

Privacy

By Pamela Slea

I don't know how she found out where I was working, because I hadn't been there long, but Rachel always had her ways, I guess. I had another dumb waitressing job and she said she wanted to take me to the beach. Her voice on the line was fast and excited just like always. I looked around at the workers and the managers leaning against the walls waiting for the dinner rush and said softly into the receiver that, yeah, I could leave tonight. I took the phone around the corner where they couldn't see.

"Do you have to work or anything?" Rachel asked.

"No." I answered with some quiet hesitation "Just come and get me. Do you have a car?"

"Jeremy does. So, yeah."

"That same Jeremy?"

"Oh no, he's in Costa Rica again. This is a guy from school. This guy's a vegan and he's studying piano composition or something. He's pretty cool."

"Oh." I didn't care. There was always a man or two following her around. She was beautiful and couldn't stay in one place, and that made for a kind of magnetic attraction. Damsel in distress, they didn't want to let her get away, I suppose.

I hung up the phone. Manager Leighanne was waiting at my side with a weary expression.

"Cheryl, you know we can't accept calls at work."

“Yeah.” I said. I started untucking my shirt. I unbuttoned the cuffs slowly and deliberately. I didn't look at her once.

“What are you doing?” she said menacingly. I loved this part. I stayed straight-faced and indifferent.

“My friend is in town. I have to go away for the weekend.” I hated that my voice was so soft. I wanted to be loud and intimidating.

“Ok...?” she chuckled. This was a good situation for both of us because she got to feel responsible and normal, while I got bleaker and uglier, but I got to leave.

“You're going to have to get your shifts covered!” Her voice got smaller and smaller as I walked toward the entrance and the revolving front door.

“We might be able to work this out if you can find someone who is willing to...” she disappeared as I pushed the door and stepped into the Washington D.C. sun. I took off that hideous striped dress shirt, bleached and starched until it faded, and walked away in my black tank top. I liked the contrast of that, from shapeless and obsequious to young with cleavage... I had a thought that I left my sunglasses in the locker, but I cut it as a loss. I could never keep track of those things anyway.

Rachel and the guy came over after midnight. He had a noisy two-door with a pretty serious muffler problem. It was dark red or purple or something and several years old but a hell of a lot more than either one of *us* ever had, and I took my green duffel bag stuffed with the tiny dresses and red lipstick I kept for when she showed up. I brought a black bathing suit with translucent mesh that covered the non-essentials. It would've

been a lot sexier if I was ten pounds thinner, but it's hard to pass up free restaurant food, and I had gotten a little heavier than I was used to.

I watched her get out of the car and run towards me, her feet hitting the pavement hard like a child. She embraced me like she always does and her tiny frame touched me like I meant something – she squeezed me hard with her whole body and then gazed up at me. I was about 3 or 4 inches taller than she was and quite a bit bigger in every way, which made her look even more perfect. We stared into each other's eyes and stroked each other's cheeks and she cried and told me how good I look, like she always did.

Rachel was a beautiful crier. Like in the movies her skin tone stayed even and unblotched and her eyes were clear. Just a tear out of one eye, a tear out of the other. She would tell people her eyes were green, but they changed dramatically with whatever she touched, and she sounded so convinced when she said it I never thought to argue. She could say whatever she wanted and it would sound right to me.

“Jeremy wants to go ahead and drive all night so that we don't hit the holiday traffic. His parents have a place right by the beach!” I looked at him and he sort of grunted. He was impossibly tall and thin, and his head was so far above ours, it was as if we had our own private world with his stomach as a background. He glanced down at my name-brand shirt and fitted jeans and hated me. I noticed her long skirt that rested on her hips. She had a loose fitting tank top that complemented her chest perfectly and I was embarrassed. I realized that I would have nothing to wear all weekend.

“Um... I just have to run back to the apartment and get something.” I gestured to the door and half-turned.

“No, silly, anything you need you can borrow from me. We really have to get going. We’ve been driving all day and we still have a long way to go. Honey don’t look at me like that! Maybe we could get some coffee and cigarettes to make it more fun?” She looked up at him and raised her eyebrows and blinked. This thing that she does has a universal effect on people. It’s like a super-power. If anyone else were to do it they would look ridiculous, but from her it’s magic; hypnotic. They shared something non-verbal that he considered meaningful and I studied the shape of her clavicles.

There are several things about being in the back of an old car that are not fun. They exhaled their smoke out of the windows and it would travel directly back into my face; regardless of where I was sitting the smoke from one or both of their cigarettes ended up in my face. And I had more than one lit cigarette butt fly into my lap as I tried to think or sleep or do anything. My legs were cramped up into strange positions and the car was so loud from the damn muffler I couldn’t hear what Rachel was yelling back at me. When they were between cigarettes I would stare out the tinted windows and try to make out trees and lights.

This Jeremy guy who was so intent to get there on time kept falling asleep at the wheel after Rachel had given up being awake and making conversation, but when I tried to scream over the muffler at him that I wasn’t tired and I could drive he would get all manly and upset and insist that he was not tired, then fall asleep and swerve into the other lane. So I devised a method where I would watch him drive and poke him with my finger when he started falling asleep. That way he wouldn’t have to acknowledge that I was helping him and we didn’t wrap ourselves around a tree.

We arrived in the early hours of the morning and pulled into a trailer park. The engine shut off and my ears were ringing. My legs were weak as I maneuvered my way out of the back seat and finally stretched out. His parents looked ridiculously old as they came out to meet us. His father was covered in hair and was smoking a cigar. They smoke inside, I thought mildly. I'm in for a smoky couple of days.

His mother was wiry and gray, gesticulating wildly as she rushed towards them. She embraced her son and moved immediately to Rachel, transfixed.

"And who is this?!" she cried in a ridiculous soprano ecstasy that I figured Rachel probably got all the time from strangers.

"Mom, I told you, this is Rachel. I met her at school." Jeremy mumbled and I became aware of his slight southern accent and he looked almost bashful. Men look so weak with that expression, I thought.

"My, what a beauty. Darling, tell me, what are you doing with my son?" she turned around and tried to move her inside when she noticed I was there. I pretended I was distracted by the scenery.

"And you are...?" Her voice trailed off and she didn't seem very interested in my response. I felt trapped. I looked at the scenery again. "Cheryl."

"Oh?" She leaned in like she couldn't quite hear me, and then she leaned back again. "Ok." She smiled uncomfortably, the way that strangers always smile at me and took Rachel's hand and led them inside.

We set up sleeping bags on the floor and I prayed into my pillow that I would fall asleep before anything happened between them. She settled herself in her blankets next

to him and stretched out her arm to me, almost like royalty waiting for a kiss or like a child wanting a parent to pick her up. I wandered across the room to them, the happy couple. Her hands were tiny and graceful, with long, artistic fingers and reckless nails. I put my hand in hers and she kissed it.

“I love you. I’m so glad you could come. You know you’ll always be my best friend. We’ll always find a way to be together.” She looked at me so seriously, so solemnly. And she knew it, that I was hers forever and ever. That I would do anything for her. That she was perfect.

“I missed you.” I answered and she kissed my cheek. I walked far far away, back to my cold sleeping bag and I guess we all napped until the afternoon.

When we woke up, the sky was heavy and gray, but it wasn’t cold. I personally thought it was the best weather for the beach because there is no one to do annoying things when you’re trying to have a good time, like taking up the whole beach with a volleyball game or trying to knock the girls off the guys shoulders in the water. But also the gray makes it such moody weather. Makes me feel at home. The sky and the sand and the water are all variations on the same color scheme, sad and gray.

We got out of the car and started taking off our clothes covering our bathing suits and she’d bought the exact same one I did. I smiled because we did this all the time. I could sometimes guess what she liked. She was overjoyed by our similarity. She jumped and clapped her little hands like a nymph.

On the walkway to the water her towel dropped slowly, casually off her hips. When it finally settled onto the sand I set mine in the same place, and Jeremy and his parents followed. This is how we set up camp, I remarked to my invisible self as I organized our home base.

I felt like an ogre, a gigantic shadow beast looming just behind her as we made our way to the gray sea. The sand was wet and clumpy and big, almost rocky on the soles of our feet. I could feel my thighs wobble with each step. I hated that promenade toward the ocean where everyone can see everything about you. I always just wanted to appear there, but there's all this walking.

The water was cold and I immediately started to shiver. This felt stupid because she is the skinny one and I am the one with all the padding, so I shouldn't be the one who is cold. Whatever. We went farther and farther out until we couldn't touch the bottom. The water was murky and gray, and the waves were big and gentle as they rolled us up and down. She giggled as the waves drew her up. Finally she swam over to me.

"You know you can tell so much about a person based on how they act in the ocean." She said. I swam closer to her. Her hair flattened on her head and made her look younger, innocent.

"Like you, you're always by yourself and contemplating something deep, and I'm playing in the waves and letting them take me wherever they want, and Jeremy's over there trying to body board these tiny little waves. He's so playful. Like a child really." She paused, no doubt thinking about how much she truly loved this one for real, and every one before him was just an illusion.

My teeth were chattering. I was trying not to let her see. I didn't want to leave. I looked at Jeremy's tiny head in the distance. Rachel startled me -

“What were you thinking about?”

“What? When?”

“Just now.”

I was thinking about how much I hated Jeremy, but what came out of my mouth was different. I was thinking it as I spoke it, so it was almost the truth.

“You know freezing to death or drowning are the easiest ways to die. I've thought about this a lot, not because I want to kill myself or anything, but just because it's interesting to me.” She was looking at me, maybe a little distracted, but I kept going.

“A lot of people do it the wrong way, you know. They'll take a bunch of aspirin or antidepressants, and that won't kill you, it'll just fuck up your system. Or there's cutting your wrists and sitting in a bathtub or shooting yourself, which are inconsiderate and messy. Somebody's gonna find that shit and get freaked out.”

Her expression was hazy – I couldn't tell whether she was concerned or scared. I continued, but faster.

“But if you die in the snow, or if you drown, it's painful at first – I mean, there should be some kind of pain because you're dying, right? And so it hurts a whole lot and you get scared and freak out, but then, once that is over, you just give up and kind of fall asleep. Kind of romantic...” I trailed off and looked at her. I wanted her to know this is how I feel, that she should care. I wanted for her to feel sorry for me and comfort me and stay with me. She was looking toward the shore and her red hair was reaching out around her on the water.

“That’s kind of morbid. Why are you thinking about that?” she looked almost worried.

“I don’t know.”

We were treading water there, soundlessly, keeping our heads above water and my head was running over all the things I wanted to confess, that this is the one moment where she will listen, but nothing came.

“You want to know a secret?” she asked me, like it wasn’t a rhetorical question.

I realized that I paused too long and she was expecting a response. “Yeah, I mean. Sure.”

She lifted her right hand out of the water like a flamenco dancer, way over her head, and crumpled into her fist was her black bathing suit. She looked at me very seriously. “This water is so dark you can’t even see into it. It’s like the ultimate privacy, you know? All you can see is everybody’s tiny little heads bobbing around.”

Yeah, I thought. It’s like we’re all alone.

And her bathing suit came back into the gray ocean and she swam away, pleased with her creativity. I didn't have to control my shivering or my emotions anymore, and I bobbed in the water as the reality of our conversation settled in. She wasn't really asking what was on my mind, she was waiting to talk so that she could show me her bathing suit in her hand. She was holding her suit as I was bearing my soul for the first time and she won.

I swam off, writhing violently in the water, kicking and bobbing, water up my nose, attempting to shed the hideous swimsuit and feel the water rush over my body. I got it off, felt the salt water all over my private parts, the parts that were mine, and I felt

the weight of being a grown-up and being a woman, worst of all. My bottom lip trembled and I let my ugly tears merge with the ugly ocean.

It was time to go back.