

The Bear vs. His Lunch

It's August, and the heat has reached its peak. We loaf around the restaurant like sick lions, desperate to conserve ourselves. Sally is balancing on a stool, taking a wet cloth to the corners of the ceiling.

"When in the hell was the last time somebody cleaned these?"

"Danny?" Mal asks me. A heavy, lone bead of sweat drips from her nose politely onto the kitchen floor.

"Smoking ban...years ago... those stains will never come off though," I tell them.

"Disgusting," Sally says, making a face. Sally makes many faces, with her hair pulled back tight, her foundation on, her smokes- apron- front- pocket. "She's a real hot shit, ain't she?" Bud Jeffries leans over and whispers to me. In the winter, he plows the parking lot free of charge. "With the biggest plow in town comes big responsibility," he never fails to mention.

Outback, where I work, is the dish machine and the three-bay sink. When the wind blows, the smell of grease traps and congealed waste comes sailing through the screen door.

Ever since Mal's gastrectomy, the doctor told her she needs to *delegate more* — *take a second* — *alleviate stress*. "Doctor Lingo Horsecrap," she rebukes. But on slow days, I'll cook, and Mal tends to the books. In a year, she said, that if I get any good, she'd consider moving me there full time.

I live with Mal and her husband in a damp old brown house about a half-mile away from the restaurant. Originally, the restaurant was my father's, but he's currently in jail, doing time for his fifth— and if we're lucky— final DUI. After the arraignment, my mother filed for divorce, sold the restaurant to Mal, and relocated to Connecticut with her new man, Kenny. Eva got

straight A's and ran off to college as fast as she could. Nobody knows where Frankie is—the last I had heard, he and his girlfriend got nabbed shooting up in a Burger King bathroom.

Mal put me up in the porch room in the back of the house. It's filthy, crumbs everywhere, ashtrays filled with cigarettes that burnt out decades ago everywhere, toys of kids long grown up everywhere, but don't get me wrong—I'm grateful. It's still better than living with Kenny.

At home, Mal has the same routine every day. First, she'll call her son, Bill. Bill is a thirty-something momma's boy built like a bulldozer. At the end of every call, she'll ask him, "When am I gonna get a grandbaby!" and kiss the receiver until he hangs up. After that's done, she'll plop down at the computer and play games until it's time to make dinner. Her husband, Ron, is a little man with a beleaguered face and thick tortoiseshell glasses. He works for the cable company. On his days off, he'll bring gizmos in from his truck, sprawl them out on the kitchen table, take off his shirt, and tinker with them all day.

Like any other tenant, I'm free to come and go, responsible for my food and deodorant and toothpaste, things like that. Occasionally, Mal will make dinner for the three of us. Tonight, it's sweet sausage and batatas. "The key is frying the batata," she shows me, oil snapping on the stove, "and a good spicy mayo for dipping." It's delicious, but Ron complains and storms off to his room. Mal gives me another helping and tells me not to worry about him, "there's a chicken pot pie in the freezer for when his temper tantrum is over."

A few times a month, Mal will open the slider door and hand me letters from my father. Letters addressed *Frank Morris, Sr. Address 627 Randall Rd. Ludlow, MA Hampden County Jail and House of Correction*. Mal and Sally took me to see him once. I haven't visited since. He'd grown a giant beard, which made him look ancient and unrecognizable: like he should be prospecting for gold or sleeping atop a mountain somewhere. He was sweet—on his best

behavior— but all I could focus on was his wristband. On there was his mugshot— an old one, very old— maybe from his first or second stint in jail? I gave it several not-so-inconspicuous glances. He was only a kid then, not much older than me. He looked lost. Scared. Out of wishes. Out of angels.

How odd it was to blink and see my father sitting in front of me, forty years later, looking so much more alien. Fitted in a green jumpsuit too big for him, he seemed small and leather-bound, but otherwise at-ease in this environment. He asked me how Eva was doing and whether I had heard from Frankie, and what I thought of the Sox bullpen. I told him mom and Kenny found a place. He said he saw him there in the courtroom. At some point, a muscly guy with a shaved head and a large vein running like a river across it knocked on the glass. “Louis,” my dad said, “this is my youngest.” Louis put a hand on my dad’s shoulder and looked at us lovingly. “Chacho, your old man is a real fuckin’ OG!”

Tuesday is dead. I change the sinks, fill them with soapy water, watch them get cold, take apart the dishwasher, clean it, put new rolls of toilet paper and paper towels in the bathroom, and scrub the shelves in the fridge. “This restaurant is cursed,” Mal says, sitting at her desk, her skin hanging like a coat from her collarbone. We make ourselves omelets just to give us something to do. Around one, Ritchie Duplot stalks in. He owns a body shop and a junkyard a few miles down the road. He sits down at the bar, his enormous, malignant stomach following behind him like a slave.

I roll some silverware.

“Mal, how the hell are ye?”

"Hanging in there, Ritchie," Mal replies, poking her head through the serving window, "yourself?"

"Oh, just fine— thanks, honey," Ritchie says, patting Sally on the hand as she sets his coffee down. He orders the special: perogies with kraut and fried onions, a side of ketchup and French fries, coffee, and a large unsweetened iced tea. Ritchie's buddy, Lugnut, shows up shortly after. I watch them ogle Sally. With her back turned, Lugnut licks his teeth and mutters under his breath "nice ass" to Ritchie. They break out in laughter.

"Don't you two have work to do," Sally asks, running them their bill and placing it in between them.

"Yeah, we gotta get Lugnut here back to the nuthouse," Ritchie says, taking the bill.

"Twenty percent gratuity! Why don't you let me take you out sometime, and we'll call it even?"

"Why don't you fix my fan belt like I asked you to, and I'll think about it."

The two of them get up to leave chuckling, and on the way out, Ritchie whacks me on the arm and says, "Hey kid." I feel the heat from the booze and amphetamines cooking in his mouth. He leaves, and so does the scent of sweat and scorched iron.

After work, Mal drops me off at the bus station. She offers to drive me the whole way, but I refuse. Kenny and my mom live in a bright, tidy townhome among hundreds of townhomes that sit neatly on a hillside opposite Connecticut dairy farms. "In here, Danny!" My mom is in the kitchen, bringing a crockpot to a boil. I follow the steam travel up the cabinets and over to the living room where Kenny is sitting on the couch watching television. Rambo, our old golden, is lying on his back between Kenny's legs. "Didn't think you were gonna show up there for a

second," he smiles and says to me, coming into the kitchen to put my mom into a full nelson, peppering her with kisses. She is ecstatic. Dinner is ready.

Kenny's favorite pastime is revisiting his divorce. I can't recall a time when he's referred to his ex-wife by name. "The bitch" is his favorite. Or, when he's had a few, "Big Whore." He has a daughter who doesn't talk to him and a son who splits time with him and Big Whore. We have stew for dinner, and Kenny tells us he's going to take Aaron's Xbox away for good this time. Big Whore lets Aaron get away with everything. My mother huffs and puffs along with him. When silence inevitably comes over us at the dinner table, I do this thing I quite enjoy, where I stare into my mother's eyes for minutes on end. It creeps her out and pisses off Kenny, but I figure if I stare hard enough, I just might find her in there somewhere. "Cut the shit Danny," Kenny barks.

After dinner, Kenny and my mom give me a ride to the bus station. They're going line dancing. In the car, she puts in the instructional cassette they mailed to her, and the sound of a fiddle stabs us in the ears. "Aaron is going to stay with us for a little while Danny," she tells me. Through the speakers, Lula Mae, the "Belle of the Ball" directs us to start with our right foot—*Fan-Out. In. Out. In.* "You guys can hang out when you visit. Have some family structure in your lives," Kenny adds, a glint of streetlight passing over this thinning hair. "Sounds great," I say, feigning enthusiasm. It's enough to satisfy them. I fix my gaze out the window, and it's quiet for the rest of the car ride, as Lula calls out *Right. Left. Heel. Toe. Front. Side. Back. Side.*

It's late, and everyone is asleep by the time I get back. Inside it's dark and formless, the only sound the cricket's song from the woods. I'm buzzing with exhaustion. I creep onto the porch, thankful for what evening's blackness conceals. In it, I can be anywhere. And yet, as I fall

onto the pull-out sofa, with the staleness and the humidity in the room choking me, I know this is not entirely true. In the blackness, I can be nowhere.

When I finally fall asleep, I dream of my mother. She's raking leaves in our front yard. It's deep into Fall. Rambo is nosediving from pile to pile. I'm watching her from my window. I pass the time in my room, throwing bunched up socks at the wall. It's game seven of the World Series, and I'm pitching a no-hitter. She's complaining to herself that nobody helps. Her face is flush, a few strands of her strawberry brown hair stick to her forehead. She keeps raking. She ties her hair back and gives a stick to Rambo. I feel bad about leaving her all alone out there, but I never do anything about it.

Wednesday is crazy. Sally jogs around with a fleet of plates clinking on her arm. Ritchie comes in at a quarter past noon, half in the bag. There's oil all over his jeans, sopping wet and dripping all over the place, and one of his suspenders busted, pendulating in the wind. He orders and then disappears into the bathroom. When he finally returns, he's not happy his food isn't ready.

"Will ya hurry the fuck up!" he says, pouring his body over the counter. On her way back from the three-top in the corner, Sally rubs his back, trying to coax him to his stool.

"You stink, Ritchie. I tell you what, why don't I fix you a fresh pot of coffee. I promise your food is just about ready."

Ritchie clears some phlegm and looms over her, his breathing boozy and labored. "I been waitin' thirty damn minutes," he mumbles as they make their way back. The afternoon's light has receded, spilling their shadows on the wall—two silhouettes side by side, a bear and his lunch, arm in arm.

When he finishes eating, Ritchie starts hollering at Sally from across the restaurant. I bring a soda over to him, per his request, and he berates me for the amount of ice in his cup, banging his fist down like it's a gavel. "But I put in a quarter of ice like you asked," I plead with him, realizing how foolish and potentially dangerous this is. He gives me a black, inscrutable look, as if this whole time, like the ice in his cup or the cheap plastic plants in the corner of the room, I've been inanimate. I hear contempt for me gurgling inside of him, distilling itself in the space between him and I like a vapor. The Flaherty's, the liver-spotted couple sitting at a table behind Ritchie, stare at me, mortified, their coffee jittering.

Sally, bringing back dirty plates, sees this and intercepts us. "Easy there, cowboys. It's a quick fix. I'll just get you another coke," she says. But as she walks by, Ritchie teeters low and grabs her by the butt. "Ah!" I hear Sally scream, the plates sinking to the floor. A couple of pancakes and a few ramekins lie there upturned, syrup oozing slowly into the carpet.

Turning a magnificent cherry hue, Sally marches right back over to Ritchie and slaps the hell out of him. Even with his bristly grey beard, his face is marked. Sitting on the stool with one foot planted on the carpet and the other resting on the stool's steel rings, he and Sally are still eye level. He wipes his mouth with his thumb and lets out a strangled, tortured laugh. It gets stuck somewhere in his throat and remains there until it pushes through, and by the time he coughs it out, he's howling.

"You bitch," he says, inching his way toward her, "I was just tryin' to regain my balance." He keeps pressing forward, backing Sally into the corner wall—where I am, currently vexed, doing not a thing to help.

"Excuse me if I couldn't find nothin' better to hold on to!" he howls maniacally.

“Go to hell.”

“How about a little foreplay first?”

“You’re disgusting.”

“How do you like it, huh? Rough? That how you like it?”

“Ritchie!” I yell. I hadn’t thought it over—what I was going to do—action just sort of—spasms out of me. Sally’s shoulders start to fold, and I can see her hands shaking, the freckles on them a peripheral blur. “Stop it, man.”

Ritchie spits on the floor.

“What, you got a hard-on for her?” he asks me. He seems genuinely interested.

I feel the blood drain from my face. Looking around the restaurant, I notice everyone watching us. *Where the hell is Mal?*

“You even get hard-ons, boy?”

My insides beat on the door of my skin.

“Maybe he don’t get hard-ons for *girls*,” he says with a corkscrew smile, speaking to the whole restaurant, “maybe he gets em for *boys*.”

“AT LEAST I CAN FIND MY DICK,” I yell as coldly as I can manage. My heart is beating so fast it feels like my body’s been bombed into another life, but being inside a moment with real danger is intoxicating. It makes me bold. I take a step toward Ritchie.

His slobbering expression turns vindictive and resolute. He spits on the ground and lunges for me.

Size fails me. Inexperience fails me. Ritchie dribbles my head like a basketball against the wall, and I feel my feet lift off the ground. But believe me when I say: time never felt more

negligible than with Ritchie's paws around my throat. I was born in this cursed place, and I'm going to die here. But this doesn't surprise me; in fact, I welcome it. Ritchie is just taking me on the last lap.

It's not Sally's face or Ritchie's brown, gnarled teeth before my eyes that stay with me as the oxygen leaves. No, as Ritchie's voice—some voice, a voice—grows fainter and fainter, and the corners of my vision became overrun with gray and then white—it is the image of the grist mill on the wall at the far side of the dining room I keep returning to. My parents put that mural up shortly before they opened this place. And I can see all of us, distinct from the black and white fractals storming my eyes, mom and dad each holding a side of the mural, Frankie and Eva and me, in between, smoothing it over the wall, and the grist mill, ablaze in an autumnal glow.

And then I see Mal with something hoisted high above her head. Is it a frying pan? I feel the reverberation of whatever it is hit Ritchie. His grip around my throat ceases, and my feet fall on the floor. Buckling, I collapse there, sound pressure returning, oxygen and blood seeping back into me.

“You got two seconds to get your ass outta here before I call the police!”

We're both on our knees now, Ritchie and me. His hands are crawling along the carpet, searching for the door, desperate for mercy. Still on his knees, he manages to wedge the door open, leaving blood-smearred fingerprints on the glass.

“You are not to step foot inside this restaurant ever again! You hear me!”

It's pathetic. He's stuck in between the door, a web of blood trickling from his right ear. A customer goes to help. I get back to my feet, humbled by the change in fortunes, by the juxtaposition in body language. It gives me a base, lonely feeling.

Mal drops the frying pan on the floor and turns to me, grabbing me by the wrist.

“If you ever speak like that to a customer again, you’re fired. If you have a problem, you come to me,” she commands, tears in her eyes.

"Yes, Mal," I say, barely able to speak.

Mal grabs her keys and leaves. A hush comes over the room, holding everyone captive.

"My God, are you alright?" Sally asks me, her mascara a mess. There’s a ringing in my ear, and it's sore around my throat where Ritchie choked me, but besides this, I’m fine. I take a few cumbersome breaths, heave a little, feeling the adrenaline burn through me, keeping me weightless. The Flaherty’s tie their shoes. Bud Jeffries stands up and puts a fifty-dollar bill on the bar. A family of five ask for to-go containers. Everyone agrees it’s time to go.

We close up shop early. I clean the flat-tops, wrap up the lowboy, sweep the floor, do the dishes, and spray out the dishwasher. Sally goes around the restaurant, apologizing. She wipes Ritchie’s bloody fingerprints off the door, counts the register, leaves the stack of slips along with the cash in Mal’s bank bag, and we lock up.

“You want a ride hon,” she asks me in the parking lot.

“I’m going to walk if that’s okay.”

She takes out a menthol from her purse, and we stand like this for a moment, the heat overwhelming, no breeze to take pity on us, life itself just lying there, listless, waiting to be gorged.

“That was quite a thing you did today,” she says after some time had passed.

I don’t know how to respond.

“Sticking up for me like that. People don’t,” she begins to tell me, choking up, “realize the shit I have to go through.”

“I do. Mal does.”

“You’re a good one, Danny,” she says out of the side of her mouth, digging through her purse for her keys, her cigarette still unlit, bobbing along, “why don't you finish school?”

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I walk home, shirt stuck to my back, sweat collecting on my brow like rainwater on a leaf. There’s something about summer; the sun’s glare, the inflamed skin, and the bits of life on a collision course that feels immense and unmerciful.

It was in Summer that my father would annihilate himself, unable to stand it any longer, hungry for sabotage, drunkenly careening goodbye. There was a simplicity to it—to his oblivion, something foundational and primal in the way that he would unravel that my mother couldn’t protect us from. It always managed to hurt us, and she hated him for it.

The sky turned purplish and closed off as I make my way up the street. A little blonde girl on a pink tricycle, no more than five or six, is alone in the middle of the road, popsicle smudge cheek to cheek. She waves at me disinterestedly as if to tell me she is quite content on her own.

It begins to rain, but it doesn’t come as much relief, the humidity so pervasive that it feels more like a steam bath. At best, I think summer just sits there and watches idly; other times, it’s crueler, making sport of us, hoping will be senseless enough to lash out at it.

Mal’s words, the look she had given me, the tears in her eyes, run around in my mind. I never wanted to be a burden or a curse. I think of my father, think of his face, his voice, what he is doing at this very moment, but it comes to me like a distant, half-born thing. The same goes for Eva. Frankie. Mom. *Where did we all blow off to?* If I could be with them in more than just scatterings of memory, I would tell them I love them, tell them all I wish we could be together.

Or maybe I wouldn't say that at all, maybe I'd say to them these things that are just as true: that I've begun to take responsibility for myself, that there is as much love inside me as there is hate, that sometimes I'm so overcome with anger I find myself walking around looking for god; just so I can punish him.

It's pouring as I walk up the driveway. The burnt patches on the lawn soak it all up, greedily breathing new life. The front door opens, and Ron comes out, yelling something unintelligible back inside the house. He slams the door violently. As I approach, he turns around and looks me dead in the eye, his face as purple as the sky. He smolders there in the rain for a second before he gets into his truck and skirts off. Once inside, I walk into the living room where Mal is sitting in her chair in front of the computer. Tears are swimming in her eyes.

"Danny," she says, a little startled. "Oh, don't worry about this," she tells me, laughing it off shakily, trying to clean herself up, "I was wondering when you'd get home."

"I took a walk."

She dabs at her face with a clump of tissues, drying her eyes and wiping snot from her nose.

"Well, just be careful. There's poison sumac all around here."

I nod and sit on the couch. It's quiet for a moment.

"Mal, are you alright?" I ask.

She can't answer. Her lip starts to tremble, and a tear trails down her cheek. For reasons inexplicable, I remove myself from the couch and wipe the tear from Mal's cheek. Mal closes her eyes and holds my hand firmly against her face. She pulls me in. If I'm sure of anything, it's don't let go.

