
THE CANCER DIET DANIEL WALLACE

In his rear view mirror Tony could see the last golden-red scrap of sun falling behind the curve of the world. It was beautiful, almost like somewhere far away an entire city was on fire, and he wanted to show it to Jasper. But Jasper wouldn't have cared. His son didn't care about the sun.

"How much farther, you think?" Tony asked him instead. They'd already been on the road for a while.

"What?"

"To Newton's."

Jasper shrugged. He looked out his window but there was nothing to see there now but the night. Just like that, all the light was gone. He kept looking anyway.

"I'm kind of thirsty," Tony said. "They have any water out here?"

"Pretty sure they do."

Tony nodded, as if they were actually having a conversation.

"I bet they do," Tony said. "You're probably right. I bet they'll have lots of water. I bet your buddy has water and he'll want to share it. I bet we'll find that to be the case. If he has a spigot. I used to drink water *directly* from the end of a hose when I was your age, but no one does that anymore. It seems a little third-world-ish now, doesn't it? Drinking water from a hose on a hot summer day.

"Water comes in bottles now or it doesn't come at all. I wonder how long before it'll be the same way with . . . air. Maybe when you're my age you'll look back at those days when you were driving down an empty stretch of highway in the night with your dad to some friend's house and both of you were just breathing the air that happened to be in the space around your mouths. *Ah, remember how it was before we had to strap canisters to our back and breathe through a tube? Those were the days!*"

Nothing, nothing, nothing from his son.

"I bet we'll be there soon," Tony said.

But they weren't there soon. Long stretches of two-lane blacktop bordered by darkening fields of mysterious crops (corn? tobacco?) coupled with equally long stretches of total silence, and pretty soon Tony's mind cradled a single thought: why didn't Jasper have a friend who lived close by? He could ask him: there Jasper was, sitting right next to him. But it wasn't a question he would answer.

Jasper rarely spoke. There didn't appear to be any reason why – he wasn't abused or forced to do onerous chores or to go to church or to do anything, really – he just didn't talk that much anymore. *Yes, no, and I don't know and I said I don't know!* were about all they could squeeze out of him.

There were articles he'd read online that said this was par for the course with a twelve-year-old. But it was sucking the life out of Tony, the quiet. Sometimes he just had to talk to make noise – meaningless, stupid noise, to stay sane. "Makes no difference if he is a hound, better quit kicking my dog around," he said.

He almost sang it. His own father had sung the same thing to him, and Tony had hated it because it seemed forced and dated even thirty years ago. But Tony had become the last thing in the world he wanted to: his father. And one day Jasper would become Tony, and that was just sad, because Tony didn't consider himself particularly wonderful. He was mediocre, or maybe slightly above mediocre if only because he was aware of his own mediocrity. Jasper could do better.

But this quiet! Tony whistled, he sang an old song Frank Sinatra probably sang. He turned on the radio and Jasper turned it off. Then he rubbed his son's head – anything to maintain a connection.

They drove over a hillock and suddenly the moon was there, full and big and bright. They passed an old dilapidated barn and an ancient house crumbling into itself, with a huge hole in the roof, as if a meteor had crashed into it.

Tony pointed at it. "I bet everybody who ever lived there is dead," he said.

From Jasper, nothing. *I mean, all I want to do is talk, have a conversation.* But this twelve-year-old kid with black bangs so long they covered one side of his face was harder to talk to than a beautiful woman, and talking to beautiful women was *hard*.

Not that Tony talked to beautiful women anymore. That was one of the good things about being married: you didn't *have* to, didn't have to try, and you didn't have to feel like a putz for not. Being married was like, *Oh, I could talk to you if I wanted to, but I don't.* His wife wasn't beautiful like that, of course, because he never would have been able to speak to her if she were. But she was nice enough. Definitely better than mediocre. Except for her back. Her back was like a side of ham.

He'd never liked her back.

After they passed a gas station on the right (dark, empty, abandoned, it was an old *Sinclair*, the one with the green brontosaurus on the sign – that's how far away from civilization they were!), he looked down at the directions on the seat beside him.

"So it's the next left," he said. "Then the first right. Turns into a dirt road after a mile." He laughed. "Then it's virgin forest we have to machete our way through. Did you bring a machete?"

"I wish I had," Jasper said.

Fifteen minutes later they made it to the house, a sweet-looking cottage nestled in a clearing, surrounded by immense, dark, dense woods. Why are cottages always *nestled*, Tony wondered? Skyscrapers aren't nestled. Only cottages. This was a thought worth having, he thought, and tucked it away to think more on later.

Jasper already had a foot out the half-open car door.

"Okay. See ya, Dad."

It was magic, how fast he was able to get away.

"Whoa!" Tony said. "Hold your horses. Put the brakes on. I'm coming in."

"Not necessary."

"Necessary," he said. "Need to meet the parents."

"There *are* no parents," said Jasper.

Tony, in less than a second, felt his blood pressure rise until he felt like his head was going to explode. Surely Jasper did not expect – had not had him drive him all the way out here when there were no – he was only *twelve*, for God's sakes – no way he was going to.

He took a nice deep breath, kept his voice to a near-whisper. "No parents?"

"Just a mom."

A mom! Okay, then. All is well. "Meet the *parent*, then. Let her know that you have a dad and weren't . . ." *hatched*, he was going to say, but Jenny had been talking to him about being too harsh with Jasper, too sarcastic, this was a delicate time in his life.

"Whatever. Just to say hello."

"Suit yourself."

Jasper was good enough not to bolt ahead, now that they were going in together. They walked side by side, their arms almost touching as they swung. It was moments like this – so microscopically small and, to anyone else, seemingly meaningless – that gave Tony hope for the future.

As they came closer to the house, and his eyes adjusted, he could see that it really wasn't what he'd taken it to be. Through the nearly palpable dark of the country nothing was visible until you were right up on it, and now he could see it was less a cottage than it was a cabin.

It was in fact just *that far* from being a shack. Four walls, a roof. Clearly, a mere afterthought of a structure made of hastily assembled scrap lumber and old fence posts, as if a storm was a-coming and someone needed a quick and dirty shelter.

A window was covered with a tattered piece of grimy plastic. The porch was a depository of broken things: chairs, bicycles, flower pots. And box after weathered cardboard box, damp and empty and torn. He had seen some old boxes before, but these took the cake; they were the oldest. They were the boxes Adam and Eve used when they were leaving Eden. Ha ha. Now that was funny. *He* was funny. He wished his son knew that.

Tony knocked on the screen door and waited, his son obediently standing beside him. From somewhere deep within the bowels of the ramshackle lean-to, a dog barked and barked again. "Hello?" Tony said. Nothing. Not a single human sound. But he could see inside.

Through the rusted mesh of the door he could see what might have been the living quarters of a colony of ferrets given free rein over their dead master's terrain. His mind resisted cataloguing the disarray; as if viewing a bloody car wreck, he turned his head and closed his eyes.

Remnants of ancient meals, yellowed newspapers dating from the 20th century, clothes and shoes tossed off last winter which would remain forgotten until next winter. He wouldn't have been surprised to see a corpse, a pair of feet sticking out from below the couch.

The dog was the first to arrive, barking wildly, strings of drool dripping from its thin black lips. Don't all these kind of people have vicious dogs, some half-domesticated mongrel monster, a poor man's wolf? Hackles raised, teeth bared, it appeared more than willing to tear a limb or two from Tony's body, rip his son's throat out, and dine on their innards. This flimsy screen door was the only thing that kept them from certain death.

"Jesus Christ," Tony muttered.

But Jasper was unfazed. "That's Snooky," he said.

"Snooky? I would have guessed Grendel."

"Why?"

"It's a monster's name."

"Snooky's a good dog," Jasper said to it through the screen. "Aren't you, Snooky?"

Tony laughed. "And I have some beautiful desert real estate you might be interested in acquiring." His heart shifted into a higher gear in order to catch up with the beats it had missed. His fatherly instinct was to bundle his son in his arms, toss him into the car and careen out of there like a mongoose on speed. But just then a human form emerged from the darkness. It was female, but what kind – sister, mother, crazy aunt – it was impossible to say.

"Snooky!" the female said, exasperated. "Please leave those poor people alone. They come in peace."

The dog backed off a little, but continued to idle on growl until she took him by the collar and pulled him up and away and pretty much tossed him backward.

"Sorry about that," she said, taking another step or two into the light. "I'm Serena. Newton's mom."

Well. Okay. She wasn't the disheveled, overweight, greasy-haired, pug-faced alcoholic who, based on the trash heap she lived in, Tony had fully expected. He wondered if his expression betrayed his surprise.

Slender, with the stylishly angular face of a model, she gave the impression of a woman much younger than she should have been, considering that she had a son his own son's age. She had short, jet-black hair cut to frame her cheeks, big green eyes, and a slightly elfin nose. Not unattractive. She was, in fact, pretty beautiful. Nice moderately-sized breasts lounging beneath a blue spaghetti-strapped blouse. Legs short, but thin.

"Hey Jasper and Jasper's dad," she said, opening the door. "Hurry now. Get in before the bugs do!"

Jasper and Jasper's dad slipped in quickly and she let the screen door shut behind them with a bang. The dog barked again – once, sharply – before slinking off into the darkness. "These *huge* mosquitoes breed in the pond out back," she said. "Bigger than woodpeckers. I swear." She laughed, and smiled at Jasper. "How goes it, Jasper?"

"Great," he said brightly, happy in a way he hadn't seemed all week. "Newton in his room?"

"Where else?"

And Jasper disappeared, nimbly stepping over an empty pizza box and a pile of unmatched socks, slipping into infinite darkness of the scary shack as though through a wormhole – and he was gone, gone, the way he wanted to be. Newton's mom looked up at Tony with that pleasantly exasperated expression all parents learn. *Kids!*

"Serena Carnahan," she said, extending a hand. He took it. His hand, which had never seemed extraordinarily large to him, did now: it enveloped hers like a fleshy croissant. He was a good foot taller than she was as well, and bigger from side to side. Too big for the room itself, in a way, as if he'd been built to a different scale. This made him feel awkward, looming, a giant. He wished he could shrink.

"I'm Tony," he said. "Tony Mossman. Thanks for having Jasper over."

"Are you kidding? Thanks for bringing him out. We're not exactly on the way to . . . anywhere."

Truer words had never been spoken. "It's nice to get out in the country," he lied. He hated the country.

"This is the *boondocks*, Tony. Off the map. Beyond the beyond! The country was about ten miles that-away." She smiled, and her eyebrows bounced a couple of times. "My husband had that good ole pioneer spirit."

"Husband? Oh. Jasper said – "

"I meant dead husband. Sorry."

"He didn't . . . mention that part."

She shrugged. A moth dive-bombed her and fluttered, caught in her hair, until she shook her head and set the moth free. "Don't worry about it. We miss him and everything but it was eight years ago now and you know – or maybe you don't – after eight years of being gone it's kind of like he never existed in the first place." She looked at Tony, her head tilted to one side. "Is that a mean thing to say?"

"What happened?"

"Well, he seemed fine. Healthiest man I ever knew. Turned out he had a congenital heart defect, though, and one day – bam! – he just keeled over. Eight years ago, like I said. And the only time I think about him now is when I go out back and weed the graveyard. Thought of him tonight, in fact." She held up her hands to show him the tell-tale evidence: the tips of her fingers were crowned with dirt. "Weeding."

"You have a graveyard?"

"Yeah. It's cool. I'll show it to you if you want. Found it when we bought the place and

cleared away the underbrush. Some of the gravestones go all the way back to the seventeenth-hundreds. Thought Newt might as well go there, too. Pre-hallowed ground and all."

She shrugged again and pushed a pair of shoes under the couch with her left foot. He watched her, thinking of the husband who had settled this godforsaken patch of hundred-year-old forest, built an outpost with his bare hands, then died, and was now mostly forgotten.

Was there anyone like that in Tony's life? His grandparents, certainly: dead, all of them, and none took up even the smallest room in his heart now. His best friend, Kevin Manning, was killed – decapitated – by a semi on his way to work one morning, ten, eleven years ago. They'd grown up together, spent countless hours in each other's company.

Kevin was with him the day he purchased his first 45 – Michael Jackson's version of *Rockin' Robin*. They smoked pot together on their way to school. They even had the same girlfriend once, Carla somebody, who Kevin went out with after she broke up with Tony. Who kept his memory alive? Not Tony.

"Hey," she said. "You want some iced tea or something? Coffee for the drive back?"

"No," he said. "I mean, no thanks. I should be getting back, I guess."

She seemed disappointed. Maybe it was his imagination, but her eyebrows, an important part of her expressive artillery, appeared to droop. No doubt visitors were a rarity here. She got the odd parent, like him, most of whom (also like him?) were a dull lot. She probably saw more deer than actual people. A boyfriend was a possibility – she was a little firecracker – but there was no evidence of one.

"Okay then," she said. "Think you find your way out of here?"

"Sure. And if I get lost I'll just ask somebody the way to civilization."

As soon as the words left his mouth he wondered if they would offend her. Turned out they didn't. She laughed. It wasn't even that great a joke and she laughed! Nice to hear that. Jenny had heard all of his jokes by now. "You got that right," she said. "He – my dead husband – said it'd take a hundred years for the rest of the world to get here, by which time we would be dead and it wouldn't matter. He was right about that at least. The dead part."

"Actually, I'm surprised you get electricity out here."

"Every time it rains it flickers and dies."

"Oh man. Whenever the electricity at our house goes out Jasper *freaks*. He can't watch

television! He can't play his precious video games! Which I imagine is what they're doing as we speak."

"You think?" she said.

"It's his thing."

"I'm not so sure myself."

Something about the tone of her voice caught his interest. "What do you mean?"
"Look what I found under Newton's bed the other day."

Half-hidden behind an immense television set there was a three-tiered, built-in bookshelf filled mostly with thick paperback thrillers, forgotten cups of coffee and jar after jar of spare change, heavy on the pennies. She pushed some of the books out of the way and removed a magazine from a secret spot. As she handed it to Tony she raised her eyebrows until they almost crawled up under her bangs.

It was a magazine called, simply, *Skin*. He'd seen it on the stands, sealed in plastic. On the cover of this issue was a young woman wearing nothing but a lacey bra and a ridiculously small pair of Hello Kitty underwear. The important parts were covered, but most of her spilled out of it like an over-inflated balloon.

Tony looked down at Serena. They both knew what this meant.

"Wow."

"Yeah," she said. "I mean, you know it's going to happen one day and it's cool and everything but when it happens it's a shock."

"To say the least. Jasper has never shown the slightest interest in girls."

"Newton has, a little. He likes to irritate them, which is good practice for later in life."

"And marriage," Tony added.

He continued to stare at the magazine, entranced. "So when Newton finds out this is missing – "

"I doubt he will," she said. "This wasn't the only one."

"Oh."

"Looked like there might have been ten or more. I left them there."

"Good move. So as not to arouse suspicion."

"Yeah. But also because this one features Jessica Alba. I love her. She does a swimsuit thing in this issue. Page forty-seven."

Serena gingerly removed the magazine from Tony's grasp and swept a pile of laundry from the sofa onto the floor. She sat down, crossing one leg beneath the other, becoming an even smaller package of person. She looked portable. She looked like she could ride on his shoulders like a chimpanzee. "Get a load of this," she said. "If you have a minute."

"Sure," he said too quickly. "Why not?"

He sat down beside her. Her thighs – doughy white, freckled – flattened a little and pressed against his gray linen trousers, which he hadn't changed from work. The moment he had arrived home he was assigned the task of child-hauling; Jenny would have done it herself, she said, but she had that night-blindness thing which became most pronounced when she was asked to do something she didn't want to do at night. So he took off his tie and left, his mute, spacey son in the passenger seat.

Tony was the assistant art director at an ad-agency, a job which consisted mostly of creating colorful images of soap and automobile tires. It was not his dream job; Tony, like millions of other people, had always wanted to be an artist.

He'd never told anybody this, and scarcely admitted it even to himself. But in college he'd had a girlfriend who painted, and her empty canvases made his heart beat faster, his head spin with possibility. To be a part of something so beautiful, and pointless, and human – to be a stream emptying into the river of art – what could be better?

But there was nothing in his background to support this notion. His father was a contractor, his mother a housewife, and he had no real talent to speak of. Who was he to think he could be an artist? He made a compromise by taking this job at the ad agency when he was just out of college; he would soon have a family to support, after all. But it turned out not to be a compromise. He might as well be driving a truck.

Just as Serena was about to open the revelatory pages, she stopped and looked at Tony.

"Have I apologized?" she said.

"For what?"

"For this," she said, lifting her arms up and out to indicate the entirety of her hovel, the amazing and nearly perfect disarray, a disorder bordering on order itself, an ongoing accident which seemed to have been planned down to the last detail. Even the pictures on the wall – one of Jesus, another of Richard Nixon (both of them, he knew somehow, there for laughs) – were askew.

Her left arm, outstretched across the sofa behind him, almost rested on his back. He remembered a girl in junior high he had used this very same maneuver on, but Serena didn't drape her arm around him. The moment he became conscious of it she removed it and brought her hands back to the magazine.

She sighed. "It's a pigsty," she said. "I hate living like this. I hate it. Seriously, I'm sorry you have to see it at all, that anybody does. Luckily not too many people do. But it's hard sometimes, you know?"

"Do I ever," he said. He laughed. "You should see our place."

She looked at him dubiously. "Come on, Tony. I'm sure your home is nothing like this."

True. He couldn't claim this sort of disaster, even if it made her feel better. He shook his head.

"I didn't think so. This takes the cake. I feel like I've become Martha Stewart, if Martha Stewart died and came back eviler than she already probably is and did the opposite of everything she ever did when she was alive."

Tony laughed and laughed. Martha Stewart coming back from the dead! *That* was funny! But Serena didn't laugh so much. She smiled wanly and sighed.

"It's the chemo," she said.

His laughter, long since out of his control, lingered on. He wasn't sure if he'd heard her right: maybe she didn't say *chemo*. Maybe she said something else. But what? Nothing really sounded like *chemo*.

"I'm sorry. You said chemo?"

She nodded. "It just completely drains you – of everything. Every ounce of strength. Inside and out. They tell you it will, but then of course you think you'll be able to withstand it, to keep going the way you were before when the cancer was there but *not* being treated. Which when you think about it is weird: I felt fine before I started getting the cure." This was funnier, to her, than her Martha Stewart joke. *She* laughed and laughed. But now the laughter sounded hollow, ridiculous. "Breast cancer," she said.

His mouth hung open but not a sound came out of it. He was stunned at first, but then he felt tricked, tricked into thinking about Serena the way he had been thinking about her. He forgot to breathe.

He felt as though he were sitting on the sofa beside someone he thought was human but then revealed herself to be from another planet entirely. Only after this did a wave of sadness wash over him, and he touched her hand. "I'm sorry," he said.

But she looked at him with a smile meant to provide a segue to a more pleasant topic. "So. You want to see her or not?"

"Who?"

"Jessica!" she said. "Hello! The pictures of Jessica Alba in the magazine I stole from my son."

"Sure," he said. "If you want."

Quickly – too quickly for him – she thumbed past pictures of breasts and thighs and taut, flat stomachs – women all the colors of the rainbow – until she arrived at the Jessica Alba pictorial.

The truth is he wasn't sure who Jessica Alba was until he saw her face, and even then couldn't tell you why he recognized her, what movies she had been in, who she was dating or had recently broken up with – the things everybody knows these days about the truly famous, whether you want to know or not. She was pretty, though, this Jessica Alba. Kind of a girl-next-door look . . . if you lived next door to a really beautiful girl.

Serena continued to study the pictures as though she were reading them, as though there were something there to be understood.

"I really don't know why I like her so much," she said. "But why does anybody like anybody? People are just drawn to other people for some reason, right? This one, where she's on all fours covered in sand? It's sexy, but it's also fun. She's just a sexy girl having fun. Oh, I don't even know what I mean."

She turned the page, where there were more pictures of Jessica Alba in various states of near-nakedness. And there was a quote from her highlighted in big orange letters. "***I like it when men say exactly what they want.***"

It was clear the image they were trying to provoke with the quote, but he bet it was taken out of context. She was probably talking about going out to dinner with a man or something like that, and she said this harmless thing and they twisted her words to make it sound like something entirely different.

Tony had a bizarre thought just then: he wondered if Jessica Alba would like him. If they accidentally met somewhere. But based on this quote he thought probably not. He rarely said what he wanted because he rarely knew. Things came at him and he didn't know how he felt about them until they did. Like this. On the couch with Serena Carnahan. How did he feel about this?

"I wish I looked like her," she said. "I know that's the whole problem with this culture and all that bullshit. But I do."

"But she doesn't *really* look like that. It's all airbrushed."

"Maybe they got rid of a zit," she said. "But you can't airbrush those breasts. Those lips. That incredible body. The one good thing about the chemo is that I've actually gotten close to my ideal body weight." She laughed. "I used to be . . . *heavy*."

"Heavy? You? I don't believe it."

"Fat. I was fat! Seriously. I've lost thirty-seven pounds in two months. Diets never worked for me, before this one. I like food too much. Maybe I should write a book."

"The Cancer Diet," he said. Once again he tried to stop the words before they escaped, but he couldn't. *She* could be flippant about it if she wanted because it was *her* cancer; she owned it and could do with it what she liked. But not him. "Sorry," he said. "I shouldn't have said that."

"No!" she said. "It's a great idea. Brilliant. On the Cancer Diet you can eat what you want because you don't want to eat. And when you do eat, more often than not you'll throw it up. It's perfect. With cancer, we can all be as beautiful as Jessica Alba." She laughed, and sighed, and looked back at the magazine.

"Sounds like a *Twilight Zone*," he said.

Which is where he was. Elbow to elbow with the diminutive and possibly dying Serena Carnahan, with their sons sequestered in a room on a bed looking at the same magazine he was looking at, learning how to look at women.

"You chew on your nails," she said. She picked up his hand to get a better look. It was true: he chewed them all the way down to nothing. He'd done it all his life. "You shouldn't chew on your nails."

"You're right. I shouldn't."

What he should do now is go. He should never have come in. And he realized then that if she hadn't had cancer he wouldn't have; she would have been short and fat and he would have wanted nothing to do with her.

He would have watched her emerge from the shadows like the nightmare he'd expected and he would have run. Her hair wasn't real, he saw that now. Even her eyebrows were painted on.

"I should go," he said.

She set his hand down on his knee, but gently, as though it might break.

"Don't you wanna see the graveyard?" she said.

They walked out back into the total darkness of the wooded night. Then she flipped an outdoor switch and like magic the yard suddenly appeared; bathed in the yellow hues of the dim bug light it looked like an old sepia photograph of itself.

There was no graveyard, not that he could see, but instead a small jungle of weeds, weeds like trees, chest high, their thick rubbery green stems striated with red, as if it weren't water they needed to grow but blood.

Her backyard was another repository of discarded crap, lorded over by a dead refrigerator. If Jasper weren't inside looking at half-naked pretty women on the beach this is where he might be now, hiding, suffocating, dying inside the refrigerator-crypt. Growing up: it was just one dangerous thing after another. It never stopped.

"I do try to keep it nice," Serena said. "But it's just . . . hard."

Huge primordial bugs found them, pointlessly swarming around their heads. People must secrete some odor that attracts them, he thought, otherwise he had no idea what they could possibly get out of this.

Serena walked a couple of steps ahead and pushed some of the weeds aside. And there was her husband's grave. It was marked by a big white rock, inscribed only with his name and the day he died. A couple of feet away was a real tombstone, its edges worn smooth by time, its face pockmarked and gray. Sure enough, the guy had died over a century ago.

"He didn't think it was important, the day he was born," she said, reading Tony's mind. Then, softly: "I actually think he was embarrassed, dying as young as he did. He didn't want people to know."

"People?" he said. "What people?"

She turned to look at him through the weeds. "Us," she said.

And then the porch light went out. The weeds, the graves, even Serena disappeared beneath a dark sheet of night, and in the moments it took him to make sense of things Tony heard the mischievous laughter of two young boys who were done looking at girlie magazines for a while and had decided to scare their respective parents with the horrors of the night. They even made the necessary ghostly sounds, moaning like the newly risen dead.

Then all was quiet again. Nothing moved. No sound, no life.

It was as if Tony were floating through the deepest and darkest space, alone. He heard a twig snap, and he felt a hand take his own and hold it, tight. He thought it was Serena's at first, but then he thought – he couldn't tell – it might be Jasper's. It might be his son. But it didn't really matter now because he was lost, and he needed someone,

anyone. So he took the hand and let whoever it was guide him back toward the light.

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