

So Different Now

by Ben Tanzer

She's right there in Thirsty's. In her usual spot. Drinking her usual drink. Yuengling on tap. One after another.

And he's there too. Behind the bar. Pouring drinks. One after another.

Sometimes they speak. But mostly she orders. He pours. And so it goes.

The three of us, Becky, Jamie, and me, went to MacArthur elementary school together. MacArthur was built on top of a swamp and now allegedly sinks one millimeter into the ground every year, year in and year out. Maybe that's just the local folklore.

Becky had lived over by St. Johns Church, near Mill Hill. Her older brother Billy was a famous high school drunk. Her dad had died when we were all young, it was something on a construction site, and her mom always looked harried. Becky took care of herself from the start. She got herself up for school. Got dinner made and paid the bills when needed.

She also followed me around. At first it was just around school, moving desks to be closer to me, maybe changing tables in the lunchroom. It was harmless. But then I started seeing her as I was leaving school. Drifting across the lawn, watching me, following me with her eyes, and then everyday venturing just that much further, up the hill in front of school and towards the cross-walk and the crossing-guard, the one who had lost her nose to cancer and now wore this triangle thing in the spot where her nose had been.

And then she moved past the cross-walk and the creepy house where the old shut-in lady lived, the one who waved to me as I

walked to and from school even as she plotted to lure me into her home so she could bake me into some kind of stew or possibly touch my dick.

Soon enough Becky was past the shut-in's house and Dave Jordan's house as well, Dave who's step-dad never spoke much after coming home from Vietnam and never could stand for any kind of noise in the yard.

I kept looking over my shoulder, but Becky was there, coming, coming after me, up the street and towards my house, and I am running now, the sweat trickling down my back as I head-up the hill in front of my house and through the front door, where I am safe and can play Missile Command before I go out to see my friends because she is gone.

Except that she isn't.

"Who's the girl sitting on the front lawn," my dad says walking in, "she's cute."

My dad isn't living with us right now, but he's home to make dinner, because everything is going to be like it always is.

"Becky's on the front lawn?" I say.

"Becky? Sure. Should we invite her in?"

"No, no, what am I going to do?"

"Do, do about what?"

"Leaving the house?"

My dad pauses. He knows something about leaving the house.

"Here's what you do," he says, "you put on your Lone Ranger mask and just leave, walk right by her, no eye contact, no looking back."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, it will work like a charm."

And so I do, never looking back and never really talking to her again.

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"Hey, Becky," I say, "can I get you a drink?"

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, why?"

I know why. She knows why. We haven't talked in twenty-five years. Still, she looks good, decent. She has nice eyes, kind eyes. Plus, the fact is my wife is fucking our friend Tommie and I'm the last to find out.

"I'll have a Yuengling," she says.

"Cool."

"Jamie," she yells motioning him over, "another Yuengling."

"Two," I shout.

"Sure," he grunts.

Jamie walks over to the tap.

“Are you friends with him?” I ask Becky.

“Why?” she says cautiously.

“I don't know,” I say, “he seems kind of weird with that bad bowl haircut and those fucked-up teeth. Well, and that shit back in high school.”

Jamie had terrorized us when we were kids. He was bigger than we were. And mean. Smashing our ears on the bus with the palm of his hands and messing with our bikes if we left them unattended for even a second; endlessly pelting us with rocks, ice balls and crabapples; grabbing our nipples, or worse, our balls, in the locker room after swim class, grabbing them hard, and then pausing, his smile malicious and hungry.

We knew enough to know that his home life was fucked-up, all poor and violent, but we didn't care, he was a fucking bully, and we all hated him, suppressing our anger and fear, because we couldn't fight him and there was no one to tell. No one's parents were ever around, and say they had been, who was going to talk to Jamie's fat fucking father Joey? No one, no one's dad was that tough or scary.

And then he was gone, as if abducted by aliens, which we would have believed, and enjoyed. But no, the rumor was that he had been sent to a home for juvenile delinquents. For what we did not know, but did it matter? No, we were free, until we weren't.

In high school the rumors started-up again. Jamie was coming back. He had done his time. We all started getting tense and worked-up. If Jamie had been a bully before they sent him away, what would he be like now?

He wasn't a bully. He wasn't even tough. He was small now, smaller than all of us, like he had stopped growing. And maybe he had. He

was soft. His shoulders perpetually bowed. Quiet, dressed in his Anderson-Little oxfords, he never spoke, never really looked-up from the ground. He was scared of everything, you could smell it. Rumors were that he'd been raped wherever it was they sent him, which seemed possible, because here he was, fucked-up and different.

"I don't think any of that stuff people said about him was true," Becky says.

"No?" I reply.

"No, he had a rough time, but he's better now."

"Yeah, how do you know?" I ask looking right at her.

"Can we talk about something else?"

"Sure, how about I walk you home?"

"Yeah okay, why not."

We walk down Vestal Avenue towards Becky's house. Past Robby's Liquor Store and the old post office. We walk into her house and we are both quiet, anticipating something that already seems likely to happen.

"Do you want a beer?" Becky asks me.

"Okay."

"So, your wife's banging Tommy," she says matter-of-factly.

"That's what I hear."

"Is that why you're here?"

“Can we talk about something else?”

“Yeah, okay, what?”

“You know what, maybe we could just fuck.”

“Okay, sure.”

And so we do.

The next day I am at work and I am thinking about Becky and how it is even possible that I'm doing so all these years later. She told me she's off work today, though it's not remotely clear to me that she actually does anything besides drink at Thirsty's. I walk over to Robby's during lunch, grab a six-pack of Yuengling and decide to surprise her.

As I get to her house I see Jamie sitting on her porch. He's dragging a knife back and forth along the table in front of him. He looks up at me. He's glaring.

“Hey,” I say, “is Becky home?”

“She's my fucking girlfriend,” he says quietly still dragging the knife, still looking at me.

“What?”

“You heard me,” he shouts, “Becky is my fucking girlfriend, my girlfriend, my fucking girlfriend.”

My heart starts to pound.

“I-I-I didn't know,” I stammer.

“My fucking girlfriend,” he says slamming the knife into the table

and walking away.

I knock on Becky's door. She opens it. She's been crying. I don't feel bad, just furious, though why I do is hard to say.

"What the fuck," I say, "Jamie's your boyfriend?"

"Yeah," she says looking beaten down.

"What the fuck."

She doesn't say anything.

"Why didn't you say something?"

Nothing.

"What the fuck?"

"You were making fun of him," she says, starting to cry again.

"What are you, fucking five years old?"

Nothing, more crying.

"Seriously, why didn't you say something?"

"Because it was you," she says.

