

The North Curb: A Short Story

By Paul Attaway

The air was crisp, not cold, but with a flat texture owing to the paleness of the sky; bluish, but not blue, pale, but not overcast. Were the sky truly blue, you'd say for certain that it was a crisp, clear day. But you couldn't say that. The weather bred uncertainty. Which direction would the day go? Would clouds roll in? Would the sky deepen with a true bluishness bursting through, or would it remain poised as a day lacking contour, a day born for contemplation?

She'd arrive later this afternoon and we'd spend the weekend together. A boon for hotels and restaurants, Valentine's Day fell on a Friday this year practically begging to become a long weekend. How could you not 'getaway for the weekend?' Anything less telegraphed ambivalence, trouble at home, a romance lacking intensity.

Valentine's Day had become a competition to see who could have the most perfect date. "We're spending the weekend at the Mayfair," he boasts. "Kind-of a last-minute decision." Bullshit. Those reservations had to have been made months in advance. Ugh. I hate the forced spontaneity of Valentine's Day and the unspoken, wink-wink, understanding that the sex was going to be great.

She'd land in a few hours. I'd meet her on the north curb. We know the airport well since we've been travelling here for years. "I'll text when I'm taking off," she said. Why hadn't we travelled together? I think we both had rather flimsy excuses.

"I have some business the day before. I think I'll head over Thursday. Do you want to go with me?"

"No," she remarked casually. "I have a few things I've been meaning to get done. I think I'll knock them out and catch a flight out Friday. You get your business done."

Had we grown ambivalent? Too comfortable with each other? Had our life proceeded down a predictable path set out long before we had even met? What if we'd never kissed that night at that party? What if she had stuck with what's-his-name? The good-looking idiot she had a crush on. What was his name?

"Another refill sir?" asked the waitress. Or was she the owner? I wonder if she is one of those millennials you read about with a college degree and no prospects. If she had a college degree, does that make her a barista? These thoughts pass quickly as I look up and see a plunging neckline and a snake tattoo crawling up from inside her shirt. Why do these girls, I mean young women, think that a tattoo can improve on a great pair?

I wasn't dead, just married for twenty-eight years, but I still recognized an attractive woman when I saw one. As I'm pondering all this, in walks a woman who might as well have been a ghost. It couldn't be! But it looked like her. Or what I imagine she would look like after, what, thirty years? I heard she was living abroad and then had gone off the grid. Good grief, she went off the grid before there was a grid. When the web arrived, I searched her name a few times. Nothing. Then I just stopped looking. It was embarrassing. I was happily married with four kids, and not just happily married, but still in love.

She was coming this way. Was it her? She glanced at me and kept moving. No, I'm imagining it. It's not her. Then she paused and turned her head slowly but with purpose.

"Brad?"

I look up and nod and pretend that the awareness of seeing an old friend is just starting to spread across my face.

"Lauren? Yes, it's me. I'm Brad."

"Of course you are." A slight laugh escapes as she pauses. "I just can't believe it's you."

We stared at each other and then out of nowhere I come forth with a remark that floors her and makes her agonize all over again, no doubt for the millionth time, why she left me.

“Funny weather we’re having.”

I’m such an idiot. I’m not sure she heard me though because as I stood up, I banged the table hard enough to send the massive cup of coffee flying.

She laughed softly to herself. God, how I had hated that laugh. I never knew if she was laughing with me or at me or remembering something one of her model friends had said about me.

“Are you waiting for someone or may I join you?”

That smile again. Now that smile, I always loved that smile. It told me it was going to be OK. She smiled a lot.

When thirty-two years ago you are a senior in college and madly in love, or so you believed, with the most beautiful girl anyone had ever seen and your time together is defined by a passionate intensity, weekends away, and parties, that because she was by your side, seemed to spin centrifugally around you and then it suddenly ends... an ending defined by an immediate, unexplained absence and punctuated with a four line note that combine to slap you so hard you stumble

dazed for months trying to shake the cobwebs free as your brain screams 'She's gone! She's gone!'. When this happens, what do you do?

And now she's standing right in front of you. "Yes, please have a seat. I'm not waiting for anyone. I mean I am, but not here. I'm waiting at the airport. No, I'm waiting for someone to land at the airport. But I'm waiting here. My wife."

Smooth, Brad. Very smooth.

"So, you're married?"

"Yes."

"How long?"

"Twenty-eight years."

"Kids?"

"Yes, four."

"Oh my."

"Yea, crazy. Boy, girl and then twins, a boy and a girl. The twins just left for college last fall. The girl went to Georgetown, so now we have an excuse to go back. We're empty-nesters now."

"And it's good?"

“Yes, but different without the kids always around. We’re entering a new phase in our life, or so that’s what people like to say. What about you? Married? Any kids?”

“No. I mean I was married for a while, a long time ago. But you know me, I couldn’t stay still.”

Silence. Her eyes cast down. Was this it? Was I finally going to get an explanation? An apology? Good God, we we’re making plans for what lied after college. And there it was. That sense of ... What was it exactly? Always just under the surface. Her sense of loneliness in a room full of people who wanted to be close to her. What was it about her that seemed so carefree but empty, spontaneous but lost? *Just ignore it*, I’d tell myself. She’s having fun. Everyone had fun when she was around. She made everyone around her feel good. Or were we pretending, numb to our surroundings? We could forget, or ignore, whatever we wanted to forget or ignore. But it wasn’t real. Was it just the feeling we had in college, of being on the precipice of real life and here was someone who seemed un-phased about tomorrow, or was she hiding some profound pain? Bury it. She did; so, I did.

We spoke over the table, heads leaned slightly forward, not as two old friends but as two with an old friendship. We talked of and laughed at the

memories. I had kept in touch with classmates. She had not. I told her who married who, who was divorced, who had died too young and who were grandparents already. She asked about my work, my wife, and our kids.

I asked about her life, and she would deflect. Vague answers about time here or there. She tried writing, restored an old home or two.

I don't know how many people in the coffee shop had come and gone, but suddenly it was late, and I said I had to go. And just like that, the conversation ceased. She looked at me, a look that bordered on a gaze and she seemed on the verge of saying something and then she turned her eyes away and smiled to herself, sadly but with resolve. No explanation would be forthcoming. Our lives had proceeded through time and space from then until now and any attempt to explain the change in trajectory imparted by her sudden absence would only cheapen where we each had arrived. And what would the point be? No, it was too late for an explanation and we each knew it.

We did not exchange phone numbers or email addresses, nor did we promise to stay in touch. We knew we'd never see each other again.

I drove to the airport with the top down. The sky was a deep blue, and the air was crisp. I pulled up to the north curb and saw her before she saw me. She looked as beautiful as the day we first kissed. Our eyes met and we each smiled at

the other and I knew that I was smiling to myself as well. This was good. This is our life together. A long weekend at the Mayfair. Just what the doctor ordered.