

Shouldn't Isn't Can't

November 1981

Chet Devero laughed when he saw Plug, Walt's '65 Dodge Dart: flaking scarlet lips on the grill; on the hood a faded pair of intertwined dragons: one blue and green, the other red and orange; an Octopus's Garden on the passenger side; a jungle complete with vines, monkeys and parrots on the driver's side; and bison crossing a prairie on the trunk. The auto body man squinted at his shaggy visitor.

"Sure you wanna paint over all this?"

"It's time," Walt said.

"Gettin' a haircut too?"

"Hadn't planned on it." Walt's long bushy hair was a hundred shades brown to gold, accenting a somewhat less frizzy beard.

They circled Plug together, Devero scuffing the paint with a pen-knife. "Not a bad sanding job. Put grease in the keyholes before you mask 'em – if paint gets in you gotta replace your locks. I'd say –" he rubbed the back of his neck and circled the car again. "Five or six hours. Don't know how it'll take paint."

"How much will this cost? I'm pretty broke."

Devero's eyes lit. "Matter of fact, I got some paint I'll sell cheap. Had it custom mixed – supposed to be gold, but it came out babyshit brown. The client wouldn't buy it, so here it sits. I'd love to get it off my shelf. With my labor on the sprayer, I'll let it go for \$35."

"I can handle that. When can I bring it in?"

"I'll be here Thanksgiving morning, till three. Get here at eight to do the prep and masking, then I'll run the sprayer."

"How long will it take to dry?"

"An hour max. See ya at eight Thursday." They shook hands. "Oh, and cash for the paint and my time."

"Traveler's checks OK?"

Devero squinted at him. "Only one kinda cash I know of."

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Walt resumed phone book deliveries, feeling odd: he'd started a landslide and now everything around him was in motion, going down. He'd knocked Anna loose from whatever was anchoring her, and his recent encounter with the law had started a bigger slide – his housemate Romo quitting the pot-dealing business, the prospect of the whole household getting busted, and now he was set up to paint over his past. Maybe Devero was right about his hair. But by the time he finished his route Boulder Barber was closed.

In his kitchen – cracked green floor tile, bare light bulb, a mismatched collection of cabinets stuffed with six residents' stashes of grains, flour, beans, and things to cook them in – he relaxed, tilting back in his chair, knees against the edge of the varnished butcher-block table. He was thinking about dinner when Anna called.

She said, "My friend Burke wants to meet you – join us tonight for cheesecake at eight downtown."

After hanging up he asked his housemate Barbara, a California blond, if she ever cut hair.

"No, but my friend Rita does. She might be around this weekend – I'm not sure if she has Thanksgiving plans."

"I mean now."

She gave him a sideways look. "What's going on Walt?"

"Don't you feel the earthquake?"

"Romo's really freaked out – in two years I've never seen him like this. I mean, he's never had to kick anybody out of this house, but Pick isn't going to stop smoking weed here."

"Right. I've been given the fun task of finding our resident stoner a landing spot."

"You don't think he got the vibe?" Barbara said.

"Oh, no doubt, but Romo's feeling some urgency – he doesn't want to get back from that Dead show in Houston and have to 'Plant Pick's sorry ass in a snowbank and pile his shit on top of him', as he put it. That concert will be his last hurrah."

"Wish you were going?"

"Nope. I have business here: paint my car, get Pick on his way –" He almost said 'propose'. What a ridiculous idea, but that's what he wanted to do – kiss Anna's fingers and ask her please please –

Barbara smiled watching his expression change. “That girl’s really under your skin.”

An hour later, shaving-mirror in hand, Walt sat on a stool in Rita’s kitchen. She, like Barbara, was from the Bay Area – another glossy palomino type, though auburn not blond.

“How do you want it cut?” she asked.

“Short.”

“With this much beard?”

When he left Santa Cruz two years ago he’d just let it grow – told people shaving was a hassle on the road, but the truth was, his flourishing hair kept him from noticing how everything inside had stunted and died.

“Hell, why not?” he said finally.

“Then do that first, so I can cut your hair based on your face – there’s stuff in the bathroom.”

It felt very strange to be using someone else’s shaving cream, razor, sink – but he felt like someone else, hitchhiking through, heading for new territory. The attention people gave his car had provided him a niche, helping him hustle work in small towns. Plug was still broadcasting that message – which his shagginess reinforced. Time to present himself as a man with purpose. He turned his left cheek toward the mirror and scraped – he didn’t crave the mainstream but he wasn’t going to avoid it any more, if it went where he wanted to go. His moustache went last – once he was comfortable exposed, he’d decide whether to let any of it grow back.

Rita and Barbara nodded, the shine of their eyes all the approval he needed. He broke up grinning. “Let ‘er rip.”

Rita pinned a sheet around him and experimented, combing his hair back. “You have a good forehead – let’s show it. Would an inch be too short?”

“I trust you. Do what looks right.”

He closed his eyes, spirit growing lighter as she clipped away. His scalp tingled; as a layer disappeared the world breathed closer. Eventually, Rita announced he should look. His forehead, nose, and cheekbones were tan and everything below them irritated red, but here was his high school graduation picture, only now he was leaner, older, seen

some miles. Again he had that avalanche sensation – as long as he kept moving he'd be OK, but if he stopped it'd bury him. *Silliness*, he reminded himself. *Lightness*. Rita brushed loose hair away then unfurled the sheet. Standing amid the gold and brown twists, he coiled one on his finger.

“Got a baggie?” he asked Rita.

“I just bought new guitar strings – one of those envelopes should work.” She gave him a clear one he tucked the lock of hair into.

“Gonna sell this?” he gestured to the clumps on the floor.

“Maybe. If anyone thinks it's worth money, you want some?”

“I got the cut I want,” he laughed. “What kind of music you like, Rita? I'll buy you a record.”

“The Go-Go's – *Beauty and the Beat*.”

On their walk home Barbara chattered while his head got cold; he decided to buy a hat. Forgoing dinner he drove downtown and parked by the army surplus store. With fifteen minutes till they closed he tried on berets, Union army hats, driving caps, thought long about the brown felt cowboy hat with feathers on the band – nice, but he'd only been on a horse once. Then he saw the fedoras and liked the look, as though he'd just stepped out of *The Maltese Falcon*. He chose a charcoal gray one – the most he'd ever paid for a hat but he was due a check Monday for the phone book deliveries he'd done so far. The distribution center was open Friday – he could stock up and work the whole weekend.

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Once the cheesecake plan was set, Anna got restless – Burke was bound to say something, intentionally or not, that would make her squirm. But thinking about it wasn't going to help so she went walking, and pretty soon she was pacing the length of the downtown brick mall. Too cold to sit, too soon to go into the deli – she window-shopped. This town never stopped changing. In high school she'd joked that if you got tired of Boulder you could hang out in a different neighborhood for six months, then when you went back, half the businesses would be new.

Potter's had been a drugstore; now it was a bar, a busy pickup scene stocked with cokeheads in flashy clothes. Noise spilled out as she went by. In the next block a guy in a fedora tipped his hat as he passed her, then she heard “Hi Anna” in a gruff voice. She

turned, wondering if she'd imagined that – the guy was standing a few paces away looking at her, arms crossed over his chest, head cocked to one side, a slanting grin on his face.

As though he knew her. She stepped closer, examining him; he stood like a piece of statuary. When she was circling behind him, Walt's voice said, "Hi Anna."

"No!" She shot around in front of him, grabbing his arms. "No – it can't be."

He laughed. "Why not?"

"But where's your hair?"

"Saved you some." He handed over a square clear envelope.

"But –"

He put his hands on her shoulders and leaned in to kiss her. She started to fight him off before her lips told her, 'Wait, I know this mouth.' His brim was bumping her forehead; finishing their kiss, he plucked off the hat then put his arms all the way around her.

"Come with me?" he said into the back of her hair. "I'd like to do something I never did before."

"Such as – ?"

"Take you to a hotel room and love you till it's time to meet your friend."

She pulled back – *who the hell* – "You've really changed."

"Not very much. It's just hair – it grows, you cut it. Or else you don't. I realized this evening it was the history of a lost man. I don't feel lost any more."

"Well I do – you knocked my feet out from under me."

"So I can catch you and lay you down. Please?"

"You said I was in charge," eyeing him askance. Which was what he'd told her before, when she was shying away from intimacy.

"You can say no." He watched her face. "Ever say no?"

"No."

"Then say it now."

"No."

"No you won't say it, or 'no'?"

She shook her head. "This is absurd."

“Yeah,” he grinned, and without his beard his amusement seemed twice as wide.

“You really want me to say no.”

“Anna Karenina Brubaker, I want you to say what you mean, whatever that is.”

He set his fedora on her head – too big – it sat on her ears. “Can I buy you a hat?”

She looked at the envelope in her hand, inside it all that remained of the man she’d fallen for. “Buy me a drink, mister.”

“Anyplace you prefer?”

“The Catacombs.”

He offered his arm, she curled her hand around it and they walked around the corner and downstairs. Choosing a spot near the door he pulled out her chair, pushed it in as she sat, then plopped his hat on the table.

“I really feel like Anna Karenina now,” she said. Vronsky was a military man – in his pea-coat Walt looked like a sailor on leave.

“Then shall we drink champagne?”

“Yes.” She checked him out: the familiar – eyes, nose and forehead – and the new – flat cheeks and rounded chin – the whole of his face. It was dawning on her he was good-looking.

The waitress arrived with bottle, glasses and an ice bucket on legs. She popped the cork, poured, and iced the bottle with a napkin on its neck, then left.

“Cheers!”

Glasses in hand they looked at each other. Anna felt seasick.

“No wait,” Walt said, holding his fedora to cover his face, up to his eyes.

“Recognize me now?”

Her vertigo subsided. “If someone showed me pictures of five clean-shaven men and told me one was you, I’d never pick you out. I don’t believe it now.”

“So pretend we just met.”

She was counting on Burke to throw cold water on this impulsive attraction, but Walt all clean-cut might make a good impression – what if Burke encouraged him? “I just don’t get it – what do you want?”

He closed his eyes and sank back, smile expanding. “I want something so silly I’m not even sure –”

No, she wasn't ready to hear that. "So what triggered this transformation?"

"Well, jail time had something to do with it. And finding out your name, and meeting your namesake –" She'd brought *Anna Karenina* for him to read in jail. "And changes at home."

"What changes?" The less he talked about her, the better.

He leaned forward, she turned her ear to catch his whisper about a house meeting, a deal to relocate Pick.

"Gonna start wearing a suit?" she said with bitter sarcasm. Yesterday she couldn't have imagined that – now any sellout seemed possible.

"If I have to," he said. "I don't mind. My identity's not tied up in how I look."

"But the face you offer the world *is* your identity. You've destroyed the guy I –" Unable to finish that sentence, she hid behind her hand – she hated blushing when she was trying to make a point – some imp playing with her thermostat, upstaging her words.

"I can grow it all back – I just wanted you to see me. If you meet a clean-shaven guy and he lets his beard and hair grow out, you still know him. But if he's hairy from the start, you've never seen him – so you don't really."

I sure don't, she thought, while he continued enthusiastically, "You're the first person I've wanted to meet since I left Santa Cruz. Congratulations."

"Hope you don't mind if I close my eyes." With them open, gravity was on the job, but when her lids dropped she felt the earth turning, the magnetic field tugging her head north, moon pulling her tide. She swayed. These champagne bubbles were making her lightheaded – should've ordered a shot of vodka. Looking around the bare brick alcove helped ground her. "We better hurry up – Burke'll be standing around waiting."

He lifted his drink again. "Here's to you –" They clinked rims and sipped. He emptied the bottle into their glasses then stood, putting money on the table. "Let's go."

"We have to finish this first."

"While we walk – c'mon," he said.

"We *can't* leave a bar with drinks in our hands." Didn't he know anything?

"Sure we can – let's go." He shrugged into his coat, put on his hat and, cupping a glass against each palm with stems hanging between his fingers, led the way upstairs and out. As they headed for the deli he handed over her glass.

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Burke was pacing; spotting them, he said, “That’s illegal you know.”

“Right,” Walt said. “Help us get rid of the evidence.” He offered his glass, and after Burke took a slurp in solidarity, extended his hand. “I’m Walt.” They shook. “You know this woman?” nodding toward Anna who was looking dazed.

“I’m never sure,” Burke grinned. “Let’s go in – my feet are cold.”

They waited for a table, Walt still holding the glasses natural as you please, nobody showing a flicker of concern. When they got their booth he took one bench, Burke the other. Anna hesitated at the end of the table. Finally she decided she’d rather sit next to Walt than look at him – every glimpse of his exposed face startled her afresh.

They opened their menus, as though they couldn’t get cheesecake and coffee without reading about them first. When the waitress came, Anna agreed to split her piece with Walt, Burke ordered his own, and they all asked for coffee.

After she left, Walt tapped the rim of his champagne glass. “Don’t abuse words,” he told Anna. “You said we can’t leave a bar with drinks in our hands. But we did. ‘Shouldn’t’ isn’t ‘can’t’.”

“Actually,” Burke said, raising an admonitory finger, “In Russian they *are* the same word: *nel’zya* means “it is forbidden” and also “it is impossible.” The cohort in power had to keep the lid on tight – Russians have never respected authority.” He laughed. “But you’ve proven there is a distinction. Here you are, enjoying your bubbly in an establishment where you not only didn’t buy it, they don’t even sell it.”

“Seemed a shame to waste it,” Walt said.

Burke glanced around the busy room. “Nobody here seems to care.”

“Except Anna.”

“But Anna keeps track of all the rules, didn’t you know?” Burke said. “She’s given me severe lectures about the proper order in which to wash dishes, and how to construct *huevos rancheros* –”

“That’s because,” she huffed, “I’ve endured so many misinterpretations of a simple meal. The mistakes are almost endless: beans on the side, eggs on the bottom, a plate of chili with eggs floating in it and tortillas to mop up the mess – “

“OK,” Walt said. “How are they supposed to be served?”

“Layers: warmed corn tortillas on the plate, topped with refried beans, then fried eggs – absolutely not scrambled – and a sprinkling of cheddar or jack cheese on top. Chili or salsa go on the side, if you want them. But really, without a tortilla foundation there’s nothing to hold a bite together – might as well call it chili and serve it in a bowl.”

“I’m going to write Anna’s biography,” Burke said. “I plan to call it *The Right Way*.”

The waitress arrived with a tray and with the quick precision of a bird pecking up seeds, distributed their desserts, mugs of coffee, water, napkins, forks and spoons, and a small metal pitcher of cream.

After their first tastes of cheesecake, Anna said, “Walt, tell Burke about your week in jail.”

Burke raised his eyebrows.

“A cascade of errors,” Walt said. “A woman was assaulted in a downtown alley and the cops decided I was the culprit. Next morning she sort of ID’d me in a lineup –”

“ ‘Sort of?’ ” Burke said.

“She still had a headache, wasn’t really sure. But they didn’t like my out-of-state plates or my out-of-control hair so they kept me in jail –”

“What hair?” Burke said.

Walt laughed. “I think Anna’s a little off-center because a few hours ago I had a full beard and long bushy hair.”

“Really.”

“Show him your souvenir, Anna.”

She pulled the clear envelope from her jacket and handed it across the table. Burke fished out the twist of hair, letting it uncoil.

“Hm,” he said. “I see what you mean.” He curled it around his index finger. “But the cops didn’t cut it for you?”

“No – I just decided this evening. Anna didn’t know.”

“Well, that would explain her funk.”

Forking another tiny bite off the cheesecake, she glared at them both. “Burke, you were –”

“I was worried you were seeing a criminal. But now that I’ve met him, I think he’ll do.”

“Do what?” Walt said.

“Make her smile from time to time – between agonies, you know.”

“Agonies?” Walt nudged her gently. “Really?”

“Other people are the source of all my miseries,” she said. “On my own, I am a serene and happy person.”

“I dispute that,” Burke said, setting down his mug. “Serenity’s hardly one of your traits.”

“Because you enjoy disrupting it.”

“The Dalai Lama’s serene – a man who’s lost his country yet smiles and blesses people wherever he goes.”

“I never claimed –”

“And right now, with almost no provocation, you are again proving that ‘serenity’ is not a suitable word to describe your state of mind.”

“In her defense,” Walt cut in, “I have seen her very happy and care-free.”

“Thank you,” she said. Walt was pacing his bites of dessert to match hers, though he’d barely touched his coffee, drinking mostly water. “Burke, you wanted to meet him – shouldn’t you be asking *Walt* questions?”

“Right. So, jail. Mistaken identity – but they let you go?”

“There was another problem – while I was cleaning the Atheneum Theater, I found this really small baggie on the floor – white powder. I know a guy who’s a chemist, so I thought I’d have him identify it for me. It was in my pocket when the cops brought me in.”

“Coke?”

“No. Turned out to be a knockout drug. The assault I was suspected of? The victim had a spiked drink with a guy at a downtown bar – an hour later she was found unconscious in an alley.”

“I can see having that substance on you would be a problem,” Burke said.

“Took them six days to find a better suspect – but they didn’t seem that happy to let me go even after they charged him.”

“Well, that explains jail, but not your haircut.”

“It’s time to molt. I’m painting my car too.”

Anna turned to him, eyes wide. “No, no, you don’t mean that.”

“Yes I do. That’s how I’m spending Thanksgiving – worked out a deal with a body-shop guy.”

“Oh,” she said in a small voice.

“It’s a hippie-mobile,” Walt explained to Burke. “Went with my shaggy persona. So it’s due for the paint-job equivalent of a haircut.”

“You should see it, Burke,” Anna said. “Before he ruins it.”

“Now that I’m on the cops’ radar,” Walt said, “I think it’s time.”

“Makes sense to me,” Burke said.

In troubled silence Anna studied the coffee precipitate flecking the bottom of her cup. She’d thought she was on firm footing with Walt, but here he was yanking the rug – as though that guy she’d fallen for was an illusion. How was she supposed to trust him now? It appeared his hippie ethos of peace, love and going with the flow was gone too – leaving what?

Burke asked, “So is that janitor gig your only job?”

“Actually, that’s over – the manager hired a replacement while I was in jail. But pretty soon I expect to be driving a school bus.”

“Buy some earplugs,” Burke advised.

“A raincoat, I was thinking,” Walt said, and they laughed. Then he talked about odd jobs he’d done – installing signs; minor repairs to lawn-mowers, chainsaws and cars; landscaping; picking fruit... “I’ve been on the move a while, making money any way I could, but it feels like time’s starting to slide away. I’m ready for some traction.”

As they got ready to leave the deli, Walt picked up his champagne flutes.

“Why’d you swipe those?” Burke asked.

“I didn’t – I left enough extra on the table to pay for them.”

“That’s got to be a first in a bar – maybe the waitress thought it was a really good tip.”

“That’s her business,” Walt said. “But I didn’t think it’d be fair if she got stuck with the cost.”

“But why –”

Walt shrugged. “We weren’t done with our champagne – ran out of time. Not to worry – I’ll find a use for ‘em.”

When they arrived at Plug, Burke admired the decorations, though he knew streetlight masked their true colors. The guys talked cars awhile, standing around while feet then hands then noses got cold. Walt offered to drop Anna at home, Burke said he was going to the jazz club if anybody felt like joining him. Anna vacillated till Walt made it easy by tipping his hat and getting in the car, driving away while she stood looking after him.

Every time she fell in love, her heart went into Anna Karenina mode: an ungovernable state of desire flooded her rationality. But Walt’s transformation had stranded her, forcing her to reconsider whether she loved the person he turned out to be. Maybe she ought to just walk away.

I can’t, she thought. Or do I mean I shouldn’t? Was rejecting him wrong, or was it simply impossible?