

## Night in the Ruts

This joker thought he was among friends. You know the type, comes into the motel bar, looks around, sits one, no more than two stools over from you or the guy you've been talking to all evening, orders a draft, pays for it, and only then does he get up to take a leak. He wants to show you he trusts you with his change and with his drink. What does he think we would do in the way of violation, lift a single or a fin, drop some spit? Anyway, you listen and hear the flush and then the door. Guys like this? They never wash their hands and then they try to insist you shake hands with them some time before last call. I usually make sure to sneeze into my hand and not wipe it on my jeans when I know he's looking in my direction. The guy next to me looks over when we hear the flush and then no faucet and we shake our heads, but stop before the joker rounds the bend.

In this case, the guy I've been talking to all night is one I see at this same place almost every time I'm in town. He works for the railroad, so I've come to think of him as CSX whenever we wind up here at the same time. When we do, we usually take turns buying rounds until the tender gets sick of us playing all the old Aerosmith on the jukebox, switches off the tube playing silently all evening and sends us to our rooms. CSX has a kid in the junior high who made the lacrosse team and my little girl was already planning her prom dress.

Not that you could tell by the blizzard going on outside, but her graduation was just barely two months away. This guy and I were so regular, it was almost like hanging with a friend.

There were a few other customers, sitting at tables, talking low and laughing loud, obviously traveling together, but we didn't pay them any attention and we were just as invisible to them. It's an okay way to spend an evening if you gotta be on the road. CSX and I have one thing in common, aside from knowing every detail of the Lucky 7 Motel, formerly one of the less glamorous chains, in Montgomery, New York. We're each selling something.

For me, it's seed, weed killer, sod, all kinds of stuff to make your lawn a beautiful place to mow when you don't want to talk to anyone, when you've run out of words. I got this job in the first place because I was the star of my hometown football team, which was definitely not a place where the scouts come looking. They knew I wasn't going on to college. Even community college would have been too much of a challenge for me. The guy who owned the turf farms in my home town, he and my old man were in some order together, Lions, Moose, some stupid animal that could never perform the secret handshake the men use beneath its stuffed and mounted head behind closed doors in the lodge hall. He gave me a job hauling out at the turf farms because he knew I could lift more than most of his other employees. My forearms and my back, those are my advanced degrees.

CSX, he sells safety, peace of mind. He spends his whole year on the road, just like me, a few days a week. I get to talk to people though, shoot the shit, pass the nursery guys our products calendar

with the skimpy outfit girls riding tractors, leaning on hoe handles, maybe get myself a free cup of coffee before heading to the next stop along the way. If they don't offer, I usually miss the urinal before I leave, but always, I wash my hands.

CSX, though, he's got almost no one to talk to, checking the light bulbs, breaker boxes and receivers on all the striped bars and warning lights at the railroad crossing guards. He looks at them here, moves on, working his way through parts of the northeast then home for a few days to catch up with the wife and whatever sport junior's in this month, maybe catch a game, yell at him to do better, have a little in the middle of the night, then back out, making sure those reflective boards come down and keep us from killing ourselves on the tracks, like they could hold back someone who really wanted to do that.

We watched the joker come in, order his draft and begin the ritual. When he went to the john, I called Three, it being my lucky number. CSX, more conservative than I am, claimed five. We've been betting on this kind of glad-handing need for about a year. The stranger is different every time, but his actions are always pretty similar. It is just a matter of minutes before one of us wins the bet. Since I nabbed the early number, I got a plan. As soon as I hear the urinal flush, I clear my throat and start, all loud and with enthusiasm.

"So then, you won't believe this, the guy in the next car? He starts picking his nose, and I'm talking third knuckle. I don't even

know how. Seems like he'd break something in there," I said, watching the second hand make its first sweep through, two more to go.

"Yeah, well, some people have big noses," CSX said. "I can see it happening. So'd he get anything?" Only twenty seconds.

"I wasn't watching all that closely. Probably. He wiped his finger on the underside of the dash, so, likely there was something on it or he wouldn't have bothered." I took a long draw on my Saranac and looked up at the clock. Less than a minute to go for me. The rule is that we can not acknowledge the stranger at all, can't encourage him to barge into our conversation, but I can see in my peripherals that this particular joker's beginning to grin. I've got him, and CSX, he can see it too. He's already pulling his wallet out to pay.

"I got flashed once, from the next car," the joker said. CSX sighed at his own timidity and handed me the fifty. It might seem like a lot, but over the course of a year, we about break even. When I win, I just slide the fifty into the secret pocket in my wallet, where I used to keep rubbers back when I thought I might get lucky on the road, back when I thought young single women came out to motel bars looking for a little night time company, before I realized that the only other people in those bars were hoping for exactly that same thing, and that we would all leave at closing time disappointed and horny.

When CSX wins, I just remove the fifty from its hiding place and pass it back to him. I suspect he might do the same. We've probably passed the same fifty back and forth a hundred times by now.

"So then, his wife slaps him," I said. "He just took it, let her whack him right across the jaw."

"And then what?" CSX said.

"How's that?" the bartender said to the joker. Looking for tips, always looking for tips. For that, I considered stiffing him, but since I'd be back within the month, I knew that I wouldn't.

"Light turned green. Didn't see what happened then. I just went on my way," I said.

"Same thing, here, sort of," the joker said, trying to make eye contact. "I was just sitting at a stop light and this car next to me honks, so I look over, figuring probably someone wanting directions. I live in a tourist town," he says, pausing, waiting for anyone to ask what town and the bartender does, mentally adding up his tip with each prompt he gives. "Niagara Falls, one of the seven wonders. It's mostly a wonder there's anyone there anymore, what with Love Canal and then all the plant closings," he said, laughing at his own routine, something he has said a thousand times before in places just like this one. Another salesman.

"So this beautiful young blonde in the next car waves to me, and I, being generally a friendly guy, wave back." It's always a beautiful young blonde, or a fiery redhead or a sultry brunette. It's never some ham-faced middle-aged wife or some desperate guy with hope and fear in his eyes at the same time. It's always a woman and she's always young and hot and her hair is never black and her skin is never at the brown end of the scale. Like the joker's. Like mine.

He wasn't from my reservation, but he might have been from the one closer to Niagara Falls. Like me, he's tried to erase all traces of his accent, but I could still hear it, mostly in the ways he clipped his T's. Usually he remembered to breathe the tail of that sound, but sometimes he chopped it right at the hard part, a reservation signature as clear as if he had yelled "Hol-y!" in wonder. I had learned to fill in the same way. I've seen this very bartender make faces when a more visible Indian walked in the bar. The expression isn't there long, like the underside of a leaf blowing in a breeze, but he's shown it to me, looking for company and agreement, and that's how I know I've hidden my accent successfully. I pretend I don't see it, for him and for me. I hate the expression and I hate my own silence, but in sales, you have to learn this trick. If your customer hears something alien in your voice, you might as well keep on moving, because he thinks you're selling him something bad. Maybe they think it's revenge for small pox blankets, land deals, you name it, we have lots of catching up to do and nobody wants to be home when that bill comes due.

"At first I think she might be one of my former students. It was hard to tell with only dashboard and traffic light by which to see." Student, he said--officially another salesman, of the idea variety. "She has on a sweater, one that buttons, or I think it buttons, but then suddenly, she grabs the collar sides and yanks. They're snaps, not buttons and beneath the sweater, she's wearing nothing. She grabs these impossibly perfect breasts, warm pink-nippled breasts and she jiggles them for me, laughing and smiling, and then the light turns

green and she's gone in, well, in a flash." He's told this story so many times that he's even got a punchline for it. He laughed, naturally, as he said it and then repeated it. "In a flash."

"Did you try to follow her?" the tender asked.

"Eh . . . . She took off, headed down a side street. She had it planned, I suspect. Perhaps she did this kind of thing often. I just went home, smiling, an interesting end to an otherwise not particularly memorable day."

"What do you teach?" the tender asked. CSX signaled for the tender to pour us another draft. He even offered one to the joker. He had ordered a domestic when he walked in, and he'd be hard pressed to suddenly switch to bottled import just because someone else was buying.

"A few things. Mostly late teens with attitude," he said, again, pausing, waiting for the laugh that wasn't coming. "College English. Mostly freshmen comp. Not very exciting, but it pays the bills."

"Something else you'd rather be doing?" CSX asked, getting further into the game.

"Sure, but . . . ." He had no rehearsed story for that question.

"What are you doing up here?" CSX asked, knowing that the joker and I were from the same area, relatively speaking. He had to drive by the turf farms on his way home to one of the seven wonders.

"Speaking engagement," he said, perking up. This was a story he was comfortable with.

"You ever fuck any of those college girls?" CSX asked, cutting him off. "I hear it happens a lot. Me, I don't run into any women on

the job and my buddy here, he's just a dumb seed man. Nobody ever wants to give you a blowjob for seed," he said, and the joker didn't even laugh at how clever CSX was. "But man, all that opportunity. I bet some of it just comes knocking on your door." The joker laughed nervously, sipped from his beer. He had a story to tell, but he wanted it coaxed out.

"No piece of ass is worth getting fired . . ." he started, but you could hear the pause, you knew it wasn't a period at the end of that phrase. The tender had even stopped rinsing beer glasses to hear the rest of this. "But this one time, I was doing conferences, individual meetings with students, and this gorgeous woman, older than your average student, more experienced, we call them non-traditionals, well, she'd scheduled herself last appointment of the day. No final exams in this class, just this conference. She sat in the student chair, which in my office, I keep right next to the desk, you know, right next to the In and Out Box." He smiled again, looking, but only the guy he was paying returned it.

"So I told her she wasn't doing all that well, which was the truth, and she climbed from her chair, got down on one knee, one knee, I hadn't seen anything like this in my whole career, like something straight out of the Pay Per View Movies, and she put one of her hands on my knee and asked me if she could perhaps have an oral exam. She said she was very good at oral." The tender kept smiling, even raising an eyebrow at this one. One way or another, he intended to collect all the change from the twenty that had been sitting on the bar since he poured the first draft.



"But I told her, this was a writing class. So that was it, nothing dramatic, but . . . ." There was always a but with this kind of story, as surely as this snow blowing fiercely by the windows would be gone in a week and the crocuses would be pushing through as they do every spring, coming attractions for the summer, helping my business. People see those little purple and yellow flowers opening up, maybe even peeking through the snow, they know the miserable weather's going to bed soon, no matter how many inches are covering their lawns.

"I saw her one more time after that, about three years later, at a wedding. She was there with her husband, big guy, so for most of the night, we didn't even speak. It was a lavish reception, much dancing, much drinking. We ran into each other at the bar later in the evening. She stared out at the mirror behind the bar, while the bartender mixed her Sloe Gin Fizz and she suddenly informed me that I had lost out, and that if I would have paid even a little more attention to her, she would have done it without the benefit of getting her grade raised. She said if I were perhaps even interested that night, I should go to the front door, stand there for a little bit, scratch my head then step outside, and she'd be along in a minute. And then she walked away."

"Did you go?" CSX said.

"Never saw her again."

"How come?" I asked. I wanted him to tell me that college professors didn't really do that kind of stuff. My little girl had big plans for herself after graduation and I had saved since she was born to send her to college. I didn't want her cleaning other

people's houses, like most of the Indian women in my mother's generation had done, or working in diners like my wife's generation, or do what most of her friends were going to do--scan unstamped cigarettes for white people avoiding their taxes at reservation smoke shops.

I didn't want to have to think about some old guy's fly being half-undone when she went to his office to get help on something. I trained her at home as best I could to not sound like a rez girl, but my wife was from the reservation I thought the joker might be from and her accent is heavier than mine. There will still be traces of it in my little girl's voice this fall, when I lift her belongings like so much seed and throw them down in a dorm room with fire-retardant mattresses long after the crocuses are gone and the college lawns are rich and full, waiting for my little girl to lay on them, reading a book in the September sun before the leaves fall, forgetting that I laid it down for her, a carpet of possibilities, free of the dandelions that are always trying to push their way back up.

"She didn't remember me," the joker said, finally, after taking a long pull from his beer. "We had gone to high school together. It was nothing so dramatic as even being turned down when I asked her out. I never did. Her father had been one of the Guidance Counselors. I guess he didn't necessarily keep the rules of confidentiality in place at home. It was clear I had been part of some dinner conversation in their household one evening, because she told two friends and it turned out just like a shampoo commercial, because they told two friends, and so on. I'd gone to her father with

questions about colleges and he thought it was hilarious that I even considered college because I was from--"

"Ah shit!" the tender said, flipping a switch below his bar and the neon OPEN sign blinked off. "Do me a favor, guys, act like you're drinking up." He walked over to the tempered glass door to the parking lot, turned its stainless steel deadbolt and then went back to washing glasses. In the distance, a bad-muffled car grew louder and louder, and eventually an old Pontiac that had seen better years came barreling into the parking lot, skidding and spinning down the incline that I knew was likely to give me trouble in the morning as it does in the winters. Montgomery sits sort of on a mountain side and the Lucky 7 sits far below the highway. In the winter, you learn to negotiate the parking lot like a skier and always make sure your truck comes to rest at an angle, no matter how different that angle is from the yellow lines painted below the ice.

The Pontiac's driver was trying like a son of a bitch, but this was one of those tricky snows, really wet, the kind that sent you only where others had driven before you. He came to a skid and got out, and even through the snow hitting him like small meteors, I could see that he was an Indian, likely from the reservation a few minutes up the highway. He tried the door and looked in with his hand up above his eyes to cut reflection. The tender walked over and shouted that the bar was closed, they'd already had last call, and then went back to his station, turning his back on the man swearing and pleading with him through therma-pane glass.

"Ever since they opened that casino, they think they own every damned thing," the tender said. The man got back into his Pontiac after a few bits of universal sign language. The car started a minute or so after several attempts and when the back up lights came on, the spinning tire sounds came through like squealing pigs. He wasn't going anywhere without help. He kept trying and trying.

"So why do they come here?" someone from a table said, watching the car rock in place. "There's got to be other bars in town."

"The name. The owners dumped their franchise contract so they could tie into the casino. Guess they figured people would stay here if they thought there was some kind of connection. Now they think they own it, like it's somehow connected to their casino." They--that was the only word he used. We weren't even worth naming. The tender walked over to the bank of windows, I thought maybe having second thoughts, but when he got there, he started drawing the blinds.

"Well, what are you gonna do?" CSX asked, not speaking to anyone, really, just expressing the disgust he shared with the tender, and I knew I wouldn't share a corner with him again. I stood up and as I did, the joker did too, grabbing all of his change from the bar. We turned the deadbolt and stepped out into the winter, each pressing against a bumper edge and a headlight, testing our feet in different patches of snow, feeling for secure leverage. We pushed the guy straight up the hill backwards, snow kicking us.

Our hands cast odd figures on the bar's exterior, like kids shadow puppets, our fingers glowing red with veins from the headlamp light passing through them. At the street level, he put his breaks on

and we stood up. He tried to climb from his car, but the joker ran to him, patted his shoulder and told him to head on home before he got stuck again. "Nyah-wheh," the driver said, and the joker responded, "jeh." The driver smiled, rolled up his window and rolled on into the dark, toward the reservation that lay a few miles before him.

"So you're from Tuscarora," I said, holding my hand out.

"Yes. Tonawanda?" he said, taking my hand in his. I nodded.

"Seems like we had the same Guidance Counselor," I said. "I got the same advice. In my case, though, he was right. I wasn't college material."

"How long did you have to tell yourself that to believe it?" he said.

"Not long at all. It was what I expected," I said. We listened to the steady sound of the Pontiac's muffler drifting home. When we turned back to the building, the shades were back up and the OPEN sign on again, a beacon through the flying snow. The tender stood in the glass door, waiting for us to make our way back in. The joker elbowed me, pointed with his chin to another open bar, just down the street. "I'll buy the first round," I said, pulling the fifty from its secret pocket. "I gotta make some change." The paths the tires had made were already drifting over, would probably be totally gone by the time we checked-out in the morning, but we watched them fill, committed them to memory the way we had so many other things and then, finally, stepped in fresh snow, careful not to lose our footing.

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