

Ethan Goffman

The Return

Nate had learned to be careful around Sylvia. However much he tried to avoid it, their conversations invariably turned to politics, and a river of sentences would pour from Sylvia's mouth that Nate considered absolute nonsense. He would interrupt, become condescending, and even started screaming once, all tactics that he considered beneath him.

They say you can't choose your family and it's also true with coworkers. Fortunately, Nate had to be in the office only twice a week—Creative Solutions, Inc. continued to allow telework most days. Unfortunately, the office was almost empty, and one of those two days his only colleague was Sylvia. At first, he had found her endearing, with her body slightly spilling out of her ill-fitting outfits, reddish bangs that flitted into her eyes, and a nervous stutter at the end of sentences. Now he just put up with her, used their interactions to pass the time.

All through the burning summer, there was little work, although a rush was looming in the fall, the incessant season. The only good thing about the office this summer was that Creative Solutions was paying for the air conditioning.

So now they dawdled without much to do, speaking only sporadically, interspersing work with computer games, reading, and social media.

To make small talk one long and winding afternoon, Nate announced that he was currently obsessed with the computer game “The Return.”

Sylvia brightened up. “I’m the same!” she announced, her voice rising. “I love that game! Although it’s frustrating. I kind of hate it too.”

The plot of “The Return,” which had received rave reviews and garnered a small but loyal following, was that you’ve been living alone during the Covid pandemic but are finally ready to return to normal life in the outside world. But you’ve been isolated so long that everything is scary—enormous dogs growl, cars seem poised to run you down, people skulk toward you, sudden noises erupt. On the video screen, everything takes on a heightened sensation, with blinding colors in day scenes, spooky grays and purples at night, a faint sensation of spinning or shaking. Stuff happens suddenly and you have to make quick decisions.

“Why do you sort of hate the game?” asked Nate.

“My very first time playing, dogs were snarling. I faked my way past them, but then a huge Black guy with an afro came at me like he was about to attack.”

“That’s Alvin,” said Nate.

“So I did the only rational thing. I whipped out a can of mace and sprayed him right in the face.”

“That’s horrible. Alvin’s a great guy. He can help you a lot.”

“How was I to know he wasn’t going to stab me and take my money? Then it’s game over. Besides, I probably have a more vulnerable looking avatar than you do. He probably would have come right at me.”

“No, you did the wrong thing. You have to be friendly to Alvin. I immediately started a conversation with him. It’s a kind of test. If you’re too paranoid, you fail.”

“So you’re saying it’s my fault. That’s the problem with you—you’re always certain that you’re right and that I’m wrong.”

“Maybe you did what you thought was the right thing.”

“Anyway, it’s ruined the whole game. Black Lives Matter made a huge fuss, there were protests, and now my character is in jail.”

“Yikes. That’s a completely different timeline than what’s happening to me.”

“That’s the problem with games nowadays. They’re so politically correct. I’m sick of all their fake wokeness. In real life, if I trusted a Black guy like that coming at me, I’d end up dead.”

“That’s ridiculous. Black people are just like anyone else.”

Nate couldn’t believe he was saying this. It sounded condescending to him and insulting to Black people. But that’s the way it is in conversations with Sylvia.

“Maybe as a man, that’s what happens to you. Maybe you’ve just been lucky. But if I acted like you, I’d pay for it, in the game or in real life.”

“Maybe you just need to be open to other people.”

“I fucking try.”

“Or maybe you should just pick another game. There’s buttloads of games out there.”

“The way things are today, there’d be something wrong with the new game. The corporations just want to take your money and find a way to sock you with political correctness. They’d probably make my character gay or something.”

“Now you’re being ridiculous. Maybe you want to find something to upset you so you can complain.”

And suddenly she is shrieking. “I hate it! I hate it I hate it I hate it I hate it I hate it I hate it.” Her arms are hyperextended, her face red as a fresh plum.

“Hate what?” Nate says.

“You and that fucking game. Your fake wokeness. The way you all look down on me. All the time and money I waste that just makes me look like a fool. The corporate socialist politically correct fascists that can’t even make a game or a movie that I can just enjoy. And Hollywood, who find a way to promote homosexuality in every movie. Or worse, sex change. They’ve got children today fooled so half of them think they’re homosexual.”

“Diversity is a good thing. You have to be open to different kinds of people.”

“You’re a fake along with all of Hollywood. It’s all over television and movies and even computer games. They all kowtow to a fake diversity even though they’re all white men. And a few token Asians. Half of them are homosexuals anyway, that’s the problem. All you people just think I’m an idiot, but I’m smarter than you. I know what’s really going on. And there are plenty of people that agree with me. The real news is out there if you want it. I wish I could smack the hell out of you. Maybe it would knock some sense into you.”

And she stomps out, while Nate just sits paralyzed. He doesn't know how he's going to keep working. Maybe he can request a different office day, but Creative Solutions is very particular. They want to be the ones in control.

Summer is almost over, the season of too little work, and the season of too much work is coming. Already, a long report looms.

Perhaps he should quit right now. Just walk out.

But he knows what will happen. He will stay. Sylvia will be back soon enough. They'll start a conversation and that little hitch of uncertainty in her voice will convince him, once again, that, deep down, she's a decent person, just confused, that maybe he should give her another chance. But nothing will change. They'll sit here working, little volcanoes waiting for the next eruption.