

Wide Angle

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I TOLD DARCY I'D MEET HER HERE. Right here. I can't say where here is. I've made promises. We're going to grab a bite to eat.

You wouldn't know to eat here. It's on the corner, a sign above the door says "Groceries." The "G" and the "S" are wearing off. On the window, just right of the door, Lonnie, the owner, has dabbed the business hours in white-out in very small letters.

I find Darcy and take a seat. The place is a seat-yourself, serve-yourself establishment. Not buffet or anything, but if you want something to drink, you go over to the ice box and get it yourself. Milk, whatever your preference, skim, 1%, 2%, whole—they got it. Coffee, nothing fancy, a good solid roast. Cream and sugar, nobody's guessing how you like your coffee. Deal with it.

There is dust on the textured walls. Raised, four-pronged crowns. The tables are sticky. Our soup comes and Darcy goes to wash up. Her sister, Valerie, who is sitting kitty-corner from me, gets herself up on one knee and dips her spoon into my soup. Plantain coriander. I've got this plastic alligator head in front of me. It's a toy. You open the alligator's mouth and he shows his teeth. I press the teeth down, one at a time. If I'm lucky, I'll be left with just one tooth up. But, you see, one of these teeth is a booby trap. Push it down and the alligator snaps at you. The booby trap tooth changes every time. I push down a back tooth and the mouth goes off. I'm not so lucky.

Valerie puts her spoon to her mouth, blows, sips. Darcy's on her way back to our table.

"You're delicious," Valerie says to me.

It wasn't my idea to have Valerie here. No way. Darcy's idea. The idea light bulb went off in her head, not mine. Too bad that light bulb wasn't one of those yellow ones, designed to keep bugs away. Valerie bugs.

"Soup's that bad?" I say.

"What's wrong with the soup?" Darcy's back.

"Ryan wanted to taste mine," Valerie says. "I said to use your own spoon."

"It's the other way around," I say.

"You're the other way around," Valerie says.

Valerie is instrumental in bringing me down, and I don't want to be down. This is supposed to be an up time in my life. Wife leaves, takes the kid with her, and I'm in the dumps. It's like when my first beach cruiser got ripped off. Dub and I are fifteen and we got cruisers and we're cruising. And my cruiser is red, stretched handlebars, fat seat, white-walled tires, and I take bumps in the road like the princess and the pea. We get to Dub's place and park our cruisers in the garage, and we pull down the garage door. Dub's mom comes home, honks for Dub to open the garage. He hoists the door, raises it aloft, his mom drives in, and Dub never pulls the door down again. It's aloft. Dub's garage is a fat face grin on the front of his house, inviting someone in, a dentist perhaps, to extract that bad tooth in the back of the mouth, that tooth that looks a lot like my red Schwinn beach cruiser.

I go to get on my cruiser, ready for home, and Dub's garage door is still wide-high in the air and my cruiser is gone, extracted. It's like someone has gone and taken a picture of a bike in a garage, but they don't realize that the objects in the foreground, the car, the lawn mower, toolbox, shovels, hoes, and hose, appear larger and overemphasized and the bike is lost in the background. So I crop the foreground, but the bike isn't there. It never was. My dad buys me a new beach cruiser and suggests that I get black, instead of red, so it won't draw attention as easy. This I do, and am happy to be cruising again.

It's Valerie who comes along and shoves a stick into the spokes of my new cruiser, on which I am now cruising, and now I'm not hungry anymore. I push my soup aside and drink water.

I go to the counter, grab Fig Newtons, and pour coffee.

"This is no way to get to know someone," I say. I'm talking to Darcy in a whisper, pointing with my face over to Valerie who's whipped open the weekly, most likely scanning the personals, perhaps going googly-eyed at the story I read in there this morning about a woman in Alabama who delivered a fifteen-pound baby vaginally.

"You're right," Darcy says.

She gets her keys from her purse and tells Valerie that she doesn't know how to say this, but get lost, and tosses her sister the keys.

"Ryan will take me home," Darcy says.

"Sure, sure," Valerie says. She puts the weekly back together, rolls it into a tube, puts it to her eye, and eyes me. The good thing is that she can only see my mouth, or my nose, or one of my eyes, and not all together as a face.

"You can take my soup to go," I say.

"It is very delicious," Valerie says.

"Take his soup," Darcy says.

"I'll have it for lunch tomorrow," Valerie says.

"O.K., yeah, we'll see you," I say.

Valerie pockets the keys and puts the rolled up paper again to her eye. Then she puts her other hand against the side of the roll and walks out of the place saying, "I have a hole in my hand," over and over.

"Valerie's trouble," Darcy says.

"And you're not?" I say.

"I never said that."

"No you didn't," I say, "and I agree with you."

"Agree with me on what?" Darcy says.

"That you're trouble."

"I never said I was trouble," Darcy says.

"Well what then? Are you trouble or not?" I say.

"I'm somewhere in between trouble and not trouble," she says.

It's rhetorical. She's trouble.

"I'm getting more coffee," I say. "You want some?"

"Nope," she says.

At the counter I pour coffee into my mug and look into the fridge for cream and I can't seem to find it. Lonnie's always moving this stuff around.

"Ryan," Darcy says, "is my smile off?"

She smiles.

I extend my arm, close an eye, put up my thumb, and aim it at Darcy's mouth as if I just finished painting it.

"Nope, right on," I say.

"You know, 'smile' has the same letters as 'slime,'" Darcy says.

"Oh yeah, same thing."

"Not the same, just close," Darcy says. She puts her mug to her mouth and finishes off her coffee.

"More coffee now," she says.

"Please."

"Please," she says.

"Just sugar?"

"Yeah, the raw stuff," she says.

Two cups of joe in hand, I go back to our table and decide it's about time to put things out in the open. I've been carrying Holly's picture around with me for the last couple days. It's still in the envelope. I take it from my pocket and hand it over to Darcy. What's this, she says, and I tell her to just open it. She opens it and looks at the picture and I say it's my daughter, Holly. And the feet? Darcy says. My wife. You're married? Darcy says. She left me. Darcy takes her coffee with both hands and takes

a sip, or two, or three, and doesn't say anything in between. Well, this is a fine howdy-do, she says.

"Do you love her?" Darcy says.

"Maybe."

"Do you love me?" she says.

"Lust," I say, "at least."

"Good enough," Darcy says.

The lights are on. Darcy's idea, although I don't mind. On the way over here, to Darcy's place, we argued whether or not lust was good enough. From the way things have turned out here, I'd say good enough indeed. Darcy had the bed turned down, all ready. I tried to keep an eye on my watch, and I'd say it took about fifteen minutes to get from her front door to here. Here. The bed. Both of us are naked. Naked except for our socks. The lights are on. The lights are on and a photo of Darcy's family hangs on the wall. They are nestled in close to each other—Darcy's dad in a dark sports coat, mom in a dark suit, and the three girls, Pilar, Darcy, and Valerie—portrait posed and framed by a frame. It's Valerie who's bigger than life, looking right at me, me at her, and I can't take my eyes off her. Darcy's in the background up there. Down here she's real, corporeal, and temporal, and our bodies are keeping some kind of time with the several clocks ticking around us. And the house, the bed, is silent. Except for that ticking.

Sunday morning paper. The order is religious: comics, calendar, sports (Lakers by four), money, metro, front page. No matter how bad I want to scan the front page, I can't give in, and it's a good thing I don't today, because the big headline this morning is: 5 Dead in Plane Crash. What if it wasn't five? Maybe it was just four, the editor just added one more to please his sense of aesthetics. Like the floral shops who never make a bouquet of roses with an even number of flowers. Try them, they won't do it. They'll talk you into going with one more. Balance, they say. This plane has no balance. A Lear jet, following too close behind a full-on airliner, is knocked to the ground by the airliner's turbulence. Like a wake behind a motor boat. We ain't talking boating here. This is a burger mogul, dead on impact, plus four. Luckily for everyone in the vicinity, for my sanity, no one on the ground was killed. The plane crashed in a triangular-shaped vacant lot.

I heard the crash. I really think I did. It happened a few miles south of Darcy's place. Too close for comfort. If I'm ever to have total comfort and joy in this life, they're going to have to do away with air travel.

"You're fidgety," Darcy says.

"I heard this," I say, holding up the front page Darcy's way. There are fresh picked daisies in a tall, clear glass on the kitchen table. Darcy is all

legs, in a nightshirt, and I'm hoping to sneak a peek at her underwear.

"You heard nothing," she says.

"I'm not one of those people who have interests," I say, "but this interests me." I turn the page and show her the wreckage.

"They obviously picked their spot," she says.

"God picked their spot," I say.

"Let's go out for a bite to eat," Darcy says.

We get cleaned up and Darcy drives us to this omelet joint. I order an omelet named after a bunch of lawyers from this area. Extra tomatoes and a bran muffin that Darcy eats. And milk.

Dub waits outside. In Cook's office I tell him that I heard the crash on Saturday. All his plants have recently been watered and spritzed.

"No shit?" Cook says.

"The windows were rattling," I say.

"That's got to be something," he says.

I hold a hand above my head and crash it down to an open palm. "Wham." I'm improvising.

"Everything else O.K.?" Cook says.

Fine, fine I tell him in so many words. I'm done with Cook for the day and now it's me and Dub, out to our trucks, and when Dub asks if I got under Darcy's skirt I tell him he's filthy.

Yes or no?

"You don't quit?" I say.

"I have an obligation," Dub says.

Darcy is palming a planner and pencils something down in the calendar.

"I think we might be synching up," she says.

Darcy firmly believes that men, like women, have cycles.

"What? What did I do?" I say.

"Mr. Poops," she says.

Darcy's got a thing with mister. Her cat, black, with white face, chest, and paws, and a black moustache like Chaplin, is named Mr. Fizzgig. And now me, whenever my moods swing, whenever my emotions get out of line, I'm Mr. Poops. Darcy's cycle is Aunt Flo-mine, Darcy is attempting to plot it now.

"Where is Mr. Poops?" I say.

"Oh, he's here."

"Just tell me."

"You've been curt all day long," she says.

"I'm going out for a smoke," I say.

"See."

The sun is down. There's still light enough to make out the clouds. The clouds are tire tracks, as if someone burned-out in a muscle car, leaving skid marks in the sky. I promised myself I'd file for divorce. But first I've got to come up with five good reasons. Then I'll divorce Megan. There are two so far:

1. Megan left me.

2. Megan stole Holly.

It was all one action. Maybe I should count those together.

1. Megan left me and stole Holly.

Number two can be irreconcilable differences. No. That's too easy. Besides, I haven't talked to Megan and I don't know where our differences lie.

The front door opens and out comes Darcy's arm, panties dangling from her fingers.

2. Mr. Poops lusts Darcy.

Does this picture have a theme?

That's what it says on the back of this photo of Holly. Holly. Holly. Holly. Holly. Now that I don't see her anymore, the name doesn't fit. This photo is black and white: Holly, in overalls, in her baby seat on a patch of grass.

She's all smiles.

Bordering the grass is a brick walkway, big bricks. Big gray bricks. Of course they're gray in a black-and-white picture, but I think they're gray in real life too. They don't have the same texture as the smaller red bricks you'd expect the smart little pig to build his house with. Then there's the wall. About knee high and a can of pop sitting there.

Product placement.

That's the theme. I'm going to see this photograph in a magazine. An advertisement for pop. One of those advertisements where the picture isn't about the product at all, it's about bodies, one on top of the other. But it's not really about bodies because one of them is wearing little white briefs that have someone's name on them. And this picture isn't about Holly, dolled up in red and white, just like the pop can; it's about the pop.

The camera is tight in Holly's face, super close-up, so the picture seems to be about Holly. But the wide-angle lens allows for the grass, the walkway, the wall, and the can of pop. The can of pop with the print of the bottom lip, left behind in lipstick.

I've strung up string. On my wall. This is where I'm hanging Holly's pictures, "Holly in the Desert" and "Does This Picture Have a Theme?" held to the string by clothespins. Holly's wham-bam blonde hair tousled by wind.

I should make one thing clear. There are certain smells I can't get out of my head: the ocean, rubbing alcohol, a baby, bloody and warm, fresh from birth, cilantro, mustard, sex (hers and mine), and Christmas.

Christmas eve. I'm a kid and my family is sitting around the Christmas tree: Me, Reed, Michael, Mom (on Dad's lap), and Dad. My brothers and I hold mugs of hot chocolate. Each mug has our name on it. Mom was feeling crafty and sent away for kits. I think Mom and Dad are drinking coffee and it's got to be spiked with a little whiskey or something. Dad doesn't have to drive anywhere tonight, like it matters. And I don't see panty lines underneath Mom's nightgown.

"Let me tell you something, boys," Dad says. "Marry a happy woman. A woman who is happy just to wake up in the morning."

"O.K.," we say.

"Will you do that for me?" Dad says.