

About How Bad It Hurts

Ruth wiped down the counter with a coffee-stained rag. The Christmas lights from the health food store across the street shined in the diner's tinsel-trimmed windows. The whole restaurant, except Ruth and one little girl at table seven, was in the mood to celebrate. The girl looked around four years old, or she could have been small for her age. Ruth was a poor judge when it came to such things.

"I'm bored," the girl told her mother. She yanked the tips of her long, blonde braids and threatened: "Mom, if we don't leave right now, I'm tearing my hair out."

Ruth brought a round of beers to table nine and carried a free barbeque appetizer to the family at table four. She smiled big, full-toothed smiles and laughed at the customers' resolution jokes. That was the hardest part of working in a restaurant for Ruth. Everyone on the other side of the check is having a good time. Ruth had been working at Sweet Lips Diner since it opened three years ago. She hated that she was starting to fit in there, or "fill out her apron" as her boss would say. She missed working at the laundromat on Cliff Street where everyone felt as miserable as she did. Customers were a reminder of what Ruth isn't and of what she needn't spend time celebrating.

At 10:30, Ruth hung up her apron by the kitchen door.

"You out of here?" Jan asked.

"Yeah," Ruth said. She sounded tired.

"Another date?"

Ruth nodded and put a wad of tips into her jacket pocket.

"I wish I did," Jan said. Her eyes scanned the diner. "There's got to be something better to do than wipe up someone else's mess."

Ruth sat on an empty bar stool and waited for Mike. They met a year ago in the diner. She knew a lot about him, had seen him come in with his daughters and his friends from the bowling alley, and had been dating him for the past three weeks. On their last date, Mike

lay in bed next to Ruth and looked down at her breasts as if she were a younger woman, not turning forty-nine in February. He said: "I wish I knew more about you. Will you tell me about you sometime?" Ruth was reminded of Herman Melville's *Bartleby*. *I would prefer not to.*

When Mike's Dodge pulled into the lot, Ruth walked stiffly across the diner, bundled in her large winter coat. Her body felt full of purpose and ideas and foreboding. Ruth's feet hurt. She passed the braided girl and heard her whisper, "Mom, I'm telling you I'm going to lose it."

Ruth showered, pulled her damp hair through the teeth of a barrette, and began a few chores while Mike watched Jeopardy in the living room. Her home was small and clean and predictable. It was a one-bedroom on Delaney Branch Road, down near the river, where the barges could be heard early every morning. Ruth liked to count her tips as soon as she came home, put the dollars in the box on the bookshelf and the change in an empty pickle jar by the couch, but she wouldn't as long as Mike was there. She poured a cup of coffee and listened to Final Jeopardy. "Who is Sir Francis Drake?" This is what the New Year felt like.

Mike rested on the couch with Leo, her orange and white cat, sprawled in his lap. Leo's flabby stomach was exposed and his paws poked up gently against Mike. Leo was a large cat compared to most.

"This has got to be one of the nicest animals I've ever met," Mike said. He looked down at Leo as if he might change at any moment, the way cats often do.

Ruth put her coffee on the table. As a younger woman, she might have curled her legs under her, but she was feeling older these days and her body no longer bent the way it once could.

"His mom died under my porch, and I had to nurse him. That's probably why," Ruth said. "If you put your finger near his mouth, he'll suck on it, like a baby."

Mike tried, and he did.

“Happy New Year,” Mike said.

“Happy New Year,” Ruth said.

“Did you get hit on any tonight?” Mike grinned. Ruth blushed and tapped his knee. He had been there once before when a man slipped her his number. She never called a customer back. No one before Mike. Ruth was broad-shouldered and tall. Her age showed in buttons at the corners of her lips and eyes. Her hair wasn’t the shining black she remembered. It was gray and turning to a color like rust on top. The type of men who talked to her at the diner weren’t handsome either, but they liked her wide smile and her sad brown eyes.

“Do you still want to know about my family?” Ruth asked.

“Yes.”

Telling Mike about her family felt like betraying them. Mike was the type of man who believed in kindness and the memory of kindness, but Ruth’s story was not kind. It was clouded and rolling, like storms that stretch over flat land where there is nothing to stop them from going. In the thrumming of the dishwasher, the roll of the dryer, the tick of the thermostat, the pounding of her chest, the young silver maples outside bent beneath heavy snow, the garden waited for spring and life, the seconds bobbed at the pendulum of the clock above the television, and Ruth settled into herself. She began with the first person who came to mind.

“My husband was sterile. Come to find out,” Ruth said smiling. She would always call Lewis her husband. She told Mike how young they were and about the rice at their wedding, how she thought she would never get it out of her hair and how they found it all over their motel room as if someone had snuck in during the night and showered them while they slept. “I thought Lewis and I would watch the childhood of our children disappear. I looked at him and said to myself, ‘When he is gone, no one in the world will remember the things I remember.’” Ruth imagined that this is about where she should start crying, but she was never a woman to cry in public or to cry very much at all. Now, she felt shame bundling inside her ribs like snakes in a nest. She didn’t even cry at Lewis’s funeral. Ruth cried by his grave after everyone, including the preacher, said goodbye.

“Lewis died in January, 2009. He had brain cancer.” Ruth tried

not to think of the way Lewis looked in his hospital bed or how his throat rattled during those final hours, but she could hear it. “It seems like everyone I’ve ever loved died in January.”

On the television, a car salesman talked about New Year’s savings. The camera scanned a row of trucks in front of the building. There were trees in the background full of leaves making it obvious that this commercial was filmed a long time ago. Those trucks were gone.

“We adopted from my sister,” Ruth said. She took a drink of her coffee. “She died not too long after she had him. The police found her down in Athens in a hotel with so much blood coming out of her nose and mouth that they had to peel her from the bed she was in. Cocaine, they said, and a lot of it.” Mike nodded his head slowly as if he had seen it before. His oldest daughter wanted to become a truck driver. The thought of drugs and men and weather made him scared for her. What kind of nineteen-year-old girl wanted to become a truck driver?

“She named her son Eric before we took him. My sister didn’t give him to us. Not really,” said Ruth. She explained how their mother coaxed Ruth into adopting and how angry her sister, Kathy, had been when she realized that the baby wasn’t going to a family far away, in some place like New York or California, but staying in her own. For some reason, Kathy had very romanticized ideas about adoption agencies. Ruth could still remember the way her sister stood up from her hospital bed, leering and wild. Kathy threatened them. *He won’t go with you*, she said. *He won’t ever be yours*. The stitches where Eric ripped his mother during birth tore as she walked toward Ruth. Blood dripped down her leg and onto the green linoleum floor. *He won’t go with you*.

“Eric looked so much like my dad when I was holding him, but it never felt right. My sister knew it when she said Eric was never mine.” Eric joined the military when he turned eighteen years old. Not long after, Hurricane Katrina hit, and he left for Louisiana. The only letter he ever sent to Ruth was written during his time there. Eric wrote that he was scared and staying in an abandoned mental institution with his troop. Ruth lost the letter. She wished she hadn’t. After Iraq, Eric was discharged on medical leave, but he did not tell

Ruth what happened or why. “Last summer, he checked himself into rehab.” It was October before she found out where he was, and she went to visit him at the Stuart Clinic & Wellness Center.

It was a cool day, and the center arranged for them to sit outside on a fenced-in patio. There were flowerpots by the door growing red chrysanthemums and perennial sunflowers. On the windows were smudges shaped like people’s hands. She didn’t recognize Eric when he stood next to her table. His muscles were gone, and his eyes looked like they were burrowing into his face. He was shaved bald and walked with a limp. There were clear, flesh-colored hearing aids in both of his ears.

“How are you?” Ruth asked.

“What do you think?” Eric pulled a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket and nodded to one of the attendants on the patio. The attendant came over, pulled a lighter out of his breast pocket, and extended it to Eric. It might have been an intimate moment, if it hadn’t looked so helpless. “They think we’d set the place on fire if we could.”

“Would you?”

“Probably would.” Eric blew smoke toward an empty table.

“Why?”

“Because I’m nothing like these people,” Eric said waving his cigarette. Ruth felt like she was beginning to panic. “I room with a god damn deaf mute and eat fucking cafeteria food like I’m in elementary school. I live in this place with a lifeless pack of fuckups. All they want you to do is hold hands and talk about how bad it hurts, some bullshit like that.”

Ruth felt defensive. She would have made Eric lunch for school if he had ever complained. She realized how ridiculous this sounded. There were other things to be worried about. Secretly, Ruth was glad to see him smoking. The cigarettes meant there was someone on the outside of the rehabilitation center visiting and buying him things. She wasn’t the only person who cared.

“Do you think they can help you?” Ruth asked.

“Cure,” he corrected her. “They call it cure here.”

Ruth was silent.

“Come on,” Eric goaded. “Ask me the question again. Ask it right this time.”

The butt of Eric’s cigarette glowed. The wind was blowing, and a hovering cloud blocked the sun. An elderly man stood at a window on the second floor with his palm pressed against the glass. He watched Ruth and Eric on the patio.

“What the matter, Ruth?” Eric said. “Are you going to cry like some one of these fuckups that sit in a circle all day talking about drinking and war? Huh? Are you going to tell me what you see in your nightmares, Ruth? Are you going to tell me about the ones you see in your dreams? Are you going to tell me about how Lewis died?”

She looked away, and Eric finished his cigarette.

“They can’t cure me. There ain’t a cure for what I’ve got.”

Ruth sat quietly next to Mike. Leo purred even though neither touched him. “There was a part of Kathy that never left Eric. She stayed in him. All that anger stayed in him. We thought we were going to have a beautiful son, but that was nonsense.” Ruth sighed and listened to the snow fall. “I learned what ‘beautiful’ meant a long time ago when I was a kid. My mom taught me.”

Her mom became irritated often, and her annoyance escalated quickly and easily into something much more frightening and dark. Looking at nothing, she would say, “Everything is so beautiful” in this stoic voice. *Everything is so beautiful*. Even now, Ruth can hear her mom’s bitter judgment when she thinks of those words. They can’t come to her any other way. *Everything is so beautiful*, just before she would leave. Her mom went for walks a lot in high-heel shoes and stayed gone for hours. There were days when Ruth thought she would never come back. She was so pretty that someone might take her from them, but her dad said nobody would take her. Nina De-Fazio-Pates would go on her own.

“He said he was married to a woman who never seemed to want what she had. He called it a curse.” Ruth picked white cat hairs from her sweat pants. She didn’t want to look at Mike. The thermostat kicked off. She felt warm and picked up her F&M Bank coffee mug. “My mom died before he did though, and he missed her. He died too, some years later, in January, from a stroke.” She looked down

at the chestnut scar on the back of her hand. She had been the one to find her dad. He kept dogs, and they were going mad by the time Ruth arrived. When she opened the door to his house, cussing because the key was stuck in the lock, one dog, a blue heeler with a milky eye and crooked left ear, jumped and bit her. Ruth's hand was bleeding, and her dad was sprawled on the floor.

"It's funny though, how much my parents changed me and how much they had to do with the way I raised Eric." Ruth shrugged and told Mike a story about band-aids. The Pates were a poor family. Once a month, her dad provided her mom a small amount of money for groceries. There was no spare money to spend, and her mom refused to buy band-aids for kids who used them like they were accessories. So when Ruth got hurt—a scrape on the knee, a cut from a briar, a stubbed toe—there were only tiny band-aids in the medicine cabinet, band-aids big enough for a bee sting. It was a small thing like this that made Ruth grow up feeling scared and cautious, like she better not fall, because she wasn't protected well enough. When they adopted Eric, Lewis painted the nursery blue. Ruth drove to the grocery store and bought three boxes of band-aids, all in different sizes.

"Really, it feels like my whole family is dead sometimes," Ruth admitted. "I have a brother who is about your age. He lives in Fayetteville, and his name is Benny. I haven't talked to him in a few years, since Lewis died. Last I heard, he was married and had a second one on the way." She could not imagine what Benny might say if he knew that she was dating someone his age. An adolescent Benny would call her gross. An older Benny might have just smiled thoughtfully at her and said his name was Ben, not Benny anymore. "It's hard to believe that he's the one who turned out alright," Ruth laughed. "Benny was always kind of different growing up."

Benny liked to hide. It may have been his way of preserving himself. He would find "a new place" to hide every week. If you asked Benny why he was inside of Dad's jacket hanging in the hallway, he would say, as if you should have already known, "It's my new place." He never ate at the kitchen table with them. Instead, he ate beneath it. Ruth's mom thought he was disgusting when he ate and didn't mind, but it bothered her dad. He spanked Benny at the table,

and for awhile, dinner was something to be scared of for it. Eventually, Ruth's dad stopped eating with them and took his meals on the couch. Ruth never liked the way her mom treated Benny, just because she found him disgusting didn't mean she had to make him feel like he was. Her mom hated touching him, and he would go without baths for days.

When he was six years old, their mom made Ruth and Kathy bathe him for school. One evening, Benny splashed in the bath and put a bar of yellow soap in his mouth. He held in it there for a long time. The soap stretched his face. He bugged his eyes out to look down at it dangling from his mouth. Ruth and Kathy watched their brother, with furrowed brows, like an animal in the zoo that finally decided to move.

"Why do you think he's so weird?" Kathy asked.

"Because he doesn't think he is," Ruth said.

"Do you think he'll always be this way?"

"Maybe, if he never finds out."

"Think we should tell him?"

Ruth shrugged. She checked the bath water to see if it was warm. Benny stood and put his face down into the water as if he was checking the drain for lost fish. Water ran down his legs and backside. His penis dangled between his thighs. Grinning like a mad woman, Kathy walked over to the bath and turned on the shower. When the cold water hit Benny, he screamed and fell forward gashing his forehead on the faucet. Blood left a red ring around the tub once the water was drained, and Kathy was never allowed to give Benny a bath again. Not that she minded. Ruth thought Benny always moved a bit differently than everyone else. Like instead of walking around in the world, he swam through it. She thought Benny swam until he could find air, and maybe the air was cleaner in Fayetteville.

Ruth was quiet after she finished her story. The dishes were done, and the snow was coming down harder than before. The light on her porch showed a thick layer of white in the yard and on Mike's Dodge.

"Why do you think Benny left?" Mike asked.

Ruth didn't know. She wished she could pull a memory of her and

Benny together, one that seemed less sad, one that formed some kind of clue, but she couldn't. She wanted to reconstruct a tiny part of their life together and hold onto it. Maybe then she could bring him back to her. Ruth's hands felt heavy in her lap, like they were holding or grasping onto something, like maybe that memory was right there at the end of her fingertips and she just couldn't see it. She wanted a true memory of her and her brother, the only family member she had left. She thought of Benny's first day at school, all those lonely mornings waiting for the bus, the way he looked when he opened his college acceptance letter, and the strange, familiar manner he swam through their childhood home, but none of these memories felt like *theirs*. She would always remember the way Benny cleaned his plate beneath the table at dinner, licking it noisily until there was nothing left, how empty his plate looked afterward on the floor, how that emptiness bore an understanding she could finally feel.

"Maybe," Ruth said, "he didn't feel like wiping up someone else's mess anymore."