Strawberries

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strawberries

Andrea knew it was a bad idea. That wasn’t the question. Sometimes you had to go through with an idea, not to confirm whether it was good or bad but to see what happened. That’s how you knew you were alive, she decided, watching the suitcases spit out of the wall and onto the conveyor belt.

Why had she checked her suitcase? She never checked her suitcase, preferring to haul it through the whole miserable process, so as to avoid the step she’d arrived at now. Maybe she was punishing herself. That made sense, given the circumstance. The circumstance was this: she was going to visit her ex-boyfriend Nick. They weren’t having an affair—she didn’t think so, not yet—but they weren’t exactly friends either. They hadn’t seen each other since high school.

“Excuse me,” a man said. “I just need to get my bag.”

Andrea looked at the man and then the conveyor belt, which was pushing a series of evenly spaced suitcases in her direction. She stepped aside, and he rushed into the space she vacated.

She checked her phone. Nick had offered to pick her up, but she declined, thinking the setting would lead to theatrics they would regret: a messy hug, hands left too long on shoulder blades, all the unfamiliar smells they’d acquired or learned to disguise. Better to rent a car, to be in charge of when she arrived and departed. That car felt a long way away now, which was okay. She wasn’t ready for whatever happened next.

Her suitcase was among the first to appear. She scooped it off the conveyor with one arm. With her other arm she cut through the air, not realizing everyone had gotten out of her way. Was there something frightening about her here?

She’d taken out her phone to call her husband. It was an instinct. But also she wanted to talk to him. As always, he picked up right away.

“How’s Florida?” he asked.

“Is that where I am?”

“That’s what you said.”

She winced, not because it was an accusation but because it wasn’t. She heard at least one of her boys crying in the background. Or, if not crying, then asking for something in a way that was indistinguishable from crying.

“I’m in the airport,” she said. “I might just stay here.”

“Airports have bars.”

“How are the boys?”
He paused as he debated what to tell her. The longer he paused, the worse the boys’ crimes became in her mind. How much trouble could they have caused since she left? She knew the answer: a lot.

Plus, her husband was permissive. He permitted any number of things she wouldn’t, which made her the bad guy, which she resented. She tried to focus on her resentment as she made her way to the rental car counter.

“The boys are fine,” her husband decided.

“I’ll bring them back something stupid.”

“Bring me back something stupid too.”

Andrea nodded into the empty air. She hung up the phone and placed both hands on the empty rental car counter.

“Is anyone here,” she asked loudly.

Why was nobody else in line? She might have loudly asked that too.

She rubbed the handle of her suitcase and felt suddenly sheepish over its contents, including—humiliatingly—the bra she’d bought. She left on the tags. And there was—it was so stupid—the plastic bag of strawberries, already swimming in their own tawdry juices. She would throw out that bag before she got in the car, provided she got a car.

She unzipped her suitcase, and it was worse than she remembered. Not one but two bathing suits. Three floppy hats. Did she think that by flying back to Florida she would transform into a wearer of floppy hats? The sandals she didn’t regret. She was momentarily overcome with a desire to plunge both feet into hot sand. Then she allowed herself to imagine—just for one moment—the ocean washing over her feet. She felt the sudden cold, the scratch of salt. Already the sun was restoring something. Her skin? That would be good. She reached for the skin beneath her eyes, which was the skin she worried about most. She worried about a lot of skin.

“Sorry,” a woman said, rushing behind the counter.

“I have a reservation.”

“Of course.”

The woman got to work on a computer. Andrea took comfort in the speed of the woman’s typing. It felt good to be taken seriously. Few things bothered her more than being ignored. She consulted her phone to see if her husband had written. He hadn’t. Neither had Nick. Increasingly, she thought of them together, not as competitors but as different aspects of the same life. She shared some things with one and some things with the other. There were few things she shared with both.

Hideously, they had the same name.

“Okay,” the woman said, “I see the problem.”

“There’s a problem?”

The woman produced a look of professional pity. “When your flight is more than an hour late—”
“That wasn’t my fault.”

“No, but when a flight is more than one hour late, the computer—”

So the computer was going to take the heat. Andrea was familiar with—strangely comforted by—this strategy.

“When is the soonest I can get a car?” she asked.

“I might be able to help,” a man said.

The woman looked at him. So did Andrea. She thought she recognized him. Did they sit next to each other on the plane? Did they go to high school together twenty—God, more—years ago?

“You let me get my bag,” the man clarified. “From the thing. What’s it called?”

“Carousel,” the woman said.

Carousel! The whimsy was incongruous. Andrea thought, unwillingly, of her boys at home.

“I don’t need my reservation,” the man said.

“What’s your name?” The woman was already typing.

Good news: it was no problem to transfer the reservation.

“How come his car wasn’t given away?” Andrea asked.

The woman gestured toward the computer.

“Glad I could help,” the man said before disappearing forever.

“Do I get the keys from you?” Andrea asked.

“You’ll need to take the shuttle,” the woman said.

The shuttle arrived every fifteen minutes, except when it didn’t.

The air outside was thick. Andrea hadn’t prepared herself for how different the air would feel. It seemed a harbinger of all the things she hadn’t considered, which, of course, there was no way to know about in advance. She began to worry about these things, not one by one but all at once.

She’d thought, many times, about seeing Nick for the first time. Or for the first time again. But she hadn’t thought, not really, about the next hour or the hour after that. Her flight back wasn’t until Sunday evening, and it was only Friday morning. The number of hours between now and then seemed larger than anything she’d accounted for at home, where the trip raced from idle flirtation to reality.

She tried, standing at the shuttle stop, to retrace her steps. The only other person waiting was a teenage girl. Andrea wondered why this girl was traveling alone. Where was she going? Andrea didn’t ask. The girl wore enormous black headphones. She moved her head steadily to whatever music moved through them. When Andrea was younger, boys always wanted her to listen to music with headphones. How eager those boys were to share their secrets! So many people told her then how hard it was being a teenager that she began to believe them.

Now she looked back at those years fondly as a time of colossal self-involvement. It was unimaginable to think of her concerns first without denial or compartmentalization. Indeed, denial and compartmentalization—
especially that—had accompanied every aspect of this trip, starting with the purchase of plane tickets.

*Are we sure this is a good idea,* she’d written Nick.

*Of course not,* he wrote back, and her heart thrilled.

It was a problem. Because she was married. Because he also was married. Because, worse, she liked her husband. Did Nick like his wife? Andrea didn’t ask. They didn’t talk about their spouses. They talked, almost exclusively, about the past.

The shuttle arrived in a huff of exhaust. It made her tired just looking at the shuttle. The door opened loudly, and the girl got in first. She had no suitcases, only a backpack, which she wore with both straps, criminally uncool in Andrea’s day. Andrea sat across from the girl on the shuttle. They were the only two passengers. The driver was an enormous man squinting beneath a translucent green visor like the ones croupiers wear. At least, they wore those visors in movies. Andrea had never been to Las Vegas or any casino. She’d never been to most places. She could drive the rental car anywhere.

No way the girl was old enough to rent a car. Andrea was pretty sure you have to be at least twenty-five. What would she do to be twenty-five again? She thought about it, though doing so was more unpleasant than she’d expected.

At twenty-five, she had her pick. Men wanted to take her on dates. Friends wanted to meet her for drinks. People were always paying for things. She reached into her purse. She would give two dollars to the driver, one for her and one for the girl, who was really jamming out to the headphones now. Andrea smiled at the girl, which she ignored. Surely, it was good that this girl didn’t feel pressure to acknowledge a stranger’s curiosity. Although it seemed a little rude.

The shuttle opened its door in the middle of an expansive parking lot. Andrea handed the driver two dollars, and he thanked her so profusely, she suspected—but couldn’t confirm—irony. At the edge of the parking lot was a little hut. Andrea followed the girl into this hut. Andrea worked her way to another empty counter. The girl sat in the only chair.

“Where is everybody?” Andrea asked.

The girl didn’t answer, of course.

“I’ll take whatever,” Andrea said. “Whatever color, whatever size.”

She spread her arms, resisting the temptation to put her hands on the empty counter again. There seemed a finality to that repetition. She might be tired, but she wasn’t giving up.

Because things stay the same for so long, it’s easy to forget how quickly—how often—they change. Like that, a woman was behind the counter, retrieving the reservation. Like that, Andrea was inside the sedan with all its comforting scents: fake leather, black rubber, disinfectant. All she had to do was tell the car where to go, and the
computer pointed the way. The accent of the GPS was unplaceably—British-adjacent, robot-British?—elegant. The highway was wide open. She was at Nick’s house before she knew it.

Was his house what she expected? It turned out she hadn’t expected anything. You can only expect so much, and she’d directed her attention elsewhere: to his appearance, for one thing. She studied both the photos online and the few photos she’d kept from high school. He didn’t send her any pictures directly, and she didn’t send him any either—their exchanges were shy, even polite in this regard.

Nick’s house was neither big nor small. It was both nice and not, a single man’s house. But he wasn’t single. He had a wife. How hard Andrea had worked not to think about his wife! Andrea parked on the street, though the driveway was empty. Absurdly, she almost checked the mailbox.

What was she doing? The enormity of that question roared into her consciousness. She was sitting behind the steering wheel of a rental car. She was applying lip balm in the rearview mirror. She was depositing keys into her purse, but she wasn’t opening the door. First she needed to decide a few things, such as who she would be when she knocked on his door. It had been a long time since she made that decision.

She could be fun. Wasn’t she fun once upon a time? Didn’t she produce joints from her bra and light them in the passenger seat of cars going very fast? Didn’t the people in the backseat—beautiful people, men and women, all eighteen-, nineteen-, twenty-years-old—bend their slender wrists to retrieve the joints from her? Not two years before she couldn’t hold one without burning her fingertips. She wished she had a joint now, or at least a lorazepam. She considered driving somewhere else, maybe a pharmacy.

She could drive to the apartment where she’d grown up with her mother. Like most people Andrea went to school with, Nick hadn’t moved far. She could get to the apartment, if it still existed, in ten minutes.

Andrea was tired of thinking. She was tired, period. She returned to the rearview mirror to confirm what she already knew, that she looked desperate. That was okay. There was no pretending anymore. Or there wouldn’t be as soon as she knocked.

But there would be no knocking because there Nick was, standing before his door. He was taller than she remembered. Or maybe just taller than her husband. Of course, Nick had been watching her. Everything she’d been worrying about, he’d been worrying about in his own unknowable way.

Andrea hurried out of the car. She smiled or attempted something approximating a smile. He attempted something similar. There were, between her car and his door, about twenty-five feet. At some point he would walk to her, or she would walk to him. Maybe they would walk to each other. Or maybe this was a dream, an entirely reasonable performance of the unconscious mind. She would think, upon waking, that was something.

But it wasn’t anything, not yet. She was still deciding who she would be, and he was deciding too. He couldn’t control how tall he was, but he could control what he said and didn’t. He wasn’t saying anything, and she wasn’t saying anything either. They remained frozen, almost smiling.
Then she realized she’d expected the seventeen-year-old version of him. No matter how many times they texted—they rarely spoke by phone—she carried the high school version of Nick in her mind. What did he see in his private dream? They still weren’t saying anything. Of course, she’d expected to become the seventeen-year-old version of herself, the Andrea who was more than fun, who possessed a brain full of ideas, who wasn’t about to spend the rest of her life circling the same half-empty parking lots. That Andrea was gone first chance she got. So what was she doing back?

“You want to come inside?” Nick finally asked.

Andrea locked the car doors with her keys, and the car produced a conclusive beep, triggering an unexpected panic over the girl from the rental car counter. Before leaving, Andrea had neglected to make sure this girl was okay. What if she were still sitting inside the little hut, waiting with her giant headphones? If nobody came to get her, would she try to rent a car, or would she start walking? When she got where she was going, would she stay, or would she go back to where she started?

“Let me grab this one thing,” Andrea said.

She unlocked the trunk. She hadn’t meant to get to this point. Things had gotten away from her. Everyone had flirtations. They were healthy insofar as they kept you from doing something worse. But here she was, on the precipice of something worse. Her husband was at home with the boys. Nick’s wife was out of town—girls weekend, Nick had said. All of this effort for what? She shook her head, which was inside the trunk. The rest of her body was outside the car. She was sweating more than seemed reasonable for one human body.

“Do you want help?” he called.

She grabbed her suitcase and thought with horror about the strawberries. There was nowhere to jettison them without Nick’s seeing.

“Do you think I could have a glass of water?” she asked. “I’m not used to the heat anymore.”

He disappeared into the house. She closed the trunk and moved quickly to the driver’s seat, where she inserted the keys into the ignition. She turned the radio loud, but only she could hear it. Only she could smell the strawberries. The windows were closed, and she was on her way back to the airport. She could go home, anywhere.

Or she could find the girl. They could get coffee and a donut. Andrea had a few things to say, but first she would listen. The girl had her own story to tell.

Please, take off your headphones. Tell me where you’re going. Tell me what you’re leaving. Maybe I can help. I’ve seen things—I’ve made mistakes! But I’ve fixed them too. Maybe we can help each other.