

WORLD WHEELS

Let's talk about Dennis. He tells me I'm weak at the wheels.

"I kill egos," Dennis says as Betty lays down our drinks. Dennis continues, "Give me five minutes, and I'll kill yours."

Betty says, "Don't be a punk."

Dennis says, "I want to tell you about egos."

"Take a break," I say to Dennis.

Betty leaves.

"You can do better?" Dennis says. He reaches across the table for my fountain-filled soda. "Let me see." He takes a long drink. "Show me and Betty."

"Not here," I say. In the booth to my right sits an elderly couple. I think about people. I think about myself in their equation. So I'm not feeling this. Dennis isn't listening. He's moving. He thinks I'm going to be weak, and so he chooses to ignore me.

Dennis is up. "Does anybody here know my friend Sam?"

Dennis is an instigator of awkward moments. He thinks he helps people. I'm weak at the wheels. I don't know what that means. I don't know who I am. But you know Dennis. Everyone in the whole stinking world knows Dennis.

#

"Sleep here if you need to," you tell Diniz, hoping Diniz has somewhere else to go. It's late. It's hot. You're sitting in your ratty recliner in Santa Maria, Rio Grande do Sul, your native country of Brazil. You work at noon tomorrow. You tell Diniz, "I have to work at eight."

“One more drink,” Diniz says in Portuguese. Beer cans surround your couch like war prisoners. Soon he will be living there. “I have a plan.”

You squint through his bright face. “I’m sure you do.”

#

I’m holding a bowling ball when Dennis shouts, “Don’t hesitate so much.” I look behind me when he says, quietly now, “I don’t like you when you hesitate.”

Dennis shows up at my apartment in State College, Pennsylvania. I hadn’t seen him for months. He just smiles and asks me what I’m doing. I tell him I’m still doing art, and he struts inside like an athlete. Art intensifies his masculinity. Dennis says to me, “The same old, Sam old.” He assumes what I say means nothing. He defies time and space.

Gutter ball. I throw again. Four pins down. I drop into my blue plastic seat where Dennis sits across from me with his arms folded.

“You hesitated,” he says. “I don’t like you when I’m right.”

“I don’t bowl,” I say. I look up at the score. Dennis is killing me. I look at the clock. It’s almost bar close.

I accept Dennis because I’m lonely. I tell this to him in bowling shoes: “I accept you because I’m lonely.” I met Dennis eight years ago at Penn State, where I studied art, where Dennis and I had the same friends and did the same things: drinking and sports. He’d disrupt my portraits. He’d drag me out of my dorm and bring me to parties. I’m part of his routine. Dennis rolls a strike and I think he’s like a sky-watching event. His ball comes back. It’s sparkling red. I never know when he’s coming. He happens.

“I don’t want to play anymore,” Dennis says like a five-year-old. He looks six lanes down where three young black women bowl. “I want to do something fun.”

Dennis strolls over to the women. They're pretty. He says something I can't make out and it has them all laughing. I shake my head. Dennis knows his audiences. Then Dennis makes them quiet and uncomfortable. My eyes widen, and they start laughing again. I try to sleep in plastic.

"You always thought people here were stupid," Dennis tells me as we walk. "That was you, Sam."

He's talking about the places he thinks I should move to, like Philadelphia.

"You realize," he continues in my stairwell, "we're the only people on earth without cell phones?"

"Don't be vague," I say.

"The wheels are stuck," he says in my living room. "It's simple. I learned the world isn't where it's supposed to be."

I say, "The world needs more than we can offer."

"Think about your answers," Dennis says on my balcony. "What do you want?"

"I want to do art."

"What does that mean?"

"Buy me a blank canvass," I say. "I'll show you."

#

"Hesitation trips you up," Diniz says. He thinks you should move to São Paulo. "You think too much. Your brain is diseased. This world is diseased."

"We're the disease," you say.

"Hesitation trips brain," Diniz says. "That's the mantra for your rodas. I'll be damned if I don't get that through your head."

“The secrets of life,” you say.

“Listen to yourself, the sarcasm. It’s sad.” Dennis reaches for an empty beer can. “It’s like I’m talking to a ghost.” He rests the can between his knees, and he rolls a cigarette.

“I want to tell you a story. It’s about you.

“Guy walks into a bar, has no friends. He walks up to a woman, tells her he’s lonely.” Diniz lights the cigarette but keeps the lighter flame going. “This guy—it’s you—starts a fire in the woman. She looks right and left. She sees in the man he’s all business.”

You lean on your knees. “Should I finish your story?” you say.

“Yes.”

“This guy—it’s Diniz—starts a fire in the woman.” You stand up. “Diniz takes her to her apartment, and they have a good time. It’s fun for you both.”

Diniz smiles as you leave him there.

“And then the fire goes out,” you yell to Diniz from your bedroom. “Diniz puts it out because he’s bored. Diniz wants to move to São Paulo.”

“You’re sick,” he says.

#

Dennis talks about ideas at Denny’s. It’s always Denny’s. His plan is to help the wheels. I ask him why Denny’s? He says it’s the everyman he’s interested in. He says Denny’s is right in front of our faces.

The waitress tells us her name. It’s always Betty to Dennis. She tells us the specials.

“Take this woman, Sam—Betty,” Dennis says. “She’s stuck. She’s so wrapped up in her orders she can’t see herself. She can’t move.”

“My name’s Diane. Who’s Betty?”

“She’s like you,” Dennis says to me.

“You find value in cruelty?” I say when Diane leaves. “What’s the matter with you?”

“You see what I’m doing, so don’t play dumb.”

Dennis gets up and finds Diane. He makes it about her. I see Diane laughing, and I see Dennis as the guy you ask for directions. He’s pure id. People who have forgotten Dennis see an open face with open eyes. What suggests he’ll help tells me he’ll tag along.

“You know how I help this young lady?” Dennis says, back.

“You don’t. So I don’t.”

Dennis eats his eggs as I consider honesty in shapes nobody is prepared for. The eyes tell you what’s his, is yours. By degrees he will convince you—when Dennis has you—that what’s yours is his. You go where he goes.

Dennis says, “I show Betty she’s in control.”

#

“I want to share what I’ve learned,” Dionýz says in your tiny apartment. You’re in Žilina, Slovakia. He wants you to trek to Vienna.

“We’ve shared enough,” you say. You’re drunk but aware of the time.

“Your job is bullshit,” he says as you try to leave him. “Just forget it for five minutes and understand something for me,” he yells in Slovak. “Quit your job for art, not for Vienna.”

You’re angry. You’re at your bedroom door, behind Dionýz, and you look at his nest with your books strewn all over the floor. You survey the beer cans and makeshift ashtrays. You tighten your jaw. Somehow Dionýz feels what you see.

“I’ll clean this up tomorrow,” he says without turning around. “I appreciate everything you’re doing for me.”

You return to your recliner next to the couch. “Five minutes is all I need,” he tells you. You let your chair back and sigh to the ceiling.

“When I was in Vienna,” Dionýz starts, “I realized something about people.” He’s collecting the cans now, restless. “Something that’s applicable everywhere I go.” He finds more trash. “I went high and low. I was in the suburbs; I was in the streets. I stood outside theaters; I worked odd jobs. I went to the fútbol matches. I was everywhere and talked to everybody.”

“In Vienna,” you say.

Dionýz sits back down and strokes his chin. “I made up my mind that I’ll adapt to every situation and every person on their terms. I’ll look for things, little things.”

You furrow your eyebrows.

“This is different,” Dionýz says. “I’m different.”

You let your chair down for eye contact with Dionýz.

Dionýz says, “After a while I decide how to fuck with them.”

“Jesus Christ!” you say.

“You’re not getting it,” Dionýz says. He can’t stay still, so he paces. “I was experimenting. These are legitimate social experiments. I want to help.”

“Help with what, exactly?”

“The kolesá. The wheels.”

#

I'm home from work. Dennis wants to show me the wheels in real time. So we walk to a high school baseball game. He talks about his ideas in the context of the whole world, like that's the big picture. Go figure that to Dennis the world is the big picture. I tell him I don't believe a word of it. This encourages him.

"This guy," Dennis says. He leans into me with his shoulders and points eight rows below us. The bleachers are sparsely populated. "This guy is fucking dying for something."

Dennis descends. I eat my popcorn. It's supplementary action, about as entertaining as the game. Dennis chats up the stranger. A ballplayer hits a double. I try to make out what they're saying, and then the inning ends.

"Sam, this is Richard," Dennis says. "Richard Martin."

"Hey, Richard," I say. I put my eyes to the ball field and consider the situation. Richard stands very straight.

"Richard loves baseball," Dennis says. Dennis points to a dugout. "Richard knows baseball."

Richard sits down next to Dennis, who sits in the middle.

"Richard, let's talk," Dennis says. "In one minute, I want to know everything you know."

I lean forward and look at Richard. He wears a denim shirt.

"That's a pretty big request," Richard says. He has an honest and concerned face.

"One minute?"

"Yes."

"I'll have to think."

“Don’t.”

“I’m not sure I understand you.”

“Tell us what’s hidden.”

“What’s hidden?”

“Your penis, Richard.”

“Excuse me?”

“Tell Sam the size of your penis,” Dennis says, “when aroused.”

Richard’s mouth opens. His hands jet to the bleachers. “Ah, well, gentlemen—

“OK,” Dennis says, stopping Richard by the arm. “I apologize.”

I pull my hat over my face. Dennis puts his other arm on Richard’s shoulder.

“We don’t need to know that. We never did,” Dennis says. “We’re students conducting a social experiment, Richard. If you wouldn’t mind our company for another minute?”

I try to stay with it. Richard tightens his face.

Dennis says, “What did you think about when I said that?”

Richard folds his arms and looks to the baseball game. “That you were trying to harass me,” he states.

“Absolutely,” Dennis says. “And why did you think that?”

Richard looks at Dennis, and then at me. “Because you’re being rude.”

“And if you wouldn’t mind telling us what you felt?”

Richard blinks at Dennis. He scratches a cheek. “Alarm,” Richard says, and then he gets up.

“That’s perfect!” Dennis says. “Thank you, Richard Martin.”

Richard turns for another look on his way down the bleachers, a blistered tomato.

“You know us,” Dennis yells to him.

Dennis turns to me and says, “Praise your wheels, men.” He plunges into my popcorn and looks me square in the face. He says, “Sir Richard stays to fight.”

#

You roll out of bed. It’s time to work in Kampala, Uganda. Dionysus is awake, on your couch reading your book. George Harrison’s “Give Me Love” is playing on your laptop, and Dionysus asks you if you want to travel five thousand kilometers to Accra, Ghana. You tell him you’re going to work.

“Five minutes,” he says. Dionysus is reading *I’m Still Scrambling* by the American sports figure Randall Cunningham, an autobiography. “Let’s talk about Accra, Ghana.”

You tell him goodbye. You leave your apartment and walk downstairs. You hear Dionysus yelp, and you listen to his footsteps as you exit the building.

“You want to know what that stiff old man from the game is doing today?” he asks you from behind.

“I really don’t.”

“He’s taking a look at himself,” Dionysus says, catching up. “Last night he got a good look. He looked inward so now he’s outward. He sees his wife; he sees his kids. Today he’s looking at them. He knows them.”

“I get it, Dionysus. You take guys like him out for drinks and talk shit and they’re new men.”

“Christ. He’s even taken an interest in his penis. He’s moving.”

You stop at an intersection. “Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“At the game, before the booze, and before the women. What if that man looks you dead in the face and says, twelve inches? What then?”

“He’d be moving.”

You let yourself breathe. You look to the street so he can’t see your face. Standing there on the cement, beside this couch-crusted maniac who’s selling you horseshit from his cookbook—you know whatever he’s doing is better than the place you’re headed.

“What’s in Accra, Ghana? Don’t fuck with me.”

#

He litters my kitchen table with maps. He talks about SEPTA and bike paths and things to look at in Philadelphia. He sets his beer where I should live. We’re talking about my wheels. It’s been three weeks since Dennis moved in. I quit my job as a grocery clerk. Dennis tells me things will change for me. He criticizes my bank account. He says, “All you do is save.”

We meet other Richard Martins, but mostly we drink alcohol. His maps collect dust. Dennis keeps saying he’ll show me wheels on “the big ball field.” I don’t pay attention to that. That’s not why I quit.

“State College,” Dennis says to my city. We’re walking past laundromats and retail stores. “Think about its name.”

“The state of college,” I say. I know what he means. “Perpetual.”

“Philadelphia,” Dennis says.

#

“Let’s watch a movie,” Chinese Dennis says to you in Songjiang University Town. He’s speaking English. He’s making jokes. “Americans love movies with Matt Mahogany.”

“McConaughey,” you correct Chinese Dennis. “Matthew McConaughey.”

“Misogyny?”

#

My seeing through Dennis is the reason he never quits me. He says, “I will never give up,” and I know he’s talking about himself as much as me. He quit just about everything else.

We’re at Denny’s again. Betty has menus. Her name is Cindy.

“I apologize for being rude,” Dennis says. He smiles big. He holds the menu out in front of him without looking at it. He’s looking at Cindy. “I’ll have a sandwich.”

“Listen,” Cindy says. “We have a lot of sandwiches.”

“I know,” Dennis says. “I’m sorry.”

“What kind of sandwich do you want?”

“There’s more to life than sandwiches.”

I look at Cindy. I want her to see we are harmless, so I say, “I’ll have a bacon cheeseburger, please. French fries are fine. Give this guy a chicken sandwich, no fries. I’m paying because he has no money.”

“How far can an awkward moment go?” Dennis asks Cindy, halting her pivot.

“Pretty far, friend,” she says. Her answer refers to the here and now, ironically. She has the eyes of experience, the face of a mother.

“Seriously,” I say, looking to them both, “when you think about these moments, if you freeze them. What’s there?”

Cindy hesitates, but she’s thinking. She has brown hair, and she has dimples. “You get a look at a person, I guess. In someone you admire, maybe, you’re surprised how tight they’ll get in tough spots.” She’s looking at me. I’d asked the question. “Maybe they surprise you in better ways too. But awkward moments offer perspective?”

“Perspective gifts brain,” Dennis says.

Cindy glides away.

“She’s beautiful, right?” Dennis says.

“Yes,” I say.

“You should get her number.”

“That’s a good plan,” I say. I’m happy about the idea. “But you’re an idiot. You’d hijack whatever comes of this, and you know it. You want to humiliate me.”

“Embarrass you in front of women?” Dennis says, mocking offense.

“Forget it.” I take a drink of my fountain-filled soda. I look at Dennis. His mind is moving in places I don’t want to know. Why the fuck can’t we just eat our food?

Dennis is up. “Does anybody here know my friend Sam?”

“Shut up.”

He yells, “My friend’s ordered food, and he’s afraid to eat.”

“Sit down, Dennis.” I turn to my right and see a family of four. They look concerned.

“Look at you,” Dennis says. He sits down. “You’re in control.”

I look at his face and want to smash it with the napkin dispenser. I clench my soda and suppress the urge to hurl it at his chest. I grind my teeth instead.

“You want to know something, Dennis?” I say quietly. “You know damn well you don’t care about helping anybody.”

“That’s crap.”

“You’ll keep up with whatever this is, until it gets boring. You’ll come up with some other game, some other way to amuse yourself.”

Cindy brings our appetizer order. Mozzarella sticks. She lays down the plate.

“Sam has the biggest ego you’ll ever meet,” Dennis says to our waitress. He looks hurt. He tries to hide the hurt. “You can literally reach across the table and touch it.” Dennis touches my hand. “You can touch the ego.” He looks at me and says, quieter now, “Show Betty how big your ego is.”

“Have you ever heard of a guy who only eats at a diner that shares his name?” I ask Cindy. “This guy,” I say, pointing at Dennis, “this guy does that.”

Cindy zeroes in like an umpire.

I say, “What about the times it only hurts?”

Dennis says, “You have it backwards.”

“You can’t take these moments any further than a few drinks, and then the fun’s over.”

“If you don’t fix those wheels, you’ll end up broken and alone. You’ll die and everybody will hate you.”

“You’re an asshole,” I say.

Looking at Cindy, Dennis continues, “Everybody has good wheels, even people like him. The problem is something only he can fix.”

I bury my face in my hands. I pulse fingers on my forehead. I let go. “Keep your big picture out of my face.”

“Sam.”

Cindy puts hands on her hips. Dennis tells her, “He’s my best friend.”

I can’t tell if he’s serious. I look away. The family of four is gone. One-dollar bills wilt on their table.

Dennis says, “I’m sorry. I go too far. Let’s talk about Philadelphia.”

I blink into the family’s mess of plates and napkins. “No.”

“Tell me what you want me to do,” Dennis says. His voice is different. I look at him. His eyes are strange. “Do you want me to move out?”

“Not exactly.”

“What do you want then?”

I shake my head. I try to smile. “I want you to grow up. We need to grow up.”

The three of us form a teepee, a pyramid, an altar.

“When you move out,” I start to say.

“What should I do?” Dennis asks Cindy. It’s hard to tell if she’s enjoying herself.

“What you guys probably need,” she says, above water, “is a marriage counselor.”

Then Cindy laughs so hard she’s in another world. Cindy returns to the diner, ready again. “I can’t speak to your drama, right? But you seem like nice people. The way I see it, you’re both in a crisis.”

Dennis smiles to himself. He takes a breath to speak, but reaches for his water instead.

“Crisis of what?” I say. This takes me.

Cindy thinks, her answer hiding inside worlds of denim shirts and people eating and Dennis waiting as she thinks. I see Dennis when I met him. He's the senior on campus; energetic; handsome; everybody wants to know him. I see sunglasses and the weekends he needs to be called Deion. I see him outside of this diner, and he's added weight. He's the life of the night shift, anywhere. He doesn't own a phone. We're friends. We walk into bars and out of bars, and now he's in my wedding.

Cindy locates universal truth in Happy Valley. I see what it means to walk home alone.

"He really doesn't know how to talk to someone like you," I say. I feel like a priest. I'm the bowling ball, sinking in water. We're in Philadelphia. This is my blank canvass.

I tell her, "I do."

THE END