

SIX NINETY NINE NINETY SIX

The rain delay sent us into opposite corners. I sat looking out the window. On the other side of the Rest Assured store, my son fiddled with his phone. We had been listening to the Phillies game on my dad's radio, like I did when I was young, but then the rain came. The Crosley was still on, but the sound was just white noise. My boy Jake was seven, and I had no option but to bring him to work. It was a favor for my ex-wife. Some unexpected *thing* came up, and so we spent the day waiting, not expecting much action. Jake had always been a Phillies fan, but now that his mom was dating a guy from North Jersey, he was getting interested in the Mets. Just horrible, really.

"If you want anything to drink, there's a fridge in the backroom," I called to him.

He said he was okay.

"We have another hour of this," I said. "Sorry it's been so boring."

Through the streaks in the window, I saw a silver sedan race across the parking slots. The cherry blossoms now damned the storm drains. A woman and a teenager exited and walked across the parking lot of the Peach Orchard Shopping Center. I grew up in this area of South Jersey, and I'm not educated, but I know irony. When we were young we would dare each other to steal a peach. I would run as fast as I could, hop up, pluck a peach, and race back to the smiles. Now I just sit, waiting. As the two drew closer to the store, half hoping they were shopping for phones at Verizon, I realized I knew the woman. We met at a singles dance, a PBSN event. Professional Business Singles Network. About four or five weeks ago. We danced

and talked and had some drinks. I was rather vague about my sales gig, and I didn't have a card or a LinkedIn account. I looked her up online and showed my mom the Google pics. She said the woman was "way out of my league."

"You said that about Katherine," I said.

"And was I right?" she said.

A year after the divorce, I wasn't having any luck with the bar scene. I'm a mattress salesman, so I'm not sure if that makes me a professional business single. On most days I mess around with a tie that I never fully clasp. My neck has sagged some. It's not like I sell the mystique of a Mercedes. The last time I buttoned the top button was on my wedding day. That it choked me tells you all you need to know. I guess someone in the major leagues would know all about a Windsor knot and cufflinks and buffed shoes. I'm not sure what type of car Janet drove – this woman from the dance was named Janet, but she was major league, I guess. I found it difficult to dance with her and keep my obvious arousal, let's just say, in the dugout. What was that they used to tell kids at dances? 'Keep enough room for the Holy Spirit?' Sound advice, I guess, but now there's enough room for the state of Texas. Well, that dance was the best chance I had since the divorce papers. I watched some soft-porn on Youtube with lesbians making out, and I just projected Janet's face onto the white pillowtop beds. Judge me all you want, but at least I'm honest. I stay away from raunchy porn. I don't need to see male appendages. I don't need money shots or close up couchie shots. I make sure the women aren't too young because it gets perverted, considering I'm old enough to be their dad. Just two women making out on a bed for a minute or two is just fine for me these days. Anyway, I called Janet. I didn't give a crap what my mom said. We got along well at the dance, like I said. I left two messages, maybe three, and after a week, I just gave up.

But now she was coming into the store.

I would normally use my rain sale pitch, but seeing Janet again threw off my usual salesmanship. The bells above the door jingled. She wedged the door open with her black boot. “Will you get in here Justin?” she said. The boy, despite the rain, lagged twenty feet behind, holding his phone. She shook a dripping stub of a navy blue umbrella. “You’re getting soaked!”

“Yeep,” Justin replied, strutting with black sneakers covered in pink cherry blossoms. The boy was probably fifteen. The kid pulled a black hat over his forehead. The rain had made freckles on his black shirt, half-tucked over his baby fat tummy.

“Good afternoon,” I said.

She slowly unbuttoned her jacket and scanned the store. She was just as attractive as I remembered. She had plump lips and wore an overpowering perfume. Underneath her jacket a tight orange blouse and low-rise jeans defined her reconstructed figure. She was around forty-five, I guess, with long black hair tied up. She reminded me of Queen Nefertiti. I know I fall in love much too fast. I guess it’s stupid to call it love. It’s probably what throws women off me. Too much enthusiasm. It’s tough for me to play coy, disinterested. I imagined a nice dinner out with Janet, a quiet but busy place where I would not use a coupon or a Groupon, even though that’s the only way I went out with my ex-wife, Katherine. I would pick a place where someone might know me, to show I was known in the community. Local boy, well liked, and all. I would purchase a bottle of red *and* white, not knowing Janet’s preference. It would be no Wegman’s six dollar bottle either. Or a cheap box wine that I would oxidate in the blender. I would consult the store experts and the Wine Spectator score cards and examine the bottle and the country, and purchase a fine value for under fifteen bucks. The bottle would break the ice, and get us comfortable while we talked about our sons and our careers and our break-ups. I read mostly

nonfiction, and not all sports related. I had one book all planned to discuss: Hampton Sides wrote this marvelous book called *In the Kingdom of Ice* about the first arctic expedition, and it goes nut crazy. I love true adventure stories. I had another book lined up too, that I read for this date that never happened: *Close to Shore*, all about the shark attacks along the Jersey shore that led to the writing of *Jaws*, my all-time favorite movie, after *Raging Bull*, and *Dog Day Afternoon*. And oh, *On the Waterfront*. I wondered if she was a DeNiro fan. I'm no DeNiro or a Brando in a wife-beater, but I know my way around film. And after dinner, we would see a movie, and then maybe ice cream afterwards. I can always tell how a woman enjoys sex by the way she eats. Katherine would play with her food, flicking this piece here and there and nibble nibble and take most home that would crust over in the back of the damn fridge. She never once licked a soft serve. She always used a petite spoon and a cup. Just awful. I'm sure she just saw me as someone so crude she could never rehabilitate in her upper league fashion. At the end of the date with Janet, I would shake her hand politely, and ask if I could see her again. I have old-fashioned values in a world that seems to value nothing that isn't online. Janet would smile, chuckle even, if the wine was still working, and say she would be "quite pleased" to see me again. Thrilled, I would have been surprised if I made it home without jerking off in the car.

"Good afternoon," I repeated with hesitation, approaching her. I half feared she would recognize me, but after standing there like a doofus, I knew I was safe in my anonymity.

"My son needs a new bed," she said flatly. "I guess it's a twin size."

"Yes. And my name's Stan," I said. "*Stan*. Short for *Stanley*. Looks like he's outgrown a toddler bed."

"Are these the twins?" the woman asked.

“Yes, but those aren’t the only twins on display. All of the models can be ordered as a twin. This model here, The Dreamstate Pose Sleep Excelsior II, is the lowest quality I wish to sell. . .”

But she wasn’t listening because she pulled out her phone from her back pocket. From her conversation, it seemed like she would be awhile so I eased back onto the bed. My son took no notice of the two customers. I’ve always wanted to ask him what he thinks of my job. I want him to know that all work is valuable, and that he really shouldn’t be embarrassed. I give him things that money can’t, like bonding over baseball stats and stuff. Janet snapped me back when she asked for a bathroom. I pointed through the store. “I just cleaned it this morning,” I said, but this for some reason startled her. Then it started hard: the rain on the roof, and what rain. I approached her son Justin who was pushing down on each bed.

“Can I ask you a question?” I asked. “If it’s none of my business, you can just tell me to back off, Mattress Dude. But what’s with your hat that says “dope?”

The kid continued staring at his phone, his fingertips foxtrotting across the screen.

“You’re either advertising you’re a dope addict or you’re an idiot. You know, a dope means an idiot. And why would you want people to know that about you?”

“Whatever. It’s just a word,” the kid said.

“Ah, like cool?”

“Suppose.”

“What kind of car does your mom drive?”

“A Jaguar.”

“Now, that’s dope!” The kid didn’t laugh. I pointed to my car, parked all alone. “You see my ride? A 2005 Honda Civic. Stick. 4 banger. 170K. And it goes 0 to 60 . . . eventually.”

I realized he didn't want to talk about cars. I'm not sure he could make eye contact, utter more than a few syllables, or even shake a hand. Jake had a few years left before those awful teenage years. Was I seeing the future with my own son? I wasn't a punk kid. I followed my mom everywhere and didn't give her hell at all. I was a model teenager. Never caused waves. I glanced at Jake and wondered when he would start rebelling against me. Perhaps it already started with the Mets thing, or being sore I missed his home opener. If I didn't have customers I would have walked over to Jake, hug him, and promise not to be a douchebag dad. My dad died when I was ten. My dad didn't live long enough to reveal any douchebag qualities. I had to start working, and I never stopped. There was no one else, as I was the oldest.

I asked Justin what his mom did for a living. She was vague at the dance as well.

"She has her own company," he said. "It's a dog walking service."

"She walks dogs?"

"Yeah, walks dogs."

Janet startled me with a cough and, with the edge of contempt, asked, "Were you helping us or not?"

Embarrassed, I scrambled off the bed. I had been keeping an eye on her kid, making sure he wasn't up to anything funny, and I told her he was a fine boy.

"He's a pain in my ass, if you really must know."

"Then maybe it's you who needs a new comfortable bed, right?"

Her son had moved to the Canyonland Rhapsody Pillowtop King.

"Feel free to lie down," I suggested. The kid stretched out with his arms and folded them around his head. A mess of cherry blossoms dirtied the foot of the bed. He reached out and turned the knob of the radio. The knob came off.

“Hey! That’s my radio! My Dad’s old radio!”

“Alright, alright,” he said, trying to wiggle it back. “Who cares?”

I wanted to thrash the rotten punk, but I wanted sale and his mom, so I joked that he mustn’t be a baseball fan.

“It’s beat,” the kid replied.

“Beat? It’s the All-American pastime.”

“It’s the All-American *beat*-time,” the kid replied.

“What do you think of the bed?” the mother asked hurriedly.

“I don’t like this one.”

“How about this one?” she said, sitting on the next model. “I like this one.”

The boy peeled one of the cherry blossoms from his sneaker, rolled it, then sniffed it and smirked, “Mom, that’s a P.O.S.”

“Watch your language young man!”

He flicked the blossom like a booger and said, “I didn’t say piece of shit.”

“You shouldn’t talk that way to a lady, young man,” I said.

She stared at me. “Please. I can handle this.” Then she turned to her son. “I’m warning you. We can leave right now. Listen. When it’s your money you can...”

Her cellphone rang out again. “If this is your father again!” Janet sat on my cluttered desk. Jake rolled away from her in my executive chair. He liked to roll around the room, but now he just rolled closer to the wall, transfixed on his phone. I was offended, really, that she did not recognize me. True, it was dark at the dance. True, perhaps she had a few drinks. But it wasn’t that long ago. She couldn’t have been too into me if she didn’t start stalking me online, looking for any evidence not to date me. As she talked, she picked up the wooden frame with the picture

of my son Jake in his baseball uniform. I suddenly felt inspired to help this boy so I asked him to check out the beds. I pushed on the mattress. “This one’s got the right amount of give.”

“What?”

“Go ahead. Lie down. Don’t be shy. This one’s *just* right,” I said like Goldilocks.

Just then I heard a thud, and broken glass.

“Oh,” she said, looking down. “I must have nudged it.”

The oak frame fell. I said it was okay. It was cheap frame bought with a 50% coupon from AC Moore. I picked out the chards from the edges of the frame. A jagged point sliced my finger. I snagged a tissue from my porcelain baseball dispenser and wrapped it around bloody finger. The picture was not damaged.

“That’s Jake,” I said, showing the picture. “My son. He’s over there. He’s quite a player!”

“I can see the resemblance,” she said as she glanced at her watch. She asked her son: “Have you tried every bed in the store?”

“Yep.”

“Which one does he like?” she asked. I pointed to the one. “How much is it?”

“Just the mattress costs six hundred and ninety nine. And ninety-six cents. And that comes with a full nine year and three hundred and sixty five day warranty.”

The woman said she couldn’t see spending that much on just a twin, but I assured her they went even higher. As the boy tossed and turned on the bed, he said, “This one is just right, this one is juuuuust right.”

The mom said she wasn't expecting to pay seven hundred dollars for a mattress. Justin arched his back and pulled up his pants and smiled as he ran his hand over the white pillow top. "It's Dad's money," he said.

I nodded my head, and thought, touché, and pointed my finger like a gun.

"Let me discuss it with my son."

I walked to the window, fingering the grooves on the golden knob of the radio, wondering about the game. What did it matter? Phillies fan, Mets, fan. Win, lose. The sun goes supernova. It's all a wash. Why should the result of a game interfere with my mood? And what did it matter what I said about the mattress? And what did it matter that I was a mattress salesman on a soggy Sunday afternoon? I just plug numbers and fill out forms and collect credit card numbers. As I waited, I chewed on the pen. Damn oral fixation, right? Even if they both walked out now, I wouldn't have cared. I'd track down a band-aid, follow the game, if the radio still worked, and hug my son. Then with a wave of her hand, Janet called me over. A summons. They decided to get the one the kid liked. "After all, it is his bed," she said.

"Excellent," I said.

As I collected her credit card and pulled the proper forms, the boy stood by my side wearing his black 'dope' hat. While I was happy with the sale, I knew I liked her less for her decision. She lacked sound, financial judgement. She lacked the ability to say no to her son. I couldn't be with a woman who had no sound money sense. And her son rode her like a horse.

"Keep that thing off inside!" the mother said. "Don't you have any manners?"

"Nope."

I wanted to call Jake over to calculate my commission on the sale. It's the way to learn math. I'm always showing him how much I save and how much the man takes out in taxes and

Social Security, which I'll never see, unless I reach eighty. Soon the rain was horrendous; like the monsoon scenes from third world countries, the rain that drowns oxen. "Looks like we're under Niagara Falls, huh?"

She didn't hear or care. She just browsed through her phone when I asked, feeling my gut clench: "Listen, don't you remember me?"

The question didn't register. "I'm Stan. Stanley Rybeck. Remember? That PBSN dance?" I ask louder. "We danced, had a nice time, and you gave me your number."

"When was that?"

"A few months ago. It was winter then. Cold as anything."

"Why, yes, I do remember. I'm sorry. It's been so long."

"I left a message, two messages, a third with your son. How come you didn't call me back?"

"Oh, I don't know. I don't think I ever got the messages."

She scanned the phone some more. Scrolling, scrolling, scrolling. Then she said, "Justin, this guy's ripping us off. There's a mattress on Amazon that gets rave reviews. Free shipping. It's got 4,703 reviews, and mostly all 5 stars. Plus, I get 3% back on Amazon. I didn't even think Amazon sold mattresses!"

"They sell everything," he said.

"It's only \$350!"

"So half price?"

"I can put that savings into a college fund," the mom said. "Those grades need to improve!" She looked at me squarely. "Because I want to my son to college. It's essential nowadays, right? College."

I tried to save the sale: you can't trust reviews. You got to test a mattress. It's something you use everyday for eight hours, and you can't cheap out on something so essential as lumbar support and what price can you put on a solid night sleep? But I knew I lost. So I showroom the wares, and then they click, and find something better. I don't know if Tuft and Needle compares with the Ortho-Posture Valleybrook WhisperDream 3000. Everything goes by a different name, and I have to sit here day after day to make distinctions over quality. In another year, this store just may be a yogurt store, or another burger joint, or a senior urgent care.

I asked if there was anything I could do. When she asked to bring it down to \$350, I said there was no way I could compete at that price point. You see, now everything is just about price. There is no personality anymore. The middle men are just cut right out.

"Will you get over here, Justin?" she demanded. "This has already wasted enough of my day. We didn't even have to suffer through this." She opened her navy umbrella. She insisted that Justin stay with her. "Or you're gonna get really soaked!"

I walked toward them. I didn't want Jake to hear. I told her that I may have lost the sale, but all may not be lost. I still had her number. I pulled it out from my wallet to show her, to prove to her that at some point in her life, I was just fine to go out with. "Would you like to catch dinner? I'd really like to hear more about your dog-walking business."

Janet hesitated and looked at her son. He just shrugged his shoulders. She raised her eyebrow and said she was awfully sorry, but she was rather involved in many things, and didn't really have any spare time. "Nothing personal," she said.

"That's okay," I called out to her. "If you have friends, tell them I'm having a rain sale."

I watched them cross hurriedly across the parking lot. The lights flashed on the Jag. Her perfume remained. I noticed that Jake sat by the radio now. He had reattached the knob. He

turned on the volume and said the rain had stopped and the game was back on. I said that was a good thing. And it was a good thing that I didn't go out with Janet. She would have cringed at the torn seat covers of the Civic. She would have quietly criticized the creases in my pants, the frayed edges around my shirt collar, the meat that was too well done, the wine that was not chilled enough, and that my nose hairs were not plucked to satisfaction. And I didn't need any of that. I can get that anywhere, even at home. And I can remain comfortable in my mom's crumbling two-bedroom rancher in Pennsauken that I will inherit after her death. There's a PBSN event at the Sheraton this weekend. And sure, I'll be okay. Hope springs eternal, right? Whatever happens, I'll be okay.

I was about to sit down with my son. The Phillies were losing 8-nothing in the 7th inning. It was a half an hour to closing when the bells jingled on the door. An elderly couple walked in with a black umbrella, but I told them that we were closing.

"But the sign says you're open until five," the man said.

"Sorry," I said. "Can't be helped. It's an emergency. Try Amazon. They never close."

So I moved with Jake to the car, listening to the rest of the game. For dinner we ate soft serve cones from McDonalds. I told him I would like to see his next game. I wiped a glob from Jake's nose.

"Why did we wait for the game when we knew they were going to lose?" Jake said.

I didn't know what to say. He's no dope. It did seem like a waste of time. Maybe, I said, it's like a family, and when someone is having a bad day, or a bad season, it doesn't mean you walk out, right? It's all about hope.

He pulled out his phone. "I'll check to see if the Mets won."