

GAS

Chad Aldrich, like so many writers, wondered, always, how to make someone want something in his stories. Thinking of his own wants didn't quite do it; they seemed so paltry. You couldn't write a story about wanting a milkshake, after all, since once the guy had drunk the thing the story would be done—wanted, sought, bought and swallowed. That was the nature of it all, wasn't it? The reason we've been put on earth, if there is one. So it had to be all in the obstacles, then, but how mundane; you trundle off to buy ice cream and on the way you have a flat tire, or get waylaid by a friend in need of help, and the problem of not being able to indulge in the milkshake becomes the pleasure for the reader. No wonder Chad has yet to publish a story in a reputable journal, since for him the pleasure of milkshakes is in the drinking, in the indulgence of them, not in being denied. "Who the hell enjoys being denied?" he once asked Madge, the woman he lives with.

Least of all Chad, who now finds himself overpowered by the desire for the very treat he has been thinking about, thus finds himself in his ancient Honda groping its way toward Alexander's Ice Cream. Not for the first time this year, either, and it's only the first week in January.

This modest excursion is not without its problems, the voice in his ear tells him. Madge's voice, telling him that ice cream is going to sink them financially if he keeps this up. Added to

that, there is the thought that inevitably creeps in around this time of day, that this is the hour—the one after the leisurely breakfast, the perusal of the Times, the checking of e-mail, the second cup of coffee—when he has promised himself (not to mention Madge) that he'll look for a job. Not a writing job—that has yet to pan out—but a job job. One that will enable him to pay the rent, the most prominent among the bills sitting on his desk. *Their* desk, Madge would correct him, if she were able to overhear his thoughts, since it has come down to her through her uncle's family, lent to him in the hope of producing results of an all too specific nature. And if these “matters of conscience” (as he likes to call them in his fiction) weren't enough, there is the problem of the gas gauge threatening to pin itself on *empty*, a not infrequent occurrence, since it is never allowed to creep above the line indicating quarter full. Its place there, rare though it is, indicates as accurately as any signal the limit of Chad Aldrich's luxury.

Indeed, it is almost as if this little jaunt has been devised in order to bring to his attention the fact that the replenishment of gasoline in the rusty tank of his ancient Honda may have to take precedence over his desire for a milkshake, there being, possibly (given the evidence before him) not enough fuel to see him home. Not to mention not enough money in his pocket to buy a gallon of gas *and* a pint or so of his favorite mixture of milk and coffee ice cream. A dilemma, if there ever was one, that makes him aware how the need for one side of the equation (gas) makes the other side (the milkshake) more desirable, thus producing a resentment for the former, a decisive need for the latter, leading to a deserved denial of the former in favor of a decided *deserving* of the latter. He is good at solving problems; he will cross that bridge, the one involving fuel and forward motion, when he comes to it; first things first. There is, of course, the fear that one may derail the other, that he will not have enough gas to make it to Alexander's, but there is only one way to find out.

And with what a sense of victory and exhilaration he pulls into Alexander's parking lot, turns off the engine to his accommodating Honda and finds his place on a stool at the counter! Where few words are necessary to obtain what has been foremost in his thoughts for some time now.

And then a strange thing happens. He finds himself as if moved forward magically in time to a point where there is only worry. Worry about whether he will have enough fuel to get home, and if so, whether Madge will be there when he arrives. If she is, what he will say to her about where he's been; and most of all what she will say to him when he tells her. If he tells her. These thoughts, of course, are not all that odd; it's not as if he's never been here before. What's most annoying is that it has become clear to him that he has finished his milkshake while thinking these thoughts and now can't remember the taste of a single drop of it, not one moment of pleasure from the first taste that must have flowed from straw to esophagus, to the last dollop of the delicious sludge at the bottom, transferred from glass to tongue with the use of the long-handled spoon requested for this purpose. Chad's first response is to order another, an impulse quickly checked by remembering that Alexander's does not accept credit cards. His debit card is worthless, as always, so there is nothing left him but to pay and drive home, which leaves him with twenty-three cents and at least that many reasons to be fearful of the immediate future.

Praying is not a procedure Chad resorts to frequently, finding less need in his daily life than many people, but even for those confused about their beliefs there may come a time when to evoke the help of something powerful in the universe might serve as a desperate version of an emergency modus operandi. And who is to say it has not worked, Chad's car coughing into a parking place a hundred yards from his home? A parking place not without its problems, its two-hour limit for one. But problems are meant to be put off in the hope of transferring them to

someone else, or at least to the future when fortune is more likely to grant success. “Empty,” after all, is one of those words like “unique” or “pregnant,” resistant to modifiers. His tank is empty. Empty means empty.

So the first goal as he enters his apartment, immediately apparent, is not to ruin Madge’s good mood, her happiness at his return, her ebullience over the present, whether from something new, or more of the same he cannot tell. No reason however, not to be prepared, therefore, to have at the ready the usual assortment of excuses. She is facing him now, barring the way with happiness, the veritable cat proud to have laid the severed head of a squirrel on his doorstep.

“Guess what,” she says.

“You’ve won the lottery.”

“C’mon, play the game.” Oops, he’s already in danger of spoiling her mood.

“I can’t guess,” he says. “What?”

“I got a job.”

The smile that accompanies this announcement produces in Chad a mixture of emotions swift and complex enough to be unfamiliar, as if detecting the flavor of an unwanted fruit among the much anticipated and inviolable chemistry of a milkshake. In sum, he feels a) irritation at Madge landing a job before he does, b) guilt at not having looked for one himself, c) envy at her success, and yes, at her happiness, and d) shame at the comparative success of their mornings.

“I thought you’d be proud of me,” she says.

“Congratulations,” he says, feeling he’s failed to find the right tone. The look she gives him now threatens the future in a way all too familiar, the look that preceded her departure two years ago shortly after his proclamation that he would have to forego the day job in order to take his vocation as a writer as seriously as it deserved. Was that the first time he had seen it? Hard to

say. This morning when he had suggested changing the daily routine, exchanging the free-scheduled time of the afternoon for the structured, employment-seeking time of the morning, he had witnessed the same look of disdain on Madge's face. Unrelenting it is, too, with its messages over the years, and her ability to outstare him, as she does now. He is suddenly overtaken by an overwhelming desire for another milkshake.

"I'm the one who should have found a job," he says. It's the kind of thing he's supposed to say.

"But I'm the one who found one," she says in that all-forgiving way of hers, expiration date unknown.

Her forgiveness trails off into silence in which he is expected to do what, kneel down and give thanks? Why does every one of her accomplishments grate so heavily on him? What he'd like to do is resume a normal life, the life he led only a few days ago, when even worry and uncertainty of the future gave the life of a true artist the texture needed to write fiction. He should ask what this attractive partner standing before him has in mind for the coming days, but to do so would make her the captain of the ship. She is still smiling. Generously. Or obstinately. He feels diminished by her happiness, her success at finding a job, her good mood expecting one reciprocally from him. Next she will declare herself the author of a bestselling novel, a dream he has harbored for himself, therefore rightfully hers. But this is ridiculous, and he recognizes it for what it is, his own insecurity doing its best to cast a shadow on Madge's sacrifice. For surely that is how she will frame it. He should bubble forth; women always expect that. Yes, bubble forth as she would, indeed has for his victories, modest though they have been. The acceptance of his story in *Focal Points, a Journal of the Arts*, God rest its soul. Or after the coffee house reading, when she bucked him up, countering his paranoia at the meager turnout—the meager,

begrudging turnout—patrons actually annoyed at having to turn off their laptops to focus on someone outside the screen of their electronic devices—even after that, she had been supportive.

“Every artist has had to suffer the Bourgeoisie,” she had said, and without a trace of irony.

So how to respond as she expects?

A request for more information might help.

“So when do you start?” he asks, hoping it doesn’t sound as if he’d appreciate knowing when she’ll be out of the house.

She looks at her watch.

“Presently,” she says, “though I have a few minutes to welcome the appreciation of those, who, thanks to my efforts, may spend the afternoon alone, writing.”

“I *am* grateful,” he says, not sincerely, remembering the writer’s block of the morning, unable to think of what in the world the lifeless excuse for a protagonist with whom he still struggles could want from life.

“May I have the keys, please.”

“It’s not in the driveway,” he says, referring to the Honda stubbornly parked down the street, the one their modest income makes it necessary to share.

“I think there’s something wrong with it,” he says now, regretting it, but knowing that anything he says he’ll regret. He tries a few things out silently to himself as she asks her monosyllabic question: *It had trouble starting after my visit to the employment agency* might work. Or: *I drove through a humongous puddle and it stalled out.* Less effective during a spell of dry weather. *Someone forgot to put gas in it,* he thinks of saying, opening the difficulty out a bit, but realizing in time its accusatory undertones, so with downcast eyes he tells the worn patch of carpet by the door that the car has run out of gas.

“The car did this on its own, I take it,” she says.

“It had a little help,” he says, with the contrite tone he has had to practice over the last few years.

“This is not going to be very comfortable for me, is it?” she says, “calling in on my first day at the job to tell them my boyfriend’s run out of gas and I can’t come to work.” There’s no anger now in the way she’s looking at him, just disappointment. A look that says now that he’s screwed up his own life he’s free to do a job on hers. Disappointment is what he sees there, and he wonders how long she’s going to want to put up with what she is so intent on examining.

“How far away is your job?”

“About a mile away,” she says.

“That’s not so bad,” he tells her, wishing he hadn’t when he notices that she’s wearing heels. Once again he’s fighting for something to say— *I’ll buy you a taxi— I’ll call a friend to drive you—Maybe there’s a bus line in that direction*, but he has no money, no friends with cars and the nearest bus line is also a mile away. She’s changing into a pair of running shoes. “Tell you what,” he tells her, “I’ll walk with you.” Why this appeals to her he’s not sure.

“Bring the gas can,” she says. “You can buy a gallon of gas on your way back and pick me up after work.” Perhaps it’s the thought of him carrying the dirty gas can that’s giving her pleasure, but he settles for it. Anything’s better than her disappointment.

“C’mon, then,” she says, pressing four one-dollar bills into his hand, “a little exercise will do you good.”

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When Chad picks Madge up he has to go in to retrieve her—he's early—so it gives him a chance to see where she'll be spending her days. She's at the back of a large room of desks and cubicles, gathering her things and changing back into her running shoes. Smiling at someone.

"Well, that was boring," she says, when they're out of hearing range.

"I guess that's the way it's going to be for a while," is all he can think to say, knowing it will annoy her, but he isn't feeling all that privileged himself.

"You mean my boredom is necessary to keep the engine of great genius purring along."

"Our boredom," he says, the only two words he can think of.

"Meaning you have nothing to show for an afternoon off to write the Great American Novel?"

"I have gas in the tank to show for it."

"Which I paid for."

He lets her comment go by. He's just about to get into the Honda when she says, "Let me drive, I have errands to do on the way home."

Fine by him, since it lets the gas gauge speak for him.

"Wow. I didn't give you that much money," she says.

"They let me fill it up as part of my pay for filling in for the new guy," he says. "Ted, it turns out, is in a hell of a bind." Ted is the guy who works on their car.

"What's wrong with the new guy?"

"He's moved a thousand miles away."

"So you're filling in for the new guy."

"I am the new guy, you might say."

"For how long?"

“On the grounds it might,” he says, his shorthand for pleading the Fifth.

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When he finds the note on the kitchen table he feels like retching and has to go out for a drink.

“You’re like a bartender to me,” he tells the eponymous Alexander. His second milkshake allows the words to roar out of him: “She left me.” Chad tells him about the note Madge left behind, her moving to the West Coast and all. “Without a word of warning.” He swirls the straw around the goop at the bottom of the glass, orders another. “But who could blame her,” he adds, feeling a little weepy. Anyway, a little self-deprecation goes a long way in retelling anything. Alexander wipes off the counter by way of response.

“A little advance notice might have been nice. Or a goodbye. A hug to acknowledge nine years together. Seven. Whatever. I read the note, and before it even fully registered, the beverage of choice chimed in with its need for consumption.” Chad takes a slug without the aid of the straw. “Cheers.”

“She must have been working on this plan while we were both seeking work,” he continues, “my rigorous attempts to seek employment misrepresented in the most flagrant ways. Probably not insignificant that the firm she worked for transferred her to California.”

Although he has brought the note with him, he resists the temptation to read any of it aloud.

“Hard to believe Madge would do a thing like that,” Alexander says. That Madge and Alexander got on famously Chad now finds annoying.

“She’s probably told everyone in that tone of hers.”

“Of course if it’s libelous,” Alexander asks with a wink, his smile equivocal.

“Not much I can do about it.”

Chad finishes the milkshake with a gurgle, mulling it over.

Alexander returns from a foray to the other end of the counter. “You let this bother you anymore, you’ll need a support group,” he says. “You’ll get over her in time.”

“I’m over her now. It’s what she said in the note that hurts.”

But even Chad has to admit, there’s a hint of truth to some of it, the part that rings in his ears: *You’ll see. My move will be your enabler*—how he hates that word, *enabler*—*to help you back on your feet, even if you have less time for your writing*. The oil and tire changes, she means.

“I’ll just have another for the road,” he tells Alexander. Who’d object? It’s been one hell of a day already. Who wouldn’t forgive a guy being twenty minutes late to his afternoon job?

END