

NORTH AMERICAN
LAKE MONSTERS

STORIES

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You Go Where It Takes You

He did not look like a man who would change her life. He was big, roped with muscles from working on offshore oil rigs, and tending to fat. His face was broad and inoffensively ugly, as though he had spent a lifetime taking blows and delivering them. He wore a brown raincoat against the light morning drizzle and against the threat of something more powerful held in abeyance. He breathed heavily, moved slowly, found a booth by the window overlooking the water, and collapsed into it. He picked up a syrup-smearred menu and studied it with his whole attention, like a student deciphering Middle English. He was like every man who ever walked into that diner. He did not look like a beginning or an end.

That day, the Gulf of Mexico and all the earth was blue and still. The little town of Port Fourchon clung like a barnacle to Louisiana's southern coast, and behind it the water stretched into the distance for as many miles as the eye could hold. Hidden by distance were the oil rigs and the workers who supplied the town with its economy. At night she could see their lights, ringing the horizon like candles in a

vestibule. Toni's morning shift was nearing its end; the dining area was nearly empty. She liked to spend those slow hours out on the diner's balcony, overlooking the water.

Her thoughts were troubled by the phone call she had received that morning. Gwen, her three-year-old daughter, was offering increasing resistance to the male staffers at the Daylight Daycare, resorting lately to biting them or kicking them in the ribs when they knelt to calm her. Only days before, Toni had been waylaid there by a lurking social worker who talked to her in a gentle saccharine voice, who touched her hand maddeningly and said, "No one is judging you; we just want to help." The social worker had mentioned the word "psychologist" and asked about their home life. Toni had been embarrassed and enraged, and was only able to conclude the interview with a mumbled promise to schedule another one soon. That her daughter was already displaying such grievous signs of social ineptitude stunned Toni, left her feeling hopeless and betrayed.

It also made her think about Donny again, who had abandoned her years ago to move to New Orleans, leaving her a single mother at twenty-three. She wished death on him that morning, staring over the railing at the unrelenting progression of waves. She willed it along the miles and into his heart.

"You know what you want?" she asked.

"Um . . . just coffee." He looked at her breasts and then at her eyes.

"Cream and sugar?"

"No thanks. Just coffee."

"Suit yourself."

The only other customer in the diner was Crazy Claude by the door, speaking conversationally to a cooling plate of scrambled eggs and listening to his radio through his earphones. A tinny roar leaked out around his ears. Pedro, the short-order cook, lounged behind the counter, his big round body encased in layers of soiled white

clothing, enthralled by a guitar magazine which he had spread out by the cash register. The kitchen slumbered behind him, exuding a thick fug of onions and burnt frying oil. It would stay mostly dormant until the middle of the week, when the shifts would change on the rigs and tides of men would ebb and flow through the small town.

So when she brought the coffee back to the man, she thought nothing of it when he asked her to join him. She fetched herself a cup of coffee as well and then sat across from him in the booth, grateful to transfer the weight from her feet.

“You ain’t got no name tag,” he said.

“Oh . . . I guess I lost it somewhere. My name’s Toni.”

“That’s real pretty.”

She gave a quick derisive laugh. “The hell it is. It’s short for Antoinette.”

He held out his hand and said, “I’m Alex.”

She took it and they shook. “You work offshore, Alex?”

“Some. I ain’t been out there for a while, though.” He smiled and gazed into the murk of his coffee. “I’ve been doing a lot of driving around.”

Toni shook loose a cigarette from her pack and lit it. She lied and said, “Sounds exciting.”

“I don’t guess it is, though. But I bet this place could be, sometimes. I bet you see all kinds of people come through here.”

“Well . . . I guess so.”

“How long you been here?”

“About three years.”

“You like it?”

She felt a flare of anger. “Yeah, Alex, I fucking love it. Who wouldn’t?”

“Oh, hey, all right.” He held up his hands. “I’m sorry.”

She shook her head, immediately ashamed. “No. I’m sorry. I just got a lot on my mind today I guess. This place is fine.”

He cocked a half smile. "So why don't you come out with me after work? Maybe I can help distract you." His thick hands were on the table between them. They looked like they could break rocks.

Toni smiled at him. "You know me for what. Five minutes?"

"What can I say. I'm an impulsive guy. Caution to the wind!" He drained his cup in two great swallows, as though to illustrate his recklessness.

"Well, let me go get you some more coffee, Danger Man." She patted his hand as she rose.

It was reckless impulse that brought Donny back to her, briefly, just over a year ago. After a series of phone calls that progressed from petulant to playful to newly curious, he drove back down to Port Fourchon in his disintegrating blue Pinto one Friday afternoon to spend a weekend with them. It was nice at first, though there was no talk of what might happen after Sunday.

Gwen had just started going to daycare. Stunned by the vertiginous growth of the world, she was beset by huge emotions; varieties of rage passed through her little body like weather systems, and no amount of coddling from Toni would settle her.

Although he wouldn't admit it, Toni knew Donny was curious about the baby, that his vanity was satisfied by the knowledge that she would grow to reflect many of his own features and behaviors.

But Gwen refused to participate in generating any kind of mystique that might keep him landed here, revealing herself instead as what Toni knew her to be: a pink, pudgy little assemblage of flesh and ferocity that giggled or raved seemingly without discrimination, that walked without grace and appeared to lack any qualities of beauty or intelligence whatsoever.

The sex with Donny was as good as it had ever been, though, and he didn't seem to mind the baby too much. When he talked about calling in sick to work on Monday, she began to hope for something lasting.

Early Sunday afternoon, they decided to put Gwen to bed early and free up the evening for themselves. First she had to have a bath, and Donny assumed that responsibility with the air of a man handling a volatile explosive. He filled the tub with eight inches of water and plunked her in. He sat back and watched as, with furrowed brow, she went about the serious business of play: dropping the shampoo bottles into the water with her, moving them around like ships at sea. Toni sat on the toilet seat behind him, and it occurred to her that this was her family. She felt buoyant, sated.

Then Gwen rose abruptly from the water and clapped her hands joyously. "Two! Two poops! One, two!"

Aghast, Toni saw two little turds sitting on the bottom of the tub, rolling slightly in the currents generated by Gwen's capering feet. Donny's hand shot out and cuffed his daughter on the side of her head. She fell against the wall and bounced into the water with a terrific splash. And then she screamed. It was the most appalling sound Toni had ever heard in her life.

Toni stared at him, agape. She could not summon the will to move. The baby, sitting on her butt in the soiled water, filled the tiny bathroom with a sound like a bomb siren, and she just wanted her to shut up, shut up, just shut the fuck up.

"Shut up, goddamnit! Shut up!"

Donny looked at her, his face an unreadable mess of confused emotion; he got to his feet and pushed roughly past her. Soon she heard the sound of a door closing. His car started up, and he was gone. She stared at her stricken daughter and tried to quiet the sudden stampeding fury.

She refilled Alex's cup and sat down with him, leaving the pot on the table. She retrieved her cigarette from the ashtray only to discover that it had expired in her absence. "Well, shit," she said.

Alex nodded agreeably. "I'm on the run," he said.

"What?"