

Pancake House

1950 words

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It showed a big snag on I-95 at Pompano Beach so Ed took the turnpike instead and dealt with the tolls.

It was an hour and 10 from Lauderdale to West Palm, and then you had to find her place.

Ed was going to leave it alone, the new boyfriend maybe stalking her--after all, she made her own bed and what will be will be--but he couldn't quite with a clear conscience.

What you had now unfortunately--now that you were committed--was a bit of a race against time. When the new idiot asked Ed this afternoon if he knew where Kaitlyn went to, Ed told him. Not specifically, but what he threw the guy was *the motel scene in West Palm*.

Ed didn't care for Kaitlyn, and liked her even less since they split up. She'd called him, first time in a year, only because she was nervous about this new guy. There'd been an incident she said, nobody got hurt but the police came. Ed reluctantly flew down and spoke to

the guy, decided that even though the guy was a loser he didn't seem dangerous.

That seemed to be that, and Ed stopped for a drink on the way to the airport but started thinking maybe not.

Kaitlyn said he'd been in Afghanistan, now was a security consultant. A bit of a red flag when Ed dropped in on him on a Wednesday at 3 and the guy's lounging around in basketball shorts in his cheesy apartment in Coconut Creek. The guy gave an explanation that seemed okay.

Still, you put it together--better get her out of there.

Ed decided don't alert her, that might be worse, just show up.

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The Royal Coach Motor Inn had seen better days, it reminded Ed of those places they'd stop on vacations when he was a kid, big piece of property, spread out, the standard pool in front by the office except this one had been paved over.

He looped around the parking lot and gave it the once-over. She'd said she ditched her car, had left it in long term parking in Laurderdale and rented one to be

on the safe side. Too hard to figure that out now so you had to phone her.

She answered, said she wasn't home quite yet, was on her way back from work, there'd been a cocktail thing after that kept her late. And what was the reason for his call, I thought you were back in Yonkers by now?

Ed said he was going to drive it instead, but forget that, just get here and we'll go into it.

Kaitlyn said well he didn't have to be rude. She still worked down in Hacienda Village, was commuting, but he gave her credit, she did show up pretty quick.

Ed said, 'So listen. Full transparency, this is on me. I kinda let it slip to the clown. Where you were. I mean the vicinity.'

'Scuse me? . . . Gary?' she said.

'Yeah. One of those where I trusted my instincts. That you were bent out of shape irrationally. I rethought it after. My bad.'

Kaitlyn gave it the expected *I don't even know what to say. I'm sorry I ever had anything to do with you and now look where we're at. Adding the What a moron I was. Truly unbelievable.*

'Yep, your fault,' Ed said.

And Kaitlyn raised her fist and came toward him and for a sec Ed thought Jesus she's really going to hit me, and she did but it got softened into a bump on the arm.

'What you're dancing around, all your excuses,' she said, 'we need to leave, don't we.'

'Probably not critical, this minute,' Ed said, 'but be a good idea.'

He helped pack her up and he said Jupiter should work for now. It was a half hour north, she followed him, and they checked into a Holiday Inn Express.

Ed was debating one or two rooms and Kaitlyn said don't be ridiculous, last she checked they *were* still married.

Ed wasn't worried about saving money with the one or two rooms, he wanted the privacy. But Kaitlyn being fragile currently, and him part of the cause, you better leave it alone.

He did suggest getting something to eat, couldn't see laying around on the bed, even though there were two, and flipping channels the rest of the night.

She said she wasn't hungry but she could sure use some air--whatever that meant, and they found a 24-hour diner and settled in, big comfy booth.

After a little while Kaitlyn said, 'I appreciate it, I really do. You coming down and all. Even though you're a screw-up.'

At this point Ed was more, 'Does your friend Gary carry a gun? Routinely?'

'Yes I've seen it, a small one,' she said. 'A shoulder holster. Do you think things would have been different if we'd had a baby?'

'Ah God *damn*,' Ed said. 'We went through this so many times.'

'I know. My sister, they're better off now she says. That's all.'

Ed said, 'If you moved back to New York, could this guy still find you?'

'I'm sure, I mean I had someone from second grade who I didn't even remember find me on Facebook.'

Ed had a few of those as well. 'Yeah that's a dumb question. How about, would he *care* enough to?'

'I can't read him. I thought I could but I can't.'

She'd mentioned he came back early from over there with not a PTSD deal exactly but *some* fallout. It wasn't rational but Ed was wondering now could the prick have like a metal plate in his head or some shit.

He said, 'A split personality, you're saying?'

‘I don’t know. Hot and cold. I suppose.’ She said, ‘Babe what’s the bottom line do you think.’

‘*Don’t* call me that. I thought I made it clear when you played that card on me to come down.’

‘Thanks a lot,’ she said, and she started crying and Ed felt bad.

‘Bottom line what?’ he said.

‘I can’t stay here forever. Even from West Palm it was an hour and a half to work with traffic.’

‘That’s why I brought it up, you moving period. Forget the job. You got some cash, that’s why we sold the apartment.’

‘Yes well that lump sum doesn’t go very far in New York. *You* know that.’

‘So move to friggen . . . Fort Wayne, Indiana. Even better . . . Then I can relax.’

Kaitlyn got up and moved to his side of the booth and started massaging his shoulders. She said, ‘It’s nice of you to tell me that.’

‘Well what would *you* be feeling? Something’s in the way, you can’t just flick it off like a mosquito. I’m mean yeah, you can take care of the problem--get creative, there’s this guy at work and so forth--and then we end up on 20/20.’

Meanwhile the shoulder rub was feeling decent and he told her that.

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They slept in and she said she was calling in sick. She had her back to him and his arm was draped over her like the old days. ‘How are you feeling?’ she said. ‘Any overnight regrets?’

‘Plenty,’ he said.

‘You can tell me your secrets,’ she said. ‘I have a few too.’

‘Not a *secret*, a perfectly nice woman in White Plains.’

‘Is she pretty?’

‘Okay let’s don’t play that game again. We are so past that shit.’

‘I’m just asking. Why do you do this Ed?’

‘I have to admit,’ he said, ‘Now you got me curious about *your* secrets. You were always a pretty straight shooter, laid it on the table.’

‘Not curious enough to ask though.’

‘Nah.’

She turned his direction. ‘Hmm. Well. So . . . since it won’t mean anything to you anyway . . . I fucked Blake once.’

‘Wait. The guy down the hall?’

‘Unh-huh. Remember we had them for dinner that time? That’s when you launched into your travelogue, your backpack through Europe adventures from 1995.’

‘1998. I thought everyone enjoyed that. They pitched in, asked questions.’

‘You are so delusional. Y’ever hear of people being polite?’

‘Well who was the wife? I’m drawing a blank.’

‘Girlfriend. Her name was Jerilyn. She was quiet. She was an illustrator.’

Ed was pretty dang certain Blake’s wife or girlfriend wasn’t that gal Meghan who he *himself* fucked that one time. But good to have it clear.

Kaitlyn was on the road and Ed was sleeping in the office most nights by then. He stopped by to pick up a few things and Meghan was standing there pretty still in the hall. No big deal.

‘Any others?’ Ed said.

‘You just said you weren’t curious enough to ask.’

‘I know.’

‘Okay. This one’s a little harder. Before I met Greg I kind of had a girlfriend. In Harbordale.’

‘Oh,’ Ed said. ‘Nice there,’ is what popped out.

What he wanted to say, *so she couldn't help you?*
You had to drag me into this mess?

'You're not jealous,' she said. 'You never were a sympathetic person.'

Fact was he *was* a little jealous hearing the first thing, not sure how he felt about the lesbo one, probably a little jealous there too, plus intrigued. He'd tried to push her that direction a couple times, switch things around, when they were starting off, back in the place on East 23rd Street. Some wild parties for sure. She rejected the idea like it was poison.

'Well you've changed,' he said, 'we all do.'

They got up and showered and were driving to the pancake house on Indiantown Road.

Kaitlyn said, 'What about your guy at work that was relevant?'

'Wouldn't apply,' Ed said, 'when push comes to shove. This guy's an apprentice electrician. He got me some mace once. Supposedly Turkish military grade.'

'I don't mean to laugh, it sounds like an oxymoron. You think of coffee.'

'So do I but look up top militaries, they're in the discussion,' he said. 'I never took it to the next level with

this guy, but my strong suspicion is he'd rough someone up for the right price.'

'So why wouldn't it apply?' she said.

'Jesus.'

'I just want a normal life Ed. I'm happy to come back to New York with you, but you have to promise me we'll try to have a baby.'

And there you had it. She hasn't changed a bit. Still directing traffic, attaching conditions.

Ed said, 'Or the alternate, sticking around like Gary doesn't exist?'

'I don't know,' she said. 'What would you think of getting your friend to at least speak to him?'

Ed thought about that one. 'You mean not cross any line? Just a friendly conversation?'

'I'm not sure *what* to think,' she said.

Ed said, 'How about this then? . . . I go home, talk to my guy, he comes down takes care of it, what you're saying--or knows someone down here already, works it . . . Lay low for a week, ten days and you should be good. Everyone moves on.'

She was processing it.

She said, 'Babe, I'm more grateful than you know.'

Ed said not a problem, and if she didn't mind he was gonna jump on 95 after breakfast.

Kaitlyn said she hadn't been this hungry in weeks, and was going with one of the combo specials.

Somewhere in North Carolina Ed decided the guy at work wasn't a great idea. He figured he could do it himself, confront the a-hole again. In person would be better, he could pull out the look, which he didn't use last time. Some of that Turkish mace to back it up.

Problem with all that of course, the shoulder holster business.

So better handle it on the phone, that might work. Safer at least.

Ed was thinking that's twice now he tried to help her, what more did she expect.