

Wichita: 2:28 a.m.

by Mark Lewandowski

While Pamala and I waited for the host, we scanned the restaurant for empty places. Even at this late hour Denny's was packed, mostly by youngish white couples like us wanting an early breakfast after the bars had closed. But just on the other side of the host station four tables had been pushed together to accommodate a large Black family. There were school-aged kids, and likely parents and grandparents. I assumed the booths behind them seated overflow members of the group, since one of the young girls occasionally looked back and laughed with a boy there. A cousin, perhaps? All were dressed to the nines: the men and boys in suits and ties, the women in full length dresses with the padded shoulders—a popular style in 1988—and the daughters and granddaughters with puffed sleeves on their bright yellow and red and blue dresses, hair pulled back with matching ribbons, legs and feet clad in white socks and blacked, buckled shoes polished to a glimmer. Were they returning from wedding?

Looking at them I felt like a slob: face pasty white from not only two months of reading and writing as a first-year graduate student, but before that three months sliming fish in Alaska. I wore cheap draw string pants from J.C. Penny's and a thread bare Grateful Dead t-shirt with soggy pits.

Pamala didn't seem to mind my appearance; at least she said nothing about it. We clasped hands and smiled at one another. Would our families travel to *our* wedding someday, I wondered? Or was the scene in front of us a far-flung future? Would we one day be the older couple in the center of the tables, brood in tow for a grand-niece's wedding?

A future of us together was likely a one-sided fantasy. Pamala was engaged to another, and when we met my first day in Wichita, she made no attempt to hide the ring from me. While we waited for our table at Denny's I wished the fiancé to see us, even though it was the middle of the night and he lived over a hundred miles away in Topeka.

He would learn the truth then, and he'd walk away from this woman I loved and she would never have to make the choice between us.

Instead, two white guys came in. One wore a dirty baseball cap. The other had his car keys attached to a chain which linked to a belt loop. He swung the keys on the chain and caught them over and over again.

We continued to wait on the host. Too long, probably. But I wanted to stretch out this night, this feeling of being part of a normal couple doing normal couple things like waiting on a table without sniggering familiars wondering if she would ever come clean to her fiancé, or if I'd ever snap out of it and stop being such a sap. So we swayed our twined hands and laughed about the visiting writer who had bought a change of clothes to the club, swapping out his seer suckers for white linen around midnight. Man that guy could sweat. And he had been a Peace Corps volunteer in Haiti. How did he survive the heat?

Finally, the host spotted us, raised a finger and mouthed "One minute."

"Wait," one of the two guys behind us said. "Do you see this?"

"Holy shit!" the other shouted. "Look at all these fucking niggers!"

Her hand squeezed mine tighter.

Certainly the family in front of us heard that? The little girl who had been laughing with her cousin turned around and we locked eyes for a second before she went back to her pancakes.

"Jesus Christ. I can't eat with all these niggers in here!"

Now the man in the center of the table looked up, though he didn't stop chewing his food. Did he think I said it? Did the little girl next to him think so? Did either see the two guys behind us who had clearly come in after us?

I pulled Pamala towards the door, brushing past the two guys, and shouted, "And I'm not going to eat with rednecks!"

Outside, I then remembered that Pamala's Toyota was at the very back of the dark parking lot. Before we took five steps the door of the restaurant opened, and sure enough, here came the two guys, the one still swinging his keys. They stepped in behind us. We said nothing, just hurried our pace. Both men chuckled.

This is how it ends. In a Denny's parking lot at 2:30 in the morning.

Were they getting closer?

“Shit,” I whispered.

When we got to the car, Pamala pulled away to open the driver’s side. I finally turned around, knees shaking, to get between her and the two men. To do what? Something. Anything.

The men weren’t there. Pamala unlocked the passenger side and I jumped in, banging my head on the door frame.

“That’s them, I think,” she said, looking through the rearview mirror. The reflection of their tail lights reddened her cheeks.

“We can go back,” I said. Still whispering.

She shook her head.

“Is there a Perkins in Wichita?”

“I just want to go home,” she said.

She kept her eyes on the rearview mirror and backed slowly out of the spot.

I felt myself sinking deeper into the passenger seat. My head dully throbbed. I couldn’t remember ever feeling so impotent. Nine months later when Pamala ended our relationship I’d keep revisiting that night, wondering what I could have done differently, considered over and over the inanity of what I shouted out: *And I’m not going to eat with any rednecks...*

Was this the first clue that I didn’t measure up? Was our relationship doomed after that?

I just had to make it about myself. Not about that big, beautiful family eating pancakes, the real target of the slurs.

As we left the Denny’s parking lot I tried to spot them through the windows. The little girl especially. Had she heard me? Or did my sad little gesture, perhaps like the rants of the two guys, just fold into so much white noise?



Mark Lewandowski is the author of the story collection, *Halibut Rodeo*. His essays, stories, and scripts have appeared in many literary journals, including *The Gettysburg Review*, *The North American Review* and *The Florida Review*. In addition to numerous Best of the Net and Pushcart nominations, his work has been listed as “Notable” in *The Best American Essays*, *The Best American Travel Writing*, and *The Best American Nonrequired Writing*. He has taught English as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Poland and as a Fulbright Scholar in Lithuania. Currently, he is a Professor of English at Indiana State University.