

Eskimos Happened to Come Wandering By

by Tyler Koch

Meet Carl.

He's six-three, two hundred and thirty pounds. He has light-brown hair, which, when he was younger, and especially during the summer, tended toward blonde. He likes his pants pressed. He folds his shirts fastidiously and will refold them until they are free of wrinkles. He has separate spaces in his closet for his shoes. Tennis shoes here, casual shoes there, dress shoes toward the back, as not to be disturbed or accidentally scuffed by the comings and goings of his wife. On his nightstand are two books stacked perfectly: *The Republic* and *Infinite Jest*. His cell phone, which he keeps in his back pocket while traveling, has only three downloaded applications: his bank, a simple game of chess, and Webster's Dictionary. When he texts he prefers to speak instead of type. When he receives a call he prefers to use the speaker, but will resort to headphones if the situation necessitates. In all manner of language, he prefers jargon to humorous, and pluvius to rainy, but most of all, he hates the phrase, "That's so cool."

Meet Patricia, known as Patty, Carl's wife.

She's five-three, one hundred and twenty pounds. She has greying hair which is dyed every two weeks, so that to the rest of the world she appears as a strawberry blonde. She wears workout clothes most of the day and can be found, when at home, either by herself or in the company of others, in yoga pants and a sports bra. In her twenties she worked as a sports model for several major brands, featured in their spring and winter catalogues. Now in her forties, she still receives offers. There's a space in her office where she pins emails and business cards to a corkboard. On her nightstand is the latest release of *Woman's Health*. On her keychain

are passes to three separate fitness clubs: one for weights, one for yoga, and a third for a personal trainer she's hired, named Nick, who is ten years her junior and a physique competitor. She doesn't feel as though she needs the guidance, but she likes the way Nick looks at her, and the way his hands feel when he's correcting her technique.

Meet Lindsey, Patty and Carl's daughter.

She's five-three, one hundred and twenty-five pounds and is, in nearly all respects, a mirror image of her mother. But instead of yoga pants she prefers clothes from Anthropologie. When her paycheck arrives, twice monthly, she takes what she earns and stashes it in a special account for shoes and purses and other accessories. So far she's bought a Coach purse, Prada booties, Jimmy Cho pumps, and Givenchy boots. She's unlike other girls in that she's not wild about diamonds, except for diamond earrings, and instead prefers sapphires. On her nightstand are issues of *People*, *Cosmo*, and *Entertainment Weekly*. She's not someone who reads a magazine cover to cover, but chooses instead to focus on the pages relevant to her. Lindsey has a boyfriend named Henry who comes from a great deal of money. They're only in high school, but the thought crosses her mind regularly that this might be a good fit for the future, even though Henry is jealous and hates it when she flirts with other boys. She's picked out her engagement ring already.

Meet Peter, brother to Lindsey, son to Carl and Patty.

He's six feet even, one hundred and eighty pounds. He's in college, the Student Body President in fact, and wears dress pants, a button down, and loafers to class most days. In his closet are variations of the same in different colors. On his nightstand are issues of *Politico* and *The Economist*. He's a senior this year, and lives in a rented house with two of his friends. Already he's looking at jobs for when he graduates, and has decided to move to Washington, DC. He wants to work on the Hill. He knows that to be taken seriously he'll need a graduate degree, but he wants to make

connections first, ride the coattails of an influential senator for several years. Eventually he wants to make a run at office. He's currently single but chooses to be that way. He receives several texts each night from different women, subordinates within the student body government. They're all pretty but he knows that when the time comes he'll have to pick his wife appropriately. She'll need to check all the right boxes.

Meet the Dove family: Carl, Patty, Lindsey, Peter.

They live in a well-to-do neighborhood, which is to say they think of themselves as upper middle class, not excessively rich, but with enough money that Carl plans to retire when he's sixty, and will receive a pension from the university where he's a tenured professor. Their home consists of five bedrooms, one for each family member, with a guest bedroom. Carl and Patty haven't slept in the same bedroom for three years, but each prefers it that way. Carl snores from time to time, and Patty is known to talk in her sleep. Lindsey and Peter have bedrooms that share a wall. Occasionally Peter asks Lindsey to turn down her music, but otherwise they are agreeable, which is to say, they smile at one another, and are willing to text to communicate. As a rule, the Dove family eats together once a week, on Saturday. Patty has never learned how to cook, and Carl, while taught at a young age to make pasta by hand, finds his time better spent reading than preparing a meal. Thus, Saturday dinners are generally thought of as pizza night, occasionally Chinese, and rarely Greek. It's been nearly a year since the Dove family has gone to a restaurant together.

We return to Carl.

He's speaking with a student after class.

"But Dr. Dove, I'm afraid I still—"

"Here's the premise, Hannah, if I can be so blunt. The world is round, yes? Well, not precisely, because the nature of a sphere spun at a high velocity distorts the very shape, but let us assume, if we can, that the world is round. Can we both agree to this

fact? Yes? Excellent. Now, I posit that all agreed upon facts are, by their very nature, observable, and by this I mean they are natural phenomenon, above all else empirical. I am not referring to the interpretation of those facts, but the facts themselves, immutable as they are.”

“Dr. Dove I'm afraid—”

“Please, Hannah. Let me speak. I am merely elucidating the groundwork, which is necessary, in order to arrive at a conclusion we are both agreeable. So here we are, at the understanding that facts are observable—”

“But Dr. Dove I don't agree.”

“No? Why, then, if you can, please explain.”

“Consciousness.”

“Consciousness . . . ”

“Yes Dr. Dove. Neither you nor I would argue against consciousness.”

“You've correctly surmised that consciousness is not observable, in so far that there is no machine, given our current technology, that can measure consciousness.”

“Yes.”

“But is consciousness a fact?”

“I don't see why not.”

“Well surely you can prove this, then.”

“I don't think I can.”

“And why not?”

“Because as you said, that we have no machine to measure consciousness.”

“Then by our previously agreed upon premise, I would argue that consciousness is not a fact, merely, at this time, an opinion. To say differently, I can no more prove your consciousness than you can mine. For that matter, what is to say I have consciousness and am not being controlled externally? I am not arguing against the notion that you and I each *believe* the others unconsciousness, but facts and beliefs are different. Which, uncoincidentally, brings us centrally to the issue.”

“But Dr. Dove—”

“Yes Hannah.”

“I'm afraid I still don't understand.”

“No? Then allow me to continue. You are of the opinion that God is real, which is to say, there is an omnipotent, omnipresent, perfectly moral being among us with the power to, at a whim, dictate the course of nature and defy the very laws of physics that define our reality. Yes?”

“What I wanted to speak with you about is how creationism and evolution could possibly go together, if you remember from my question in class.”

“I certainly remember, Hannah, and now allow me to expound. Creationism rests its entire premise on tendentious nonsense, or to say, is devoid of fact. Contrarily, evolution rests its premise on fact alone. Surely you can see how one is more powerful, need I say more axiomatic, than the other?”

“But Dr. Dove, what about the Big Bang? We have yet to figure out how that started. What if God started the Big Bang?”

“So you are a Deist?”

“What?”

“No matter. What you assert, here, Hannah, is not a lack of fact but a lack of time. For example, everything we've discovered about physics has led to another discovery about physics, and so on. This is a progression, and in no way recedite, and so, think of it as a staircase if you will. Simply because we have not reached the top does not mean the top doesn't exist. We simply, at this time, and with our current understanding of the universe, are unable to reach it.”

“Then what is to say we haven't yet had the time to understand God?”

“Your fervor belies your rationale, dear Hannah. I say to you this: physics, the laws of universe, both macro and microscopic, have withstood the test of time. Your God, the Christian God, which was, in truth, first the Jewish God, and later, the Islamic God, has changed through the millennia, and moreover, this God lacks

substance, which is to say, there are no facts of his existence. You may think I have a bias toward your God but in truth a worship of any God, in any religion, both ancient and yet to be founded, exists on a bedrock of air. I am happy to oblige the admittance that religion provides a foundation upon which one can live their life. However that admittance must come with an acceptance that what you believe is simply that, a belief, conjecture, and at it's very best, parlous. It has long been thought of atheism that we are a people devoid of belief. But simply put this is untrue. We are a community of believers of facts, or to say, we are believers in logic and science."

We return to Patricia, known at Patty, Carl's wife.

She's at the gym with Nick, her personal trainer.

"Does this look alright?"

"Looks great."

"Are you sure? I couldn't possibly be doing anything even the teensiest, tiny bit wrong?"

"Well there is the matter of your hips."

"Oh could you show me, just so I don't injure myself.

You remember what happened last time."

"Here you go."

"That feels better. Does it feel better?"

"It feels a lot better."

"Have I told you you're the best trainer I've ever had,

Nick."

"Not today."

"Then I want you to know."

"You're the best client I've ever had."

"I know you're lying."

"And the prettiest."

"Now I *know* you're lying. And you're making me

blush."

"I like it when you blush."

"Oh stop that. Of course you don't. I'm a woman in my forties. You're more interested in the younger woman, I know. I've seen you look at them."

"I've seen the way you look at me."

"I'm going to blush through my clothes if you keep this up."

"I'd like that."

"Tell me something you like about me, if that's true. The smallest, littlest thing."

"Your eyes."

"Well aren't you the charmer. What else? Is there something more?"

"Your legs."

"What about my legs?"

"Their shape."

"But not as good as yours. I've seen how you look, Nick."

"You like how I look?"

"Oh now your teasing me, aren't you? Men like you aren't attracted to woman like me."

"There aren't any women in their forties who are like you."

"Oh stop it. I'm blushing again."

"It's the truth."

"Now I think you're just making fun of me. You're making fun of me, aren't you?"

"Not at all. I know women in their twenties who don't look like you."

"I don't think I've blushed this much in ages."

"I can make you blush more if you want."

"Oh Nick—"

"How about this?"

"*Nick* . . . Well."

"You're blushing."

"I'm going to keep blushing if you don't stop."

"I don't want to stop."
"I'm a married woman. The thought . . ."
"Here."
"Oh my. That's certainly something, isn't it?"
"You like it?"
"What's not to like?"
"It's all yours."
"Is it? A man who looks like you interested in a woman
like me. It's not anything I ever expected."
"I'd be crazy not to be."
"Oh? Well then if that's the truth . . . Do you like that
Nick?"
"Yeah."
"Then you don't want me to stop, do you?"
"No. Don't stop . . . God, don't stop."
"Mmm."
"Patty, God. That's amazing."
"I like it when you say my name. Say it again."
"Patty."
"Mmm."
"Patty. Patty. Patty."

We return to Lindsey, Patty and Carl's daughter.
She's at Henry's home, in the living room, watching
television.

"What's his name?"
"Who?"
"That guy you were spending time with after school on
Friday."
"Oh Henry stop it."
"What's his name? Was it Zack Peoples? Was that him?"
"No it wasn't Zack Peoples."
"Then who?"
"I'm not telling."
"It was Zack Peoples."

"It was *not* Zack Peoples, Henry. Be sure of that."

"I'm going to find out who it was."

"Fine."

"Fine."

"When will your parents be home?"

"Nine. Ten. Why?"

"I don't know. How come we never get invited to one of their parties? They sound like great fun."

"We're not old enough to drink."

"But we could, I don't know, hang out. Meet other couples. You wouldn't want to do that? Don't your parents know the Rawlings? And aren't the Rawlings, I don't know, nearly the most famous people in the state."

"You know they know the Rawlings. They've been over here for dinner, once or twice. I've met them. But they're boring to be honest. Now the Finns . . . the Finns are the people to know."

"I've heard you talk about them before. Don't they own the . . . "

"An industrial company, something to do with landscaping."

"That's right. And they've become very popular. You said your parents said so."

"Very popular. And fun."

"Then why can't we go to one of the parties so I can meet the Finns?"

"I'll have to ask my parents."

"Would you? Please?"

"I'll ask. But you have to stop hanging out with Zack Peoples."

"Fine. Even though it wasn't Zack Peoples. I promise to stop hanging out with him if you can bring me to a party. I want to meet all these people. One day we're going to be them."

"We?"

"Oh stop. You know what I mean."

"Most of them are boring, though."

"Not the Finns."
"No. Not the Finns. But the others."
"But they are important, Henry, and that counts for something. I'd rather be important and boring than exciting and nobody has ever heard of me."
"I'd rather be exciting and important."
"Yes. Well that seems best, doesn't it? We can be like the Finns, only younger."
"You would like Mrs. Finn. She's a hoot. And she didn't come from money, neither of them. Self-made."
"Your parents are self-made too, Henry."
"That's why my parents are invited to all the parties, just like the Finns. Because they're exciting and important."
"Exciting and important. I like that."
"I do to. And before I forget, my parents invited you to church with our family next week."
"Haven't I already been to church with your family?"
"You know how they are."
"Yes, I do. Will the Yost family be there?"
"I think so."
"Alright. Then I'll go. I'd like to talk to Mr. Yost again. Can you believe he's a runway designer?"
"There's all sorts at church."
"I want to talk to him again. He's exciting and important."
"Important for sure. Exciting? Maybe."
"Oh you're just jealous that I want to talk to him."
"Can I tell my parents you're coming to church?"
"Yes. I'll come. I just feel very uncomfortable praying. It's a very uncomfortable thing to do."
"Just close your eyes and think of a song."
"A song? Is that what you do?"
"Every time."
"Do your parents know you do that?"
"Of course not. They think I'm a good Christian."

"I'll be a good Christian if it means I get to talk to Mr. Yost. Even if I'm pretending the entire time. I've really just never understood the point. Have you?"

"Never."

"Is there a point?"

"Belief in a higher power, I suppose."

"It seems silly to believe that."

"Don't tell my parents."

"Oh I won't, Henry. I'm going to be the best pretend-Christian there is. We can be pretend-Christians together. Exciting and important."

We return to Peter, Lindsey's brother, son to Carl and Patricia.

He's at church with a female acquaintance, and they're speaking with the pastor.

"That was a stirring sermon, Pastor Robb."

"Call me Robb, and thank you Peter. I appreciate that. It's always good to see new faces in the congregation."

"Thank Angela for bringing me along."

"Well thank you Angela."

"Of course Pastor Robb. Peter is my friend I mentioned at the last university Bible study."

"Are you going to be joining us at Bible study now, Peter?"

"If I have the time. I'm the Student Body President and it's a very demanding position, I'm sure you understand. The hours—frankly, I don't have much freedom. But you have my word that if my schedule clears, I'll be in attendance."

"I'm happy to hear that, Peter."

"Say, Pastor Robb—Robb, as it were—do you have a quick moment for a question?"

"Of course, of course. I always have time for questions."

“Well, my observations are that you are a very influential person, a powerful person if I can put it simply. How did you come into your role as pastor?”

“It's not me that's powerful, Peter, but the Almighty.”

“Yes, yes. Of course. But in regards to your influence as pastor.”

“I didn't always want to be a pastor, actually. I wanted to be a musician. It wasn't until my twenties that I realized my calling was elsewhere. I was dating a young woman—now my wife—who took me to church for the first time. The Almighty spoke to me and he's never stopped, not since that day.”

“But in regards to your influence . . . Maybe it's better to ask how you manage the demands of your flock, so to speak.”

“It's a challenge. You're right about that. I rely on the guidance of the Almighty.”

“And His guidance, are there specifics? Because it seems to me, with my limited experience, that influence comes from power, or, another way, that influence comes from having something—a position, or a knowledge—that other people want.”

“I've never thought about it like that, Peter.”

“And more so, it's these positions and knowledge that people are attracted to. Speaking from my position as Student Body President, the influence I have over other students is directly correlated to how much they care about a certain issue, am I making sense?”

“I think you're mistaking my position—”

“Because if so, then your influence as pastor is tied to the religiosity of your flock. The more religious they are, the more influential you become. Of course this works in the opposite way as well, but I tend to doubt you come across these sorts of individuals here. After all, it's only the religious who listen to your sermon—an excellent sermon, might I add. So, then, it would seem, influence is a consequence of how well-suited you are to assist others with their problems. If I can use the President for an example, his influence is so great—unfathomable, really—because he has the ability to solve a

large majority of problems. Senators and governors are like this as well, and because of their influence, those close to their position have influence. So influence breeds influence, and so on. Would you agree that being a man of influence, you have a responsibility to your congregation?"

"I do."

"I think there's also responsibility increase our influence, don't you think? Because the more you're admired, the more you can be admired in turn. The snowball effect, for an appropriate metaphor. May I ask you, Robb, if I can call upon you if needed, to lend your advice? The size of your congregation clearly shows that you are an apt leader of men."

"I'm always happy to help, Peter. Always happy."

"Excellent. Well, I must say again the sermon was stirring. I'm afraid I must be off, however. Thank you for your assistance today, our talk was illuminating."

"I hope to see you at Bible study."

"Yes, yes. If time permits, you have my word. Shall we, Angela? Good day Robb."

We return to the Dove family: Carl, Patty, Lindsey, Peter.

Though they regard Sunday as a day of rest, nobody in the Dove family goes to church willingly. Carl is an outspoken proponent, and reads Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins. Patty doesn't really care one way or another, but prefers not to go because she can go to the tanning salon instead, or get a massage, or schedule an appointment with Nick, her personal trainer. Lindsey knows that to be exciting and important she'll need to attend church, and that's fine with her, so long as she's not forced to pray out loud. And Peter will attend church because that's what influential men do, especially those looking to make a run at office in several years. None of them believes in life after death, nor heaven, and especially not hell. They don't pray before going to bed, nor do they read the Bible. Privately, and in their own way, the Dove family considers themselves atheists.

