

Inordinate Communications

A Daly

So, here we are, Wendy and I, again, alone, together, somewhere. We've never been "here", before, as in "this place" which is, incidentally, nowhere but we've been heading this way for a long time. This being the case, all I can say to make this experience my experience, to put myself in this picture, is that I eat fries on a Sunday. Always. It's part of who I am.

"Wendy," I say. "Get me some fries."

She looks up from her pack, troubled.

"Mmm ... I don't know ..." she says "Rye? Rise? ... Fl-"

"Fries, Wendy. Fries," say I. "Fries on a Sunday. You're with *me* now." I gesture towards myself with both hands magnanimously, signaling derision.

"Please," she says acting, rather than just being, submissive. "Not angry ... don't ... don't be angry ... with me?"

(This is her standard, by the way, an explanation for everything. Like good insurance, all her bases are covered: the inability to speak, the inability to listen, the inability to think and the one I love the most, the inability to exercise a little independence.)

"Wendy," I say. "You have to learn English. We're not in Japan. I've gotta have fries." *Think of this as a lesson*, is what I don't say. *A lesson in communication*. She points at something over a low rise, a roof perhaps, the sun on a bald patch of grass; who knows? She starts walking. I follow.

"What did you see?" I say "Houses? A 7 - 11?"

"Shh" she says, putting a finger to her lips. She doesn't mean "be quiet" - of course. She means she doesn't know the right words to explain. I sigh. My boots subordinate pieces of gravel; the road wanders gently before us, she in red and I in purple.

I'm wearing orange, actually. To me it's orange. It looks orange, it feels orange and when I put it on I feel like a big fat aubergine. But to Wendy this is purple. To my mother, it's purple, also. In fact it's purple to anyone who asks me. "Purple," I say. "Definitely not orange." I'm not the type who martyrs integrity for belief.

Wendy has gloves on, with snowflakes woven in. It's two houses that she's pointing at, one on each side of the road, in five o'clock autumn time, the middle of nowhere but still the sun's shining bright.

"Wendy," I say. "I want those fries."

She nods quickly, assuring me of fortitude's reward. She picks up her gait and marches onwards smiling.

Here is a house half shaded in front, the blue-cold shade of a nightlit day. Around the back they're probably weeding, or hanging washing, whatever people with backyards in the middle of nowhere do: it's still light around their side, anyway. Out the front, though, only roses could grow in that cold-light. Wendy knocks on the door and I linger by the gate. She knocks again and again and one more time. No answer. I'm thinking to myself that the least you should be able to expect from the citizens of a two house town is that they be at home. Where else do they go?

"Wendy," I groan. "Come on." I beckon her by turning my back and looking over my shoulder.

"Shh." She puts her finger to her mouth again, for my benefit clearly. She knows that it's aggravating. My aggravation is pure.

"Not "shh" Wendy," I tell her, sharply. "Not "shh" at all. "Shh" means quiet - in English. Quiet, Wendy. Quiet. What you mean, Wendy, is you Just. Don't. Get it."

She puts her head down. I see the crown of her green knitted hat. She walks like an automaton breaking right down. With her head hung like this, she shuffles right on past me, the bully in the corridor, and walks herself to the other side of the road. Another house, another knock, another day, another dollar. I'm slapping my hands to my sides in resignation.

At the front door of the other house, Wendy knocks continuously, loudly, not in the way of the short timid knocks she concocted before. An old woman appears.

Wendy salutes her. Wendy bows. She says

something in her twisted English.

"We ... were ... see ... to look ... both ..."

The woman is shaking her head, confused.

Wendy is smiling, bowing, submitting, trying to please with her exaggerated deference. She puts a gloved hand to her mouth and mimics eating rice with her fingers.

"Fries, Wendy, not rice," I'm thinking, as I almost feel the soft haze, myself, of wool fluffed on my tongue. The woman points through the doorway, past Wendy, my sweet friend from Japan.

The woman is looking at her, cocking her head like she's listening, nodding at infrequent intervals. I don't really hear what they're saying, but she seems to be speaking in the affirmative. She walks inside, waddle, waddle and returns to the door way quicker than I gave her credit for. Wendy by now has her gloves off and is in the business of shaking her hands. Each tip of every finger burns red. She didn't know about the cold, that shaking her hands, wherever that came from, would not warm them up.

The woman hands her a piece of paper and points towards the bend in the road. Wendy bows her head again and walks away, her arms swinging in good stride. Her face displays resolution: her feeling of triumph is apparent. She summons me with her hand, requesting that I follow, as she makes her way around the bend. I walk quickly, run a few paces, bounce a step, returning to normal just as I catch the sound of her trouser legs grating against one another. As I walk abreast her she says to me

"Do you know? Do you know?" and she's pointing at the piece of paper and pointing ahead of us. All I see is a field and a barn.

She points back to the paper, a small strip ripped from the back of an envelope, to where the woman has marked in blue a few shaky pen lines meant to depict the road and some sort of destination. I feel it again, that feeling, the feeling of intense disappointment, a disappointment encouraged, magnified, by previous feelings of hope. I'm angry first, then merely exasperated.

Why would Wendy know what she was doing and why did I ever think that she would know what she was doing? *I shook my head as the monstrous fires of my fury sought release from her imprisonment.*

"Do you even know where we're going?" I asked on the verge of outrage.

Her firm and excited point towards the future became one limp gesture of appeasement. She looked down at the piece of paper.

"Please," she said, waving vaguely at the diagram.

"This is where ... Flying."

"Fries, Wendy, fries!" I told her. "F. R. Fr. As in France. As in freak. As in Fry. As in Fries. I don't want to take off and land. I just want. Something. To. Eat."

I stopped short for a second.

How easily we could be heading towards the sea, towards cliffs where she could point me out seagulls. And that would be a real journey from the here that was literally, metaphorically, spiritually, figuratively and rationally speaking the middle of nowhere. (To put it in perspective, we're talking a four hour flight to the coast.) And upon reaching these mythical cliffs, would Wendy then turn and say, pointing at the seagulls and the hang-gliders

"Look. Flies."

"Wendy," I say, restrained, contained. "We're looking for food. We're looking to eat."

She put her hand to her mouth in that rice-eating gesture and pointed up this twilight. road.

I shrugged looking at her with eyes of reinforced steel.

All we know is that nature is cruel and now there's nowhere left to go.

We turned the bend, her walking slightly in front, I happy to drag behind all but joyfully.

Just four metres on, tarseal made a against the gravel. The demarcation made me hopeful.

A few metres again from here I see the barn, or what I thought was a barn, which is in fact a gas station. A large sign on the roof reads "Give your Boss the Big Finger: Last stop 130ks." A huge phallic candy bar bursts forth from its wrapper.

Wendy shakes her hands again. They're red now, in the entirety, except the tips which are stiff and purple. I tap her on the shoulder.

"Rub your hands," I tell her. "Like this."

I rub my hands together and then, taking hers, I press her palms together too.

"Rub them" I say, making a cup and blowing

into mine, emphasizing what I'm doing. She rubs her hands together and she nods. She acknowledges my wisdom. She smiles a bit, a sad smile though.

This is the sort of smile I hate,

I approached the service counter and asked if they had fries.

"Do. You. Have. Fries?" I asked in a clear and even tone. I put my fingers to my mouth, mimicking the moment just before the fry enters the digestive system ... The woman said

"I speak English, you know." in an accent so thick I almost didn't catch it.

"I'm just looking for fries," I told her.

She said "We don't sell those around here. If ..."

But it was the last I could make out because a large truck flew by so close that it drowned out whatever left there was for me to make from her unintelligible speech. And then she stared at me.

"Well?" she asked.

Her behaviour was unconscionable; I became unduly flustered.

Was she was putting me on trial?

I poked my thumb out the door behind me and said

"I just need to check something with my girlfriend."

I backed away and pulled the sliding glass door open behind me. I turned and walked back outside.

"Look Wendy," I said, putting my arm around her, turning her discreetly from the storefront.

"You're going to have to go in there and get me some fries. I can't understand a word she's saying. The counter maid. Can you just go in there?"

She nodded eagerly.

"Yes, yes," she responded, striding bravely towards the sliding door, ready once more to stage her performance. I could see her nodding eagerly, laughing through the window. I could also see clearly that despite the supposed advantage in being a native English speaker, Wendy's pleasing smile and eagerness to comprehend would have her questions answered in a way no one bothered to with a guy *like* me. Or *me*, for that matter.

She used, that, Wendy. There were no two ways about it. She cocked her head to one side, she nodded, she smiled, Not once would she assert herself or demonstrate her capabilities. Not once would she chisel her own identity into the sides of this vast planet. Not once would she engage through conflict, stand by her beliefs, assert her right to stand.

Like McDonalds, Wendy, that's what a fry is, as if you didn't know.

I felt these two giant marbles, my eyes, roll involuntarily, and grind against the bone of my inner skull. And she walked towards me holding in one hand a small can of soda and in the other, a tub of straight cuts, saturated in animal fat.

"I'm glad I'm not vegetarian," I observed. She looked to me for an explanation.

"Nothing," I said shaking my head. "Here. Do you want?"

She took one and put it to her lips, blowing heat off the steaming wedge before biting in.

"Any idea where the bathroom is?" I asked in time to my mastications. She looked about quickly, then above us, pointing to a man symbol painted on a sign.

"Here. Hold these," I said, handing her the tub. "I'll be back in a minute."

Wendy nodded. So here we are, alone again, together with the setting sun and fries. The bathroom bulb had long since blown – I could tell by the smell in there. The priorities had been set already, though, and it was no my solemn duty to relieve my bladder having secured some form of sustenance and contact with proto-civilisation. We would eat and be on the road again, probably hitchhiking. Catching a bus; maybe. The water in its thin, cold trickle woke my hands and brought me back to the can with its skanky light and the deadened thrill of a cold, new night. I walked out towards the gas pumps.

Wendy was gone.

Wendy had taken up residence on the park bench across the road.

"I sit." she said, when I joined her.

"Uh-huh" I said, as I too sat. "Pass me the fries. Please."

She stretched her arm towards me without looking my way. The traffic increased to a steady dribble.

She was keeping her eyes on the road.

"So, what do you want to do?" I asked. "Should we hitch? Do you want to hitch?"

The fries were disgusting.

She was shaking her head instead of "shh"ing.

"I'm not sure either," I said. "But what I can tell you is these fries breach the codes of good food conduct. They're disgusting. Pass the Coke."

This too came the way of an arm stretched across us both with the head angled elsewhere.

I drank from the can, wiping the drips from my bottom lip with my knuckles. I passed it back. She accepted sullenly and placed the empty to rest between us unsteadily on the ground. From the way her shoulders curved in towards her body, I could see that she was cold. Maybe tired. The cumulative effect of this day was making it hard for her to think.

She shook her head. She turned her face towards me. She shook her head again, re-enacting the leading role in her production of "Poor little Foreign Girl."

I raised my eyebrows and sighed. I looked the other way.

Nature is cruel because it has to be but did she have to exact revenge in such an unappealing manner?

Using her arms as levers, she lifted herself from the seat. She collected her bag from the ground and began to walk in the same direction we'd been following all day. She'd put her gloves back on, a comforting thought: at least she'd survive another hour in this colding night. Less comfortingly, she was still eliciting that response from me through her half-assed display of helplessness.

"I'm sorry, Wendy," I said to the road. "But I don't like games."

I finished my grim supper and watched as the last of the light was sucked from the sky around me.

Three family-cars passed by the bench in quick succession. I would hitch to wherever and stay the night there. I stuck out my thumb, steeled with a maximum of patience, knowing full well that it could take forever to get picked up – especially without a girl to conceal the beast

of reality my gender represented.

I'd never said I was Wendy's guardian: we were equals here, a point with which she was yet to become acquainted.

Someone pulled over in a station wagon.

"Erldunda?" the guy asked me, winding down the window as he leaned across the passenger seat.

I nodded pointing in that direction.

"Get in," he said, unlocking the door.

We accelerated forwards as I fastened my seatbelt. I was moving forwards, always moving forwards.

"I'm Kim," he said. "And you are ...?"

I told him my name as we passed another stopped car picking up a lonely girl, possibly Japanese.

My driver shook his head: I knew what he was thinking.

"Silly girl – hitching all by herself. –st. –st. st."

I looked straight ahead of me.

The driver mumbled

"Backpackers"

... and indicated loosely with his finger into the windscreen, into the carlit spill of the darkened road, onwards into the blinding sight of the white reflective markers.