

Not

A

Good

Time

To

Say

BY ALEXANDER GALATI

Not a Good Time to Say

It was just before eight when their charcoal Hyundai pulled in front of a two-story house. The din of some unrecognisable pop song throbbed from the walls as Cynthia rapidly tapped her phone's screen.

“Has Jen arrived yet?”

“Yeah, she says she's at the fireplace.” She shoved her phone in the pocket of her bootcut jeans and opened the car door. “Thanks, Dad!”

He pulled down his window. “Make sure you don't drink too much —”

Cynthia slammed the door. “Yep, I know!”

“And don't forget to be home by midnight! You got money for the Uber?”

“Yes,” she said as she walked off. “I'll call you when I'm in the Uber!”

“I'll be awake!” He watched her approach the house. She wasn't greeted by anyone. “It's okay,” he murmured to himself.

It's just a party.

He drove off.

Gabe collapsed into his recliner and sighed. He flicked through the nightly programs on the television with a heavy glass of Jack Daniels.

Cynthia would hate whiskey. She probably was having vodka cruises — ‘lolly-water’, as Gabe called it. But then again, Cynthia wasn't like other girls. She wasn't like her friend Jen.

She wasn't.

Gabe put down his glass, rubbed his eyes. He stretched, raising his arms to the ceiling before slumping back into his chair.

Was Cynthia also watching television at the party?

No, she wouldn't be, she would be dancing, drinking. Having fun with her friends. No boys.

Yeah, of course. She was responsible.

Definitely.

Gabe stood up, drink in his hand, television still going. He wandered to their bookcase near the front door. A picture frame sat pride of place on the centre shelf. It was a monochrome family portrait of when Cynthia was younger. Her parents behind her, one hand on each of her shoulders. Her smile was contagious. Gabe caught himself catching nostalgia just as the whiskey hit him. She was a special girl. Still was.

She's responsible, though. Right?

We know she is.

Yeah.

Gabe caressed the pine wood the portrait rested on. Six long years since that photo. His stomach went heavy with a murky mixture of memory and sorrow. The three of them packed this house. Cynthia was ten when they moved in. Gabe took a swig of whiskey. She was also ten when their family went from three to two...

Oh *God*, Gabe, you're becoming that depressed drunk and it's only *one* drink. He blinked away the heat behind his eyes. A glance to the hands on his watch said it was eight-thirty.

Only eight-thirty! This party was going to go on *forever* at this rate. Another sip. The whiskey was *definitely* hitting now. How much did he pour? Would Cynthia pour this much? Gabe put his drink down.

She's responsible.

But she hasn't drunk that much in her life. She knows her limits, yeah?

Yeah?

Yeah.

Gabe knew he was being an 'overprotective parent'. He knew it. He really did. That's why he parked a few houses down from where the party was, and not right out front. He couldn't hear the music, but he could hear the kids in the front yard — probably escaping the noise inside, or making out in the privacy of the night.

There were not a lot of streetlights on the street. Gabe could count a total of three from his stationed position on the road. He had been parked for a couple hours, scrolling through Facebook. If something was to go wrong at the party — which it *won't* — Cynthia would escape and be on the road waiting for the Uber and then Gabe would know she's okay, and would drive home before Cynthia knew he was spying on her.

Hopefully.

No. *Definitely*.

Ten-forty-five. Gabe dismissed his phone and examined the road near the house. Nothing. Only the hum of absolute silence. The shadows under the trees beyond the streetlights seemed to deepen, developing new shapes of fence lines, bushes and other trees. Why was night honestly so scary? Why are parties always at night?

Well, that's how teenagers drink. At night. Ready to pass out and sleep. He glared at the house, focused. A drink would be good right now.

Cynthia's drinking.

But she's responsible. Right?

"I was responsible when I was young," Gabe muttered to himself, peering through the fogging windshield. "Yeah, I was. And Cynthia's okay." He gripped the steering wheel, eyes locked on the two-storey house ahead. For a moment, images flashed in his mind of Cynthia being groped by drunk teenagers.

No, she was okay.

...But how would anyone know?

What if she was making out with some strange boy? What if she was that 'quiet teen girl' fooling her father that she was responsible?

This was her first party, though.

Gabe remembered his first party. He wasn't going to lie to himself: he enjoyed it. A lot. The details weren't clear. He had a few drinks, played King's Cup — oh, yeah! That time when he was dared to kiss his best friend, Drew. He smiled. It was fun. Cynthia's having fun. Right?

She must be. No texts from her all night...

But, why would she want to text her father?

She would reply to him if he texted her. She should.

Gabe unlocked his phone, missing the password three times. *Remember to call me when you're in the Uber.* Sent.

Possibly mere minutes passed before Gabe texted again. *Could you please text me that you read this message?*

And again. *Cynthia? Are you okay?*

A thin layer of sweat coated his screen.

Answer me please!

For fuck's sake. Get a hold of yourself! Surely it was loud in the house. She probably couldn't hear her phone.

Yeah.

He started calling Cynthia — voicemail.

Again — voicemail.

Gabe glanced at his watch. Eleven! He hunched over the steering wheel as he spied on the front lawn. There were fewer voices outside. What if she was passed out and couldn't pick up her phone? She surely would feel the phone vibrating in her jeans. Fiddling with his phone, Gabe forced himself to breathe —

Thud!

Laughter erupted at the front of the house.

“Cynthia?!” Gabe scrambled out of his car, struggling with stiff legs as he jogged to the front of the house. The night air nipped at his skin. A group of wasted teenagers laughed with their red cups in hand, lounging about in the yard. They watched as a guy stood up from an imprint in the lawn, bowing and clapping.

Other teenagers from a window on the second floor celebrated the guy underneath them. “Woo!” they called. “He actually did it!”

“You owe me fifty bucks, Eric!” the guy on the lawn shouted.

Laughter subsided as Gabe approached the sloshed teenager. “Did you just jump from that window?” he spluttered.

The guy looked confused. “What? Who are you?” he asked, sweeping his hair from his eyes.

“Yeah, he did!” a girl sitting a few meters away called. “And he didn’t break *anything*.” She took a swig from her cup. “Wha’ a champion! Woo!” She raised her cup in the air; others cheered with her.

His head went hot. Gabe couldn’t feel the cold air anymore. What were these teens *doing*? This kid could’ve broken his legs!

Oh God.

Where is Cynthia?

Eyes wide, Gabe hurried to the front door.

“Where ya goin’?” the girl hollered. But Gabe had already plunged into the house.

The lights were dim, pop music blared, and an aroma of alcohol hit his nose like a punch. Noise. So much noise. Drunk figures wandered the house. So many people!

“Cynthia?!”

The bass pulsed through him as a syncopated beat. Girls in a corner screamed lyrics, raising their hands to the ceiling.

“Cynthia!”

He staggered into the kitchen, shoes tugging with every step on spilled soft drink and grime. Boys were throwing back shots at the island bench.

“CYNTHIA!”

Gabe shuffled his way through the kitchen and returned to the front stairway. He lifted his wrist in the dim light. Eleven-fifteen. Cynthia surely was ready to go home now.

Right?

He made his way upstairs. The music softened: fewer people were up here. Teenagers queued for the bathroom glared at him “Cynthia! You up here?” He sidled up to a door and knocked. “Cynthia?!”

A man shouted back from inside: “Fuck off!”

“Is Cynthia in there?”

No reply.

Oh God! Is Cynthia in bed with a boy? Gabe hammered the door. “Cynthia! Cynthia, are you in there!” He hastily opened the door — *bang!*

The door slammed shut immediately.

“Man! I said fuck off! Cynthia ain’t in here!”

Gabe stood at the door. Baffled. What was he *doing?*

A teenage girl, from the bathroom line called from the hallway, “Dude! Leave! Your girlfriend probably left to escape you. Psycho.”

Gabe stared at her. He was psycho. He was. He was wandering around a party looking for his daughter. He was an awful father. Six years being alone — it wasn’t easy, but he was botching it. A pulse engulfed his head.

Wait — his pocket was vibrating! Gabe grabbed his phone.

Missed call. From Cynthia! Gabe redialled.

“Dad!”

“Cynthia!” Gabe held his breath. She was okay.

“Dad? Oh my gosh, where are you?”

“Where are you? Are you safe? Please tell me you’re safe!”

He could barely hear her through the phone. “I’m in the Uber! What’re you doing?”

Gabe hesitated. “I — I was looking for —”

The teenagers shouted at him. “Is this guy serious? Leave, ya psycho!”

He raised his hands. “Yes, yes. I’m leaving.”

Gabe opened the front door and found Cynthia standing by the bookshelf, her eyes glued to the monochrome portrait. He felt like he had swallowed a cold stone, pitted and heavy in his gut. The short drive from the party was an eternity. He was a horrible father. What did he do? Hopefully the kids didn’t recognise him, or narc on him, and he didn’t see Jen, she’s the only one who knows what he looks like —

“Hey...” Cynthia said. She was quiet, avoiding his gaze, playing with the last button of her leather jacket.

Gabe closed the door behind him. “Hey. Err — how was the party?”

Cynthia just looked at the floor like she wanted it to swallow her.

He softened, opened his arms. “What happened?”

Her eyes glistened. Let out a helpless sob. Then she fell into his arms.

Gabe tightly pressed her to his chest, heart squeezing, mind racing. Whatever it was, he’d fix it, he will —

Then Cynthia murmured something.

“Sorry?”

She adjusted her chin on his shoulder. “I...I wasn’t at the party, Dad.”

Gabe froze. Clenched his jaw as his mind rewired.

What?

“Nothing happened!” she hurried, still embracing her father.

He pressed his palm to her hair. Although his mind was racing, Gabe said nothing and continued to hold his daughter tight.

What?

A few sobs later, Cynthia collected herself. She wiped her watery eyes and running nose. “Umm,” she began, “...I was at Jen’s house.”

Gabe gawked. “She wasn’t at the party, either?”

Her eyes danced around the room. “No, she was. We just met there and left early to go to her place.”

“What happened?”

“Nothing happened. We just wanted to leave because we — us...”

She looked down, and Gabe began to understand. “I just didn’t want you to be disappointed.” Her lips wobbled as she held back tears.

The stone in his gut lifted as Gabe hugged Cynthia again. “No, no. Why would I be disappointed in you? You could never...” A refreshed warmth flooded his heart, filling his veins. “I love you just the same.”

“I just —” She took in a hitching breath. “I didn’t want, like... Like, you and Dad had gone through so much. And like to have me and Jen be public, I just didn’t want to disappoint you.” She sank her face into Gabe’s shoulder. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

He squeezed her. “Don’t you dare be sorry. I love you, and I know your father would feel the same.” Gabe glanced at the portrait of Drew, himself, and Cynthia.

He knew he would feel the same.

He does.