

In Providence: Checking In



“I have a lot of folks I check on. I just go by and knock on their door, and because now, we gotta think about not causing trouble for each other, I just let them yell from the other side of the door that they’re good, and then I go on to the next house.”

He’s always dropped by people’s homes over the course of a weekend. His house is a place on the Pawtucket line that he’s lived in for about 15 years, but he has friends all over town. He tells me his rather large social circle is the result of being a man who loves a good long walk and enjoys popping into places — for a bite, a drink, or just to meet someone new.

“My brother and I always used to go walking when we were kids, and I never stopped. He became a wire guy — an electrician. He’s good too — if you need somebody. But I kept walking and I liked seeing new places and being a — being a guy of the neighborhood, except I didn’t have a neighborhood, because I kept moving around. Everywhere became a neighborhood. The whole city’s a neighborhood now, because I got people everywhere. Back before you had cell phones, you’d call people up, but you could stop in and visit them too. You could stop by to talk if they were home. I bet some people were sick of me coming by, but I never knew it, because everybody would welcome me right in and I spent a lot of weekends sitting at kitchen tables and in living rooms just checking in on people.”

With the new recommendations asking people to stay home, he decided he wanted to check in with as many people as he could — many of whom live alone or only get person-to-person contact with their co-

workers, who they might not be seeing for a while.

“They’re scared. A lot of people are scared. I’m not taking any chances, but I don’t think it’s good for you to be cooped up in your house. I go for walks and I’m not going in anywhere now, but I’m waving at people. I’m smiling at people. I’m calling out to people I see that I know. I remember after 9/11 when everybody was being nice to each other and checking in on each other, and that’s what we gotta do now.”

This weekend, he walked from his house through downtown, around the west side, and back again. He told me this week he’ll walk all over now that he can’t go into work. Per his request, I won’t tell you what his job is. It looks like he’ll be unemployed for the indefinite future, but he’s not thinking about it right now.

“People are the most important thing. You can have all the money in the world, but when you lose a person you love, or a friend you love? That’s a hurt that hurts more than — I’ve been broke. You don’t even want to know how broke I’ve been, but it never hurt as bad as when I lost somebody — and I’ve lost somebody to everything you can think of. Trust me. Trust me I have. I’m not worried about money. I can worry about money after I’m done worrying about people. But I got a lot of people to worry about.”

Because the weather was nice over the past few days, he’s seen people sitting out on their porches or on their front steps, and when they see him, he says most of them look relieved.

“Because here’s this idiot still walking around like everything’s like it always is. But that’s what I want. I want them to see me doing what I always do so they don’t feel like everything is going bad now, because something is still the same even if that thing is me.”

I went for a walk with him on Saturday and he’s right — most of the people he encounters laugh and quickly catch him up on how they’re doing. He offers to get them groceries, run errands, whatever they need — but nobody took him up on it. They just thanked him for coming by and the two of us kept walking.

And it’s true, he does err on the side of caution. A lot of places have already set up a routine with him where he knocks on the door — especially if it’s an older person — and he’ll call out to them to see if they need anything, and they’ll say they’re good, and we’ll move on. He tells me with those people, he still plans on leaving some food or other items on their front step regardless of what they say, because it can’t hurt.

“As long as it can’t hurt, why not, right?”

Hard to argue with that.

In Providence: A Paper Elephant



“Nobody can ever find the house. Back in the days before cell phones, I’d have to be on the landline for half the night talking to people calling in from pay phones. ‘No, you missed it. It’s the first right, then another right.’ Half of them would give up and go home. Once GPS and cell phones came around, we got pretty big pretty fast. Now I have to think a little harder about the guest list, because there’s too much stuff I don’t want to see go missing.”

Every first Saturday of the month, there’s a house nestled near the Roger Williams Park Zoo that opens its doors and lets people wander through one of its many decorated rooms. The house is owned by a lifelong Rhode Islander with a penchant for fanciful decor and a deep, abiding love for nature. In various rooms, there are books piled up to the point of toppling over. Quilts cover windows instead of curtains. Every table has three or four vibrant-looking dresses on it and at least one pair of shoes. The place exists on that fine line between charming and concerning.

“I found the house because I would go to the zoo with my sketchpad and I would draw and I would sit there on days when I could go, and one day, I pass by this house, and I thought it was just the perfect house for me, but I didn’t think I could afford it. Turns out the owner was in this big rush to sell, and I got it for nearly nothing. It was also falling apart, and it’s still falling apart. I had no interest in redoing anything but the foundation, because I didn’t want to wake up one night in the basement, but all the other cracks and scars I kept there, because I liked the character of the place. If something was really bad, I’d put a tapestry over it. I’d paint something and hang it up over the water stains on the walls or something. People would come over and I’d tell them to bring something I can put on the walls, and that’s when it started, with people coming over and all these things going up on the walls.”

These “things” include paintings, drawings, ripped paper with scribbling on them, words written on the walls themselves, splatter and photographs, and all of it seems to have no rhyme or reason, unless you’re the owner who says there is a strict set of criteria that long-term party guests know all too well.

“You can do whatever you want, but I hate anger and I hate war and I hate guns or just people being smart to look smart. I like beauty. I love beauty. I ask all the guests to keep it beautiful so all of this you see on the walls is beautiful. It’s a celebration of all things beautiful. For people — for a lot of the people that come here — that’s floral. That’s the ones in their lives that they love. Animals. A lot of animals. They’re inspired by how close we are to the zoo and they want this to be their museum. I was doing installation before a lot of other people. This whole house has become an installation.”

It’s true that it’s hard to picture anyone really living in the house. When I visited, there seemed to be only one bathroom and none of the rooms had beds or anyplace to sit that wasn’t makeshift. I crouched on a pedestal and watched the owner describe all the different paper birds hanging from the ceiling.

“When we filled up the walls in here, somebody got a ladder — I don’t remember who it was — they got a ladder and they started hanging these little birds and I just loved that. Now you walk in here, you think you’re in an aviary. Some are hung very low and some are just a few inches down from the ceiling, and so it creates this magical experience when you walk in and you think— It reminds me of hair and I love feeling it brush against my face when I walk through it. It’s really nice, but some people are skittish and they don’t like this room at all. They go in the room next door with the paper elephant.”

If you’re never seen a paper elephant, you’re probably trying to imagine one right now, and I can assure you, it’s even grander than it sounds. The artist used paper of every pattern, and so the effect is psychedelic and strong, even though a lit match would reduce it to ash in a matter of minutes. That’s why there are candles surrounding it.

“I want to remind people that strength is an illusion. I only light the candles during the party and I keep a jug of water nearby just in case. I’m not trying to kill anyone — or myself. I just like what it represents when all the candles are lit around it. People think it’s spiritual. It can be spiritual. If that’s what you want it to be. It can be whatever you want.”

Watching the guests enter and move about the house this past Saturday, I was struck by how upscale the whole evening seemed. I pictured it being a ragtag group of artists conducting something akin to a sit-in, but people showed up in suits and dresses, and caterers were on-hand to give out small black plates with finger foods on them. Jazz music played throughout the house, and in the room with the paper elephant, a couple discussed, at length, which European country they should move their annual vacation to now that Italy seemed unwise.

On my way out, I bumped into the owner and gave them something of an apology for assuming that they were some kind of hoarder when here I was surrounded by glitterati. They laughed and then refused my apology.

“Because you weren’t wrong. I have much too much. It’s just how things look in the daylight. You kept coming by in the daytime when the house is a real mess. I know it’s a mess. Somebody taught me a long time ago that if you light your home just right, it’ll look like a million bucks, and that’s what I do. I’m very careful with the lighting, because with everything I have — with all my things — you have to light them and then you can create all these beautiful shadows which make everything — and the house itself — look very expensive. It’s all garbage though, Kevin. Don’t get me wrong. I know it’s garbage. But it’s

well-lit garbage. When you take control of the lighting in a given space, you realize you have complete control over what they see or don't see *and* how they see it, which is just as important. I'm telling you, it's not about what you have, it's about how you light it."

They had to get back to the party. Someone wanted to add a new painting to a room upstairs and the owner had to give their approval. I never made it upstairs to see the painting, but the owner called me later to say that it was mostly red with a few green leaves along the top, and that it was beautiful. The room is already running out of wall space, as is the rest of the house, but that didn't stop the owner from hanging up the painting.

After all, you can never have too much beauty.

In Providence: Design for Life



"He was in a cop movie I think. I don't know. I don't watch cop movies. But it was a cop movie I think. He was a cool guy."

They want to crash a nearby gala. It might be something to do with charity. They don't have any idea. They've been entertaining all day — showing a friend from Boston around town. In this case, that meant

taking them to a nearby coffee shop to talk about national politics and chain-smoking in their apartment.

“He was always crashing s___. That was his favorite thing to do. Just find some big event and walk right in like he owned the place and because he was — he was famous — he was in a cop movie — and so he could do it. He could just do it. The president’s a piece of s___, but he’s right, when you’re famous, they let you walk right in.”

They find a gala and are disappointed to learn that it really isn’t that hard to get in. There are so many people waiting to get in that as soon as they start to argue about why their name isn’t on the list, they’re immediately waved forward and told they can come back and check in later when it’s not as busy. This seems to take all the fun out of it for them.

“See all these people? What’s this theme? It’s about — It’s about being wild and sexy. But these people aren’t wild and sexy. This is pretend for them. Why would you want to pretend to be wild and sexy? Just be wild and sexy. You have to put on a costume to act like you don’t give a ___? Why do that? Just learn. I had to learn. I had to learn from him that you either give a ___ or you don’t give a ___, but you can’t put on a costume and go out for a night and give a bunch of money to the _____ Fund and pretend you don’t care, because you do, and how’s that fun for you? He would have hated this. He wouldn’t have even bothered crashing this party, because this isn’t even a party. You want to go to a party? Let’s go to a party.”

So we went to a party.

It was on the East Side and if I had to make a sweeping generalization about it, I’d say it was mainly RISD students with a smattering of Brown University and one guy who was cutting up tarot cards, which I’m pretty sure will result in immediate death or possession. I don’t know. Cutting up tarot cards just doesn’t seem like something anyone should do.

To get to the party, we had to go through a small gate, along a stone path, in a side door, up two flights of stairs, and into an apartment that looked like it was decorated by either Moby or Basquiat. The kitchen was the cleanest I’d ever seen, and the bathroom was so dirty I decided I would wet myself before I would use it. There was no music, but there was a girl reading dates from a notebook. April 8th, 2007. October 23rd, 2011. I lost track after that.

“Who said he was a movie star? I never said that. I said he was in a movie — one movie. But he was good in the movie. That’s why they kept putting him in things. He wanted to move here, though. He loved Rhode Island. Providence. F___ing loved it. Couldn’t believe this place. Told me it was like a — like it reminded him of Savannah. That’s what he said. He wanted me to come visit him in Savannah, because that’s where his house was. I’m going to go there next year. I have some things to finish up here first.”

Somebody asks them how the party was — the gala — and they dismiss the question by taking out the last cigarette in the pack they keep in their back pocket, and holding it out for a light.

“I don’t like to pretend. I don’t want to be in a room full of people pretending to be fun. I’d rather just be fun. Stupid people pretending to be fun for a night and that’s — how do they do that and not get depressed? It was so depressing. Kevin liked it though. He knows all about pretending, don’t you, Kev?”

They tell me I should go home, but I tell them that, on principle, I never leave a party until the person I'm writing an article about calls it quits first. That leads them to scowl and then groan and then get up and walk out without a goodbye to the guy cutting up tarot cards or the girl reading dates. I catch a date in June — or maybe it's July.

Out on the street, it's colder than it's been in a while, and I'm not properly dressed for it, but they don't seem phased by it. They walk the eight or nine blocks back to their apartment, only turning to look at me when they're at their door.

"If you want to come to Savannah with me next year, you'd better decide who you're pretending to be and — and if that's what you want. If you want to keep pretending. Because he doesn't like pretenders. I can't bring some fakeass — like, you. Like you need to do better, Kevin. You need to do better or nobody's even going to pretend around you, right? Right? These people were pretending for me tonight, but that was for me. That wasn't for you. If it was just you tonight, they wouldn't have even — they wouldn't have even put in the effort. It's not going to be like that in Savannah, Kevin. When we get there, I need you to know what you're looking for, okay? You do that and we can crash any party you want, okay? You just need to do better."

They go inside, and I'm left standing out on the right side of midnight wondering how I can do better. Be better. Pretend to be better.

What does better look like early on a Sunday morning in Providence when it's pretending to be another time somewhere far, far away?

In Providence: Flames



“He brought Flames to the party. The boy ain’t playin’ around none, is he?”

She told me to bring chicken if I was going to bring anything, and she said to make sure it was spicy. I went to Flames on Eddy Street, which makes my favorite chicken in Rhode Island, and brought it over to her house on Sackett Street.

Every Saturday night, she has friends over and with the weather being so warm lately, she’s able to open up her yard and let people sit outside and talk for a bit until the evening cold arrives. She and her friends play cards, talk, trade stories, but mostly — they eat. And their food of choice is always something hot. Really hot.

“It became kind of a game, no? People make things and they bring things from places they found, but we try to see who can eat it and who chickens out. Don’t come to my house on Saturday because you know just what you’re gonna get.”

She’d had Flames before, but she was surprised to see me walk in with it. I guess the bet had been that I’d show up with hot wings, which her daughter’s boyfriend tried to bring by the first time he was invited over, only to get teased for how mild they were.

“He come in here telling me they were hot. He a liar. I tell him that too. My husband sucked all the sauce right off them and didn’t think nothing of it. My husband, he’s a lightweight. If he can eat your wings like that, your wings ain’t spicy. I tell that boy, ‘Bring me something else next time,’ but I let him come by again, because I like how he laughs when we joke with him. That means he’s good stock. But you brought chicken from Flames, so now I think you should have married my daughter.”

Oh, that’s right. The boyfriend is now the new spouse. Her family’s getting bigger, and she’s grateful. A few years ago, her Saturday parties started, because she was too sick to go out. Her health had been nagging at her, and when she finally got checked out, things didn’t look hopeful.

“Before that I was sunny. Used to be go, go, go. Now I gotta slow down. I did slow down. But I hate being all cooped up in the house. I started telling people come by. Never liked having anybody over before, messing up my house. I want to come to you, I don’t want you coming over here seeing how dirty my place is and getting it dirtier. I’ll dirty up your house. How about that? But it’s no good to be lonely when you’re sick on top of it, so my husband says, ‘We gotta have people over. People want to see you. People love you. They want to come by and make sure you’re doin’ all right.’ I say, ‘Fine with you’ and they come over, and they want to bring something to eat for me, I say, ‘I can’t hardly taste nothing.’ That was the problem with being sick and with my medication, I say, ‘I can’t taste anything’ and my friend, she tell me, ‘I’ll make my chili. We’ll see if you can’t taste nothing.’ I put that in my mouth, and I wanted to kill that girl. I was choking, it was so hot. But it was good, too. I say, ‘Okay, girl, you want to do like that, I’m gonna make you my grandmother’s stuffed peppers,’ which was the hottest thing I ever ate. That girl took one bite, and she’s puking up over there in that corner of the yard. We was all laughing. Nobody could stop laughing. They like seeing me laugh, too. Now we’re always bringing over the hot things to try. I like it. I never liked spicy food before, but now I eat it all the time. Wakes you up, no? That’s what I like.”

As luck would have it, she had some of her grandmother’s stuffed peppers ready for me to try when I got there. I put a little piece on a fork and as soon as it touched my palate, I thought I was going to need an ambulance. Her husband was nice enough to get me some milk, but I gagged for about 10 minutes before the deliriousness subsided.

Everybody at her house patted me on the back and told me I had to take another bite. I thought they were crazy, but she told me that eventually I’d get used to the heat.

“That’s the thing about it. When you can do it and it don’t hurt no more — that’s what feels so good. That’s why you gotta go back for more.”

In Providence: Dirty Laundry

“He’d come over and I’d do his laundry for him. That was the big thing. I did his laundry how he liked it. He never let anybody else do it. Just me.”

Late on a Saturday night, a 24-hour laundromat can be a surprisingly hopping spot. Laundry might seem like the last thing you’d want to be doing while other people are out dancing and drinking, but this is his routine, and it has been ever since he lost the love of his life.

“Used to be Sunday mornings. Not anymore. I’d rather do it now and get myself out of the house. Saturday nights were when he would come by, because his wife used to get these migraines and for some reason she was good all during the week, but then Friday or Saturday, she would get low, her moods would change, and she’d go lie down. She used to sleep all weekend and he’d come see me. I started to think she knew what he was doing and that after he left she’d have some guy come over, but I never said that to him.”

A few feet away from us, a girl is talking to someone on her phone about a guy she works with who would be cute if he’d just shut up every once in a while. On the other side of the laundromat, two other girls are sorting clothes into different piles on top of a counter, and nearby a man who looks to be in his late 40s is half-reading a magazine with a ripped front cover.

“He worked for the state. Everybody knew who he was, but they didn’t know what he got up to. Lots of those men had girls on the side, and I think that’s what they thought was going on with him when he’d be sneaking around. They all covered for each other. We met at this party I was working. I used to waiter for these fundraisers and he was there and he gave me his number — it was on a business card, but the number on the card was crossed out and then on the back was the number he had me use. He was very handsome and he was about 10 years older than me, which I liked a lot. I called him the next day and he came by and we stood outside my apartment — I had an apartment near Branch Avenue — and we stood outside — it was late summer, early fall. I noticed he had some clothes in the backseat of his car. He told me that his wife doesn’t do laundry so they take it all in to have someone else do it. I offered to do it for half what he was paying, and he thought that was pretty funny, but I was already in the backseat gathering up the clothes. Once I had them all, I invited him inside. That was when I started doing his laundry with mine. I used to mix them all together and separate them later. I don’t know why, but that’s how I did it. I had a washer and dryer in the basement of my building back then, but now I have to come here. I don’t mind. Gives me something to do.”

He’s sitting near the door so he can smoke with an ashtray he brings from home. Even though it’s freezing outside, the door is propped open, and you get the sense that’s specifically for him, although the guy working at the laundromat says it gets too hot and people like the fresh air. I ask him if it’s illegal to let somebody smoke in here, and he laughs and says he won’t call the cops if I don’t. My friend sitting by the door tells me to go ahead and call the cops, because he already knows all of them.

“Before he died, he came to the house, sat down, and told me a lot. He never talked like that before. Told me things and I kept saying, ‘I don’t need to know all that.’ A lot was weighing on his mind, I can tell you that. All those years working for people who lie. All they do is lie. The politicians — all of them. Doesn’t matter who they say they are — they lie and they f__ people over, and that’s the truth. He told me all that. He had to do a lot he wasn’t proud of, because he worked for a lot of people over the years,

and you know, he liked living in that big house away from all that. Oh yeah, he lived in a neighborhood in Narragansett. He didn't live in Providence. He wanted to be far away from all this, because of what he had to do when he was here. He told me a lot that night, and now I think it's to protect myself, because if somebody tries to f__ with me, they don't want to. I promise you that. They do not want to, because I know s__ about everybody now. I know plenty just from what he said that one night, and now everybody better leave me alone, and you know what? They do."

He still has another batch waiting in the dryer, but when I offer to take it out for him, he tells me to just sit and relax for a second. The night's turned over from late to too late, and the only person left in the laundromat is the man behind the counter and the girl still talking on the phone about a guy she knows she shouldn't like but likes anyway. Her clothes have been finished for at least 10 minutes, but I have a feeling they're going to be waiting for awhile.

In Providence: I'll Take My Diamonds Now

"He has always taken me out. That was one of the things I liked about him right away. He loved to go out. Didn't matter what day it was — we'd go out."

They've been married for 53 years and tonight, she tells me, they're going to Joe Marzilli's Old Canteen on Federal Hill to celebrate year 54. The Old Canteen has about 10 years on them, but both are holding up pretty well. She asks me if I know what kind of gift she should be getting for her anniversary, and I tell her that I have to look it up. After a quick Google search, I found out that it's supposed to be glass.

"My father, God rest his soul, he got my mother the most beautiful glass ornament you'd ever seen one year for Christmas. It was an oval and it had all the kids' names on it — me, my brother, and my two sisters. My mother cherished it. When she died, none of us wanted it, the ornament, because just looking at it made us cry. I think my niece took it. You want to keep some things, because they make you happy, but other things make you cry, and you can't have them around. That's just how it goes."

I ask her where they went on their first date.

"That would be a good story if I could remember it. You think I remember that far back? I dated a lot of boys back then. I wasn't a bad girl, but I wasn't a shy girl either. If I liked a boy, I told him so, and we'd go out. My mother would get so mad. She'd call me every bad word in the book, but I liked boys and I wasn't going to say sorry about it. If people talk, let them talk. My father was in my corner, believe it or not. He said, 'If they give you trouble, you know where to kick 'em.' I had to kick a few of them, but not many. If you kick one, they tell their friends, and everybody leaves you alone."

When I tell her that I'm trying to write a nice piece about an older couple who still makes time to go out on the town and not about a reformed bad girl, she laughs at me.

"We go out, but then we come home. But we do like to go out. But we like coming home better. That's why we've been married for so long. I like coming home with him. To him is another thing, you know, because when I come home I like it quiet and he's always listening to the radio and he can't hear a

damn thing so he's got it up so loud I have to tell him the neighbors can hear it, but he doesn't care. That's how come he's like me, because he doesn't care who minds him. He makes me mad, and I make him mad, and my brother used to say, 'You're mad about each other and mad at each other all the time.' That's why it works I guess. Fifty-four years. You know how many men I could have had in 54 years? But he kept it interesting for the both of us. We've been all over. You don't even know. One time we got in the car and — this was when we were a lot younger — we drove all the way to visit our friends in Bowling Green just because we had the weekend to do it. He's no wild man, but he keeps it fun, I have to give him that."

They're not making any big road trips these days, but they do like a late-night stop to Twin River or to get breakfast when neither of them can sleep.

"The money we spend going to these places late at night just so we can have some eggs is a sin. If my mother were alive to see me spending money on eggs when I have two dozen in the fridge at home — but it's fun to have somebody else do it for you. We love it. We love to see how late we can stay out. It's how you stay young. I believe that. We find all these little diners that stay open late on a Friday or Saturday and we sit with the kids who are all coming back from dancing or having fun and they love to see us. Some of them talk to us and ask us what we're doing out so late. I look at them and I think, 'What are *you* doing out so late? You look like you're 10 years old.' But they're not, you know, they just look it. Everybody looks young to me these days."

She tells me she has to go get ready for dinner tonight. I tell her to call me back and let me know what her anniversary present was. A few hours later, my phone rings with an answer. He bought her diamond earrings. I tell her that you're not supposed to get diamonds until your 60th anniversary.

"Yeah, but who knows if we'll live that long? I'll take my diamonds now. Isn't that what they say about flowers? Don't give 'em to me after I'm dead, give 'em to me now? That's me with diamonds. Every year from now on can be a diamond year."

In Providence: A Boy, A Girl and The Avon

"My blood was pumping. I was sitting there and my heart was racing. I was thinking, 'What am I doing? What do I think I'm doing here like this? Have I lost my mind?'"

She was across the street when she saw him standing in front of the Avon Cinema on Thayer Street. After getting dinner with her friends, she decided to hang around for a bit and find some excuse not to go home. The relationship back home was eroding, and every arrival seemed to include a rebuke over a door left unlocked or a cat unfed or rent money that should've been on the counter, but wasn't.

Rather than ruin an otherwise frivolous Friday night, she found an excuse to walk up and down Thayer the way she had when she was a teenager.

A few months ago, I wrote about Thayer Street, and how much it's changed since I was in high school, when standing out in front of Store 24 was considered high recreation. Now, everything's a little more

corporate, and if you're looking to kill time, you'd have a hard time walking down the collegiate avenue without feeling pressured to do something or buy something or get lost. Random encounters and run-ins with friends seem to be a thing of the past.

Or so I thought.

"Something — He was just standing there, but something about him caught my eye. He was handsome, definitely. Handsome doesn't really do much for me just by itself though. Something else was going on there and that's why I crossed the street."

He had a wool cap on, a blue scarf, a big navy blue coat and black jeans with black boots to match. His face was clean-shaven, and he looked like he was waiting for someone. She checked the marquee and the next movie was about to start. Something told her that she should buy a ticket.

"I felt like — It felt bad that I was standing there staring at this guy, because if that were me and it was some guy looking at me, it wouldn't be cool, right? It would be so not okay. But I thought, 'If you stop looking at him and just go watch the movie instead, it's not like you're following him. You're just-going to see a movie.' Was I hoping that would turn into something else? I don't know. I just felt like I had to go in."

So she did.

As she walked by him, they caught each other's eye. She wasn't even sure what the movie she was about to see was about, but she got her ticket and sat down inside the theater one seat in on the aisle in the back row. Right before the lights went down, like some kind of reward for her bold move, the guy waiting outside appeared — taking the seat next to her.

"I couldn't believe it. Like, what was he doing? It looked like he was meeting someone else there, so I'm thinking — Did they blow him off? Did he get stood up? I was thinking — Should I be worried? But he didn't follow me in here. I followed him. Unless he was waiting outside the theater for some random single woman to show up so he could — This is what happens when you do something crazy. Someone else does something crazy and you end up dead. But then you think about all those old movies where people would do crazy things and it would end with them falling in love and you think, 'Why can't it be like that? If something bad can happen when you take a chance, why can't something good happen?'"

Despite the unusual circumstances, they followed proper etiquette and didn't say anything during the movie. At one point, he got up and she thought he was bailing on her, but he was just using the restroom, and then came right back. She thought about a lot of things — how far could she take this? Could she put her hand on his hand? Could she whisper something to him? Could she even look at him?

"I was watching the movie, but I wasn't watching the movie. I couldn't tell you one thing about that movie. I don't even remember what it was called. I think it had subtitles, but I don't know. I never took my eyes off the screen, but my mind was somewhere else."

When the movie was over, she waited for him to get up. He didn't. Neither did she. Other people shuffled up the aisles. The credits rolled. They were almost finished, when he got up and walked out of the theater.

"I thought that was it."

She thought about going home. She thought about the rent money her boyfriend was going to claim wasn't on the counter. She thought about the unmade bed. She thought about how loud the television was going to be when she walked in and how many empty glasses were sitting in the sink with alcohol residue still in them.

That's what she was thinking about when she walked out of the Avon — and there he was.

"He said, 'Hi.' I said, 'Hi.' He told me his name. I remember he held out his hand and I laughed. How many times do you meet someone like that? A handshake was like — I almost didn't shake it, because it was so silly. I guess some girl stood him up. She texted him some excuse right as I was walking by him and he just went in like I went in. He asked me if I wanted to go get a drink, and I said, 'Yes.' People used to meet each other like that all the time, but I'd never met anybody like that. So random like that. It was really cool."

They went to get a drink and spent the next few hours talking. That was almost a year ago. I asked her if they were going to go back to the Avon for their anniversary, but as cute as that would be, she told me they're going to spend the night at home. She likes being home now. A lot can change in a year.

"I'm just glad he never wanted to talk about the movie. That was what I was worried about when we sat down for that drink. I thought, 'Please don't let him ask me about that movie we just saw, because I wasn't paying any attention to it.' I was just thinking about him. But we had a lot of other stuff to talk about."

She told me people love hearing the story of how the two of them met, but she doesn't think it's as romantic as it sounds. That it's as simple as taking a chance and then another, and then one more. I tell her that there's not a lot of magic left in the world, and most people will take whatever they can get.

Especially if they can still get it on Thayer Street.

Warmer Than I Remember

If you start walking toward downtown from The Scurvy Dog, you'll go right by his house.

"She took me home from the bar, but I lived in the opposite direction back then. I lived with three guys on Valley Street. Four times she told me her name and four times I said it back to myself so I wouldn't forget it. The next morning, I wake up, and she's gone. Nothing happened; I know that. She put me to bed and sat in this chair right across from me. She said she wanted to make sure I didn't die choking on my own puke like a rock star. I remember I said I wasn't a rock star — that I was a bum with a bum knee. She didn't say a thing. She just sat in that chair. I got rid of all my furniture a few years back, but I kept that chair just because she sat in it. The next day, it's just an empty chair."

Even in an age of social media, without a person's name, it's not always easy to find the woman you fell in love with one night after a few drinks and a conversation you can't remember. He went back to the Scurvy Dog the next night in the hope that maybe she'd be there, but she wasn't.

She wasn't there the next 20 times he went back either.

"I start going to different bars. I ask around. I describe her and people look at me like 'Is he making this up? He was drunk. He might have made it up in his head. I didn't make it up. This woman was real. The whole way home I'm laughing my ass off she's so funny. She's telling me all about this boat she has that her dad gave to her father after he died, and how she's going to take me on the boat. This was like February or March, but it was warm out that night. Not warm but warmer than it should have been. But when I'm telling people about it, they're saying it wasn't warm that night, and one of my buddies who saw me doesn't remember me talking to a woman. Nobody remembers it. Someone laughed in my face. 'Yeah, beautiful woman with a boat taking care of some drunk guy — sure, sure.'"

Rhode Island is a small state, but we all have that one person who comes to mind every so often who seems to have fallen off the grid despite the grid getting bigger every day. For a long time, I fixated on a guy I'd been on a date with when I was 19 and lost touch with shortly thereafter. It wasn't that I fell in love with him or anything. He just popped into my head one night and when I looked him up, I couldn't find him. Had he popped up after a quick search, I probably wouldn't even have sent him a message, but the inability to locate him quickly became an obsession, and when he finally appeared in an Instagram photo with a mutual friend six years later, I felt the kind of relief you'd expect to experience after a pet assumed dead appears on your front step. I added him, we talked, I expressed to him over and over again how glad I was to have reconnected, we talked about getting together but never did, and I forgot all about him until just now. Twenty years ago, I would have just accepted that there are people who disappear from your life and are never seen again, but now that seems like a disease we've cured. It makes it that much more jarring when a seemingly permanent absence pops up.

"I feel like I can't move on until I see her again. I go on dates. Meet other women for drinks. Nobody's ever walked me home. Nobody's ever made me laugh that hard. Nobody's made me feel like they got my back the way that woman had my back and I didn't know her for more than two hours. That's gotta mean something."

The question had to be asked—

Could he have made her up?

"If I did, I don't want to know. I don't want to believe it. If she's in my head, then I'll never know for sure, and I'm just going to keep looking for her everywhere I go."

The funny thing about that boy I found after all those years? Once I found him, he started showing up everywhere. At restaurants I was at. Parties. We even bumped into each other walking down the street in Newport — literally bumped into each other on a busy night with a city full of people swarming around me. It was as if we had broken some curse by finally finding each other again, and now Rhode Island was Rhode Island once more, and we'd never stop seeing each other.

"Until I find her, I'm never going to stop looking. Even if it's just so I can find out her name. All these years, and I'd settle for just a name."

If you leave the Scurvy Dog and walk toward downtown, you'll walk right by his house. It won't necessarily be a very memorable walk.

But I guess that depends on who's walking with you.

In Providence: Living on America

“I have no idea what she does for a living.”

We’re sitting on her couch. It’s a couch in a living room in an apartment on America Street on the west side of Providence. The living room doesn’t have much in it aside from the couch, but there’s an Amy Winehouse poster on the wall and some dead flowers in a vase on the window.

“She sits in that room and when she comes out she asks me how I’m doing and I tell her that I’m doing very well and she goes back in her room. She doesn’t go to work. I don’t think she comes from money. She only wears the one shirt and I think — I think I’ve seen her in two pairs of jeans, but it could just be one. I wouldn’t be surprised.”

Her roommate has been living with her for the past seven months and she claims that during those seven months she’s never actually seen her leave the apartment for any reason.

“I just don’t know what she does for money. I’ve never seen her eat. A few times I told her she was welcome to whatever was in the fridge just because I wanted to see if she’d eat any of what I’ve got in there, but she didn’t touch any of it. I don’t think she showers either, but she doesn’t smell bad. I don’t get that close to her, but if she wasn’t showering at all, I bet I would smell her by now. I don’t care about that stuff. Smells don’t bother me, but if I’m living with a vampire then I’d like to know that.”

Before this roommate there was another roommate who juggled at corporate events and somehow made a living off of it. It might be anecdotal, but it seems like lately more and more people are finding ways to exist without doing any of the things we’ve been told we need to do if we don’t want to wind up destitute. It used to be that the people with the weirdest jobs were on HGTV shows shopping for million dollar properties while claiming to be professional swing set inspectors, but now they also live on American Street and every so often you can hear them speaking French.

“For no reason at all. I just hear her talking to herself in French. My ex-boyfriend spoke French, so I had him come over and listen and he said she’s just talking about a movie she likes, but he couldn’t make out which movie it is. The point is she’s talking to nobody. She told me she doesn’t have a cell phone, because she thinks they cause meningitis, and she had this long explanation for why that is, but that was the first day she moved in, and I tuned her out as soon as she started talking, because I thought she was going to be really talkative, and that I should learn how to zone out on her, but she’s barely said a whole sentence since then unless she’s in her room alone shouting in French. She shouts the French. She doesn’t just speak it. She shouts it.”

When asked if she’s ever invited her roommate out on the town, she tells me she has — by way of leaving a message on the dry erase board on the wall in the kitchen. The response was written in blue marker and it said — I HAVE CHESS ☺

“The smiley face was nice, because it means she didn’t want me to feel bad, but what does that mean? What does ‘I have chess’ mean? Is she playing chess? She doesn’t have a chessboard. There’s no computer in there. She told me she doesn’t have a laptop, because the government listens in on them,

which would have sounded crazy 10 years ago, but it's kind of true now so I don't judge her for thinking that way, but if she doesn't have a phone or a computer—and she doesn't have a chess set. I can see into her room when she opens the door to come out and stand in front of the window in the living room at night. There's no chess set in there. How can she have chess? Chess with who?"

I should be interviewing her roommate, but when I ask her roommate if I can, she says, "No, thank you," but she invites me to sit with her in her room, and I say, "Yes" because I have to, because I'm a writer and I'm supposed to jump at chances to sit quietly in a room with a person nobody can figure out, but when we're in there, she just asks me how I'm doing, and I say, "Great," which seems like too much, probably because it is, and we don't say anything after that.

When we're done, I thank her for her time, and I go back into the living room and report that this is going to be the most boring thing I've ever written and why am I writing an about town column if I'm going to half-profile people who never go out on the town?

"It's January, Kevin. Nobody's going anywhere. Everyone's just holed up. I think it's strange, because she's got a whole apartment to be holed up in and she's choosing the smallest of the holes, but I still get it on some level. It's a scary f***ing world out there, right? She doesn't seem scared, but she must be a little if she's making up chess games and standing in front of windows all the time, right? Right."

I agree with her even though I have no idea if she's right.

But I'm also pretty sure she's not wrong.

Lately, in America, it seems we're all living somewhere around there.

In Providence: Hungry Heart

"My wife used to love Bruce. All she'd play is Bruce. Let me tell you, Bruce Springsteen ever showed up at the door, I was out, boy. I was a goner."

He lives in Wayland Square within walking distance of Books on the Square and Red Stripe. Currently, he's the father of four and the grandfather of six, but there's another one on the way, and at the age of 78, he's decided he wants to start a band.

"We haven't booked any gigs yet, but that's not what we're looking to do. When you get to be our age, you're just looking to stay out of trouble."

His wife wasn't just a fan of Bruce Springsteen. According to him, she was also an avid reader, a lover of any movie with a car chase in it, an incomparable mother and the love of his life. She passed away in 2017, and it left him unmoored.

"I thought I was going to go right after her, because I was so down in the dumps about it. But she would have said, 'Who's going to look out for the kids if we're both gone, you jerk?' That's what she would say.

That's why I got to hang around for a little bit longer. We got a granddaughter getting married in the spring, and I gotta be there to see it. Before then, I need to find something to do, and I remember that I used to play in a band when I was younger."

"*The Four Legs.*"

They played a total of seven performances and then split up when the bass player broke his hand punching a guy in the face at one of their shows for saying they sucked.

"He had a point. The guy — not the bass player. He was a real a**hole."

What did *The Four Legs* refer to?

"Hell if I know."

The new band doesn't have a name yet, but he wants to call it *Arthritis*.

"That way when the music is bad, they'll say, 'What do you expect? They all have arthritis.' I recruited some guys I play golf with and my brother-in-law, and we play down in my basement because I don't want the neighbors hearing us. We have to play loud, because my brother-in-law can't hear a damn thing. I keep telling him that he needs to get his hearing checked, but he's stubborn as all hell so I said, 'Forget it' and besides I don't need him to hear anything; he's on drums."

What would his wife think of his new hobby?

"She'd love it. This kind of thing could always get her to laugh. Me and my big ideas. I was always tinkering with something or breaking something she needed to use — like the bathroom sink or the shower or our car. I don't know how she put up with me."

Then I make a request.

"That's a tough one. Let me ask the band."

A month later, I'm in his basement along with a few invited guests for the first ever, semi-public performance this foursome's ever done.

After thanking the six or seven of us sitting on folding chairs next to the furnace, the show begins. They've learned a couple of standards, and they do those first. Right after "Spirit in the Sky," they arrive at my request, and just as I had hoped, it comes with a special dedication.

"You all know whose favorite this was, so I hope she's listening."

Nobody would tell you it was the most polished rendition of "Hungry Heart" they've ever heard. It was bumpy and off-tempo and the vocals were erratic, but as they performed, I saw everyone in the room — the band included — lean into the song in a way you're lucky to find even at the most joyful of concerts.

When they finished, we all cheered and *Arthritis* took a goofy-but-sincere bow.

Afterward, I asked him how it felt playing that song.

"It felt pretty good. Thank you for asking me to do that. Felt good singing that song like when we used to be in the car driving somewhere and I'd sing and try kissing her neck and she'd swat at me saying we were going to get in an accident. I was always trying to be her Bruce. But see, I got to be married to my girl for 50 years and he didn't, so who came out on top?"

So what happens now?

"We might do it again. There's a senior center that has acts like us. My brother-in-law needs to get his head out of his a** and find the rhythm, but other than that, I think we're doing all right for a bunch of guys older than dirt."

Hey, I tell him, everybody's gotta start somewhere.