

Effort

2200 words

When Ralph signed up for this internet dating thing, he didn't expect to be sitting across the table from a three-hundred-pounder in Pocatello, Idaho, but that's what was happening.

Virginia picked up a fry and told him she was glad he'd come out. "It must have taken you, what, nine-and-a-half, ten hours?" she said.

"Thirteen," Ralph said. "Though I could have cut off forty-five minutes apparently, heading north out of Wells, risking my life on an old two-lane highway."

Virginia said, "Yes, 93, that would put you in Twin, and then Poky the back way. That's how everyone comes . . . still, thirteen, that seems long."

"Yeah, well, I stopped a bunch of times, what can I say."

"Did you enjoy any of the stops?"

"Jesus. I guess . . . as much as you can, considering there wasn't a whole lot to work with."

"Which ones?"

"Criminy . . . Well, there was this one Wendy's on I-15 . . . Not just the folks eating in the place but the kids

behind the counter, all of ‘em were super-friendly . . . You come back out in the parking lot and you think you’re in a Disney technicolor movie, everything’s so clean and fresh, the lush farmland and snowcaps right there.”

“That’s LDS,” Virginia said.

“Huh?”

“Mormons. I’m one of them, supposed to be. I got out of it, thank God.”

Ralph finished his club sandwich and wiped his fingers. “Okay let me ask you something -- that frankly -- would more than piss a lot of guys off in this situation . . . Why the different picture?”

Virginia looked out the window onto Center Street. “I know. I’m not very attractive. That’s fine.”

“That’s beside the point,” Ralph said, not meaning to put it exactly that way, but too bad. “We’re talking eight hundred miles here.”

“You’re saying you were entirely misled? I thought we had a very warm and candid conversation on the phone.”

“I mean Holy Mackerel . . . whose photo was that, anyway?”

“I have no idea, someone off the internet, who I felt could represent me nicely.”

“Well that’s just great,” Ralph said.

“Are you being sarcastic?”

It was a simple old-fashioned restaurant, and there wasn’t all that much room in the booth. Ralph remembered an incident one time at a diner in Yonkers, New York, where a heavy woman couldn’t get out of the booth after she finished her meal, and the fire department had to come and un-bolt the table.

Virginia said, “Did you really play minor league baseball?”

“You know what? Let’s don’t turn this around.”

“What was it, A-ball, rookie ball, double A . . . what?”

“Okay, it was semi-pro.”

“Cause my brother-in-law Tim played, in the Brewers’ system, and my ex and I, we used to drive down to Spring Training.”

“Good for you.”

“And Tim, and all of them -- they had a certain look, a way about ‘em, that I’m not seeing in you.”

Ralph said, “What happened to your ex?”

Virginia said, “Oh boy, what didn’t happen . . . if you’d like to . . . have dinner later, or something . . . I’ll get into it.”

Ralph was distracted now, thinking, could he salvage the trip somehow, maybe drive to Jackson Hole, or circle back through Boise, see what that was about. “Come again?” he said.

“You look like your picture,” she said, “which I do appreciate.”

“Well it’s been real,” Ralph said, picking up the check.

“Where are you staying? . . . Or are you.”

“Down the street, at the mom and pop place.” Which he had last night, but he couldn’t take it so he moved this morning to the Super 8 that was up the hill off the interstate.

Virginia got in her car, which wasn’t all that easy, Ralph noted, and before she closed the door she said, “Thank you for lunch. And I’m sorry if I disappointed you.”

Ralph didn’t say anything, he just gave her a long look and let it ride.

He felt marginally better after a swim and a hot tub and a nap, and he asked the young guy working the front desk of the Super 8 if there was a joint where someone like him might go to socialize.

The guy said there weren't many options, but to try a place in Chubbuck that had karaoke.

This dame had been a piece of work. But he had only himself to blame. He'd listened to Paula, who gave haircuts out of her house, saying that her brother in Florida found an online match after his girlfriend dumped him, and they were going on three years.

Ralph had been an idiot for not at least keeping it local, which would have minimized the collateral damage. You meet up with a three-hundred pounder in, say Sacramento, it's not the end of the world, maybe you stop off at a Rivercats game on the way home. But letting yourself get duped in Idaho, that was something else again.

Yeah, he might have stretched the truth here and there on his internet match profile -- the baseball technically wasn't even semi-pro, it had been a Thursday night league -- but who didn't?

Deducting half your body weight off your photo though, come on.

For an Idaho bar, there was a lot less country music being performed by the karaoke competitors than he would have thought. It was mostly contemporary pop tunes with an oldie here and there. Occasionally a performer would send one out to someone, either in the audience or somewhere else.

Ralph's favorite competitor was a tall red-haired woman named Dawn. She was slightly flat the whole way through, but she was having fun up there on the little stage and moved nicely to the beat.

Ralph didn't see any guy waiting for Dawn when she came back to the bar, so he figured why not, and went over and told her she was entertaining.

"Ooh," Dawn said, and smiled. "That must mean the singing part wasn't that great then."

"I'm not sure about that," Ralph said.

"Fair enough . . . So how's the quality tonight, so far, in your experience?"

"I don't have any experience. I normally try to avoid karaoke."

"I get it," Dawn said. "You're here on business, just passing through, or what?"

"Yeah, killing time. I made an error of judgment, which is costing me now."

“Mystery man,” Dawn said.

“You don’t want to know.”

“No? . . . So what do you do?”

“That I took a week off from to be here? Plumbing and heating.”

“Oh,” Dawn said. “Well . . . I have a toilet that’s running, and a shower that leaks. Does that qualify?”

“Very funny.”

“Do you . . . suppose you could take a look?”

“Tonight?”

“Sure, why not?”

Ralph had a hunch she really did want him to check out the repairs, and probably nothing more, though she was tough to read. Still, he was wide awake from his nap, and couldn’t think of anywhere in particular he needed to be.

Dawn said, “I’ll put on some tea.”

The house was a 1950’s style brick ranch on a wide street near the college campus. The place had some charm but it was beat up. Ralph said, “Can I sit down for a few minutes? Or do you want me to get started?”

“Please,” Dawn said, pulling out a kitchen chair. A teenage kid appeared and opened the refrigerator.

“Oh hi honey,” Dawn said. “Andy, this is -- I’m sorry, what was your name again?”

“It’s not important,” Ralph said.

“Mom, what happened to the chocolate milk?” Andy said.

“I got some tools in the trunk,” Ralph said. “Would you have a flashlight?”

“I’ll see,” Dawn said.

“You’re a repairman?” Andy said.

“I’m not supposed to be. I’m on vacation, but your mom said things were leaking.”

It wasn’t the right way to do it, but for now, Ralph bent the float rod downwards just a bit, which lowered the water level in the tank and stopped it from running. The shower needed a new hot water seat, which would have to be picked up.

“That’s okay then,” Dawn said. “I at least know what it is now.”

“I’ll come back tomorrow and take care of it,” Ralph said.

“Really? You would?”

“I’m not thrilled to be, but I have my pride, once I start a job.”

Andy was eating a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. “So what happened?” he said, “You and my mom hooked up, but then she jammed you and made you work?”

“Andy . . . !”

“No, that’s a reasonable question,” Ralph said. “Your mom and I barely know each other though, so it wasn’t like that.”

Andy laughed and Dawn glared at him.

“So what time’s good in the morning,” Ralph said.

“Okay let’s see, it’s Saturday, I’m on at six, home at three.”

“She’s a waitress,” Andy said.

“Honey, can you let him in? Say around ten?”

“Nah, don’t worry about it, I’ll wait until you’re off.”

“It’s okay,” Andy said.

They’d renovated the rooms at the Super 8 and Ralph slept the best he had in a while, barely moving a muscle until the sun woke him up. Out the window you could see the freeway, but beyond that the Bannock Mountains and the Portneuf Valley stretching what felt like a hundred miles.

Yesterday had been a weird one for sure, starting with Virginia, and nothing was going to happen with Dawn, but he felt good doing the right thing and taking care of her leaks.

Andy opened the door for him, though it took a while. Ralph said, “Too early. I knew that was going happen.”

Andy didn’t say anything and Ralph could hear him clanging around in the kitchen as he took care of the shower, and then fixed the toilet the right way.

“Tell your mom I put a new valve in the tank. Better technology, no need to mess around with float balls anymore.”

“Okay, I’ll tell her,” Andy said.

Ralph had his tools packed up and was at the door. This was a good kid. It was wrong to ask, but he did anyway. “So what happened to your dad, and stuff?”

“He lives in St. Louis,” Andy said. “He got remarried.”

Ralph regretted asking the question.

“It’s okay,” Andy said. “Do you have any kids?”

“Me? No I don’t.”

“You have a California license plate.”

“Yeah. I live in Santa Rosa.”

“My mom brings home a lot of guys,” Andy said.

Ralph put his tool bag down and tried to come up something to say. Wanting to tell the kid, that’s got to be a shit deal, but try not to blame your mom. What he said was, “You play any sports?”

“Well, wrestling just ended. I wasn’t very good and I’m not going to do it again. Baseball’s starting up, I’m on JV’s.”

“What do you play?”

“Third. Sometimes left.”

“That’s good,” Ralph said. “There any games yet?”

Andy checked his phone. “The first one . . . we got Minico, the 24th, it looks like. At home.”

“That’s what . . . two weeks from Thursday?”

“Something like that.”

Ralph took a minute.

“Does it bother you when people watch? I had trouble with that for a while, when I played.”

“What people? You mean my mom?”

“I was thinking . . . maybe me,” Ralph said.

“Wow,” Andy said. “You’ll still be on vacation then?”

“There’s a chance,” Ralph said.

He took a long walk through downtown and a couple miles up Yellowstone which gave him some room to think.

When he got back to the hotel he asked the young guy at the desk if there was a long term discount and the guy said there was a 30-day rate, and Ralph said he'd take it.

That night he called his boss at home, telling him he was going to need more time off. The boss asked how much more, and Ralph said he wasn't sure, and the boss said fine, take an extra week, but if that doesn't work, find another job.

Ralph hung up and stretched out and began flipping channels. He had to admit, they put out a nice spread in the morning in the lobby, you could even make your own waffles, and he was already looking forward to it.

Virginia said, "This is so much fun."

"I'm surprised you wanted to sit behind the plate though," Ralph said.

"What do you mean?" she said. "That's the only place. You can pick up the pitches."

"I always like it down the line. I don't like looking through the screen."

“Is that your friend? Forty-four?”

“It is . . . Pretty amazing thing, that was my high school number too. He asked me what mine was, and said he’d try to get it.”

“How sweet,” Virginia said. “That almost makes me cry, actually.”

“Well,” Ralph said, “there’s another game tomorrow, and a double-header on Saturday . . . I’m planning to be at all three.”

“I am too,” Virginia said.