

## Dialogue

Gary told himself fifteen more minutes. In the meantime he attempted a semblance of conversation.

"So," he said, "you're going to LA?"

Trent nodded. "Taking the long way. The wife wants me out of the house for a while."

They were at O'Brien's. Outside the mountains darkened. The late October air was getting cold, too. Gary wanted to get in a hike before the weather turned completely.

"Thanks for seeing me," Trent said. "I just needed to make a stop somewhere, and I remembered you lived here."

Trent grinned, the same toothy one he used to flash in the hallway between classes. But he had really gotten fat, even fatter than the last reunion. Gary estimated the guy was three hundred pounds, maybe more.

The server came over. Trent turned his teeth on her, one eye askew. He asked how she liked living in Ouray.

"It's great. I love the mountains. And I moved here to take care of my dad. He's a retired firefighter..."

"Hey, good for him! So do you have a boyfriend?"

"Yes, he's the other reason I'm here."

"Ah! A lucky man." Trent winked.

"So what are you having?"

Trent looked over at Gary. But Gary wasn't hungry.

"Okay..." Trent squinted at the menu, fingering his fluffy white goatee. "I'll have the chicken tenders, and a beer. What do you have on draft?"

After the server took his order, Trent watched her walk away. Then he hoisted a shopping bag to the table. From the bag he took out a small bottle: it was hot sauce bought from the specialty food store on Main Street. The label said *Sphincter Shrinker*.

"Have you tried it? I love hot sauce! Can't wait to try this...!"

Gary made a face. "Have you had a colonoscopy?"

Trent made one back. "Is that all you can say? I'd forgotten how super fun you can be."

Their high school newspaper had run a feature on the editorial page called VOX BOX VOX, with Gary and Trent taking opposing positions on the issues of the day. In his black-and-white photo Trent leaned forward, grinning, his feathered hair parted in the middle, while Gary stared very seriously through his very large glasses, neck boyishly thin in his shirt collar.

"It's just something I see. Ulcerative colitis and lesions can be caused by too many spices in food sometimes, which if..."

"Well, I like a little spice in my life, okay? Here, I also bought *Flaming Flatulence* and *Brazen Bull Batter*." Trent tucked away the other bottles while leaving the sphincter sauce on the table as if a challenge. "And no, I haven't had a colonoscopy."

"At your age you should. Men your age are more likely... But, never mind."

Gary was done with that. The clinic was now being run by a younger doctor, and that was fine by him. It gave him more time to ride his motorcycle and fish and be with Melissa. But the last few months had been tough. He felt lost at times, even downright bored, and he blamed his

baffling semi-retirement malaise on agreeing to meet Trent Kontrelos of all people--not exactly his favorite person--at a restaurant in town. It took ten minutes for him to regret it, especially once Trent started talking about his home appraising business in Colorado Springs. Gary steered the conversation to updates about mutual friends in the Denver area, some of them dead. And then mutual teachers, most of them certainly dead.

"So," Gary said. He tapped his fingers.

The tenders arrived, with apologies for the slow service, along with a second beer. Trent liberally sprinkled hot sauce, grinning, and then bit into a tender. His eyes goggled.

"Mm ahhh awwwyywoaayaarrgh!"

"Good?"

"Damn!" Mouth open, Trent fanned himself with a napkin. His beefy face was sweating.

"Holy crap... Whew! *GODDAMN*. Want to try some?"

"No."

A bit of sauce bled on Trent's goatee. Frowning, Gary drank his ice water. Five more minutes.

"Right. Anyway, I'm going to Los Angeles for my screenplay. The Great Pitch-A-Thon. You heard of it? There're agents and producers there so I can pitch my movie. I took up writing a few years ago, and now I really think I have something. Can I try on you?"

"Try...?"

"Yes, pitch my movie. It's called the elevator pitch. If I wind up in an elevator with Steven Spielberg, this is my movie pitch."

"I don't know, I'm probably not a good judge of--"

"It's called BLACKWORLD, about a tourist resort in the future where people go to an urban environment and interact with blacks. You know, drug dealers, gangbangers, pimps and prostitutes. You know, the *real* inner city. Except it's not real. All the blacks are actually robots. So the tourists can feel completely safe and get an authentic experience without any real danger."

"Okay, I don't know if..."

"But, wait, wait. The movie doesn't really start until this white family goes there and the husband and wife are fighting about the usual things married couples fight about, and they have two teenage kids, a son and daughter, and early on the wife catches her husband having sex with one of the black prostitutes. Right? Even though the girl is a robot, she's really hot. Someone like Halle Berry. Anyway, the wife gets so upset that she finds one of the scientists who runs the park and she has an affair with him and they activate one of the drug dealer robots to put a scare into the husband. But it goes too far. The drug dealer robot starts killing all the tourists, and the other black robots join him in a killing spree. A real bloodbath. The family just barely escapes, and in the end the husband has a showdown with the drug dealer and kills the robot just as he's about to kill his family, and the husband and wife reconcile... Oh, and I think the robot should be played by Samuel L Jackson. So in the last shot of the movie the seemingly dead robot opens his eyes suddenly."

Gary stared. No words came.

"You know, sequels." Trent waved his stubby fingers. "What do you think?"

Gary looked as he did with his dying patients. "Sounds sort of..."

"Sounds what?"

"Racist."

"Well, sure, that's what the movie is about, in a way. Racism. That's the short version, at least. The pitch!"

"Right." Gary glanced at the window. He shifted in his seat. "Well, anyway..."

"Wait, you're not leaving already? I'm not even done eating!"

"Right, no, sorry. I'm just... I have to check in at the clinic. There's a patient with, ah, hepatitis."

"Okay. Okay. I get it. This isn't your idea of a good time. I just thought..."

Trent sagged, his face suddenly looking old and tired. With alarm Gary noticed tears seemed to be forming...

"No, no, it's fine," he heard himself say. "Really. It's good to see you."

"Really?"

"Sure. Yeah. Yes."

Gary sat back in his chair. He knew he should have been amused, or at least distracted, by the sudden appearance of his old high school rival. Melissa was in Grand Junction visiting her ailing mother. And his motorcycle wasn't as fun as he thought it would be. Nor was decorating the new house and putting in a hot tub... For a minute Gary thought of bringing up politics. Yes, that had always been their thing. Everyone in school had looked to Gary and Trent to articulate what they should be thinking about Richard Nixon and stagflation, about taxes and guns and abortion... The debate had been on last night. But the rhetoric was so nasty, so bruising; he just didn't have the stomach for politics anymore beyond attending the occasional potluck hosted by the Ouray Democrat League and putting up a lawn sign or two. Besides, looking into Trent's

craggy face, with his lips stained clownishly red, he felt it was best to remain silent on the topic.

Who knew what what kind of emotions and weirdness would get unleashed...

Trent sighed. "Facebook has ruined everything."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean it used to be people got together in real time. Now they don't."

"Maybe that's not a bad thing."

"Ha!"

Trent ordered another beer, again watched the girl walk away. Was that his third? Gary tapped on the table. Time was running out. How hard was it just to stand up and say it was nice seeing him, good luck with everything, but now he had to go...?

"I've been having problems with Andrea. Our marriage is... It's tough right now. She asked me to move out a few weeks ago. But it would have been hard on the kiddos not to have me there. You know? So instead we decided I should get away for a few weeks, think about things alone. And I took the opportunity to finish my screenplay. It's been good for me so far."

"Good. That's great... So I..."

Trent stared into his beer. "Things started going downhill when Dree found me on the computer one day. She was understandably upset."

"Oh...?"

"I had a really bad addiction..."

"Addiction?"

"Yes. To porn, believe it or not. I was really ashamed."

"Oh, well, you don't need to tell me. Really."

"No, it's part of my therapy. Anyway, I was doing it about two or three hours a day. Sometimes six. I was supposed to be working on my appraisals, but... The temptation was so close, so easy. It was really getting out of hand. You know, Exploited College Girls. Girls Gone Wild. Bang Brothers. Facials and threesomes. You name it... Oh, and anal sex--which was something Dree didn't even--"

"Okay, really, you don't..."

"So Dree found out and..." Trent blew out a beery breath. "She was really angry. Just pissed as hell. I don't blame her. We went to our church and got counseling. They paired me with a guy who had the same problem. He's become my sponsor and he told me his story about how he overcame his addiction. He's inspired me in a lot of ways, he's just great. Now he monitors what I search on the internet. If I get into something a little sketchy, even on my phone, he calls or messages me. It's really helped."

"Great."

Yellow leaves chased each other down the street.

"Yeah..." Trent drank his beer.

"So, ah, I should go. I want to take a hike before it's too late, the last one of the season... But good luck on your screenplay. I hope it sells."

"Mm! Me, too!"

They were silent a moment.

Trent stood first and offered his hand. "Thanks for spending a little face time with me. I've been pretty lonely these days. It used to be I had so many friends, and now..."

"Right. I know."

They shook hands. Their eyes met.

"So you're taking a hike, huh?"

"Yes. Not a big one. Just on the Perimeter Trail." Gary twirled a finger.

"I thought you had to check in at the clinic...?"

"I will. But I want to get in my hike first."

"Well, do you mind if I came with? I don't feel like getting back on the road just yet. It's been a long haul already, and I don't need to be in LA until next week."

"Oh! Um? I didn't know you were a hiker."

"I just thought I'd stretch my legs and suck in some mountain air. I never get into the mountains that much. Is that okay? I don't want to cramp your style. I promise you won't even know I'm around, I'll be quiet. But if you'd rather not..."

"Mm, mm." Gary tapped two fingers to his lips as if mentally checking his schedule. "I suppose so, sure, I guess..."

"No, look, forget it. I don't want to be a pest."

"I'm just thinking you'd be bored. Right? It's not that fun, and..."

"Hey, if you're thinking I won't be able to keep up, you're wrong. Besides, I beat you in the 100-yard dash that time. Remember?"

\*

They drove to the trailhead. Gary was counting on Trent lasting about ten minutes, if that.

"Wow. Just amazing! Beautiful!"

Trent wore a sleeveless Army jacket over his flannel shirt, a Rockies baseball cap, and Converse sneakers. Arms akimbo, he squinted at the waterfall. Gary smiled, surprised to find



himself enjoying the scenery through Trent's eyes. Yes, it was beautiful. Incredible, actually.

What had he been feeling so low about?

In his backpack he kept his phone, wilderness guides, binoculars, a few granola bars and a jumbo bottle of water. Trent carried only a bottle of Evian.

"You lead the way, bucko!"

"Okay."

Inhaling the clear sharp air, smelling of pine and wood smoke, Gary mounted the railroad-tie steps and charged up the trail. Minutes later, over his shoulder, he saw Trent far behind. Trent barked a laugh.

"You haven't ditched me yet!"

"Let me know if you get tired."

"Let me know if *you* get... tired!"

They climbed past the Baby Bathtubs, a series of smooth depressions in riverbed rock, and then followed a steep, sinuous path. Bits of snow flurried.

Once they reached the footbridge, Gary stopped and drank from his bottle.

"Are you all right? Maybe we should turn around."

"Yeah?" Trent huffed between gulps at his bottle. "You... can't handle it?"

"No, I was concerned about you."

"Right!"

They went on, crossing a grassy field crowded with gold-freckled aspens. Trent stopped again. He finished off his water, and then palmed his chest. He grimaced.

Gary turned. "Are you okay?"

"Yes... just..."

"What's wrong?"

"Hot sauce," Trent panted. "Gave me some heartburn, I think..."

"Are you sure it's not a heart attack?"

Trent shook his head. Snow was collecting on his cap. "Just a little reflux."

"Are you sure? We can turn back..."

"Yes, I'm sure! Come on."

"Okay, we'll turn up here, and then we can head back. Okay?"

"This is great. Really. I like it!" Wheezing, Trent squinted into the distance. "I just wish I had my glasses on, but... It's giving me ideas for my movie... Wondering if... I should... have a mountain scene..."

"Yeah? You know, these mountains are millions of years old. Of course, these are young mountains, comparatively, that's why they're so spectacular..."

Gary glanced at Trent. He remembered an old argument once where Trent had implied, shockingly, that the earth was only six thousand years old. Trent also apparently believed in the Rapture, and a number of other silly concepts. But when Trent didn't take the bait, Gary thought maybe age was finally making Trent a bit wiser.

Good for him.

The ground was turning white. Yet the snow seemed harmless, drifting down in soft pillows, only making the surrounding landscape more picturesque. Feeling happy, Gary was absorbing the pristine beauty of it all when he felt a poke at his shoulder.

"Hey, can I...? I'm still thirsty."

"Sure."

Gary offered his bottle--but Trent suddenly withdrew his hand, as if from a snake.

"You know what, never mind."

"What?"

"Let's go. I don't need the water right now."

The bill on Trent's cap was pulled down on his dark, beefy face.

"What is it? Come on." Gary shook the bottle. "Stay hydrated."

"No, thanks, doc."

"Is something wrong with my water?"

"No."

"Then take some. Come on."

"I'm not drinking out of that. Sorry."

Then it hit Gary. On the bottle was a sticker: BERNIE SANDERS 2016.

He laughed. "Okay, that's good. That's funny!"

Trent said nothing.

"You're not serious. Come on!"

"Let's just go. I don't need the water."

"So you're not drinking from this because... it has a Bernie Sanders sticker on it?"

Trent scowled. His upper lip tightened across his teeth.

"Peel off the sticker first."

"Oh, COME ON!"

A pair of birds shot out of a nearby pine.

"This is stupid. Just have some water, and then we can head back down."

"No. I'm not drinking from a bottle that has some guy who wants to take all my money for his socialist utopia."

"But he's not even running anymore! Who cares?!"

"Well, I have principles. Something you and your kind don't get."

"Oh, fuck. Jesus!"

Gary stuffed the bottle in his backpack and stomped off. They went on for a full mile or more, winding up and down the muddy trail. Then Gary stopped, puffing clouds. Trent was far behind, a fat dot amid the aspen trunks and whirling snow. Gary looked around. He had been so furious, arguing with Trent in his head, that he was no longer sure where they were. The landscape wasn't looking familiar.

"Shit."

Coughing, wheezing, Trent finally caught up. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Oh no, are we lost? I thought you knew where we were going!"

"I do, I do, just shut up a minute."

Ouray had vanished below, obscured in the fog of snow. Wind whistled through the standing cuspids of rock, branches whipping against the low featureless sky.

"Okay. Come on." Gary turned up a black fissure in the white. He wanted to seem confident, determined.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes!"

They went on climbing, and then descending. Suddenly, Trent cried out. He had fallen forward--his body flopping in the snow. Flailing, grabbing branches, he pulled himself upright and lifted his left foot.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine... Just a slight sprain..."

Shrugging, Gary took out his bottle and drank. From the corner of his eye he noticed the hand reaching--

"Now it's good enough for you?"

Trent said nothing.

Gary thrust the bottle at him. Trent brought the bottle to his mouth, guzzling, water darkening the front of his jacket.

"How was that socialist water?"

Trent grunted. He stood on one foot.

"Look, are you sure you're okay? Let's take off your shoe so I can look at it."

"No! I know my body. It's fine."

"All right."

Gary took back his bottle, and they went on. But Trent was struggling. He had to stop and lean on something every two minutes.

"Why don't I go on and I'll bring help. You might need to be airlifted down."

"No," Trent croaked. "No. I can do this."

They went on. Finally, Trent had to sit on a rock. He took off his cap and wiped at his face. After drinking again from Gary's bottle, he started to scratch at the Bernie sticker.

"Would you please not do that?"

Trent sneered. "What a great guide you turned out to be. Just great. I should have known you had no idea what you were doing."

"Thanks. You know, I should have left as soon as you started hitting on that waitress. It was pretty disgusting. She's a teenager!"

"This coming from a man who used a Woody Allen quote for his senior picture."

"What does that mean?"

"It means if we're talking about character, you definitely shouldn't lecture me about morals."

"You are ridiculous. Seriously."

"Right back at you, *bucko*."

"Give me the bottle, come on--"

Trent grinned. He flung the empty bottle: it bounced and disappeared down the mountain.

"Bye, Bernie!" he yelled.

"Wow, what an asshole you are. Ridiculous *and* an asshole."

Trent hobbled over to the shelter of a giant pine. There, sitting again, he gingerly took off his shoe and sock. His foot was swollen, latticed with red and purplish veins.

"I expect you to buy me a new bottle."

"Right. With a shiny new sticker on it too?"

"You know, I didn't hurt your ankle. You did that on your own."

"Speaking of ridiculous, what kind of person spends thousands of dollars on a *settee*?"

Earlier Gary had told Trent about the new furnishings in his house. The interior decorator he hired had convinced him to buy a settee for the dining room.

"I didn't spend *thousands*--"

"A typical liberal. You want everyone to live in your socialist utopia so long as you don't have to. Typ-i-cal."

"I'm a doctor, not a hippie. I just think the wealthy should pay more in taxes."

"Uh-huh."

"And reform the banks. You don't think there's something wrong with our banking system?"

"And you really believe the *government* can fix it?"

"Better than your capitalist cronies, that's for sure."

"I'll take capitalists over government *dickheads* any day!"

"Oh, shut up."

"*You* shut up!"

Wind flung icy pellets in their vox-boxing faces.

"Fuck! How long are we going to have to sit here?"

"Come on."

Trent pulled on his shoe and followed Gary. They marched through the snow--now knee-deep in places--and came to a space between the trees. Gary worked his way inside. He lit it with his phone: empty. Albino roots hung down like ticker tape. Both men sat on the dry earth, exhausted faces dripping, while the storm moaned outside.

\*

"This should be over soon. And then..."

Gary started to crawl for the opening--but Trent grabbed him.

"Hey! Don't leave me here. I'm serious, I won't know how to get back."

"I won't. Let go!"

"Promise! Don't leave me to get raped by bears!"

"What?"

Trent sat propped against the dirt wall, his pant leg rolled up: the ankle was eggplant-purple, elevated on what looked like a fox skull.

Gary checked the conditions outside. A drift blocked the entrance--he swiped at the snow to get a clear view. A complete white-out, a blizzard. He returned and sat near Trent. The shrinking gap shrieked; snow entered in puffs like fairy dust.

"Too bad I don't have my bottle. I could collect water with it."

"Yeah, too bad."

After a silence, Trent said, "I went back to South last year, just to look around. It's really changed. I hate how it looks now, none of the character like back when we were there. They even took out the Johnny Reb from the lobby floor."

"I don't miss that."

"What?"

"All that Confederate stuff. The Confederate flag getting waved at pep rallies. It's embarrassing to think about now."

Trent grunted. "Just more political correctness run amok."

"Right. So you don't have a problem with people waving Confederate flags?"



"Not really. Who's it harming? It's just a stupid flag."

"African-Americans! Wow, I can't tell if you really have these opinions. Is it possible you're this crazy?"

"Now the mascot is a penguin. How sad. How *boring*."

Gary checked his phone for the twentieth time: no signal.

Trent coughed. "Damn, I'm tired."

They huddled against the wall. They were silent for a long time.

"I've been dreaming about my brother a lot," Trent said. "He died last year."

"Oh. Sorry."

"Some funny dreams. Back when we were kids, so real... And some really weird dreams... He was gay, you know."

"Mm."

"He came out to me a few years ago. And... I was really hurt. I felt so much guilt about it, like I should have done something as his older brother. But then someone at a convention I didn't even know that well came up to me and said the Holy Spirit had spoken to her. She said the Holy Spirit said to tell me that I should give my albatross to God."

"Albatross."

"Yes. Now, she had no idea what *albatross* meant, but I did. I knew immediately what I had to do. And so I gave my albatross to God."

"But why an albatross?"

"Don't you know the Wordsworth poem? An albatross is a symbol of guilt. And it was because I felt guilt about John being gay. But I told him I forgave him, and in his last year we really started to connect."

Trent wiped at his eyes.

"Hey, I'm sorry. But..."

"What?"

"You do know, I hope, that being gay is not wrong."

Trent chuckled. "There's the Gary Van Pelt I know. The sanctimonious prig. Always eager to lecture everyone."

"I'm not *lecturing*. I'm just saying, in reference to the alba--"

"Just like your hero, Bernie Sanders. Always with the scolding and the lectures. What a crock. What a fraud. You understand that now, don't you?"

"Absolutely not. What an offensive idea. Bernie Sanders was the most authentic and caring politician we've had in decades."

"Maybe if people like you and Sanders hadn't created this atmosphere where being gay was okay, then maybe my brother would still be alive."

"Okay, I don't want to argue with you. You're insane. And your movie sucks. It's typical of people like you to be so racist. It just comes naturally, I guess."

"Ha, ha. This is your worst nightmare, isn't it? Being trapped in a cave with *me*."

"Don't flatter yourself."

"You want it all. You want to tell everyone how to live--"

"Not at all. Not at all! I have *no* interest in telling you how to live. Just to *let* live. Yeah?  
And, by the way, I remember you talking about Ayn Rand all the time, but then *you* are the ones  
telling us what to do. Not to mention--!"

"Oh please, you--"

"Not to mention! Let me finish my point! You go on and on about the hero individual and  
then it was Rand herself who received social security later in life!"

"That's a liberal lie, that's just--!"

"It's a *fact*!"

"This country is heading toward disaster and it's because of liberals who play politics  
with the money of hard-working Americans who--"

"We've had more growth under Obama than any other--!"

"No, we haven't! He's been the worst job-killer in fifty years!"

"That's ridiculous. Just like everything you say. But I've had enough of this--"

"No, you don't! Just because I'm winning!"

"I'll gladly argue day and night with you, and *win*, but it's pointless because you're just--"

"No, you're not going to leave me here! No--!"

"Let go, asshole!"

"NO!"

"Goddamn you...!"

\*

A Red-naped Sapsucker flashed past. Brian was sure of it. Excited, he stumbled down the slippery ground made hazardous from snowmelt, spearing his staff as he went. He got down on one knee and froze. Was that the speckled tail? He grabbed for his binoculars.

No. Just another Swift.

Then he caught sight of movement in the trees. Boots slipping, he made his way over the gleaming rocks. There he found a mound of melting ice and a tangle of branches. The Sapsucker was possibly nesting in there. Brian crouched and, heart pounding, cleared away the branches and other debris. It was a cave. Light wavered inside. He inched forward--

He screamed.

Two corpses. Their decomposing heads tilted close to each other, jaws open, eyes black pits. Brian sat, not believing, shaking, barely breathing. He felt a sadness, tears welling. From the position of the bodies he assumed the two had been lovers.