

At the end of the day

By michael howard

WHY WE LIKE IT: *'At the end of the day' is an expression we use to mean when all the crap has cleared away what lies beneath comes to the surface. A group of friends have come together and their casual conversation, at once innocuous, even banal, is the fuse of a dynamite charge. Through fragments and glimmers of dialogue a story is laid out and we are drawn into a private world where old wounds refuse to heal. Of all the authors we've published no one comes closer to being a 'poet of the ordinary' than Michael Howard. It's writing that drinks the bittersweet wine sap of everyday experience in a style which eclipses improvement. His impossibly beautiful prose is to minimalism what boneless sleep (to quote Carl Sandburg) is to a cat. Five stars. Quote: Rob grunted and waved his hand dismissively. He was sitting forward with his forearms on his knees. Theo was slumped against the back cushion, almost lying down. He took his hat off and put it on his chest. His dark hair was flattened against his head. It looked painted on. And this intoxicating four lines of dialogue:*

"Who's going," Rob asked with his mouth full.

"Katie, Jim and Emily for sure. Probably a few others."

"Emily's insufferable."

"I totally agree. But we don't have to talk to her."

Read Michael Howard's Can anyone else feel that? (Issue 2-Fiction)

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Alyssa came through the door about six thirty. Rob and Theo were sitting on the couch drinking Michelob Ultra and watching tennis. They were still wearing their polo shirts and khaki shorts and hats.

She said, "Hi boys," and kicked off her heels, put her keys and purse down on the kitchen table. Rob said, "Hey Lyss." Theo looked over and waved. Alyssa took a small apple from the bowl on the table and bit into it loudly. She moved to the living room.

“How was your game?”

Rob grunted and waved his hand dismissively. He was sitting forward with his forearms on his knees. Theo was slumped against the back cushion, almost lying down. He took his hat off and put it on his chest. His dark hair was flattened against his head. It looked painted on. Alyssa said:

“Does that mean Theo won?”

“By two strokes. I triple-bogeyed seventeen.”

That’s true, Theo thought. It was also true that Rob had lost his ball in the trees on the fourteenth hole and then played one that didn’t belong to him rather than take the one-stroke penalty. So he would have lost by more than two strokes if he hadn’t cheated. Theo was tempted to say so but he didn’t, just as he hadn’t called him on it at the time. Rob was under the impression that his fraud went unnoticed.

“Anyway it was a lousy day all around,” Rob said. “For both of us.”

Theo thought that that was true, too. It had been a lousy day.

Alyssa asked what they shot.

Rob looked at Theo. “What was it? Eighty-three, eighty-one?”

“Yup.”

“Yuck,” Alyssa said. “Well, it still beats work.”

“Yeah, how was it?” Rob asked distractedly. The TV had his attention. It was late summer; the US Open was underway.

“Usual.” She started telling a story about something a coworker did but stopped when she saw that she had no audience. She looked at the TV. Federer was steamrolling some American qualifier.

“Think he’ll win?” she asked.

“The whole tournament? Doubt it,” Rob said. “He hasn’t had good form this summer. It’ll be Nadal or Djokovic.”

Theo said, “I wouldn’t count him out.”

“Theoretically he could do it,” Rob said, “but I’d be very surprised.”

Alyssa realized she was still standing and sat down on the loveseat. The apartment had come furnished, so the decor was new, modern and coordinated. She and Rob split the rent down the middle. Theo had his own place nearer the city. He and Rob had known each other a long time—since junior high. They’d played sports and thrown parties and engaged in juvenile antics together. Went to different colleges but stayed in touch. Now Theo sold car insurance and Rob worked for an IT distribution company. Alyssa worked there too. The wedding was planned for next spring. Theo would be the best man.

“If he keeps serving like that he’s got a shot,” Rob said when the match ended.

Theo nodded.

Alyssa got up to throw away her apple core. She asked if they wanted more beer. Rob answered for both of them. She took two more bottles from the fridge and poured a little Chardonnay for herself. On her way back to the living room she switched on the light. The sun was almost gone. Another day gone.

“Did you eat?” she asked.

“No,” Rob said. He fell back and rubbed his eyes. “Not since lunch.”

“I’m starving,” she said. “And I don’t feel like cooking.”

“Order something.”

They did. Theo went to the kitchen for another beer. Rob said he wanted one too. It was a good thing they’d bought two six-packs with the money Theo won off Rob in the golf match; they’d probably go through all twelve bottles. Theo felt low as he pulled open the door of the fridge. He’d been feeling low for a while. But right now, at this moment, he thought he felt lower than ever. Beating Rob today didn’t give him any satisfaction at all. That was unusual. Theo hadn’t planned on spending the rest of the day at Rob’s place but he didn’t know what else to do. He dreaded going back to his own apartment. The thought sickened him. Everything sickened him lately.

They sat in the living room wolfing down chicken wings and half a tray of pizza. The US Open was still on but it was a women’s match and Rob and Theo weren’t interested in women’s tennis. Alyssa wasn’t interested in any form of tennis. At length she mentioned that some people from work were meeting up downtown for drinks a bit later. It was Friday night, after all.

“Who’s going,” Rob asked with his mouth full.

“Katie, Jim and Emily for sure. Probably a few others.”

“Emily’s insufferable.”

“I totally agree. But we don’t have to talk to her.”

“Sounds like you’re set on going.”

“I’m not opposed to it. Are you?”

Rob threw his crust into the box and leaned back, sighing. “I guess not.”

“We can wait till the match is over.”

“No, it’s alright,” Rob said. “It’s only the second round.” He looked at Theo. “What do you think?”

Theo indicated his clothes.

“Right.” Rob thought for a second. “Well, we could stop at your place so you can change. Or you’re welcome to borrow something from me.”

“That’s okay,” Theo said. He forced himself to yawn. “I’m pretty tired.”

“Sure?”

“Mhm. And,” he lied, “I have to pick up my sister from the airport in the morning.”

“Fair enough,” Rob said, yawning himself. Alyssa was looking at him. “You really wanna go, huh?”

“Sure. Why not?”

“Alright,” he said. “Let me shower and change. Then we’ll go.”

Alyssa smiled and sent text messages to her friends. She and Theo made small talk while Rob took a shower. How is work and what have you been doing lately and did you see that new Tarantino movie? Neither of them had but both said they wanted to. Theo pointed out that it got good reviews. Alyssa asked him what his sister was coming into town for. “Just a visit,” he said, and then he felt a great disappointment at being unable to come up with a better story. As though some opportunity had been wasted. Alyssa almost asked him how Brook was doing.

“Well,” she said once they’d run out of things to talk about, “I better clean up.”

“I’ll help,” Theo said.

Theo drove from Rob's apartment to the supermarket. He pushed a shopping cart slowly up and down the aisles in his golf clothes. Every so often he took something from the shelf and turned it over in his hand, looking at the nutrition facts and ingredients without reading them. After half an hour his cart was still empty. He began grabbing things at random. Cookies, prunes, frozen waffles, hamburger buns. He put a case of Budweiser in the cart. Two cans of tuna fish for his cat. A carton of eggs. A bag of powdered sugar. He paid with his debit card and shoved the clattering cart across the parking lot and loaded the groceries into the trunk of his car, next to his clubs. He started the engine and stared at some trees in the distance. "Afterlife" by Arcade Fire came on the satellite radio. Theo shut it off and drove away, away from his apartment.

The same blue Dodge was parked in the alley next to her building. Two months ago it would have been his car there. Right there in that spot. Theo rolled up to the curb across the street and stopped. He fixed his eyes on the window, third story, second from the left. The lights were on. The window was open. The curtain swayed a little. She was home. He was there. But Theo couldn't see them. He wondered what they were doing. Having dinner, maybe. Watching a film. Getting ready to go out. Or maybe doing something else.

Theo studied the small yellow square until he had no more thoughts in his head, and then he was driving around the back of the building and parking his car in an empty space. He looked around, got out. Crept through the shadows. When he came to the blue Dodge he crouched down and reached into the bag. An egg went curving through the air and splattered with a tiny thud against the bumper. Then another. Three, four, five. He stole closer and cracked a few between the hood and the windshield. The last one he crushed against the door handle. He ripped open the bag of powdered sugar and poured it all over. It would be a bitch to clean off, mixed together with the eggs like that. Theo knew from experience. His first car had been attacked in a similar fashion back in high school. He was fit to be tied. He had a famous temper in those days ...

But that was a long time ago. And he'd come a long way.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Going through some old notes I saw that I had scribbled down an idea for a story in which a recently single young man is spending time with two friends who are in a successful relationship. I figured I'd give it a try. As with most of my stories, nothing happens; it was the character dynamic and general situation I wanted to investigate. I imagine that Theo unconsciously despises his friends and that's interesting to me. As for the last scene, some rogues did in fact do that to my first car.*

BIO: *Michael Howard's essays and short stories have appeared in a wide variety of print and digital publications. His website is michaelwilliamhoward.com.*