

Well Insulated

It was just housewives and senior citizens in the middle of the day at the supermarket on Reserve Street, with a smattering of the unemployed. Darryl, just showered, the backs of his ears still wet, was one of the latter. He wandered around the aisles, sweating under his coat, wondering where the morning had gone so quickly. Why had he gone shopping if the only things he could think to buy were a rotisserie chicken and a box of Red Hots? Finally, he made his way to the register. There was no line. It was a Thursday, after the lunch rush, and the girl working the express lane placed Darryl's items into a paper sack with slow precision. She was skinny, barely working age, with hair covered in a swarm of butterfly clips and a metallic nametag that introduced her as KYLIE.

“So, where you from?” she asked, holding the chicken up over her head in search of a barcode.

Darryl barely registered the young woman's curiosity as he fished for his debit card in the mess of ATM receipts and small bills in his wallet.

“California.”

He always said the word *California* in a lower voice than the one he used at home, with his wife. It was as if the number of times he'd said it had worn it down in his throat, and through overuse it had developed this deeper shade.

Darryl answered this question about where he was from more than any other. Far more commonly than questions about his name or occupation. Much more often than how his day was going or if he wanted cash back. His wife was always begging him to answer that he was born and raised in Montana. On a ranch somewhere, with cattle and church. Just to see how people would react.

It wasn't an unfriendly question, the way most people asked it. Just curiosity. There weren't a lot of black people in Missoula, Montana. People just never considered the possibility that they were the second person to ask that same question that day, the fifth that week, the nineteenth that month, or what it might feel like to be asked where you'd come from day in and day out like a foreigner, despite having a Montana driver's license and no accent.

His wife was also from California. She'd raised a daughter there. But that was a long time ago, and anyway, nobody ever asked her. Her icy blue eyes and raw, red cheeks made her look like she belonged to that shallow valley. People around there tended to look worn down, the same way the land was once worn down by miles of glaciers pulling boulders and skeletons of great beasts over it, digging pock-marks and deep wrinkles into the skins of the mountains. His wife looked the part in her oversized parka and skinny legs lost in faded Costco jeans.

She had followed her daughter up there in the middle of one of the worst winters. Her daughter, well, she'd followed a man there, and he was following some kind of dream inspired by outdoor magazines and REI commercials. The daughter was diagnosed with cancer and needed her mother. Darryl followed the whole mess of them because he didn't know what to do once the woman he loved flew off like some crazed bird, heading north in the middle of winter, spiraling right into the storm. He sat in waiting rooms while the young woman wasted away. When it was over, years had passed and they found they'd made a life up there without even noticing. They scattered her daughter's ashes at a bend in the Blackfoot River. The man her daughter had loved, the one who had brought them all out there, moved back to Sacramento.

Darryl had been a valet manager at hotels in Los Angeles and San Francisco. There wasn't much to valet in Montana. He'd had a lot of jobs since moving there. He worked in inventory for a while. His boss Chuck drove the employee van around with a rifle stashed under

the driver's seat and a pistol in the glove compartment. As the staff made their way to count sunglasses and cartons of cigarettes in mini-marts along winding mountain highways, Chuck told them stories of eating squirrel meat in the woods with his brothers up in Eureka and of shooting a moose mangled by an eighteen-wheeler to put it out of its misery.

Later on, Darryl worked for a truck washing company. He was the oldest one on the crew. Most of the others on the side of the highway wielding pressure washers like metal magic wands against the sides of muddy semi-trucks were barely out of high school. But he kept up just fine. He had a wide frame and looked taller than he was. He also worked for a local cell phone company, a car dealership and a nutritional lab down on the reservation. He liked the rez. He told his wife it was a nice change of scenery working up there. She understood he meant it was nice to be around some People of Color, as they would say in California. He found the company was pretty divided, Indians versus settlers. He chose sides without a second thought.

During a span of unemployment, Darryl worked for the temp company Labor Ready. They assigned him to different positions around western Montana. For a week or so he installed insulation in newly assembled homes out in Deer Lodge. Deer Lodge was one of those towns that made people thank God they didn't live there whenever they drove through it. That's just how it was. And Darryl did thank God every dark afternoon he got in the work truck and headed back home to Missoula. His wife might have dragged him up north to that horrible winter, and it's true she hated it when he watched football in the house, but she kept their simple home bright and comfortable and it was a good place to return to those nights. He'd lived in warmer climates with colder women, and he didn't miss it nearly as much as he could have.

As the job wound down, he was the only worker taken out to the site. On the last Friday working there, his supervisor left at noon, and the contractor for the new development agreed to

drive Darryl back to Missoula that night. Installing insulation was sickening work. A ring of sweat hung around his mouth all day long where a mask was held in place with tight yellow bands to keep the fiberglass out of his lungs. Any exposed skin was irritated by the sharp pink and yellow fuzz, and his neck hurt from reaching up high to staple the long batts of foam securely between the endless rows of two by fours.

It was already dark when he walked out to the blue Ford pickup parked at the end of the unpaved cul-de-sac. The light was on inside the cab, and the contractor sat behind the wheel, licking together a cigarette. Right away Darryl noticed two things: the .270 Winchester sitting in the gun rack in the rear window, and the faded tattoo on the back of the man's right wrist as he tucked the tightly rolled cigarette behind his ear. It was of a Confederate flag.

I don't have to get in, he thought, *I don't have to get in this fucking truck*. But as he looked around at the cluster of unfinished houses on the outskirts of that god-forsaken town, the wind crooning like a barn owl as it sped along the empty ground, he couldn't think of where else to go. And he was tired. A dry-lipped, cracked-fingernailed exhaustion pulled him deep into the bench seat of the pickup. He took off his gloves and blew on his gray palms, looking straight ahead at his reflection in the windshield.

The contractor turned to him.

"Bob's the name," he said, and nodded, as if agreeing with himself. The men were the same height, and as Darryl turned his face, he found himself looking straight into a pair of veiny blue eyes, framed by sagging lids. He immediately looked away.

"So, where ya from, Darryl?" asked Bob, starting the truck.

"California."

"Oh yeah? Huh. Never been. My son was in San Diego a while before he shipped out to

the Middle East.” He paused. When Darryl didn’t say anything, he continued. “He’s still there, fighting for a year now. Some bastards over there. Real tough.” He looked over to see Darryl nodding before returning his eyes to the road.

He talked about his son. About the guns he used and the letters he sent. He moved on to other topics and his voice filled the cab with a roughness that Darryl could hear although he stopped listening to the words somewhere between Goldcreek and Bearmouth. The forest hamlets were tucked away in the trees, knowable only as reflective white lettering on the green highway signs illuminated in the truck’s headlights.

Darryl was uneasy and kept his hands on his knees, massaging old football injuries. He kept watch over Bob’s movements out of the corner of his eye, even as his mind wandered. When Bob snapped up his sun visor without warning, Darryl’s whole body seized. But for the most part, the man driving prattled on about nothing in particular, and didn’t seem to notice whether his passenger was listening at all. Soon Darryl’s thoughts turned to his old commute, so different from this one, in Bay Area traffic ten years ago. He’d hated traffic then, but now he was thinking it hadn’t been half-bad. He’d had a 3 Series BMW that he couldn’t afford, and he loved using the seat warmer on the nights he thought were cold before he knew what cold was. He really got to know cold during his first winter in Montana. It was like encountering a celebrity that he knew about from movies and billboards, and then meeting them in the flesh when they pulled up in front of his hotel in Beverley Hills. Finding out they were a bad tipper and left trash on the floor of their car.

He didn’t know cold then. Only thought he did.

Silence filled the cab as Bob paused to take a breath, stretching his fingers out past the steering wheel. Darryl looked up and realized they were driving through East Missoula, about 10

miles from his car parked outside the temp agency. He let a full breath out of his lungs and watched it cling to the window beside his face.

“Well, ya sure don’t talk much, do ya?” said Bob, and Darryl felt accused. He’d been the talker once, when he used to golf for free behind the Ritz Carlton on his lunch break. He’d joined a foursome with Barry Bonds and his father one afternoon, and he was so nervous he couldn’t shut up, even though golf is a quiet game and everyone was trying to win. He’d talked through every stroke as the other men focused on the white ball floating up against the bright blue sky. Now he couldn’t think what he’d managed to talk about that whole time.

The silence in response to Bob’s statement had gone on a few seconds too long. Darryl turned toward him, looking at his tobacco-stained fingertips hanging over the top of the steering wheel, and said the only thing on his mind.

“Well, looking at your tattoo there, I’m not sure there’s much to say.”

“Oh,” said Bob, turning his right wrist up, as if surprised to find anything there.

“I guess that would...bother somebody like you, maybe.”

“Yeah,” said Darryl, looking ahead as they took the Orange Street exit off the highway, “I guess it would.”

“Ya know,” said Bob, his voice quieter than it had been the whole trip, “I got that tattoo a long time ago. I was a kid, I didn’t know what it meant. Just something that a lot of my friends cared about. I didn’t know it was bothering you.”

“Yeah, well, that’s all right,” said Darryl.

It was quiet in Missoula and the ice-covered streets were empty. It was quiet in the truck, too, as it coasted around the night’s slick corners. The two men sat still and uneasy under the shadow of the deer rifle like two sinners under a portrait of the Virgin Mary. The white and

yellow fluorescent sign outside the temp agency gleamed like a beacon at the end of the dark road. When they pulled up underneath it, Bob stuck his hand out in front of Darryl's chest.

"Have a good night, now." Darryl curved his own hand around awkwardly, so that his elbow jutted into the passenger-side window's cold rubber lining.

"Thanks," he said, stepping gingerly into the cold, dry air.

He drove himself home in his Toyota Corolla, so furious that he was blind. He didn't see the houses he passed or the white snowflakes that began to fall, spinning in front of his headlights. He couldn't see, could only feel, and what he felt was like a boot kicking him in his chest repeatedly so he couldn't breathe, either.

When he got home to the squat gray house at the end of Third Street all the windows were dark. He stepped out of the truck and forced a cold, burning breath into his lungs. He was home now. He had to calm down. As he fumbled with the house keys in his gloved hands, he wondered what his brothers—two dead, and the other estranged—would say if he told them he'd just driven some 80 miles with an armed confederate. He thought of his brothers most days, carrying on a conversation with the three of them in his head as if they were still teenagers in LA. They were silent now, though. Speechless.

He opened the front door and pulled off his work boots, pushing his thick, sore feet into a worn pair of house shoes. He shuffled down the hallway to the bedroom. His wife was there, lying naked on her stomach with the covers flung off, the sheets pulled up between her legs. *Night sweat*, he thought. He had the urge to wake her up. The edge of the bed sagged low as he sat down on her side of it. He ran his rough hand down her spine. She turned over, asleep but aware of his presence, and flung her arm out toward him. Her breasts spilled down either side of her ribcage. He rubbed his bald head with both palms. He wanted to shake her. He wanted her

teeth to rattle together. He wanted to yell, demand they get the hell out of this cold, colorless place where she was so hot at night and her silver hair blended in with the snow. He shuffled back down the hallway, stretched out on their second-hand couch, and turned on the TV. The Late Show was starting. He was asleep before the band had stopped playing.

Darryl didn't go back to Labor Ready the next day. He knew his wife would be annoyed as she woke up on her own, when it was still dark, to get to her job keeping the books at Bitterroot Motors out on highway 93. But she didn't say anything because their bills were paid through the month, and she only said something to him about work when their bills weren't paid. When he had first moved to Missoula, she was broke from her daughter's medical bills. He had supported them both for as long as there was still tip money from parking Porsches and Lamborghinis in Beverly Hills. So she didn't say anything. Unless there were bills to pay. He drifted between wakefulness and dreams as she made ready to go, running her fingers through her jaw-length hair and pulling wool socks on over her dry, flaky heels so that the fibers snagged and crackled like static as she pulled them up to her calves. As she left, she gave the front door a good hard slam, and he woke up with a start.

He wandered into the kitchen, heated water and cracked eggs into a pan. The thermometer outside read five degrees. There was frost all around the edge of the window above the sink. He knew he was lucky to be warm in the kitchen wearing a thick sweatshirt, with coffee brewing and butter sputtering in the pan. On days that cold it was a privilege just to stay inside. But he was ill at ease somehow as he slid the spatula under the delicate white membrane of his breakfast. His brothers started talking to him.

Chris started it, his voice in Darryl's head soft like it had been when he was alive. It sounded as real as if he was standing right there at the stove next to Darryl, a carton of orange

juice in his hand, about to take a swig, *“I can’t believe you survived that shit.”*

And then Arnold chimed in, loud, insistent, *“yeah, man, that was some bullshit. Who gets a tattoo like that and doesn’t know what it means?”*

Darryl wondered, *“what if he comes after me?”*

Bruce, never one to get upset or lose his cool, said calmly, *“if he wanted to kill you, you’d be dead.”* Bruce spoke slowly, his deep, gravelly voice reverberating in Darryl’s mind. His was the voice of reason and always had been.

Arnold cut in, *“but what if he couldn’t figure out how to get rid of you afterwards because your supervisor knew you going home with him?”* Arnold loved a good conspiracy.

“You’ve gotta watch out around there,” said Chris. *“You never know what people are gonna do.”*

Darryl nodded to himself as he poured coffee into a bright yellow mug.

“You were dreaming this morning, before I left,” said his wife a few nights later as they were eating dinner and watching the evening news.

“I was?”

“Yeah, you said clearly, three times over, ‘yeah well that’s all right. That’s all right. That’s all right,’” she chuckled. *“What were you dreaming about?”*

“Can’t remember.”

Bob had been in his dreams several nights in a row. Sometimes they were just driving, saying nothing. Once Bob’s face had contorted into an evil grin and he’d cocked his wrist back behind him, reaching for the Winchester. He hadn’t told his wife anything. He had wanted to talk to her about it that night when he came home, but not since. He wanted to let it stew and fester for a while yet. If he told her now, she would put her hand on his arm. She would say, *that must*

have been so hard for you. She would want to talk about how difficult living in Montana could be. He didn't want to talk about it anymore. He just wanted out.

Darryl ate the last bite of rotisserie chicken and stood up, clearing their plates as he did so. Thursday night football was on and the Broncos were playing the Chiefs.

"I'm going to watch the game at the Press Club."

"Just watch it here," she said. "I don't mind."

"Yes you do." He kissed the top of her head, "and it's no fun when you're rolling your eyes the whole time."

When he walked into the bar he took a seat at the far end in front of the TV. He felt the pale winter faces swiveling in his direction as he walked past. He knew if he returned their stares they would look back down at their drinks just as quickly.

"Hey, Darryl!" called the bartender, who always remembered his name. Usually Darryl appreciated it, but that night it made him cringe a little.

He heard his brother Arnold's voice in his head, "*you know he's thinking about you when he tells people some of his best friends are black, right?*" Arnold laughed, as much at Darryl as at the bartender.

Chris chuckled softly, too. Bruce was silent, but Darryl could imagine the look on his face: eyes cast to the ground, the corners of his mouth turned down like, "*what'd you expect, man?*"

The next day Darryl saw an ad in the paper for a position as a manager of a sporting goods store. He drove out there in the afternoon to drop off a resume. When he pulled up, he saw a giant orange banner that shouted "GUN SHOW! COME AND GET 'EM!" out over the slushy

parking lot.

There were forty-some tables scattered throughout the store, whose center aisles had been cleared out to make room for the guns. There were men and women milling about in wool caps colored traffic-cone orange and stiff jackets patterned with dead leaves. Darryl saw a boy who looked about thirteen pointing a shotgun out at the crowd.

“Pow! Pow pow pow!” he cried.

“Cut it out,” said his father, who was peering into the scope of a long-range rifle.

Darryl stopped at a table in front of a middle-aged man with a thin ring of red hair clinging to the crown of his head. He had freckles all over his exposed scalp. Several columns of handguns were arranged in descending order from largest to smallest on a white vinyl sheet covering his table. Darryl picked one up from the middle of the far left column. It was heavy and cold in his hand.

“That’s a nice one,” said the man, wiping his palms down his flannel-covered stomach. “.45-caliber bullet, real smooth trigger. Looks like it fits your hand, too.”

Darryl looked down. It did fit his hand.

“Got a lot of firepower, too, don’t it? Three magazines with fifteen rounds each.” He looked at Darryl, raising his eyebrows.

“How much is it?”

“That’ll run you four-seventy-five. But it’s a good quality gun. Not the kind that’s gonna jam on ya when ya need it.”

Neither of them said anything for a few seconds.

“Alright, I’ll take it,” Darryl said, handing the gun back to the man who quickly took it in his pudgy grip and replaced it in its column.

“I’ll get you one in a box,” he said, lifting the white vinyl tablecloth delicately with both hands as if it were a bride’s wedding dress, poking his head underneath.

“I’d really like to have this one here,” said Darryl, picking up the gun again.

“Uh, okay,” said the man, straightening up. His face was flushed from bending down.

“The box is back here somewhere,” he said, looking around behind him.

He turned back to Darryl.

“Have you ever bought a gun before?”

Darryl didn’t say anything.

“You’ll need to take it down there to the lady at the last table to register it.”

“All right,” said Darryl.

“Well, here ya go,” the man set the box on the table between the rows of guns. With his free hand, Darryl reached into his jacket pocket for his checkbook.

“So, uh, where are you from?” he asked as Darryl filled out the seafoam green slip.

“Me?” asked Darryl, zipping up his jacket pocket once more. He cleared his throat and looked down at the gun lodged in his palm. “I’m from around here.”

It only took a few days for his wife to notice the money missing from their joint checking account. He hadn’t done anything to hide it.

“Are you fucking insane?” she shouted when he told her what he’d spent it on. “I don’t even know where to start. With the fact that you brought a gun into this house? With the 500 dollars you spent when you’re not even working, on some toy!”

“It’s not a toy,” he said, raising his voice to meet hers. “It’s for protection.”

“You sound like a crazy Montanan!”

“Well, if you can’t beat ‘em!” He threw up his hands, shouting, “these people are armed! They’re racist. And I’m not taking it lying down!”

“Not taking *what* exactly? After ten years of nothing happening, what exactly are you not taking anymore?”

Darryl didn’t have an answer for that. Instead he said, “look. I’ll keep the gun in my car. It’s not a big deal.”

“Darryl!” she screeched, “*football* is too violent for me! I can’t sleep knowing there’s a gun in the driveway!”

“You’ll get used to it,” he said, opening the door to an icy wind that cut through the warm living room.

“Where the hell are you going?” she called after him.

“The shooting range!” he shouted back.

He didn’t go to the shooting range. He didn’t even know where one was. He just drove around, wasting gas. He briefly considered going back to the sporting good’s store and buying ammunition, or at least dropping off his resume. He’d forgotten to do it before. All the adrenaline from holding the gun had pushed everything else from his mind. But he didn’t really want ammunition. And he really didn’t want a job managing a sporting goods store.

“*What are you doing out there, Darryl?*” he could hear his brother Bruce asking him, his rough voice was like a door creaking open on rusty hinges.

“I don’t know,” whispered Darryl, to himself, to his brother, to the light fading beyond the brown hills at the end of Reserve Street. The truth was, he’d never known. He never thought he’d stay long enough to find out.