots back as she stands up nearly falling over. Peter catches her.

"Maybe you already had it," pushes back Ruth. Bette nearly kicks the entire table over as she struggles to get up again.

"Bette, slow down there," says Peter as he helps her back into her captain's chair.

"How about I offer you a bit of a larger cut - say 30 percent?" offers Peter a short moment later.

"Now, Pete, that doesn't seem..." starts Leonard. Peter stares him down and Leonard retreats.

"Ruth, you got any problems with Bette taking a bit more off the top?" asks Leonard. Ruth shakes her head, fluffs up her short, blue hairs and rolls her eyes.

"If that's what it takes," responds Ruth.

Leonard looks towards Bette and grabs her hand once again. Bette slowly shakes her head yes and offers a sly smile.

"Looks like the team's back together," smiles Peter.

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Over the next week, the team prepares for the job.

Peter is seen dusting off an old pair of binoculars that were kept in a box with bird watching books.

Bette joins a group of speed walkers as they tackle a dreaded hill near the entrance of the retirement home. She's sweating and winded, yet determined.

Leonard entertains a small group of residents in the television room with a magic show.

Ruth walks up to a floor length mirror in her bedroom wearing a vintage, two-piece suit. She puts on some red lipstick and kisses the mirror.

Later that afternoon, the owner and manager of *Woodland Shadows Retirement Park*, Richard, is struggling to keep up with coinciding deliveries to the dining room. He's balancing a clipboard and box in his arms as the bank delivers cash and picks up a deposit, a local food distributor earnestly awaits a signature, all while dining staff await his direction to begin their shifts. Peter peers through binoculars from outside of the dining room. He's crouching in the bushes and groans as he shifts his wait. His back cracks loudly as he reaches for his notepad to take notes.

As Peter walks into the television room he sees dolled up Ruth chatting and smiling with a security guard. She sends him a quick glance as she slowly caresses the lapel of the guard's jacket. Leonard is just finishing up another magic show, and as his audience end their clapping, he nods at Peter to say hello.

Out of the corner of his eye he sees Lou swipe the television remote control off of the lap of a sleeping resident.

Peter heads out into an outdoor courtyard from the television room. Bette is there stretching after another walking session. They both take a seat on a bench.

Bette tilts her head and rests it on Peter's shoulder. She then gently picks up Peter's hand into hers and they rest together.

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The next day, the dining room staff begin arriving to prep for dinner. *Matchbox Twenty* plays, again, through the crackles of the speakers.

Ruth distracts security with her flirting near the front entrance of the home.

Peter creates a diversion in the dining room by trying to demand to be seated early.

Bette awaits near the loading dock with a metal food cart wearing her speed walking shoes.

As Richard is waiting for the bank driver to arrive to pick up the previous day's deposit, Leonard approaches with the hopes of swiping the building's keys from his pocket through the guise of a magic trick.

"Leonard, Leonard are you okay?" Peter turns from his diversion to see Richard trying to hold up Leonard. Leonard slowly approaches the floor, clenching his chest, his face grimacing in pain.

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After the ambulance leaves, the rest of the crew congregates in Peter's cottage.

Peter glances up at the worried and solemn faces of Bette and Ruth. "Time for 'plan B.'"

"Peter. We need more than a 'plan B' while Leonard is healing," declares Ruth.

"Can we even be thinking about anything besides Leonard in this moment?" asks Bette.

"Ladies, we can't wait any longer. Leonard would want us to follow through. I have just the person to fill in for him, and to help us fix this."

Both ladies look up at Peter and then at each other.

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The next day quickly approaches, and the dining staff is yet again preparing for another dinner service.

The crew members, minus Leonard, take their familiar positions.

Ruth walks away from her flirting with the security guard. She glances towards Peter at the front of the dining room and shows him a peek of the set of keys in her hand.

A few minutes later, and Richard isn't distracted with requests to watch magic, so he's available to greet the bank driver for the previous day's deposit.

As Peter continues distracting staff, Richard rushes into the dining room stressed and angry. "Peter, please, please come back when the dining room opens." He gently, yet firmly, ushers Peter towards the doors out. "Everyone, into the meeting room now!" The staff rush off to meet Richard's puzzling request.

Peter leaves the dining room, and Ruth meets him. "Dear Peter. Let's go for a walk shall we?" Ruth grabs his arm as Bette is seen running past a window, pushing the food cart.

Simultaneously, the bank driver leaves the premises empty handed.

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Two days later Leonard wakes up abruptly in the hospital from a nap. He's alone in his sunshine-lit hospital room. As he turns on his side to go back to sleep, he notices something on his side table.

A single, pre-packaged, sticky toffee pudding proudly sits on top of a handwritten note. A shiny, silver spoon next to it. Leonard grabs the pudding, spoon and note that reads "There's more where this came from, friend. See you when you get home."

Leonard smiles and eagerly opens the pudding. He takes a big bite, closes his eyes and rejoices. "They did it," he whispers as he shoves in another spoonful.

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Three weeks later, and things seem back to normal at the *Woodland Shadows Retirement Park*. Residents are enjoying their evening meals. A newly hired manager is seen happily engaging with staff. The team is back together, celebrating the return of Leonard. They're laughing and enjoying their meals. They see Lou walk away from the dessert station wearing a new suit.

"That looks expensive," whispers Bette to Peter. Peter winks at her.

Another resident stops a dining room staff member to ask about the desserts. The team overhears the response, "I'm sorry, sir, we won't have any more sticky toffee pudding until next month's delivery."

The four friends exchange proud glances and slowly abrupt into laughter.

Back in Peter's cottage, hidden in cases under his bed next to bird watching magazines and books, are packages of sticky toffee pudding, awaiting to be enjoyed in secret.