

ANDRÉ NARBONNE

WE DON'T DO THAT ANYMORE

WE DON'T SAY WHAT WE THINK

Terry, the boy in the chair, is a straight-shooter—the result, I imagine, of living in a straight town affixed to a straight stretch of highway.

“One of them, eh?”

It’s my mistake for throwing him a curve and saying there’d be more cod if we stopped fishing capelin, which the cod eat. It’s intellectuals like me—the barbers and gym teachers in town—who talk about a moratorium on capelin.

In a linear town, where you live either north or south, a devotion to them-or-us identities is as much a matter of course as this boy’s bad teeth are the result of a vote twenty years ago to stop fluoridating the water. What connects us is a singularity of concern. The sea is thinning, not that you’d know it from the looks of strangers. When the wind is westerly but slow, almost soothing, the fish plant rot seeps downtown. The smell isn’t so much a plague as a biblical-strength insult. Tourists who pull off the highway drawn to our clapboard authenticity make faces.

I’ve known the boy in the chair for half my life and all of his. He is already on the boats with his father, an uncle, and a cousin. He’s my boy Dan’s age, but Dan doesn’t fish.

I smile into the mirror. He returns an expression of malice.

“Dan sure freaked me out one night. You know about him, don’t you?”

Keep it friendly. Keep smiling.

“He’s coming tonight,” I say. “Maybe he’ll have time to hang out with you. Is that the right expression?”

“Dan’s not for me.”

He wants to pay me back for having an opinion on the capelin fishery. He wants to bludgeon me with secrets that aren’t secret.

I hope Brenda can’t hear. Our house is attached to the shop, and she’s

inside preparing for our son's return. She doesn't like to think people bash Dan—mostly because she's delicate about me.

"God, that party before he left . . ."

"How much off the top?"

"Oh, I don't care. Hack away."

Thank you.

"That last party he was pushing it. I mean, he was way over the line. Making a fucking statement. Is that the right expression?"

Brenda is at the door. She is five years older than me—I'm thirty-nine—and she is beautiful. I wonder if we will ever make love again. There's time. I have half my life ahead of me, if I outlive my father, whose favourite meal was salt cod. And Brenda still loves me.

Brenda never worked outside of the home, but she worked hard enough inside it. She raised Dan, who left for university in Toronto last September. He's kept in touch, but he didn't come home as he said he would for Thanksgiving, Christmas, or Easter. His communication has had little personal content. It's all about achievement, good grades, winning an English Department writing contest.

"You know Terry," I call to Brenda, and the boy in the chair jerks his head, suddenly aware of a third to our conversation. Good thing that teaching gym has kept me agile enough to yank the scissors away from his ear.

"Hi," she says.

"Hi."

That closes him. He won't act up in front of a wife. She picks up a magazine and sits in the chair beside him. We never use that chair. It's a prosthetic for business we don't have.

For all of our passion, when we had passion, she has never let me cut her hair. She prefers to drive one town over to her sister's. It's a small act of rebellion against me that helps to maintain her autonomy.

Ten minutes for a ten-dollar cut is time enough. Then I'm holding a mirror to the back of Terry's head and being slighted with, "Whatever." Then he's gone, except for what I'm sweeping off the floor, and Brenda and I are thinking. We do that a lot. We just think. It's one of the things we like about each other—the ability to be close without speaking.

I am thinking about the work I will need to do to make her want to make love to me again. I don't know what she's thinking.

WE DON'T PLAY GAMES

I would have picked Dan up, but he chose to arrive by taxi. I couldn't pin him down on how long he intends to stay, but his only luggage is a backpack. We've been holding back on possessing his room. Everything is how he left it but cleaner. If his luggage tells us anything, it's that the room is no longer his.

I'm on the gravel to meet him. Brenda is at the window with a posture that suggests the repetition is getting to her. She knows how much I miss Dan. I should not have shown her the love poems he left hidden in his room, which describe a homosexual relationship.

Dan is handsome, thin, and dressed like he means to cut down a tree.

“How was your flight?”

“The plane . . . oh, don't stress about that. I know you hate flying.”

“Was it turbulent?”

“Pleasurably.” His smile is real, but he doesn't ask me how I am or why his mother is inside. Instead he says, “I've got something to show you.”

He pulls eight pages from his backpack, which seems to hold more books than clothing. “It's the story I told you won the Davies Prize.”

This is how he avoids intimacy? Of course he doesn't remember the greater part of our intimacy: the early mornings he spat up milk on my neck while I cradled and sang badly to him in order to let Brenda get one more hour of sleep, teaching him to tie his shoelaces, the first time he climbed to the lowest branch of the maple tree in the backyard, the day I took the safety wheels off his first bicycle, or the afternoons I waited for him outside of kindergarten. My intimacy with Dan was like an intimacy with myself, but we don't do that anymore.

He's too willing to be easily pleased, so there's no reaching him at supper. He's framed us tidily to the point of fiction, but we're real enough in the story, and Brenda is fuming.

“New Meanings” is about a girl who leaves her sexually repressed parents in their sexually repressed fishing village on the East Coast to fall in love with herself in Montreal. The story comes with a citation from the judges, who praise Dan's ability to ventriloquize. Apparently he's got the voice of a bon vivant down. Nevertheless, the story is agist. In it, the father is basically embittered, complaining about everyone in town. The daughter needs

to free herself of the oppression of living with someone who is opinionated. The story opens with the mother's death—the catalyst for the daughter remembering her childhood and arriving at a new appreciation of something I cannot grasp.

I tell him, "It's great. Better than great."

Brenda says, "It's insulting."

"Why?"

"How could you write those things about your father?"

"It's not about him. It's fiction. Oh, you mean the horse."

There's a horse in the story named Baldy Oompah, which is the name of the first horse I rode when I was very young—so young my father had to hold me in the saddle. The name stuck with me, and I put it into bedtime stories I told Dan when he was a child. In his story Baldy Oompah is the heroine's horse, which her parents sell to revenge themselves against her adolescent freedoms.

"I have to work with the material I've lived."

"By making your father immaterial."

"It's fiction. It won a prize. I thought you'd be proud."

"Of course we're proud," I say. "So what are your plans for tomorrow?"

Will you see anyone?"

"No, I'm like you. There's no one here I like."

Brenda drops her fork on the table.

"Then let's do an Indiana Jones. Do you remember?"

From the time Dan could walk, we would wander the countryside looking for animals and plants to name, giving Latin words to clouds: cirrus, stratocumulus, noctilucent. We would comb the shore for shards of mysterious blue glass that washed up from some unknown history. One day we found an unbroken medicine bottle, and I said, "We're like Indiana Jones," and the name and the possibilities it suggested stuck. "Let's do an Indiana Jones," I'd say, and we'd grab our jackets and go. We stopped when I was offered the gym teacher's job, which meant financial stability at the cost of time. Within a year I was no longer Dan's closest confidante, but I could buy him an X-Box.

"Oh, Dad. I don't want you to do old stuff for me. We haven't played since I was . . . what? Seven?"

"Let's call it research."

In a town in which things are patently obvious, what's obvious to me is

that the reason I've lost Dan is because he wants to be lost. I know that in losing Dan I've lost Brenda, too. I want at least one of them.

WE DON'T INDIANA JONES

In the late morning we kick across an empty field in pursuit of arrowheads we know aren't there. Dan is pleasant, and I'm searching for signs that I exist.

"I'm in a class on Victorian novels next September. We start with *A Tale of Two Cities*. Have you read it?"

I haven't. "My Dickens was *Great Expectations*. You see what's come of it."

He laughs. "I read that. And *Little Dorrit*. I'm trying to read everything before class starts, so I'll really know the work. That's my plan for the summer: everything by Dickens, Trollope, Eliot, Collins. One novel every two days."

"How long are they?"

"On average? 400 pages when you factor in Thackeray."

"I won't see much of you, then."

"Didn't I tell you that I'm going back on Monday?"

"No."

"I thought I told someone."

"I would've heard."

Don't press. Never mind that this was never a visit: it was punctuation. Maybe if he knew me.

It's awkward, but I try. "From the time I was a child," I say, "I've had nightmares about being in a sunken submarine. I must have watched *Run Silent, Run Deep* or some other claustrophobic war flick. A plane looks like a submarine. That's why I've never flown." I've run out of words.

Dan smiles.

"Kooky."

Then he shares something he's never told me—his theory about the coercive power of adjectives—while I continue to carve out a space of now.

"I never meant to spend the summer," he explains at supper. "I'm just touching base."

Brenda says, "You're not in the army."

“You’re angry because I’m not like you. I hate this town.”

He’s wrong. She’s angry because she thinks something that comes of her has let me down. She won’t forgive herself for hurting me. She won’t even allow herself to have sex.

“I can’t stand the smell of the place. I’m not desensitized and I don’t want to be. If I stayed in this town, I wouldn’t be able to smell how putrid it is, and I’d think that was good. If I stayed in this town, I couldn’t be . . . You don’t like my writing. You don’t understand it. You think my writing is a personal attack. It’s not. It’s an expression of who I am. I can’t be a writer here.”

Brenda laughs.

“This has nothing to do with you,” he shoots.

“No, I’m dead.”

This has become a conversation between two dangerous people. They should have this conversation when they are not dangerous.

“I’m trying to tell you something.”

But he’s framed us as yokels.

Brenda closes him: “If you’re done with your humanity, could you give it to someone else?”

I return to the shop after the taxi pulls out of the drive. I feel alone and compressed, like in a submarine. I don’t want to accept the loss of Dan.

There’s something in the mirror I don’t like—a line that runs through my neck like a string through a marionette. How long has that been there? How long have I been a puppet-man?

Brenda stands quietly at the door, watching.

“I love him.”

“Yes,” I say.

She can’t forgive Dan for turning us into clichés, even before he wrote about us.

I point at the line running up my neck—an object line on a blueprint. “What do you see on my neck?”

“Nothing.”

“You don’t see anything?”

She shakes her head. “No.” She is so quiet that it’s like listening to an hourglass.

“Did I ever tell you that I don’t fly because of sub movies?”

“Many times. And you told me last night that you had this conversation with Dan, and he didn’t get it.”

“Oh, right. He’s not being bad. You know that, don’t you?”

“I could give a shit whether or not our son’s gay.”

“No, I know. It’s not that. When I was his age, I didn’t have a clue what I wanted. All I knew was what wasn’t good enough. What isn’t good enough for Dan is this town.”

“You didn’t know what was good enough until you met me.”

“Yes.”

“And it doesn’t matter that I’m difficult?”

“I like difficulty.”

She smiles. “In that case, I want you to cut my hair.”

“Cut your hair? How?”

“You decide.”

“I always fancied Audrey Hepburn in *Roman Holiday*.”

She laughs. “Feeling aggressive today?”

“Since we’re setting a precedent, I’m going to make it count.”

She drops into the chair we never use.

There’s something I’ve been meaning to tell her. A better story. “It wasn’t meant to be a secret. He was trying to let me know.”

“Then why didn’t he?”

“He was trying to tell the person I was when he was young. The poems were waiting to be discovered by Indiana Jones.”

She gives it some thought before arriving at, “Maybe.”

“Maybe, nothing. That’s how it is.”

“Are you telling me?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, I’ll agree, but only if you say ‘off!’”

“Off?”

“Like the barber in *Roman Holiday*.”

“Oh, off!”

And I’m happy in a way, even though I know the poems weren’t left for me. They were abandoned in the wreck. It’s enough that Brenda thinks I believe it. It’s enough that for the first time in a long time she wants to play.