

CRUSTS

MJ Connelly

The man with the station wagon had been searching the same patch of beach for twenty-one days. He would stop sweeping at intervals, as his metal detector announced the presence of some scrap of metal. Slinging his backpack off his shoulders, right, then left, he would remove and unfold an entrenching tool. He would dig, unhurriedly, until he unearthed some beer can or ball of foil. He would drop the junk into a garbage bag before carefully filling the hole back in, stowing his shovel, hoisting the pack back onto his shoulders, and continuing his search. From dawn to noon he swept, halted, dug, filled, hoisted, stepped, sighed. At noon, or thereabouts, he would retreat to his station wagon. He would sip something from a battered orange thermos, and methodically eat most of a sandwich—peanut butter and jelly, judging by the crusts he dropped in the garbage can on his way back down to the beach.

I was sitting on the hood of his station wagon when he trudged up to the parking lot for his twenty-first lunch. He dropped his pack and detector in the trunk, walked to the front driver's side door, stopped, and stared at me. I stared back. It got awkward. Eventually, I broke the silence:

"What are you looking for?"

"What?"

"You've been here for three weeks now, searching the same patch of beach. What are you looking for?"

He didn't answer, just stared.

"I must be going insane," he muttered.

"I'll say!" I said. "You've been searching the same square mile of beach twenty-one days in a row. Don't you think if what you were looking for was here, you'd have found it already?"

He stared at me some more, then dismissed me with a wave of his hand, climbed into his car, and turned on the radio. I left him to it. That afternoon he kept looking at me as he searched. I looked back from my big white rock by the stairs. He left, as always, at sunset.

I tried a new opener just before his twenty-fifth lunch. It was sunnier than usual that day, and there were some kids down the coast trying to launch a kite.

“Hey, can you do me a solid? It won’t cost you anything.”

Standing with his hand on the driver’s door, he paused for a moment, as if debating whether to reply.

“Can I do you...a solid?” he asked, tentatively.

“Yeah! A solid. A favour. A good...turn, if you will.” I winked. He didn’t like that. “What is this? Am I being punk’d? What are you?”

“I’m just a guy asking another guy for a favour.”

He glanced around to see if anyone was watching us. After a moment, he leaned in conspiratorially.

“What do you want?”

“When you’re done with your sandwich, could you maybe leave the bag open? It’s kind of finnickty getting into it to eat your crusts. I usually just end up sort of tearing a hole in it, but tearing leads to swallowing and I swore I’d give up plastic for Lent.”

He boggled at me for a moment, then nodded, slowly.

“Uh, yeah, sure. I’ll just...leave it open, on top of the garbage can?”

“That would be cool of you.”

“Sure.”

“By the way, what are you looking for?”

He didn’t answer. When the radio started, I hopped off the hood and waddled to my rock. The old man kept his word, though. After he was back on the beach, I retrieved my scraps of PB&J from the open sandwich bag on top of the garbage can.

“Y’know,” I mumbled between swallows, “I think we’re really starting to build a rapport.”

I approached the wagon man again during the fourth dig of his thirtieth morning.

"Maybe if you tell me what you're looking for I can help you find it," I offered. The man startled a bit, and his reply was tinged with disdain.

"No, no I don't think you can."

"Well, what would be the harm in letting me help? Do you think I'm gonna try and steal it before you can take it home? I'm a pretty simple guy. Unless I can eat it or fuck it I'm probably not interested."

He grimaced, which was fair. I look pretty gross when I eat.

"No, no, it's not...what would people think if they saw me talking to you?"

I glanced meaningfully down the empty, cloud-covered shoreline. No kids today.

"I don't see anyone, do you?"

Another grimace.

"Ron! Can you hear me?"

The voice came from a middle-aged woman in business clothes. She was standing in the parking lot near my favourite rock-by-the-stairs. The wagon man clambered over the driftwood toward her.

"Cecilia? What are you doing here?"

"It's Mom, Ron. Dr. Singh just called. He says he needs to speak with you."

"Can you tell him I'll be there soon? I think I've almost found it."

She was quiet for a moment.

"I'll be there as soon as I've found it, alright? It's very important to your mother."

Cecilia didn't like that answer. She bit her lip and fixed him with a worried look. "Just promise you'll call him, okay?"

"I promise."

I was poking at the mason jar lid at the bottom of the hole when he got back. "That was your daughter?"

He picked up the lid and turned it over in his hands, feeling the dimpled sides. "Stepdaughter."

He looked up from the lid and into my eyes. "What the fuck am I doing?"

"What?"

"I'm digging up trash on a beach, babbling to a seagull—"

"Tern."

He blinked. "What?"

"I'm a tern, not a seagull."

"What's the difference?"

"Seagulls don't talk."

"Neither do terns, if they know what's good for them."

He dropped the lid back in the hole, and didn't bother filling it.

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"Did you call Dr. Singh?" I asked. It was the thirty-first morning and Ron had just arrived. I was on the roof of his wagon. He hadn't opened the trunk yet.

"Curiosity killed the cat, you know."

"I know," I replied, "but I don't really like cats all that much."

He chuckled. "No, no, I guess you probably don't." He paused, his hand on the handle of the trunk.

"Her wedding ring. I'm looking for her wedding ring."

"Cecilia's?"

"My wife's. We were here a month ago for our anniversary. It must have fallen off at some point. Her memory isn't what it used to be. Dr. Singh wants her put in a home."

His hand was still on the handle. "I was hoping..."

He was silent for a moment.

"I was hoping that maybe if I got that ring back..."

A tear dripped down his windburned cheek and soaked into his beard.

"You were hoping she might remember you."

He didn't answer, just set his jaw and opened his trunk.

"I know we were sitting right here, right by the parking lot. It can't have gone far. I'm going to find it, I have to."

He gathered his tools and started his search. I watched from my rock.

On the forty-third day the police arrived. Cecilia must have told them where to look. Her mom had gotten out of her nursing home somehow and wandered in front of a bus. The kids were back, fighting with their kite down the coast. They didn't hear the cop tell Ron that his wife was dead.

Ron sat in the driver's seat of his wagon and cried. I waited on my rock. When he ran out of tears, he honked at me and pointed to the passenger seat. He'd torn his sandwich in half by the time I flapped over.

"I don't think you'll ever see me again. Eat while you can. You're too skinny."

I ruffled my feathers. "Y'know, I'm actually a few grams overweight thanks to you."

He chuckled, exhausted. "You're a funny bird, y'know that?"

"I try."

We watched the ocean while we shared the sandwich. The kids had gotten their kite in the air, and there were snatches of laughter on the wind.

"What are you going to do now?" I asked after I'd finished my half. "Well, I've got a funeral to plan."

"After that, I mean. Once the grieving's done."

"What would you do, if your wife died?"

"Befriend an old man and eat the crusts of his sandwiches."

The wind faded for a moment, and the kite began to fall.

"I'm sorry."

"Me too."

The kite was almost in the water now, too much string and not enough wind.

"Do you miss her?"

"More than anything."

Eventually it was time to go. I stretched my wings, thanked Ron for the sandwich. We said our goodbyes in that way you do when you love someone you barely know, and you're sure you'll never see them again.

I wish I could tell you that Ron was wrong, that he came back to visit me, that we grieved together. But he wasn't, and we didn't. He drank himself to death six months later. I found his obituary wrapped around some French fries.