

IT WASN'T SO much the way he appeared that caught my attention, with his grease-stained tee-shirts and tattered baseball caps that are typical of mechanics such as him, but rather the way he gazed at me, piercing into me with his squinty brown eyes, accented by a steady upward stream of cigarette smoke.

I met him at a Mexican restaurant located in the shopping center where my mother worked as a thrift store manager. The owners of the restaurant always offered us free meals, most likely assuming we were poor. It was a family-run business, two grandparents, an aunt, a father and a snotty little Catholic school girl named Desiree. She literally stole everything I ever brought into that restaurant, from books to markers. She had the audacity to deny it, even when she was caught red-handed.

I was a precocious eleven-year-old, having read my share of Stephen King novels and medical books. I had nothing in common with holier-than-thou brats who had their little fascist panties in a twist, so I gradually took notice of Earl. "I'm Earl," he chuckled, pausing to take a drag off his Marlboro. I stood there holding my book on witchcraft as he eyed me from head to toe. "Here, sit down." He prodded my side then pulled me down into the chair he had pulled out for me. "What the hell is that? Are you trying to cast spells or something?" I replied with all the gumption I had, "See that girl over there?" I pointed to Desiree, who sat across the room giggling as her "Na-na" brushed her dark hair in long even strokes. "I can't stand the little bitch. I want to embarrass her somehow, but I haven't decided how yet." He roared and stuck the cigarette butt into the ashtray.

"You shouldn't mess around with that stuff, it'll come back to haunt you," he said as he reached for his beer. I watched him wipe the perspiration off the glass and take a deep swig of the amber-colored Heineken. His hands were red and ashy and his yellowish finger nails were outlined with tire grease. From the sides of his cap, I could see that his hair was white, lined with a hint of gray. He was well-built, his muscles still cut from his younger years. He had no facial hair, except for thick sideburns that framed his face. Aside from his filthiness, he wasn't all that bad to look at.

We talked for at least three hours that day, pausing every so often to order our meals and ask for refills of our drinks; Heineken for him, Dr. Pepper for me. I learned that he had been a sailor in his youth, and had fought in Vietnam. His best friend was a black lab named Doobie, who had died of distemper. His parents were divorced and his father was an alcoholic who regularly beat him, mostly for smoking and talking back. He told me his relationships with women weren't exactly Nobel-prize worthy, and he had more illegitimate children than he could count. I soaked in his stories about life and hardships, and laughed at his shallow advice.

"You should seduce and marry the first old rich guy you can get your hands on, then when he kicks the bucket, take the money he leaves you and find yourself a nice young guy," he said. "Money isn't everything," I refuted, scolding him as if he were the child. "You'll know better when you get older," he replied simply, reaching for the tenth Marlboro that day.

That was the start of many conversations with Earl, many revelations I wouldn't understand until I was much older. He had a knack for telling dirty jokes, and never hesitated to include me in the fun. One particular day he was kidding around with some of his grease monkey buddies when I came into the restaurant for lunch.

"Hey Kiddo," he yelled from the table scattered with poker cards. "If a band of pigmies is a bunch of cunning little runts, what's a girl's track team?"

As grotesque as my relationship with Earl seemed and sometimes felt, there was a strange comfort in it. I felt that he needed me in some way, that I could save him from himself.

On my twelfth birthday he gave me a stuffed pink rabbit. He didn't show up at the restaurant that day, but instead dropped off the gift at my mom's store. I didn't hear from him or speak to him at all for a whole week and wondered if I had done or said something that made him disappear. I pictured him lying on the floor of his house, beer bottle in hand, an unlit cigarette dangling from his lip.

He re-emerged the following Tuesday, apologized for his haste and explained to me about some sort of interpersonal problem I had no clue about. He threw me some change, handed me a piece of scratch paper with a phone number scribbled on it, and asked me to call and ask if Shannon was there. I stuffed the change in my pocket, took the paper and walked to the pay phone. "No one answered," I sighed as I shuffled back into the restaurant. I never called the number.

He offered to take me to the carnival that afternoon. For some reason I chose not to go. I went home early with my dad and went swimming instead. I never really thought twice about it, even though in the back of my mind I knew the carnival would have been more fun. Maybe I was still holding a grudge because he missed my birthday. Or maybe it was the way he was blowing kisses at me from across the table, his dark eyes drinking me in while I tried in vain to concentrate on the enchiladas in front of me.

Days went by and Earl once again seemed to vaporize into thin air. No one heard from him in weeks, and I couldn't help but replay his odd gestures over and over again in my mind. "He was just playing around," I reasoned. I envisioned him, his sharp features clouded with smoke, his lips slightly parted, stubble forming on his cheeks. Earl, who advised me to seduce an old man.

I never heard from Earl again, and I don't remember exactly when I had the epiphany that Earl was a sexual deviant, but I did, and nevertheless I missed him, parts of him that made me laugh, parts that one would think "stole" my innocence and yet in some bizarre way exemplified it.

Earl was a philosopher of sorts, a cynical chauvinistic pawn in the game of life. He was a dreamer, a scoundrel, the epitome of a dog. Yet he taught me many lessons, lessons that I still carry with me. In the worst kind of way, he was a dear friend. Someone who showed me precisely the way *not* to live, and for that I am grateful.

