

seemed natural to shift the point of view with certain lines of dialogue. Since there are only the two of them, I could generally dispense with the "he said/she said" tags and give descriptions of them as they're talking, and those external descriptions were places where I could shift focus (just the name itself could be enough of a trigger) before shifting point of view. For the final switch I used a repetition of the phrase "Morton, her husband." The first time it occurs in Lilly's consciousness, essentially a quoted thought. The second time the narrator invokes it consciously, ironically, and pivots into Morton's perspective one final time. I was pleased I stumbled onto that repetition.

Some other things I discovered as I wrote: I needed something for Lilly to be doing. The needlepoint seemed like a natural thing—something fine and tiny done by a large woman. Ditto the dog, Muffy. The bug lights—I worked in a canning factory and I was always fascinated by those insects' deaths. I figured that if they were on a marsh it'd be practical for them to have one of those. The leprechaun, the lawn furniture, the childlessness, the climax and its aftermath (what Morton and Lilly would actually say to each other)—I had no idea about any of that as I began writing. I just kept trying to picture them there on that deck, and imagine what they were doing, what they were thinking, what they would say to each other. That's probably why the climactic scene is fairly intense—when I finally got there, there needed to be an explosion. I knew, given the mention a couple of times of Morton drinking, that something had to happen with one of those bottles at the end (especially after he wants to throw one or smash one and doesn't). And after I wrote the opening I knew that the marsh was enough of a presence, both physically and psychologically, that it needed to come back into play in some way at the end. I wanted things to feel cramped for them, the world—the past—pressing in on them, both in their minds and externally, and through the structure, the narration and the setting I worked to evoke that.

Wednesday

David Haynes

THAT'S RIGHT, YOU'RE NOT FROM TEXAS

HERE COME A couple of useless sentences: We couldn't make it work. We just weren't each other's types. Think if you will about the untold millions for whom such ideas are entirely outside their ken. Their parents trade a goat and a couple of pounds of cheese for some poor creature wrapped in a sheet, and for a lot of young men a positive outcome is one in which his future life partner has all her limbs intact and whose visible anatomy doesn't feature any giant hairy moles. Makes one ashamed, doesn't it, and perhaps a little embarrassed too about all those who jumped off our own hooks.

Yasmine and I, both recent transplants to a godforsaken urban wasteland known as Dallas, were headed to the Melrose Hotel bar for a quiet drink after seeing a student production of *Six Degrees of Separation*. We had been going out for three months, steering through the intellectual bona fides segment of dating. I'd sprung for the box seats at the Meyerson and she'd hauled me to the sorts of movies where everything is hazy and people talk in French for a couple of hours. It

his habit. This was the Stop of the soccer mom who, beyond hysteria, is one balled-up fist short of a date in family court. And like all hysterical mothers, Yasmine even put her hand across my chest as if to keep me from flying through the windshield when I jammed the brakes on.

Which, of course I did.

We, both of us, peered through the back windshield to discover what I had done. Alas, like tony communities across the globe, the Park Cities are tastefully underlit by gaslights, and all that stretched behind us was impenetrable darkness, interrupted here and there with quavering puddles of golden anemic lamplight.

Yasmine, as any second-rate disaster movie heroine worth her salt would have done, had concluded and then announced, "We'll have to go back." And we've all seen enough of these films to know the drill. Lava flows would be blocking the exits to the island even as I put the car in reverse. At any moment some unfortunate extra would be sucked into Mochra's gaping maw.

I backed down the street and eyeballed this woman sitting next to me. I gave her my what-the-hell-is-your-damn-problem-anyway look. This was another move I'd learned from my father. Mom would ask him—for the twenty-seventh time—if he wouldn't mind pretty please doing something like separating frozen pork chops or reaching down the double boiler from the top shelf of the pantry. Dad would slam that cleaver down into the meat, never, for not even one second diverting his curled-lip sneer from her direction, potential lost fingertips be damned. Ignoring his glare, her own face a vision of equanimity, Mom would shuck her peas, flinching now and again as the blade chopped through to the cutting board. "Supper in an hour," she'd chirp, gathering her hunks of hacked flesh into a baking dish. This was a broad who played to win and who knew how to savor a victory when she did.

I was a man who backed down dark and segregated streets at the whim of a woman I hadn't even made my mind up about yet. I rolled

about as far back as I believed. I'd rolled forward, announced, cleverly I thought, that there didn't seem to be anything there.

Undaunted, Yasmine bolted from the car to have a closer look at the situation.

"Ooooh," she sighed, that sound women make when they break a nail or when their stockings run or when the man they went to the bed-and-breakfast with finds ESPN on the cable lineup. "The poor, poor thing."

I warned her that I was pretty sure she wasn't supposed to be touching that. This is another thing one learns watching *Monster-vision*. Poking around strange animals always turns out badly. At any moment, whatever the hell that was would erect itself, extend its claws and eyes would be gouged from their sockets, almost certainly my own.

But Yasmine was way ahead of me on this one. Felix had already taken the express bus to kitty heaven. I must have gotten him real good—a two-tire job, at least, maybe I'd even dragged the bastard.

She asked me if I had something in the car to wrap him in, and I thought, okay, so we'll cover him up and leave him for the Mexicans to pick up in the morning. I agreed to sacrifice my tire emergency towel for the good of the order.

So peaceful he looked, curled up there against the curb, and I could imagine him reclined just so in the sunny spot at the foot of his former owner's bookcase. And as Yasmine approached him with the tire towel, I entertained a trashy fantasy that the moment she cradled him in cloth and lifted him into her arms, his little kitty-cat eyes would snap open and he would spring back to life. Santa Yasmia of Highland Park, patroness of mediocre actresses, restorer of lost house pets.

But that didn't happen, and instead she said, "We have to see if anyone around here is his people." And before I could protest, before I could remind her that it was nine-thirty at night and that we were in the Park Cities, a place that didn't cotton to door-to-door canvassing even in broad daylight; that we were two people of African

"We're trying to find his owner," she told the woman, and she flourished a hand in the direction at my unfortunate cargo. Like some Renaissance Madonna, I tilted my bundle toward his viewer.

"Bless his heart, that's old Sammy-cat."

Yasmine extending a sympathetic hand, asked, "He's yours?"

"Lord, no. Old Sammy don't belong to anyone. He's a wild old tom what's lived around here for years. He's dead, is he?"

Directing this question toward his murderer, Yasmine looked over where I was standing, so I said, "He was run over by a car that had been being driven by me."

Which caused Yasmine to give me a look, which was then short-circuited by our homeowner, who said, "Y'all bring him right on in through here. Come on with him."

She showed us into her front parlor. She had filled the room, as had many of her neighbors, with the sorts of heavy hard furniture one imagines might have decorated medieval castles, assuming, of course, the lord of the manor had an account at the local Sears. Leather, hard edges, wrought iron, rough-hewn cedar-beamed boxes. A dog the size of a small horse pranced through the room, ignoring us. We were not introduced.

"That Sammy-cat's been living back in here for four or five years. He wouldn't stay anywhere and they never could catch him. Can I offer y'all something?"

Yasmine enthused over the hospitality, though she ultimately passed. What I wanted more than a drink was a place to unload my bundle of joy. Hoping that we didn't mind if she did, our hostess topped up her goblet with something brown from a lovely crystal decanter. Pioneers could have crossed the continent on her liquor cart.

"Do y'all live around here?" she asked. "I don't think I've seen you in the neighborhood."

And I thought, here we go, but charming Yasmine bit this conversational hook like a starving piranha, unlike myself detecting not the

slightest ill intent in the query. She described my professorship and her own association with a prominent law firm in town. She confessed to her lifelong citizenship of North Texas, however recently new to the Metropolis.

"Rodney here lives right down the street, practically. Just down Douglas, over the city line."

I hefted the carcass in my arms by way of acknowledging my residence. The old tom had been a big mother. That had to be a good twenty pounds of dead cat meat I was holding, and in an uncomfortable position too, eschewing dead animal emissions from my immediate person.

"A professor?" the woman chirped. "I could tell you were a something." And then she took another big slug of the sauce.

Personally I'd about had it with Park Cities cocktail hour, so I asked, "Do you have a trash bin out back?" And I once again lofted the guest of honor for emphasis.

Well, you'd have thought I'd asked these women to peel off their panties and get down on all fours.

"What?" I asked. "Isn't that what you do with these things?" I honestly didn't know. When I was growing up, house pets on their last legs had a way of disappearing quietly sometime during the school day. They didn't make dads any cheaper than my father's edition, and I can't imagine him doing anything other than making a run to the nearest dump. I bet he didn't even slow down while tossing the bag from the car. We are not a sentimental people.

Apparently our other mourners were. The two women had reached their hands toward each other the way that women in the audience on Oprah do when Dr. Phil isn't making any headway with the bad husband of the day.

With her other hand Yasmine caressed the bundle in my arms. "Sammy here deserves something a little more dignified than that," so I said, "Fine." I might have mentioned the fact that this piece of work in my arms had no doubt crapped in every garden between

dead cat stink. I loved that touch. It had been the perfect thing to do just then. It had said to me, "I get you." And, "It's okay." And it felt right and good. So good in fact that we skipped the drinks that night and went directly to my place and, as they say down in these parts, we had us a whole bunch of sex, a whole bunch of times.

And I imagine you're thinking how crass I am. But people hook up over much less every minute of every day. Neither of us had anything to be ashamed of.

We hung out for almost another half year after that night, Yasmine and me. Me, through all that time, denying to myself that we would not be each other's forever "it," because I really wanted her to be, or at least for a long time there I did. But it just sort of . . . ended after a time.

I ran into her just once since and we chatted for a while, and it was real friendly. I could tell that neither one of us bore the other the least amount of ill will, and that was comforting to see. It's unlikely we will cross paths again. There are four million souls in North Texas and nothing resembling a place where folks like us might meet. And, anyway, I will leave Texas soon. If there's a God in heaven, I will.

I think about her now and again. About the night in Highland Park, of course, but other things too. The time in Mazatlán and a Thanksgiving with my folks. I liked her and I'm sorry that we didn't fit. I'm two or three ladies down the line these days, and sadly, this current one doesn't feel like a keeper either. Call me picky, but this is supposed to be for the rest of one's life—Dad's rule, remember. A fellow just can't take any chances.

And I'd like to think that Yasmine thinks about me as well. She would still be unattached I'm pretty sure, and you just know that there's a group of girls around her age who she hangs with on the weekends and sometime after work. They go to that wine bar on McKinney or they drive up on Greenville and get the jumbo margaritas at the Blue Horse.

They are a self-sufficient lot, these friends. Each of the ladies has a

good job and everyone pays her bills on time. And, no, not a one of them has a live one on the wire, or at least none of them has what she'd consider a keeper. Everyone is disappointed, but they are a cheerful and optimistic lot. They buy another round and talk about the big sale at Kohl's and a potential trip to Ocho Rios. Now and again the talk circles around to the death of good black men and all the might-have or should-have-beens.

Yasmine—she's the sweet one of the group—she wonders rhetorically whatever happened to good old Rodney. The girls have a good laugh at his silly name and they try to remember which one he could have been. Was he the brother with the BMW and the bad BO? Didn't he live down there in a loft in the West End? Doesn't his mama still send you a birthday card every year?

Yasmine, she'll giggle and shake her head. There's a place in her heart for every one of those men, and we all hold on to her as well. But she'll say, no, she'll say "Rodney. You remember Rodney. He's the one who ran over the cat."