

Despair at McDonalds

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He could still smell her on his fingers.

He went back to her. They drove up Route 7 to the undulating pastures outside Kent, barely speaking to each other on the way except for occasional small talk about the past, his roughing up his knuckles on the window that time, the cold dinner they never ate, etc. etc., because each knew the other so well by now anyway that anything important was already known and so could be left unsaid; and checked into a farmhouse that had been converted into a combination boarding home, restaurant, antique shop and real estate office, where up in their bathroomless bathroom, white curtains billowing against her sweet, brown-eyed face with the smells of new-mown grass and relish and sun tan lotion, he ate her out lovingly, mindlessly, until her stomach rumbled and her upraised knees, after some preliminary hip-shifting, drifted dreamily apart, and he felt the spurring caresses of her calves against his ribs. They would be safe here.

But then he decided they wouldn't be safe here after all. He started hiding the weekly paper from her, all eight pages of it, so she wouldn't see whatever it was in it which so distressed him he now spent his evenings out on the front porch, rocking alone in the cool, moon-filled Connecticut evenings while the rest of the lodgers watched television in the parlor and she stayed up in their room sitting on the edge of the bed worrying about him. They eventually borrowed the manager's pick-up truck, drove it to the nearest station, and boarded a train for New York City. He drew smooth, sideways ovals around a number of apartment listings in the Sunday Times, but never got around to picking up the hotel phone. Knowing him, she left most of their clothes suitcased.

Money kept pouring in. They flew to Bermuda, but halfway from the airport to Hamilton he realized their cabbie's beat-up station wagon was being followed. He started blinking. He told her it was the brightness of the sun. She let it drop, looked back out the side window at the distant sea.

He took to spending the long, polished, finely-grained afternoons at one end of the hotel bar, sipping Scotches while she went shopping with friends their first breakfast there. He became known to the dark native bargirls as 'the fair one', and they would wonder while waitressing what this tall, tanned, thin man found to think about all day while sitting erect and self-conscious on his leather stool.

He was happy here-- as happy as he could be under the circumstances. He even agreed to go sightseeing, to at least keep up a front of normalcy, and she did a happy, head jerking back doubletake at that news. Afraid to use motorbikes, they rode the buses everywhere instead. To the Crystal Caves, the fields of tulips, the Aquarium. At the Aquarium he sensed their presence. He felt his forehead bead and his legs tremble with numbing, bumping-into-the-display-cases panic. He stared in hopelessly at the Moray eels floating in the illumination of their tank: at their immense, sad, slow greenness. An unwelcome warmth began rising in his body, and though he tried at first to ignore it, and then tried walking casually to wherever the men's room might be, leaving a puzzled Viola with her back suddenly turned to reflect in the display case she had been a moment before peering into, he knew that this time the stomach brimming behind his lips could not be yawned away.

Much of Bermuda charmed him: the pastel homes which came out so prettily in snapshots, their roofs flat and bordered so precious rain water could be caught and saved; the double trays of the store cash registers for both American and Bermudian money; policemen in shorts; and the narrow roads built for horse travel which now oversized buses charged down so unheedingly that many of the traffic signs had their streetside halves snapped off. Each night in their room they read short notices in the tissue-thin pages of the paper about motorbiking honeymooners who had been killed or delimbed by these buses.

One late afternoon, resting on collapsed lounge chairs after having braced

the pool's goose-pimpling waters, he asked her if she would mind if they flew back to the States. They discussed it some more that night after dinner, outside on the balcony attached to their hotel room. Viola realized how important it was to let him get it all out. She sat with her drink tilted slightly in her lap, holding her cigarette smoke in her mouth whenever she thought its sudden exhalation might, at crucial points, distract him; and generally kept very attentive while he rambled on in a self-conscious way she had always found endearing. He could tell by her eyes she was really listening to him, and honestly didn't know what the point was to what he was saying, but was trying to at least seem as though she did. After awhile he lapsed into a defeated silence. Viola, trying to be helpful, poured some soda into his glass, setting off an effervescence which immediately began lowering in pitch as the popping bubblets took up less and less of the glasses' volume. He looked out at the tiny lights twinkling on the far side of the bay, their feeble streak of color rolling on the bluish black water. After he had remained silent for over a minute, Viola went "Hmm...", and nodded her head several times, each slow nod meant to be more thought-filled than the last one. They went to bed.

Next morning, they decided to return to America. There's so much to see in America.

They had their first fight since getting back together again, in Wyoming. Both were tired of the road by now, of crisscrossing the country like a spider webbing in a fly; tired of having trouble remembering what day of the week or state of the union they were in; tired of living in motels where everything but the ashtrays and the towels were bolted to the motel itself. So they camped out in Wyoming, outside Laramie, setting up their newly bought equipment just in time to crawlfrog through the flaps as the cloud mass overhead burst thunderingly from the weight of its own blackening underbelly, forcing them to eat cold canned food, huddled together in

their tent, and she never looked more beautiful than in the flat light of the battery powered lantern, with her half-wet hair and her large dark eyes and a cheap army green surplus blanket wrapped around her which was already starting to give off a not unpleasant odor evoking his boy scout days; and he lost his temper when she said, more playfully than she'd been in weeks, "Like this?", after he had finished explaining to her as a punchline to a childhood camping story the irreversible effects of touching in this kind of weather the canvas wall with a fingertip. They fought most of the night, dragging everything out, so that their poor tent was pummeled not only on the gloomy outside by the force of the rain, but on the bright inside as well by their waving hands as they shot out in controlled but angry gestures. The next morning, though, she pulled her pants down only an inch or two, and drew her trousered legs up until her knees were touching her breasts, and her heavy-soled hiking boots sticking straight up in the air. When he finished the gruff little speech he had been making while she was unbeknownst to him doing all this, and rolled over inside his sleeping bag to see what her reaction was, he immediately, unconsciously propped himself up on his elbows, looking not at her eyes, which he couldn't see from where he was, or at the rest of her body, which was still completely covered in her coarse, baggy outdoors clothes; but only at the handspread of buttock she was mooning at him almost monkey style, and the supple rose line between them. He entered her slowly, feeling her moistness encircling him, rising up his length, holding him snugly within her, responding to each downward pump with an upward echo, neither of them needing or wanting to undress further; and each time they made love after this time, right up to when he forced her to finally give up and leave him for good, he thought of this speechless, kissless time in the damp, dawn-lighted, wall sagging tent; and though he never knew it, so did she. Pants pulled back up when they were done, the rhythm of small talk gradually reasserting itself as they

stretched outside and decided what to take with them, they one-legged up into the jeep they had rented and drove off, leaving nearly all of the equipment behind, food still on the plates, water still in the canteens, down pillows still in the sleeping bags. Perhaps it's all still there.

Sometimes he'd wonder, spending a few casual hours changing ones into tens, or waiting in the shut off car while Viola hopped into a store to buy toothpaste or cigarettes or emery boards, if the town they had pulled off the interstate into might not be a good town to settle down in. Once in a while, but not too often, walking across the parking lot on a morning almost as beautiful as the cartoon blue of the swimming pool he'd invariably have to pass on his way to the manager's office, key in hand, maids already pushing their carts door to numbered door, approaching theirs, though Viola, still in the shower, was just now reaching out, with soapily chinesed eyes, for the crème rinse-- sometimes, but not too often, on such an unexpectedly beautiful morning, when he'd return the key he'd stay with the clerk long enough to find out a little something about the town. On those rare mornings when this did happen, they'd gas up their car as usual, but instead of immediately getting back up on the interstate, they'd cruise down the side roads, note where the schools were, point out unusual street names, walk with their hands in their pockets, deliberately bumping their shoulders into each other, down the aisles of what they decided would be a representative supermarket, and generally try to get a feel for the town. Back up on the interstate after lunch, zipping along at seventy though there was really no reason at all to go that fast, they'd talk for a while about the town, by now about two hundred cows behind them, and she'd write its name down on a handy slip of paper, so they wouldn't forget it, and fold it in half, and put it in her purse with her toothpaste and cigarettes and emery board.

Ten thousand crucifixes were waiting for him at general delivery in Santa Maria. They had decided, spending a few nights in Sparks, Nevada, where several of

the TV stations were cabled in from San Francisco, that since they had come this far west, they might just as well go all the way to California, which neither of them had ever seen before. He made some phone calls.

Their ears popped coming down out of the Sierra Nevadas, too bad they didn't have any gum, Viola said, turning the radio down for a moment, and at the first big town they hit on I-80 they stopped, took their overcoats off, and ate out in the sunshine at a boastful McDonald's. The sweet fresh smell of the air reminded them both of Bermuda. They would be happy here.

They rented a furnished apartment in Santa Maria, put black and white forest prints up on the thin, beige walls, and smoked pot for the first time, pot which they bought at what they later realized was a ridiculously low price, from the next door neighbor, a sleep-eyed girl with a hair style like Einstein's, only pure blond, who always seemed to be out front cleaning out the inside of her car in a pair of white short-shorts, and whose bare feet he heard through the walls each night, while Viola lay dreaming in the bedroom, slapping across the linoleum floor in her kitchen while he sat on his rented sofa smoking cigarette after cigarette.

He and Viola took to spending a lot of time at the beach, getting their tans back: looking at him standing by the water line, thin as a cartoon in his oversized bathing trunks, she would smile a slightly sad, vulnerable smile women sometimes get while looking at certain men in their lives; and whenever he floated on his back, waiting for the next wave to lift him up, carrying on a conversation with her the whole time, she'd think how much his legs, refracted in the ocean, looked like a pair of rubber bands. They vacated the apartment after about a month, continued south on 101, and ended up living in a motel room just outside San Diego. They went to the Zoo, of course. He rented a camera at the entrance, leaving his driver's license as collateral, which didn't mean anything to him at all, since it was fake anyway; and

they took turns taking pictures of each other with different animals in the background, animals who opened their furred eyelids and looked out with the focus of the mentally retarded; animals pressed so fiercely against the chain link fences that when they shuffled back, tilting their heads sideways, they had empty tic tac toe boards imprinted on their noses.

He saw her one day while he was driving around downtown San Diego trying to relocate a Portuguese restaurant they had eaten at their first night here. She had taken the bus in to go shopping, it was close to his birthday, and there she was waling along on the sidewalk, not realizing he was watching her as he waited for a traffic light to lower to green, and as she made her way through the crowd, most of whom appeared to be going in the opposite direction, she had her arms around herself, hugging herself it seemed for reassurance, her long hair flat looking as it flagged about in the wind, her features not so much shy as insecure. That night, sitting in his chair while she sat on the sofa, he secretly watched her instead of getting lost in thought as he usually did right after dinner, and saw her patiently waiting for him to come out of his reverie every half hour or so, and throw her a little small talk, meantime just sitting there quietly, staring down at the carpet, putting an interested look on her face when she spotted a newly spilled wine stain, as though starved for company she were conversing with herself, and he felt a horrible, heart churning twinge which made him open his mouth and start talking, anything would do, she was already so visibly, pathetically grateful that he was suddenly paying so much attention to her tonight, but he very quickly ran out of things to say, much of what interested him wouldn't interest her anyway, and after a few amateurish attempts on her part to keep the ball rolling, to which he'd only respond with a distracted grunt, lost in thought, she smile, lowered her eyes, and invented a conversation with him in her mind, as she usually did, telling him about herself, things she had never told anyone before, except

him, long ago, which she wished to say to him again, in case he had forgotten about them.

They were running out of money. He took her one hot, still afternoon, a double fan of yellow dust across the windshield, kids in different-colored shorts playing noisily in the streets, to a Baskin-Robbins. He bought her an ice-cream cone. They sat in the car, side windows rolled down to get a breeze, listening to the radio while she crunched through the cone after the last small bead of pistachio. She handed him her used paper napkin with a flourish. He stepped out of the car, a plane passed overhead, and on the way back from the wire basket at the front of the shop he noticed how dirty his side window was, almost as dirty as his windshield, he'd have to buy some Windex, and for that matter take the car in for a tune-up, so many miles, so many motels, and halfway through wondering if he should trade it in or not for a new model, he suddenly wondered why his side window was up at all. He had left it rolled down. He came up alongside the driver's door and slipped his fingers around the handle just as, through the speckled grime of the glass, he saw Viola's long-nailed finger touch the top of the inside button and push it down. Stupidly, his thumb pressed against the handle's button on his side of the door anyway. Locked out. He stared in at her. She was laughing, stretching her mouth wider with both index fingers, the window behind her also rolled up with its button pushed down. He put his hand on top of the car, found it was hot to the touch, and rapped against the glass. Inside, Viola brought her face up close to the window, lowered and reopened her eyelids a few times in exaggeratedly contemplative blinks, and then stuck her little tongue out at him. His hand tightened into a punch which bounced off the window. If it had shattered it, the glass would have exploded in her face. A happy old man in plaid pants glanced over from one of the outdoor tables, then just as quickly looked away. He seemed less happy. Viola

retreated to the passenger side of the car, and gingerly pulled the button up. He got in. She turned the radio off. He turned it back on and put the car in reverse. She turned it up louder. He reached over and turned it off.

They went back to their apartment and she put something frozen in the oven. When the buzzer went off forty minutes later, both looked at the other from where they sat, she on the sofa, he in his chair. The buzzer whined on. She got up and turned it off, put her hands into oven mitts, and took out the dinners. Neither of them bothered to eat. The dinners sat on the range all night. Perhaps they're still there.

She asked him to stay in tonight. He asked her why it was so important that he stay in tonight. He turned on the TV. She went to bed.

Hours passed. The late night news came on. He pushed himself up out of his chair, passed through the bedroom, unzipped his fly, pulled it out, and, as men have done for thousands of years, watched himself pee. Traffic noise, which for some reason always sounds different at night, OM'd through the open bathroom window with a rhythm as soothing as rainfall. He flushed the toilet.

Back in the living room the TV was still talking to itself about sports and the weather. The air was sickly with the smell of four hours' worth of exhaled cigarette smoke. He slid open the front picture window, standing there hands in pockets looking out past the glowing city at the huge, lightless space in the cool distance where the Pacific Ocean lay. After awhile he closed the drapes, their bottom border already starting to ripple in the strong breeze.

Halfway back to his chair he heard the steps approaching. He turned around to face the front door. The drapes breathed out, rising up slightly into the apartment, then were sucked back against the screen. The steps stopped outside his front door. On TV, outside some big building, a male movie star with a black bowtie dipped his head forward, talking into a microphone someone else held.

Viola always forgot to lock the front door. But it was always the first thing he did when he got home.

The inside doorknob turned, first clockwise, then counterclockwise. He watched it, looking like a cartoon: tall, thin; long blond hair combed straight back, eyes shut now, eye balls pressing against the lids; large, veined hands hanging helplessly at his sides. He looked like a very tired cartoon. The steps walked away.

He opened his eyes.

He had very blue eyes. He shut the picture window, made sure the front door was locked, and went into the kitchen. He came back out a moment later, unscrewing the top off a bottle of Scotch.

No glass.

Viola lay sleeping on her back, her mouth partly open, her shut eyes turned down slightly at their corners as though she were listening to bade news. He stood over her, swaying a bit, shoeless and slightly befuddle-eyed. The luminous dial on the small, squarish clock ticking on the nightstand now read 3:45. He remembered the day they bought that alarm clock at a large downtown discount store, him waiting patiently behind her, playing with a lifesaver in his mouth while she tried to choose between that one and a larger, oval-shaped clock with roman numerals. After a few slowed down blinks he focused back down on her sleeping form. The tendoned hollow at the base of her throat flexed, changing shadows as she swallowed in her sleep.

He reached down and touched her shoulder nearest him. She trolled away from him onto her side, baring the long curve of her back all the way down to where it flared out again into her energetic hips. He put his knee on the mattress, hearing it creak under the increasing weight. He pulled his right hand back, let it swell into a fist, and brought it down with a wallop onto her spine. The impact was so hard his now unfisted hand still throbbed with the evenly spaced memory of her spinal discs across the backs of her knuckles.

Her body jerked. She turned to face him in the semi-darkness, propped up, eyes

still closed, head wagging to one side, drunk with sleep, and asked him in a remarkably clear voice where the baskets with the blue eggs were.

He touched her shoulder. "Relax. You're only dreaming."

She stayed propped up a moment longer, closed eyes still uncertain, then abruptly lowered her head back down onto the pillow. He managed, without knocking anything over, or making any noise beyond his labored breathing, to get out of his turkish-taffishly uncooperative clothes in five minutes of classic vaudeville. He slipped between the sheets, folding himself into the warmth of her drawn up knees, what we in the States call 'spooning'; feeling himself bump and grow against her slightly sweaty buttocks.

Sunlight woke them up.

His hand still ached, and he caught her trying, with the motions of a dog chasing its own tail, to examine the bruise on her back in the bathroom mirror. They showered separately. As they normally did anyway, but even if he had wanted to shower with her, which he did once in a while, both knew he wouldn't have been allowed, this morning, to. For the first time since they had gotten back together again, she waited until he was out of the bathroom before closing the door and sitting down on the toilet.

There were lots of unwashed dishes in the sink, so he asked her-- not, will you marry me, or will you forgive me, or will you please help me, will you please, please help me-- he asked her after a few soundless, open-mouthed starts-- asked her silent back, really, because se was staring out the front picture window with a coffee cup in one hand and its saucer in the other-- asked her if she'd like to go out for breakfast.

She put her coffee down and massaged a favorite circle of forehead above her right eyebrow, elbow on the table, eyes looking up and away from him. Eyes slightly moist. Her why are you doing this to me look. It depressed him a little that he didn't feel as depressed as he thought he

should; that troubles between them which always made her lapse into a worried, face-wrinkling session of sorting it all out in her mind, chaired and cowed; or made her face get hot and red and teary-eyed in sincere, tear your heart in little pieces to see it grief at what was happening to them, to them, not to someone else but to you and me-- it bothered him that these troubles always seemed to him to be not so unbearable.

At another table a little kid screamed out that he had just seen Ronald McDonald, and was small enough and uninhibited enough to stand up on his seat to get a better look, but it was only a taller than usual girl behind the counter in one of those sexless, pajama-like outfits the help all wear there.

So. She wanted to know what was going to happen between the two of them. She was putting up a brave front, acting very mature, although he had only to glance down to see that she had hardly touched her breakfast, and that she was frightened, very frightened, not of him, but of losing him. He noticed for the first time the crow's feet around her eyes, knew he had put them there, and imagined what they would look like after another year of living with him. What had he done to the girl he loved? When had it happened, when in the midst of his constant shaking of tails, and debugging phones, and arranging for safe drops had he slapped out of her the last, final, fatal drop of joy?

She started crying. Very quietly. Very hopelessly. This was the way it had ended before. This was the way it would always end: tired woman with the collapsing face, weeping with her hands propped up over her eyes, shoulders sagging and shaking so she wouldn't break down into sobs, because they were in a public place, they were always watched now, always watched, even in the shower, even at the movies, even in sleep when they weren't even dreaming, and all because of something that had happened so long ago, that didn't even involve her, that he could never really discuss, even with her, although she ached and suffered and let herself be

slowly, mercilessly destroyed by it even more than he did, because she loved him, she still loved him, she would always love him, even after all that was happening, had happened, would still happen; and all he wanted to do, all he ever wanted to do, was to unbutton his shirt, and take off the bullet-proof vest, in clear sight of everyone, and walk slowly, soundlessly, out into the parking lot, out into the brilliant sun, out into their crosshairs, out into the end of all this ceaseless, pointless traveling; but each time it ended like this instead, with her gone, her food uneaten, and he at the counter, ordering hamburgers, surrounded by tourists, except...except...and the girl behind the counter saying, "For here or to go?", and him saying, the tall, thin, tanned, blond man, who was as thin as a cartoon, a tired cartoon, a very tired cartoon cracking a joke: "Fix it for here-- I have nowhere to go."

And the girl smiles, she's good at smiling, and the tourists press, and somewhere in the crowd two sets of eyes meet, both of them brown, dull brown, but not a word is said.