

THERE GO I

by

Bill VanPatten

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SHE WORE BITTERNESS like it had been carved into her face by a mad sculptor. Each wrinkle, each line in her advanced crow's feet, each gin blossom bore witness to a heart that long ago must have stopped feeling anything other than resentment. Her peppered hair was untamable in its greasy need to flop-flop with each lumbering step. An oversized t-shirt blared "Chukchansi Casino", and faded blue jeans hugged her double-wide hips. I imagined her as a homeless person—straddling the gap somewhere between menopause and old-age dementia—pushing a shopping cart along the street, yelling at passersby and flipping the bird to anyone who honked at her to get out of the way. But here, inside the Save Mart, in the produce section, she was just a local shopper, scowling at oranges and apples.

I'd heard stories. In our gated community there was an abundance of storytellers. Danny, for example, was all of twenty-one years old and had grown up in the neighborhood. Wheelchair-bound since the age of thirteen, he'd lived his life through everyone else's business, making it his work to know all the news, all the dirt.

"She's cray cray," he once told me. "Her ex-husband told the judge, 'Give her everything—the house, the car, I don't care. Just get the bitch out of my life.'"

Danny's eyes lit up as he recounted this tidbit, like Gladys Kravitz telling her husband, Abner, that something was amiss at the Stevens' house. But the head security guard confirmed this woman was beyond just a screw loose, that maybe the hinges were about to give way.

"Neighbors called us out a number of times," he said, his six-foot, uniformed-clad bulk speaking with authority. "Once she wielded a baseball bat and wouldn't let her husband into the house. Then there was the time she tried to run over the bastard in the driveway." He spat onto the lawn next to the guard shack. "Yeah, she's got more issues than *People* magazine."

I STOOD AT the array of avocados, squeezing several in pretense of selecting one. She moved over to the mushrooms and began inspecting them, picking each one up, turning it over and sniffing. I pictured her behind the wheel of her big-ass Buick,

throwing it into gear and aiming for her husband—like a deranged Kathy Bates character. Had she headed straight for him, foot slammed on the accelerator, wanting to ram his gut? Or had she taken aim for the knees with the intent to cripple him for life?

I glanced down at the avocados: fruits with thick, parchmented skins, and soft flesh underneath that could ravish your tongue like a buttery lover, and at the core of each a hard and impenetrable pit the size of a small unbeating heart. Inside this woman—with her baseball bat, with her husband-gunning car—was there something soft and buttery underneath? Or was she just a tough, crinkled exterior wrapped around a stone-like pit? I looked up at her. *What life's work brought her to this point?* I asked myself.

When I was ten, I had already figured out that boys were more appealing to me than girls. My uncle must have sensed this, perhaps watching the way I walked, the way I talked, the way I played. He slipped into my room one night as he babysat me and my sister, softly perching himself on the side of the bed. He stroked my head and asked why I spent so much time alone.

“I dunno,” I whispered.

It was dark and although my parents weren't home, something told me I should speak in hushed tones. Moonlight filtered through the window, its pale bluish-white glow illuminating his hand as it moved from my head to my cheek, his knuckles barely brushing against me as he let his hand drift toward my chest.

“I think I know why,” he said, hints of Old Spice and beer coming off of him.

His hand slid underneath the bed linens to rest on my belly. Slowly, his fingers probed for the elastic top of my pajama bottoms. I think I let out a slight moan because he leaned forward and put his lips to my ear.

“You know you're my favorite nephew,” he cooed. “I would never hurt you.”

THE WOMAN PUT the bag of selected mushrooms into her cart and headed for the deli section. I watched as several people passed by and nodded politely, none of them stopping to chat. She pushed on without acknowledging them. Her uneven gait caused me to glance down. Her feet were clad in scuffed white Nikes, the heels worn on the sides, her ankles thick like baby sequoias growing up into a pale denim shroud. Why did she have a slight limp? Was that from a row with her ex-husband? Or was it the scar of a long-ago injury, a constant reminder of some childhood trauma, a bike accident or maybe something worse?

She stopped by the open case that held imported cheeses. She didn't strike me as a brie kind of person or even a gouda lover—her looks and demeanor suggesting Velveeta was more to her taste, at best American sliced singles. She picked up a wrapped hunk of Swiss, maybe a Jarlsberg, examined the label, and then tossed it

back among its kin. That gesture made me wonder if she had children and if she'd been a good mother, once had kindness in her eyes, or whether her kids grew up like unwanted items at the deli, tossed aside as powerless witnesses to the battles between their warring parents. Had CFS ever visited? Had neighbors ever checked in on the children? How had they grown up and what were their lives like now?

BY THE TIME I was thirteen, my uncle had begun to pass me around to his friends. I was popular because I was small, tallness not being a gene that had made its way to my parents' families—and those towering men liked to call me “son” and “boy” as they performed the three f's they all relished with salivating eyes: fondling, fingering, fucking. It never hurt. My uncle had trained me, I knew how to relax, and in that lonely space we nostalgically refer to as childhood, I liked the attention.

When I turned fifteen, my uncle found someone new: a younger cousin of mine. He was eleven, and I became the unwanted cheese, tossed back into the pile in the deli case. My uncle and I fought, and when I threatened to expose him, he slapped and punched me.

“You ungrateful little shit! I'll kill you if you ever threaten me again!”

That night, I loaded his Tecate up with Seconal I'd gotten on the street, and he collapsed trying to fuck my little cousin.

The details of the aftermath of my uncle's sudden death aren't important. I'm here, my cousin's fine, and no one is the wiser. What is important is that we all have something we carry around, demons we exorcise on a daily basis. For some of us, what's inside gets turned into useful energy, creativity even. Van Gogh became a painter. Oprah became a celebrity icon. I became a writer. For others, what lurks inside festers, morphing into an emotional syphilis that blocks choices and stifles any chance at normalcy. Who knows why some of us go one way and others go another?

I FOLLOWED THE woman as she made her way down the meat aisle. Again, she picked up a package, examined it before frowning, then tossed it back. She pushed on, the wheels of her shopping cart now squeaking, announcing her. I watched as the gaze of a five-year-old boy followed her turn into the bread aisle, knowing that he had not yet developed the adult restraint to keep from staring, his jaw slack as though he were taking in some manifestation of a monster he'd heard about from an older sibling.

This woman was not one of the lucky ones. Whatever had happened to her had taken root like bad ivy to choke out anything that could bloom hope, and as her cart

squeaked its way past loaves and buns neatly lined up on shelves, a voice spoke to me and said enough, stop looking, this is not you. You went down a different path. And then I thought of twenty-one-year-old Danny and what he would do if he knew anything about my childhood, about my uncle—how he might telegraph stories from his wheelchaired existence.

AS I EMPTIED the grocery bag, my husband came up and put his arms around my waist. He hugged me.

“How was the grocery store?”

“Fine. Uneventful as usual. How do nachos with guacamole sound?”

“Mmm.”

He kissed me on the ear and then said he was going back to his office to finish something. I pulled out the avocados from the bag and stared at their wrinkled skin, picturing the hard pits within.

THE END