

Patti Scheibel

Home

Outside on the porch Chris sits on the steps and smokes a cigarette. She traces something with her white tennis shoe in the dirt where the grass won't grow. I stand in the doorway behind the screen breathing in her smoke and the charred smell of barbecuing somewhere near on this warm summer night. All up and down the street crickets chirp and the lushness of people's gardens lingers in the air.

By the set of her spine, I can see she is thinking. I would go out and sit with her on the steps, but she seems restless and my presence would only be an intrusion. Still, I like to watch the way she holds the cigarette between her thumb and forefinger, and the way the glowing orange tip flits through the darkness like a firefly.

So often I wonder if she ever thinks about me or if she's threading together all her memories and abstractions like beads on a string. I think about her a lot and how I love this house with a porch to sit on and talk or laugh. Chris manages to weave in passersby, either to talk about or to call up to sit with us. I never invited anyone; I'm awkward with strangers.

Even the first Saturday after we moved in, she invited the mailman to sit with us and have a beer. He came stumping up our walk way gleaming with sweat, his blue uniform sticking to his stocky frame. Chris said, "Take a break for God's sake! You look like you need a beer. Why don't you sit with us and catch your breath?"

I resented her invitation because he looked to me like a pain; like the kind of cocky guys who ask me in department stores where the automotive section is. They always act offended when I explain I don't work here and I don't know. I swear I must look like a typical saleswoman, although I can't imagine what a typical saleswoman looks like. Chris laughs about how often it happens and tells me it's because I go around with the same slightly dazed expression that she sees in salespeople's eyes during half price days. That's the kind of person she is though, the kind that stares into salespeople's eyes and remembers them.

Anyway, the mailman dumped his letter sack on our steps and personally handed our mail to Chris with a big grin. Then he thrust out his big hand at me to shake. It was hot and sweaty and I made a point of wiping my hand off on my jeans. "I'm George," he told me happily. "Glad to meet you."

I said, "I'm Nina," but I didn't say I was happy to meet him. He flopped down into our new white wicker lawn chair. I thought his weight would break the delicate weave, but it didn't. Chris introduced herself and asked him what it was like being a mailman, as if it were some rare and highly sought after career.

He rolled the open can of beer between his hands for a moment. He said, "Well, I don't really consider myself a mailman. I mean I know I am, but it's not what I really want to be." He was aching to tell someone whatever it was that he wanted to be, but Chris didn't ask and I couldn't.

She said, "If it weren't for ferocious dogs and lugging all that mail around, I'd like to be a mailman, or mailwoman, or do you say mailperson?" He shrugged helplessly. "Well whatever. You get to be outdoors and see where people live and what their names are. You could even read all the magazines you wanted to without having to buy them." Chris always could sidetrack a conversation. Not that she meant to ignore George, although he did look like he was about to burst a blood vessel all over the fresh green paint on our porch, she just gets caught up in an idea and can't control herself.

In a rare fit of mercy, I asked good old George what it was he wanted to be doing. His round face seemed ridiculously angelic

when he said, "I want to play the cello."

Chris smiled and asked, "You mean you want to learn how? Or do you already know how?"

"I know how to play already," he impatiently explained. "I want to make a living at it though."

Soon they were knee deep in arpeggios and intermezzos so I quit listening because I didn't understand. I watched their faces and listened to the humming of their voices. George's face grew soft and his voice dropped to almost a purr. Chris's face had that aura of distant interest she gets when she talks about something she knows but she hasn't touched or seen yet. She's beautiful, or maybe not beautiful in the sense most people would think, but beautiful in the way ideas make her face move and her hands wave as if she could touch and make personal the things I don't understand. Things I can't understand that leave me watching lips move.

After that George sat with us every Saturday and had a beer. I didn't mind him taking up so much space anymore because he loved the cello. Once he even brought it over one evening and played for us. He looked like a different person without his uniform, almost a stranger. The music was dark and bitter but lovely, and it made me glad that it was summer outside, not winter. Chris stared at him so hard through the half light of an early dusk that the black pin points in the center of her eyes grew and enveloped the brown. I couldn't watch George playing. It seemed too personal, worse than watching someone make love.

We have a new mailman now, an old frail looking guy that isn't very sociable. He won't even stop for a beer. We lost contact with George. One Saturday he simply didn't come, and this new guy showed up. I wasn't very sociable either. I asked if George was sick, and he shrugged and dropped our mail into our letter box instead of handing it to me, even though I was standing right there. "What happened to George? Where is he?" I yelled to make sure he heard me. He shrugged his spindly old shoulders and scurried away from me. He didn't say hello or goodbye or anything at all.

I admit I cried. Actually I cry quietly at least once a week, and usually I'm not even sad when I cry. Sometimes just reading the newspaper makes me cry. I used to think I was crazy, but Chris told

me sometimes a person's body takes over and skips over emotion to get rid of built up toxins. Probably my body needs an outlet for the dust that blows in my eyes from the patch of dirt where nothing will grow in our front yard. But that time I cried up a storm in the bathroom with the door locked so Chris wouldn't see. The deep purple she had painted the walls made it the perfect place to cry in. I never told her how horrible it looks though.

She must have unlocked the door from the outside because she was just suddenly there, asking me, "What's the matter?" When I told her I missed George she laughed and held my hand. She said, "What does it matter? I'm here."

"But he didn't say goodbye."

"Maybe he didn't have time. He probably got accepted into a symphony orchestra and had to leave right away. Can't you just picture him in a tuxedo? It's where he belongs. Here, blow your nose." She held out a single square of toilet paper. I felt a little silly clutching her hand and blowing my nose, but then she smiled at me; and I realized how easy it is to get lost anywhere at all if you don't have a map.

I suppose I've always been greedy. I remember how I'd spent weeks steaming the labels off of cans to paste up on the dull white kitchen walls: Hunt's tomatoes and Birdseye beans along with the rarer peaches and beets -- things I didn't really like that I bought strictly for the labels. Chris would have nothing to do with it at first because, as she told me, "There's such a thing as good taste." Later though she'd bring home an occasional can of lima beans or something she hated, explaining to me that she'd never given them a "proper chance." She pretended not to notice the new labels I pasted up whenever I got around to it. But one night I found her in the kitchen squinting up her eyes at the half finished wall and muttering, "Green Giant corn here or maybe some pretty yams...." After I'd covered up every bit of white wall, it looked so cheerful I swelled up like a turkey with pride.

But Chris wouldn't admit it looked good, not even when I said point blank, "We sure did a good job, huh?"

She said, "It's a kitchen. There's not much to say," as if a single good word would magically transform her into one of those strange

women on television who bliss out over waxed floors.

Watching her there smoking, I know instinctively she isn't thinking about houses or anything in them. I put my hand on the door frame just to reassure myself it's solid and real. I know she's smarter than me. The last big think I had was back in school, right before I dropped out, when I concluded that someone should have given Kafka a kitten or a puppy. It's penicillin for syphilis and puppies or kittens for existential depression. Dr. Peterson told me not to be so fucking cutesy. I never heard a professor say fuck before. I only meant that watching a puppy yap at a sprinkler or a kitten hunting a stink bug might have been better for him than locking himself up in a room. There's a joy anyone can see if they look, but I wasn't sure anyone there wanted to look. Dr. Peterson also told me only an intelligent person should tackle Kafka. When I told Chris about it, she couldn't stop laughing. She told me I should have known scholarship is like a football game of the mind. She even got me laughing when she said, "Did you dig him up and bring him into class before you tackled him?"

We both work at the same factory stuffing cotton balls into the tops of aspirin bottles. We wear surgical gowns and surgical caps and even rubber gloves, which is a little inane; because people are always rubbing their eyes or picking the sleep out or wiping their noses. Instead of using unclean hands they use germ free gloves though. Chris tells me she enjoys the job because it gives her time to think. Me, I don't think as the aspirin bottles pass me by on the conveyer belt. Sometimes someone says something and it startles me, because I realize I'm standing there doing nothing, and the elastic gathers in the surgical cap are digging into my forehead, and I don't even know how long I've been there. Chris always tells me no one can stop thinking for even a moment, but I can never remember what I've been thinking about. It's like waking up without remembering any dreams.

Chris remembers all her thoughts and sometimes she tells them to me; like the way Buddhist monks shave their heads and wear orange robes the color of poppies instead of dull black or brown like Christian monks. She thought it would look like Halloween if all the monks could be gathered together. She told me Buddhist monks

used to set themselves on fire during the Vietnam war in protest. We were digging holes in our garden to plant bulbs. She stopped digging and told me this thing very carefully, and I knew I was supposed to remember it. Why, I don't know. What does it mean to her? Certainly it was a tragedy: people killing themselves for peace. Maybe she meant they weren't killing other people for peace, but killing one's self doesn't seem very effective either. I dug into the soil concentrating on monks in orange, burning. I planted the hyacinth bulbs so close together they never bloomed.

But sometimes, like now when she sits with her back towards me, I know she won't tell me what she's thinking even if I ask. Probably she's thinking about wide open spaces, fields or deserts where the sky stretches out so far there's no way to avoid it unless one looks straight down.

She's been so many places I've never seen: Pakistan, Japan, even New York City, which she says counts as a foreign country. She told me the people in New York city are like chickens in factory farms where they have to cut their beaks off because the chickens are so crowded they go crazy and peck each other to death. She said that's why New York has gun laws; but they need ice pick laws, and tire iron laws, and so many laws, soon people would be living in empty buildings. She told me about a temple sand garden in Japan. Sometimes a tourist would leave foot prints, but the next morning the sand would be as smooth as glass again. She told me how she saw a young monk whistle, and birds flew down from nowhere and lit on his skinny outstretched arms. She told me about the beggars in Pakistan who would follow her around and show her their children with missing limbs or distended bellies. She lived cheaply in a hotel that used to be a palace. She broke her arm there, when she fell out of the four foot high bed on to the marble floor. So many nights I've curled up on the lawn chair and traveled inside her voice.

She never said anything about it to me, but I heard her one time out on the porch say to Mrs. Zilas, our neighbor, "I feel old and done in." I was making iced tea, and I heard it through the window screen. For a second the beautiful walls of our kitchen seemed hideous and gawky. It made me want to make some fun for her, loud roaring fun like people in Times Square on New Year's Eve.

Chris is only twenty-seven and Mrs. Zilas must be at least seventy; but Mrs. Zilas would never say a thing like that. Underneath her orthopedic shoes and frowsy moth eaten sweaters beats the heart of a mad woman who'll never give up; who'd never admit to it even if she felt "old and done in."

When I came out to give Mrs. Zilas her iced tea, she calmly informed me that she stretches her social security check by eating sparrows and robins. "I spread crumbs out on my ledge and kill them while they eat." She seemed rather smug about it. Chris nodded in understanding and asked Mrs. Zilas how she killed them.

She replied, "With a bow and arrow." I saw how shaky her frail hands were when she lifted the full glass to her lips to take a tiny lady-like sip. Chris was very amused. She egged Mrs. Zilas on by asking which bird tasted better and what was the best recipe to use.

I like Mrs. Zilas because I could really imagine her with a bow and arrow if her hands were steadier. I asked, "Wouldn't it make more sense to shoot whoever is in charge of sending such paltry social security checks?"

She looked lost for a moment, but then she said, "I wouldn't be blabbing about it if I had, now would I, Missy? Besides, you shoot one bureaucrat and another pops up right away, just like toadstools. Believe me, I know." She gave me a very dangerous look. I liked her even better.

Sometimes though, like that time she was talking to George about music, Chris sounds like she drank down an entire dictionary like buttermilk. Then conversation turns to static inside my ears, as if I were caught between two radio stations. Words crackle. If I listen closely enough, I can faintly hear a ghost of meaning, but it fades so fast.

Then there are times when I'm alone with Chris when I have something important to say to her to bridge the gap between my ignorance and her, something to wash it away. It flashes through my mind like sunlight bouncing off a mirror; but words aren't fast enough and then it's gone as if it were never even there, leaving me propped up like a rag doll against these walls. It's almost as though I'm a foreigner with no native language; no way to tell her.

I breathe in Chris's smoke. Maybe Chris writes what she's

thinking about in the dust with her tennis shoe. Maybe when the sun comes up I could see her thoughts spread out like a diagram in the dirt. Maybe my mind or this house is too confining for her, who has been so many places, and I'm too stupid to know it.

Cats somewhere unseen yowl into the night, probably copulating. I choke back a giggle; and Chris turns and looks at me through the mesh of the screen door. Always, I make sounds when I most desire to be quiet. A tiny stream of smoke flows from the corner of her mouth and drifts up into her short curly hair. She says, "Come out or go away, but don't just stand there. You make me nervous."

I go out and sit besides her on the porch, ignoring the wicker furniture. I hold my words in. Chris grinds out her cigarette into the dirt under her shoe, obliterating whatever she traced. We sit in the dark heat filled with the chirping of crickets. Chris brushes a gnat away from her face and says, "Do you ever get lonely?"

I want to say, why should I when you're here, but something in the set of her square jaw stops me. Instead I say, "Maybe we should get you a dog."

She looks at me from the corner of her eye and laughs. "Nah, with Mrs. Zilas two doors down having a pet might not be a good idea." I'm not so dumb as she thinks, perhaps. A dog lives a long time; years and years in which it's blindly and faithfully loyal. People shouldn't leave them behind when they move, but they do anyhow. Then the dogs go wild; snarling and snapping at strangers, knocking over trash cans for scraps. Maybe they even have vague doggy dreams about the door no longer opening when they bark and bark until they're hoarse. Chris lights another cigarette, and I watch the orange glow as she draws on it. Ribbons of smoke curl around it, and I breathe it all in.