

Sex, lies & eggplant

Dinner conversation interprets placement of desire



I say this is anyone's story. But for the sake of characters, it's about Beth, who is someone, I, who am everyone, and it took place here, at Crane River, rested in the Heartland of a nation.

As we drink red wine to clear our thoughts, Beth tells me the problems she has with her relationships.

She tells me she was neglected by one for whom she cared. She said she was left alone. She said her feelings weren't cared for.

Her partner said Beth didn't clean the sink. Beth said clean bathrooms shouldn't matter. I am sure it went deeper than that. I wonder who is right. But I nod to comfort Beth. I know she trusts me.

She excuses herself to go to the bathroom and as she leaves, my eyes follow her. I think I want to be a part of her relationships. I tell myself I can have her. I let myself believe this.

Beth comes back from the bathroom, and I ask her how her trip was and she asks me, "Trip to where?" I tell her the bathroom and, as she looks at me confused, she says it was a good trip.

I tell her I am glad she had a good bathroom experience and that since we spend two years of our lives in bathrooms, we should really make the most of every trip.

She agrees. People really should talk about bathrooms more often ... It makes them human. Beth is human. I am human. We are human, I swear.

She is now sitting down. I am resuming the hearing of the truth of her life according to her. A now-neglected soul ... but her ex-lover was so good looking. Things had been going along so well.

Some bumps that look like only foothills really are mountains. She ran into one of those.

I tell her I feel her pain. I do. Women have treated me the same way they have treated Beth.

I want to comfort Beth as I would any other friend who was going through her experiences. But I feel other things as well. I cannot separate Beth from other women in my mind ... at least from women I have desired.

She is beautiful. Other men in the restaurant stare at us. They want her for lust, she wants me for a friend. I want her for both.

The waitress brings us our meal. Crane River may be the only place in Lincoln that has decent vegetarian food, and we have a meal of eggplant. Beth is a vegetarian, though I am not.

I will kill the cow and eat it the next day. I once owned a black leather trench coat with gloves to match.

When around vegetarians, I am compelled to eat vegetarian food. I will take tofu with asparagus if it will get me some place else. I am not going any place tonight, I know.

Beth's food is mashed up within moments. Beans and eggplant combine, and the once colorful food that came, orange swirl and strawberry garnishes with flecks of parsley, is now a brown mess.

We pay \$10 a plate for food based on its presentation. But what once was beautiful now is chaos. I try to convey the point to Beth. Her food is a metaphor for her life. Why not? We laugh out loud. Together.

We eat our food, and Beth asks me where all the good women have gone. She tells me the women she has met are all self-centered, and they can't make up their minds on anything. She wants to know why she can't find a nice, hot girl.

The wine I have had has allowed me to let my guard down, and I become careless with my

words. I tell Beth she needs to face it, that she is hot and intimidating.

I tell her I understand her concerns, but let's face it: all the other hot girls in Lincoln are screwing frat boys. She tells me hot women should screw hot women. I tell her most men in this world would agree with her.

"That's what all my male friends say ... 'Hey, I don't need to join in, but can't I just watch?' Hell no, you can't watch! God why don't they get it? We don't want men there at all ... It's not that I don't like guys, I even look at some and say 'yeah, he's all right,' It's just that ... I couldn't fall in love with a guy."

I could not fall in love with a guy either, but I am glad there are those who can. I fell in love with one woman. I know why people fall in love with

women.

So what if Beth wants the same? Who says she can't? Why does she have to love someone with a penis? She doesn't like penises.

I tell her my thoughts. I tell her things that I think will comfort her. I don't know why I am giving advice to a lesbian. I don't know what it is that I know.

In the novel "The Passion," Jannette Winterson wrote: "trust me I am telling you stories." As I talk with Beth, I wonder if I am telling lies. But I think she is comfortable with me, perhaps comfort is what she needs.

I cannot help thinking she is beautiful. I cannot help having a side of me that wants her. These are the things I hide, the things I lie about. Is truth necessary if it kills friendships?

The waitress walks by and hands us our bill. Both of our eyes follow the waitress as she leaves. We discuss our opinions. Beth is a sucker for her auburn hair. I am in for the legs. We are in competition. Beth pays. She says she owes me this one. For listening.

We get up from our table and head on to see the rest of the night. We will meet more people and talk about where we are from, whom we know and the shows we have seen. We will talk of things:

remember when, that was great and thus the story will go on.

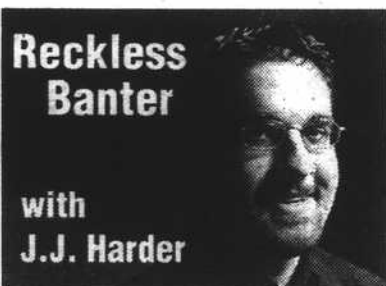
As we walk out, I take one more notice of her, but with the knowledge that though my desires may be, for the time, real, her desires for me never will be ... they can't.



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A little respect

Runaway father leaves family with emotional scars



Reckless Banter

with **J.J. Harder**

You can see all 44 long years of her life in her old, brown eyes. Her hair is thin and frizzy from too many cheap perms and the stress of being a single mom.

Raising two children alone has taken its toll on her body and her life. She's sitting in her old chair, grading her third-grade students' math assignments.

"Why can't they understand simple multiplication?" she yells.

"Another batch of geniuses, huh Mom?" I say as I walk in the room.

She sighs as her red pen empties its ink in systematic checkmarks. Every time I see her grading papers, I think of when I was a child. And when I see how she looks now, I can only think of what I didn't have growing up.

I had been thinking about talking to her about it for a long time. I knew it was time to find out about my past.

"Mom, tell me about what hap-

pened," I say.

"What do you mean?"

"I'm talking about my dad."

Her face turns a bit pale, and she stares off blankly. She pauses for a moment and kind of regains her composure.

"What do you want to know?"

I never really wanted a dad. Not when my friends would go to Royals games and talk baseball with their fathers. Not when I missed the father/son prayer breakfast every single year. Not even when my face was a bloody mess because I had to learn how to shave by myself.

I came to terms with the fact that I wasn't blessed with a "normal" family. And I was independent, so I didn't need to cry about my misfortune.

"He left when you were 10 days old," she says, "and I haven't seen him since."

Her tone is bitter, not because she wanted him to stay for her, but because she wanted him to stay for me.

"Do you wish anything would have happened differently?" I ask, knowing exactly the first thing she would say.

"Well, the money comes to mind," she says.

Her eyes fill with that look you get

when you think about winning the lottery. And that's about what 20 years worth of child support would equal. Coupled with the huge college loans he left in her name, she was forced to deal with quite a financial burden.

Working two jobs for 10 years didn't faze her at all, but knowing that I grew up with less than I should have just killed her.

She wished I could have had a better haircut than the one she gave me every month courtesy of the electric clippers. She wished I could have worn clothes that weren't from neighborhood garage sales. She wished I could have been called something other than "dirty kid" by my rich friends. She just wanted better for me.

"Why don't you call him?" she asks me. "You could probably even go visit him."

Ever since she discovered his whereabouts, she's been nagging me to go see him. She's hoping that he'll buy me a brand new car or something.

But I was never really interested in finding out about him. And I'm a curious person; it's just that I've never even thought about finding out what happened until now.

"Mom, you know I have no desire to go to see him whatsoever," I reply. "It's you that wants to see him, not me."

She knows I'm right, but I always

thought she wanted to see him just to get a big check or make him talk to her lawyer.

"What do you want from him, anyway?" I ask sarcastically. "What in the world can he give you now that he never did before?"

And suddenly I know she's going to let me see some emotion she's never shown anyone before. Her water-filled eyes tell me it isn't going to be the standard money-hungry, I-got-stuck-with-the-check-for-your-life response.

"Respect would be nice," she says solemnly. "Just some respect."

Not wanting to reveal any more, she gets up and quickly leaves the room.

At this moment, and for the first time in my life, I want a dad. I want my mom to have a husband. Someone to support her and encourage her in every way, as God intended it.

Seeing the look on my mom's face just broke me.

I think about the thousands of dads who leave their families each year. And the kids who grow up without fathers. They complain that they couldn't be in Boy Scouts or never learned to throw a spiral. They become dependent on drugs and say it's because they had nothing to depend on growing up. They commit heinous crimes and blame it on not having a dad.

But what about the moms who watch their children grow up without dads by their sides? They rush kids around to practices between jobs. They go without new clothes so the kids can wear the latest brands. They have to try to raise moral, responsible children in this crazy world by themselves. It's an impossible task.

Sometimes I try to get angry at my own dad, to get fuming mad like the talk show guests who grew up without fathers. But I can't. Sure I'm upset with him for leaving, but I'm frustrated because every day, men across the country leave their wives and families for selfish reasons.

They have affairs and run off with younger lovers.

They can't pay the bills and move to other states. Most of them don't even bother to marry their lovers, they just leave pregnant, unwed mothers to fend for themselves.

These "deadbeat dads" make me ashamed to be a man. And they make me respect single mothers all the more.

I can't remember the last time I told my mom I love her, but I know how to tell her now. I can call my dad and ask him for one favor. Something that all dads need to give their wives and something that could ease a little of my mom's pain.

A little respect.

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