

Question · *Stephen Dixon*

I'M SITTING OPPOSITE HER. I say "Do you want to?"
"I don't know."
"You've time. Waiter?"
"Yes?" he says.
"Check please."
"Yes sir."
"Well what do you say?" I say to her.
"I still don't know."
"You going to make up your mind in the next thirty seconds?"
"Don't be nasty to me."
"Waiter?"
"It's coming right up, sir. I have to write it up first."
"Forget it for now. Or give it when you feel like it, not to mix you up.
But I'd like another cup of coffee."
"Another cup?"
"Another cup. You?" I say to her.
"I don't know."
"Have another cup."
"I always get too high and fidgety with two cups."
"What'll it be please," waiter says, "one cup or two?"
"I don't know," she says.
"Two cups just to play it safe," I say.
Waiter goes. She looks up at me.
"Well?" I say.
"Well what?"
"Well have you made up your mind?"
"I told you I don't know. It's not something I can make up right away
about—I mean my mind, your question."
"I knew what you meant."
Waiter brings a coffee pot and pours our coffee.
"Thanks," I say.
"You gave me too much," she says.
"You don't have to finish it all," I say.
"I know but I didn't want to waste it."
"Don't worry about wasting it."
"But coffee's expensive."
"Not as expensive as they say it is or make it out to be. I figured it out
once. At least not as expensive to warrant fifty to sixty cents a cup."
"Would you like your check now?" waiter says.
"If you don't have it made out yet don't worry," I say.
"I have it right here."

“Sure, put it on the table.”

He puts it down. “Thank you,” he says.

“You too. Thanks. Should I pay you or up front?”

“Up front or me.”

“Which would you prefer?”

“You can pay me.”

I gave him a twenty dollar bill. He goes to the cashier with it. The people at the door are looking at us.

“What do you mean you figured it out about coffee?” she says.

“The coffee manufacturers, they raised it two times, three times over what it was a year ago, right? But the restaurants, when you think of it, because they doubled the price of their coffee, like this one, are now almost getting four and five times the profit from it despite the higher wholesale price.”

“But you’re not considering their larger overhead in a year and that all kinds of wages and insurances and such are more. Cleaning bills for this napkin, tablecloth, his uniform, for instance, also.”

“You’re right.”

“I worked in restaurants, so that’s the only reason I know it.”

“I know you’re right. I wasn’t figuring the rest of it. Cleaning. Overhead.”

“I still don’t understand how you got four to five times the profit for a cup of coffee when they only doubled the wholesale price of it, but maybe you didn’t explain it clearly enough.”

“I don’t think I did. You see—”

“Here you are, sir,” waiter says, “and have a nice night.”

“You mean here she is, ma’am,” and I put the check in front of her.

“Oh?” he says. “Well all right.”

“No, I’m only kidding. Tonight’s my treat, next week’s hers. Thanks. You’ve been very nice and this is for you.”

“Thank you.” He puts the tip in his pocket, takes our glasses, the spoon she didn’t use. Our table’s clear except for our cups and pitcher of milk and sugar, pepper and salt which will stay, and my spoon. He knows I drink it with milk. I pour the milk in the cup and stir it. I drink, she sips. She looks at her coffee.

“I wish I had a spoon,” she says.

“You drink it black.”

“To stir like you. I’d like to do it.”

“Use my spoon. I’m finished with it.”

“You used it.”

“I just put it in the cup, I didn’t stick it in my mouth.”

“I wouldn’t mind if you put it in your mouth. But it has milk on it. I like my coffee absolutely black.”

“Lick it off.”

“That would look ridiculous.”

“Then I’ll lick it off.”

“You lick it off then, but no milk on it. It must be licked clean.”

I lick it, look at it. Still has some milk on it. Lick it all the way in and out of my mouth, look at it. It’s clean. I give it to her. She stirs her coffee with it.

“Well?” I say.

Just looks at her coffee and stirs.

“Come on. Do you? Don’t you?”

“That question from before?”

“What other question?”

“You could’ve asked other questions before.”

“I did ask other questions. But I’m asking now about this one, that one, the one.”

“I don’t know.”

“When then?”

“I don’t like to be pushed or rushed.”

“I haven’t. I asked you and you said you don’t know and you don’t know and you don’t know and now we’re having another coffee and the people at the door want our table and the waiter wants us out of here and a question like that one is best settled right here when we’re sitting and comfortable rather than when we’re on the street and standing or walking but cold.”

“Give me a little more time.”

“Everything okay?” waiter says.

“Yes thanks,” I say. He goes. Busboy takes my empty cup away.

“If I had it black like yours he wouldn’tve taken my cup away.”

“That’s why I have it black.”

“To give yourself more time?”

“I don’t know if it’s why I have it black. More because I like it.”

Busboy passes our table again, comes back and takes my spoon.”

“I don’t think she’s through with the spoon yet,” I say to him.

“Oh sorry.” And to her: “You’re not?”

“I don’t think so.”

He puts the spoon down and goes.

“You could have let him have the spoon,” she says. “I’m through with it.”

“I just don’t like them shoving us out of here like that.”

“They’re busy. It’s Saturday night. Dinner hour, the night and time they make about forty percent of their week’s tips and the restaurant its earnings and which makes up for all the nights they don’t have this many customers. I should be more understanding of them, since I worked so many years waiting on tables, and just drink up and go.”

“First tell me yes or no.”

“Maybe I should just leave the rest of the coffee and go. I didn’t want a

full cup anyway.”

“Yes or no?”

“And you didn’t tip him enough.”

“I gave him exactly fifteen percent.”

“You didn’t. I calculated it. You gave him about thirteen percent.”

“You must be figuring thirteen percent of the total bill plus tax. I gave him fifteen percent before tax.”

“Maybe you’re right.”

“Not maybe, I am. And what do I have to do, consult you about everything in a restaurant?”

“Don’t get snappy again.”

“Why not? You’re more worried about the damn waiter, nice as he is, and their overhead and compensation insurance than about me or us.”

“Not true and don’t yell at me.”

“Oh forget it,” and I get up, get my coat and say to her, “If you’re ready, I’ll walk you home or wherever you want to go.”

“You don’t have to walk me anywhere.”

“Good then,” and I turn to go, turn to her, “goodnight,” she looks out the window, and I leave.

I go home. Phone’s ringing when I get there.

“What is it now?” I say.

“What is what?” Murray says.

“I thought it was Denise. How are you?”

“I’m not Denise. What’re you doing tonight?”

“Nothing.”

“Want to see *Challenges*?”

“Sure.”

“I thought Saturday night you’d be out but then thought maybe this Saturday you’re not. In front of the Laron at ten?”

“Right.”

I hang up. “Right.” I grab a plant Denise gave me and yell “Right, yes, sure I want to go to a movie tonight” and throw it against the wall. It breaks, earth and planter parts going several different ways, big stain on the wall, mess on the floor. “Sure I do goddamn you,” and put my fist through the bathroom door.

I wash it, iodine and bandage it, dial Murray with my good hand but no one’s home. I go to the Laron.

“What happened?” he says.

“I called just before but you weren’t in.”

“But what happened? Your hand. It’s bleeding through the bandage.”

“I suppose you already left. I called to say I couldn’t go to the movie after all.”

“You shouldn’t’ve come. I would’ve known something was wrong or you got a better date. But what the hell happened? It must’ve just happened.

You get into a fight? Catch it on a knife? What?"

"I just came down here to tell you. I'm not feeling well. I'm going home."

"Okay, I appreciate that. But what's with the hand? You can't answer a little question?"

I shake my head and start home.

"What's with you? You feeling sick? If you are, I won't go to the movie. I'll take you to the hospital if you want."

I keep going.

He yells "Okay, forget it. Hell with your hand. Forget I asked."

I turn to him. "I can't answer because I'm ashamed, don't you see? I got crazy with myself over Denise and threw it at a door and mashed it and it was so stupid to do I'm ashamed."

"That's better," and he turns in my ticket for money and goes in the theater.

I go home. Denise is sitting on the stoop.

"There you are," she says. "I was going to wait five more minutes and then send it by mail."

"You mean you finally have an answer for me? Hallelu."

"Answer? To that question in the restaurant? I forgot about that, no. Your set of keys. There was no room to slip them under your door. Here."

She holds my keys out. I take my bandaged hand out of my coat pocket and hold it out to her palm up. She says, "What's this, a joke? No, I don't want to know. I know it's bad. I'm sorry if your hand hurts you the way your face tells me it does, but I've got to be going, goodnight," and sticks the keys in my coat pocket.

"I'll tell you what happened," I say as she crosses the street.

"I don't want to know," walking without turning around.

"I'll still tell you because I believe in answering questions."

"You got your points in. That should be enough."

"I'll still tell you, points or not, which wasn't my point to get in, but I'll tell you because I've nothing to hide from you and this is the reason why."

She's across the street, stops, says "All right—what?"

"I'm not yelling it across the street."

"You've yelled everything else across, why not this?"

"Come here or I'll come there."

"I'll come. You're hurt. You are hurt? That bandage isn't a fake?"

"The answer is no."

She waits for a couple of cars to pass before she crosses the street. "Now what? If you're not going to act like an ass again with that, "The answer is no."

"First, how do you feel about me?"

"About what? Which way? What does that have to do with anything? When?"

“This way. About everything. Your heart. Feelings. To me. Before and now—how?”

“A week before—we both knew. Now, neither of us does.”

“Will you come upstairs with me?”

“Have you been to a doctor or hospital?”

“No.”

“Then only to look at and wash and dress your hand.”

“I don’t feel too well anyway so that’s okay by me.”

We go up the stoop. She takes the keys out of my pocket, unlocks the vestibule door and we start upstairs.

“What was that question before you asked me in the restaurant? I’m curious.”

“One at the end? I forget. You don’t know?”

“I forgot too. That’s why I asked.”

“It was important to us though. That’s what caused the argument and my eventually smashing this damn thing through a door, which is part of what I was just going to tell you I did and why.”

“It was much more important to you but maybe we better forget it for now.”

“Why?”

“Just because I shouldn’t have brought it up. It’ll lead to things and then more arguing and bitterness and I don’t feel like it now.”

“Now I remember.”

“All right. What was it? Bad hand, sour feelings, potential explosion, but you want to have it out, let’s.”

“No, I suddenly forgot. Tip of the tongue, off it again. I’ll remember it though.”

“Hopefully when I’m not here, if you did forget.”

“Honestly, I did.”

I didn’t, but didn’t want to bring it up again. She’s right: more slights and recriminations and then she wouldn’t even feel like going in my apartment.

She unlocks the door, puts the keys on the mantle, takes my bandage off, says “Oh my god, it’s awful,” bathes and dresses my hand, makes me take two aspirins. I say “I still don’t feel too well. Could you stay?”

“Yes, but on different sides of the sheet.”

We go to bed. The hand hurts like hell. I can’t get to sleep. She says “Your jumping around bed is keeping me up.”

“My hand.”

She turns on the light. There’s blood all over me and on my side of the bed. She says “I better take you to a hospital.”

We go to one. They take x-rays and say I broke a couple of fingers and part of the rest of the hand.

After a cast is put on she says, “Whatever it was you asked of me in the restaurant that was so important to you then, I would have said yes to to

avoid all this.”

“Who can predict anything?”

“Naturally, but I only said that about your restaurant question as an expression of how I now feel.”

“Anyway, it only proves you never know what can sometimes happen.”

“Now I know and you frighten me and made matters much worse for us, much.”

“Don’t be.”

“I am. You want me to retract it? Well I can’t.”

“You’ll feel different tomorrow or so.”

“No I won’t. You scared me silly. Break your hand? Next you’re liable to break my fingers and then my face. I’m sorry for your hand and knuckles and such, but for us you couldn’t have made matters worse. I’ll get you a cab and see you to your door but that’s all.”

“All I ask is you sleep on it.”

“No. It’s the wrong time to say this now, but I’ve definitely made up my mind. No more.”

I smash my cast against the hospital wall. She runs away. I’m screaming at her from the floor to never come back, while trying to hold my hand.