

BENDSVILLE

—Andrew Pinkerton

BENDSVILLE HAS ALWAYS BEEN the idyllic little family town where it seemed the perversions of modernity had somehow overlooked its existence, or perhaps, to be more accurate, modernity chose not to wander so far through the hills and fields and forests for fear of becoming lost. Many of the entrapments of larger cities, such as big box retailers and strip joints and the like, were hard to be found, and societal blights like school shootings and big-time theft were not to be heard of.

Yes, a town of picturesque proportions Bendsville is, the type one generally imagines exists only in a Rockwell painting or a *Little House* novel. You know, the kind of town where there isn't any fear from leaving your front door unlocked and your neighbor Edna has been your neighbor since you were a small kid. But if one were to enter town today, he, no doubt, would have justifiable cause to think it necessary to yank down a curtain of smiling, down-home pretenses and expose Bendsville as an undeniable fraud.

That would be overboard, however—probably even dancing into the realm of extreme. Make no mistake, though. The usual warmth of the town served too well as a contrast to the scene within my own home—a scene I'm sure is taking place in many a family's houses across town as well.

"I—I just couldn't get to him in time. I heard him playing around in the basement, and then—just the worst screams. He must have been playing around in the water. We don't have the filtration on down there..." Her voice trailed off, a tremble managing its way in, reminiscent of winter's slow yet recognizable intruding into fall. She, our next-door neighbor Peggy, sat on the plush sofa in our living room, picking at some of the frayed threads on the arm. I made a mental note to trim those off later. While her voice carried some traces of grief, her face, with lines crossing her forehead and eyes dark and low, was riddled weariness. Weary from scenes

like this playing out over and over. Her seven-year-old son Charlie was lying on a bed in our guestroom. He was quiet now; his breathing slowed, but was running a fever and was covered from head to toe with a faint rash.

I sat next to my wife Sam on the couch that was across from Peggy. I moved my hand to rest on Sam's thigh, but she pushed it away as quickly as I made contact. She knew it was less a gesture of any sort of affection as it was a "See, dear, this is why we don't have any children." We both watched her, truly wanting to help, but obviously knowing her son would pass soon no matter what.

A couple days later, the sun beaming down on us with very few clouds to obstruct its rays, we gathered around a plain grave site with a small handful of neighbors and Peggy, who stood along side her two remaining children, to bid our final adieus to Charlie. No one chose to wear black; we merely showed up in whatever felt most comfortable—there was really no need to get all dressed up, anyway. It was a simple service, really. Charlie was placed to the left of his father's own grave without much being said. There were no musician playing some melancholy chords and no slow-falling rain like you'd normally see in the movies. I don't even think there was any real reason to trouble the minister with coming out to such a simple event.

To be honest, I don't even think it would truly be worth coming out for if it weren't for the en-

suing gathering, hopefully providing some decent food and a little wine, as cheap as it'll probably be. Okay, maybe it sounds as though I'm erring a bit—or a lot, whatever the case may be—on the side of glib, or perhaps even inappropriate, if you think that's a better word choice. And, I'll admit, you may be right. But let me start by saying it's not that I don't care, because I do, honestly. But when scenes like this play out over and over, the entire bit becomes fairly rote. You play funeral, then you go on with your day-to-day life as if nothing ever happened. It's like the five o'clock news where the newscaster warns of impending doom for this or that country and then we immediately cut to a loud, flashy commercial about the furniture store's warehouse clearing sale. It all becomes, eventually, unrealistic in a way. I'm sure Peggy will be bummed out for a while, but eventually, even to her, it'll all become unrealistic and she'll also go back to the way things were.

Anyway, the gathering didn't disappoint at least. The cheapest supermarket wine and some deli sandwiches for all were available. We were all fitted into Peggy's small ranch house; thankfully, the majority of the neighborhood didn't deem it necessary to show up.

Of course, the familiar chemical plant contamination chatter was present too. It always seemed to happen. Every time someone passed the way Charlie did, and it happened more than enough times for it to just be some anomaly, there was always talk about how it's all the plant's fault and how we can try this or that to keep it from hap-

pening again.

"You all know as well as I do all kinds of crap is going to come out of this. People protesting and wanting more regulating agencies or whatever. If it weren't for all the jobs that plant's given us, I just wish someone would take a torch to the place and put an end to all the dang commotion." Jim was, obviously, always the voice of reason in our community.

There were six of us left, the rest having left after making their obligatory appearances. We were all sitting around Peggy's table, a few half-eaten sandwiches littered around the kitchen, waiting to be cleaned up.

"But don't you think that's a tad ridiculous? I mean, if the plant were the problem then shouldn't something be done? But anyway, there hasn't ever even been any kind of proof that the plant is even what's causing the problems," Steve, a skinny, younger neighbor rejoined.

"Well, maybe not. But you seem to have all the answers, Steve. Why don't you tell us what the real problem is here? I don't see anyone trying to stop you."

"Look, all I'm saying is that it would be nice if people could stop thinking about only themselves sometimes. If there's a problem, it needs to be fixed, regardless of how disruptive that would be. But I also know it's ridiculous to keep blaming these losses on fictitious chemical spills."

"Yeah, well, once you've lived here as long as I have, maybe your insight will be more valuable." Jim paused to wipe off some spittle that had accumulated around his moustache. "Until then,

I'd suggest it's better to keep your mouth shut about things you don't understand."

Bendsville's finest.

The conversation continued with that kind of tired back and forth for a while until Jim finally decided he'd had enough and made his way back to whatever hole he crawled out of. To be blunt, though, I do see Jim's point and don't figure there's any reason to be raising all kinds of hell or making some sort of wild assumptions about whatever is going on.

I was relieved to leave, being back in the comfortable quietness of my own home, and away from the townspeople chatter. Sam, however, sitting on the corner of our unmade bed, was unusually, almost eerily quiet. Must be some residual emotions lingering from the funeral thing earlier. "That was a pretty good service for Charlie, didn't you think?"

"Yeah." No emotion.

"You okay?" I moved closer, leaning down onto the bed, next to Sam.

"Yeah."

I took a thoughtful pause, weighing out the consequences of my next question, determining whether or not it was worth delving into. "Samantha, what's wrong?"

She paused too, probably a similar thought-process racing through her mind as well. I waited. And then waited some more. Finally, when I was near the point of getting up and dropping the issue entirely, she spoke. "I want to

leave."

It took a few moments for me to process what the syllables ejected from her mouth meant. I felt a strong compulsion to give in to the anger quickly surging inside of me. But previous instances told me to put a hold on the anger for a moment. Sam never was one to be impressively articulate or in control of her emotions. "What does that mean? What do you want to leave?" The terseness in my voice must've betrayed my anger, for tears began filling Sam's eyes and her petite frame began trembling. "Come on, Sam. You don't need to be upset. Just tell me what's going on. What do you want to leave? This house? I know we still have a lot of work today, but we've only been in here a few months. We'll have it looking like a new home soon enough, just like we did the last one."

Sam stood up from the bed, a few springs creaking as she did, and sulked over to her nightstand. The journey wasn't that far, our room truly was more compact than I'd like it to be and the peeling flower décor wallpaper did expose the house's age. She picked up a pair of socks and tossed it from one hand to the other. Back and forth. "Do you really think that's what I care about?" She sounded hurt, almost offended.

"I honestly don't know. You won't tell me what you care about. It's like you've been completely zoned out—in some other dimension—for the past couple months. I wish I knew what was going on

with you. Why are you talking about leaving?"

"Can't you see, Paul? Are you blind? Something is not right with this town. It's, like, some weird movie where everyone knows something's wrong but everyone just wants to cover it up and pretend like we're all normal."

I tried, I really did, but I couldn't keep a chuckle from escaping. "This is why I tell you not to watch Lifetime. It's like poison, killing you slowly and painfully. Come on; let's go to bed. It's late, and I'm exhausted. We have too much painting to do tomorrow to spend the whole night talking about this."

She stopped tossing the pair of socks around and let them drop to the floor. "This isn't some joke!" Her voice cracked on the last syllable, eliciting more chuckling from myself. "Stop it! There's something wrong here and you know it. It's not normal for people to just keep dropping dead like they do here. It's just not, and I don't care if you think it's funny. We need help, and you know it."

"Sam..." I removed from the bed too and inched closer to her. "You know sometimes things just go wrong at the chemical factory, and pollutants get released. It was asinine to build it so close to our water supply, but they're working on fixing everything. I don't understand why you're being so paranoid about everything all of a sudden. We've both grown up here; you've never had a problem with anything before."

"I don't care what 'they're' trying to fix. That plant isn't the problem. There's something seriously wrong with the people here.

Something wrong with you. And me. I've never noticed it before, but I do now. And I'm sick of it. You and I—we're having a child. And I refuse to let him grow up here. I'm leaving this town, whether you're with me or not."

I froze, forgetting to breathe, all earlier pretenses of anger or joking scurrying away to God knows where. "You're...pregnant?" The words somehow finding their way past my lips.

Sam simply nodded, dropping the pair of socks to the floor. The tears from earlier resurfaced and started streaking down her face.

"But how?" We had already agreed on not having kids. We didn't want to take on that burden, especially while they were still figuring things out with the water supply.

She just shrugged. Apparently she had already exhausted her vocal chords.

I shut my eyes and breathed. Deeply. A part of me was furious at her for letting this happen. But she also looked so helpless, and scared. I reopened my eyes and wrapped my arms around her. "Let's go to bed. We'll talk about it tomorrow."

* * *

I awoke the next morning to an empty bed. Sitting up instantly, I scanned the room. No sight of Sam. However, all of her stuff was still here, so I don't think she could have run away. I jumped out of bed, threw some jeans and an old t-shirt on and walked out of my bedroom, through the hallway and into the kitchen. Scanning the room, I saw, taped to the refrig-

erator, a piece of scrap paper with Sam's handwriting on it.

"Went to see a friend. Will be back later. – Love, Sam."

I crumpled the note up and tossed it into the trashcan beside the fridge. I picked up the coffee pot, filled it with water from the sink and poured the water into the back of the coffee maker. Searching through the cabinets for the coffee can, I then realized we'd run out a couple days ago. Dang it. I threw on a pair of tennis shoes, deciding to make the walk to the local coffee shop the next block over, to the right of our house.

At the shop, the short, college-aged barista was by far too distracted by her headset to give any significant portion of her attention to anything else. Apparently, desiring a soy latte brought to 130 degrees is too much these days. Or at least for this nimrod, anyway. I took my over steamed latte from her, making sure to not tip her, and found a seat in the crowded café. I purposefully tried to keep my eyes locked on the coffee cup and small tablet before. For some reason, it was especially painful and bothersome to look at the faces of the people today. I had never noticed how ugly people were before. And their voices did nothing to help their cause. It seemed like everyone was set out on some self-pity trip, moaning about this or that problem and wondering why others can't realize they have a life to live too.

I did my best to block them out so I could figure out what on earth I was going to do about last

night. I knew Sam was just overreacting to Charlie's death. Her hormones were probably on overdrive from the pregnancy or something. And the pregnancy... I had no clue what to do about that. We can't have a kid right now; it's too much. But she seemed so scared last night, and so adamant about leaving. The way she is, she truly might just leave without me. Not that I could entirely put her I fault, as I can tend to be, perhaps, overly indifferent, or maybe calloused, at times. But I also don't think anyone could be much surprised that I am either; it's just the way things are here. I took a sip from my now cooled off latte and checked the time on my phone: 9:46. Looking around I noticed Jim had made his way in. Hopefully, he won't see me. I don't want a replay, with insider's commentary on last evening's conversation.

And then again, maybe Sam is right. Maybe something is wrong here. Maybe Bendsville is a town that looks nice from a distance but scrutiny has a different tale to tell. I laughed again, thinking about. I'm starting to sound as crazy as her.

My reverie was interrupted by my phone's vibrating. Looking at the number, I didn't recognize it so I let it go to voicemail. I'll call back later. But then whoever it was called again. Annoyed, I picked up. It was Steve.

"Hey, you need to get over here." His voice was riddled with urgency.

"What's going on? Why?"

"It's Sam. She's not doing

well. She just passed out."

"What are you doing with my wife?" The surrounding customers raised their heads in response to my elevated voice. I could feel heat rushing over my face.

"Just get over here." The phone clicked and the line went dead.

I shoved my phone into my pocket and stormed towards the exit, tossing my half-empty cup in the general direction of the trash.

At Steve's, who lives a few streets down from my own house, I walked right into the living room, not wasting time with knocking. Upon entering, I saw Sam lying on the couch, sleeping. A woman, who I assumed to be Steve's wife, although I'd never met her before, was dapping Sam's head with a moistened cloth. I dashed towards her and knelt down, cradling her face in my hands. I fought the tears that wanted to break out—this is the same condition Charlie had been in just the other day, right before he passed.

Steve bounded down the steps, pulling a jacket on, and came to join us at the couch. "Hurry. We've got to take her to Wash-town." Washtown was the next city over, a several mile drive north.

I shook my head. "There's no use. I've seen this too many times. Nothing can help her." I sank down onto the carpet, releasing my hold on Sam's face.

"There's a hospital there. They can treat her. She'll be fine, but we need to hurry. Please, trust me."

I looked at him for a moment. I never really could stand

him, ever since he moved here. But he looked so concerned, so intent on providing the help my wife was in need of. Reluctantly, I stood up and lifted Sam from the couch, cradling her.

* * *

I must have dozed off on the trip to the hospital. I guess all the drama had finally wrought its damage on me. When I came back to the land of the living, I was sitting in a hospital room, Sam lying on a bed, an IV in her wrist and her gaze transfixed on the television. I squinted; it was too bright in here.

Noticing my stirring, she looked over. "Hey," she smiled.

"Hey." There was something different about her visage, but what precisely I couldn't ascertain. "What did they say—"

My question was interrupted by a man, probably a doctor, and Steve entering the room. "Steve, thanks for bringing us. I guess you were right," I said, more than a little embarrassed.

He nodded and smiled.

"I'm glad to see everyone's well."

"So is there a chance we'll be getting back to Bendsville before night? I don't I even shut our windows. Clouds aren't looking too nice right now."

The man who I presumed to be the doctor, judging by the stethoscope dangling from his neck and the prideful disposition about him anyway, chose to interject at that point. "Bendsville?" He asked, looking at Steve.

"He's kidding, obviously," Steve responded, chuckling. Then, to me: "You know no one's living in Bendsville, at least not since the plant caught fire and burned down

most the city decades ago. Come on, man." Steve then directed the doctor back out of the room, muttering something about paperwork or some other triviality. ⚓