

THESE PEOPLE MEAN NOTHING TO EACH OTHER

by Greg Stolze

1. JEFFRO

Jeffro wasn't a drug addict. Really, he wasn't.

That's what he told himself as he slumped behind the cash register, waiting for the next customer to check through. He was wiped out. Lot of standing on the job, but only two hours until he was off and then he'd meet Ked, and Ked would help him score some meth. Ked, now, Ked was an addict. Crumbly teeth and big burns on the back of one hand, willing to do anything or screw over near anyone to get his meth money. Ked was definitely an addict. Unlike Jeffro.

"Hey."

...Jeffro could hold a job, he wasn't stealing from the register - he was clear headed enough to see the advantages of a thin but steady stream of cash instead of one big dumb lump that put you out of work and left you stealing more to get the meth you needed. Not that Jeffro needed meth. Besides, with so many people using credit, it wasn't like there was a fortune in the till, though it would keep him in meth for a month or more if he robbed it. Longer, probably, since he didn't use every day...

"Hey!"

...not being an addict and all.

"How can I help you?" Jeffro asked the man with the cart, a man who (he realized) had been waiting for some time now.

"How 'bout you ring me up." The guy had a flat voice, flat-top haircut and flat-cut fingernails. He lugged up a fifty-gallon plastic garbage bucket, blue, with a patented seal-tight lid. Jeffro picked up the scanner, but it tumbled out of his fingers and bounced to the floor. When he bent to get it, he

couldn't get all the way down, so he grabbed the coiled black cord and reeled it in with that.

Flat-top didn't look impatient so much as resigned. He was missing a piece out of one ear, you could see right through it. Not a normal piercing, some kind of accident.

"Fifty gallon seal-tight," Jeffro mumbled as he scanned it. "Tarp."

Ear-hole grunted as he picked up a sixty-pound bag of Quik-kreet, like a fat stone sausage, and rotated it to present the barcode. "I got two of these."

"Kay."

"Do I pay you for ice from the machine?"

"Yeah. You getting a seven pound bag or a twenny-two?"

"Like four, five of the big ones. Five I guess."

Jeffro started to key it in when he saw that the guy was pulling twenties out of a wallet. Like a lightning flash, the thought crossed Jeffro's mind that he could just leave the ice off the tab and pocket the cash from it, people ripped off ice from the chest all the time in the summer, it wouldn't be weird for someone to do it in winter and he'd have extra money. Extra meth money.

Jeffro blinked.

2. EMILY AND MERLE

Emily and Merle's apartment had a couch just about big enough for the both of them, but they didn't use it much, and never together any more. Merle had bought himself a recliner one year, and Emily had bought herself a fat cushy overstuffed not long after. Those chairs flanked the couch and faced the TV, and it was in their individual seats that they sat.

"I even called the cops," Merle said. "I mean, you figure it's got to be against the law, right? Public indecency or something. This poster, seriously, it was the size of a coffee table, full color photo of a *dismembered fetus!* I mean, that's just *nasty*. Could cause an accident. But no. It's their *freedom a' speech* and there's nothing the cops can do."

"What's the world comin' to, people wanting to express their opinions and things." Emily was sarcastic. Anyone who knew her would agree that she was a sarcastic woman. She liked pistachios and was eating some.

"How the hell is a picture of a bloody dead baby *speech?* I mean, if it said 'Abortion is Murder' then more power to the guy. I'm as pro-life as the next fella..."

Emily barked out a harsh laugh. "Yeah, if the next fella is Gloria Steinem. You weren't real pro-life when Janey got knocked up."

Merle glowered. "My opinions have matured since then."

"Convenient."

"Fine. I don't know why I even bother."

"Me either Merle, me either."

"I just want to be able to get a gallon of milk and some crullers without having to drive past a, a *bloody fetus!* 'Zat too much to ask? I didn't ask 'em to put the freakin' Planned Parenthood next to the only exit from the grocery store lot that isn't a left turn across two lanes of traffic. What I should do is get a poster of, like, a giant erection with the words 'Reproduction is Beautiful' and see how long *that* would be 'protected speech'."

"But where would you get a picture of a giant erection?"

"Ha ha, Emily. Ha ha. I didn't hear you complaining..."

"Hold on. I wanna see this."

"Oh yeah, she's good." They were watching 'Dancing With the Stars.'

As they gazed, unspeaking, there was a loud thud from above them. It came right before a commercial break.

"Christ, what was that?" Merle asked.

"It was a thump, honey."

"No, I mean... Good grief. Did that guy go up there?"

"Guy?"

"Her, whatsit, her son-in-law or her daughter's cousin or something. You know. The *guy*."

"The one with the man-boobs?"

"No, that's Miss Greene's son, she's up on five. How she stays fat going up five flights of stairs is beyond me. Maybe her son carries up all her groceries. Anyhow, this is the guy with the ear thing."

"Oh yeah yeah. He's her niece's husband, the woman on two goes on and

on about how badly he treats her when the niece isn't around."

"Can't be too bad if he's out on a night like this, moving her furniture."

"Moving furniture?"

"What else could it be?"

"Hmph. She complains about everyone. Said Greene was trying to steal her money, accused her of being Jewish. Said Commies in the government were moving her things around when she was at the Senior Center."

"Oh, one a' *those*."

"Crackpot, yeah."

Then the show came back on.

3. BRIAN

Brian huffed as he inched down the steps. "So she was... what? Your aunt-in-law or some damn thing?"

"Wife's aunt."

"So that'd be aunt-in-law."

He got a snort in reply, which he thought was unfair. Here he was going out of his way to help his buddy move a freezing cold, surprisingly heavy garbage can down a flight of steps, endangering his disability checks and coming out on a nasty day for it. He'd been promised a case of beer in payment, of course. Still.

"Was she the one you said had money?"

"What?"

"Yeah, you were saying she had money hidden in the walls and stuff. Like behind the light switches."

"I don't know what you're talkin' about."

"Coulda been someone else I guess. I mean, if some old bat had money, I guess *you* wouldn't be her choice of company."

Another snort.

"So tell me again how all this food went bad in her fridge?"

"I don' wanna talk about it."

Brian shrugged. They were at the bottom of the steps.

4. EVERETT

Everett had cancer.

Cancer.

Every time Everett thought about it, thought, 'What can I do about the cancer?' it was as if there was a pause and an echo. Maybe it was just him trying to measure the idea, but his train of thought would would stop and he'd disembark to contemplate the enormity of it.

Cancer.

He'd come out to the lake house to think things over, his wife had taken to calling it a 'spiritual retreat' but Everett hadn't had a single thought or feeling he'd call spiritual, unless fear counted. Then again, she was the one who called it the 'lake house' when it was a cabin on a pond. It had only gotten indoor plumbing when Everett bought out his brother's share of it.

He'd brought a couple of his favorite movies on DVD - *Dial M for Murder*, *Bringing Up Baby* - but he didn't feel like he could watch them. Not profound, spiritual retreat material, he reflected, either one. He'd brought his rod and reel as well, but it was too cold for it. Had it been a perfect fishing day, would he have gone out and savored each moment of daylight and tranquility, knowing it could be his last? Would a trout caught that day be unbearably delicious? Or, had he caught nothing, would he still have been perfectly content? Might he have found through it, through pursuit that was peaceful and in its own way worth doing even without yield, might he have found a wordless metaphor for accepting his disease? Probably not, he concluded. It was raining and sodden, only an idiot would go out fishing, probably to catch flu. Everett presumed his immune system had enough to deal with, what with the cancer and all.

(Cancer!)

Then he blinked as his eye caught a movement by the pier. Someone was backing towards the water. As the back of a boat passed the curtain of dank and dripping evergreen boughs, he shook his head and muttered, "Idiot."

In a flash, an absolute instant, he had an idea of the boat's fool owner. With the appraising eye of practiced envy, he saw that the boat was a nice one, probably fifteen or twenty feet, and new. Not 'this year' new but 'drove it off the lot this very afternoon' new. So the owner at least knew

enough to buy a boat in the off-season, but taking it out right away? Stupid! Puerile. Like a kid who can't wait to ride his Christmas bike, even in the snow. Probably not even a real fisherman, just some rich boy who took it into his head to fish after reading *A River Runs Through It* or more likely watching the movie.

Once the boat's prow (its lines achingly beautiful) cleared the brush, he realized that the rustless-new trailer was hooked to a weathered Ford pickup, maybe nine years old with a lot of miles. The man who emerged to work the boat further into the water was dressed in Carhartt overalls and a ball cap - certainly not the expected callow parvenu. Everett leaned forward and momentarily wondered if his voyeurism might be noticed. Then he realized how dim he'd let the house become - as it had darkened, the effort of standing to turn lights on had seemed pointless when all he was doing was sitting and trying to come to grips with things. Now he was in the lightless cabin, peering out through thin strings of obscuring rain as a bulky man wrestled a blue oblong to the tailgate of the truck, tipping it to release a shower of white-chunked water. He tilted it back up and sloshed it around, but must have decided to keep some water in it because (with obvious effort) he transferred it from truck to boat.

Everett was wondering if the mystery boater was planning to catch fish and put them in the watery drum (was it a garbage can?), later to kill them at leisure. If he was, he was wildly optimistic.

"You are going to get wet and cold and frustrated, my friend," Everett mumbled. "And you won't have a single fish to show for it."

He leaned back to consider the idea of an over-equipped man setting out to a miserable task at a fruitless time of year, all in the name of pleasure. Would that serve as the metaphor - the one (he realized) he hadn't even known he was seeking on this trip, the framework that would let him examine his illness objectively, without panicky echoes each time the word 'cancer' came up?

It was going to come up a lot more often in the next months. Maybe year. Maybe years, maybe a remission and many more years of enjoying life more keenly for the misery of chemo and

radiation. Just as that fisherman might enjoy summer days on the water all the more after the first night of soggy and lonesome failure.

Everett didn't realize he'd been staring off at a corner of the window, lost in his dawning thoughts, as the man clambered aboard with something like a fat stone sausage under his arm. By the time the boater was pouring gray powder into the blue container and affixing its tight lid, Everett had decided that he could bear to light a lamp and watch a movie after all.

When the boat pulled back in, Everett was enjoying Cary Grant and Katherine Hepburn's zany antics. Already much detail he'd observed was sloughing off the skeleton of the idea, his archetype of the naïve and hopeful sailor.

Throughout his treatment, Everett took much comfort from the image. But had anyone asked, he wouldn't have been able to give more than a vague description of truck, or boat, or man.