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## In Between

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*Julie Wolf*

## In Between

Raymond's the only poet in Between. He knows as well as anyone in this town that pets aren't allowed in the diner, but he brings that little mutt on in just the same. He comes in at the same time as always, as I'm about to go on break, and nods at me from the doorway. Personally, I don't care if every dog in the state of Georgia walks in and helps itself to a bowl of grits, but I'm still on duty and have to enforce Harlan's rules.

"Raymond," I say, "you know that dog is strictly prohibited."

Raymond always tells me what I say is important, but he slides into a booth with the dog right beside him anyway. 'Rose Red,' he says, which is what he calls me even though my hair is blonde and my name tag says "Rosalie" on it plain as day, "let the dog stay and I'll keep my pants on."

I'm not sure what he means, but it seems like a fair exchange. Business is slow enough as it is without Raymond sitting here bare-assed to drive the customers away.

"Your pants? What are you on about now?" I say, giving the dog a scrap of bacon from the dirty dish I'm holding. Then I lower my voice a little, setting the dish on the floor. "At least put him under the table. Harlan'll make him buy a cup of coffee otherwise."

Raymond shakes his head but does what I ask him to. He should listen to me; I'm nearly old enough to be his mother. I look around the diner, checking for customers I know aren't there, and sit down in the booth opposite Raymond.

"Harlan!" I yell. "I'm going on break!"

Harlan comes stomping out from behind the counter, drying a plate with the bottom of his t-shirt. "Make it quick. I'm not paying you to sit around and smoke cigarettes with him." Then he marches back into the kitchen, muttering.

"Damn that Harlan," I say, lighting a cigarette, but Raymond just looks at me with a look that says, "It doesn't matter."

Raymond doesn't seem to mind that no one around here likes him much. He's unusual, that's for sure, but I've always tried to take the time to understand him anyhow. "Now, Ray," I say, "what's all this about pants?"

Raymond pushes an ashtray toward me and says, "The sign doesn't say anything about pants." He points at the two signs hanging next to each other in the front window, one with a red line through a snapshot of a puppy, probably one of the strays Harlan Jr. is always trying to find a home for, and the other one that says, in Harlan's handwriting, "No sherts, no shoes, no service."

"So? It doesn't say anything about pants," I say. "They're just understood."

"No, Rose Red, nothing's just understood."

"The pants, Raymond," I say. "What about the pants?"

He shrugs. "Think of them as insurance."

"Insurance? For what?" I say.

"Insurance against what, Rose. It's against." He runs his hand through his hair. "Prepositions," he says, staring at me hard with those sunken eyes, "are more important than people here would have you think."

Raymond still hasn't gotten it through his head that most people in Between don't think about prepositions at all, but I go along with him regardless. "All right," I say, "insurance against what?"

"That sign doesn't say a thing about pants. I could come in here without pants on and Harlan would have to treat me like any other paying customer. I took it upon myself to wear pants." He glances back toward Harlan, who's sneering off into space. "I figure I go the extra mile, I wear the pants, I can bring the pet."

"Lord, Raymond," I tell him, "it's no wonder everyone round here thinks you're crazy."

I thought he was crazy, too, the first time he came in to Harlan's, because he just stared at me for a long time before saying a word. Then he said, "I know; I can tell." I asked him what exactly it was he knew, and did it have anything to do with what he wanted to eat, because booths were for paying customers only. He sighed, covered his face with his hands, and ordered a cup of coffee.

*Julie Wolf*

That boy, I remember thinking, could use somebody to help him get dressed in the morning. Poor thing, wearing a ratty black knit cap and a torn flannel in the heat of summer. I sat down with him during my break and asked him who his relations were, and he said, "I am unrelated of late." I took that to mean he wasn't here on a visit, so I asked him what made him come to Between, because no one comes to Between—if you're born here, you most likely won't die here—and he said to me, "We're all in between. Where are we if not in the middle?" I must have looked at him like he had two heads, because then he said to me, "That's with a lowercase." A few days later, though, he told me he'd left Fulton County in a stolen car looking for a place to buy pecans, but the car ran out of gas on 78, at the turn-off to Between. He liked the name, ditched the car, and stayed.

Raymond's always talking about words, never about the weather or Sunday's sermon or Harlan's special of the day. That's what bothers people about him. He's been in Between going on two months now, and Harlan's customers still watch him, but not gentle, the way he watches me. They look mean, like they're burning on the inside with something spiteful to say to him.

Instead, they just say it loud enough for him to hear.

I don't like the way they treat Raymond. I've known everyone who comes in here my whole life, I've always gotten along with them, but lately, they don't say much to me, either. They're happy to let me pour their coffee without so much as a "Morning," and I don't mind in the least. My husband tells me, "Rosalie, people are talking about you. They're saying you're as crazy as him." Harlan must tell Billy I spend my break sitting with Raymond, though it could be anyone, because Between's so small, you can't step in a pile of dog crap without someone being there to see it and tell your husband about it. Billy doesn't love me to pieces like he once did, so it can't be he's jealous; he just doesn't trust Raymond. "He ain't like a regular man," Billy says, which I tell Billy is maybe why I like sitting with him.

The bell on the front door jingles, and Leland Morrison walks in, dropping his empty mail sack in the doorway as if expects his mother to pick up after him here, too. He huffs and puffs his way to the counter, where I see him and Harlan looking back at me and Raymond every so often, saying words like "lunatic" and "faggot." Raymond's looking under the table, at the dog I

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reckon, and I think maybe the tip of his ear turns red, but he doesn't say a word. He never does, not about them.

Raymond uses words I've never heard before, words like "be-smirch" and "aplomb," which send me running for the dictionary at the end of the day, but most folks in *Between* couldn't lay their hands on a dictionary if they had all night to look for one. I've asked Raymond before what's keeping him here, with no family needing looking after and no one else like him. I tell him all he would have to do is haul his skinny ass in one direction or the other and he'd could land someplace people might not call him a queer.

Stand in front of the diner and look over one shoulder, you're facing Atlanta; turn your head the other way, you're looking at Athens. *Between's* right in the middle. He never gives me a straight answer, though, just says, "We stay." Billy says it's crystal clear, and I must be blind and crazy if I can't see Raymond doesn't know he's not wanted, that Raymond hasn't got the sense God gave a Tic Tac. Could be he just doesn't care about the same things as other people.

Harlan clears his throat, which means, "Say good-bye to your little friend, Rosalie; I've got a business to run." I light another cigarette and say to Raymond, "Bossman's calling. You got anything to read me today?" He reads me new poems every day. I'm never sure if they're good or bad, but I know they're his, because they almost never rhyme. Raymond doesn't like constraints. Trouble is, sometimes I wouldn't know they were poems except for the fact that Raymond's a poet. If I don't understand, though, it's nice just to listen; something different anyhow.

Raymond knows I haven't read a poem since high school, but he says he likes the way his work "falls on my ears." He calls it his work, which may be why he has no job to speak of. One time he said to me, "You understand, Rose Red, that the fog does not come in on little cat feet." I said he was right about that, that then you'd hardly even notice it, and you can't help but notice fog, particularly when you have to drive through it; and he grabbed my hands and said, "Perhaps if the cat were wearing work boots."

Sometimes when Raymond gets going like that, I'm not certain even he understands what he's saying. All I can do is try.

*Julie Wolf*

Raymond's always been a little shy reading to me, ever since that first time he came in and I asked him what was in his notebook. It took me a while to get it out of him, but finally he read me something he said was about death and I thought was about a lawn mower. Now I think maybe he just acts shy to make him seem more like a poet, but I don't let on that I know. Raymond says poets are private people.

He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a wrinkled piece of paper, smooths it on the table in front of him. He says, "The pain of exposure is exquisite," to which I say, "Is that why you were so eager to drop your drawers before?"

"Oh-Rose-you-make-my-cheeks-red," he says, like it's all one word. I can tell he wants me to think it's poetic, but it sounds to me more like a fancy way of telling me to keep quiet. I don't say that, though. Raymond has a heart of gold; he just likes to hear himself talk, is all. He touches the corners of the paper, and I say, "Come on now. I haven't got all day."

Raymond sighs. "This is a poem for anyone who is a slave to the clock."

I look at my watch and laugh a little, but he doesn't react.

"It's called 'Alarm Clock,'" he says.

I stare at the top of his head as he leans over his poem and wonder about the brain in there. His finger moves along under every line as he reads.

Out  
Out, damn spot I say.  
I say, Spot  
what's that you've got  
in your mouth?  
A shoe?  
My shoe?  
I take issue with that.  
I am not ready yet  
to get  
up.  
Now shoo.

Raymond always keeps his head down for a minute after he's done, which is good for me because I almost never know

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what to say. He writes a lot about shoes. Once I asked him why, and he said, "Have you ever walked a mile in another man's acrylic sweater?" You ask me, I think it's because "shoe" rhymes with a lot of other words, but I could be wrong, because, like I said, often as not his poems don't rhyme at all. I wish they did sometimes, because then I could at least point out a nice couple of lines.

Come to think of it, though, this one does rhyme, and I'm stumped anyway, so when Raymond looks up at me, I start to push the salt shaker in a circle on the table. "Sometimes it's hard just hearing it," I say.

He turns the paper toward me so that I can have a look for myself.

"That's all right," he says, his voice thick, as if he's about to cry. For a second I think it's because I haven't said anything about the poem, but then he says, "I always feel a little speechless when I hear good poetry, too."

"Mmm," I say, nodding but not really looking at him.

"It's meant to be sung, you know," he says, and I sit straight up. Harlan would never let Raymond back into the diner if he started singing.

"You know Harlan doesn't like music," I tell him. "He doesn't even have a juke box."

"I don't mean literally, Rose," he says. "But you hear the music, don't you?"

"Well, I'm not too musical, Raymond," I say, turning the salt shaker again. "Billy always says he'd rather listen to cats mating than hear me sing."

Raymond touches my hand, and the salt shaker wobbles a little. "Billy's a fool, Rose Red," he says.

Billy says I'm a fool for spending all my time with a poetry-writing city boy half my age, in public, where everyone can see me. Still, I probably shouldn't let Raymond talk that way about my husband, but some things it's hard to argue with, so all I say is, "It's all right, Raymond. I think I know what you mean, about the music." I almost forget to pull my hand away.

Raymond looks sadder than I've ever seen him look, and sighs. "There's music in all of us," he says. "Billy just can't hear it."

*Julie Wolf*

Harlan's stomping around behind the counter, clearing his throat again and picking up napkin dispensers and setting them back down, hard, so I say,

"Looks like I've only got time for one more."

Raymond pulls a folded envelope out of his pocket. "You might want to read along with this poem, *Rose Red*," he says, sliding it across the table.

"This one's got a more complex structure than the last one. It's an urban drama."

I'm looking at Raymond, but I can feel Harlan's eyes on me.

"Okay," I say, taking the envelope. I've seen urban dramas on TV, and I'm not sure I can concentrate on a poem about poor people or pollution with Harlan staring at me like that. I'm willing to bet he won't wait till close to tell Billy Raymond touched my hand.

Raymond pulls his knit cap out of his shirt pocket.

"Raymond!" I say. "It's August! What do you need that for?"

He clears his throat. "Exposure, remember?" He puts the cap on and presses his hands into his temples, as if he had history's worst headache and Harlan was banging pots and pans and making all the noise in the world.

Raymond looks right at me when he starts, not like he did for the last poem, when he barely lifted his head off the table. Now I look down.

"This one's called 'Put Your Money Where Your Mouth Is.'"

He starts:

Your lips are red  
like the lining  
of my guitar case.

Look at it, poor gaping maw,  
empty, open  
like a mouth waiting for a kiss.

But wait. What's this?

Alas! It is fed  
and see how the red  
is now dotted with dimes.



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These are changing times.

You smile and I see how  
brightly your teeth shine,  
like the change you throw in my case.

You look old to be wearing braces.'

Before I can ask him what a maw is, Raymond takes his hat off and keeps staring right at me. "Rose Red," he says, "I wrote that one for you."

I try to light one last cigarette but fumble a little with my lighter.

"That's sweet, Raymond," I say, "but do you think Billy would like knowing another man's writing me poems?" Truth be told, Billy wouldn't care and if I did tell him, most likely he'd just laugh and say, "I didn't think he liked girls."

Raymond looks serious, like a little boy who's too old for his age and says, louder than he's said anything all day, "Billy's the one who ought to be writing you poems. That man doesn't know what he's got."

"He's got a wife who's a waitress who's about to lose her job, is what he's got," Harlan says from the counter.

I hate to think of Billy having a laugh with Harlan at Raymond's expense, but with Billy out of work, I have to do as Harlan says. I put my cigarettes and lighter in my apron pocket, thinking about that last line about being too old to be wearing braces. "You know, Raymond," I say, "you need a girl your own age, not some old lady like me."

"O sweet flower," he says—and I know it's 'O' and not 'O-h' because Raymond explained to me once that the 'O' by itself is used for love and worship—"a muse has no age."

There's a crash from the kitchen, and Harlan yells, "Get your ass in here, Rosalie! And tell your friend booths are for paying customers only."

I stand up. "I'm sorry, Raymond, but you heard the man." I know I've got to go back to work, but I don't want Raymond to leave just yet; he's safe when he's here with me. I walk over to the coffee pot and fill a mug for him.

*Julie Wolf*

"I'll pay for it," I say, "with my change, like the braces on my teeth." I grin at him, showing him a mouthful of teeth that were never made straight.

"Thank you, Rose Red," he says, putting his cap back in his shirt pocket.

Raymond drinks his coffee, but he and the dog don't stay much longer. When Raymond rises to go, he says, "The diner ceases to exist for me when you are not in it." I say, "I most certainly am in it. Who do you think filled up all those ketchup bottles?" And he says, "You know what I mean."

And I do know what he means. I understand him. If he reads me a poem tomorrow about ketchup bottles, I won't say, "Raymond, what are you doing writing poems about ketchup bottles?" I'll say, "I know, Raymond, that those bottles represent Billy and Harlan, because they need me to take care of them, too." And then I'll think it, but I won't say it: Raymond, the irony isn't lost on me that there are two bottles and not three; I realize this apparently minor detail means one day you'll leave me here the way I was before, with my husband and my job and my ketchup bottles and my coffee break.

He stands in the doorway a second longer than normal. If he's waiting for me to follow him, he knows I'm not going anywhere. And as Raymond walks through the door, with that dog at his heels, the two of them going Lord knows where, I want to tell him I would miss him if he ever took off in one direction or the other, like I always say he should. I want to tell him, "The diner ceases to exist for me, too, when you are not in it," but I don't. Instead, I just wave and say, "See you tomorrow." The door's closing behind him when I say it, but I think he can hear me anyway.