

## Someplace Other Than Here by Laurel Saville

When I asked him why he hadn't talked to me, asked me for my phone number, he told me about the 6-second rule. His boss was scared of getting sued. Told the guys that they couldn't look at any woman for more than six seconds. He'd let a guy work drunk before he'd let him stare at a girl going into a building they were working on. But he did look at me. Never for long. Just steady and frequently. For weeks, every time I drove in and got out of my car, I'd look up and see the bright blue of his eyes. Sometimes when I was inside, at my desk, writing letters for my boss, taking messages, printing out reports, I'd see him outside the window, carrying lumber across the parking lot, mixing a batch of concrete in a wheelbarrow, buckling his tool belt, looking at my window, looking at me. Sometimes he smiled.

I wrote my name and phone number on a piece of paper and for days and days I put it in my palm as I got out of the car. I thought I'd walk up to him and introduce myself. Shake his hand and leave the scrap of paper there when I took my hand away. But there was always the scaffolding, a pane of glass, a group of other guys, or the long black parking lot between us. So I called. I took the number from the side of one of the trucks, told the answering machine that Tina from building seven was calling for George-I'd heard the other guys yell out his name from time to time-and left my phone number. I didn't want to catch him on the phone. I just wanted to let him know that I would talk to him if he would talk to me. And I wanted to give him the chance to not call back.

But he did. He said that he didn't know my name, but when I gave the building number, he knew it was me-he was glad it was me. I told him my real name was Justine, but that I'd never gotten used to the grown-up sound of that name, and let everyone call me Tina, ever since I was a kid. He said he'd do the same. He said he knew another Tina-said, "Just Tina," and then laughed at his own, unintentional pun-his sister, but they didn't talk much because she lived somewhere out in the mid west with a drinker for a husband and a bunch of kids, so there wasn't much for them to say to each other. I took that as a good sign.

He didn't ask me out. We just talked about little things, the building, the people who came and went, where we lived. He asked what I did in my office. I told him I helped a guy manage other people's money. He said that sounded interesting. I told him it wasn't. He laughed-quick and short-and asked if he could call me again some time. I liked that I made him laugh, so I said, "Yes." It took him a few days to call me again. In between, we smiled at each other. This time, he asked me how old I was.

"Twenty three," I said. Then asked, "How old are you?"

"Twenty six," he said. He paused. "You look younger."

I said, "That's what people tell me. It's the blond hair. And because I'm petite."

"No," he said. "It's the backpack. It's because you carry that backpack."

Then he asked me why I was living with my mother. Still. I answered by asking him why he was living with his brother. And his brother's girlfriend. And her two kids. He didn't answer either, just laughed again. He wasn't laughing at what I said so much as with some kind of relief, some kind of deciding. Then he asked me if I'd like to have dinner sometime. With him.

Now it was my turn to laugh, at the way he asked me, at his nervousness. I said yes. That's how it started. A nice dinner at a small place, him showered and shaved, handsome in a different way, with a small razor cut on his chin, clean jeans and a button down shirt, shoes that weren't work boots, unsure how to, but ordering wine anyway, paying with a credit card that looked like it didn't get much use.

Then pizza and a movie, a drive on a Saturday afternoon, talking and then not talking, empty coffee cups rolling around on the floor behind the front seat. Looking at each other when the other wasn't looking, wondering if the blanks needed filling in, or if they were just fine as they were.

It was a small place, out by the highway, just a parking lot and a single-story building with about a dozen rooms. It looked clean, the cars in the lot weren't junkers, and it was close enough that we could get to work in the morning, but far enough away that it made me feel like we were going somewhere. The sign said "Shady Lawn", but there wasn't any of either. I parked by the office and asked George to stay in the car. I hadn't told him anything. He didn't ask questions, just folded his arms over his chest and watched me walk away. No one was at the desk. In a shadowed corner, there was a young girl with skin as dark as a cup of coffee. Her hair was even darker, long, sleek and so shiny, it showed white patches where the light touched it. She was wearing matching sweats in pink, like bubblegum, and eating a sandwich, white bread with something white in between. I thought she was about years old, but then she looked up at me, and her eyes, black like her skin, looked much older. The room was hot, with a strong, damp smell that clung to the back of my throat. The girl got up and yelled into another room where there was a television on and voices speaking a language I'd never heard before. She looked at me only long enough to say, "Just one minute. He be here." Her voice came out as if she was playing some kind of instrument. I wanted her to talk to me, to hear more of her voice and accent, but she sat down and went back to her sandwich.

A guy came from the back room, walking fast, springing up on the balls of his feet, rubbing his hands together. He looked just like the girl, only she was beautiful and he was not. I wondered how that could be. He smiled, blazing white teeth shining in his pink mouth surrounded by dark skin, and talked fast, asking how long I would be staying with them. As if I was really staying with them. Like I might walk around back and join them in front of the television. I said just one night. That we were passing through. I don't know why I said that last part.

He said "we" would give me a room down at the end, something with a little privacy, a little quiet. The girl looked up at him when he said this, critical of something in his tone or manner. She was eating her sandwich in a circle, turning the bread a bit after every tiny bite. He said there was a diner next door. Most excellent food, owned by his brother, who was a chef, and made many kinds of dishes, both American and from home. His worlds tumbled out, one on top of another so that it took me a minute to gather his meaning. He bobbed his head and smiled at me while he talked. I took my key and was about to go, but didn't. I wanted something more, just wasn't sure what it was.

"Where are you from?" I asked. "Where is home?" I flicked my eyes over to the girl to include her in the question.

"We from Pakistan," he said, breaking the word into three different parts, with a long "e" in the middle. "We are coming from Pakistan."

Pakistan. I said it out loud and the man looked at me eagerly, like I might say more. But it was simply a pretty word that felt good in my mouth. I didn't know where Pakistan was, just that it was a long way away. I'd never been more than a few states from the town I was born in. I wondered what that would be like, to be away, not just for a day or a night or even a few, but to have every day be a day that you're away.

When I got back in the car, George looked at me, steady, a little hard. I couldn't read his face. I told myself that I'd only known him about a month. I wondered if I'd made a mistake.

"What are you doing?"

"It's what we're doing." "Okay, so what are we doing?"

"Staying here."

"Here?"

"Yep."

"Really?"

"Really. For the whole night."

He was quiet, staring through the windshield of my little beater Honda at the door of the office I'd just come out of. I wondered how his thoughts of me might now be different. But he's a guy, I thought. As if that explained something. Then he turned to look at me again. I held my breath.

"Thanks," he said.

"For what?"

"For doing this."

"You're welcome." I wasn't used to being thanked. So I said, "Thanks for thanking me."

We moved the car to the end of the lot, in front of our room. We didn't have any bags—he hadn't known he'd be staying and I hadn't wanted to give myself away. The room was clean, just a bed, a dresser, a night table and a TV. I asked him if he wanted to call his brother. "No," he said. "He won't even notice I'm gone." I said that my mother would, but only until she'd gotten to her third martini. Then he went into the bathroom with the day's dirt on him and came out ten minutes later wrapped in a towel, damp, clean, smelling of soap, with his hair finger combed back from his face in thick, black, wet ropes. I stepped up to him, ran my fingers through his hair where his had just been, along his jaw line, stubble still in place, down his neck, into the fur on his chest, and then traced the hollows where his muscles joined and moved in different directions. He took my hand, brought it to his mouth, kissed it, and then pulled it behind me, pulling me against him, and put his face into my neck. For a long time, we stood like that, leaning against each other, breathing each other in, taking our time.

When I woke up the next morning, the first thing I saw was his arm with its long dark hairs lying across my body, the first thing I felt was his chest rising against my back, the first thing I heard was his breath in my ear. I told myself, don't think, just feel, just feel this.

We stayed a few more times over the next few months. We took turns. Sometimes I'd check us in, sometimes he would. I looked for the girl but didn't see her. I thought about asking George if he saw her. But I didn't. Because each time he came back from the office, he said something, like "Thank goodness the rooms smell better than in there," or "What kind of garbage you think those guys are eating?" I never said anything about these comments. Something else I would feel bad about later.

In the mornings, if I woke up and George was still asleep, on his back or curled up against me, I'd lay still and look at some part of him. His hand and his fingers big with muscle, the palms thick with callouses, the black hairs straying over his knuckles. Or his chest rising and falling above the flat plain of his stomach, the sheets tangled around his waist. His body fascinated me, how different it was from mine, with its hair and hard muscles, scrapes and scars. When he woke up, he wouldn't kiss me. But he would move his roughened hands over me, along my arms, rubbing my breasts, up and down and in between my legs. He'd bury his face in the pillows, plant his prickly cheek against mine, his breath hot and ragged against my neck. My body always responded, opened itself to him. I thought this was something; I thought it was enough. Afterwards, he'd get up and shower, shave, brush his teeth. He'd

come to me, put his arms on my shoulders, or wrap them around my waist and kiss me full on the mouth, tasting of toothpaste. I'd get a hint of the night before on his breath, a whiff of something darker, mustier, more real. That's when I'd kiss him harder, my tongue searching for that other thing.

The last time we were there, I was in the bathroom, brushing my teeth and looking out the window above the sink at the nasty old pool out back, empty except for a foot or so of dark green water in the deep end, covered with dead leaves. It took me a minute to realize someone was sitting on the end of the diving board. It was the girl, but she was sitting so still, she looked like a garden statue. Her skin was shiny and dark, like a coffee bean glistening next to the bright blue of her sweat pants and top. Her legs dangled over the end of the board, and her hands held onto the edges alongside her thighs. She was staring off into the distance, her face empty of thoughts or feelings that I could recognize. I wondered if she was trying to remember something, something from home. I wondered how your idea of home might change when it wasn't a place you went to, but a place you just remembered. A voice called a name I didn't recognize, just two long notes, the first high, held for several seconds, then lower, held just for a moment. The girl didn't respond. I kept watching, and slowly, she began to bounce on the end of the board, barely noticeable at first, then a little more, a little faster. Nothing changed, not her position or her expression, even as she made the world around her move.

Sunday afternoons we'd go to his house. His brother and his girlfriend always had a lot of people and kids around on Sunday. His brother wore a big apron that said, "Kiss the Cook." Which everyone did. They also brought big plastic containers of potato or macaroni salads, desserts made with canned fruit and marshmallows, pasta dishes, big slabs of meat for the grill, cases of beer and packs of wine coolers. I brought something once, a fruit tart I got at the bakery, the kind of thing my mother used to get years ago when she would spend her afternoons playing bridge with friends, rather than drinking, but it looked small and insubstantial on the kitchen counter piled high with other kinds of foods, and only two slices got eaten, one by me. Kids climbed in and out of the above ground pool. People sat in webbed chairs on the concrete slabs outside their back door. Later, they'd watch sports on television, play cards or games, finishing what was left of the beer or wine.

I didn't drink much. I hated playing games. But I was good at it, even when I didn't really understand the rules. Sitting at the kitchen table one night, I'd been playing and winning, but I was tired, ready to stop, to leave. They all said, just one more hand, just play one more hand, give someone the chance to beat you. So I did, and I won, and George slapped me on the back just a little hard, and someone dropped something big in the kitchen, and from the other room, everyone roared in appreciation or frustration at some play for some game on the television, and his brother yelled out that it was alright, nothing had broken, and I stood up and thought: if I never come back here, ever again, nothing will happen, nothing will change. Someone else will just start winning.

I sat down to write him a note. I tried to write him a note. But I kept hearing other people's voices in my head, how they'd tell him what a great guy he was, that they never really thought I was right for him even though they tried to give me a chance. They'd tell him to go out and find a new girl, someone who really appreciated him, who liked the same things he did. A nice girl. A fun girl. A girl who'd make a good mother. That was it: a girl who could be a mother. I thought I might be ending something that might be my best chance for something, but I didn't know what that thing might be. I picked up the pen and wrote, "I want to be someplace other than here." I didn't leave it for him. I ripped off a piece of paper with just those words on it and put it in my wallet. For a long time, I'd come across that scrap of paper when I was cleaning out old receipts or fishing for a few extra bucks, and every time I did, I'd ask myself, "Are you there yet?"