

Lucky Critters

Marty and I were crossing against the light at the intersection of Third and Front when for reasons I will never know, Marty, who'd been my Big Naked Guy for just over two years, stopped dead in front of an oncoming maroon Bonneville. The car ripped him right from my hand, and the Big Naked Guy became the Squashed Flat Guy. I shouldn't make fun, but that was my love lying there and it was easier to think of him flat than the way he really was -- all over the asphalt, kind of . . . messy.

With only twenty years of my life lived and my big guy already gone, my days were a wreck. My most pressing need: if I wanted to keep our love nest, I had to get myself some employment and rent money. I worked for a while at Gidget's Floral Design, but Gidget said my arrangements "lacked grace." I did a stint at Miss Lulu's fabric store on Main Street, but the nappy feel of the felt made my skin crawl, so I tried Johnson's Discount Furniture instead. The guys at the store gave me a green apron and let me wait on customers, but after two weeks of watching black folks return cheap chairs with arms now broken and tables with legs fallen off only to be told that a gazillion payments were still considered due, I folded the apron and handed it

back to Mr. Johnson, who did not understand my reasons for leaving.

As a result, I ended up at Lucky Critters, a pool hall and grill that's been in downtown Florence ever since my old man was twelve years old, sitting at its counter, smoking illegal cigarettes. Lucky's is the type of place that has to tell you - sign taped to the front door - "No alcoholic beverages brought into or off of premise." The alcohol is kept in the back by the pool tables where Marty and I used to shoot Eight Ball - beer in ice chests, Rocking Chair bourbon under the bar if you know to ask for it.

I run the counter up front. Our specialty, served only at breakfast, is fried bologna biscuits and for lunch it's the triple-decker burger - three patties mashed with a spatula on the grill then stacked high on white bread so soft your fingertips leave dents. The trade sits at the counter or picks up to-go boxes (with chips) and pays the owner, Miss Lillie, at the cash register. We get along, Lucky's and Miss Lillie and me, because they expect nothing of me, and I am happy to accommodate them in return.

So I was none too glad when the driver of the maroon Bonneville took to coming into the place, sitting at the counter and looking at me sideways out of the corner of his

eye. He was that kind of sideways person - sliding onto the stool, staring at the menu board while he ordered, eating his burger with one hand cupped around his plate, hiding the tip under his napkin. All of this sidewaysness was unexpected, given the head-first way he'd plowed over my Big Naked Guy, but I didn't want to overstep. Lucky's might've been his place from way back or he could've been there just because of me, or he might not even know who I was. So I asked.

"You here because of me?" I ripped his ticket from the pad but didn't give it to him, just held it there where he could see that it was ready - tuna salad, iced tea, bag of chips. Four dollars and eighty-five cents, plus tax.

His eyes stayed low while he scratched a thin upper lip.

I figured his silence answered part of my question: he knew I was the girlfriend holding onto the big guy's hand when the Bonneville slammed into him. I wasn't wailing, I wasn't splattered with blood, I wasn't hugging a bony mess of a man, but I was, all the same, the girlfriend. Or I had been. I tapped the ticket against the counter, letting him know I wasn't giving it up until I got the rest of what I wanted.

Something of what I was feeling must've communicated itself to Miss Lillie because she looked up from her tallying of receipts. The whirring of the adding machine stilled until she satisfied herself that no beer bottles were going to be broken against noggins, then she resumed with her flying fingers routine.

All the while, Mr. Pontiac Bonneville stared at his plate, examined the half-eaten crust of his sandwich, the same dazed look on his face as when he'd circled the wreck site. Circled and circled.

"Miss Kelly," he finally said. "Your friend, Mr. Martin Howell, lost this." He pushed back from the counter so he could rummage in his pants pocket and lifted a gold chain into the air. He laid its dazzling length onto the counter.

The cue ball hit its mark at one of the pool tables. A guy said, "Shit. Give me another one." A beer hissed open. It was twelve-thirty, lunchtime.

I stuck my fingertip into the arc of the necklace and swirled the chain on the countertop. I'd scraped everything off the bedroom dresser looking for it, I'd picked through the toolbox and thrown every little hinge and washer across the room, I'd asked Marty's mom and dad at the funeral - pleaded, really - but no necklace.

I pried open Mr. Bonneville's hand, let the chain curl into his palm, weighted there against his skin by the golden "Z", then closed his fingers into a fist. "Come with me," I said and pulled my purse from underneath the counter. "Half an hour," I called to Lillie's lifted eyebrows. I clamped my hand on the man's forearm, led him out the door with his fist balled around my guy's Z.

We walked down Third Street, the man's not-quite-short stride matching my not-quite-tall one, and I held onto his arm.

We walked up the hill to the TimesDaily offices, their boxy trucks gaping empty of papers, and I held onto his arm.

We walked past the Community Ed Center and into Cherokee Heights and still I held onto his arm.

Once, just past the newspaper parking lot, I glanced over to see if the man's face betrayed calculation, to see if I was dragging along someone composing a get-away line, but he looked back at me as full frontal as he'd been since the grill of his car knocked and spun my guy while I tried to hold on, and he said, his eyes wider than necessary, "I owe you."

I wanted to re-assure him of my intentions, but we had arrived at the love nest so I unlocked the door then held

it open for him to enter. He stepped over the threshold only to turn and stick out his skinny forearm, as though to re-offer it for grabbing, his fist still closed against the necklace. When I hesitated, he backed into the living room.

The pulled curtains filtered the air to dusk, so I started with them.

I showed him the hem I'd made in the curtain's fabric, pricked with blood because I didn't know how to sew and Miss Lulu's cotton wiggled under my ignorant fingers.

I showed him the flower shop roses I'd saved from our second anniversary, clamped with a clothespin and drying upside down in the closet, their blood red running to their heads.

I showed him the Johnson dinette table and chairs - four chairs, one with a hopeful booster seat - that we'd bought on time when things seemed so happy.

The man had seen the most important thing - the Z that went with my A - and he needed the rest, to see it all, what it had been between us. It wasn't his fault. My Marty had stopped in front of his car, cocked his head and listened. To what? The yet-to-arrive screeching of brakes? The sharp intake of breath that was galloping into our future? The echo of his own voice calling my name - "Lujean!" - as he spun and let go of my fingers? I don't

know, but not one bit of it had the curving-over, unhappy man standing in my bedroom caused.

I pulled open the dresser drawer, lifted the golden "A" from its cotton. The chain's length dangled in the unused air. I unwrapped the man's fist and poured the second chain inside, it's A hitting the angles of the Z, the turns of the one letter finding the other's niche, the beginning lining itself up with what might have been.

Then we sat at the dinette and I showed him pictures of Marty and me, waving, smiling at the camera. I went through the whole album, told him every little thing I could remember about where we were, what we were doing, who we had been back then. As I flipped the pages, the man's angular body relaxed and he asked me questions. Vague ones at first -- What age were we then? Why had I dyed my hair? Then he got bolder, pointed to Marty's ball cap - "Was he a Braves fan?" he asked.

By the time he left, in addition to the necklaces, I'd also given the man Marty's Braves pennant and his steel-toed shoes and his twelve-foot ladder and his dop kit and his framed poster of Lynnard Skynnard singing in concert last summer when we'd gone down at the last minute to the amphitheatre and paid half-price at intermission and listened to the words this time because the members of the

band who were left were trying so hard to keep it going with the others dead and gone - we'd leaned against each other, listening, as day turned to dusk turned to night.

After that, the man stopped coming into Lucky's, not, I don't think, because I scared him away but because it was just done.

And while I'm okay with that and everything else, from now on, when I walk to and from Lucky Critters, I won't be crossing the intersection at Third and Front, either with or against that blaring red light.

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