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ERIC W. WILLIS

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## CHARLESTON. TWENTY-TWO

**E**VERYONE IS A BOOB.

My cousin, Jona. Think John with an *a*. She sits across from me. I watch her eat like a man three times her size. Between gulps of coffee, she wrestles a patty melt whose insides threaten to plop from between grilled slices of bread back onto her plate. Both of her hands are committed to devouring meat and cheese and copious amount of grease. I stare at my own, untouched, in a booth at Waffle House and wonder if my stomach can hold it in after too many vodka cocktails. Too many bars. Too many rumbling stops and starts in her too-fast car.

“If I gain back some weight, I’ll have boobs again,” she tells me between monstrous bites. “Right now, I’ve got nothing.” Her voice is full, deep, and speckled with gravel.

I look around, sure that someone’s staring. She speaks with a volume I’d never dare in public.

“I should call your mother. Tell her I’ve gotten her little doll drunk. Boob, your boy’s drunk,” she says to the air.

“Boob” is one her favorite words. She has called my mother this for as long as I can remember.

I laugh. My head spins. “She’d never answer the phone this late.” Still, my eyes bulge, thinking about it. I shuffle around in my seat.

“Relax, boob, nobody cares. Everybody here knows me.” She reaches for a cigarette. “Right, Boob?” She hollers off to my left at the kitchen. A man there nods and waves a spatula. She is cool, calm, collected. Puffing

out smoke while she stares at me. Unaffected by the shared, accumulated alcohol that, for my part, has rendered me useless.

“This is my Waffle House,” she tells me, pointing two fingers straight at my face while her cigarette lingers between them. Her voice lowers now. “Nobody’s gonna mess with you here. Not while I’m around.”

#### **YOU CAN SLEEP WHEN YOU’RE DEAD.**

I arrive in Charleston, South Carolina, in the middle of the night on a Sunday, my body still rumbling from the constant motion of hours and hours of driving. The ins and outs of curves through the mountains of Tennessee and North Carolina on the longest trip I’ve ever taken by myself. It’s my last spring break before graduating from the University of Kentucky, and I’ve gotten it into my head that I need to see the ocean for the first time. Plus, there’s a guy. Jeffrey, this time. He moved to Hilton Head Island for a new job two seconds after I fell in love with him and his third-floor, downtown apartment, complete with art-deco windows and heavy wooden everything. Clean. Pristine. The scent of Catalyst cologne lingering in my memory. He’s the first one, ever, to take my breath away. Literally. That short little pull in my chest.

A week would be too long. He can’t accommodate that, he tells me. Work is crazy. He’s in the middle of an event. One night. Dinner. Maybe.

I take it. Whatever I can get. Convenient enough that I can disguise my intentions with a trip up the road to see Jona for the first time in several years, make out like I’m not some love-crazed little gay boy in pursuit of something sordid. My mother doesn’t have to know. Jona doesn’t. He’s just a friend who happens to live in the area. My own, personal, secret love affair.

“It’s about time,” she says, standing there, smoking a cigarette, looking at me, up and down. She can’t weigh a hundred pounds. As alive and awake at two in the morning as anyone I’ve ever seen. A large dog comes up to greet me. A blond retriever, panting like there’s no tomorrow. Slobbering a giant hello.

There are several things I know from talking to her on the telephone.

Often for so long I have to set the phone down because my arm hurts from holding it. Lying over it on my twin-sized bed so she can keep talking while I listen from my rented room in Lexington.

She's living in a double-wide with a man she's taking care of in exchange for room and board. This is her only form of income at the moment. Her gainful employment in the lab of a water quality testing facility evaporated over disputes with management and a string of unavoidable absences related to her health. Lupus. Cancer. Combined with her mouth, unable to hold back with whatever she thinks about everything. Her husband, Jim, a Navy man, out to sea, again, on a six-month assignment, cheated on her. They have been separated for some time. Their house, empty. Up for sale.

She is just over ten years my senior. The intelligent one, aspiring to medical school. The one who made something of herself and moved away from our ordinary hometown of Evansville, Indiana. The one who could light up a room and talk to anyone about anything with passion and confidence for hours, like there was no end. Like right now would last forever.

#### **DON'T TELL YOUR MOTHER EVERYTHING.**

The porch is piled with plastic storage boxes. Lawn chairs. Furniture.

"Couldn't fit everything inside," she tells me as we pass by, the dog fumbling past us. The smell of the place gets me first. Wet dog, kitty litter, cigarettes, and urine. A gray cat leaps by, makes her way past the coffee pot.

"Don't tell your mother I let the cat roam the counters."

I laugh a little, like it's a joke. I don't know what else to do.

"When we got here, I had to take the wallpaper down. Peeled it back, the place was full of roaches. Don't tell your mother that, either."

My stomach churns. My bag grows heavy on my arm, my fingers gripping harder.

"Come in, meet Rex," she tells me. Rex is the roommate. An actual Hell's Angel she met at a bar. We head to the back bedroom where a man too tall for his home hospital bed lies watching an infomercial for steak

knives. There is Native blood in him. His hair long and straight and jet black. His eyes are crazed and glazed over at the same time.

“Hello,” he says, half to me and half off into the distance.

“This is my cousin,” Jona says, and they continue with insignificant small talk as I take in the room. Nodding. Thinking. I had imagined something more frightening, a rougher man, dangerous and mean. His sickness quickly tempering that. His feet dangle over the edge of the bed in a room strewn with pill bottles, bandages, oxygen tanks.

“He has hepatitis,” she reminds me as we leave the room. “It’s getting worse.”

There’s more. His lungs are riddled with the wrath of Agent Orange. His tour in Vietnam an early one, before anyone thought to tell the poison sprayers to protect themselves as they spoiled foreign lands.

We leave him to his television as she shows me the bath. Past another bedroom filled with boxes. Clothes, lamp shades, Christmas decorations I recognize from photographs. Remnants of a former life. The pile so high and deep I can’t see the end of it. Then on to my temporary room. She sits at her computer in the corner. Talks like she always does, endlessly. About music she’s downloading for free as she types away in some chatroom in the corner of the screen. Memories. Family. Our grandfather still healthy and smoking three packs a day at ninety.

I fall into a shallow sleep, having, finally, put down my bag. Used to the air and too tired to care. Imagining, in a few days, the sight of Jeffrey. Drifting as she chatters away, telling me she’s glad I’m here.

#### **DON’T ACT LIKE A TOURIST.**

She allows me one day to sightsee. Any more would be an indulgence. I’m here to see the real world. Learn a thing or two outside my lonely bubble from the woman who’s seen it all.

From the seagrass baskets, shells, and jewelry at the market, I settle on a T-shirt with an embroidered shark and the name of the city on it.

“Of course, you’d pick something that dull,” she tells me. “Any boob

walking down the street'll peg you as an idiot tourist in a second." She looks at me with that look she has. Not quite smiling, but obviously amused. Her eyes bright. Knowing. Everything.

At Hyman's we eat calamari she deems "slightly overdone."

"It shouldn't be chewy," she tells the waiter past my embarrassment, and we get it for free. I sit, silent, as they arrange it.

"Tip him what the meal would have been," she says, and I do.

We stand in line for pralines and share one from a box. She breaks off a piece with her tiny, pointed fingers.

"They're too sweet for me. All sugar," she says. I ignore her and finish the rest, chomping down. Maybe she doesn't know everything.

#### **HOLD ON TO YOUR REAL FRIENDS.**

It is a cloudy day, so we take to the pier. Find a porch swing there and rest our feet. We are lucky for this. The sun could trigger an outbreak. Lupus erythematosus. A disease that has left her skin subtly marked with the remnants of repeated rashes that started sometime in childhood. When not flared, she is white as paper and has learned to hide it well. The right shade of make-up, the right light, maintaining her beauty for the outside.

"Women never liked me," she says as if returning to a previous thought. "I don't have any female friends. Never have. Been that way since high school."

"Why not?" I ask as we sway in the breeze, remembering her in a photograph. A yellow prom dress and a beaming smile. Always ahead of her peers, she was, by then, already involved with an older crowd. College parties. Twenty-somethings. She dated a local newsman who either didn't know her real age or didn't care.

"I'm too much of a threat. I can talk to men. I get along with men. No problem. Women don't like that when it's their man you're talking to." She looks out across the water. Flicks away ashes from another cigarette. "But with men, it's a problem, too. If you're too smart, they feel threatened. Less like a man. Most of them can't handle that."

I wonder about her husband, Jim.

“You know what, putz. You’ll only ever have a few friends in this life. Plenty of acquaintances. People who don’t really give a shit about you,” she says. “But true friends? Maybe one.” She’s lit another cigarette, points with it from between her fingers as if illustrating life’s lessons on an invisible chalkboard. “Family? Now that’s different. You. Me. But real friends just don’t happen.”

**KNOW WHEN TO CALL IT QUITS.**

“It was a stripper,” she tells me. We are in her old kitchen. It is empty, half-way through a new paint job for some unknown future buyer. The house, something of a suburban dream. Cul-de-sac. Screened in back porch. Wooded greenspace beyond the backyard. Part of the Jona I thought I knew.

I look at her, confused. A step behind her churning mind.

“Jim, boob, Jim. A weekend in Savannah and he picks up a stripper. Now we’re here, in this empty nothing.”

I look around, imagining what it used to be. Dinner parties. Navy men. Christmases and late-night chats on the back porch. A breeze blowing by. Jona, laughing. Entertaining. Charming them all, one by one with random thoughts about everything.

“He didn’t think I knew people down there. I knew. I told him, flat out, he had to wear a condom after that. He blew up.”

I don’t know what to say. I never do, so I listen. Take in the pieces she gives me as her mind moves on and on inside her head in front of me.

“Sometimes it gets too hard,” she tells me. “Sometimes it just has to end.”

**ALWAYS REPAY YOUR DEBTS.**

We buy pork, on sale, and navy beans at the grocery store with food stamps. She takes me home and makes dinner. I feel like a child again, quietly waiting for food. Think about Jeffrey and Hilton Head Island, wonder if he’ll be glad to see me. Wanting him to ask me to stay. It will be clean there. It won’t smell like animals and sick men in back rooms watching television. I’m sure he’s found a maid to clean for him. Maybe he’ll have the same soft

sheets. Take me to the beach. Feel the sand. Let me touch him.

A curtain-filtered light seeps through the windows as the day fades on. Jona has a pot of coffee on, as always, and sips between chops and stirrings. A rumble emerges from the hallway. The dog startles out of sleep.

“Jona. Jona. Help me. Jona.”

Like some sort of banshee, crazed and afraid, Rex runs down the hall in a fumble of hair and arms and gangly legs.

“What is it?” she asks. “Sit down. Hold on.”

Rex has cut himself somehow. He wails like an injured child. The dog flops about, barking. Scared. She takes to the bedroom for gloves and supplies.

“This is why he can’t be alone,” she tells me, dressing his wound like she’s done it a hundred times. Calming him. Nursing. Taking control.

“Help me get him back to the bed,” she says. We each take an arm.

“His sister wants him in a home,” she tells me once everything is settled down. He’s gone again, into his own little world. “I promised I’d never let that happen. Most of the time he’s fine, but it gets bad sometimes. I owe him, though.” She tells me how he tracked down Jim when he disappeared once for several days. Hell’s Angels on rescue duty. I imagine a fleet of motorcycles cruising down the highway, Jona strapped into a helmet, holding tight to Rex’s back, his long black hair blowing in the wind. Her blond waves mixed right in.

#### **DO IT EVEN IF YOU DON’T KNOW HOW.**

We drive across a bridge in the dark as warm air seeps past me through a crack in the window. My head bobs with the blaring radio.

“You look like you’re sucking a dick,” she tells me. I immediately stop. What she doesn’t know is that’s exactly what I spent the last forty-eight hours trying to do without success. Instead, I made a fool of myself.

Yes. Jeffrey took me out to dinner. Some bar food sort of place in a strip mall. It was loud. He had to ask me to speak up so many times he got annoyed. Then we sat in his fancy new chairs and talked about how he loved



his 12-foot ceilings. He told me Hilton Head had some sort of building code for height and colors. The Red Roof Inn didn't have a red roof here, and the McDonald's sign didn't stick way up in the air. I looked around, admiring, soaking in some sense of wealth and comfort I wanted so bad I could puke. Tried to act coy and inviting. Then he decided to go to bed. Left me on the couch, only to say, in the morning, "I guess we didn't have to have sex." Like I was supposed to have snuck into his bedroom and jumped him without an invitation.

I started to think I didn't know anything, meandering around his apartment after he left for work. Telling me to stay as long as I wanted as long as I was out by the afternoon. I showered for a half an hour, wiping away the last three days, watching the light through an overhead window. Pouted at the fact that I wasn't on his important telephone numbers list attached to the side of his refrigerator. Pouted some more when I found condoms in his bedside drawer. Someone else had been here. I wasn't the one.

I sprayed myself with his cologne and went to the beach he recommended. Finally, the ocean. The real thing this time, not just on a pier above it all. The sun and the sand and the seagulls hopping by. I drew pictures and wrote in a journal I brought with me. Revelled in the quiet. *Sand has already collected on all my things, shoes, feet, pants, and hands. The blue goes on forever.* I spent the whole day, until sunset, hoping he'd call and say, "Stay."

Jona doesn't know any of this. I tell her it was fun. It's enough. She's occupied with her own celebration, having taken back her maiden name while I was gone. Dressed up in a pantsuit the morning I left and went to the courthouse to make her divorce official.

"You never did know how to dance, putz," she says, the bridge now behind us.

"It's hard, ya know," I say.

"Ya know. Ya know. We're not Canadian, ya know." She laughs at me and at herself. Actually laughs for the first time all week. We're out for our big night. A proper celebration. She drives us from bar to bar, zipping through

Charleston in her half-broken car. Everywhere, she knows someone. Every bar, we're on "the list." At a dance club, we hang out in the DJ booth, the man there one of her short-lived flings. I gaze from above at everyone below us, sipping vodka and cranberry juice. Her night filled with free shots from the bar or some patron who knows her from a thousand other nights like this.

"I haven't paid for a drink in a long time," she tells me, with that look again. That almost smile. Throwing back another one with a bearded man on a stool.

"Finally free," she tells everyone. And everyone cheers. "One more."

We move with the music. We dance. The blur begins, and I remember a cloud. A wedding dress, silky and white.

*"Turn. Left foot. Right. And again."*

*At twelve, I am inept. I fail her direction. I am in a blue suit, a hand-me-down, dancing in my school cafeteria. A space that moonlights as a theater, a church hall, and a reception area. Tonight, it is transformed into a sea of love complete with pink, heart-shaped balloons, music, and a hundred people I do not know.*

*"Boob. Your boy can't dance," she tells my mother from across the room. It is true. I can never remember my lefts and my rights, much less what comes next. But I do not care. I am with her in this moment, with Jona in her wedding dress and her perfectly rolled curls. Her heels so high I can hardly reach up to her. This is goodbye. Though I do not know it, yet. Tomorrow she is gone. Away with her tall, dark, and handsome to a place I do not know. Away so that I miss her and wonder what she becomes. Dream of following. Someday. Maybe. Out into the world.*

The room spins. She takes my arm. No more shots tonight. She seems to whisper through darkness and flickering lights. That sly smile leading. Taking charge. "Alright putz. It's time. . . food. . . now." And away we zip into the night.

**YOU ARE GOOD ENOUGH.**

"I'll have a white Russian," she says to the bartender as we pull up two stools.

She knows him. They spit niceties and inside jokes at each other, something I've come to recognize as a pattern. She knows everyone, everywhere we go, including three regulars at various spots along this square-shaped bar. We are in a place called Divots, the only golf-themed nightspot I have ever seen. The theme is subtle. Some festive green wallpaper strewn with tiny, well-dressed players and a waist-high statue of a man in mid-putt near the bathrooms. We are two of a half-dozen patrons on a weekday afternoon in her closest neighborhood haunt.

She introduces me to more people I won't remember, embarrassing me while relaying some sense of pride. "This one's in pharmacy school. Watch out for him. Sharp."

"You know that's all you'll ever be able to talk about," she tells me. "You'll be the most boring boy at the party. Drugs. Drugs. Drugs. And not even fun ones."

I worry. I'm twenty-two and already doomed to be boring.

Two years from now, she will take a job in this bar, in need of extra cash. I will picture her here serving drinks to a half-dozen weeknight patrons. She will banter and talk and sip coffee between fewer and fewer cigarette breaks as she tries to quit.

She will tell me on the telephone I don't call enough. I don't return her hellos as quickly as she'd like. She'll leave messages:

"Family matters more, ya know. Ya know. Ya know." Laughing at herself, at our inside joke. "Call me."

Her calls will seem normal. She'll talk until my arm hurts, still. But she'll tell me, without saying it, that life is getting harder. She's on heart medication. Rex spends more time lost in his television. There's less partying. Fewer nightclubs. Fewer endless friendly acquaintances.

I won't know this soon enough, that things are getting harder. And won't know the gaps in her story until people mention them later. The cancers. The rape. The history of heart disease from the other side of her family that no one bothered to recognize. I will wish she could tell me, one more time, some lesson, some story about how to survive.

She will never know about Jeffrey. About how stupid I was, trying to play at love without accepting myself, completely. The woman who knew everything. Who would have made it okay. Regardless.

One night, she will close up this golf bar and go home. She will return to an ailing man in a haze who won't notice her fall into an overstuffed couch. He won't notice her failure to move for two full days as blood pools in her face, turns it purple and black and distorts what is left of her radiant beauty amongst the broken pieces of a life that never gained the traction it needed to thrive. He won't notice until he needs her, and she has nothing left to give.