

## **The Girl With Colitis Goes By**

You awaken with the sinking feeling that you are having a sinking feeling. Downstairs in the kitchen you make black coffee, eat a plain piece of toast and stare out the kitchen window. The neighbors are having breakfast too. You watch them closely, as if you're in a Hitchcock movie. You are Jimmy Stewart in a wheelchair. You are looking for clues. Clue number one: The woman reads the newspaper and wipes her nose. Clue number two: The man drinks orange juice and eats bacon off the woman's plate. Clue number three: The little girl looks up from her cereal bowl and waves at you. She waves almost frantically as if she is trying to tell you something. Her mother looks up at you as well. But her look says; *If only I had put up curtains.*

She is your ex-wife.

She left you nine months and three days ago for your neighbor, Curtis, a professional bowler from Australia. You had run into him a few times, while he was washing his car or coming and going with groceries, different women (none of whom you found particularly attractive) or occasionally carrying what you now realize were bowling ball bags. You said polite hellos but tried not to engage. He seemed like the kind of guy who could talk your ear off until you were forced to lie about where you needed to be.

When your mutual friends Sam and Carol ask what happened over drinks you tell them the same thing you tell anyone who asks: You were both happy or you thought you were both happy. You are a broken record but it's the most you can say without your voice rising and cracking like you're going through puberty again. As you nibble mindlessly on fried calamari you tell them at first you thought she was joking but quickly

realized she wasn't when she started throwing things out of drawers and on the bed. You leave out the part where she yelled, "Jesus, Nick, when are you going to grow the fuck up?" Or the part where she said, "You are so emotionally disconnected, it breaks my heart." Or the last weepy message she left on your cell phone in a soft but resigned voice; "I love you, Nick. But you really don't know a damn thing about my life. And you never even thought to ask." You ask them if they think she's crazy. They nod politely, looking away at the flatscreen TV above the bar. You tell them you always seem to be getting women wrong. They seem relieved there is a police car chase on the news. *Always*, you mumble to yourself above the din of sirens.

Later that week your sister Amy insists you talk to someone. She tells you she is tired of getting drunken phone calls from you at two in the morning. You're fine, you say. You don't need to talk to anyone. You change your mind when you find yourself on Amy's doorstep crying like a five year old. Your nephew Bryce (who just turned five) asks her what's wrong with Uncle Nick. "Nothing," she says, "Uncle Nick is just sad about life. Sometimes," she tells him, "people just get sad."

The first thing your new therapist Vicki tells you is that you didn't do anything wrong. She tells you it just comes down to communication and people don't always communicate what they want. "It's the number one reason most relationships fail," she says like she's the keynote speaker at a conference. As she tells you this, you think to yourself, Vicki is surprisingly sexy. I want Vicki. You picture her bent over her pristine white couch as you pleasure her from behind. You picture her begging you not to stop as she calls out your name. When she tells you your time is up, you don't move. Instead you

begin to sob uncontrollably. In a shrill, almost girlishly high voice, you tell Vicki it kills you to watch Curtis eating breakfast and laughing and smiling with your wife and daughter while you watch like it's a Reality TV show. If only there was a remote for you to change the channel. Vicky wants to know why you insist on watching them in the first place. Vicki wants to know why you wouldn't just change the channel, or better yet, smash the TV with your bare hands. "Metaphorically, of course," she says holding the door open for you." Vicki also thinks it would be best if you came back two, maybe even three times a week.

When you first met her she was making jewelry and selling it on Mulberry Street on the lower east side of Manhattan. On the way to your favorite cupcake shop one weekend, you got up the courage to say hello. Her easy smile, her slight build, and auburn hair drew you in. At dinner that night you talked about war, and music, and the hipsters you both mistook for homeless people, and Fellini movies and about muses and how there aren't any anymore. She said it was because women were relegated to not being artists back then and had to inspire instead. You liked that she was an artist. You found her inspiring.

To impress her you tell her you are a semi-famous keyboard player from a semi-famous eighties band. She didn't seem impressed and never heard of the band. You were slightly disappointed and Googled yourself to show her pictures. She thought you were the cutest one by far. She loved your hair and wondered how much hairspray it took to keep it so...big. She tells you she saw a tree frog that morning that changed its color to

look just like the tree it was clinging to, right in front of her. By the time the chocolate pot-de-crème arrived, you were in love.

Back at your tiny cottage-slash-music-studio you drink two more bottles of red wine and play Beatles songs for her on your old Korg. She insists that you are singing the lyrics all wrong and you are. But you don't let on. You want to make her laugh more than anything. "Well then," you say, jingling the keyboard like a lounge singer, "we'll just have to agree to disagree." She leans over and holds your cheeks in the palm of her hands. She kisses you hard. Her lips are a symphony. An orchestra of feelings you've never felt. Your arm slips onto an A minor flat on the keyboard that sounds like a prelude to a Duran-Duran song. You belt out Hungry Like the Wolf and with each chord you realize you should have kept kissing her.

Three years in to your marriage she stopped kissing you. You went to the dentist for a teeth cleaning, just in case. You stopped eating garlic. You bought mints and flossed twice a day but mostly you grew apart. Now she and your daughter live next door. When she pulls into her new driveway *right next door* you can't help but blurt out: "Hey, Carol! How does it feel to be a bowling trophy wife?" She gives you the same look of disdain she gave you at her lawyer's office when you asked if she wanted to grab dinner sometime.

"Don't be an asshole, Nick," she says and slams the car door.

She is carrying grocery bags filled with flour and sugar and blackstrap molasses and fresh blueberries. You will miss her homemade pastries. You've decided if they ever knock on your door and ask for a cup of sugar you will not give it to them. No matter what kind of strudel is involved.

You teach music and social studies at the local high school. In your *Cultures of the World* class, you ask a group of sleepy tenth graders who haven't yet discovered the wonders of coffee, what makes a culture? You prattle on about how diverse cultural groups use their geographical environments and resources to maintain physical, social, and economic structures. You can't help but think of Mr. Australia making the most of his geographical resources by stealing your wife. As you get to the chapter on colonization, you discover a warm, salty mist coming from your eyes. You save yourself and your dignity by putting on an old PBS documentary on race and class in America and slip out the door quietly.

In the hallway you run into the pretty blonde algebra teacher you kissed a few weeks ago after a staff softball game. In the passenger seat of her car she leaned in, her lips warm, her breath milky. At some point her hand had inched its way inside your pant leg. "Why, Mrs. Robinson," you joke, not only because she's older but because you can't remember her first name. Darlene? Darla? Denise? You try not to be too charming or smile too much. You don't want to invite possibility. Still, you fuck her in the backseat of her Prius. As you drop her off she invites you to a potluck dinner on Friday. "I'd love to," you tell her, "but I'm all out of luck."

After school you pick up your daughter from her piano lesson. "What did Beethoven do when he died?" she asks as she puts on her seatbelt.

"What?" you ask feigning an alarming sincerity.

“He de-composed!” She laughs a hearty, guttural laugh like her mother. When you drop her off she insists you come in and say hello to Mr. Pickles, a flea-ridden, stray cat you found and both nursed back to health last summer. According to her, Mr. Pickles hasn’t been too happy here. “I don’t blame him,” you mumble quietly so she doesn’t hear. Like Mr. Pickles, your curiosity gets the better of you and you go in. Unlike Mr. Pickles, you have a knowing feeling that you will end up in a tree and not be able to get down without the help of emergency services.

Inside, the house is overgrown with bowling trophies. They are tangled on mantles and strewn across bookcases. A few tall ones are anchored about on the floor like garish sculptures. You notice right away that they are mostly second and third place finishes. Through a large mirror with a giant silver bowling ball emblazoned on it, you notice Mr. Second Place standing behind you. He is drinking a beer like he stepped out of a damn commercial. There is a vacation-like quality to him. Like he’s been on a cruise ship too long. “Hiya, mate,” he bellows. “Quite a collection, eh?” You turn to find him admiring his own hall of mediocrity instead of addressing you. You, on the other hand, can’t take your eyes off him. You’ve never seen him this close up. You study him. Like a mole that might be skin cancer, he is changing shape right in front of you.

He is ruddy all around. His face, his neck, his forehead, even his voice is full of crevices. You can see how someone could accidentally fall in. His eyebrows are thick and wiry. His unshaven facial hair reminds you of bristles from an antique brush. His earlobes are long and his hair is thick and unkempt. What the hell does she see in him? It can’t be his cheap aftershave. You decide it must be hidden away in his accent. So you listen as he talks.

“No hard feelings about the old lady, eh, mate?” you hear him say.

“Hard feelings?” you say. You didn’t mean for it to be a question.

“Yeah, mate. The heart’s a funny thing, isn’t it?” He turns and looks directly at you, drumming up what appears to be sincerity.

“Is it?” you ask, never intending to start a conversation.

“Yeah, these things just happen I reckon.”

But you are thinking the exact opposite. You are thinking it must have taken an awful lot of planning. A lot of late night phone calls and clandestine meetings at bars or hotels or (god forbid) bowling alleys. Maybe even *your* favorite bars. It’s a small town. Were you being warned cryptically on cocktail napkins or with songs from the jukebox? You recall hearing Johnny Cash on heavy rotation.

Your daughter interrupts. “Daddy, want to see my room? I have a new goldfish named Burt!” She tugs at your hand.

“Not now, sweetie,” you say, staring at him and his worn, leathery eyes.

You try not to picture seedy hotel rooms but you do. You imagine him asking if they have an hourly rate because he’s too cheap to splurge. You imagine your ex-wife going along, slumming it because at least he’s not *you*. You imagine her night after night looking out your kitchen window and across the yard (that you mowed that morning) *at him*. Signaling to *him*. Blowing kisses at *him*. Her eyes saying a thousand different ways, I don’t want *him*, I want you. Were you there too, roasting a chicken? Asking naively, “who wants more potatoes?” Suddenly you are getting warm. Your face is flushed. You can’t feel your hands. Your ears are ringing.

“No sense anyone getting your knickers in a bunch, is there?” he says, guzzling the last of his beer and still talking with that goddamned accent. Somehow you end up on the

floor with Mr. Second Place in a headlock. You clamp your forearm across his neck. Your leg is wrapped around his hip. You are tightening your grip. He coughs and spews. He is very red. He is getting redder. Your daughter is crying and yelling. “Daddy, stop it! You’re hurting him!”

Later that night, as you get ready for bed, an old Beatles song keeps playing in your head: *Look for the girl with the sun in her eyes, and she's gone*, it keeps saying over and over like a mantra. You try but you can’t turn it off. Like your mind has a mind of its own. You begin to worry that maybe this is what insanity feels like. Luckily you are seeing Vicki on Tuesday. And Thursday. And Saturday. As you fall asleep you imagine her throwing off her heels, and undressing for you slowly. Her blouse first, then her pants, her underwear. She tosses her bra on the floor like a piece of paper and straddles you. You wrap your arms around her ample firm hips, pressing your head against her heart. She is an oak tree in a storm. She runs her long hands through your hair, holds your head up towards hers and whispers, *Poor, sweet boy. Poor, poor, Nicky.*

In the morning you make black coffee, eat a plain piece of toast and stare out the kitchen window. Crumbs from your dry toast fall into the sink. Their tiny breaded bodies crash onto the hollow shores of the stainless steel. The neighbors are having breakfast too. The man and woman are arguing. The woman appears to be crying. Her head bent slightly as if each tear needs a reason to fall onto her lap. The little girl looks up from her cereal bowl and gives you a faint smile. Like she is trying to tell you something.

*End*