

## Last Call

After twenty years working construction, I could sit at the bar and tell a guy's trade by his appearance, his gestures, even his odor. A roofer's body was bronze, black tar in the creases of his skin and he'd squint to adjust his eyesight to the dim lighting after working outside all day. Stevedores and warehousemen were hard and muscular, and held their chests out ever so slightly like a woman showing off new implants. Bricklayers resembled the fortresses they constructed, their skin coarser than forty-grit sandpaper. And if a guy smelled like rust or oil, he worked at the shipyard.

McGann's Pub was a rare Philly drinking establishment where tradesmen from different unions could commingle in relative harmony, mostly because proprietor and former professional boxer Eddie McGann constantly canvassed the crowd from behind the bar looking for an excuse to punch somebody's lights out. You knew when Eddie had someone in his crosshairs because he'd get this giddy look on his face, like a teenager who caught his little brother jerking off in the closet. He'd line the guy up with the exit sign and clobber him so hard the poor bastard would back-pedal through the door and land in the gutter outside on Rowland Avenue.

Weekend nights at McGann's were Metallica-loud and I would set my cell phone on vibrate before I walked through the door. One Friday night I felt the phone massaging my thigh. I took it out, didn't recognize the number. "Hello?"

"Shawn?"

"Yeah. Who's this?"

"It's Johnny. Johnny Sheehan."

Johnny was the older brother of Newt, my closest childhood buddy. Me and Newt were inseparable. Some people joked we were twins, a joke because Newt had a head and nearly one

hundred pounds on me, not to mention a different last name. Johnny, a steamfitter at the shipyard, was the big brother I never had and got me into an apprenticeship when I returned from Vietnam.

I could barely hear him over the shouting and the jukebox, so I headed for the door and out into the cold November air. “What’s up, Johnny?”

“I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but Newt’s not doing well.”

“Cirrhosis?” I asked, a logical guess considering Newt’s lifestyle.

“Kind of wish it was.” Grim answer, I thought, yet it didn’t prepare me for what followed. “Stage four lung cancer.”

It felt like somebody sucker punched me in the solar plexus. “So what are we talking about, Johnny?”

“I don’t know if he’ll make it through the weekend.”

Silence, and then I thought I heard crying on the end of the line. “Newt’s invincible, Johnny” I said, though I didn’t convince myself. “He’ll win this battle like all the others.” Newt had overcome more adversity before his twenty-first birthday than most people did in a lifetime: Lost his dad to cancer in sixth grade, his mother in a car accident right after high school, and then had his own drunken car wreck that left a dent in his skull and put an abrupt end to his college football career. A year later he got into a feud with a homicidal truck driver at the warehouse where he worked when he started running around with the guy’s wife. Newt and his babe exiled upstate, married and had twins, and never returned. When the kids turned three his wife got cancer and fought the good fight for two years before she died.

“I’ll drive up to see him tomorrow,” I said. “And I’ll ask if any of the guys want to go with me.”

I walked back inside the bar and broke the news. Seven of us agreed to meet at Lonzo's house Saturday morning for a trip to the Pocono Mountains. Lonzo Vitoro was the lone Italian in our predominantly Irish neighborhood, but he fit in because he was a born entrepreneur who specialized in borderline illegal business activities. Lonzo opened an auto detailing business the summer he graduated from high school and hung a sign outside that read, "Professional Auto Detailing—Twenty-five Years Experience." Among the enterprises he had on the books was a limousine service.

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It seemed a lifetime since Newt's exile from his cramped Philadelphia row house to become an unlikely transplant in the remote mountain town of Blakeslee, Pennsylvania. His brawny six-foot-four-inch tattooed frame and thinning dirty-blond mop that barely hid the four-inch scar that stretched across his forehead earned him a pass from locals who made a sport out of vandalizing properties of city slickers who bought cheap real estate in the Poconos as an investment. His new neighbors had a hard time getting beyond the foul language and crude mannerisms, but his booming laugh slowly and methodically chipped away at their unease, and before long he became the favorite bartender at Gallagher's Pub.

When Newt first moved north, we'd visit him whenever we went water skiing in Lake Wallenpaupack in the summer or downhill skiing at Big Boulder and Camelback in the winter. Distance and time took its toll, and the visits dwindled to an occasional stopover after a long night of drinking and we'd hop in a car and weave up the Northeast Extension of the Pennsylvania Turnpike. It had been ten years since anyone had seen him when we congregated at Lonzo's house Saturday morning for the ride to the Poconos.

"What time's Lonzo gonna be back, Donna?" Grog asked Lonzo's wife.

Donna looked at me and I rolled my eyes hoping it would keep her from exploding.

“How many times do I have to tell you, Grog? He’ll get here when he gets here. Have another beer, for chrissake.”

Tommy perked-up. “I’ll have one.” Consuming ridiculous quantities of alcohol was a source of great pride to Tommy, along with never wearing underwear, a habit he bragged about as much as other men did the size of their manhood.

Lonzo walked in five minutes after ten. “You guys ready shove off?”

“We was born ready,” said Halfie.

Lonzo looked Halfie up and down, his sneakers untied, hair uncombed, clothes disheveled, and smirked. “What’d a cab drop you off from the bar this morning, you load?”

Halfie scrunched his face into the anxious expression he’d make anytime someone asked a simple question. He’d get this faraway look in his eyes, as if an answer were floating in space. Stumped, he said, “Fuck you, Lonz.”

Grog punched Halfie so hard in the shoulder that I felt the percussion. “Watch your mouth, you idiot. The kids are upstairs.” Grog was the chronicler of the gang and the only guy who could trace Halfie’s nickname to its origin. Halfie was a troubled kid from a dysfunctional family of thirteen whose voice would tail off at mid-sentence whenever he spoke, leaving everyone to wonder if he could even finish a thought. One night back in grade school we were sitting in an alley drinking beer and Newt and Halfie got into it about who the better guitar player was, Jeff Beck or Alvin Lee. Halfie said, “Man, nobody could do ‘Goin’ Home’ like Alvin. Didn’t you see him at...” and he never finished the sentence. Newt looked at him and said, “Woodstock? You trying to say Woodstock, *Halfie*?” and it stuck.

Lonzo looked around, and then at me and said, “Is this it?”

“Yeah,” I answered. “Chuckie and Splash got arrested and thrown in the tank after they left the bar last night.”

Lonzo rubbed his hands together like a cub scout rubbing two sticks to start a fire. “All right, let’s go. Joe’s outside waiting.” Joe, a seventy-two-year-old retired cement finisher and recovering alcoholic, was one of Lonzo’s limo drivers who never passed on a chance to make a few extra bucks, especially after the windfall he made when he took us to the Eagles-Giants game. He knew the more we drank, the more generous we became. The Poconos would be a long day of drinking, and once the pot came out anything could happen. Oddly, Joe was also a practicing Buddhist, and possessed some mysterious aura that could calm a union hall full of teamsters.

Halfie, Tommy and Grog charged out of the front door, down the steps and piled into the limousine.

“Hey, Lonz, how many limos you got?” asked Grog.

“Three. Why?”

“How come there’s a twenty-two painted on the back?”

Lonzo gave Grog a *mind your own business* look and said, “Don’t worry about it.”

Joe pulled from the curb and drove away while Halfie and Grog opened and shut compartments, played with dials and switches, and flopped the armrests up and down. “What’s this for?” asked Halfie, his fingers turning a dial back and forth.

“Sound system,” said Lonzo.

The veins in Halfie’s wrist bulged as he twisted the dial. “But it don’t work.”

Lonzo shook his head. “It’s not on, asshole, so don’t break it.”

I watched Tommy fidget. Sweat beaded on his forehead when Joe turned onto Roosevelt Boulevard. “Lonz,” he said, “there ain’t no beer distributors on the turnpike.”

Joe looked at us through the rearview mirror, and said, “I got you covered, boys. Ben’s Beer World is just before the on ramp, and there’s a liquor store in the same strip mall.” There was a mass sigh of relief.

People watched the long black limo with its tinted glass pull into the parking lot. The doors flew open and six bodies fell out like clowns spilling from a miniature circus car. Our grand entrance into the store was one we’d honed over the years—a tightly-packed scrum that fanned out like soldiers overtaking a village. Tommy, hands stuffed in his pockets, conducted surveillance from his six-foot-two perch as the guys roamed the aisles inspecting the import and microbrew selections, reverently praising the virtues of Harp, Heineken and Sierra Nevada. Grog walked directly to the Guinness he couldn’t afford, bowed and kissed the top of the case. Lonzo waited at the counter to buy a carton of cigarettes while Halfie walked the hand truck to the Yuengling, the local staple where he knew everyone would eventually wind up.

A short Asian woman with long black hair watched closely from behind bullet-proof glass with quarter-inch holes drilled into it. She tilted her head back and peered through reading glasses as she tapped the register calculating the price of provisions stacked chin-high. “Lottery tickets, boys?”

“Save ‘em for the old farts,” said Grog before he noticed the short old man behind him. “Sorry, bud, I flunked sensitivity training.” He looked back at the woman, “And a pack of rolling papers. No, make that two.”

Joe popped the trunk for us to load the beer while Halfie and Tommy ran into the liquor store and bought four bottles of wine and two bottles of Jameson's. When they came back with the goods, Joe said, "Think you got enough?"

"It ain't like there ain't no beer distributors up the Poconos," said Halfie.

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The limo soared out of the north side of the Lehigh Tunnel—The Irish Pub Express. A mile past the Hickory Run rest stop Grog shouted, "Joe, pull over. I gotta drain the monster."

A chorus of "Me too's" followed sounding like kindergarteners on a class trip.

"Why didn't you say something a couple of miles back when we passed the rest stop?"

"What's the difference?" asked Grog. "It's all woods up here, just like one big toilet. You think the deer piss at a rest stop?"

Joe eased onto the shoulder and the limo emptied. A long line formed along the side of the woods, steam rising from the ground two feet in front of us. A car speeding past honked its horn. Without turning to look, six hands shot up with middle fingers extended.

When we got back inside the limo, Tommy said, "Wait'll Newt sees the limo pull into his driveway."

"Yeah," said Lonzo. "You know him, he'll probably walk out, get in and say 'Let's go to the bar' like he seen us last week." Silence descended into the limo like a peculiar odor. I figured the other guys were thinking about the brawling and partying Newt, not the guy I knew. My Newt was contemplative, poetic, and at the heaviest moments, like after last call at McGann's when just the two of us would stagger up Brighton Street, saintly. One night, just as dawn was about to break, we were lying on his front steps looking up at the stars and he said, "Kids is kids, Shawn. We just get contaminated by the baggage the world unloads on us. The key to survival

is,” Newt paused, turned his head toward me, our eyes met, “never lose touch with the child inside.” Nobody I knew talked like that.

I believed that Newt was connected with a higher power. It happened during a mêlée outside the Irish Club in Mount Airy. I caught a guy so hard in the side of the head with a haymaker, I thought I broke my hand. The guy backpedaled, rammed his head into the side of a car, and his body slithered to the ground. Scared the shit out of me. I thought I killed him. Newt walked over, real calm, stooped down, cupped his hands around the guy’s head, and said, “Get up and be gone.” The guy opened his eyes and walked away. Newt straightened up and looked at me, put his index finger to his lips, and winked. I never shared the story with anyone. Nobody would have believed me anyway.

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Ten minutes after the piss stop, the limo steered around the long curve leading to the Pocono exit. The reality of our trip, the gravity of our mission, set in when Joe made a left onto Route 940 for the final leg of the journey. Tommy cracked the seal on the Jameson’s, releasing the pungent aroma of barley that pulled us deeper into a collective state of glum. He took a long slug from the bottle, and passed it around until it returned half empty. Tommy stared into the bottle as if a message was written on the bottom, and then raised it to his nose and inhaled, like he was snorting a reefer. Grog’s eyes widened and he pulled the papers from his jacket pocket and rolled a joint. He fired it up, inhaled deeply and sent it on its way following the whiskey.

I leaned over the front seat, and said, “Make a left on the dirt road up ahead, Joe.”

The limo veered left onto a bumpy road and we all slid to the right. Years of walking the neighborhood drunk and falling off barstools served Tommy well, he didn’t spill a drop, but the joint fell from Grog’s mouth onto Halfie’s lap.



“Son of a bitch!” Halfie jumped up, smashed his head on the ceiling and slid back down into his seat rubbing his noggin. Grog bent over in a laughing fit that sent smoke from his mouth and nostrils, his face so red I thought he’d explode. Tommy got hysterical, and said that he saw smoke come out of Grog’s ears, and everyone giggled like little boys telling jokes about their wieners.

“Where’s your buddy live, Shawn?” Joe asked.

“You’ll see a driveway after we round the bend coming up. Take it slow.” Not far from the end of the curve I pointed to an opening in the trees. “There it is.”

Joe pulled into the driveway and shut off the engine. The limo was quieter than a monastery at three o’clock on Good Friday. “I didn’t come ninety miles to sit in Newt’s driveway,” I said. “Let me out!” Four heads nodded, relieved they wouldn’t be the one to make initial contact. I stepped over Grog, squashed Tommy’s toes and opened the door.

Cinders crunched under my feet when I stepped outside. I stopped for a moment to look at the house, took a deep breath, and then walked to the back stairway. The creak of wooden steps under my weight sparked an eerie thought, *What if I look inside and Newt’s already dead?*

I cupped my hands around my eyes, pressed my face to the glass and waited for my vision to adjust to the darkness inside. Through a forest of leafy-green hanging plants in the kitchen, I could see the outline of a gas tank, and followed a thin spiraling tube that looked like a strand of angel hair spaghetti across the room. The tube ended at the silhouette of a large frame on a hospital bed. At first I froze, but then was relieved to see his chest expand and contract, ever so slightly. At that moment I could feel his presence from fifteen feet away. I couldn’t help wondering if this would be the last time I would see Newt.

“Hey, Shawn. Is he in there?” I turned around to see Halfie’s face ridiculously scrunched sideways in a four-inch opening in the window. He must have read the look in my eyes. “Sorry,” he said, and rolled the window back up.

I turned back to face the guy who never had an equal. Childhood memories filled my head—drinking rotgut, back-alley fistfights, Newt throwing guys through the air like rag dolls. We shared beds down the shore in the summertime and cells in the Fifteenth Police District anytime, celebrated the births of our friends’ children together, and mourned the deaths of family members. I smiled thinking about the time we got arrested for a barroom brawl and the cops forced him to squeeze into a plastic prison suit five sizes too small that made him look like a giant sausage. The sight was worth getting locked up for. Newt had been living ninety miles away for more than a decade, but distance and time never broke the bond, at least not in my heart.

I tapped on the window and there was a slight stir on the hospital bed. Newt’s head turned toward me. “Door’s unlocked, asshole,” he shouted, followed by a coughing fit.

A sturdy black lab greeted me when I opened the door. I stepped inside and was eyed by the biggest black cat I’d ever seen, and an unusually docile Golden Retriever. Sitting on the kitchen counter was a white cat with black and auburn splotches, and standing guard in the entryway to the living room was another black cat with a thick white streak down its back. I crossed the kitchen and walked slowly through thick, musky air into the living room, my vision adjusting with each step. I made my way to the hospital bed and looked down at Newt’s ravaged body, hoping no tears would drip into his face. “Hey, buddy.”

“Yo, Shawn. What’s happening, brother?”

I leaned down and hugged him. “How you doing, my man?”

“Great, couldn’t be better,” Newt answered in classic defiance. *Lose your father in sixth grade—dealt a bad hand. Split your head open in a car crash in college—shit happens. Tragic car accident snuffs the life from your mother—it was just her time. Terminal cancer at fifty-two—it’ll be my time when I’m good and ready.* “You gonna hug me all afternoon, or get me out of this bed, you fuckin’ faggot?”

“Sorry, Newt. You just caught me off guard, that’s all.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah—enough of the sentimental bullshit. Get me out of this prison cell and let’s have ourselves a drink.”

Newt wrapped his arms around me and I hoisted him to a sitting position, surprised at how much weight he’d lost from his football days. “How’s Johnny doing?”

“Oh, you know Johnny, never had a bad day in his life. But I had to tell him to stop coming up.”

“How come?”

“He couldn’t handle it anymore. It got worse and worse, and then the last time he was here, he saw my crimson dome from the radiation and cried the entire time. It was bringing me down, man. I know it was selfish, but I just couldn’t take it.”

I pulled Newt’s legs around to the side of the bed to face me and when I straightened up I saw Halfie’s goofy face again, this time pressed against the glass on the kitchen door window.

“Oh shit. Newt, I forgot, some of the guys are outside.”

“What? Turning over the garden, mending the fence, feeding the horse? Tell ‘em to come the fuck in!” he coughed on top of laughter.

At my cue, the cavalry invaded carrying cases of beer, bottles of wine, and the rest of the Jameson’s. The dogs wagged their tails and the cats meandered around at their stations, as if

excited to get the party going. Tommy had an armful of firewood he'd gathered from the pile across from the kitchen steps and put it on the stone hearth that separated the kitchen and living room. He threw some kindling onto the hot embers and built a pyramid with the logs. In an instant, flames jumped toward the chimney and warmth radiated into the room.

Still sitting on the side of the bed, Newt pulled the tubing from his nose and said, "Shawn, grab the portable bottle," motioning to a thin green cylinder of oxygen on a small hand truck in the corner. I pulled it over and handed him the nose adapter to put around his head. "Turn it on." He inhaled deeply and smiled, and then kicked the walker to the side and grabbed my arm, "Let's get this party rollin'."

When we got to the light of the kitchen I saw the damage that the cancer had wreaked on my best friend. Everyone's eyes were fixed on his head, a big, bald and purple orb that shined like some mysterious celestial body.

"What are you assholes looking at?" he asked. He took a seat at the head of the table, ready to hold court just like old times. "Gimme the Jameson's," he demanded. "Hey, Grog, grab my smokes. They're up on the mantle."

Grog handed Newt the cigarettes. "Don't light up with that thing on," he said pointing to the oxygen bottle. "You'll blow us all up!"

"No shit, genius," he said taking off the nose adapter. "Tommy, put this over in the corner."

"Hey, Newt. What's with your head? It looks like Jupiter." It wasn't Halfie's fault, he just didn't know any better.

"How do you know what Jupiter looks like, you fuckin' idiot? You flunked out of charter school and they wouldn't let you take science in public school. It's a miracle they accepted you

in vo-tech.” Newt’s tone softened, and he continued like Halfie was his little brother. “But if you must know, it’s the radiation, or *was* the radiation. They told me they can’t do anything more for me, so no more gamma rays are going to be shot into my body. I’m really gonna miss it, coming home exhausted, nauseous, mouth all dry. The goddamn shit makes my food taste like rust. Really neat shit,” he said with the coughing laugh I’d gotten used to.

“Sorry, Newt. I didn’t know,” Halfie’s voice tailed off.

“Nothing to be sorry about, my man, unless you had something to do with me getting this God-awful disease. But this is the hand I was dealt and I’m gonna play it until all my chips are gone. Fuck ‘em, you know what I mean?”

Newt sat at the head of the table, a short putt from death, and taught us lessons on how to live. He’d take long, exaggerated drags on a ciggie, daring the smoke to have the audacity to attack him, and then he’d throw back a shot of whiskey and guzzle a beer in defiance, as if to say, *You want to take me? You better be ready for a fight.*

The sun eased behind the mountain so gently that nobody noticed until flames that danced on top of the logs sent our shadows flickering off the walls and ceiling. Newt raised his eyebrows toward the mantle and said, “Grog, gimme my weed.” Grog grabbed a bag full of joints and handed it to Newt who fished through with closed eyes, pulled out the largest one and fired it up. He coughed so hard I swore I saw his head throb. A wide smile spread across his face, and then he passed the joint to Halfie. “Smoke ‘m peace pipe, my friend.”

Newt’s eyes sparkled. He took a deep breath, extended his arms above his head, and then slowly lowered them until his palms rested on the table. He gazed at each one of us as if we were his children. “You know guys, when I told the bastards at the clinic to level with me they said I had two, maybe three weeks to live. That was six months ago. There’s only one person who

knows whether I'm going to beat this thing." He paused and looked up toward the heavens. "As far as I'm concerned, I ain't goin' nowhere. Every time I close my eyes, I tell myself, 'When I wake up I'm going for a walk.' I just don't know if the walk will be outside that door, or in a better place. That's the only way I can look at it—the only way I will look at it."

Brownie, Newt's Golden, walked over, sat down and leaned against his leg. Newt massaged her scalp. The only sound in the house was the crackling of the fire. I sat across the table and stared, not sure if I was imagining a younger healthier Newt or if it was the effects of the cannabis and the booze.

"So if I'm not here the next time you guys stop by, I'll be out for a walk—either in the woods, or somewhere better." He was quiet for a moment, and then grinned. "But remember this, wherever I am, I'll have a smile on my face, and if they serve Guinness, I'll have a pint in my hand." Newt looked at me and winked. Something inside of me stirred.

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The limo cruised south on the turnpike, the cabin silent like a rolling crypt. I looked around and smiled at the circle of grown kids who'd settled into a dream-like state. Some wore a goofy grin, others an expression of deep thought. A bond was forged among us stronger than brick and mortar. Nobody dared disturb the state we'd reached.

Miles Davis filled the air so unobtrusively it was hard to tell if he was in my head or piped in over the sound system. I caught a glimpse of Joe's wide smile in the rearview mirror. He lowered his head to make eye contact with me and winked. The moment reminded me of a *Rolling Stone* article I'd read about Miles' life where he said, "Don't play what's there, play what's not there ... Trust your instincts." I was uncertain whether Newt would be with us the next time I traveled to the Poconos, but my instincts told me his spirit would live on.

Light exploded into the limo when we entered the Lehigh Tunnel and everyone lifted their head. As suddenly as the light filled the cabin, it fell back into darkness, but the sudden change created a stir. Tommy said, “Halfie, get your hand off my thigh.”

“I wouldn’t touch your leg if I was stranded on an island for a year and there were no women,” said Halfie.

“Don’t worry, if we were stranded on an island together, I’d beat your goofy fuckin’ brains out before the first week was over.” Laughter filled the limo and then faded into a cloud of sweet smoke.

The next thing I knew we were back on the Boulevard. Joe looked in the rear view mirror and said, “Your place, Lonzo?”

“What time is it?”

“Twelve-thirty.”

“Anybody hungry?” Lonzo asked.

“The kitchen at *Three Chimps* is open until one a.m.,” said Tommy.

“Drop us off at *Three Chimps*,” said Lonzo.

Two guys blowing a joint outside the tiny bar on James Street looked astonished when we stumbled out of the limo giggling like kids getting off a school bus on a Friday afternoon. We managed our way up the steps and through the front door to a lively, shoulder-to-shoulder Saturday night crowd.

“Lonz, order me a Guinness. I gotta hit the little boy’s room.”

“Sure thing, Shawn.”

The buzz inside the bar dissipated in the stillness of the bathroom, loud rock music replaced by a Gregorian chant so mesmerizing I wondered what Newt had cut his weed with. I

looked into the mirror while I washed my hands, and turned quickly when I thought I saw the reflection of a silhouette, but I was alone. I dried my hands and when I opened the door the rowdy crowd that had packed the place now stared at me with pensive expressions. A path opened in the multitude and I made my way to an empty stool between Lonzo and Halfie.

A bartender I'd never seen before with long dirty-blond hair and a curly beard walked in my direction. He placed a pint of black stout in front of me, and smiled. "Drink up, my friend," he said. His words, their ethereal tone, wrapped themselves around me. He winked and walked away. I took a long sip of the stout and felt warm and comforted.

A vibration in my pocket yanked me from a transcendent state. I pulled the cell phone from my pocket. Johnny's name was on the screen. I got up, walked across the room, and opened the door. I was about to throw the phone across James Street, but couldn't help myself from opening it. Johnny's text read: *NEWT'S GONE*. I looked back to the bar, and as I expected, the bartender was gone too.