

Ditto

by Melanie Yarbrough

I think Winston's driving a school bus now, she said.

It was dinnertime, not gossip time but she didn't seem to notice a difference those days, not since losing her job at the Dress Barn. Any chance she got, she'd talk about the misfortunes of others like she was comparing their hardships to her own until she'd get to crying and carrying on. Talking about her poor daddy and how the last time she saw him, he was standing outside the house he built—with his bare hands, what have you ever built with your bare hands?—like he was counting each brick. She had loved him but didn't tell him enough and you've gotta tell the people you love that you love them and did John reckon that old daddy knew her love for him? Well. Did he? John just wasn't sure how much more he could take of it. Not tonight after he'd run into Jane Leary in town and she'd looked at him with that diamond on her finger like they—she and him—were missing out on something. Like he needed one more thing he was missing out on.

“You going to finish that salad?” John had stopped being cautious long ago, agonizing over how to word his questions, his answers.

His voice had lost the pleading quality it once had and now it was tired without yet being defeated. The way he saw it, she'd keep on him until he sounded defeated or she put him in the ground, if they weren't one in the same.

No, she said in her vicious tone, adding multiple syllables where there were none, to better enunciate her hatred of whatever he'd just done or said. I ain't going to finish my salad.

He didn't respond, waiting.

You wanna know why?

He'd come to treasure her questions as opportunities not to answer her, to withhold from her for a change something she wanted.

John! Do you want to know why I ain't. Gonna. Eat. My. Salad?

“No, Nikki, I don't.” He looked straight at her, not to challenge

her, but to better gauge what it was she would throw at him. Her eyes always darted to the thing right before her red, swollen fingers snatched at it, like a thing possessed.

A couple times he'd actually caught the thing—a salt shaker, her ring, and a spoon. That made her the most angry. Then there was no time to respond, she'd start grasping anything within reach, flinging them before her fingers had fully clasped around it. Those nights he slept in their camper, the door locked, listening to her screaming from the house.

He stared at her, anticipating the sting of something against his cheek or the crash of her bad aim.

You don't give a damn about anybody but yourself, you know that?

He laughed a little.

I hate you.

He started to say it back, started to pull his jaw toward his throat into the simple and overused vowel, but stopped himself, thinking of Niagara Falls making its way out of the United States, away from him. He thought of the mountains he wouldn't climb, the nature trails where he'd never lose his affinity for oatmeal, the women he could have loved, that might have loved him back. Might not have hated him. He thought of the children, who looked more like Nikki, the only reason he could look at her anymore. He thought of Jane's leather purse that made a sound like keys as their bodies pushed against it from either side, a casualty caught in the middle of their misplaced passion. He licked his bottom lip as if to taste her there.

