

Dallas Angguish

Bubbles

Olympic Mountains, Washington State. Spring, 2000.

Hitchhiking from San Francisco to the Olympic Mountains in Washington State is not recommended. For starters it's many thousands of miles. Then there's inclement weather, strung-out truckers and wandering serial killers to contend with. It's not until you leave Oregon that the roads are a little safer. The redwood byways of Washington are traversed only by the odd hippy, the occasional dotcom millionaire headed for Seattle and a few silver haired retirees in campervans on their end of life journeys to all the national parks of the mighty U.S.A.

For the superstitious, the cliff-hung coast of the Pacific Northwest is full of phantoms, spectres by the roadside. The ghosts of prangs, collisions. Since the early fifties, when this region really opened up to motorists, thousands of lives have been lost on those tight bends. Every make and model of automobile has careened off those precipices, landing on the rocks below in muffled underwater explosions. Nobody bothers to haul out the wrecks. They rust into the sea. Become the abode of flesh-nibbling fishes that dine on bits of meat and bone loosed by critical impact; a victim's arm, a stray toe.

This is why I organise my ride ahead of time, as does Chocolate Johnson. Chocolate Johnson is afraid of serial killers and one-armed ghosts. She answers an ad in the newspaper:

Non-smoking gentleman seeks nice person/s to share driving and expenses on scenic trip to Olympic Mountains National Park. Must be neat. Prefer educated person/s who enjoy conversation.

I also respond to this ad. Something about it appeals to me. It has a domestic, homey feel to it. More to the point I have only one other option:

Totally mad raver dude needs cashed-up love bunny to act as steering-wheel-jockey on ganja fumigated dash to golden-top-mushroom fields in far-out Washington. Bare-butt backseat humps just one of the wild bonuses. Will supply crazy amphetamines. B.Y.O birth control.

I'm not afraid of serial killers or one-armed phantoms. I *am* fearful of horny crack junkies. Besides, I doubted that I was Mad Raver's type; I'm hardly a love bunny. More to the point, my grandmother always said an excessive use of hyphens often indicates a bad character. Also, at the time my wallet was going through another dry spell. I certainly wasn't 'cashed up'. I suspected Mad Raver would be waiting some time for a response to his ad.

When Chocolate speaks to the author of the first ad, she thinks he seems nice enough, even if he does have a lisp. Raymond Scott, that's what he's called. He has no problem with her being African-American, sounds intrigued when she tells him about her PhD in Literature; black women writers of the Jazz age. When she enquires Raymond says he owns a mail order business. The slow way he answers reminds her of her grandfather. She wants to ask what he sells but there'll be time for that on the long journey north to the Washington peninsula. He offers to pick her up. They work out a time and it's all set.

Chocolate clips out the ad and puts it in an envelope with the Raymond's name and phone

number. Just in case. If she happens to go missing the contents of the envelope will prove vital to any investigation. Not that she's paranoid. It's just that America isn't what it once was. There are so many crazies out there.

Her friends tease her, tell her stories about women murdered on lonely Oregon roads, about phantom hitchhikers who appear and disappear with the blink of an eye. They feign lisps and make pranks calls over the days before she leaves. They know how superstitious she is.

On the day of departure, she nearly calls to cancel. She feels pensive. A little worried her *own* ghost will end up roaming the wild rainforests of the Olympic Mountains. Her friends' mischievousness hasn't helped. When Raymond comes to collect her she is relieved to see how ordinary he is. No visible facial tics. No eye patch or hook for a hand. No Freddy Kruger fingernails. He's just a portly late middle-aged white guy with balding blonde hair and soft piggy eyes.

He is similar in appearance to one of her college professors. The one who teaches medieval poetry, whose rotund wife wears pink cardigans over tweed skirts. The same professor who can't look her in the eye when she goes to class without a bra. He gave her a 'C' on her first paper. After that she *never* wore a bra. The poor professor spent the rest of the year in a state of sweaty discomfort. The power of unfettered boobs.

Raymond lisps a pleasant hello, shows no interest in her boobs at all, only in her luggage that he is relieved to find amounts to a single tote bag. He admits he always over-packs, was worried there wouldn't be room for her stuff. I watch from the backseat. I forego the front when it becomes apparent that I make Raymond uncomfortable. I don't know why.

Perhaps it's my pink *I love Justin Timberlake* t-shirt. Perhaps it's all the badges pinned to my rucksack. Mostly, the badges advertise my favourite musicians from the Eighties: Culture Club, Tears For Fears, Bronski Beat. One is an Andy Warhol portrait of Elvis Presley and another is a pink triangle. One reads *Talk to the hand 'cause the ears aren't listening!* And then

there's my favourite: *Beam Me Up Scotty!* Meaning, of course, that I am a triple threat; gay, effeminate *and* a Trekkie.

When Chocolate climbs in she introduces herself, says she didn't know anyone else was coming. I say that I'm a last minute ring in. She settles in, makes some comment about the car, how she likes Volkswagen bugs, particularly red ones. Road trips are more fun when taken in cars with character. The VW will add a certain charm to the trip, she says. Raymond smiles. He's proud of his car, happy she likes it too.

We depart unceremoniously. Raymond is a careful driver, like a grandma with the kids in the back. Chocolate's fear subsides. I can tell she's thinking *This isn't going to be so bad after all*. When we cross the Golden Gate Bridge we each notice that the others are breathing more easily. We all have worries we're happy to leave behind. We rumble along highway 101, the great asphalt serpent that hugs the west coast from L.A. all the way to the straits of Vancouver Island. Before long, the urban mishmash of San Francisco recedes into nothing. There is a sense that we have escaped our troubles.

Chocolate dreads the prospect of a life confined to academia. She'd hoped to be a writer, a novelist. Her writing teacher, Ms Hortense Bruner, a stern white woman with contracted lips, thought this would be a mistake. She casually informed Chocolate of this over a cup of coffee and some Oreo cookies. No talent. The words 'pedestrian', 'uncomplicated' and 'contrived' were used.

From that moment on, Chocolate threw herself into literary theory, into criticism. She's smart, that no one can deny. But being clever doesn't make her happy. She wants to be creative, visionary. The trek to the Olympic Mountains is a last ditch attempt to reawaken her creativity; find some meaningful way to express herself. What does a protestant white woman know about black writing anyway!

Raymond's worries are financial. Business isn't doing so well. He blames it on the

Internet. No one bothers with mail-order anymore. His stock isn't moving like it once did, has slowed to a snail's pace. Barely enough to keep him busy. He owns his home at least, and has saved a little nest egg. He won't starve. However, if he doesn't do something soon, make a change, things could easily get much worse.

He needs a breather, some thinking time. Thinking takes Raymond a lot longer than most. He does his best thinking amidst the serenity and splendour of nature, away from all the distractions of life. He finds the mountains inspiring, a perfect backdrop for making plans. In a way they are a reflection of himself; large and still, grounded, impervious to the elements.

As for me, I'm fleeing a recent self-realisation. It's frightening what a little introspection can reveal. I've found that I have not matured beyond the age of eight. In pop psychological lingo, I'm emotionally 'stuck'. When I was eight I lived with my aggressive, and often drunk, father, my co-dependent mother and my two siblings. I was a middle child. At the time of writing I am living with my co-dependent little sister, her alcoholic husband, and her two children.

My little sister has always mothered me. Her two children, whom I adore, treat me more as a sibling than as an adult. I often lose pitched battles over the remote control. I eat my meals at the kiddies' table. Mere coincidence? I think not. So I leave the country for a while, trying to grow up fast. I don't want to be Jan Brady forever.

At first, Chocolate, Raymond and I exchange only a few words. Later, as the beauty of the passing landscape affects us, we settle in, open up. Chocolate and Raymond find a mutual curiosity for each other. I'm left unnoticed in the back. The middle child again. They ask each other questions.

"What sort of mail-order do you do Raymond?"

"What sort?"

"Yeah, what do you sell?"

“Shoes... large size... women’s shoes.”

“Is there a lot of call for that?” Chocolate is intrigued, not disparaging.

“Used to be more call for it... now everyone... uses the Internet.”

“What’s your most popular shoe?”

“Most popular?”

“Best selling.”

“Well... there’s an Italian stiletto... it moves pretty good... the red ones... are popular.”

“Your customers are hookers huh?” she laughs. He doesn’t see the joke, responds in all seriousness,

“No... some of them are men, but none of them... are prostitutes... I don’t... think.”

“Men?” Chocolate is surprised.

“Yes... homo... sexuals.”

“Oh! So you sell shoes to drag queens?”

“...Y... Yes.”

I’m beginning to think there’s more to this round little man than meets the eye. I can tell Chocolate is as well. Her demeanour becomes decidedly more curious.

“Do you like your customers then?” she asks.

“Yes... of course... the backbone of my... business.... Some of them... have been with me for thirty years... ever since... I first got started.”

“Really, that’s amazing!”

“S’pose so.”

“It must’ve been hard for drag queens thirty years ago, even in San Francisco.” There is a gentle sympathy in Chocolate’s voice. She’s alluding to things, horror stories we’ve all heard about the bad old days before Stonewall. Before Gay Liberation got started. I prick up my ears, hungry to hear what Raymond says.

“It... was...” he mumbles. Chocolate and I wait for more, we know it’s coming. We can tell by the pained look on his face. “I used to... lose customers... to the mental hospitals... or... to the penitentiary. Their orders would stop coming in... then years later... I’d hear from them again... get an order... for a size thirteen slipper... and know they were out. Some of them... they never... never came back.”

“What happened to them?” Chocolate asks. I know the answer well before Raymond’s slow sentences reveal it. It’s the history of oppression. I’m silent in the face of it.

“...Shock treatment... lobotomies...”

“How awful!”

“Yes... good customers...” Raymond sighs, “Shame... what happened....”

We are all silent then. My thoughts go to angry places. What kinds of doctors invent a way to electrocute someone without killing them, so that they can be electrocuted over and over again? And what kind of doctor wakes up one morning and thinks ‘I know how I can make these queers and hysterics more manageable, I’ll stick an icepick in their brain!’

Raymond slow drives along the coast, his chubby feet weightless on the accelerator. His slow driving corresponds to his slow way of talking. His whole being emanates an unnatural calm, an unnerving calm that has about it a hint of sadness. The quiet of an abandoned garden. There is something of the child in him, a lonely boy. His blue eyes are always damp and cool. He looks to be permanently on the verge of tears. If it weren’t for his smile, the warmth in his lisping voice, you would think him thoroughly forlorn.

I’m aware that he thinks Chocolate is absolutely wonderful. He can’t hide it. I know that he is an only child. I bet he was one of those kids who always yearned for a sibling. Judging by the way he looks at Chocolate, his yearning was for a sister. Chocolate would make a great sister. She has an openness, a femininity filled with nobility and humour, and a kind of ‘queenliness’ that is thoroughly appealing. As a little girl she would have been irresistible,

precocious.

Raymond's face is an open book. His thoughts go undisguised. They move over his features, changing his appearance for all to see. He doesn't think Chocolate will like him much. A dull witted, overweight and balding guy who sells women's shoes to homosexuals. What's to like? He looks out the window, embarrassed all of a sudden. How could he presume Chocolate would ever want to be his friend, let alone think of him as a brother? In fact, he is thoroughly likeable and Chocolate thinks him adorable.

She reads his silence as a sign of shyness. Rather than confront his timidity she joins him in quiet observance of the passing scenery. On the other hand, he can't wait to hear what she says next, what happy sounds she'll make. He waits and waits, becoming more and more expectant. She remains quiet, waiting for Raymond to speak first so as not to ruffle his gentle spirit. I brood in the back, finding the whole thing ridiculous.

The rugged coast acts as a welcome distraction. For two days I stare out the window at the dark blue ocean, the wave clawed cliffs, the beehive hills. Every now and then a tree draws my attention, either because it is very large, a redwood or giant oak, or because its mossy boughs, its gnarled trunk and witch-finger roots, give it a haunted ambience.

With the passing of each hour, each sunset and sunrise, Raymond and Chocolate become inseparable friends. When we stop for coffee or cola they meander off together, forgetting that I am on this journey also. I occasionally interject in their slow motion conversations. They peer back at me through the rear vision mirror in a disinterested fashion, feigning pleasant smiles, so I make no further interruptions. It's not that they don't like me; it's just that they like each other a lot more. Three's a crowd. More so in a Volkswagen Bug. Poor Jan Brady.

Towards the end of our journey they enter a comfortable silence, having swiftly reached that stage in their relationship where words are not necessary for the communication of feeling. I jealously watch the passing to and fro of subtle glances, little smiles. I become incapable of

any facial expression other than a sneer. They begin to treat me like a spoilt child. I live up to their opinion of me by throwing tantrums; the backseat is too cramped, the weather too damp, and the Bug too noisy.

When I'm not complaining, I'm thinking about the country we're driving through, the secrets it holds. The topography of the Olympic coastline tells stories that are thousands of years old. Stories that are illustrated by crisp breezes carrying the scent of pine, sea and wildflowers. The perfumes of an open sky. These are stories witnessed by people long dead, and older stories that unfolded before the existence of human beings that can only be told by the landscape itself.

"Is it any wonder people see ghosts here." I'm thinking out loud, speaking into the wind.

My isolation in the back seat has caused me to forget the presence of my companions. My statement does not go unappreciated however. Raymond and Chocolate nod in agreement. Perhaps they were already thinking that exact thing. I notice Raymond looks at me with more intensity after that. I have dispelled part of the illusion that I am completely shallow; a *Pop Age* moron.

Our last stop is an overnighter in a cosy motel overlooking the heavily glaciated Olympic peaks. A glance in any direction is a visual thrill: wide alpine meadows, remote lakes, moss bearded forests, meandering rivers flanked by fields of pimpernels. After unpacking the car I go for a walk. A few yards from the motel I feel I'm in deserted wilderness. I find a small granite boulder, exactly the size of a stool, and settle myself on it, Buddha-wise. As clouds pass overhead I notice the pimpernels; their scarlet, white and blue petals closing up with the dimming of the light. They hide from the night, and from dull weather. At dusk, as it gets cold and threatens to rain, I go back to my room. The idea that I'm just like a pimpernel makes me smirk.

I find a note stuck under my door, an invitation from Raymond to eat dinner in his room,

with Chocolate of course. I think to myself that his handwriting even *looks* slow. Somehow it reads slowly as well. The note suggests that, as we are all going our separate ways in the morning, we should get together to say goodbye properly. A kind of last supper. I don't feel terribly inclined but I go anyway, nothing better to do.

It's a quiet night, though more pleasant than I'd expected. We eat dinner by an open fire, a night-time picnic on a blanket spread on the floor. Chocolate tunes the radio to a local radio station. Country and Western mixed with a very white bread kind of gospel. Raymond is more jovial than usual, though his speech remains as slow as ever. Slow as a crawling glacier. I have only one spiteful moment, when Chocolate serves Raymond's food for him, leaving me to look after myself. My revenge is to not laugh at her next joke. I didn't get it anyway. Something about Proust. I never get anything about Proust.

After dinner, Raymond gets that look on his face that means he has something meaningful to say. Chocolate and I smile encouragement and wait expectantly. He begins, "I've never... told anyone... what I'm about to tell you... I feel... we have become friends and... I'm sure you're... both wondering... why I'm so... slow." I must admit I was. "When I was... a young man," he continues, "they used to call me... b... bubbles... I had a lot of... blonde hair... and I was the life... of the party."

He makes a little smile, raises an eyebrow, as if to say *Hard to believe isn't it!* Chocolate takes up his hand, says that as far as she's concerned he's still the life of the party. He is reassured by her affection and goes on. "When I... was about eighteen... I got arrested... for kissing... in a park."

"You got arrested for kissing?" I can't believe it. He smiles at me, slowly explains.

"It was fifty... years ago.... I was kissing... another... guy... his name was Tommy... he was... r... real nice." The room is silent as we wait for Raymond to continue. "...The judge said... I had a choice... prison... or... an operation." Chocolate can't wait anymore, she

interrupts.

“What kind of operation Raymond?”

Once again, before he reveals it, I know the answer. The slow driving, the monotone speech, his unnatural calm, that hint of sadness. These things all implied what he was about to confirm.

“...It was... a lobotomy operation... that’s why... why I’m so slow...” His eyes fill with tears, as do mine. “It’s not... because I’m dim witted... they really... really *did* call me... bubbles....”

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