

The Deli Chick

6 pm. Sunday. Early December.

Driftwood Price Chopper. At the deli counter.

“Quarter pound of bologna, half a pound of Swiss. Finlandia,” I say.

“Alpine Lace is better,” says the Deli Chick.

“Yeah?”

“On sale, too.”

“It’s good?”

“Everyone says it’s the best.”

“I’ll take half a pound.”

“Honey ham’s on sale, too. Boar’s Head.”

“Too oily. And he hates it.”

“Try this.”

She carves off a sliver. It’s good. Nearby, Ryan - my eight-year-old - shoves a giant carving board into the cart.

“Ryan - put it back.”

“It’s bamboo. Hard bamboo. The whole thing!”

“We have, like, ten carving boards!”

“Really?” asks the Deli Chick, impressed. She chomps her gum like a roller-derby queen.

“No, not really,” I say. “Maybe four. Of different sizes, though.”

“The bamboo ones are better,” she says. “Stronger.”

“See!?” says Ryan.

“Better for the environment, too,” she says.

“See!?” says Ryan.

“How’s a regular carving board bad for the environment?” I ask.

“Well – forgetting the plastic ones – even the pine and oak ones wear out quickly.

Whereas these are made out of – ”

“Bamboo?”

“Which is a more plentiful resource, lasts five times as long, and is much easier to wash. Not that I’m saying you should get one...” Chomp chomp.

“See?” says Ryan.

“If you say ‘see!’ one more time, I’m going to put you through that meat grinder,”

I say.

“See see see see see see see see see see see see,” he says. “Put me through the meat grinder! Put me through the grinder!”

“Try this,” she says to Ryan, handing him a frail, whispery piece of ham.

“What is it?”

“Ham,” she says. “Try it.”

He smells it, nibbles. His eyes bug out.

“You hate ham,” I remind him.

“No, I don’t.”

“Half a pound,” I say. “Skip the bamboo.”

“Awww,” they say in unison.

“Frankie! Frankie!” yells a kid in a tuque and Rutgers sweatshirt to the Deli Chick. He whispers in her ear, and pulls something – tickets – out of his pocket. Her eyes widen, excitedly. Nearby, I pick through raw red hamburger meat. Ryan tugs on my coat.

“Dad – that guy in the hat’s beating you out.”

“Mm. Want meatloaf this week?”

“You better make your move!”

“Ah.”

“Dad!” he pulls on my arm, staring back at the counter. “Now *another* guy’s asking her out!”

“Let me know what happens,” I say, moving on to poultry.

10:30 pm. Monday. Watching the Devils game in my basement with Don, both of us in full Devils-watching gear.

“What about the one you met online?” says Don. “Melody?”

“Melanie. Very nice.”

The Deli Chick/4

“And?”

“She looked good. A little tired. Couple years younger than me. Maybe forty-something.”

“And?”

“Divorced. Two kids.”

“Professional?”

“Pharmaceutical something. Very nice. Very stable. Lots of charity work on the side. Volunteers with MS kids.”

“Sex?”

“Just met her, dude.”

“So...?”

“I dunno. She likes Bon Jovi. She went on and on about Bon Jovi. Bon Jovi Bon Jovi Bon Jovi.”

“You don’t like Bon Jovi?”

I stare at him.

“So you’re picky now?” he says.

“I’m not into all this dot com stuff. Match.com. DriftwoodSingles.com. Jesus - I said I would never ever *ever* do this.”

“Yer a fuckin’ hermit.”

“My granmpa married once. And when my grandmother died he spent 35 years alone. And he was perfectly happy.”

“No doubt he was getting it left and right.”

“No doubt.”

“Dude – ” he glares at me. “It’s not good for you. And it’s not good for Ryan when his number one role model is a cranky and depressed shut-in all the time.”

But I ignore him and watch the game.

9:30 pm. Wednesday. Price Chopper parking lot.

It’s freezing out. I’m bundled up, packing my bags into the car. The lady in the car next to me opens her trunk – but then her bag breaks and groceries spill out everywhere. Reaching to pick things up, she loses another bag and then everything’s all over the place. I crouch down to help her. The wind whips around, fiercely.

“Thank you!” she yells.

“No problem!” I yell.

“I told him he was packing it too heavy!”

“Y’gotta pack your own bags!”

“He wouldn’t let me!”

She pulls her scarf down, and – guess what? It’s the Deli Chick.

“Hey! How’s your son?”

“Good. Great. Home with a cold.”

We’re hopping back and forth, shivering.

“He’s sweet!”

“Thank you. Yeah. I think that’s all of it!”

“Thank you so much! What a nightmare!”

“Sure. Goodnight.”

“G’nite!”

And we head quickly to our cars. But I stop. And I’m outside of my body - watching myself stopping. Watching myself doing this utterly crazy thing.

“Hey – !”

And she rolls down her window.

“I – I don’t mean to be – to be – I don’t know – creepy or weird or – ”

“Uh?”

“Never mind.”

“What?”

“You wouldn’t want to – get a cup of coffee – with me – sometime?”

“Well,” she says. “How about now?”

“Now?”

“Or in an hour? I just need to put my groceries away.”

“Oh – okay. Sure. I’m Nick, by the way.”

“Frankie,” she says.

An hour later. In a booth at Leo Coffeehouse.

“My ex has a whole other family, now,” I say. “Guy has two kids. Two girls. And now they’re having one together. It’ll be Ryan’s half-brother or sister or - whatever. I don’t even ask anymore. But it’s fine. It is what it is.”

“And he gets along with them all?”

“Yeah. When he sees them. Which isn’t much. Sees them on the holidays. They’re three hours away. Which is a little too close, a little too far – if you know what I mean. But the worst of it was over a couple years ago.”

“Tough raising him yourself.”

“Nah. My mom helps out. She’s there now.”

Her shoulders sink, relaxed.

“So, the deli, huh?” I ask.

“Yeah. The deli,” she says. “I smell like meat all the time. And my feet and back are always killing me. But it’s fine. Not what I planned to do.”

“Does anyone plan to cut meat?”

“Oh sure. The Deli Manager comes from a long line of – of – ”

“Deli Managers?”

“Seriously. He does. Cutting meat’s a whole family tradition with some people.”

“But not you?”

“I got laid off six months ago and a girlfriend told me they needed somebody a couple days – ”

“And you’re still there.”

“And I’m still there. I don’t like to brag, but I’ve put on, like, fifty pounds since I started.”

“All that meat – ?”

“Cheese. I’m a vegetarian.”

“How can you work at a deli?”

“I’m not killing the fuckers. I’m just slicing and serving ‘em.”

She grins.

“I am so less hungry now,” I say, smiling.

And she looks at me, looks into my eyes. And a little electricity goes off that I haven’t felt in about ten years.

“Oh hey! There’s one perk,” she says. “The deli manager got me an iPhone!”

She pulls out the latest iPhone. It’s nicer and newer than mine. And I’m suddenly stupidly jealous.

“Kewl, huh? It’s my first one.”

She leans closer to show it to me. And she does have a smell – a good smell – like meat and lavender. And the phone rings suddenly. And we both jump, surprised.

“My boss,” she mouths, soundlessly.

“Yeah? Hello?” she says, answering.

“Deli emergency?” I say.

“Hey,” she says. “Yes. Yeah, it works! Works fine. Uh huh. Okay. Great. No problem. Bye.”

“All good?”

“Wanted to know if I could do mid-day shift tomorrow.”

“Can you?”

“Yes.”

“Well, now I know why he got you an iPhone.”

I stare at her, knowingly. She blushes.

“Please! He has kids!”

“If I was Deli Manager, I’d get you an iPhone, too. Probably get you three iPhones and a Vespa.”

“Stop.”

She puts it away, sees me glance at my watch.

“You have to go?”

“I – well – yeah, I should.”

“This was nice.”

“Yeah. It’s nice seeing you – y’know – without a blood-stained apron on.

Although you wear it well.”

She smiles. And then she’s quiet, thinking.

“What?” I ask.

“I dunno. Nothing,” she says. “Well - I thought I’d ask if you – I dunno – wanted to come back and smoke a joint with me or something.”

“A joint?”

“Oh-my-God! Did I just say that? That sounded like a 15-year-old, didn’t it?!

I’m such a loser.”

“No! No. Not at all.”

“No?”

“No.”

“So...?”

An hour and a half later. Frankie’s apartment. In bed.

Not how I had imagined the day would end.

“Nick,” she says. “Can I be honest with you?”

Here it comes. I knew this was too good to be -

“I sneak pieces of meat.”

“Oh. O-kay.”

“What did you think I was going to say?”

“No idea.”

She stares off, puzzled.

“I can’t help it,” she says. “I mean, some of the cold cuts are really good.”

“They are good.”

“I feel guilty recommending things to people if I haven’t tried them, y’know?”

“So, you’ve tried everything?”

“Mm.”

“Even the braunschweiger?”

“Yes.”

“Y’know - you’re an awful awful vegetarian?”

“I know.”

I breathe easier. And I feel her warmth settle against me.

“You think - we went too fast tonight?” she says.

“I - I dunno. What do you think?”

“Life’s too short to be shy,” she says.

And she wraps her fingers tightly around mine.

We see each other again. And then again. And almost always, somehow, ending up back at her place.

10:00 pm. Thursday.

Watching the Knicks in the basement with Don, both of us in full Knick regalia.

“She cuts meat?”

“Yeah. Short black hair, bangs – always giving out free samples...”

“Wait-a-minute – ! Chick with the nosering?”

“Yeah.”

“Dude – *she’s hot!*”

“She’s very nice.”

“In one day!? You nailed the Deli Chick *in one day?!?*”

“Well, that’s being completely crass.”

Don hugs me, forcefully.

“Dude! I’m effin’ awestruck!”

“I think - we were more on the same wavelength than I had originally thought.”

“So?” he asks.

“So what?” I say.

“So now what?”

“So now what what?”

“*So?*”

“So, I dunno. I just met her. She wants to take Ryan ice skating.”

“*Bonding with the kid even!*”

“Yeah. He loves her.”

Don stares at me a long time, then suddenly becomes cross-eyed, pained, angry.

“Oh shit. Screw you, man. *Screw you!*”

“What?”

“You’ve got a *but* in your eyes.”

“I don’t have a *but* in my eyes. I don’t even know what that means...”

“Dude – you totally have a *but* in your eyes. I know you! And this is where you always kill it!”

“I haven’t even said anything!”

“You expressed doubt, dude!”

I stare at my half-empty beer.

“I dunno. It’s just a little - sudden for me. She’s like half my age!”

“You’re what?”

“41.”

“She’s – ?“

“28.”

“That’s a jackpot, dude! Let’s call your ex and rub her nose in it - ”

“Do what?”

“I’m kidding. Boy – look at you - y’got all panicky for a second.”

“Look – I think – I think – in the rational, reasonable world – the world that Ryan and I currently inhabit – that the concept of *stability* isn’t a bad thing.”

“What?”

“Nothing. Forget it.”

“Is she crazy? Unbalanced? Pissy?”

“No. Not that I know of, yet.”

“She a heroin junkie?”

“No. She smokes a little pot.”

“This is you in a nutshell, Nick. You freak yourself out too much.”

“Yes, I do. I *do* freak out. Seriously. Sometimes – at night – I lie there and I literally have anxiety attacks. What if something happens to me? What if I get hurt? What if I get killed?”

“What if you spontaneously combust - like right now?”

“Right. Yes.”

“Then we’d both be fucked.”

“This is what I think about *all* the time. Yeah, I’ve got friends. I’ve got my mom. But it’s basically just Ryan and me. The two of us - this micro-micro family. It’s just too small.”

He stares at me, at a loss suddenly for something clever to say.

“So maybe the Deli Chick is your road to stability?”

3:20 pm. Friday. Outside Driftwood Elementary.

Ryan bobs back and forth from leg to leg, looking anxious.

“Hey!” says Frankie. “Sorry!”

“I thought you forgot me - ”

“No, no! I just – ”

“I coulda been kidnapped like 20 times by now!”

“It’s great that you weren’t. So, you wanna go skating or what?”

7 pm. Friday. Front of my house. Frankie watches me shovel snow.

“I just – I couldn’t get out,” she says. “And I got stuck on the way over – in all that fucking after school traffic – ”

“It’s fine,” I say. “Everything was fine. He had a great time. It’s not a big deal.”

“I was trying to race over and I’m honking at everyone – and parking five blocks away – and he was really worried. I should’ve called you. I’m such a fucking idiot – ”

“You could’ve called him. He has an iPhone too. For emergencies.”

“Like his dad’s stupid girlfriend being 20 minutes late?”

I stop shoveling and stare at her.

“So – you’re my stupid...girlfriend?”

She looks confused.

“Of course I’m your stupid girlfriend. Aren’t I?”

I smile at her.

“Yeah.”

10 am. Saturday. At the car wash, watching the shampoo spray all over my Camry. Talking to Don on Bluetooth.

“I have absolutely no idea what I’m doing, Don. I need things predictable. Reliable. I completely made up my mind to end it. And now she’s my girlfriend! It’s *not* excellent! I was fucking furious with her! I mean – I mean – yes I like spending time with her – I do.”

I watch jets of water shoot freely all over my car, and roaring vacuums clearing every drop away in instants.

“I just feel so out of control, Don. And frankly, it scares me.”

9:30 pm. Saturday. The Cactus Pear.

It’s a little hole in the wall in the middle of Driftwood, barely room for a bar, much less the little sound stage for music acts. Frankie’s dressed in jeans and a t-shirt. She looks great, hot, feral. It’s open mic night and she’s singing a couple songs to a small, but friendly crowd who seem to know her well. I stay in the back (if there is such a thing) by the bar, and watch. Me, the 41-year-old, invisible man. Two guys accompany her on guitar and a single snare drum. The drummer is tuque boy from Price Chopper. The other looks like his twin. Seattle grunge lives.

She starts with “Yellow Ledbetter” – which seems more of a piece for her guitar player than her. But she delivers the unfathomable lyrics with a deep, husky, guttural sound that would make Eddy Vedder proud. She follows with a screeching “Piece of my Heart” that surprises me, and for a moment, she’s smokier and sexier than even Janis.

Take it

Take another little piece of my heart now, baby

And like some beautiful, ethereal creature, she’s pained, wounded, fragile. My heart beats faster as I hear the ache behind her words. *Am I doing this to her? Are we*

The Deli Chick/17

doing this to each other? Drenched with sweat, hair matted, she finishes. The crowd hoots, hollers. And I'm right there with them.

2:30 am. Her place.

I wake up panicked, see the clock.

“Shit! I fell asleep!”

“Your mother – ”

“Babysitter! Got a babysitter! Shit! I gotta go!”

2:40 am. Home.

16-year-old Laurie is asleep on the couch. Next to her, wide awake and pissed, is her mother.

“I am so sorry,” I say. “I - I - I - there was an accident and - “

I'm an incredibly awful liar. But it doesn't matter. The mom, disgusted, tugs at her daughter.

“Laurie - Laurie - let's go. C'mon.”

And they leave. And the house is silent.

7 pm. Sunday. Driftwood Café.

Frankie and I have coffee. We say nothing. She stares away from me, out the window, hurt, angry. And I feel like shit. And she gets up, and walks out, and doesn't look back.

9 pm. The upstairs hallway outside the bathroom. Ryan's in his pajamas, crying and angry.

"I liked her!"

"I liked her too."

"Then why?!"

"It just – didn't work out, honey. Sometimes –"

"Why didn't it work out?"

"We were just a little too different, y'know?"

"Bullshit!"

"Ryan –"

"It's bullshit! It is!"

"I know. I'm sorry."

He breathes, sits on his bed, and looks down, sadly.

"I shouldn't've told you she was late," he says.

I kneel down by the bed, look him in the eye.

"Listen to me," I say. "This had nothing to do with you."

"Well, I told you. And now she's gone."

“Ryan – don’t even think that!”

But he curls up on his bed and looks at the wall.

“Dad...?” he whispers. “You don’t have to worry about me all the time.”

“I - worry about everything, sport.”

“You don’t have to. And you don’t have to find me a new mom.”

I look at him, surprised. *Shit. Is that what I was doing?*

“I - I wasn’t,” I say. “Is that what you - do you want one?”

“No. I’ve already got one. Somewhere.”

“I know.”

“We’re fine the way we are.”

“That’s absolutely right.”

And I hold him and rock him, slowly, until he falls asleep.

3:30 pm. Sunday. A couple weeks later. Stanhope A&P.

Ryan and I stopped going to the Price Chopper for obvious reasons. The A&P is more run down, but they’re renovating and they’ve just put in a prepared food section. The place is decked out for the holidays and school kids are in the front of the store singing Christmas carols that play over the store loudspeakers.

And here at the A&P, the deli guys look like deli guys: big, hardy, white-haired men, butchers and ex-marines. They’re all business. Not cute or chatty. They don’t

wear sweatshirts to make them look less provocative. And they certainly don't give free samples of meat.

And Ryan finds the bamboo carving boards.

"They're reinforced! Price Chopper had the normal ones, but these are reinforced!"

"Why do you want a bamboo chopping board so badly anyway?"

"Hot Wheels ramp!"

And so, the kids have finished and the grocery's turned on the canned music.

And it's a regular day again.

Have yourself a merry little Christmas

And I realize it's not canned music. It's a husky familiar voice.

Let your heart be light

And Ryan rushes to the front of the store, abandoning our cart and carving board.

And there she is, dressed in sparkling white deli cutter's overalls, but with a red and white santa's hat on, and singing to a karaoke machine.

From now on our troubles will be out of sight

Ryan waves to her, maniacally. She grins and waves back. And then finishes singing. And the crowd claps, and she comes over to us.

"Merry Christmas," she says.

"You sound great!" says Ryan.

"Thank you."

“Dad let me get the bamboo board!”

“Good. The ones here are better anyway – ”

“They’re reinforced!” they say in unison.

“Frankie!” calls one of the burly, all-business ex-marines.

“It was great seeing you guys again,” she says. “Stop by and get some meat!”

And she goes off, back to work. And, I realize, Ryan’s right. I can’t be scared all the time. No matter what happens.

Life’s too short to be shy.

“Frankie!” I call out. “Do you – do you have any plans for dinner?”

She stares at me.

“Never mind,” I say.

“No,” she says. “I don’t,”

“Would you like to have dinner with us?”

“Only,” she says, “if Ryan cooks,”

And Ryan looks at me, panicked.

“I don’t cook that good,” he says.

“It’s okay,” I say. “We’ll help.”