

## Lies

The old man's leather hat is the color of cardboard. He thumbs through a newspaper on the table in front of him, his coffee cup empty and the waitress waved away with an aggravated grunt. I recognize the picture on the front page. The paper is at least a week old. It looks well read. I imagine his fingers are cracked, maybe nicotine stained, though I have not seen him smoke since he sat down at the table over to our left about half an hour ago. His face is wrinkled. His hair is that stubborn shade of black that refuses to whiten, descending into that odd shade best attributed to week old dishwasher.

If I were talking to you at the moment, instead of sitting here in silence and feeling you watch me, I would tell you, in no uncertain terms, that I am much more interested in figuring out why this old man is reading a week old paper with a look of concentration on his face than in listening to whatever bullshit you are currently speaking out loud. If you were speaking. Now, you are waiting for me to say something. To respond.

I turn to make eye contact. This is as loud as I feel like being at the moment.

"53 dollars and 17 cents."

53.17 is the value you quote to me, this being a Saturday afternoon and in front of me is a half-drunk martini with a chewed olive stick. No olive. I pinch my nose with my thumb and index finger, as though I might be staving off a nose bleed, and briefly close my eyes. I hear a car hitting the brakes a little too harshly, some blocks down the road. I hear laughter, but not coming from the patio. Probably someone on the sidewalk. I hear laughter on the patio, behind you and to the right. A young girl. Sweet sounding. Cheerful. I take three brief breaths.

I brush the faint mist condensed to the outside of the glass. I wipe my finger. Human contact.

"Look, you know..." "Fifteen days..." "It is all this..."

Things I start to say. Things I wish to respond with. They do not make it as far as my mouth before getting muted. Emerging, as it were, as a series of three little coughs. Down turned eyes. A angry set to my jaw. My foot taps twice, lays still.

You are here, with me, being there across the fake marble table at the same time. This is a wall I no longer wish to tear down from in between us. I like the separation. It is comforting in a way I miss the world being. A way which I used to think of you as being.

I want to put this talk in pure numbers. I want to mention logic, linguistic functions. I want to discourse upon the gentle manipulation of variables. I want to talk about Eastern African politics, though it is your field. I want to talk about anything where the concept of reason dominates. I hold my tongue.

The shadow of small leaf flutters past my head. I turn slightly to the left and catch the old man staring into space. I do not turn to see what he is looking at. I turn back to the right, and look down at your hands.

I realize now that you are tapping, faintly, on a piece of paper in front you. A receipt. Two and a half years of relationship quantified on a piece of dingy white paper marked on by that half-broken typewriter you like to call quaint and "A little bit of the old ways, you know?"

The restaurant is half full but emptying. The patio has only three tables being put to use. The old man and I, I realize, represent nearly half the population upon this wooden floor.

A damned receipt. Here, right here, are my pure numbers. You have granted my wish. God. I realize, suddenly, that I do not love you

any more. I feel damn near nothing. Nothing. Oh the strangers we become in a two week wake.

\$53.17 is written there, I am sure. I can almost see it, though the paper faces you. I suppress a chuckle. You always had a stupid sense of humor anyway. 5 3 1 7.

Or, like the check writers:

*Fifty-three and 17/100*-----

I give a cursory glance to the receipt.

300.00
- 65.30
-120.63
- 25.93
- 95.52
+ 60.55
-----
= 53.17

There are reason for these numbers. I don't care to look, besides to briefly note you have credited me the last time I went grocery shopping, and granted me the resell value of the engagement ring. All this removed from half of half a month's rent. Past that, it is a blur.

A notarized blur, at that. I could hit you, you know, but it would do neither of us any good. The little girl sitting sort of behind you is likely twelve or eleven, with cute little beautiful color purple ribbons and a nice, floral print sun dress. She has innocence in her eyes, laughing at a joke her mom is making involving an impromptu elephant's trunk composed out of a arm hanging limply in front of her face. Though I suppose I have anger in my eyes.

"You are an ass," you say, generally unprovoked, with your unnaturally sour red lips colored like an apple on an old television. Possibly an offshoot of that much too sweet strawberry soda sitting about eleven finger widths from your right hand on the table. "You're an ass and you are going to give me my money!"

The child stops laughing and looks briefly at us, her sweet face an indication that you are too loud. I do not meet her mother's stare. I am embarrassed enough for the both of us.

"Of course," I say in a quiet tone. A desperate attempt to reset the mood, "but, don't you worry about it. It will have to be Tuesday before I get the check in from that overtime I spent the past couple of weeks at work." I think it is your exclamation point that made me not admit to the money sitting in my back pocket. I found it unnecessary, uncouth. Only slightly spoken, but even a fool could hear it.

The little girl is not laughing at all, despite mom quickly trying to tell another, nervously playing with her drink and tinkering the side of her plate with her fork. Little girl fears somewhere coming forth. \$53.17 worth of little girl fears.

"Tuesday?" Three seconds of silence. Damn your dramatic effect and your affected large eyes widened by sheer utter stupidity in thinking that I will care.

"My mom's birthday?"

Your mother. Beverly. The Widow Sinclair. With her fifty year old arms dangling like slabs of meat from those horrid tank tops she always likes to wear, dingy and grey, as though they were her uniform as the middle aged old woman stain. That smoke drenched house. Friday afternoons playing three-person Bridge.

You hate her more than I do, but you stuck with her. I think, sometimes, just to spite me. That sounds egotistical even to me.

Your mom profited so much off the death of Daniel Sinclair, a blue collar man with no real drive in life besides to make enough money to pay for cable and to get his nominally attractive red haired wife to have sex with him. "Your mom hated sex, you know?" I feel bad for that man, or at least for the man that was,

prior to a 1988 train accident. A wife and a child that never quite understood that you don't so much profit off of life as live it. Its like a stupid little soap opera and I get to come in the last season, with deplorable ratings, for nothing more than my own damned sense of adoration.

"You little child."

The mother behind you is already standing up and beckoning her daughter to follow. I want to apologize. I want to jump up and tell some little kid knock knock joke. Doing either of these things would be an act of destruction. Our relationship is already gone, I just want to stay sane.

"You idiotic little child. You no longer EVER get to talk about my mother, ever...GOD. Little, stupid...Child..." you stutter rant. The old man, I can feel, is looking our way. I realize that I have somehow managed to push your button one step too far. Time was I would have cared to know why I would say such a thing out loud. Now I do not care. I am pissed off and I want to hurt you and I want to hurt this conversation about your mom.

Your mother.

That Bitch Sinclair.

I will try and find a reason later.

"I said that your mom hates sex," I say. I even go so far as to smile. "She smiled and hated your dad for his penis, you know, God rest his soul, that Daniel. I kind of liked the man." I have never, of course, met him. Just stories behind your tongue. Things you point out in photo albums. I hear the family go through the glass door into the restaurants main dining room. They are silent. I have no idea what they are thinking.

"Goddamn you! Damn you  
GODDAMN YOU!"

You have lost all civility.

"You have lost all civility," you say to me with one finger pointing right at my face. You say it like you know what the word means. Like it means \$53.17.

One simple bill. The debt of all mankind.

The old man stands up and walks away from his table. Last week's paper is tucked firmly under his arm and I know now that it means something special to him. I cannot fathom what, I haven't the time. Your last outburst probably offended him, though I have no real way of knowing how true that claim might be. Your mouth always hurt me. Hurt us. More than it should have. It always flared up. It always exposed your pink tongue and your tiny little vocabulary mostly spiked with some intonation of a desire to be witty but generally relying on the simplest of verbal toys, dangling like tops and string puppets.

I want to say sorry for you to him. I mean this less as an act of solace and more as an act of contrition. I say "I'm sorry" to you.

I know it will anger you.

I have no doubt this conversation is over. Final and done. It is some sort of fog filled last gasp and I cannot even think to put up with it anymore. I draw from my pocket three twenties and put them down on the table. I turn around and leave. I think you are talking but I do not care.

And all of this because of my old college roommate's fiancé. You came in right as they stepped out the shower. It was all perfectly innocent but you somehow felt the need to push it into my face. To scream it into my face. "Cheater," you said that day, and right there, at five minutes past three in the afternoon, I realized the truth.

You had been having an affair.

I am standing there in the silence created by a cellphone which has finished

playing that horrid rendition of the 1812 orchestra. I am standing there, quiet, as Tory's fiance stares forth. Just a towel. An innocent misunderstanding.

But you think I am just as bad as you, and there is nothing one can say about that, but

"Oh well..."

And, maybe in that moment of hopelessness, "I love you" but I don't. Not anymore. All I say to the waitress with the questioning look in her eyes is "I do not know" and I think that sums up everything.

Within two minutes, I pass a golden car and then one that is purple. An ugly shade. I assume you will be back at your mom's as soon as you can get there. I assume you paid my portion of the check graciously. I assume the blue car ahead had just left their blinker on in that way old Alabama drivers will sometimes do.

Slow down to forty-five miles per hour, merge over into the left lane, and exit down Guaridan street.

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