

Anton Nimblett



On the Side

LEIGH IS LYING ON ME. His legs are still on the passenger side, I guess, but I can't see them because that whole side is pushed in, mashed and crumpled into this tiny little space and there really can't be enough room, but his legs are there. I feel cold. I tell him, "Leigh, the cops are gonna come and put flares down in the road." I feel cold and sleepy. His waist is kinda on the gearshift box, his chest is on my side, and his head is on my chest, warm against my chest. He's wearing my bandana with the Trinidad colors, and he's so close to me, close to my mouth, close to my nose, that I smell the espresso he had earlier. So, I tell him, and tell myself, "you know those little pink flares they put on the road, real pretty right, little salmon stars. The other night when I was going home I saw some a block away from me on Myrtle; they looked like party lights on the road, like lights by a pool for a grand little pool party." But it wasn't a party, only an accident.

The cops are gonna come. And the ambulance. Then what? I'm so fucking sleepy. And cold. Then, Lester – shit, Lester. What was I doing with his man in the middle of the night? With his man, driving his car? "We just went to the diner." Why was I driving? Lester won't get it. That's what we do, me and Leigh. We eat in diners. It just happened like that, "right babe?"



When we started again after I saw him in the bar, we went to Junior's. "That's where you live? You right near Junior's, yo" Leigh says. "I know you be getting your cheesecake on, on the regular." And I tell him I haven't been to Junior's in years. "That's it I'm coming by there tonight. We going." When we get there, Leigh grabs the red plastic handle on the big glass door and waits while I walk in out of the drip-drip drizzle that's been graying up the whole day. "After you, baby," he says and gives me his grin. We walk in and it's bright inside: red, and red and white. And the cheesecakes are there in a special counter by the door. Plain and pineapple and strawberry and blueberry, they're lined up in the cases, from the little six inch ones to the big party size, ready to get boxed up in the red and white candy striped bakery boxes. We pass red vinyl stools at the counter on the way to the hostess stand. A middle-aged waitress with a red and white apron greets us and walks us past more red columns to a booth in the back, a red booth in the back. "You're gonna like this waitress," he tells me. "She's real cool, ya know, like a big sister or a moms ya know." And when she comes back and

Calabash

takes his order and they do their little regular-customer/special-waitress thing I can see him being the little boy in the big Tims, and I can see her being charmed. She wears her hair in a short natural like my mother's friend Hyacinth who kissed me once in a dream in the back of a cab.



"So, you like them Trini women, eh?" I say to Leigh while we wait for the food. And he says, "I told you, she's good people." And after we start eating — he's got pancakes and scrambled eggs with cheese and a side of sausages, and I'm too hopped up to eat my cheeseburger, so I nibble at the fries — after we start eating, he tells me she reminds him of Lester's mother. "But Lester's Guyanese though," I say. "No, he's Trini too." Leigh looks at me, I mean he's been looking at me all night, but now he gives me the direct, full power look. "Can I share something with you?" And he waits, not going forward as though the question is a preface, but waiting for an answer. "Can I?" "Please," I nod. "Every man I've ever had in my life was from Trinidad." "Really" I say, "guess once you go Trini, you never want a Yankee." And he screws his face up at my bad joke, but laughs anyway. And shares. Shares why he and Lester broke up six months ago. Shares how close they had become: special because it was nothing special, ya know; built a home together in Jersey, bought stuff, cared for each other, met each other's family, men and women do it every day, right? And I remember all those years ago when I had done all of that too, been part of the model gay couple, the couple our friends told their friends about. And I remember how hard it was when I lost it too. "I'm glad I touched you in the bar last night," I say, because I don't just want to tell him, "I know, I know." But I give up on eating any more, three quarter of the burger sits next to the red ketchup on the white plate. And when Leigh says "take a ride uptown with me," do I know that I'll let him take me to Harlem with him even though we're five blocks from my studio? Take me to Harlem to the studio that he got when he had to leave the home he built with his man. Take me uptown, and let him, and let him take me.



I wake up. There's an ambulance behind us. It's a big old ugly truck, square and hard, like an evil transformer toy grown up. I am still cold. And the ambulance's flashing lights are on, like big monster eyes spitting fire, blinking from dark to blinding red, back and forth, dark to red, red, dark to red. And now an EMT is standing at the car, at Lester's car. Looking in the window at me and Leigh. I hear his radio, crackling and squawking and when he shines a flashlight in, I see us now, the shattered window, the hole where the windshield should be. "Sir, can you hear me," he says, "sir." "Yeah," I say, but it's rough and garbled like "yghmp". And when he plays the light in the car and waves it around and over us, I see the glass everywhere — the dashboard is covered with it, and the hood and inside too, it's on me, on my legs, on Leigh, all over him. Not flat and sharp like splinters, but rough and crumbly looking. Decorating everything like sprinkles on Mr. Frosty's cone, because each piece is picking up some light and flicking it back at my eyes with a different color: Detroit metal green from the hood; FUBU blue from my jeans; white and yellow from the lights; dark red from the Trini bandana; bright red. Shit bright red from my arm, from Leigh's face and arm and leg.

Bright, blood red from Leigh's body. "Shit, help up. Look at him," I say to the EMT. "Okay sir, okay. We're going to take care of you."



And the first time Leigh shows up in Lester's car instead of his, I should have known because he makes a point of asking for "cd's, not tapes" when we leave my apartment. But I was still grooving on how he looked, on how good he looked. When he had called me that morning he was at the shop getting his hair braided. "You might like it, I don't know," he teased "it's different from the way I always have it." He always has it back in cornrows, maybe a dozen cornrows, neat from forehead to neck, sleek from temple to nape. They were like that when I first met him five years ago — before Lester. When I met him at Sound Factory Bar, because that was the place back then. I remember the attitude — tough and hard and scary. Hard when he stepped over to me, baggy denim overalls over nothing but Tims; tough all the way when he walked with me to the coat check downstairs; scary, trying to be scary when he moved me in the corner and got his face in mine. "Yo, don't forget to call me, okay? Okay? Leigh." Then he said it again, "Leigh". And touched his lips to my lips in the dark corner. I remember. And when he shows up tonight, I gotta groove on the look. "You got me cheesing, son" I pull him in the door. "You like it, like my hair?" I grin. "Do it fit my face and everything?" "Yeah," I say, liking the small cornrows twisted tight around many jagged parts. Liking the hair and loving the Coveralls. He's wearing Shawn John Coveralls — light brown. "Nice," I think. "Yeah, you look real nice," I say. And I kiss him in the hallway.



The cops are here now. They came just as the EMT was getting me out of the car. Some cars slow down to rubberneck as they go by. I'm doing my calm, crisis-management thing, but I know that it won't last much longer, because it's really a fake and I can't remember what the EMT's look like. I need them to get Leigh out the car and take care of him. The cops sit me down on a kind of built in bench in the back of the ambulance and I can tell that they're managing me, keeping the situation under control. They ask questions, but they're not the ones I expect. They don't ask, "where are you coming from" or "what is your relationship" or "who's his next of kin?" They're filling in the paperwork — date and time and last-name-first; they're keeping me away from the flat paddle-like board and the oversized neck brace that the EMTs are using on Leigh.



The Downtown Brooklyn Diner should have been the last one. "What are you saying?" Leigh asks. "Hub, that you don't want to do this?" I remember this place from years ago and though they've renovated it's still an ugly place. We're here because there's too much traffic to go anywhere else, as hungry as we are. I don't answer him right away. Can't. It's Monday afternoon and I should not be sitting in this booth with a street sign that says Shore Parkway. There's a different sign at each booth. Cadman Plaza where the two uniformed cops sit all the way in the back. Coney Island Avenue right behind us where the Latino family sits with two small boys and a baby, keeping our voices

down. I need to be finding a job and handling some business; too much time on my hands.

"Or, that you want to do this one more time then never see me again." I stop thinking about everything he's said so far; stop thinking about how I've fucked up 'cause I'm finding out now about shit I should have asked about before. Before I went uptown. Shit yes he and Lester broke up last October; yes, it was ugly and vicious; yes, he has his own place in Harlem. But also they see each other now. "What does that mean, exactly?" Lester spent two nights in Harlem last week. . . oh yeah, and Leigh spent three nights in Jersey. Yeah, and Saturday night when I saw Leigh in the bar he had just left Jersey. And I'm thinking, "you can stop now, I've heard enough." But yeah, "we were just picking at each other so I said I'm going to move my car and take a little drive." And yeah, when we were sitting in the car outside the club and Leigh's cell was ringing, um yeah, it was Lester. Yeah, "he wants us to get back together". "He wants?" Okay yeah, "we're talking 'bout getting back".

So what am I saying? No, I don't want to do this again. No, I want to do this one more time. No. I'm saying that all I can do right now is finish my chicken gyro. I can make sure that I eat all the feta that's making the boring greens on the plate; finish the grilled chicken and fried pita that are pretty good, because you can't go wrong with grilled chicken. And if there're weren't all the "yesses" and "yeahs" and "nos" tossing around in my head, I'd want a wedge of lemon to take the chicken just there. Just there, like I was for a minute, for a hot minute on Saturday when I thought I could take a shortcut, just there like on Sunday when I thought that you'd make a great guide.

"All, I'm saying is. . ." I look over and his plate is empty. What did he order? Can I tell what he had just by looking at the empty plate? Is that gravy from the meatloaf, or barbecue sauce from the chicken wings? Was that sticky looking place where mashed potatoes sat, or were they scrambled eggs? "... finish your coffee so we can get out of here."



But Brooklyn Diner wasn't the last. After another, then another it became a joke, "where we gonna go today son", you asked the third time and the fourth, when you knew we'd end up at a diner again. And after it was a joke it became a tradition. And it felt good, like knowing there's gonna be presents under the Christmas tree. Then it became a contest, a challenge: "Man, we're going to a real joint today, not like that weak-assed joint you picked last week." Or, "Leigh wait till you see the French toast they make here, it's as thick as your arm and the color of a Trinidad sunset." Then it just was what we do. Grits and scrambled eggs at five in the morning after sweating in a club, or chicken wings and fries when we woke up at two in the afternoon after he stayed in Brooklyn, or burgers on wheat toast with mayo and tomato and no lettuce before a movie. And coffee for you, always coffee for you. Tonight you had espresso at The Seaview Cove Diner.



"What are you doing tonight?" Leigh asks as soon as he walks into my apartment. And I grab him like I always do when he walks in here, always - if he hasn't called in a week and I'm on that edge between jonesing and fury, always - if he left twelve seconds ago and came back for his gum - I grab him and lean against the wall with him

on me so I can put my lips right on the smooth, tight muscle over his collarbone, under his ear. "You know what I'm doing, I'm seeing you," I say into his face. "For real though do you have anything to do? Do you have anywhere to be?" And when I say, no, he grins the grin I work to get, and before his kiss is over, he's dragging me out the door. "We going for a ride, yo..."

It's not warm enough today, but as we're on the FDR riding up past the Water Club then the Roosevelt Island Tram, we open up the sun roof and we turn up the music and Darling Nikki makes me laugh. And Leigh keeps driving, through the Bronx and unto I95. "You not hungry babe, huh?" And I shrug and he screws up his face in a double wink and says, "good, cause by the time we get there, you'll have a big ole appetite." And I95 takes us past Stamford and Bridgeport and some other ports and then Route 2a to another road and some smaller road with a sign that tells me we're now in Rhode Island – the Ocean state. Have I ever been in Rhode Island before? And when we swing into the gravel parking lot with the chunky white stones crunching under the tires, the sign that says "Seaview Cove Diner" is painted on wood in white block letters below a faded red picture of a lobster. And when we walk in, Leigh's Fubus hanging off him, his cornrows peeking out the back of my Trinidad bandana that he claimed as a do rag the first night he stayed in Brooklyn, walk in with me trying to keep up pace in bootleg Iceberg from Fulton Street, the joint notices, the customers quiet and the waitresses turn. "Let's do some eating babe," Leigh says smiling.

So we start with shrimp cocktails, extra lemon and Tabasco on the side. "And leave the menus right here for us, we're gonna keep looking," Leigh says. And he tells me about his new job and thanks me for helping with his resume. Then we order Greek salads with stuffed grape leaves and lots of feta and end up feeding the last few olives to each other. I don't pay attention to the other customers; I don't ask him why he didn't call this week. And when I want to have the boffo-bacon-burger, Leigh talks me into the surf 'n' turf. "We'll be having the same thing babe," I try to protest "we never get the same thing." And he says "except for the coffee though." And after he's charmed the waitress — 'cause when you just meet Leigh, either he charms you or he scares you — he gets her to sit with us after the diner empties out. Her name is Lola, a young grandma with a feathered pixie haircut, and she comes to New York at least once a year to go shopping. They trade pictures of his kids and her grandkids. And she tells me that I can't leave without having some of the apple pie a la mode 'cause they order them from her good girlfriend who uses fresh nutmeg "... and beside, you could use a little more meat on your bones..." and turns to Leigh with arched eyebrows "... right?" So it's two am and they're closing when we leave and after the espresso for Leigh and the cappuccino for me — on the house, cause "you've got a long drive and it's late". We pull out of the parking lot, from the gravel unto the smooth pavement of Route 1 and Leigh is all trash talk, phone-sex talk, and I'm all soap opera tease as I push my seat back and lick my lips; and by the time we're on Route 78 I have my left hand on Leigh's thigh and his right hand inside my belt. The moon roof is open and the light is soft on Leigh's face.



The ambulance is square and hard inside. I watch the EMTs put Leigh on the stretcher, and I hear them on the radio with the hospital. I wonder if the blanket they've put around my shoulders is

clean. And I think how nice it would be to be here alone with Leigh, just us looking across at the hills in Jersey with the lights reflecting on the Hudson. And I think that we wouldn't be here if I'd have let him walk past in the bar that night, or if I didn't have such a heavy meal, maybe skipped the apple pie. The cops finish the accident report. "No it's not my car." I show them my license and they find the registration behind the sun visor. "Yes, my friend Lester knows I'm driving it." It doesn't show up as stolen and they finish the report.



I started to drive somewhere in Rye because by then Leigh was fighting with the big rigs on the road. After snaking through ten miles of construction with concrete barricades inches from the car, Leigh's agitated, he's cussing and honking with each big rig we try to get by. I don't hesitate when he asks me if I want to drive. I don't even remember that it's Lester's Maxima; I don't even say something about being glad he trusts me to drive him, he never lets anyone drive him. And I think he's calmer by the time we get back to the city. I'm driving down the West Side Highway and Leigh's on my right, then the Hudson, then New Jersey's hills. But when I pass the exit for 165th Street, he's pissed. "I'm not going to your apartment, you know I'm not comfortable there." And he's agitated again, "why we always got to go through this?" And by the time we get to the 135th Street exit I'm not looking at him, and I reach to turn the music back on, 'cause I'm not going to listen to him either and then there's his hand on the steering wheel turning it to the ramp and "what the fuck" I react without thinking, without thinking, holding onto the wheel, yanking it to the left. Then... what? Then what? Then nothing 'til the transformer ambulance, nothing 'til the colors.



They wheel Leigh to the back of the ambulance, and the stretcher's legs collapse into nothing just like on tv. One EMT climbs in after us and the other slams the doors, one after the other. I'm looking out the little square windows in the back of the truck, over Leigh with the oxygen tubes and EMT working on him and I see Lester's car again. It's crumpled up against the ramp, with glass sprinkled around and the flares are flickering. I hear the siren start to scream and close my eyes with that image as we pull off. 🐾