

Suddenly Salad

Having recently turned sixteen years old, Anthony went job hunting. High school was out for the summer, he could use spending money, and he needed an excuse to get out of the apartment and away from his dad.

The job search sucked. Layoffs from the plant had flooded town with people out of work and desperate for a paycheck, even for the minimum-wage jobs Anthony and other kids were hoping to land. After nine dispiriting rejections, he finally signed on as a stock boy at Head's U-Pack-It Supermarket, a tiny eight-aisle grocery that catered to shoppers fooled into believing that do-it-yourself bagging came with lower prices.

Anthony soon realized why Head's had a job opening when no one else did: Dallas Head, current owner and son of the store's dead founder, was a paranoid crackpot.

According to one rumor, Dallas had been abandoned at the altar by a black-hearted woman from North Philly. Another rumor countered he'd fabricated the tale to garner sympathy and that no woman had ever agreed to spend an evening with him, let alone a lifetime.

Each day Dallas sat hunched over his ledgers from behind smoked glass in the tiny elevated office at the store's center, vigilant for any employees exchanging words for more than ten seconds, the maximum duration needed for sharing "business-critical" information. Anything more was rebellion.

Anthony obeyed, spending his days slicing open boxes and slapping products with a price sticker gun. Dallas rejected barcode scanning technology. He claimed computers were collecting shoppers' information and storing it in a mountain in West Virginia "guarded by G-Men in jackboots."

Anthony would've been fine working in isolation, but then a new employee arrived. Rebecca was about his age, hired to work the cash register. She had thick chestnut hair worn bunched behind her head (company policy), creamy-perfect skin, ragged fingernails and soulful eyes that darted away too quickly.

Once, Anthony carried a case of canned pineapple past the unisex employee restroom when he heard muffled sobbing. He glanced around and shoved the pineapple behind a flat of paper towels, grabbed the sticker gun and started slapping prices, waiting. Rebecca emerged a few minutes later, her eyes red. He quickly looked away, uncomfortable and curious at once.

Over the weeks of summer, they slowly built a friendship on soft-tipped teasing, seeking each other out during breaks to compare stories of his high school versus hers, and competing to recall their most embarrassing moments. They even dared to challenge the rule against on-the-job chatter. That is until Dallas caught them.

They'd been whispering in the "rust room," the small work area behind the meat department nicknamed for the bloodstains on the lower half of the walls.

"What do you two think you're cookin' up?" Dallas squinted and snuffed, his Magnum P.I. mustache quivering, his feet splayed melodramatically. He wore a white short-sleeved shirt and mustard-colored IGA commemorative necktie. A platoon of Bic pens saluted from his pocket.

Anthony jumped. "Nothing, sir."

"You think I'm stupid?" Dallas's shoulders were permanently locked in a shrug, as if all questions put to him were already answered with *beats me*. "You think I don't know how you pull it off?"

"I don't know what you mean, sir." Anthony replied.

Dallas feigned disbelief. "You mark down a couple of T-bones to a nickel and she lets 'em sail past that register so you can have a nice supper – on me! – followed by *whatever you do after that*." He shot Rebecca a glare like a magistrate in Old Salem Town. Her face went red.

Then suddenly, as if his brain struck a pothole, Dallas appeared to forget his accusation. He swept his gaze across the ceiling tiles. Anthony sought out Rebecca's eyes and quickly mouthed *Crazy*.

But the respite didn't last. Dallas leaned forward, his face inches from Anthony's. "I got news for you, Mr. Big Thinker. According to the Pennsylvania Consolidated Statutes of November 25, 1970, no labor union can be formed in a retail grocery establishment without a minimum of eighteen employee signers. Good luck finding ten. How's that *sit*?" He wore glasses that automatically darkened in bright light. Under the store fluorescents, his eyes were impossible to track.

Anthony theatrically considered the question. "I'm not interested in starting a union, sir. I just need money for a new receiver because my dad knocked a Heine into my old one."

Rebecca covered her mouth with her hand. Dallas didn't notice. He walked away, satisfied for the moment, making a *chick* sound with his tongue. Anthony raised an eyebrow at Rebecca and mouthed *He's crazy*. He expected more ravings from the rubber room, but the store manager stepped up into his watchtower and locked the door against a conniving world.

Chastened by their close call, Anthony and Rebecca resolved to color within the lines from that day forward.

They devised a twist on normal conversation. It would happen in snippets of just a few seconds. He'd restock Froot Loops and she'd whisper to him as she passed, checking the price of

Rice-A-Roni. He'd help an oldster tote groceries and brush her elbow walking by. The shift became one elongated conversation, with ten or twenty minutes passing between each exchange:

He: "Why'd your parents send you to Catholic school?"

She: "My mom thinks Catholic boys are less depraved than the rest of you."

He: "Ha! She better check out where your depraved boss's eyes travel behind those goofy glasses."

She: "Oh, I can feel it, like radiation poisoning."

And so it went. When the topic would run its course, they would challenge each other with questions, back-and-forth, taking the in-between time to think of an answer and a new question. Their work shifts flew by.

He: "Where would you rather spend the night alone, desert or jungle?"

She: "I'll take scorpions over being soaked all the time. The worst word in the English language is *moist*. Who appreciates you more, your mom or dad?"

He: "My mom." His eyes glanced from hers. He avoided telling people his parents were divorced, and that his mom had said *Enough!* and walked out on her own terms, as Anthony never could, wasn't allowed to, not until he'd turned eighteen. He cleared his throat. "Who's on your case the most, your mom or dad?"

She: "Are you kidding? Mommie Dearest. My step-dad always gets home late. If you could live your life in another century but you knew you wouldn't catch one of their diseases..."

After their shifts, they would sit together on a concrete bench in front of the store drinking Vernors ginger ale and talking, no longer in time-lapse, sometimes for ten minutes before the station wagon would pull up, her mother's smile like a mannequin's. On his bike ride home,

Anthony would replay everything she'd said. In his bed at night, he would imagine telling her things he'd never told anyone.

The next day they would begin again.

She: "Would you rather be a city pigeon or a country mouse?"

He: "I'd do anything to fly above it all. You?"

She: "I'd do anything to get away from here, so I'll take the country. If you had to watch one movie every day for a year, what would it be?"

He: "Hey, *I'm* here, so thanks for nothing! *Dr. Strangelove*; mutually assured destruction is hilarious. What one book would you want to be stranded on a deserted island with?"

She: "I wasn't talking about getting away from *you*. The dictionary. I'd memorize it so when I'm rescued everyone'll think I'm smart. What's the meanest thing someone ever said to you?"

He: "I have to leave. What's the nicest thing someone ever said to you?"

When she passed him twenty minutes later, she hesitated a step and looked at him straight. "It was when you said, sit with me 'til your mom picks you up."

His heart soared.

One afternoon, they stood alone in the stock room. She kissed him on the lips and said it was her first. "Mine too," he said, a little dazed. It wasn't, but he wanted this in common with her, something beyond their minimum-wage jobs in a dying grocery store run by a man who thought the Procter & Gamble logo was a satanic symbol.

After work, they sat together on their bench talking, no longer in time-lapse. He confessed to feeling lost, as if in a foreign country. He didn't fit in at school; it'd been less than a year since his father's latest job change had brought them to Pennsylvania. She didn't fit either.

“Mom sees me as a paper doll.” She frowned. “I have to go by *Rebecca*, never *Becky*, and wear the same stiff bleached blouses and itchy skirts like every other girl at St. Mary’s Academy because it’s just the way she wants me to be, and *nothing more*.” She looked down. He began to understand her hidden tears.

Then she said, “If I had to pick between home, school and here, I’d pick here.” She scraped her shoe on the pavement. “Because you’re here.”

“Me too. Because you’re here.” And he meant it.

Was that love? He didn’t know. He only knew he wanted to be with her more than anyone else. Maybe that was enough to call it love. But he never had a chance to find out.

The following day his father announced they were leaving Pennsylvania in a hurry and moving to Wisconsin for a new job. “In the construction business,” he’d proclaimed, “you gotta follow the work.” Anthony had wanted to say *And if you’d show up sober, you could keep the same construction job longer and not have to move all the time*, but he hadn’t said anything.

Anthony called Dallas to deliver the news. Later, when Anthony dropped by the store to collect his last paycheck, the store manager sat hunched in his guard tower, pouting like a jilted lover. But Rebecca wasn’t on duty. So he went to her house.

She opened the front door and blinked to see him standing there. She wore a peach short-sleeved polo shirt and pleated culottes, a startling contrast to her dull work smock. Also unexpected, her hair was down along her cheeks and feathered on her shoulders. It was nice.

He followed her through the house and into the backyard as her mother watched. They sat across from each other at a picnic table in the shade of a sycamore tree. Then he told her the news.

She gasped and covered her eyes.

"This wasn't my idea," he pleaded, trying to lean closer, she pulling back, hiding behind her hands. "This is my dad. He makes lots of mistakes and I don't control him. No one does." His words were weak, his speech fumbling.

Her shoulders rose and fell with sobbing. Beyond, Rebecca's mother parted a curtain at the kitchen window and scowled.

In the end, the only thing he could do was walk away.

For the next couple of years, he couldn't stop reliving it. He'd been powerless. Worthless. *Harmful*. The look on her face, twisting and collapsing as if her soul was shrinking before his eyes, looking just like his father's face years earlier when the truth had sunk in: she would never come back. Perhaps Anthony's face had looked the same.

Could they be compared, the death of a marriage and the death of... whatever they had? *Why not*, he thought bitterly. What he felt for Rebecca was greater than what little remained between his parents.

Relationships with people weren't much different from relationships with places – cities and streets, apartments and even rooms. You occupy places, and people occupy places inside *you*, sometimes too deeply if you let things go that far. You had to be careful, to protect yourself, because no matter what, time passes, circumstances change and everyone moves on. You move on, or they move on.

When Anthony turned seventeen, he began counting down the months, then the weeks, and finally the days. When he turned eighteen, he picked up the house phone and dialed long distance, incurring charges, you bet. If his father didn't like it, he could just *deal with it*.

Rebecca's mother answered. Anthony identified himself and added, "I'm out on my own now," a little lie.

"She doesn't live here anymore," she replied, and after his follow-up question, "No, I won't tell you that. But I'm willing to give her your phone number, and if she chooses to call you back, well, that's her decision, I suppose."

He recited his cell phone number and then started over. She cut him off. "I got it."

The call ended more abruptly than Anthony had wanted. Any connection – even with her hostile and protective mother – was better than none.

He returned to the home phone to its cradle, found his cell phone on the front hall table where he'd left it next to the car keys, and switched the ringer volume to max.

She never called. Rather, a day later, a chirp sounded from the phone in his front pants pocket, a text message. He slid open his phone and glanced nervously. A Pennsylvania area code, same as his, because he'd held onto his number from when they'd lived back east.

She: "Where are you?"

He was in a supermarket a thousand miles to the west of her, standing in a checkout line with a basket filled from a shopping list his father had thrust out before bolting.

"Beg your pardon, beg your pardon," he said as he backed out of the checkout lane, other shoppers scooting their carts sideways and rolling back to make room. "Thank you so much." He pushed his cart free and into the pet food and paper products aisle. He plopped down, his back against an eight-pack of paper towels, and slid open his cell phone, scrambling to think of a text message that wouldn't make him sound like a crazy person.

He typed, thumbs flying, "If you were stranded on a deserted island..."