

THE SECOND 'I' IN LIAISON

by

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29 Plays Later 2016, Challenge 18: Titles.

Usually the title is the last thing I write, so this was an exercise in writing the other way round.
I took the title and improvised this piece.

Thank you to Tom Elkins for the title.

CHARACTERS

MR BARNES
MR HARTNETT
MRS BARNES
JULIA
WAITER

SCENE

BUSY RESTAURANT 'NERO'S'

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SCENE 1

THREE TABLES SET OUT ON STAGE IN A RESTAURANT FULL OF PEOPLE (THE OTHER DINERS ARE SUGGESTED THROUGH ACTING AND NOT LITERALLY ON STAGE)

ENTER BARNES AND WAITER

WAITER: Welcome to Nero's Rissdorawnt. Do you have a rrrreservation, sir?

BARNES: Yes, it's Barnes. I'm afraid it's rather delicate...

WAITER: There seem to be thrrree reservations for Barnes. There must be some kind of mistake. Let me find the Maitre D, and we will cleeeear this up. I apologise -

BARNES: There's no mistake. I have booked three tables.

WAITER: There is a mistake. They are all booked for two. It is a duplication.

BARNES: Yes, I've booked three tables for two.

WAITER: Three tables? For two? Are you triplets? Do your guests not like each other?

BARNES: You could say that. I don't want them to see each other, but I'm triple booked you see?

WAITER: Triple booked, I see.

BARNES: Have any of them arrived yet?

WAITER: There is a young lady waiting, and I believe a gentleman.

BARNES: Excellent. I'll see the gentleman first.

WAITER: As you wish, sir. And the young lady?

BARNES: I'll see her, but after Mr Hartnett. I'm going to be going back and forth a bit, will that be a problem?

WAITER: And you don't want them to meet each other?

BARNES: Right.

WAITER: You don't want them to know you're double booked?

BARNES: Triple booked.

WAITER: Triple booked.

BARNES: They mustn't know. They'll all kill me in different grisly ways. There's going to be a lady arriving. My wife. She above all must not know what's going on.

WAITER: Very well, sir. I shall be the soul of discretion.

BARNES: And if one of them starts to get a bit antsy, if you could perhaps step in-

WAITER: Step in?

BARNES: Step in a bit. Come over and say that I've got a phone call or a fire drill or...

WAITER: Your wife's arrived.

BARNES: No! No, no, don't say that, anything but that. Just say-

WAITER: No sir, I believe your wife is about to come into the rissstaurrrraunt.

BARNES: Argh! Right, I'll take Mr Hartnett then Julia, and I'll get to my wife in ten minutes. Okay?

WAITER: It's unusual, sir.

BARNES: I'll pay you of course.

WAITER: If I might recommend, slip around the Yucca plant to get to the table unobserved.

BARNES: Cheers, you're a diamond.

BARNES SLIPS ACROSS THE STAGE TAKING A TORTUOUS ROUTE TO GET TO THE MAN AT THE TABLE UNOBSERVED. WAITER GOES TO WELCOME MRS BARNES.

HARTNETT: Barnes. There you are. On time as ever.

BARNES: Sorry sir. Very sorry. Murderous traffic.

HARTNETT: You were murdered? That's some traffic. Were no arrests made? Should we not be out now combing hedgerows trying to find your missing corpse?

BARNES: Haha. It does feel like that. I'm not here!

HARTNETT: You're not all here, no. I went ahead and ordered for both of us.

BARNES: Oh.... Perfect.

HARTNETT: You'll have a steak of course.

BARNES: Actually I'm a -

HARTNETT: I don't trust a fellow who doesn't like a good steak, bloody as all hell -

BARNES: [BLENCHES]

HARTNETT: - and dripping, really dripping, like a train carriage has gone over it. Like a chicken has had its revenge on it. A really hungry chicken, on drugs.

BARNES: I'll - So if you've ordered, then great. I'll - I'll get us some drinks.

HARTNETT: I've ordered a bottle of Chateau Neuf, you'll have a glass.

BARNES: Ah. Yes, my glass is rather dirty. I'll just grab the waiter and get another one, won't be a moment -

HARTNETT: Barnes!

BARNES MOVES ACROSS VIA THE YUCCA
TOWARD THE MIDDLE TABLE WHERE JULIA IS
WAITING.

BARNES: Julia! Julia, you look divine!

JULIA: Ah, darling!

BARNES: Have you been here before?

JULIA: Never!

BARNES: What would you like to eat?

JULIA: I've already ordered for both of us.

BARNES: Oh. How did you know what to order?

JULIA: I read the page on Time Out that said you absolutely must try the steak.

BARNES: But I'm a -

JULIA: To die for, evidently.

BARNES: Well, the animal died.

JULIA: Shame about that. Those poor little cows. And the chickens. All in their millions, doing all that dying.

BARNES: Just so humans can eat their flesh.

JULIA: But they're so tasty!

WHILE BARNES AND JULIA TALK, HARTNETT SNEAKS AWAY FROM HIS TABLE VIA A CIRCUITOUS ROUTE TO AVOID MRS BARNES AND GET TO THE WAITER.

HARTNETT: Is she here?

WAITER: Yes, sir, she is seated over there.

HARTNETT: Excellent. Now don't forget what we talked about.

WAITER: I never forget a tip, sir.

HARTNETT: Yes, there's a good fellow. Now, this is a very special lady but because I'm double booked I'm not going to be seated with her quite the whole time.

WAITER: I understand.

HARTNETT: So if you could give me a nod, or come and say the phone's rung or a client wants to send me a bottle of Prosecco or something.

WAITER: As you wish, sir.

HARTNETT: Good man.

WAITER: Good luck, sir.

HARTNETT GOES OVER TO MRS BARNES.

MRS B: Hartnett, at last.

HARTNETT: Mrs White, you are as lovely as ever.

MRS B: This is rather public isn't it?

HARTNETT: I picked it because it's always full. So full that you become invisible. Except to the waiter of course. A very discreet waiter. Attentive fellow. And your husband, Mr White?

MRS B: I've given him the night off. He's probably at home playing those silly games.

HARTNETT: I expect so. Silly fellow.

BARNES AND JULIA

JULIA: I'm glad we've got this time. We never get to talk, except in bed. Sometimes I think you only ever want to talk to me alone. Good to be somewhere public!

BARNES: It's busy isn't it! It's always full here.

JULIA: You can sort of lose yourself in the crowd, though.

BARNES: Speaking of which...

JULIA: Sorry?

BARNES: I've just got to... grab that waiter. This wine's terrible. I'll get a new bottle, shall I?

JULIA: Barnes, sit down.

BARNES: Just a tick, new bottle, be right back.

BARNES RETURNS TO HARTNETT'S TABLE WHICH IS EMPTY, AND STANDS THERE HOLDING THE BOTTLE WONDERING WHAT TO DO. HARTNETT RETURNS.

HARTNETT: What are you doing standing there with that bottle, Barnes?

BARNES: I was just sitting down Mr Hartnett.

HARTNETT: Standing there like a potted plant. Why did you get another bottle? Not getting a drinking problem I hope?

BARNES: No! I - it was complementary actually.

HARTNETT: Complementary.

BARNES: The waiter.

HARTNETT: The waiter was complimentary.

BARNES: Highly complimentary.

HARTNETT: Not like a waiter, not like waiters aren't always complimentary.

BARNES: Oh I see! No, he... gave us this for free. The wine. For being such a good customer.

HARTNETT: Eating disorder is it? Comfort eating, restaurants every night, maxing out your credit card, then getting into debt, declaring yourself bankrupt. I suppose that's why you want to talk to me.

BARNES: There's a matter of business I'd like to discuss, but not that.

HARTNETT: Embezzled someone's discretionary account, no doubt.

BARNES: Never! Not embezzled. You see, it's just....

MRS BARNES TABLE. SHE IS LOOKING AROUND AND WONDERING WHERE HER TABLE GUESTS ARE. SHE GETS UP TO SEE IF SHE CAN FIND THEM, MIMING DODGING THROUGH THE PACKED RESTAURANT, AND FINDS THE TABLE WITH JULIA.

MRS B: Julia! Well what are you doing here?

JULIA: Mrs Barnes! I've got a date actually. Bit nervous actually.

MRS B: Well that's wonderful! I knew you'd scrub up. Anyone special?

JULIA: He's nice. He's just gone to change the wine. Must have been corked. He's a connoisseur. Knows everything.

MRS B: The stock of internet dating sites must have risen. I suppose you upgraded to a paying account. I wouldn't know a thing about it.

JULIA: Well, you're married.

MRS B: Saved on a whole heap of mess. I don't envy you. All that swiping. Is it left, or right, you're supposed to swipe? I wouldn't know which way to swipe.

JULIA: It's quite simple really, you see....

BARNES HAS GONE OVER TO MRS BARNES'S
TABLE, WHERE OF COURSE SHE ISN'T

BARNES: Psssst. Waiter.

WAITER: Yes sir?

BARNES: Have you seen my wife?

WAITER: Should I have seen your wife, sir? Do a lot of
men see your wife?

BARNES: Not as a rule. You haven't seen her?

WAITER: She was here, sir. She now isn't.

BARNES: Ah. Powdering her nose no doubt.

WAITER: No doubt.

MRS BARNES RETURNS TO HER TABLE

MRS B: Barnes! What are doing with that waiter?

BARNES: Darling! So [TO WAITER] and I won't stand for it again. You'd better smarten up your act or we'll take our business elsewhere. [WHISPERS TO WAITER] Just go with it.

WAITER: Indeed sir, you have our gravest apologies for any inconvenience.

BARNES: I should think so. Now. My good lady wife has arrived. Darling, how was your day?

MR HARTNETT'S TABLE

HARTNETT: Pssst, waiter. Waiter!

WAITER: Sir?

HARTNETT: How's Mrs White?

WAITER: Mrs White?

HARTNETT: The.. Mature lady...

WAITER: Ah, the mature lady. She is tearing the label off the bottle as we speak.

HARTNETT: Damn. I'd better get back to her. Look, when Barnes gets back I want you to call me over for something. And be discreet.

WAITER: I am the soul of discretion, sir.

BARNES AND JULIA

JULIA: Where's the wine, Barnes?

BARNES: The what?

JULIA: The wine. You went away to get a new bottle, and you've come back without a new bottle.

BARNES: A new bottle, yes. They're right out of wine I'm afraid. Fresh out.

JULIA: Of wine? Barnes, I can see a whole rack of wines behind the bar over there.

BARNES: Must be 'show wines'. They use the empty bottles as decorations.

JULIA: I'll call the waiter. No wine, how can they have no wine?

BARNES: It's very busy. It's always busy here.

JULIA: You know, I just bumped into, well she bumped into me, an... an acquaintance. I don't know her really. Forgotten her name. Really random!

BARNES: How nice! Where did she go?

JULIA: Back to her table I suppose. She was scowling. Must be her husband I guess.

MRS BARNES AND MR HARTNETT

MRS B: I'm glad you picked such a public place. It'll make it easier for us to talk.

HARTNETT: Less chance of surveillance, bugs and other devices.

MRS B: They record everything these days. CCTV everywhere.

HARTNETT: There's a channel where you can watch ladies rooms around the world. I hear there's such channels.

MRS B: I don't watch a lot of television.

HARTNETT: To business, Mrs White. How do you want me to murder your husband?

BARNES AND JULIA

BARNES: I think you're really super, Julia.

JULIA: That's sweet. I don't really do this internet dating.

BARNES: No, nor do I really. No time. Very busy. Business is busy.

JULIA: Business, does the word mean busyness?

BARNES: I suppose it does. That's clever, I'd never thought of that.

JULIA: [BLUSHES] Oh, Barnes. I've something to tell you. First I'd better just powder my nose though. Then...

BARNES: No problem! Off you go! Off. You. Go!

JULIA EXITS, BARNES RUNS ACROSS THE TORTUOUS RESTAURANT TO HARTNETT'S TABLE, BUT HE ISN'T THERE. HE LOOKS PERPLEXED, THEN SEES THE WINE.

BARNES: The wine! I'll take that to Mrs Barnes. Perfect!

BARNES GRABS THE BOTTLE OF WINE AND TORTUOUSLY RUNS ACROSS TOWARD MRS BARNES'S TABLE AT THE SAME TIME AS HARTNETT IS TAKING AN EQUALLY TORTUOUS ROUTE BACK TO HIS OWN TABLE.

BARNES: Darling! I brought the wine!

MRS B: We've already got wine.

BARNES: No, I went away because it was... but it wasn't... you... was it... I'm sorry, darling. Bit of a cockup. It's that damned waiter. This place has really gone downhill. I'll have to have words.

MRS B: Barnes, it's us that need to have words. Some of them four lettered, if you don't sit down. Barnes, where are you going?

BARNES MAKES OFF AND GOES TO JULIA'S
TABLE

HARTNETT HAS RETURNED TO HIS OWN TABLE

HARNTETT: Where the bloody hell has that idiot gone now?

BARNES AND JULIA

BARNES: Darling, I've brought the wine!

JULIA: I thought they'd run out.

BARNES: They must have found some more. Over there behind the bar, bottles and bottles of it all across the wall.

JULIA: You said that was display wine.

BARNES: Good display isn't it?

JULIA: Empty bottles they put back, to display?

BARNES: No, they're all bottles. I thought they were empty bottles, but it turns out the display bottles are real bottles of wine.

JULIA: Real wine or display wine?

BARNES: We'd better try some and find out!

POURS WINE

JULIA: Cheers.

BARNES: Cheers! Oh, that's, you know what would go really well with this. If I ordered some nice cheese.

JULIA: Cheese? With wine?

BARNES: I know! Cheese, with wine! I'll go and find some cheese, shall I? A nice.... Rockf... Cheddar. Where's that damned waiter? He's never around is he?

JULIA: It's extremely busy tonight.

BARNES: Busy, must be busy. I'll just find out where he is, shall I?

BARNES CREEPS OFF THROUGH THE TORTUOUS
RESTAURANT AGAIN TO HARTNETT'S TABLE

HARNETT: There you are. I thought they'd finally caught up with you.

BARNES: Caught up with me?

HARTNETT: For your embezzlement and tax evasion and misappropriation of funds and whatnot.

BARNES: Mr Hartnett, you joke.

HARTNETT: What's happened to my wine, Barnes? There were two bottles here, and now there's only one bottle, some dismal German drop and my good Beaujolais has disappeared.

BARNES: Oh yes, the waiter must have taken it back. But taken the wrong one.

HARTNETT: Or is this your drinking problem? Eh? Credit card fraud? Gambling debts, fornication? Bit of trouble at home, some vices to take your mind off the human drama?

BARNES: Mr Hartnett, I invited you here to discuss business not to cast aspersions about my character!

HARTNETT: As you wish, Hartnett. I already know what you want to discuss.

BARNES: You do?

HARTNETT: Of course I know. You're as transparent as a piece of glass in a bath of ice.

BARNES: Am I?

HARTNETT: You would like to discuss me murdering your wife.

BARNES: Shhhhhh, not so loud!

HARTNETT: Barnes, this is an extremely busy restaurant. No spooks could make out a word for all the clattering of crockery and inane chatter about interest rates and favourite foods and the new kitchen extension.

BARNES: I suppose, you're right. My wife, you see, it's this. She's...

HARTNETT: I don't want the whole sob story, Barnes. There's always a sob story. How do you want me to murder your wife?

JULIA HAS BECOME RESTLESS AND WANDERED AWAY FROM THE TABLE, WINDING HER WAY THROUGH THE TORTUOUS THRONGS OF THE BUSY RESTAURANT AND HAS FOUND HER WAY TO MRS BARNES'S TABLE.

JULIA: Mrs Barnes! Hello again!

MRS B: Julia. Lost your date?

JULIA: Have you seen him?

MRS B: Seen him? Do I know him?

JULIA: No, silly me. He's about this high, and sort of...

MRS B: Male? Two eyes? Two legs? Ten toes, ten fingers...

JULIA: He was going to find the waiter, but they've both disappeared.

MRS B: I can't make anything out in this crowd. I'm getting tinnitus from all the screeching.

JULIA: It's extremely busy. It's turning me agoraphobic.

MRS B: Agoraphobic?

JULIA: Fear of... crowds, enclosed spaces.

MRS B: Claustrophobic?

JULIA: What did I say?

MRS B: Agoraphobic.

JULIA: Is that not the same.

MRS B: They're both kinds of aggro.

JULIA: Great. Did you say you'd seen the waiter?

MRS B: I think he's cooking all the food.

JULIA: The waiter? Is he not waiting.

MRS B: The cook has quit. I saw him go, in a conflagration of crockery. Upped and went, swearing the whole time in broad Flemish.

JULIA: Oh dear. Who's going to cook the food?

MRS B: The waiter's doing it.

JULIA: And waiting?

MRS B: Apparently not, given he's nowhere to be seen.

JULIA: Perhaps my date is cooking with him.

MRS B: Shall we go and find out?

JULIA: Good idea. I keep getting lost in here. It's so busy!

THEY MEANDER THROUGH THE RESTAURANT
SEARCHING

MRS B: Which way is the kitchen? I found it before?

JULIA: Is it this way?

MRS B: This way, dear. I'm sure of it. Oh dear, it's a dead end.

JULIA: Didn't we come this way already?

MRS B: Stop a second, I think I can see.... Oh no! What is this?

SHE OBSERVES HARTNETT AND BARNES AT A
TABLE

Maybe Hartnett's found him, maybe he's already done it.

JULIA: Done what? Hey look, there's Mack over there.

MRS B: Mack?

JULIA: My date! Off the app.

MRS B: Your date is called Mack?

JULIA: That's what he's registered as on the app.

MRS B: What kind of man is called Mack?

JULIA: Mack's a nice name.

MRS B: It's nice for a gillie or a toasted cheese dish from Italy, but not a man. Mack! Where?

JULIA: Just there! We'll have to go round.

MRS B: What, him?

JULIA: Yeah, him on the left.

MRS B: What the bloody hell?

JULIA: What, do you know him?

MRS B: Know him? He's my rotten bloody husband!

THEY COME TO THE TABLE WHERE BARNES
AND HARTNETT ARE INVOLVED IN TALKING

HARTNETT: They'll never suspect you because you'll have the perfect alibi. Trust me, it's . . .

EVERYONE NOTICES EACH OTHER

Mrs White!?!

MRS B: Hartnett.

BARNES: Mrs White?

MRS B: Barnes.

JULIA: Mack!

BARNES: Julia.

MRS B: What are you doing Barnes?

HARTNETT: Mrs White, do you know this man?

JULIA: That's Mack. My internet date.

HARTNETT: That's Barnes.

JULIA: Mr Barnes? As in...

MRS B: As in my bloody husband!

HARTNETT: You're not Mrs White?

JULIA: She's Mrs Barnes.

MRS B: I'll kill you, Barnes.

BARNES: Darling, it's not what you think! There's been a mix up!

HARTNETT: There's been a mix up all right.

JULIA: Oh Mrs Barnes, I didn't know! I didn't know! He said he was Mack.

BARNES: I've never met this girl!

JULIA: Mack! You said I had lustrous gables.

BARNES: I never!

MRS B: Barnes, take your hands off that hussie. We're leaving.

BARNES: Mrs Barnes!

JULIA: Mrs Barnes!

HARTNETT: Mrs Barnes!

BARNES: Hartnett!

HARTNETT: Mr Barnes!

JULIA: Mack!

HARNETT: Mr and Mrs Barnes, I have some news that might distress you. You see Mrs Barnes, or Mrs White if you prefer, I did not know that Barnes was your husband. I have already administered the poison!

JULIA: Poison!?

HARNETT: And Mr Barnes, not knowing that Mrs White, or Mrs Barnes if you prefer, was your wife, I have already administered the poison to her!

JULIA: They're both poisoned?

HARTNETT: She paid me to murder her husband and he paid me to murder his wife, and I, not knowing they were in fact one and the same people, have ended up

murdering both of them! In a matter of minutes you will both be quite dead! I hope you are happy. You have both got what you wanted.

MRS B: Poisoned!?

BARNES: Poisoned!?

MRS B: I can feel myself weakening.

BARNES: We're dying, darling.

MRS B: Why couldn't we have talked about this?

BARNES: I'm so sorry darling! You're right! You were always right!

MRS B: You and your philandering. Fornicating!

BARNES: I'm sorry! At least we're together now.

MRS B: Together!

MR AND MRS BARNES BOTH DIE, HOLDING
EACH OTHER

JULIA: Wait a second, this doesn't make any sense at all. You didn't think you were meeting Mr White, you knew it was Mr Barnes, so why did you poison Barnes? Or Mrs Barnes?

HARTNETT: Can you think of a better ending?

JULIA: But it doesn't make sense!

HARTNETT: It doesn't have to make sense! Have you no ability to suspend disbelief at all?

JULIA: Of course I have, but anyone in the audience with the slightest intelligence would you know you've conned them. Isn't that right? Audience? Are you satisfied with this? I'd get your money back if I were you. Waiter! Waiter!

WAITER REAPPEARS

WAITER: Madam...

JULIA: Give all these people their money back. And Mr and Mrs Barnes, you can stop pretending to be dead now. We can see you breathing anyway.

HARTNETT: We still get paid, right?

JULIA: I bloody hope so.

HARTNETT: Fancy a drink?

JULIA: Where d'you have in mind?

HARTNETT: I know this little place. A quiet little place...

[HARTNETT AND JULIA GO OFF TOGETHER]

[CURTAIN]