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RAYMOND CARVER'S GRAVE

RAYMOND CARVER ISN'T GOING ANYWHERE. This is what you say to me, say, "You know, Raymond Carver isn't going anywhere," in lieu I guess of saying, "You're driving too fast," even though it's my driving that you really want to comment on. It's not because I'm concerned that Raymond Carver's going anywhere that I'm driving too fast, and in fact don't really think I'm driving too fast at all, maintaining a perfectly acceptable speed between 7 and 10 miles over the limit, which is, yes, over the limit but not enough to warrant a ticket and also going with the flow of traffic. I also don't think Raymond Carver is going anywhere or for that matter is anywhere at all anymore, and even if he was somewhere certainly not there, not where we're going, which is his grave and repository for the physical remains of what was Raymond Carver but isn't Raymond Carver anymore, though I doubt you intend to get into a metaphysical debate and merely mean to just ask me to slow down.

In the car, driving too fast, this is what I remember: how the day I brought you home from the treatment center your pants kept falling down on account of both the weight you'd lost and the absence of your belt, either stolen or more likely just misplaced when they confiscated it along with your shoelaces and bra and necklace. You stumbled walking up the stairs and from inside I could hear Francis barking. I held the door to our apartment open for you and you walked in and looked around with your one hand holding up your pants. "Everything looks the same," you said. You sounded disappointed.

I'd half expected you might be disappointed that nothing had changed but only half expected because I also thought you might be pleased to come home and see that nothing had changed, that home was a constant. It has, after all, proved comforting to me to know for example when I go to work that my books will be exactly where I left them and bed still made, which made for some anxiety when I moved in with you and couldn't then say for certain when I went to work that my books would be exactly where I left them or bed still made and yes, of course, I recognize the psychology of

trying to maintain some semblance of order and control amidst the chaos that had, especially of late, become more and more chaotic, but then of course it had become more and more chaotic, chaotic for you in a treatment center and chaotic for me to not know if you wouldn't or couldn't come home and then what to do if you didn't, like first call your parents or sister and tell them and arrange for all your things to be sent back, go through all your things and decide what was worth sending back and what wasn't and just how awful those nights were before I sent what I'd decided was worth sending back back, eventually found an apartment for myself because no way could I afford this place on my own and how the deposit, still in your name, would have to be sacrificed, so yes, why not be pleased that nothing had changed?

"Everything looks the same," you said.

Days passed and you said you were antsy. "Antsy like how?" I asked. "You mean restless? Anxious? Is there anything you can think of to do to make you less antsy?"

"Just antsy," you said. "And I can think of one thing to make me less antsy but it's the one thing I can't do, which I think is at least one of the reasons why I'm so antsy, and to be able to do that one thing would make me less antsy or restless or anxious right now but even more so later were I to actually do it, so I can't really do it, can't do anything, so yes, restless, anxious, antsy."

"What if you were able to do that one thing but just decided not to," I asked, which just goes to show how little I really know about anything at all. You were more often than not also bored in addition to antsy, restless, anxious, which seemed to me to all be synonymous but which, you said, are actually all very unique and change from moment to moment, especially in the apartment, you said, which had taken on since your return the properties of a bully. There was also then that I was leaving you at home alone when I went to work and how anxious, yes, though not antsy, restless or bored that made me.

At nights you couldn't sleep and writhed and pounded on the mattress and sat up shaking. Sometimes you paced. In the car you still shake and when I ask what's wrong you say you can't sit still.

"But we're moving," I say. "Look outside. It's actually us who are moving and everything else that's standing still, even if the opposite is what it feels like."

You don't respond but lean forward and rustle through your bag and come back up with your pills, open the bottle and take one out and swallow with the bottled

water in your other hand and then ask if I've taken mine yet today, which I have, say I have. We take the same pills, myself half the dose you do, which is convenient when I run out and you can cut one of yours in half and give it to me or if you run out I can give you two of mine.

You take the pills to keep from thinking about killing yourself, which you say you never totally stop thinking about doing but at least with the pills it stays just a thought, and I take the pills so that I won't need to organize my books alphabetically by author's last name or color-coordinate my closet, which I still do too but at least now with less fervor and necessity than when I wasn't taking the pills. For example to come home one day to find all my books strewn about the carpet, you in the middle sitting cross-legged and flipping through one after another like there was something particular you were looking for and not finding, as I did one day not long after you returned home, would have thrown me into a fit had I not been taking my pills.

"What are you doing?" I asked, not in any kind of fit at all but pleased that you had finally taken an interest in something and also reminded of the first time I invited you home to my apartment, beforehand had deliberately moved the books out of alphabetical order and even some of them stacked on the carpet in front of the bookshelf and next to my bed like I wasn't at all the kind of person to arrange all my books alphabetically by author's last name or have just enough books to fit perfectly on my one bookshelf, neither the kind of person who wouldn't leave the house with any dirty dishes in the sink or color-coordinate my closet. The opposite I guess of what someone normal would do when inviting someone home they wanted to impress, would not deliberately seek to appear slovenly if that was their natural state unless their natural state was the opposite of slovenly as mine is, so pretend to be the opposite of that. On your second visit I returned to my natural, organized state, which you took as my trying to impress you and said so, not until after the fourth or fifth time: "You can stop trying to impress me now," to which I said I could never stop trying to impress you.

"Raymond Carver has the best titles," you said. "He's like the Morrissey of short story title writers."

"Is there something you're looking for?" I asked.

"Will You Please Be Quiet Please?" you said. "I think that one's my favorite."

"The stories themselves are pretty good too, you know."

You shook your head. “I just like the titles,” you said. “Like little poems.”

I don’t know why I suggested we go visit his grave other than he was the only thing since you’d come back that you’d shown any kind of interest in and it was less than a day’s drive away. There was also that we needed somewhere to go in order for things to change for the better when we came back because that’s how change works, like a kettle waiting to boil. “Okay,” you agreed. “It would make a good title.”

The Olympic Peninsula is beautiful this time of year, this time of year being early fall, though I’d imagine the Olympic Peninsula is also beautiful every other time of year. It’s also a kind of loneliness, which I’ve begun cataloguing in a little black notebook I keep in my back pocket ever since you returned home. There are eleven different kinds of loneliness I’ve catalogued, and of them the loneliness of driving through the Olympic Peninsula en route to Raymond Carver’s grave just barely trumps the loneliness of waiting at home day after day for your body to stop wanting what it wants, but just barely. Incrementally is not the way to replace one kind of loneliness with another, I think. Loneliness especially doesn’t like change and replacing one for another only leads to crises and crises lead to breakdowns and breakdowns are bad enough at home but even worse far away from home in the Pacific Northwest, as beautiful as it is and as much as it may remind us of the



Raymond Carver's Grave Site, photo by Donna Smith

beautiful stories' titles that are your only relief about people in crises in small towns in the Pacific Northwest.

We're running out of things to say, which is ridiculous since really all we can't talk about is bathtubs or Baltimore or the eleven kinds of loneliness, but somehow every conversation I can think to begin leads logically and inevitably to one of those three topics, and what's even worse is that that in itself is another of the eleven kinds of loneliness, and that it's my current mission to avoid any and all unnecessary kinds of loneliness doesn't yet keep me from keeping silent, which makes for at least two states of loneliness that I've now not kept you from. No one speaks, not even the radio, which is broken.

We stop finally at a small motel just outside Port Angeles, where there are a lot of motels and also hotels because of the ocean and the Strait of Juan de Fuca, the ferry that takes people everyday from here to Victoria, British Columbia. We go to one of the cheaper motels, cheaper because it's a motel instead of a hotel, which I remember hearing or reading once means it's just one or two stories instead of more and also a hell of a lot cheaper and shows. It's late and we're both tired even if we are a little hungry, walk across the highway to the convenience store and buy a pint of ice cream and two plastic spoons: dinner, go back to our room and eat and watch television, have sex when something on the television reminds us that sex is something that exists and then watch some more television before we fall asleep, and even in his absence both make room for Francis on the bed.

Francis is large and white and hairy and covers all our clothes in large, white hairs and sometimes when we wake up and we're happy and he's happy because he's always happy when we're happy, we'll both, you and I, howl until he begins to howl and then we'll grab him and say, "Good boy, Francis! Good boy!" even though other times when he howls when we both, you and I, are not howling, we yell at him to stop and go lay down. I wasn't home then when you decided it was time to take a bath. Francis began barking and that was what I thought was particularly interesting when you told me later, not interesting, necessarily, but was the something that really made itself noticeable, and not because it was Francis barking because Francis is always barking but exactly because Francis is always barking, and how normally when Francis barks it doesn't necessarily interrupt whatever it is you're doing or we're doing if it's we who are doing anything but yell, "Francis!" and then "Francis!

Stop that!” or “Go lie down!” or some other somesuch thing. For example, if you hadn’t just opened up your wrists with a razor blade that’s probably exactly what you would have done, yelled, “Francis!” and then “Francis! Stop that!” or “Go lie down!” but what seemed especially interesting or noticeable to me about it all was that that was exactly what you did do.

I guess it makes sense that a moment like that you’d want to be calm and peaceful and not have a dog barking like crazy in the next room, but on the other hand a moment like that do you really care what else is happening? I guess you did, because you got out of the bath and tried to calm down Francis who wouldn’t stop barking and called emergency, and when the paramedics came and saw all the blood on Francis’ fur they thought at first he’d attacked you and tried to call animal control, and it’s not because you told them otherwise that they didn’t but because I guess they saw his fur was only red around his neck and not his mouth and also because your wounds were too clean to have ever been caused by an animal.

In the morning we sleep in, don’t wake until after 10:00 and by the time it takes us to gather our things and you to take a shower it’s almost 11:15, and the clerk tells me when I go to checkout that checkout time is 11:00 and it’s 11:15 now, which is after checkout time so we’ll have to pay for another night, which might be fair enough if there was a line of travelers clamoring for a room but what there is instead is an empty parking lot and so I say this to the clerk, not in so many words: “Fuck you.”

It’s not the kind of thing just anyone says to a stranger, and if nothing else this has been your gift to me: the ability to be indignant among strangers, to say fuck you to someone I’ve only just met, which I think means something very important and damaging and irreparable even though I don’t know exactly what it is. I’m afraid at first the clerk is going to punch me and I take a step back from the front desk. The trick with saying fuck you to someone is not to say it to someone who has nothing to lose if they punch you. Bars, for example, are bad places to say fuck you to strangers because alcohol can tend to make you feel like you have nothing to lose, as you well know. He looks like he has nothing to lose by punching me, which is why I step back from the front desk, but he doesn’t punch me, and while punching me would stop me from saying fuck you again, not punching me only encourages me to continue.

If what I say next was on the radio or broadcast television, it would sound like Morse code, and if he was to decipher the Morse code it would say, “I apologize for

my vulgarity. I want you to know that I have nothing personal against you as a human being and recognize that you're just trying to do your job to the best of your ability, but right now you exist to me almost entirely as a representation of all my failures that have brought me here in front of you." And maybe the clerk understands Morse code. Maybe he just recognizes that he has more to lose than I do, but he apologizes, he apologizes, assures me my credit card will be charged for just the one night and wishes me a nice day.

"Go fuck yourself," I say: thank you.

We drive into town for breakfast and to look around and find out where we can find the cemetery. At a small diner we each have a cup of coffee and you order the French toast. I order the biscuits and gravy, and when the coffee comes I remind you not to forget to take your pills and you tell me not to forget to take my pills either. The French toast is bad, you say, too soggy, you say, and the biscuits and gravy aren't great either but I don't say anything. You want to return your French toast and I recommend you reconsider, and not just because I tasted the French toast and you're right, it's not good, but also not necessarily bad as French toast from a small, greasy spoon diner, which is what it is, and you shouldn't be disappointed by the failed expectations of a meal when it's done nothing to warrant those expectations, that that's cruel to you and to the French toast and also to our waitress.

I try to make a deal with you, a compromise, say I'll buy you whatever else you want just so long as you don't return the French toast, "whatever you want," I tell you, like you're a child I'm bribing not to throw a fit, but that's not the issue, you say. The issue isn't that you're hungry but that the French toast is bad. I suggest that principles aren't necessarily something to all of a sudden adhere to when it comes to French toast in a greasy spoon diner, which you take as implication that principles are something you're new to, which isn't at all what I meant to say but yes, maybe, what I meant, so feel guilty and think that the worst thing you can do now is not return your French toast, which is exactly what you do: even finish everything on your plate including the little orange wedge garnish. The waitress comes by to ask if we want anything else and how everything is, and you say, "Delicious! My compliments to the chef," you say, which I think is even worse than had you returned the French toast in the first place.

After we've finished our coffee we walk up to the counter to pay and our waitress

rings up our meal on the register. She forgets to include the coffee and you point it out to her and she blushes. “Whoops,” she says. “Thank you.” You ask her how long she’s lived in Port Angeles and if she ever met Raymond Carver, which she hadn’t, she says, before her time, she says, though his second wife can still be seen around town but usually dining in more high-class establishments than this one, she says, then blushes again, realizing she’s just disparaged her own place of employment and also, by extension, herself. You’re trying hard to make her feel okay, I can tell, asking questions and pretending to take an interest, and it’s embarrassing. I’m embarrassed for the waitress, who really thinks you are taking an interest. There are brochures for Port Angeles and the Victoria Express and the Strait of Juan de Fuca and knickknacks for sale next to the register and she makes a map for us to the cemetery on the back of one of the brochures, down South C Street and past the airport until you get to Ocean View Cemetery Road, she says, and then we park anywhere and we won’t have any difficulty finding it, just north of the only large tree we’ll see among the plots. “Thank you,” we say, and as a courtesy you decide to buy a snow globe, inside the Victoria Express crossing the Strait of Juan de Fuca on Christmas day.

“Now it’s snowing,” you say, shaking the globe. “Now it’s not.”

Outside it’s raining, relatively warm and not especially cloudy before but now it’s raining and considerably colder, just like that, and we walk back to the car where we left both of the windows open, not much, just a crack, but enough to wet the vinyl armrests on the inside of the doors and the sides of the seats. We get in, roll up the windows and I turn on the defrost to clear up the front glass which has become fogged from the rain outside and now our body heat in the car with all the windows rolled up, I turn the defrost on one below high because the air coming out is still cold since it’s the first time all season we or I have turned on the heat in the car, the defrost, and then sit in the car with the engine running waiting for the glass to clear.

It’s taking longer than I’d expect, like I said because it’s the first time all season, all year for that matter, I’ve turned on the defrost, but I’m in no hurry and fine with waiting, but then you take the arm of your jacket and wipe it all up and down across the interior of the glass, clearing it, sure, but you know I hate this, know how much, hate how it creates the little moisture drops that eventually dry when the defrost kicks in, not to mention the streaks it makes, how it makes the glass harder to see out of in the long run and if you’d just have a little patience the defrost would have

cleared up the fog in a nice and uniform manner, but you can't wait, you're impatient, and now it's going to make for more work for me since now I'm going to have to wait for it to dry, tomorrow or sometime later, and get out the Windex and spend an extra couple of minutes clearing out the streaks, which isn't really that big of a deal, sure, I realize that, but it's indicative of something larger, I think, between us, that right now really does feel like a big deal.

So I put the car in gear and pull out down South C Street, take a left and I don't say anything and neither do you, which is fine by me and fine by you too I imagine, past the airport which seems like really nothing more than a strip of blacktop and a handful of single prop planes, and then there we are, a small signpost saying this way to Ocean View Cemetery Road and I take a right, park midway around a small cul-de-sac and the both of us get out.

It's not hard to see where the grave is, a well-worn walkway through the grass and like the waitress said, only one large tree among the plots, overlooking the water, the Strait of Juan de Fuca, and the mountains in the distance that I suppose are Canada. It's beautiful I suppose, suppose just because it's not really beauty I'm expecting or looking or hoping for but something a little more solid, something I can hold on to, something to tell me what to do and where to go from here, which it doesn't, but it's beautiful.

The grave is larger than most of its neighbors, a slab of ebony or black granite with the engraving, "Raymond Carver, May 25, 1938 - August 2, 1988," and then just below that, "Poet, Short Story Writer, Essayist," and that's it. I shove my hands in my pockets and all of a sudden think about leaving you here, at Raymond Carver's grave, just getting back in the car and driving home, leaving, and by the time you make it back if you ever do make it back I'll be long gone, all my things sold or given away except for what I need most or what means most to me, which isn't much these days, a change of clothes and my shelf of books, because I think this is what we came here to do and any other time it'd just be a shitty thing to do but right now it'd be poetic, I think. Right now, before you turn and look back at me and we start walking back to the car, fill up the gas tank and drive home, right now is the time to do this, right now, before you turn.

You turn, look back at me and smile, and now it's just not poetic anymore. 