

Everyone Is Gone

Owning a Dollar Bin franchise wasn't making Luke Ralo wealthy, but he gave off the smell of having come from nothing. Barbara Timoney found his wispy moustache and uneven teeth endearing. Besides which, he was a philosopher, and he was always good for a laugh. Just this morning while she was checking out, he had shown her a plastic cherub on a key chain.

“Look, water goes here,” he said, unscrewing the cherub's head. “Then, squish! He goes pee-pee! Very good for a joke.”

Barbara lowered her chin to look over the top of her glasses and saw the plastic penis, barely thicker than a strand of spaghetti, through which the cherub was able to dispense such lusty entertainment among friends.

“Hmmp,” she said. “I guess I'm too old to appreciate those kinds of jokes.”

“No no no!” Luke fired off the words as enthusiastically as the cherub would likely spray the unsuspecting. “Always, you stay young in here.” He thumped his fist on his chest. Then he shook out a plastic bag to stow her masking tape and steel wool soap pads. She handed him two dollars and sixteen cents and they smiled at each other.

* * *

At home, she found the cat up to his usual tricks. He was a rescue kitten who had come to Barbara small enough to rest in her palm and so young it was impossible to discern any outline of his future personality. For a week, he had mewed and shivered as she transitioned him from eyedroppers of milk to softened kibble. Then, seemingly overnight, Barbara found herself living with a 16-pound gray-and-white tuxedo who never met a soft paper product he didn't love.

Barbara saw the devastation the moment she opened the door. "Mr. Meow!" She used the voice she once had employed to get her students to sit down and pay attention. She followed the trail of shredded toilet tissue into her bedroom. Mr. Meow looked up from the bed, his white paws curved around the remains of the roll, and shook his head to dislodge a strand of tissue hanging from a whisker.

"Mr. Meow!" Barbara said again. This time she used the voice that preceded a call to the principal's office.

* * *

Barbara's daughter was coming for dinner. These visits were not Barbara's idea. She hadn't liked to cook when Annette was growing up but had put on a show of it, tearing Crock-Pot recipes from the newspaper and studying her copy of Betty Crocker. When Annette left for college, Barbara felt lighter. She was unable to tell whether it was the relief of having delivered her daughter, close to 100-percent functional, to the world at large, or the fact that she would never again have to pretend to enjoy cooking.

Annette was a good girl. She knew enough to bring takeout from China Garden. Still, her visit necessitated vacuuming up the shreds of tissue. Where had Mr. Meow found that roll? Barbara thought every last one had been shut away. Luckily, the Dollar Bin sold toilet tissue for cheap.

Mr. Meow and Annette didn't get along. The first thing Annette would do when she walked in would be to wrinkle her nose. On her previous visit she had accompanied the nose-wrinkle with an eye-roll and a "Jeez, Mom, it smells so—catty—in here," to which Barbara had replied, "That's not what 'catty' means."

Now they left the subject of Mr. Meow alone, though they couldn't completely ignore him. He spent the duration of Annette's stay perched on the uppermost level of his cat condo, glaring down at Annette with his yellow eyes.

* * *

Luke Ralo had many things to worry about in his life, so it seemed peculiar that he would worry about a middle-aged white lady who was nothing to him but a customer.

She had been coming for months, first once or twice a week, then nearly every day, before he asked her name. It had been a Tuesday morning and there were no other customers in the store, so he didn't mind chatting her up.

She seemed surprised to be asked. "Mrs. Timoney," she said. "Well, that's what my students called me. My name's Barbara."

"Timoney? Timoney, really?" he said.

"Yes—"

“Such a coincidence! You see, the country I come from, it’s East Timor. So funny, you have a small part of my country in your name.”

“I see,” she said.

He could tell she didn’t see at all. Most people were not moved by the undercurrents of the universe, which, attended to and correctly interpreted, added up to a magnificence beyond words. But then, most people did not lose everything and move halfway across the world.

“Luke Ralo,” he said. “That’s me.” He didn’t extend his hand over the counter because that would have seemed too intimate.

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Ralo,” she said.

He had felt obliged to object. “Please please please, call me Luke.”

Now the problem of what to do about Mrs. Timoney’s absence throbbed in Luke’s gut. This was the kind of thing that happened on his favorite TV shows—Law and Order: SVU, Without a Trace. Someone disappeared and nobody noticed. Afterwards it seemed obvious that something ought to have been done.

Luke found himself thinking of her especially during slow times: late morning, after the Hispanic mothers came to buy cleaning supplies and christening gifts but before the office workers on lunch break stopped in for sticky notes and hole punches; and late afternoon, when suburbanites ordered helium balloons for weekend birthday parties. While he was going over stock lists or straightening the tools shelf, Mrs. Timoney’s face would appear along with that stab of pain in his gut. But what was he supposed to do? He knew only her name and some of the long list of items she had bought. He didn’t know where she lived. Could he call the police and say, I’d like to report my customer missing? Of

course not. So he did nothing, and lived with the stabbing in his gut for ten entire days until she walked through the door as if she had never been gone.

* * *

“So, where did you go?” Luke Ralo asked as he rang up Barbara’s egg slicer, placemats, and toilet tissue.

“My daughter dragged me on vacation.”

“You have a daughter.”

Something about the way he said it seemed accusatory. Barbara looked up at him as he filled her bag.

“Yes, I do,” she said, watching for a sign that he cared one way or the other. There it was: a minute narrowing of the space between his eyebrows, a little sag to his usually cheery cheeks.

“A daughter can be a comfort,” he said.

“Ha!” said Barbara. “You haven’t met mine.”

“Where did she take you?”

Barbara was not sure she wanted to say. But she had been so miserable for the week, had so missed her apartment, Mr. Meow, and her trips to the Dollar Bin, that she now felt the answer well up unbidden. “Coronado,” she said.

“Yes yes yes!” Luke was saying in his gunfire affirmation. “I have been! The Hotel Del, that is where you stay?”

Barbara nodded.

“It is beautiful, no?”

Barbara did not know what to say. How could she explain the desolation she had felt lying awake at the far edge of the king-sized bed listening to Annette snore? That she had a daughter who snored and no husband, that the school district had given her no choice about retirement—she had asked for none of this! And to be deprived of Mr. Meow, of the props and comforts of her life—it was too much.

Luke Ralo had been the bright spot in her week away. She had thought of him as she used to think of her husband Patrick when they first dated, letting a little of him leak into her mind and warm the whole of her. She thought of Luke while at a restaurant with Annette, facing a Caesar salad composed of three spears of Romaine, five croutons, and a cross of anchovy fillets. She thought of Luke while walking beside the tufted dunes in the fog. She thought of him while brushing her teeth before the oval mirror above the chrome taps. If she hadn't known better, she would have thought Luke Ralo was her lover.

And now here he was, asking about the vacation. Instead of answering, Barbara felt her hand dart to the display of peeing cherub key chains. She plucked one from its hook and laid it on the counter while she reached again into her purse and handed Luke another dollar and eight cents. The breadth of his smile made her wish she had bought the cherub months ago.

“You surprise your daughter!” he said.

As Barbara left, the hanging bell looped over the top of the door tinkled and Luke called after her, “See you tomorrow, Mrs. Timoney.”

* * *

Dinner was a disaster. Not the food—China Garden had come through as usual, although Annette had insisted on steamed broccoli instead of Buddha’s Delight. She worried about Barbara’s cholesterol. She worried too much, Annette did.

No, the disaster came after the meal, while they sat in the living room watching Survivor, with Mr. Meow glowering at Annette from atop his cat condo.

“These people are letting themselves be made jackasses of!” Annette said.

Barbara winced at the dangling participle. She knew the bikini-clad, bronze-skinned contestants were not real people but she liked to pretend they could have been. A few reminded her of former students.

“When I go to your house, I’ll watch the shows you like,” she said.

Annette rose from the couch. She made that face she always made and walked toward the window. From the corner of her eye, Barbara saw her daughter in dangerous proximity to Mr. Meow. She ought to warn Annette but at that moment the contestants began arguing about which direction to go for water. Barbara kept her eyes on the TV.

Annette’s screech drowned out the argument’s resolution. “Your damn cat scratched me!” She retreated to the couch, tugging her shirt down over her shoulder and twisting her head to assess the damage. Barbara pushed her glasses up and leaned toward her daughter. Two bright lines of blood ran along Annette’s left shoulder blade. Barbara sighed.

“I’ll get some hydrogen peroxide.”

There was none in the bathroom, but she remembered buying some at the Dollar Bin recently. It would be in the hall closet.

She didn't realize Annette had been following her until she opened the closet door and heard the gasp behind her.

"Mom—what the hell?"

How must it have looked to Annette? The closet contained no coats or shoes, no hats or gloves. From floor to ceiling were stacked Dollar Bin items: baskets, bath sponges, mascara brushes, styling gel, fly swatters, cutting boards, corkscrews, boxes of spaghetti, photo holders, sunglasses, salt shakers, wrenches, glue sticks, tube socks, medicine spoons, bathtub appliqués.

"What is all this shit?"

Barbara kept her back turned. "Oh, stop with the complaining."

She knew exactly where the hydrogen peroxide would be. There it was with the other first-aid items—the no-name bandages, the cotton balls.

Annette went home after that, leaving a wad of bloodied cotton in Barbara's bathroom trash and the leftover Chinese food, improperly wrapped, in the refrigerator.

* * *

Luke Ralo tried to calculate Barbara's age. He began studying her face surreptitiously. It was hard to tell the ages of white women but he knew she had retired from teaching and her daughter was grown. He decided she was between 55 and 60, at most 15 years older than he.

He wished he had said more yesterday when she spoke of her daughter. But what could he say? I had a daughter. I had a wife. Enough time had passed that he could say the words. Still, when he did, it seemed another man came inside him to speak their names and recite the story. This other man painted only the broadest picture: how the dumb luck of his business put him in Dili while the Besi Merah Putih militia shot inside the church in Liquiçá. A line sliced into his life, before, after.

Really, could he speak of that among the party balloons and peeing cherubs?

A daughter is a comfort, he had said. He smiled to realize Barbara Timoney was becoming a comfort to him.

* * *

“I can’t do this anymore,” Annette said.

“Do what?” Barbara asked.

“Worry about you.”

“Then don’t.”

“Ma, you know what I mean.”

Another dinner done. This one Barbara had ordered: kung-pao shrimp, egg rolls, beef chow mein, cholesterol-be-damned. Annette’s nose had wrinkled as she unpacked the cardboard containers onto the counter.

“I really don’t know,” Barbara said.

There were still five minutes before Survivor. Annette took no chances and sat at the end of the couch furthest from the cat condo. Tonight, though, there was no sign of Mr. Meow.

Annette leaned toward the coffee table and used her finger as a miniature broom to sweep dust and crumbs into a pile. “This!” she said. “This is what I’m talking about. And the hoarding.”

“The what?”

“All that crap! Where do you even get it from? Every time I come over there’s another bag of something in the closet. I saw you’re putting stuff under your bed now.”

Barbara stood up. Too fast—she felt her heart beating in that hollow space at the base of her throat, powerful enough to choke her. As if she could feel inside her mother’s chest, Annette went on, “And your heart. I saw what the doctor said. Your cholesterol is through the roof. Your blood pressure is terrible.”

“Heard,” Barbara said. “You heard the doctor.”

She looked away from her daughter. Where was Mr. Meow? Barbara wanted him in her arms now, the mass of his body, the engine of his purr. She walked over to the cat condo and began raking her fingers over the putty-colored carpeting covering the platform, gathering clumps of fur that had collected there. “I don’t know what to say,” she said.

“Listen, Ma. There’s a place just a couple miles from me.”

“A place?”

Annette slid forward on the couch, jittered her knee. “It’s really nice. All redone. They have different levels of care, from completely independent to assisted to full medical.”

Barbara squeezed her fist around the ball of fur. The action made her think of the peeing cherub. She turned from the cat condo and went to the hallway where her purse hung on the closet doorknob. She found the cherub and took it into the kitchen.

Annette was following her again.

“Ma, would you just at least listen to me?”

Barbara stood at the sink and unscrewed the cherub’s head.

“I have something for you,” she said. She filled the cherub’s body, twisted the head back on, and turned to her daughter. “Surprise!”

* * *

“It’s called Oak Gardens,” Barbara said. “Have you ever heard such a ridiculous name? Oaks don’t grow in gardens.”

She stood at the counter before Luke Ralo, empty handed. She had not come as usual in the morning but in mid-afternoon and had not shopped, had not even browsed, but headed straight to the front and waited until the two kids buying ice-cream sandwiches finished counting their change and the bell on the door ceased tinkling behind them.

For the first time in a long time Luke’s powers of positive thinking deserted him. He could have said, Mrs. Timoney, this means your daughter cares deeply

about you. He thought about saying, It's only a bus ride away. He wanted to say, I am so sorry.

Instead he looked into her eyes. The irises were brown on the outside, green-gold on the inside, flecked like a cat's.

She turned away. "I'm going to need a cart today."

She spent more than an hour in the store. Customers came and went. Luke rang them up, all the while sensing Barbara's presence as she pushed the cart through the aisles. Her pace reminded him of how his daughter would walk when she hadn't wanted to go somewhere, the slowness of her steps an act of defiance or the chimerical dance of someone about to become a ghost.

Luke's afternoon cashier came at three to help with checkout so he could restock and get ready to close at seven. Unchained from the cash register, he went immediately to where Barbara stood in the personal care products aisle. The smell of cheap soap surrounded them. She continued standing with her forearms resting on the handle of the cart as he approached. Then she lifted a container of strawberry lotion from the shelf.

"Do you think I should get this?" she asked.

Luke reached for the lotion. He made sure to let his fingers brush hers, coffee-colored skin against peach. He made a show of reading the nonsense on the side of the container, then handed it back with a nod.

"Come," he said. "I will send Juanita to the back. I myself will check you out."

* * *

Mr. Meow had to go back to the shelter because pets were not allowed at Oak Gardens. But there was no prohibition against things and Barbara packed up every last Dollar Bin item. Annette was paying the movers by the box.

Once the boxes were stacked in the new apartment Annette wanted to stay and help her unpack. Barbara knew what that was all about: a chance to slip things into the trash while she wasn't looking.

She sent Annette away.

The apartment was crowded and intensely empty. It smelled of old people and dinner left out too long. Barbara sat listening for the whisper of Mr. Meow's paws and the echo of Patrick's snoring. After a while, she began to hear also the accented detonation of Mr. Luke Ralo's laugh.

###