Something Going Down, Like a Branch Snapped by Wind

by Smiley McGrouchpants, Jr-Esq-III

"Whoooooo," he sighed, a long, drawn-out, audible whistle, to stall the conversation and give him time to gather his "thoughts."

I knew I was in for trouble.

Backing up to two weeks before, we'd met under rather unusual circumstances — neither of us was busy — and, cutesy-style, like a screwball comedy from the 30's, nearly cracked our skulls together for the same . . .

“Oww!” I held my hand to my forehead. I couldn't help it.

“Yeah,” he said wincing, as people around us looked with the usual *is it alright?* pause, before, *yeah, we're fine* wordlessly relieved them of their burden.

“Neil Diamond, huh?” his eyebrow was arched, as though it only *slightly* pained him to do so.

“Yeah, well . . . 50¢!” It was a new one — too retro to be shamed into *schmaltzy*. How many generations way from Al Jolson's The Jazz Singer, anyway? I had discovered him as a discarded-but-then-everywhere treasure in my youth, 8 in 1998 meant I'd never know what was going or “over” or what-next until I could start forming my *own* opinions three years later . . . this would, spinning like a reel of film in the projector (it struck me as, when I watched the needle trace its course over the black expanse, the black sea of vinyl, chips and scratches and all) had been produced by an avalanches worth of scope, piled into record stores everywhere, the movie everybody'd *maybe* be thinking about that week, or two, or three . . . what were these crazy stadium-show emotional displays that had been humbled by time, shut up in the dustbin of history, in

Available online at *«http://fictionaut.com/stories/smiley-mcgrouchpants-jr-esq-iii/something-going-down-like-a-branch-snapped-by-wind»*
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the form of a divorced second-grade teacher whose niece was unlocking **1980** as though it was time in a bottle?

"Dan."

"Shannon."

We shook hands.

I let him let me buy it, and taped a copy for him — he was going "retro," as a way of tapping those creative impulses, if you could dig that.

I could.

Constants can be chosen too, so . . .

Nobody tells you there's "givens" everyone's born into that shift, and *settle*, with Time — the worst of which was the socially *awkward* stuff. You know: those things that make you want to shuffle your feet — it's not nuclear war, it's not curing cancer — but they become *drivers* in ways you couldn't imagine, influence behavior, period, while everyone's gotta the same 24/7, 40 hrs. a week deal.

To wit:

- my parents simultaneously came out after I graduated high school. "We figure since you'll be in college . . . " they said, still not able to look each other in the eye, after years of having nowhere else to go without stepping on each other's raw nerves. If they hadn't *both* been only childs — with one grandparent alive of mine amongst the four of them — who knows how long this would've gone on. (I met people who came from extended close families, and it was like they were in *prison*! I caught on long before I realized I was catching on: "Yep, there's *another* one!") They each had to date a series of flakes before they found someone stable. (Arguably, my mother's partner is just "stable-er.") I got a lot of letters I didn't want, full of Too Much Information, as though we were going through adolescence together, whilst I was away. At least it was from a distance. I skimmed my readings for class much less by far: "Get to the POINT!" Most of them, safe to say, I didn't have to read anyway. It was just the act of sending, of *their* writing them out, that did it for them. How could I refuse? How could I respect

them. How. Could. I.

- meantime, most of my friends at home fell apart. Pathetically, some of them took a shot at college — graduating, or not — only to return home, and fall into well-worn patterns. (??? *This* was being chosen consciously???) They can't even stand each other — it's *too* apparent — but they like the comfort of the groove. It's like a dike-level that the water'll never spill over (barring society falling, war, or some other calamity). Couples you'd never have paired together are *married*, with *kids*, and it's *so* painful: the echoes of those years like a high they're not even *trying* to recapture, just an effluvium they think coats everything and makes it "allright." They bowl a lot. They go to Applebees. They start book clubs that flounder after two-or-three weeks, symptomatic of a waning and elusive sense of purpose they only ever experienced as a trickle, not a full-on water blast, anyway . . . why bother? Who'd tell them? It'd just make them mad, and be *mean*, besides. Amazing. Losers who succeed — or, rather, *sustain* — and keep on keeping on in their little centers of universes. Resistance is futile . . . this, I'm supposed to *miss*? ("How great it felt in 10th grade when — " "Yeah! In *10th GRADE*!") If their kids only knew. Maybe then, *they* could break the lockstep! Don't bank on it, though. (This is 57% of middle America, I'm convinced: doomed.)

- college is for loading up. If you don't, you won't later. Going lazy could become habitual: I call it "recreationalizing." You don't even know you're making it into an action verb, and if you do, you're irritated — momentarily. Better to drill down; rack up a lot of "incompletes" (if not in your *classes*) and "tentatives" to check out, prime, grow, etc., later on in life. Trust me: you are already doing this. One or the other, and/or a point spectrum in-between. But probably not.

Dan didn't know what I was talking about — but he *did*, a little.

"I saw pallin' around goin' on for a while," he said, blinking and looking around and back again, causal as you please, not like he thought someone was following but like doing a sweep of the

horizon, as a matter of course. "*Generations*." He bent back and stretched.

"Where you from." This, over the lip of my coffee. Sipped it.

"Texas." He settled back down, like a crash.

"Mm-*hm*." Like I had any idea what I was talking about.

He arched an eyebrow. "You know about it?"

"Big." That's true.

"Big the *word*." He sat back in his chair. "That *defines* it, all right." He nodded at me. "You start *there*, talkin' bout Texas."

He told me:

"It takes a while to realize there aren't broader horizons elsewhere. Growing up, I mean. You hear of other places and you *go* places that're still in Texas and things filter though the media (*he laughs*) and you go someplace else and you're still in Texas and somebody talks about their cousin or somethin' and it's *still* in some other part of Texas, so you think . . . Maryland? How dare they? (*he laughs again*) Not *consciously*, but . . . who do they think they are? There's just all this *Texas*. There's *so much* of it. (*pause*.) You don't have that. (*he looks up at me*.) You don't realize how much this frames your thinking, to have all that still just be you, out of so many people, until you leave. And now here I am in Portland. On the West Coast. (*he sips his coffee*.) With a tightly-wound East Coast chick. (*he winks one eye at me to show he's kidding, and I laugh. <u>Too true, too true</u> . . .*)"

The waitress arrived.

"Big-Ass Biscuits & Gravy for . . . "

"Aye." Dan sort-of said, raising his hand, like it was *real* polite! I can't transcribe it right.

"Sierra de Bleu Balls . . . " I flushed (Dan was in the bathroom when I finally ordered.) Dan smirked a little but seemed unfazed. It was just a dopey dishname.

"So what do you tape . . . ?" I asked, ketchup and bleu cheese already dribbling down my finger as I took my first bite.

"All sorts of things." He lifted a scoop, mouthed it, swallowed, seeming to be considering something (and pointedly pausing from

looking at me directly) and decided, apparently (*gulp*, wash down w/ water) to just plunge on: “Weird things.” (*pause*.) “Things that come through the tape itself . . . ” He looked at me. “Humming . . . ” He tried not to leave me behind, or assume I'd be able to keep up easily, it appeared.

“You must have quite a get-up for that,” I said, not wanting to seem like a *complete* noob. Tech-boys and their gear; I knew some dials, some cords, some P.A. boards . . .

“You would not believe it,” he affirmed, nodding. “You. Would. Not. Believe it.” This last, gently.

Uh-huh.

We ate in silence.

For a while.

It was a hum — kinda like static, kinda like a radio-channel whine — it reminded me of Lou Reed's *Metal Machine Music* (which I had only listened to one, partway, and snapped off in frustration. My boyfriend and me didn't break up because of *that*, only, but . . . it was a lot of things, come crashing down, after being all piled up . . . and for *what*? “Thar she blows! This sucker's goin down!” It still took a season and then half the season next to “cycle it out” via workshifts, desultory applications for grad school, dream surfing on Craigslist for a new city and place to live, record-shop hunting, thrift-store shopping, and second-run movie going before I realized he'd only become a dull memory in my life . . .) “whee-EEH!”

He arched an eyebrow. (Dan did.)

“What was that?”

He shrugged, a little more reticent about wanting me to think I should “believe him,” than simply uncertain. Like a scientist amongst all his beakers with results he knows aren't sufficient, yet. “Souuunds like . . . ” there was that Southern Drawl, again. Texas drawl. Except it didn't sound hackneyed, or cute: it was where He Came From. He was Using It.

I edged closer, he spoke more, inch by inch, one thing led to another, by the end of the night we knew each other better . . .

Inch by inch . . .