

Seeing eye to eye.

Part 1.

“HE’S ALRIGHT,” the Bronx bartender said. “A regular. Quiet. He’s okay.”

Buoyed by that benediction, a threesome - a short woman, a tall woman and a man - picked their way to Codell’s table where he sat alone. “Care if we join you?” asked the short woman, vivaciously. “This place is packed!”

On Friday nights, the Bronx was a small bar with large talk, most of it from a gaggle of Wayne State University theater students. The theater was two blocks away, so the theater group and their groupies drank there in a show after the show. They talked loud and laughed louder. They seemed bigger than themselves, bigger than life.

“Sure, no problem,” said Codell.

The three sat. The short woman smiled broadly at Codell. “I’m Rikki. “This is my boyfriend Donnie and my friend Yolanda. Yola.”

“Yolo?”

“Not YOLO,” Yolanda grinned. “Yola.”

“Are you Spanish?” asked Donnie. “No hablas español.”

“Hungarian.”

To Codell, Rikki asked: “And you are - ?”

“Codell.”

“Codell?” questioned Donnie. “That’s different. What country are you from?”

Codell showed his teeth. “Right here. Detroit.”

Way to blow it, Donnie,” Rikki said. Donnie took a slug of beer and pivoted to Codell. “What do they call you for short?”

“Codell.”

“Not Cody or ‘hey, Code’?”

“Codell.”

“You’re priceless,” Rikki said to her boyfriend.

“I’m from Detroit, too,” Yolanda said. “Ever hear of Delray?”

“Delray?” Codell asked. “When I was a kid I lived at Fort Wayne. My mom got moved there after the riots.”

“What a coincidence!” said Yolanda. “We were almost neighbors. I didn’t know people lived in Fort Wayne.”

“Not in the fort itself. In the other buildings.”

“Where the hell are you talking about?” Donnie asked. “I never heard of Delray.”

“It’s not a place people go to,” said Yolanda. “It’s a place people leave.”

“It’s downriver,” Codell said. “I remember walking down Jefferson and seeing mountains of slag.”

“That’s Delray,” Yolanda said. “Delray is Delray. It’s Detroit, but it doesn’t look like Detroit or feel like Detroit. It feels like a small town, surrounded by smoke stacks. It stinks. Literally. My mom has to sweep up the soot every day. And there’s the pleasure of Zug Island.”

"What?" asked Donnie. "'Zug Island'?"

"Zug Island," said Yolanda. "It rumbles. It's a mystery. There's one bridge and it's gated off. You can't get in."

"Man, that's some weird shit," said Donnie. "'Zuuuug Island.'"

"What are you doing up here?" asked Codell. "Do you all go to Wayne?"

"No, just me," said Rikki. "I work in the theater department and there was a play tonight. This one," she said of Donnie, "has never been to a play in his life! And this one," she play-pushed Yolanda, "is here for the party."

"I might see a play if you were in it instead of backstage behind it," said Donnie.

"What's the play?" asked Codell.

"*The Iceman Cometh*," Rikki said.

"The iceman what?!" Donnie said. "What the hell kind of name is that?"

"It's a great name! It's supposed to be THE best American play."

"Yeah? Who decided?"

"I dunno, it's a classic. It came out in 1940 something, after World War Two."

"Oh, that explains it. '*The Iceman Cometh*.' What's an iceman got to do with it?"

"It's a symbol. Death."

Donnie rolled his eyes. "How uplifting."

"It's part of the play, kind of a gag, a traveling salesman joke, y'know? The husband's on the road, and his wife's at home getting it on with the iceman. The guy who delivers ice. This is like, back when they used an icebox to keep stuff cold."

While Donnie and his girlfriend were talking it up, Yolanda shifted so that one of her legs brushed up against Codell's leg. He left his leg where it was. A few seconds later he felt pressure from her leg and she kept it there. A permeating warmth spread through his body.

"There's a lot left unsaid," Rikki continued to Donnie. "You have to see it for it to make sense. You should go see it."

"Yeah? Talk me into it. What else is it about?"

"Basically, it's a bunch of drunks sitting around in a bar talking. Living in the past, deluding themselves."

"Wow, that's original. That could be any bar in the world."

"They all have their 'pipe dreams' they talk about. One of them, 'Hickey,' tries to reform them."

"Hickey!" Donnie exclaimed. "What a stupid name."

Two tables away, one of the Wayne theater crowd stood on his chair. He made a face meant to be a pained expression, threw back his head, gestured dramatically, and loudly proclaimed: "'By God, there's no hope! I'll never be a success in the grandstand or anywhere else!'"

A voice piped up from another table. "You said it, Kevin!" The bar erupted in laughter.

"Can you believe him?" Rikki lowered her voice to mimic Kevin's. "'I'm Kevin Washington and I never miss a chance for an audience.' He can't stop talking."

"How does it end?" asked Donnie. "The play."

"I can't tell you that! You have to come and see it." Rikki smiled enticingly.

"I dunno. Sounds boring to me."

"Okay, then I won't tell you how long it is. But maybe you're just scared."

"I'm definitely not scared. It sounds depressing. I don't like symbolism. Things should be what they are."

Kevin Washington stood on his chair again. "Time to go, boys and girls!"

"Should we get going to the party, Rikki?" Yolanda asked. "Everyone's leaving."

"There's actually a party?" Codell asked.

"Yeah, for real," Rikki answered. "At an apartment, some of the cast, block away. Do you want to come with us? Yola and Donnie won't know anyone there. She glanced conspiratorially at Yolanda. "We can make a nice foursome." Codell stood up, and then Donnie, Rikki and Yolanda. Yolanda was exceptionally tall, almost as tall as Codell.

"We might," Yolanda said, turning to Codell. "I think we'll see eye to eye."

Part 2. Inspired in part by Steely Dan, "Rikki Don't Lose That Number."

THE TWO couples left the Bronx, Yolanda and Codell shoulder to shoulder behind Donnie and Rikki. At the theater party it was standing room only. The apartment smelled of pot. Music was playing from somewhere. Everyone was talking to someone, voices mingling. The kitchen glowed florescent, but the rest of the apartment was dim. Donnie, Rikki, Yolanda and Codell staked out a corner of the main

room. Rikki and Yolanda chatted, engaging Codell, and Donnie drank. The Blondie song came on, "Call Me."

"I love this song," Yolanda said. She draped an arm over Codell.

"Me, too." Rikki murmured and snuggled against Donnie and sparkled up at Codell and Yolanda. "You two seem to be hitting it off pretty good."

"Understatement of the year," Donnie harrumphed, and pulled himself from Rikki. "I need to hit the head."

In a few minutes he returned. "The bathroom is a hundred degrees! If you got to go, go now. There's no line."

Codell took his advice. When he was done in the bathroom, he opened the door to find himself face to face with Yolanda. She took a quick step in to him. There was no need for conversation. She closed the door behind her with a back kick of her foot.

The party music and voices faded and went mute. Time became irrelevant.

Someone knocked on the door for the second time, louder. "Anyone in there? I really have to go. It's urgent."

"It's too cramped in here," Codell breathed to Yolanda.

The door knob turned; the door swung all the way in. Kevin Washington stopped in his tracks, his mouth open, no sound coming out. Yolanda and Codell untwined.

"Excuse us," said Codell. "We were just leaving. Sorry you had to wait."

Outside the bathroom, Codell asked Yolanda for her number. Her brow

furrowed. "No, I can't."

"Why not? We have something. I really want to see you.

"Say something!" Codell said.

Yolanda put her hands on his shoulders. "I'm married. I can't give you my number." Codell's heart slowed. "But you can give me your number," Yola said, and Codell's heart skipped and caught up to itself. "Let's find something to write on."

They went to the kitchen, found a scrap of paper and a pen, and Codell wrote

Codell
262-6087
Tomorrow 4 p.m.

"Don't lose it," said Codell. "Can you call at four?"

"Does it have to be right at four?"

"Yes. I share a phone. Is that time okay?"

"It should be."

"You could have a change of heart."

"I won't."

"What about your husband?"

"I'll call from somewhere else. If he's home. He drives a Coke truck."

"That's not what I meant," Codell said. "About your husband. I meant - on second thought, never mind. As long as you call me."

In reply, she leaned in to kiss him. "Wait," Codell stopped her. "He drives an ice truck?" Yolanda looked at Codell as if he had a screw loose.

“No, Coke.”

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The next day promptly at four, Yolanda dialed the number Codell gave her, 262-6087.

“Shield’s Pizza, can I take your order?”

“Wha - what?”

“Shield’s Pizza, can I take your order.”

“Sorry, wrong number.” Yolanda hung up, checked the number, and dialed again. 262-6087.

“Shield’s Pizza, can I take your order?”

“Shield’s Pizza!” Yolanda slammed the phone down. “Shield’s Pizza!”

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The pay phone at Prentis and Third was a new one, on a post, not in a booth. Codell was there at quarter to four to make sure that no one tied it up. At 4 p.m., the phone didn’t ring. At 4:05 p.m., it started to rain. At 4:08 p.m., dripping, Codell checked the number on the phone. It was 262-6078, not 262-6087. He had transposed the numbers. Wet through, he returned to his apartment.

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