

Ryan Stark

Grits

The diner stunk of stale cigarettes, and its placemats were plastered in advertisements. Who knew a greasy spoon could sell out. Beneath the ads for Steyer's Chiropractic and the local AARP chapter was a scab of dried coffee from whatever poor soul had to be in here before you could see outside.

Melinda—the very nice waitress who came to pour my coffee whose droopy skin suggested that she was in charge of the cigarette smoking here—chatted a bit, clutching the coffee pot and resting it on her hip, newborn-style. She said the new traffic circle the town installed a few blocks down the street was too European for her taste and that she wished to vote the mayor out next election to make sure that we stick to stoplights. I said that I liked the trees they planted in the middle of the circle. She thought they were too tall and obscured the town's skyline. The skyline consisted of a Pentecostal church built in the seventies, a brick post office that could not possibly support a postal service (and yet there it is) and a McDonald's sign that had stopped updating how many billions of customers it served back in '02, but I shrugged my shoulders to be polite. She left, and I twirled a spoon in my coffee, though I kept it black.

The front door's bells jingled and in walked TJ. The hostess smiled at him and he did not, for he saw my table and sidled around the wall toward my booth. He sat next to me, planted a kiss on my upper temple, and stood to move to the opposite side.

“Drive okay?”

“Well, yeah, it wasn't awful, but there was this grandma in this Oldsmobile that hung in the right lane, like, the entire way here. Like, I get she's old and careful, but she really held me

up here and I did not at all appreciate it.” He answered while shuffling around the menu and the placemat.

“There’s other lanes, you know.”

“There’s closer restaurants too, but here we are in the eighties pretending to be the fifties. We could have just hopped over to Lancaster.” I glanced over to Melinda to see if she heard. She was engaged in conversation with an elderly couple who were agreeing that the traffic circle’s trees were too tall. “Sorry. I know driving isn’t your favorite.”

“It’s whatever.” I smiled to reassure. He smiled back in acknowledgment. “Donna give you any gas money?”

“Plus some movie money. I’m seeing a Pixar movie right now with Tessa. Remind me to look up the plot and form a snobby opinion on it before we get back to the current millennium. Donna will appreciate the criticism.”

“I’m seeing it right now with Marissa and Maria. But you don’t need any more from me to get back home?”

“I’ll always take free money if you need to get rid of it, babe.” Melinda, still clutching her carafe, sauntered over and poured his coffee. He ordered a croque-madame with a side of grits, I a stack of pancakes. She scribbled down the orders and gossiped that the town alderman was going to have to resign in disgrace once she gets the word out about his affair. I suggested she run in the recall election; she asked who would take the orders here if she were busy being alderman. A teenager for minimum wage, obviously—if anything it would probably be better for the diner’s finances if she shattered the town’s glass ceiling—but I mustered just enough willpower to hold back the snark. TJ did not.

“More women should go into politics, I think. You could be a good alderman if you tried it out, I’m sure.” She threw him a look of disgust with what seemed to be a dash of intrigue. Perhaps she’d mill it over and jumpstart her career in politics and beat out Hillary to be the first president someday. Thanks, traffic circle.

Melinda took refuge in the kitchen after taking our orders; she saw a regular approaching that supported the mayor’s campaign to modernize the town’s traffic patterns and she couldn’t bear to look at him lest they engage in a public debate, I presume. TJ waved his head back and forth as he prepared his coffee: two sugars and two creams. It was a tic of his. Back and forth, tilted slightly up and to the left, his head would draw out its infinity, over and over itself. He picked it up in middle school, he said to me once. Something about copying his middle school librarian’s quirk.

Middle school. Being gay in middle school was a death knell. Seeming gay in middle school was dunking yourself in highlighter yellow. Other people suggesting you seemed gay relegated you to leprosy. We signed up for clubs in the sixth grade on some initiative to promote extracurricular interests while still developing before adolescence or something. I signed up next to last, and so I got stuck in the improv club, which met after school—nineteen girls and me. I didn’t even like improv. It was the only open club for a kid who couldn’t ride the bus and who didn’t have a mother at the ready to drive me home after classes. The first meeting commenced with a gaggle of girls following me, laughing with their banshee-laugh, and wondering aloud if I were gay.

I was, of course, at least a little bit. It was the principle of the thing that stuck to me here. I deserved to be bullied no more than the average straight kid there—there were plenty to choose from.

The word filtered down through the classes to the upper echelon of my grade who were always looking for more targets to ostracize. The bedrock of the insult was simple: *he is the only boy in a club full of girls. He is therefore different and weird and deserves to have that pointed out.* There was no subtlety for the slower ones to miss. Surely a more confident person could have pulled off being the lone gender in a room, but middle school does not exactly breed confidence. I was subjected to the hardly-veiled insinuations for the rest of the year: girls would pretend to flirt on the playground, or mockingly talk to me about boys; boys would slap my books out of my hand as though we lived in an actual eighties movie. I would be forced to take refuge in the closet.

In any case, I was redistricted to another middle school by the end of the year anyway, and anyone who came with me who heard the rumors didn't care enough to mention it. So, I made it out. Still alive, still here, still taking refuge in the confines of the closet I carved out for myself, still (presumably) in the same millennium, still watching his head trace out its infinity over his coffee.

TJ was talking about ancient Akkadian verb order, and I pretended to understand. He's going to Brown for Egyptian studies and linguistics and gets a kick out of letting people know this. He bought a potential professor's textbook on middle Egyptian back before he applied and read cover to cover for giggles and bragging rights. He gave me what amounted to a full book report on it over the phone back in that May without getting the least bit winded or the briefest lapse in recall.

"Middle Egyptian is the one to learn, I think."

“Sure.”

“That’s the one that’s most of what you know as, like, Egypt, in the tombs and stuff.” His voice always warbles with his passions, reaching its height at sentence’s end, and moving up into his eyes to twinkle. “I could go to Egypt and read you the walls, probably, if you wanted to one day.”

“Theoretically, yeah.”

“Theoretically. There’s probably still some hieroglyphics we haven’t gotten right yet.”
Smile.

Melinda came with the food. The regular of the incorrect mayoral affiliation stared her down as she stoically marched to our table, our dishes perched on her serving tray. She mumbled something about the mayor being bought out by the rotary club and turned on her heel to march right back to the kitchen.

“TJ?”

“Yeah?”

“The hell’s a grit?” I eyed the mush on his plate with distrust. Any slop that looks like that should not be fit to go into a person’s stomach.

“I really couldn’t tell you, but, like, they’re really good and this makes me not want to be with you right now. A little bit. Kind of.”

“Whatever.” I smiled. He smiled, but into his grits.

We stuck around in our booth for several minutes before it became clear that Melinda was never coming back. She never returned after she went back into the kitchen after serving our food. Perhaps she felt threatened by the mayor's political machine and needed to lie low until they disbanded the establishment. I left her a hearty tip and hoped she'd get closure on her crusade against her traffic circles. And the political machine.

I hugged TJ in the lot, head resting on mine, arms holding my torso.

"Once more before Brown?" I peered up at him. "We won't see each other for, like, months."

"I'd really hope so. Running out of excuses for Donna but, like, we'll make it work. We could get haircuts or something." He kissed me one more time, and I stayed in his arms until he pulled away.

He left and I left and I tried not to dwell on it for it would've been too hard to process in the moment. He was still waving to me as I pulled out of the lot, and I waved long after he couldn't have possibly seen me.

Mom was in the kitchen when I walked in. She asked how the movie was and if Marissa and Maria were doing alright and how much she owed me for the popcorn. Coming up with numbers on the spot is not a strength and the answer I gave was very obviously incorrect—no movie costs five bucks—and Maria was already back at NYU and Marissa was God-knows-where and the movie was excellent as per every critic on the planet. She accepted it as always, though, and I went on upstairs

Lying is a necessary and depressing artform. I wish she'd realize I didn't carry the stink of popcorn one day and that she'd figure it out on her own. Just not into clearing this hurdle myself.