

Up and Back

Ken's dad Arthur finished chewing a spoonful of Shredded Wheat. "You mean *Salvador* Dali, the artist?" he said.

"I have no idea," Ken said. "It just says 'Dahli-like.' Da h l i."

"Okay, read me the whole sentence," Arthur said.

"A closeted lesbian travels to Thailand with her Dahli-like Australian travel companion."

"And that's it?"

"No. 'There she finds a new purpose and upon her return she helps bring about a fresh aroma to her hometown.'"

"Sheez . . . Well they could mean the Dalai Lama, if we're talking Buddhism, but that's spelled differently too . . . What's this for again?"

Ken was home for spring break, sitting there in his pj's. "Creative Writing 10. I never should have taken it."

Arthur was thinking *this is insane*, but he said, "Writing courses are fun. I took a couple at UCLA . . . What else they having you do in there?"

“It’s a lot of pressure. We have to write a short story a week. The whole class starts with the same topic.”

“That’s fair enough . . . How many so far?”

“Five. My biggest problem, I can never end them very good.”

“Now let’s don’t jump the gun, you’re probably ending them fine,”

Arthur said. “What were the topics?”

“The first one,” Ken said, “it was a convict hides out in an animal rescue place.”

You’re kidding. “Well okay . . . so how’d you work it?”

“I had the guy be a dog trainer, before he went to jail. So he gravitates toward that kind of situation.”

“Sounds pretty good . . . How’d he escape though?”

“Not sure. I start it with him already on the loose. It ends with him getting attacked and partially eaten by three pit bulls at the rescue place.”

Arthur said, “That’s certainly . . . one way to end it . . . What’d you get on that one?”

“She gave me a C. She said I got out-of-proportion dramatic, that it should have been more what was in his head.”

“I see . . . How bout the second one?”

“That was, let’s see, the bag lady? No, that came after. It was . . . someone thinks they’re being cheated on so they hide under a tarp in the car.”

Arthur considered it. “An SUV? Or what?”

Ken said, “Yeah, even an SUV seemed shaky. I put the husband in the trunk.”

“Good, much better. What happens?”

“So the wife, she goes local a couple times, nothing suspicious. Then on the weekend she drives a straight shot to Palm Springs. It’s hot, and my guy’s afraid he’s going to die in there. But the trunk’s got one of those safety release things? . . . He’s able to get out when she’s stopped in traffic, but then he gets run over by a big rig.”

“Wow, both characters getting smoked so far . . . Or did the first story guy make it?”

“No, no, he dies bad.”

“ . . . Fine, so what’d she give you?”

“Another C. She said I needed it clear whether the wife was cheating on the husband or not.”

Arthur got up and refilled his coffee cup. “You say the next one,” he said, thinking *fuck this shit*, “there was a bag lady?”

“Yeah, I put one in,” Ken said. “It was something like, a policeman reinvents himself in a homeless encampment at Christmas.”

“She make these topics . . . your teacher? . . . Or the class does?”

“Ms. Gruenwald, yeah . . . what I did, there was a homeless woman the cop feels sorry for? So he gives her a gun to protect herself. That he once got off a suspect and kept.”

“Oh,” Arthur said.

“Then on Christmas Eve she gets boozed up, she guns down a few of the homeless.”

“ . . . That’s it?”

“Then they bulldoze the homeless encampment. Which the cop is happy about, since he hated looking at it on his patrol.”

“Unh . . . So you got another C?”

“Nah, a D on that one. She said we have too much gun violence, that literature should be an oasis from it.”

Arthur thinking, *God DAMN It.*

“You want to hear the last two?” Ken said. “Or forget those.”

Arthur said that would be fine.

Ken said, “The fourth one, I thought that was my best effort. You had a guy who runs into a kid he hadn’t seen since first grade. They’re both working at the fair now.”

“All right. What happens?”

“Well, the other kid, it turns out beat him up one day at recess. Which the first guy remembers all these years . . . So he waits until the fair is over, gets his paycheck, and then kills that guy.”

“Holy smokes,” Arthur said. “And she okay with that? . . . You just said she lectured you about violence.”

“*Gun* violence. In this one my character baseball-bats the dude. She was fine with that, but she hammered me for not following the assignment. She gave me an F, with a chance to re-write it. Which I haven’t done yet.”

“For crying out loud . . . What was it *supposed* to be?”

“It was like, someone runs into a person they knew from a past life, paranormal shit. But now they’re a male where they used to be female? . . . Along those lines.”

Arthur cringed. “She . . . pretty normal there . . . this . . . Miss Greenwald?”

“Ms. Gruenwald? Yeah, she’s cool. She just grades tough.”

“Unh-huh . . . There’s one more, you say?”

“Yeah,” Ken said. “It was someone watches a *House Hunters* that’s in Iceland, and the next day moves there to reinvent themselves.”

“Not sure I need to know,” Arthur said, “but how’d you handle that one?”

“All’s I did, I took the boyfriend in the *House Hunters* couple, and I continue his life. Meaning he dumps the girlfriend right away and then . . . hooks up with . . . these beautiful Icelandic women.”

“How does it end then?”

“That’s it.”

“Ah.”

“She gave me an A. I guess I have a little momentum now.”

Arthur finished his coffee, said he was going to do a little yard work now that the sun was coming out, and told Ken thanks for running all that by him, it was interesting.

+++

The college was a three-and-a-half hour trip, not the greatest scenery, most of it Highway 5. The town itself wasn't bad though, old-fashioned wide streets that teed into a main drag that took you to the center of campus.

It was mid-afternoon. Arthur picked up a map in the student union, found the English building, and the office on the third floor, and tapped on the little window.

A young gal opened the door, who didn't look like a professor. “You're not Ms. Gruenwald, I take it,” Arthur said.

“I'm Melanie,” the girl smiled. “Her TA. She has class until four, but can I help you?”

Arthur said, “Well . . .”

“Are you a parent?” Melanie said. “It’s fine if you are.”

Arthur nodded. “Here’s the deal,” he said. “I’m not . . . checking up on her, exactly . . . I just thought I should meet her.”

“By all means. We’re glad you came. The staff lounge is free, if you’d like to wait?” Arthur felt a little beat up from the drive and said he wouldn’t mind, and Melanie found him a can of Pepsi that hit the spot, and there was a couch and next thing he had his shoes off and his feet up and was out cold.

An hour later he was vaguely aware of a figure standing there saying something and he sat up at attention. “You caught me not at my best,” he said. “If you’re the professor.”

“I am,” Ms. Gruenwald said. “My name’s Hannah.” She had an attractive face but was overweight, and as she extended her hand Arthur couldn’t help notice the substantial cleavage that was spilling forward.

“Art Bogenreif,” he said, standing. “Okay . . . getting right down to business . . . My son’s class, Ken . . . I don’t think you know what you’re doing.”

“Well . . . I appreciate your candor,” Hannah said.
“That means a lot.”

“Jesus Christ,” Arthur said.

“And I’d love to hear more of your take?
Unfortunately I have to be somewhere. But I can meet
you for coffee in the morning.”

“Where do you have to be? That’s the last thing I
wanted to do, stay over . . . I did it once, when Ken was a
freshman, I said never again. The Motel 6. There was an
onion smell that developed in the middle of the night,
mixed with something sweet.”

“My boyfriend,” she said. “Dinner and a spin class . .
. Have you tried any of our airbnbs? I’m told they can be
quite lovely, and reasonable.”

Arthur thought about it and said fine, he’d meet her
for coffee in the student food court at nine, and they
said goodbye and he got back in the car looking for a
better motel. He wondered how you could accomplish
anything in a spin class when you just ate.

+++

“That figures, that you’d be twenty minutes late,”
Arthur said.

“I apologize,” Hannah said. “I had to answer an email.”

“Which isn’t the worst thing,” he said. “Gave me a chance to observe the student population . . . Lots of devices, not many books.”

“There aren’t,” she said. “So . . . we’re not entirely pleased with the direction of the writing course.”

“Yeah, but shifting gears for a second . . . and please shut me down if I’m out of line . . .”

“Don’t be silly. I’m a fan of full disclosure, Mr. Bogenreif.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” Arthur said. “Well, yesterday in the office, you were showing a lot of skin. Same thing now . . . I mean I don’t know, that okay for a teacher? For starters?”

Hannah’s eyes were wide. “My goodness,” she said.

“But back to the other thing . . . Why not give them all B’s if they at least turn in the story? Regardless what you think they should or should not contain? . . . And what email did you have to answer that was so important?”

“You sound frustrated.”

“How ‘bout let’s not worry about *me*.”

“I’m guessing you endured another night at the Motel 6. Which explains part of your anger.”

“Part?”

“Did you at least spend time with your son?”

“No, I don’t want him knowing I’m here . . . Wadda you mean *part*?”

“I *mean*,” Hannah said, “you’re fighting something.”

“And channeling it at you . . . what a bunch of baloney.”

Hannah stood and pushed in her chair. “We’re going to need to conclude, I’m afraid . . . Have you ever tried writing fiction?”

“I have,” Arthur said. “It’s not that simple.”

“Exactly . . . Before I go, is there anything else you don’t like about me? *Art*?”

Arthur thought it over. “Crazy thing, I could grow to like you.”

“Really . . . You don’t think I need to lose weight? Or something?”

“You said it, I didn’t,” Arthur said.

www.TedGrossStories.com