

By the Slice

Theodore C. Van Alst, Jr.

They seemed to be in love, but maybe it was the pecan pie. Even under the buzz of fluorescent lights, pie makes life so much more bearable, enhances everyone's natural beauty. Or maybe one of them was paying the other to be there. Either way, they were a couple for now.

She didn't talk so much as she moved her mouth around her words like a sleep clinic escapee. That her brown eyes whirred around as if the batteries which might have operated them were starting to crap out only added to the sense that some technician needed to fine tune her face, at least adjust the tracking. Her wide-strapped dress looked home-made, the cream and burgundy floral pattern better at home in a set of drapes than in the wrinkly pile of heavy fabric that crawled across her thin shoulders, crushed her dirty blonde hair, accented her skin that looked more like smoked bluefish than a wrap to contain a human and its attendant soul.

He had no trouble talking, or at least making the effort, definitely had tried too hard once anyway, spoke to the wrong people maybe, by the looks of him. His clothes lumpy and shapeless from the chest down, the grunge of a grey hooded flannel all olive-striped and red-orange piled around his neck, brown hair greasy and splayed on the grubby fabric belying the clean crisp earnest of his speech, his greenblue eyes turning inward and down toward a mouth he seemed to hardly believe could contain so many words and a tongue so restless. And someone had cut that impulsive tongue of his just so, not in a way that affected his speech, but still in a way that you could see the two split ends fighting to work independently behind his yellowy teeth, and his words came out fucked up not because they were impeded in any way, but because you were spending too much effort on looking at his moray eel mouth and not enough on listening to what his scuffed and ashy slack face was struggling to say.

The two of them grummumbled into their fat slices of pie, pecan and pumpkin, the too much sugar of them turning to small points of diamonded glass and glowing crystals under the hot amber lights and they picked and scratched at each other, just like everyone else in this tired but busy diner, one located not on some grimy street, or out there off an endless interstate, but in an urban strip mall, set down in the middle of a city whose main export was probably rain, the chalky stains of ten thousand storms streaking the windows that looked out into misted alleys and the too-close faces of hungry drunks who maybe just wanted a bite or two. The talking wasn't the thing the quiet couple were into, though, and the air around them changed when their hands and fingers touched here and there as they reached for their cold coffee or thin paper napkins, or really, each other, their rustles and murmurs flowing up and into a just visible stream that moved warm air and muffled words and open lust and so-sharp smells above the crowded blood red vinyl booths, and past the plastic plants that worked like fading green dust filters and heavy-leafed cobweb holders.

‘What is your fucking problem?’ he mumbled at her.
‘I am g ng s k. I d ‘t fe l g d,’ she mouthed back.
‘You’re always fucking sick,’ his tongues twisted away.
‘F k y u, as l,’ her mouth squished, as she reached to pick at the dirty beds of his nails.

He smiled, and massaged her raw, red knuckles with his thumb and first two fingers, his last two raised in a canted peace sign. She coughed, and spit up a little, slurred a shy ‘I l v y u,’ and covered the bottom of her face with one hand as she then hacked away for a full half minute or so. He never flinched, just kept rubbing her other hand.

‘You okay?’ he asked, when her rail slat chest finally stopped heaving.
‘Y p,’ she winked, and chugged her whole cup of cooled coffee.
‘Man,’ he sighed, and smiling, softly shook his head, blinking at his luck and his love.

She grinned wide, and he could see that favorite flaw of his in her face, her left lateral incisor trying to strong arm its canine neighbor, those dental imperfections gifted by Creator forever his downfall. ‘Amazing,’ he thought, almost out loud.

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Some folks communicate in small quiet gestures, others, nah. My Ma and Dad? Well, for Dad that was usually a no. Gesture-wise, there was lots of loud, pinched-lip, set-jaw nose breathing. Usually with my old man, though, there was no talking at all. But sometimes there were words, like these. Him: ‘Close your mouth, shit for brains’ – to my six-year old brother; ‘Close your mouth when you chew, whatthefuckiswrongwithyou’ – this, to my oldest but still four-year old sister on the occasional Sunday when he’d bother to eat with us; ‘Close your fucking mouth!’ – this, just this. Hahaha. He had a real problem with that mouth breathing thing. ‘Jeezus Caahrist,’ he liked to say.

My Ma, though, lots of gestures, because she smoked 8,000 cigarettes a day and drank 10,000 cups of coffee. She vibrated through my field of vision, and when she raised a hand it was like when the picture starts to go out on an old TV, like a black and white Zenith, and when it cracks and whips, the old man makes you wiggle the antenna until it stops, and then you just stand there holding it.

With your fucking mouth shut.

But neither my Ma or Dad were really communicating. That’s not what their words were doing. At least not with each other. Us kids? We knew what was happening. These two idiots were building a prison around us, the walls they put up between themselves fenced *us* in, closed our horizons and gave us nowhere to go. They made it colder in the winter and hotter in the summer, climate-dictated misery we tried to be kids in, while we wound up proxy-waging bullshit battles on their behalf, the fucking cowards, those fucking kids their damn selves.

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I laid there shuddering in my narrow-ass bed, which would normally mean January, or Chicago's worstfuckingmonththankgoditstheshortest; February. But not tonight. Something in the air was different. The whole house was asleep and it was late in the summer and still pretty warm. My ma in their room down the hallway by the front door and just passed the little room my two sisters shared. Me and my brother had beds jammed in the enclosed back porch of a typical North Side six flat, the kind that was painted grey, smelled like piss, and had a redneck landlady's son that lived in the basement, who sold tic and weed, and pulled the legs off cats, plus wore aviator sunglasses day and night, and a leather jacket, no shirt. The light from the moon was huge, and the disc in the sky even bigger, like it had been sitting in the alley right behind the garage all day, just waiting for it to turn dark and now here it was, just outside our window. I thought about reaching my hand out and touching it, but that kind of gesture isn't for kids like you and me, is it?

I got out of bed and walked the three or four steps to the kitchen. The back door was to the right, with the chain pulled across all set and the yellowy, curling ripped shade hanging most of the way down. The little light on the stove was on, and I could see the ashtray piled with butts. I listened down the pitch-black hallway for a minute, and when no noises came back I picked out a good-sized half one, and lit it off the stove like my ma always did. I knew this was one of hers because the old man smoked his almost down to the filter, and those only had a drag or two left, the cheapskate son of a bitch. Man was he ever happy when Old Golds got labeled as generics, their unexpected price drop the only dividend he ever really got.

I sat at the kitchen table and smoked that cigarette, no shirt on, but wearing the pants I usually slept in, because you never knew when you might have to take off. My leg started to trot, and I listened to the clock on the wall click along while I picked at the gold flecks in the Formica on the tabletop, the ones that would never come off, never fade. I don't know what I thought about that night, at that moment, but I really wish I did now. What's it like to have seventy or eighty years ahead of you, and what does your mind consider when it thinks it only has twenty or so at the most? What is the weight of the just-woke mind, the heft of a world limited on one plane by circumstance and venal authority, but known on another that it's been tricked, and lied to, that so much more awaits?

I jumped at a noise down at the bottom of the backstairs. It sounded like somebody cracked their shin on one of the wooden steps because the aftermath had more f-words and 'cocksuckers' than a pirate galley and that could only mean one thing.

The old man was home.
Son of a bitch.

I quick stubbed out my smoke and tiptoed back to the porch and hopped in my bed, my toes quickscaling down the sheet I pulled up, tiny lightning storms of static electricity popping where my skin made the circuit with the fabric. I hopped up my feet so the sheet went under and then I pulled it up tight to my chin and shoved my hands behind my butt. I couldn't cover my face with a sheet or a blanket, though, because in my mind that would make me dead, and I wasn't ready to go just yet. I puffed my long hair off my face with a quick blow up from my lips, then closed my

right eye, the one on the doorway side, and rolled my left around, trying to guess what was about to happen.

The old man made it up to our place on the second floor after a while, after lots of swearing and tearing, and rustling, and stops for drinks from a tall boy, or a half-pint, whatever he had left from drinking on the El on the way home, the train trying to clack him to sleep, but probably just irritating the shit out of him. I could even hear him say ‘godDAMmit’ when I know he burned the insides of two fingers trying to pull a cigarette away from his lips where it had stuck so he could tip the ash that got too long but for which he was too drunk to ‘pppffh’ blow away without taking it out of his mouth. The double blisters you get when that happens are a real bitch because the bubbles just rub at each other until you pop them. After that, it takes forever for them to heal.

Once he got to the back door, though, shit got real, real quick. He finally got his key in the lock, sure, but the door wouldn’t open because the chain.

Shit.

The chain was on the door. Ma must’ve got pissed waiting for him to come home and put the chain on. And I walked right by it, didn’t even think about it.

Fuck.

And now, he was pissed.

He started trying to sweet talk his way inside. He recounted his love, his devotion, and then his need, his desire. We heard about his job, and his family man style, his not missing work, his dedication to his career, his drive to make something nice in this world.

Silence from the darkened hallway where their bedroom was.

He called on that one god and his son, Jesus. Mary. Joseph. Josephine and Mary Josephine, our grandmas, especially ‘Unnamed Ojibway woman’ and then our ancestors, even the grandfathers, his drunken breath and oaths leaning in through the gap in the door. And though it was alcohol strong, it couldn’t move or melt the chain that denied him access to our apartment, the sanctuary and the hearth, but more likely the bed that he so desperately needed, the one he should’ve been in, so he could sleep the sleep of the just, or at least the drunk, because that one part, that was no lie—he was utterly dedicated to work, and never missed a day, except when he was in jail for another story entirely, because, I think, in the end, that work is what paid for what he really wanted to do, for the thing he felt he was born for; that job and that devotion paid for him to drink.

But on this night, he thought of someone besides himself, and that someone was my mother. Like all good addicts, to him, the fact that he had thought of someone other than himself should be somehow noted by the cosmos, that big, beautiful moon, I suppose, should have escorted him up into the night sky to rest among the stars I suppose because the old man had brought home

ARTHUR FUCKING TREACHER’S

you bitch
I got
ARTHUR FUCKING TREACHER'S
I got hushpuppies
and
I got shrimps
and
I got
ARTHUR FUCKING TREACHER'S
so
OPEN THE FUCKING DOOR RIGHT NOW
or
I WILL FUCKING KILL YOU.

And then the glass broke under the force of his fist, the bale of his ire, and the fire of his drink.
First try, first pop, right through the vintage pane.

He fumbled with the chain.

Both of my eyes were open now, and rolling.

I could hear him trying to open the door, closing and opening it, fucking with the chain
and
I couldn't not help my dad
and so I
walked the three or four steps to the kitchen
and saw a lunatic,
a decoupage Indian Orthodox icon of sadness
and despair
and love,
and sour-fogged soul, and much nose breathing, and handfuls of greasy brown paper, malt vinegar
spilling over the broken glass and the shattered wood, mixing its tang with the peppery copper
smell of the red sliding down the heavy milk white painted back door, sprays of drops and pinpoints
everywhere and his black hair hanging down over his five-hundred-year-old eyes that know how
this is all going to turn out, how it would always turn out, no matter the prayers, no matter the hope
and
then the bedroom door in the hallway burst open
just as he broke through and snapped the chain
and my ma took her self alone
and ran out the front door
into the night
lord knows where
her nightgown flashing through the present and into a past where just maybe she could rewrite all
that had happened here
and where maybe next time

we'd get a bigger piece of things, a better slice of all we ever deserved, those little bits that get taken for granted dusted across the top of a better morning, one not mourning all this shit tonight.

Author Bio

Dr. Theodore C. Van Alst, Jr. is Associate Professor and Director of Indigenous Nations Studies at Portland State University. He is co-editor and Creative Editor for *Transmotion* (an open-access journal of postmodern indigenous studies). His short story collection about growing up in Chicago, *Sacred Smokes*, was published in August by the University of New Mexico Press, who also published his edited volume *The Faster Redder Road: The Best UnAmerican Stories of Stephen Graham Jones*. His work appears in collections such as *Seeing Red*, *Visualities*, and *The Routledge Companion to Native American Literature*. His fiction, essays, and photography have been published widely.