

Pins and Needles

By Jeannette Lareau

The nonsmoking section of this restaurant was light and green. She had finished dessert an hour ago but had been drinking refills of cola one after another, waiting until she felt some desire to go home. When she got home, the usual messages and tidbits would be on her answering machine and her E-mail. She wondered about them vaguely, but ordered another drink and crossed her legs differently so her feet didn't fall asleep. If her feet fell asleep and she forgot to check for it, she would sway and clutch when she tried to leave. That was the most embarrassing thing in the world, hearing the dishes rattle as she grabbed great fistfuls of the tablecloth and lowered herself hastily back into her chair. She glanced at her glass, picked it up half expecting it to slide from her hands, and tasted her cola. She didn't want to go home yet, but she didn't want to stay here either. After a few minutes she left the money for her bill, plus twenty percent tip, on the table and started out to her car.

"Thanks, have a nice night," she said to the waiter, who was stained with some kind of gravy or chocolate. She was proud that she'd left him a good tip.

The waiter smiled guiltily and stopped leaning against the hostess stand.

"Yeah, you too!"

She pushed open the door, wincing at the loudness of the bell attached to the top of it. She began to fish for her keys as she walked, before the outdoor lights of the place became too dim to help her.

"Scuse me, miss, don't mean to bother you."

Her head snapped up. In front of her stood an old black man--no, he was middle aged, but greying hair made him appear older. His eyes were large and red rimmed. He was not starving; his dusty T-shirt and cotton pants clung quietly to a fleshy middle and thighs. He looked generally beaten, sad, but stood with his hands outstretched a little in an almost classical gesture of inquiry. He still had the soul to be confused.

She didn't know whether or not he was going to ask her for money. If he did she didn't know whether or not she would give it to him. Finally she found her keys, and weighed them in her hand while she looked at the man. When he continued to speak she searched his words for beggary, for references to the unfairness of his circumstances.

"I lived in this neighborhood a long time," he smiled. "I ate at this place when it was the Lamplighter...they still have those fries with gravy?"

"Mm, no, I don't think so...it's different now, things have changed."

"How they changed? I'm forty-nine years old, and I lived in this neighborhood for a long time."

She glanced at the collapsing fence of wooden slats that sagged along the street on the side opposite the restaurant. The restaurant's outside lights played almost invisibly on the slats.

"Well, this place is run by young people. It's sort of upbeat, and bright."

"But they don't have fries and gravy? What about that turkey dinner? I always ate that, too."

"I don't know--but I really don't think so. They have hamburgers and things like that."

"See, I'm forty-nine years old. Things are sure different now."

The man lowered his arms and they hung down, six inches from his sides. He still looked restless.

She sighed and smiled. Maybe this was his point, he was just a nice nostalgic old resident of a neighborhood that had gone downhill over the years.

"Yeah, I see how things must be different," she agreed.

The man moved away from her as though he were leaving, but then he came closer than he had been before. He looked earnest, but the littlest bit vacant; his vacancy could have been numbness.

"Could I ask you a question? I got a question, and I'd just like to ask you what you think."

"Sure."

She squeezed her keys and smiled with hollow expectation. She figured he was going to ask for money now, and she'd let herself get too involved to just get in the car and leave him. If she made him angry, he might try to follow her.

"See, you're a nice girl," he said. "I'm not a stupid man. I used to live around here, but now I live over there--" gesturing to some high rise buildings just visible over the sagging wood slat wall "--in those apartments there. I'm not a dumb man. I used to work for

Martin-Marietta, I worked with mechanics, with that--what's that, the Patriot missile. I had a good life. Now I work for less than I should, I'm worth more than that. I got a job at the Domino sugar factory over here. But I have a job, I'm working. I'm clean, you know."

"That's good. That's really good." Silently, she wondered how many circles this was going to travel in before he made his move.

He watched her face to know that she believed him, and went on with growing intensity. "Cause, I wasn't always clean...I'm an alcoholic, but I haven't used drugs for five years. Drugs are nasty, I don't want to hurt nobody. I'm not a violent man. I'm working now for less than I'm worth, but I'm clean! Now, here's my question. Here's my situation," he said clasping his hands in front of him. "I've been with this woman since I've been clean, for five years. I always need a strong woman, I'm one of those men who needs a strong woman around. I need that. And this woman's been living in my house. She lives with me, she uses my shower and sleeps in my bed. On Friday, I come home from work and I go into the bedroom to find her, and I see her in bed with another woman."

Her mouth opened a little. She closed it and lowered her eyes, watching the round line his sneakers made of his toes. Round, like an egg over easy. She could picture his expectant, vacant eyes and warm belly coming around the corner of his front hall, through a doorway into his familiar bedroom, then stopping and just quivering. The fact was, she thought, that she didn't have enough information--she just didn't know who to feel sorry for. The man's voice sounded hurt. He was so disillusioned-- oh, she didn't want to be disillusioned. Whether or not she was justified, she felt sorry for him.

Brows knotted, he pushed his hands towards her.

"She was in bed with another woman! Now, she smokes pot sometimes, but

I've been clean for five years. But I've been drinking wine for three days since then. I had just my keys and twenty-eight dollars, so I thought with wine I could last. I been thinking, and drinking wine. What did she need I couldn't give? I been good by her, doing okay, and I find her there in front of me with a woman, with a cucumber. So let me ask you. What am I supposed to do? "

She exhaled. "Well, ah...huh. That's your question, then."

"That's the question, what am I supposed to do? I need a strong woman, and I thought I made her happy. I did everything. And now I'm afraid to go home, because I'm not a violent man... What do I do? Do I forgive her? I don't want to hurt nobody."

What could she say? Forgive her, go back to her, kill her, kill the other woman, forgive the other woman? What if she read in tomorrow's paper the story of a murder or a suicide, when she could have stopped the man responsible?

"I'm not a violent man," he said.

His voice held the tremor of crying, but was angrily dry. She remembered that she'd been afraid of him; she was afraid of him again, in another way.

"This is hard...I can't tell you what you should do. Make sure you're sober, and go home and talk to her. You have to ask her why, right? You have to know why."

"Why you think she would do that, when I've been with her for all this time?"

"I don't know. You have to go home and talk to her."

The man shook his head, swaying back and forth with his hands spread at his sides. Looking at him she was reminded of her own fragility, of human fragility. He looked like a dancer.

"You're a nice girl. I'm sorry I put this on you. You can't help me. You'd never do something like this to your man, I know. This is my problem, you know, but I been clean for five years and I been drinking wine since I seen them..." he shook his head again, and smiled broadly as though he were concluding a job interview.

He stepped forward and shook her hand. "Glad to talk to you. I'm sorry you had to hear that, I just wanted to ask someone what I should do. I wanted to know, because I'm not a violent man, and I can't go home because she's there."

"Yeah, well, good luck, with everything...really, that's all I know to say."

"Thank you for your advice, ma'am. I'll remember. Thank you."

She put her key in the lock and opened the car door. The automatic lights went on inside, and the seatbelt light. The man began to retreat, still facing her, stepping backward down the road next to the slat fence. She raised her hand and waved one last time.

When she moved to get into the car, her right leg folded tingling beneath her and she went down, swaying from side to side and clutching at the shoulder strap of her seatbelt. Breathing quickly, she eased herself into the driver's seat. She closed the door and turned the key in the ignition. The lights outside the restaurant still burned, casting a pale bluish glow on the hood of her car.