

THE DAY WE MET

BY

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The man in front of me is taking forever. Did he just walk in with no reservation?
Seriously?

I'm standing in line at Dollar-Rent-A-Car in Cincinnati, shifting from foot to foot. I finally retrieved my bags from the airline, which took forever—and now I'm waiting.

It's the tenth of May, but still cold. I'm doing my best to ignore the sullen sky and bitter temperature that drove me south like a migrating bird, seven years back. At the moment, Florida and eighty degrees are two hours south, as a jet flies. But it's best to forget home now. My head is consumed with thoughts of you. Will you—can you—be everything I've imagined?

“How are you today?”

My head snaps up to meet the clerk's gaze. She's roundish, with shiny dark hair framing an ordinary but friendly face. For some reason I focus on the logo sewn onto the right pocket of her blouse. It's indecently crooked.

“Gum,” I say. “I have a reservation.”

“Did you have a nice trip?”

“Yes, fine,” I say. No banter, please. I’ve already wasted far too much time with travel and all its convoluted absurdities. I’m so done with waiting.

“Name?”

My jaw clenches. “G – U – M,” I spell it. “Just like chewing gum.”

Her head bobs over the computer like an apple heavy on a bough.

“Funny,” she comments.

Like I’ve never heard that before. Her fingers dance in staccato on the keyboard: tapping, pausing; sharp, high-speed. It’s endless.

There’s pressure on my teeth. My lips, I know, have pulled into a straight line. I deal my credit card and driver’s license face-up across the counter, like playing cards; a king and an ace. Blackjack! I win! Tell me where to sign already.

“Look,” I venture, “I don’t mean to be rude. I’m in a hurry. I have to meet someone. He’s waiting—”

She tilts her head. “You seem a bit rushed.” She pulls a wad of pony-tailed hair around her right shoulder and releases. The tail cascades over the crooked logo and finally hides the impropriety. At least there’s that.

“I just need to ask...would you like our automatic gasoline refill when you return the car? It’s three-o-five a gallon.”

“I know how to fill up a gas tank!” I snap. “Sorry,” I sputter.

“I... I...really do have to go. I promise to fill the tank. I always do.” As if that assurance makes me a reasonable woman.

More tapping. The noise ratchets up my tension. What more could she possibly have to type? And now what is she doing? Why is she leaning over, both hands clutching the edge of the grimy Formica counter? Her eyebrows arch as she peers downward.

Following her gaze, I see the uber-thin heel of a stiletto heel beating the vinyl floor like a stick on a snare drum. Oh no—it’s my shoe! When did my left leg start vibrating?

Breathe....breathe....

“Let’s get you on your way then. Sign here...these are your keys...and your vehicle is parked in 21D on the left side.”

My pen freewheels across the line at the bottom of the contract. Finally done—and one step closer to you.

“Any questions?” the clerk sings.

My right arm shoots forward—for the envelope. My left hand reaches back at the same time, grappling for the handle on my rolling suitcase. The bag tilts on one wheel, careens sideways, and flops helplessly to the floor. Can this possibly get any more frustrating? Exhausting? I can’t take the time to answer either of us. I don’t apologize.

But I want to be clear for historical purposes—because I know you’ll read this someday—that I really should have. Instead, visions of you pull me onward. I right my rolling companion and heaving my overweight pocketbook over one shoulder, I stride with fixity of purpose out the door.

Foot weighing heavily on the gas pedal, I speed down the highway. I call ahead. Your father tells me there’s a shindig at your house; a family gathering, with both of your parent’s people. I hadn’t counted on meeting you in a crowd. After all, a first rendezvous amid a multitude could be awkward. In all the emails exchanged while planning for this day, no party was mentioned. I can’t imagine this was your idea. But... You do live with your parents...it’s just one of those things.

I insist your father tell you I’m coming as fast as I can. Simple, terse, urgent. For the millionth time, I think of what I might say. “It’s lovely to finally meet.” Or maybe, “Your pictures don’t do you justice—you’re far more handsome in person.”

As I ease the rental into the passing lane, the landscape catches my attention. Gone are the now-familiar palm trees and playful clouds, leaping through sunlight. In their place, there’s a backdrop of somber gray dusk, setting off budding maple trees and growing spring grass. Like new love just awakened; puerile and tinted tender fresh .

My old home, a sober, conservative Midwest juxtaposes against my new home; a playful, laissez-faire Florida. But you are here...something new, in an old familiar place. I push a little harder on the gas. Slowly, the churning within gives way to longing. Seeing your picture propped

on my bedside table every night and every morning has made me fall in love with you. Only the lack of touch has kept us strangers. Nothing more. This meeting is everything.

A half-hour later I pull into the driveway, jam the gearshift into park, and open the door. Three actions merged into one. The jolt pushes me out and I'm running in an instant. We're so close. When I open the door, the living room is filled with people.

"Hi!" a chorus greets me. My eyes dart from corner to corner. Where are you? I thought you'd be here, waiting for me. Are you angry?

Your father reaches me first, and swallows me in a hug. "I'm so happy you're here," he declares.

And then everyone comes with hugs and hellos, each welcome—but not now.

I hear your mother's voice above the din. "Do you want to meet him?" she asks. I can see her blue eyes now: sparkling with humor, filled with wisdom. She's sensitive to my overpowering need. Her hand catches mine, and she guides me through the crowd and down a short hall. I'm breathless.

Breathe... Breathe.

I stop in the hall and then take two steps back. Looking in the bathroom mirror, I tuck a piece of hair behind my left ear, smooth the wave over my right brow, and fluff the red curls on the back of my head. Though I painted my face hours ago, my cheeks are still pinked with blush. I lick my lips to make them shiny. Then gaze down to make sure the hem of my skirt is straight,

pleased that I remembered to shine my black heels. I think, somehow, that you'll always remember this day. I want to be perfect for you.

Taking the long-awaited final steps, I join your mother in the doorway to your room.

"Aunt Jacquie," she whispers, "This is your great-nephew, Charles Carter Gum."

You're bundled in a blue sleeper with feet, slumbering peacefully on your side. Impossibly faultless—nine pounds of perfection with a curled fist resting under your chin. And then your eyes open, and my world changes forever. Clearly, the missing Midwestern sunlight has been captive in this nursery all along.

The lump rises so high in my throat; I fear it may choke me. The next sound I hear is a hiccup. A sob, really. My own. I didn't expect that.

"Go ahead," your mother whispers. "I know you can hardly wait to hold him."

And I do. Your mother stands beside me, and her mother beside her. Your father is behind me, his mother next to him. Like a glove on a hand or a boot on a foot, you fit just right in the crook of my arm. Your perfume—eau de baby—is intoxicating. I feel lightheaded, and forget what I want to tell you.

Breathe...

I'm not a mother or a grandmother, so I can't say for sure, but being a parent must feel something like this.

I see your two grandmothers through a veil of tears. They're beautiful, strong women and I feel privileged to share this moment and you.

"Carter's a pretty lucky guy to have three grandmothers," your father says. I feel his arm go around my shoulder. "What do you think?"

Looking into his handsome face, I'm reminded of the day he was born. And then I hiccup again—a joyful sob that chokes. My brother, who would have been your grandfather, passed away so many years ago. You carry his name both first and last. I stand here for myself and for you, but also for him.

I bear witness to the circle of life, filled with disbelief and humility. I would have thought it impossible to love anyone this much.

Yes, I'll always remember the day we met.