

Angie, I Think

by Derek Osborne

She looks surprisingly healthy, sitting at a table in back, salad and glass of iced tea. I'm assuming its tea. According to Camille she drinks her weight in Four Roses each week. Camille is the really nasty one. Its Camille who gets them arrested. I'm here to meet Rosalind, or Shauna, the one she claims is really her, the one who went an entire month without bathing. It's Rosalind I've spoken with mostly. Shauna is shy, but she does most of the writing. Rosalind sometimes edits. They both have told me some tales, bizarre shit only cops and psychiatrists get to see, but I never know which parts are true, or if they are only true for that hour, or that moment. One thing I do know, her poetry is brilliant—rock-star brilliant—and I need a new star. I haven't put anyone through the committee in months.

"Kisses in all your filthy places," was how she signed her first query letter.

The restaurant is one of those neighborhood joints, checkered table cloths with fake candles stuck in old wine bottles. The candles flicker. I'm expecting Billy Joel to walk by any moment. She's seen me now. I take in her bulky green sweater and faded blue jeans, the boots with stiletto heels. I'm calling her Shauna inside my head as reinforcement and secretly hoping it's her and she's taking the meds. On the plane ride out from LA (though it makes me uncomfortable) I was thinking how we could take her off the meds, get out the work, then put her back on for the tour. I'm ashamed, but deep down I know that's not why I'm here—fuck the magazine—fuck the magazine. The guys at the bar up front don't turn but each of them marks my passing.

So now I can see the pale skin, the high cheekbones and her famous dark hair pulled back in a bun. It's famous because she said it is. Rosalind tells me they wash it often but rarely bother combing it out. My own hair, what's left of it, will never be famous. I'll be the one just off camera. If she truly hits the market I'll buy a nice hat. I

haven't even sat down but I can see she's already getting me. I need to be centered for this. Once in an email Camille admitted she liked to fuck with people behind the other one's backs. Her emails are another subject, for another time—almost as good as her poems. Yes, that one's for later, I'm thinking, let's get her signed and then we expand.

“I have borne three children and mothered none.”

She likes dropping grenades. It was her closing last night before we logged off. Chatting has been a regular thing for some time. She does look good, though, the sweater helping to set off her eyes, or is that the mania, what schizophrenia does to people? Over the years she'd been diagnosed bi-polar, then ASD, and recently, Asperger's.

“Those fuck-wads haven't got a clue,” she said one night on the phone, then laughed the laugh that gave me shivers. “It's not like they give a shit.”

“She has to be able to handle herself,” our poetry editor stressed at the meeting the day before, the one where I'd pitched her to senior staff. “We can't have her pulling a Cruise on Oprah.”

“Oprah's not on anymore,” was all I could muster.

I walk passed the row of empty tables, through an archway placed in a ridiculous manner center of the dining room. I can see she's started applying some makeup but clearly abandoned the idea. One eye is done bright and alluring; the other begun, the green shadow, but softer, almost hidden when she smiles. I'm glad she's smiling. I'm guessing it means Camille isn't here. Her teeth look much too white.

“Hi,” she says, not getting up but extending her hand. The grip is neutral, growing softer, ending with a little squeeze. I look at her hand, small and delicate inside my own lumber-jack grip, each of the nails painted a different color, one of them black, her left pinky.

“Hi,” I say. “You look nice.”

“Not as nice as I could. I wanted to look nice and then decided I shouldn't, but now I can't decide which is best.”

We're picking up from where we'd left off. Fourteen hours earlier she'd been three thousand miles away, telling me not to come, fits

over how she could never live up to her online persona, jabs here and there at things we'd both said, how she was nothing more than a street urchin who'd figured out how to get over, and then she threw that right hook.

"Don't think I'm in love with you."

"The thought never crossed my mind."

"Yes it did."

That is how it was with her. One moment drifting down a lazy river, grateful for the water and scenery passing by, then coming around the bend to Niagara Falls or a squadron of pirates. Calling her an emotional roller coaster was much too trite but I thought it anyway. Attempting to gauge her mood was useless. No doubt, it would change soon enough. Her energy was even more overwhelming in person, but I had prepared for that. She ebbed and flowed, building frenetic highs then gathering down, all cellos and soft French horns, the way she portrayed symphonic movement in her writing. I'd been an ordinance engineer during the war, a fancy term for someone who dug up land mines all day. Being with her reminded me of how it was walking down a trail in the bush searching for trip wires, knowing I'd never see the one. It was really a matter of luck, her smile or that sudden bang.

"Remember, this isn't a date," I said.

"Yes it is."

"All right, it is a date."

She had that tone in her voice, the one I knew not to confront.

"Shall we shag now or shall we shag later?" she asked.

"I think we'd better start with coffee. I see you're eating."

"Been eating all week. I wanted to look healthy. Do I look healthy?"

"You look fine."

"That won't get you laid, bucko. You'll need to compare me to a thousand stars, each one the soul of every girl in every town in every city you've ever..."

She stopped.

"I suppose that's the wrong direction."

"And what would be the right direction?" I said.

"Are you flirting or editing?"

The jibes—it was one of our games—how long could we go without hurling an insult. A comment coming from her meant it was time to stop talking; coming from me actually helped her stay calm, especially if I timed it well. If I sensed the mania I'd hurl an insult, then wait, as if my blade might be touching some metal under the mud, that precious second rolling the dice. It was cute how she was now, trying to be on her best behavior.

"Don't look at me that way," she said.

"What way?"

"Like you care."

Another mine, a toe popper.

"So, are you ready to keep your promise?" I said.

She nodded like a little girl at her first party. Her eyes went green like a cat, a cat with nine lives; only here they were all living at once: one brilliant, complicated existence. She sat on her hands.

"Angie, I think."

"You think?"

"It's the oldest one. The one I remember."

"Doesn't the State have records?"

"Of course they have records, but you never see them. By the time you're eighteen they're lost."

"What does your license say?"

"I'm not allowed to drive. I told you that."

"Angie," I said, trying it on. Up till that moment she'd been shedemon666, or Shauna, Roseland, Tiffany or any number of stripper monikers. It had taken some getting used to in the beginning; she signed her emails however she fancied that moment.

"Angie, I said, "You're not saying that because you like the song?"

She bolted up from the chair, knocking it back, fists suddenly clenched and jaw stretched tight. "I tell you the truth and you mock me?"

"No, I'm not mocking you. You know it's okay to ask. Sit down."

"It wasn't okay," she said, stomping off toward the front of the restaurant.

"Angie."

"And stop looking at my ass."

I stayed cool, kept my even tone. Up front the guys had the ball game on loud with plenty of barstool coaching. The only waitress, an older woman wearing big, thick-soled shoes, stood by the door, smoking.

"I wasn't looking," I said, softly.

She stopped and glanced back.

"I have to go pee."

On her way past she grabbed her bag.

I sat there, a bit relieved. I was sure she was going to say no to our meeting, probably never show up. Our back and forth had gone on nearly four months before I knew I'd made a mistake. Thank God she was in New York and me in LA. I needed to stay professional, needed to stay detached, but the thing was reading her helped me sleep. I was becoming addicted. She'd rattle off things online and say they were only warm-ups and I'd save every one and print them out when I went to bed. My nightmares decreased when we emailed. I'd learned her personality shifts, when to press and when to back off. I could only imagine the nut jobs and perverts she met at work. I would check my mail and there she'd be, nine o'clock back east, waiting to say hello before going off into the night.

"You're falling in love with me," she'd written one evening.

"With your poetry," I had answered, quickly.

Not what she wanted to hear.

"You're just another fucked up vet who wants to kill again."

I had to be careful what I admitted; she turned any confession into a dagger. I'd been warned how manipulative Bipolar's could be, though I did have to laugh at her accuracy. Did the five of them get together each morning and discuss me over coffee? Another one of our games, me and shedemon666—the end game—where either one might disappear without a trace, the memory of someone never really known. The Net was such a strange place to meet people.

"I guess I'm enchanted," I'd written on another occasion.

"Then why don't you ride out here and save me? Is your horse lame or something? Maybe you could just kill me and make us both happy."

It was the only time I scolded her—then three weeks of silence—the nightmares came back. It was she who broke the boycott.

"I'm only writing back because I know you're as fucked up as me. I'm sorry you had to kill all those people. You made me cry."

And that was the first night I called on the phone, impulsive, maybe regrettable. Her voice melted the knot in my chest, even though our first live conversation focused entirely upon the mating rituals of cockroaches. It seemed the exterminator had done her apartment that day. I heard a door slap closed and I watched her walking back to the table. Who would she be? How many lives had she lived in the last five minutes?

"I'm back," she said, plopping down on the chair.

"Angie?"

"Yes, Angie. I'll have you know I've been taking my meds every day since we talked. They kill the personalities but not the moods. Does take the edge off my sessions, though, some of my clients aren't happy."

"That's not an excuse to stop."

"It doesn't help the tips. They like the danger, wondering if Camille might show up and slit their throats."

I tried to imagine her tiny frame all pushed and pinched and gathered up in black leather, the whip and the chains. She'd mentioned one night how she owned eleven wigs, iridescent green to jet black. Her hair, at that moment, was deep, dark auburn. Had I mentioned it was my favorite color? Her face was different. She'd finished the other eye. Some mischief entered her smile.

"So?" she said.

"So?"

"It's your turn."

"How do you mean?"

"Is it really you?" she said.

"Yes, it's always been me."

"Richard isn't some pen name?"

"No."

"Come on, then, let's go upstairs."

"Upstairs?"

"To my apartment."

She had promised to choose some neutral spot for our meeting, far from where she lived.

"This was far away?"

"Sometimes."

"You haven't touched your salad," I said.

"That was just for show."

We stood; I almost pulled out her chair, then walked past the stools with the men watching their game.

"We okay?" the bartender asked. An older man; clearly a guy who had seen it all.

"Yes, we're fine," she answered.

"Usual time?"

"No, I'm not working tonight."

"Does Kevin know?"

"Fuck Kevin."

The waitress looked over, disgusted, then crushed out her butt and moved to one side. Out on the street Angie took my arm, pulling up close. We strolled along the front of the building. It was a decent enough neighborhood, much as I'd pictured, a mixture of five story walk-ups and little shops with a deli on the corner. Not exactly dirty, but not exactly clean.

"This feels nice," she says.

She lives on the third floor, stairs hemmed in by a heavy old banister covered in layers of brown paint, green linoleum landings, EXIT signs dangling. The halls are well kept, she'd lied about that, and the entrance to her apartment has only three locks, not six. When we step inside she closes the heavy door, placing a black

metal bar in a yoke bolted to the jamb, turning all three of the locks, twice.

"I'm not a very good homemaker."

She described it once early on: the tiny kitchen, a small living room; two windows facing the street. A pantry-like bedroom was off to the right, bare mattress in the corner, a simple wood dresser. There was no mirror. The front room had an old metal desk pulled out from the wall, her laptop open, an internet line stretched tight to the wall. On the far side stood a sofa, a squared off thing with chrome legs like you'd find in a dentist's office, nothing else, no pictures, no table, no lamps or plants, a bare wood floor and the afternoon sun. There weren't any curtains or blinds.

"Remember, Angie, we said no sex."

"I remember," she said, leading me to the sofa. "Could we cuddle? Could I fall asleep in your arms?"

I remembered the line from one of her poems, 'An Hour's Layover in Paris'.

"Yes, we can cuddle," I said.

She turns and curls against me, resting her cheek up close to my chest. Now I can feel how frail she is, light as a feather beneath the wool and it hits me, the green sweater, the faded blue jeans, dark hair pulled tight in a bun.

"You're safe now," I say, a line from one of my own stories, the one I sent her about the little girl who puts her hair in a bun to look older. I lean down and kiss the top of her head. She snuggles in and falls asleep; it takes all of five seconds. I listen to her breathing; touch her difficult hair. She's cleaned the apartment, a few telltale streaks show on one of the windows. A brand new mop with a yellow handle stands by the stove, its barcode sticker still stuck. It feels good to hold her. It feels like it did in the war after digging a hole and crawling inside for the night, earth all around and sandbags soft as pillows.

I kiss her again, just on top of the head, letting my cheek rest beside her, the scent of cheap shampoo mixing in with the lingering smoke and the booze. She can sleep for now—we both can—and

instead of cradling an imaginary weapon, what I do each night when I close my eyes, I gather her up in my arms, letting the sounds of battle fold and fade to the street below, her gentle breathing, the strength of together destroying the moments alone.

