

May 2022

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Recommended Citation

Edwards, Bia (2022) "Two People Sitting on the Edge of the Universe Sharing a Sandwich," *Diamond Line Undergraduate Literary Magazine*: Vol. 1: Iss. 5, Article 18.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.uark.edu/diamonddlineitmag/vol1/iss5/18>

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Two People Sitting on the Edge of the Universe Sharing a Sandwich

by Bia Edwards

The fans worked tirelessly to fend off the torridness of the Arkansas summer. Not a soul could tell if the windows open were more helpful than windows shut, save for the occasional breeze. Even though there were screens, stray mosquitoes and flies still found their way inside only to tap the glass to be let back out. Arthur considered these insects comrades.

Ten sat in the circle fanning themselves and dripping sweat. A mix of everyone imaginable really. Delusions and paranoia, old and young, manic and depressive. There sat a crayon box filled with broken pieces all melting in the same muggy room.

People went around the circle sharing feelings or stories or progress or whatever bullshit they could pull out of themselves to get out of the room quicker. Arthur of course passed as he usually did. His back was slick with sweat and the room smelled like wet paint and B.O. He wondered how much longer he could sit here listening to one mind numbing quest for freedom after another. As one person would finish there would be a murmur of respect, and then the next person would speak.

“When I was nine years old my best friend died.”

She presented it like an offering as if it could earn her spot in the circle and simultaneously floor a group of already dismantled and traumatized patients. Arthur thought to himself, of all the cases of people pleasing, this had to be the most pathetic. He could imagine a competition breaking out amongst the patients: Tell the Worst Thing That’s Happened To You in 10 Words or Less. Sydney Joe Ryan would raise her scarred arm and stump us all with the New York story. But that didn’t matter.

The new girl, Mettie was her name, had her head down now, picking at her cuticles. She had blue streaks in her hair and matching polish on her nails. Chipped and messy. “It was so long ago though...”

She countered herself with a shrug, seeming ashamed of her claim to misery. The fans droned on, providing the type of white noise that lets you choose if you want to hear what’s going on or not.

No one in the group seemed to be listening. Even Dr. Sanders, who orchestrated this circus, had his eyes fixed on the linoleum. Just as bored and hot as the rest of us. He should be saying something encouraging, Arthur thought, at least ask “how does that make you feel?” for god’s

sake. Dr. Sanders leaned back in his chair and nodded in the general direction of the girl before checking his phone. She had a pointy chin and limp hair that was tinged with grease, like she'd spent too long without a shower.

"Alright. Good. Does anyone else have something they want to talk about—er, share?" Dr. Sanders' voice begged for silence. He was already gathering his things. When no one answered he looked around and smiled. He reminded Arthur of mustard. Sour and yellow. "How did it happen?" Arthur asked.

Dr. Sanders frowned and readjusted in his seat.

"Drunk driver."

She answered after the silence had quelled to an uncomfortable volume with eyes darting all around and the sounds of fans beginning to sound increasingly more like flies.

"Is that all?"

She gaped at him, cheeks turning ruddy.

"What do you mean?"

Arthur sneered, aware he was being unkind and not caring. He had learned she'd admitted herself to Vantage Point on the precedence of impending doom. The nurses had concluded early on that she wasn't a danger to herself and had politely suggested that her stay would be futile. But she insisted. So they let her, on account of a problematic history.

"I just mean, terrible things happen to everyone. Why does this particular thing matter? It doesn't seem like enough to bring yourself here. So what's your real issue? Genetic predisposition to fucked up shit? Chemical imbalance? Internet diagnosis? Fall into addiction?"

The heat was making him mean, turning to calcified agitation in his veins. Tell the truth, don't pretend like that's what's wrong with you. He wanted to say. He meant to say. He immediately hated himself. And maybe because she had come here of her own free will and seemed better off than the rest of them, he hated her a little bit too. He could tell she was expecting a sprinkle of validation, a nod at her being here.

Her eyes widened at the misconduct of group etiquette and she looked to Dr. Sanders for help. Sanders didn't care; she would learn to know that. In Sanders' world patients were patients, not people. He gave Arthur a sharp look and clapped his hands together, signaling the end of group therapy. Wildly unproductive as per usual.

The nurses were disappointed to have another patient to take care of when they barely had enough time and resources to take care of the first few, let alone enough damn air conditioning.

The girl was immediately labeled a “vacationer” by the patients, most of whom had been involuntarily admitted. The nurses preferred the term “invited.”

During group Mettie had time and time again made a nauseating performance of meek cordiality which earned her little to no respect amongst the Vantage Point crowd. The only one that seemed to welcome her presence was Harold, the sixty three year old war vet who had suffered and slipped through the hands of an uncaring government.

They liked to paint together when he would escape from the geriatric wing. He said she made him feel young. Arthur found them together in the activity room facing the garden window. They mixed green and blue on the canvas like the sky was melting into the grass. They weren't very good. Though it didn't take Arthur's stint in art school to tell him that.

Word got around that Arthur caused a scene with the new girl at group, which was hardly the case. Maxine scolded him anyway when she came to give him his meds and warned against making this a “hostile environment for that poor girl.” The “or else” was silent. Arthur told Maxine that everyone was too sensitive these days. She laughed and said “That's the pot calling the kettle fat love.” Arthur thought that was insensitive to say to a psych patient and also didn't mention that the saying was actually, “that's the pot calling the kettle black.”

In the day room later that week she approached him. He noticed she walked kind of like a bony penguin. She wore an impossibly large wobbling smile and large sweatshirt, three sizes too big. Arthur had been in the middle of picking his eyebrow hairs off one by one, set off by Maxine's misplacement of his coriander, which was needed to season every ferociously bland meal. Arthur turned, hand hovering over his eyebrow.

“Can I help you?”

“HIIJUST WANTEDTO TELLYOU ITHINKYOU'RE REALLYRUDE.”

She let it out all in one breath; the loudness of her accusation nearly knocked him off balance. He stared at her, shocked for a moment by her outburst. She continued to stare at him as he stood gaping at her, he physically drew back into himself feeling like a bug under a magnifying glass. Pinned down and bright.

“What are you doing to your eyebrows?”

“Pulling them out.” He tried to make his voice sharp.

She took a step closer to him, peering at his now nearly bald eyebrow.

“Don't you know it's rude to—”

“Why do you do that?” She interrupted.

“Mind your own—you can’t just ask me that!”

“Sorry. You did ask me first though.”

He resisted the urge to pull his hand up to his other eyebrow. Instead he crossed his arms and stared her down.

“Just so you know, this whole thing,” He drew a little air circle in between them. “is completely inappropriate.”

“That I’m talking to you?” She raised an eyebrow.

“Yes. I don’t deserve this. You seem like a very toxic person.”

She laughed, tilting her head back.

“I think you’re mistaking entitlement for self-love.”

He had had enough. Only a week and a half to go and I’ll be out. His less optimistic thoughts reminded him that this likely wouldn’t be his last stay at Vantage Point, this being his third stay in the last two years.

He was turning to leave when she said in a voice too loud for the day room that he started it and if he had a problem with her maybe he should just tell Dr. Sanders about it like an adult.

He looked back, rage boiling behind his eyes, then sped back to his room. His face felt hot and he desperately wanted to be anywhere but a tiny gray room with an uncomfortable bed and a roommate who’s a stranger and sweatpants and house shoes and not enough air conditioning and a schedule that is not his own. But he was here. And he had a meeting with Dr. Sanders in half an hour. He’d wanted to discuss Arthur’s mother. Again. Arthur found the topic to be tiring and unpleasant. Therapists had been exhausting the subject for years. Arthur laid on his bed and closed his eyes. He recalled how his family had fallen apart. Not with shouts or accusations. Quietly in whispers and nods behind closed doors, parting ways. He didn’t hate his mother, but she didn’t protect him when she should have. That was a point of interest for the therapists. Deep down he knew she couldn’t be blamed, which was considered progress by Sanders—not that he had provided that breakthrough. Arthur wasn’t stupid, this wasn’t some complicated thing that he couldn’t get past. It was simple. She had been his best friend, his mother, his protector. She shouldn’t have let a lot of things happen. That was it. She should have been there. The fishing trip. His cousin. The too calm water. Grandpa looking the other way. That was all.

Arthur splashed cold water in his face and shuffled to meet Dr. Sanders.

On nights that Arthur couldn’t sleep, he would sneak out of his room, make a sandwich in

the kitchen and tour the halls, enjoying the way his house shoes slid over the floors and the way there was no one but him. After the dreaded meeting with Dr. Sanders—who at one point took a phone call from a woman named Terry who was inquiring which hotel to meet him at. Arthur felt he was owed this sandwich. The session had been miserable. The photo of Sanders, his wife Susan, and their smiling faces sat staring at Arthur as he watched the good doctor chuckle and murmur into his phone.

Everything had been quiet as usual, until he came upon the day room and heard sniffing from one of the couches. In the dark, Arthur could make out the small outline of a girl balled up, knees to chest. Her long hair was tangled down her back. She was turned away from him, to the window where the moon hung just within frame. Of course it was Mettie. Arthur felt creepy watching her cry while he ate a sandwich out of sight. He sighed in a resigned kind of way.

“Why are you crying?”

She let out a little shriek and glared at him.

“Why are you watching me? Shouldn’t you be asleep?”

The dim glow of the hall light cast over his guilty face and he took a bite of his sandwich.

“Shouldn’t you?”

Maybe it was the exhaustion he felt or the fact that there was no one around, but he felt like it was easier to be nice to her in the dark.

She sniffed and wiped a trail of snot along her arm. Her lips broke into a bright smile. She would probably be pretty if she showered.

“I don’t think my roommate likes me very much.” She laughed in that teary way. He nodded, and for some reason went to join her on the couch.

“This place is bleak. The nurses do the best they can, but they’re burnt out and understaffed. And there’s no money. And of course there’s Sanders who’s barely licensed.”

“Wow, you know a lot about this place.”

Maxine constantly complained about it, and he had spent enough time here to see for himself how lacking in resources Vantage Point really was. Arthur shrugged. “I just like to stay educated. I read a lot.”

She nodded like this was true. He was thankful she didn’t ask for more proof and sat stiffly until she asked if she could have a bite of his sandwich and he obliged, tearing off a piece.

“I’m sorry for how I acted towards you before,” he said finally, remembering something Sanders had muttered about forgiveness.

She looked at him kind of funny, seeming older than she was.

“My brother was the same way.” She smiled softly.

He didn’t quite know what she meant.

They talked for a bit, small talk mostly. Hometowns, jobs, animals, restaurants. She had gone to school for economics, but ended up working in a coffee shop. He compared his stories of failing art school and then failing at being a writer and then being a musician... each less successful than the last. His latest feat: being a dog groomer for rich jewel-clad older women with small dogs.

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Shoot.”

“What made you come here?”

He wondered sometimes if he would know his own answer to the question—not the on paper version, the metaphorical kind. Mettie chewed her mouthful of sandwich and thought for a moment before wiping her mouth. She surprised him by answering.

“Ever since I was a little girl, I’ve felt like I was standing on the edge of something,” She paused and took another bite.

“And I’ve just been getting closer and closer to the edge and I have that feeling in my stomach- you know the one that you get when you think you might fall- and anyway, it’s like this voice is telling me to jump. I don’t know if I should keep trying not to fall or if I should jump, because what if I get stuck falling and can’t get back up to the edge.” She was talking faster now, turmoil rolling off her in waves. He wished she was giving him a straight answer instead of this vague nonsense, but he was trying to be sensitive so he refrained from interrupting.

“My mother fell. And she never came back, not really. She spent the rest of her life trying to climb back up until she couldn’t do it anymore and she... she decided she didn’t want to be on the edge or falling or anywhere.” She swallowed hard and continued in a whisper.

“Everyday I feel like I’m closer and closer to being her... and I want it to stop.” “Then why did you tell everyone about your dead friend?”

She shrugged, “That was my first step towards the edge.”

They locked eyes for a moment, and though Arthur responded inappropriately with a remark about choices in psychiatric hospitals, Mettie smiled, understanding more than words could convey. Something like kinship glowed between them, and Arthur felt he owed her something, this strange girl with blue streaks in her hair, who was generous with her smile and didn’t

tell whole truths. His own story pressed behind his teeth, but he swallowed it with another bite of his sandwich.

The weeks dragged on and they developed the habit of meeting in the day room with stolen sandwiches in the small hours of night—Arthur with coriander tucked in the pocket of his robe and Mettie with no seasoning at all. On this particular night, Arthur’s last night, they sat comfortably in silence somewhere between content and apathetic. Mettie wore yellow house shoes and brown plaid pajamas. Her sandwich was ham and mayonnaise with pickles. Arthur had turkey and swiss with a sprinkle of coriander. She offered him a bite of hers and he refused, explaining that red meat kills you to which she retorted that pork was technically white meat. They fell into silence again. She was thoughtful, he was the quiet observer of her inner monologue. Finally she spoke.

“You expect to be friends forever, roommates in college, have a joint wedding. All that without really knowing each other at all ‘cause you’re only kids.” She laughed to herself. She was talking about her dead friend again.

“There’s so many things you just don’t know as a kid,”

What he would later learn is that her friend had been walking to her house after a long disagreement about who would walk to whose house. Mettie’s mother being the decider, not wanting her daughter walking alone, preferring someone else’s daughter to. All that guilt and blame had poisoned her life ever since.

“We didn’t stand a chance.”

She shrugged, as if letting those thoughts roll away, taken away, by some acceptance. The sound of cicadas filled the room like a resounding applause. Tonight he felt he understood. At Arthur’s last group he told his story. By that point he had already shared it with Mettie during a late night in the day room. But it felt right to give this to the group. Felt brave. Mettie gave an encouraging smile, holding the whole world in her eyes. So Arthur began, with the fishing trip, and his grandpa who was supposed to watch them and his cousin who shouldn’t have done what he did and how the water didn’t seem to move at all. By the time he got to how he wished his mother would have been there to stop it, he was crying for what felt like the first time in a long time.

