

Bluestem Archive

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Don't Ask Her Why

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Angie's unbuttoning her shirt when I notice a pile of her clothes have accumulated in the corner of my closet. There's a pinch in my stomach, and I start to feel jumpy but keep my mouth closed. She turns around and slips off her bra, then closes the closet door and reaches for me with one hand. The room is dark. I hear a car door slam in the parking lot across the street and the hip-hop music from my neighbor upstairs. Angie's breasts look like small circles of white light.

She leads me to the fold-out couch and suggests we both get completely naked. I consider asking her what she means by "completely," but she turns around and heads for the bathroom. I open the bed, then take off my clothes and slip under the cotton sheet.

When Angie comes out of the bathroom, I notice her blue jeans are folded over her arm the way people carry their jackets while they're at the museum. She looks around, then sets the jeans on my desk near the window and stands there looking out. Against the background of the light outside, I can see the reflection of her figure in the windowpane. The Golden Waffle's flashing sign throws streaks of yellow on the curve of her hip. She looks exotic.

She climbs in bed without a word, and for the next twenty minutes, my mind is a blank. She'd never before been that intense and attentive. Not even when we first met.

After an appropriate silence I look up at her and make a comment about new vistas and she laughs vaguely. Her long, dark hair hangs in my face and tickles my lips. I take a short breath and gently try to shift our positions so I can lie on my side and breathe more easily. When Angie doesn't move, I realize I must have been too gentle. Her old boyfriend, Doug, played rugby.

She's still sitting on top of me with her hair hanging down in my face when she starts to make amusing comparisons between my job as a museum curator and her graduate work in astronomy. It's been her passion since childhood, but she's having an "identity crisis" because she's "losing faith in science." While she talks, her knees occasionally dig into the side of my ribs.

She says museum people like me are hung up on eternity and so are they, the space scientists. Then she asks me if I've read the paper today. I say I haven't and she frowns and tells me that the Nobel Prize was awarded to three scientists who have "directly detected gravitational waves."

I smile and say, maybe that explains why I'm so attracted to you.

She says, attraction, yeah, but this is about how black holes rotate around each other before merging, and that the closer they get, the faster and faster they spin until...

When her voice trails off, I nod and try to encourage her to go on, but I must have a vague look on my face because Angie lowers her eyes and says it's hard to explain to a non-scientist. What happens, basically, is that there are two black holes getting closer and closer, and the result is they merge and create a bigger black hole.

Then she slides off of me and curls up on her side. I take a deep breath and listen to the bass line of the hip-hop music vibrating through the ceiling. It's the same four notes over and over again. When Angie's breathing falls to a steady rhythm, I slip out of bed and go to the closet.

There are four T-shirts, seven pairs of underwear, five pairs of socks, and two pairs of pants, not including the pair on my desk. Two of the T-shirts were given to her by her old boyfriend, Doug. In addition to playing rugby, he's a "community activist" who splits his time between New York City and Albany, stopping in Binghamton whenever he gets a chance, which seems to be quite a bit.

Two of the shirts are gray with a large fist in the center and the words BLACK LIVES MATTER. This almost makes me laugh out loud because—well, I'm black. Doug's white. Angie's Latina. Only in America, right? Actually, that's no joke. If you ask Angie, she will explain that "Latino" means a *U.S.-born Hispanic*.

That's her definition, anyway. And definitions matter. I appreciate that.

For the most recent T-shirt, Angie cancelled out on an art opening with me to attend a "speak-out" on the SUNY campus. The next morning I went over to her place for breakfast, and she showed me the T-shirt. I reminded her it was the second T-shirt Doug had given her in the last six weeks.

And, yeah, I ain't soundin' Black!

She shrugged and I asked her if she was sure she felt resolved about how that relationship ended. And I added, do you miss big white Doug?

She told me not to call him that and said of course she's resolved about how the relationship ended but that Doug happens to be involved in some very interesting work and is quite knowledgeable about some crucial issues. I told her I didn't think T-shirts were that crucial, and she said, Rich, you don't date a man for two years and then let him just drop off the earth. I said I wasn't asking that he drop off the earth, just that he live on his part of it without bumping into us so much. And I told her that when it comes to the "crucial issue" of Black Lives—mine matters, yes.

She hunched up and gave me that look where her cheeks and jaw get tense and her eyes go blank. Then she said, Rich, you don't own me.

* * *

Looking down at the big gray fists, I roll both the T-shirts into a tight ball and throw them against the back wall of the closet. There's a soft thud and I make a mental note to ask Angie if big white Doug has ever been stopped by the police for driving in the wrong neighborhood.

Then I go to the window and lean against my desk. I feel like smoking or drinking or punching the wall. But I just stand there in the dark, looking out at the Golden Waffle's lot, where two squad cars are parked next to each other, facing opposite directions so the drivers can talk. The street is quiet and behind the squad cars the sky is a strange blue-gray, like the color of smoke. It occurs to me then: Angie and I need to move forward, take the next step in our relationship. Yes, I feel quite sure, the next step needs to happen.

But in the morning I wake up with anxiety about the exhibit that's supposed to be installed next week and decide I'm too distracted to talk to Angie about us living together. Because I'm being sort of quiet, she asks me what's wrong, and I start to explain that we're doing the history of women's fashion from the Civil War to the present and that we're doing it mixed media: photographs, paintings, film, wax figures, live models. It's a lot to organize.

Angie agrees and gives me a passionate kiss, then says this morning she'll make the coffee.

In the shower I begin to think again about Doug and the T-shirts and how he and Angie dated for two whole years, and my skin and muscles get hard. My feeling of urgency embarrasses me, but over the sound of the running water, I yell Angie, I love you.

When she doesn't answer, I yell it a couple more times until finally she pokes her head around the shower curtain and smiles. I stop lathering myself when I see her glance at my groin. Then our eyes meet and she mouths the words I love you too, and in an instant she's gone.

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Later that evening we meet for dinner at the Lost Dog Café and split a carafe of wine while listening to a quartet play smooth jazz. The guitarist, a skinny white guy, wears sunglasses and a black fedora like the ones gangsters wore in the 1920s. When I bring up the subject of our living together, at first Angie's tone is cool and detached, business-like. But then she warms up and says it's an exciting step, and finally we both smile and make a corny toast about the power of love. I suggest we find something right away, and Angie says how about a place near the university, where the "kids" live.

The following Saturday we sign a lease for a two-bedroom on Murray Street, and the landlord agrees to take \$150 off the security deposit if we clean it ourselves. So Sunday morning I squash roaches in the kitchen while Angie scrubs the bathroom floor. Around 2:00 I go out for submarine sandwiches, and we eat on the floor in the living room, laughing and exchanging stories about crazy roommates we had in college. Angie asks me if I can take Monday or Tuesday off of work so we can be finished by Wednesday. I know that I shouldn't, but I feel happy and carefree and say OK, I'll try.

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Wednesday rolls around and, sure enough, the place is all set up. Angie has put plants in the alcove, and there are bowls of flowers in both the kitchen and living room. I have my African masks on the wall above the couch and my James Baldwin poster in the front hallway. But I can't find anyplace to put my collection of Mesopotamian copper and bronze spearheads. Angie suggests hanging them in the extra bedroom and says we should also bring over the sleeper-sofa from my old place. I give her a quick look and ask her why we need that crummy old thing. She rolls her eyes and says, Richie, not for us. For guests. I nod and say yeah, of course.

At dinner we sit in the living room at opposite ends of a long, mahogany table that we bought in a thrift shop on Vestal Parkway. Angie wears a see-through blouse and has her long, dark hair pinned up. The chicken she has fixed is delicious. Exquisite, I say, exquisite. Then she leans back in her chair with her glass of wine in her hand and says, now this is more like it. I say, yeah, and this is the quickest, most dramatic move I've ever made in my whole life.

She gets up from her chair and starts to clear the table, and the way she looks at the leftover chicken tells me I've said something I shouldn't have.

After we finish the dishes, I put on a John Coltrane album and try to coax her to the couch, but she pushes me away and says she has reading to do. Then her cell phone rings. It's Doug.

She tells him he's the first one to call her at the new apartment, then takes the phone into the bedroom. They talk for twenty minutes, and when Angie finally comes out, she says she's tired and is going to bed. I've been standing in the alcove trying to tell which plants need water. When I wave to her without saying anything, she gives me a concerned look and says that I shouldn't stay up too late.

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After Angie closes the bedroom door, I drive over to the old neighborhood, where I pull into the Golden Waffle's parking lot and sit in the car, smoking cigarettes and listening to the radio. Then I go to a bodega and buy a six-pack of beer, which I also drink in the car. Then, feeling a good, strong buzz, I drive back over to the Golden Waffle and eat. After that I'm wiped out and doze for an hour in the car.

When I get back home, it's after two and Angie's sound asleep. I slip into bed and turn on my side so that I'm facing the wall. Angie presses her body close to mine and begins to whisper things I can't understand. It takes me a minute to realize she's talking in her sleep—in Spanish. Her skin is warm and a little damp, and I can feel her breasts pressing against my back, but I can't understand a single word she's saying.

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The next morning I wake up late and Angie's already gone. There's a note on the kitchen table that says she won't be home for dinner. She's meeting Doug. I grab a handful of vitamin C's and take a gulp of juice, then spot a roach crawling out of the sink and squash it against the counter with the palm of my hand. There's no time for a shower, so I leave the house smelling like last night's beer and cigarettes.

All day long there's a hammering in my head and a feeling of fog all around me. Other people's words serve as a background for my thoughts, and I can't stop thinking about Angie and Doug. Jenny Silver, this small, pretty, Jewish girl from Manhattan who works in permanent exhibit research, says that I look tired and asks if I want her to bring me something in for lunch. I tell her to mind her own business, that I feel fine. Then I say I'm sorry several times and that I appreciate her concern. I'm just uptight about this current exhibit on the history of women's fashion. She says, oh.

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After work I stop for pizza and a beer and make sure I don't get home until well after nine. When I open the door, Angie's in the alcove watering the plants. The apartment smells like cheese quesadillas.

I take a deep breath and ask Angie if she went out for dinner. Without turning around, she says no, that she and Doug came back here. He wanted to see the place. I ask her if he liked it, then toss my jacket on the couch and listen to the soft hiss of the plant spray. Angie pauses, then says, yeah, he liked it.

I go into the bedroom and spot a watch on the night table but decide not to say anything right away. Angie calls from the living room and asks me if I've eaten. She says there's half a quesadilla left. I tell her no thanks, then sit on the edge of the bed and pick up the watch. It's heavier than it looks and has

two sets of digital numbers on the face and three buttons on the side. The bottom set of numbers are military time and read 21:42. The two small dots blink on and off.

Angie appears in the doorway while I'm still sitting on the edge of the bed and says, oh, Doug forgot his watch. She startles me but I don't look up. Instead I press the button that turns the top set of figures into a stopwatch and concentrate on the numbers in the far right column. They race by, marking hundredths of a second.

When Angie starts to turn away, I get off the bed and grab her wrist. She twists her arm and says *que demonios*, which means "what the hell?" in Spanish.

I say, Doug's watch isn't on his wrist, is it?

She says, Richie, you're jumping to conclusions.

I turn around and say, maybe, but we'll see. Then I begin to pull the blankets off the bed and Angie starts to cry.

She asks me what I'm doing, and I tell her I'm going to smell the sheets. She cries harder. I grab again at the blankets. One of the pillows knocks the clock-radio off the night table. It cracks.

She yells, Rich, stop, and I freeze, holding the corner of the top sheet in the palm of my hand. I focus on the wall in front of me and take a deep breath, then say, Angie, I'm sorry. I want to trust you. Really, I do. It's just not easy for me. I'm a man—a black man—who feels many things.

She says, Richie, don't give me that crap. Everybody feels a lot of things. I could run away with Doug or move to outer space, and to you it would mean the same thing. She pauses, then says go ahead and sniff the goddamn sheets.

I kneel down and press my face hard against the mattress and inhale deeply. Then I hold perfectly still. The sheets feel worn and warm and damp against my cheek.

Angie sits down on the corner of the bed and the mattress sags. I look up at her and see that she's on the verge of starting to cry again. Her lip quivers. The room is quiet.

She tells me not to bother asking her why she did it because she doesn't know. She says the real world isn't like an exhibit in a museum, it's loose little thoughts and pleasures and impressions, and the problem is how to connect one thing with another. She says again that it's not like a museum, so I'd better not ask her to put it all together right on the spot. She doesn't know what Doug means to her, and yes, she does love me.

I'm still kneeling on the floor at the side of bed. I look at the cracked clock-radio and crumpled pillow and then back up at Angie. She's staring straight ahead. Her eyes are open wide. There's a tugging at the back of my throat, and I swallow hard to squelch the tears. Then I pull my legs out from under me and try following her line: accusations will not help, asking questions will not help, trying to make a connection between one thing and another will not help.

I get back on my knees and turn to look at Angie. Her eyes are open even wider. She extends a hand, and I take it, and she squeezes tightly. I want to say something deep and insightful—about museums and black holes and identities and love—but very slowly Angie closes her eyelids, and the gesture makes me think of a curtain being drawn at the end of a scene in a play.

THE END