

The Overtime

Ray was walking down the sidewalk under the shade of the maple trees that the city planted during some forgotten arbor day project so many years ago he didn't remember it being bare. These projects were popular in his part of his city once on a time. Beautification projects that never seemed to help his neighborhood, not unless a wave of Californians came in behind and bought and gentrified everything. Fortunately for Ray that had never happened here; the line of progressive bistros and trendy coffee shops drew short somewhere north about ten blocks. That meant that he hadn't had to move in his entire adult life, and that's exactly how he liked it.

He was taking his 4000th stroll on this exact sidewalk. Actually, 4223rd stroll. He couldn't explain why he knew that or how he kept track. It sometimes happens that men in ridiculously unextraordinary lives do intrinsically extraordinary things like possess a mental meter that told him how many times he's walked

the same sidewalk to the same bar despite nearly universal apathy about most things. This was every day of the week, especially now that he was retired. Except, of course, Sundays. He usually spent Sundays at home with his wife Laura. Despite having not been in a church since his son died in the war, he kept hold of that old-fashioned notion that Sundays were the Lord's day. Which meant he had to go to the grocery store on Saturday to make sure he had a half rack of PBJs to watch NFL football.

But today was Saturday, and though he would never know it, every one of those staccato footsteps on the old worn sidewalk was Ray's form of meditation. During nearly every one of those 4223 trips, nothing changed, and that quiet form of numb comfort felt like a warm shirt out of the dryer.

However, the usual banal march was not to be his today. He looked down the same grimy alley he had passed all those times with the same dirty dumpster. Today there was a dog with his back to him in the alley, head bent and tail wagging obviously ecstatic over whatever scrap he had found in the alley. Despite himself, Ray stopped and looked, and when the dog turned around there was a plastic bag fitting loosely over the dog's head from the Chinese take-out place he and Laura ordered from once a month or so. The dog licked his jowls and wagged his tail and

Ray let out a small laugh. His first one in quite some time. He didn't have a meter for that. The dog wagged his tail a few more times and returned to his meal, bag still on his head like a distorted baker's hat. Ray stared for a while longer and realized he was smiling. He turned and continued his stroll.

Walking up to the entrance of the Overtime Tavern, things returned to normal, the sights, sounds, and smells to his liking. He looked at the flyers taped to the inside of the windows beneath the neon signs promoting various watered-down beers and noted for the umpteenth time, some had been hanging there since Clinton was in office, yellowed, sun-bleached and barely readable. This was a place suspended in amber, with only a few changes here and there. A few times a year the owner would try a new beer on tap only to quickly pull it after a few weeks after putting the pints on severe discount. One of Ray's acquaintances and fellow Overtime denizens (Ray didn't really consider any of these people friends, more like extended family) George would hover like a hawk and wait for the keg to go on discount. And, of course, bitch about the taste of the beer with every dollar pint he put down on the way to happy town.

Opening the door, he noticed one of the changes to come along in the last few years, though it was so common now it wasn't noticeable so much. There was a table full of twenty-

something hipsters drinking PBJ and taking themselves very seriously, the skinny boys in old-fashioned beards that were wearing them instead of the other way around, and the girls trying their best to look like nothing in particular, but as a result, standing out. Two of the group were at the ancient red velvet pool table playing a game in a nonchalant manner. Apparently, it was now a thing with this generation to visit community dive bars as a sort of social awareness experiment. That and the beer was a fraction of the cost at the million brew pubs that had sprung up in the city in the last twenty years. Ray wondered for the hundredth time if they were scouts sent ahead by the future gentrification mafia to establish a beachhead.

The same exact smell greeted him as he walked up to the bar, grease from the deep fryer, stale beer from the drip trays, the chemical smell of the fly strips, and a smell that he could only describe as *yesterday* --- non-descript, but somehow no longer belonging to the present. Ray was surprised to see Dave the Bartender behind the bar (it is a known fact that every dive bar in America has a bartender named Dave). Without asking Dave said, "Amanda met someone on one of those dating sites and asked me to cover for her." Ray nodded. Amanda was the ubiquitous young lady that was cute and full of attitude that you could

often find in bars like this; it seemed every bar had one and Ray felt a small twinge of disappointment to see Dave.

Ray sat down and a half dozen men and one couple playing pull tabs nodded or said a small greeting. Maybe everybody knew his name, but no one shouted it out like on TV. This was an extended family who saw each other nearly every day.

Homeostasis was comforting. Routine is life. None of these thoughts occurred to Ray directly, but the feelings were there floating in his periphery like background music. Dave set down his PBJ cold from the cooler and in the can. Ray noticed a new tap among the 14 taps that lined the back bar. He noted that in a couple of weeks George would be happy, and really, really drunk for a couple of days.

Tony the Barber and Jeff the Retired Cop were arguing about taxes and the economy two stools down. This was nothing new. Ray knew what was coming.

"So, Ray how long did you work for the union?" This was Jeff, who was living off his pension, much like Ray. Ray realized this was the 23rd time he had answered this particular question.

"Thirty years," answered Ray as he took a swallow. "Did my time then went home."

"What did you do before your union gig?" Jeff asked. Ray realized he'd had this exact conversation 47 times.

"I did four years in the Army and got out and worked selling cars for a couple of years. But the money was up and down. When Laura's brother got me the union gig, I never looked back." Jeff nodded in feigned interest waiting for his chance to make his point ala Ray's retirement plan.

"So tell me, how have you managed to live all these years in this city with these socialists taxing us folks out of existence? I was a cop for 25 years," (Ray had heard this speech quite a few times. His pedestrian interest did not allow the meter to tell him how many) and I can't afford to live here anymore. I've had to take another job just to pay my bills. It's fucking bullshit. How do you manage?"

The bar got quiet and Tony elbowed Jeff in the ribs, hoping Ray didn't notice. He did.

"My son's life insurance helped us out." He said matter-of-factly as he took another swig and noticed his can was empty. He waved at Dave for another. Jeff stared at Ray for a full 30 seconds before muttering his apology.

"Jesus Ray, I'm ----- well, I'm an asshole." Ray nodded over his new can of PBJ.

"No problem."

The caesura in the bar's rhythm was over quickly. Beers were poured, a free one showed up in front of Ray, and Tony and Jeff were arguing the politics of taxes and the price of real estate. Ray took several more swallows of his beer glancing briefly at the college football game that was on the TV directly above his head. The meter temporarily stuck, he zoned out and didn't even notice the stranger until he was standing at the bar next to him. Uncharacteristically startled, Ray looked over and looked at the man who had his elbows on the bar with one foot up on the brass rail, waiting patiently for Dave to notice him.

Ray appraised the man. This was no hipster in search of a lower middle-class thrill. His handsome middle-aged features, perfect haircut, and pristine white dress shirt told Ray he was either a liquor control agent or part of the gentrification mafia that was sure to invade someday. The man noticed his gaze and nodded politely to Ray. "Afternoon."

Ray nodded back and Dave came over and asked the man if he wanted a drink. The man nodded. "Jameson's. With a beer chaser, please." Dave wisely poured him a pint of the new tap beer. By now all the regulars were watching the stranger and the bar had grown quiet. The man seemed to take no notice as he shot his Jameson's and took a swig of his beer. Dave hadn't yet walked away and the man asked him for another shot. He

again shot this down and took a sip of beer. "One more before you leave me, please Sir" he said in a velvet polite voice.

This one he sipped as he leaned with his back to the bar.

Ray had not taken his eyes off the man. The Man smiled at him again. "My name's Bill, Sir." He held the shot glass up in a makeshift toast. Ray nodded.

"Ray. Nice to meet you." Ray had just exceeded his normal daily allotment of bar conversation, but the man persisted.

"You live around here Ray?"

Ray again nodded. "A few blocks. Most of my life. Retired here."

The Man smiled. "Ah, got it. Let me guess. Union man at the plant, right?" Ray turned his head. "You have the look of a solid working man. Like my father." He raised his glass one more time in salute, then quickly finished it. He raised his hand to get Dave's attention. "Sir, one more for me, and one for Ray here."

Ray shook his head. "No thank you. I got one waiting for me and I'll be getting home after that one." The Man nodded.

"In that case, one for everyone else, please." That got everyone's attention. Dave's eyebrows raised, and the Man took out a wallet and laid down several bills. "Including my young

friends back there." He nodded at the table of hipsters and they cheered him with glasses raised.

Dave set up everyone at the Bar except Ray. Jeff the Cop got off his stool and walked over to his new best friend.

"Thanks for the beer. You visiting the neighborhood?"

The Man smiled as he clinked his pint with Jeff's can.

"No, Sir, just passing through. I have a thing for quiet out of the way places like this, I guess."

"I see," replied Jeff with more than just a little inspection in his voice. "Where are you from, if you don't mind my asking?"

The Man replied with an indulgent and all-knowing smile and nod of his head to no one in particular, like he was driving a road he'd driven many times before. "Let me guess, Mr...?"

Jeff said, "Jeff. Just Jeff."

"Mr. Jeff, let me guess. Retired military or law enforcement?"

Jeff paused for a moment. "Good guess. What gave me away?"

"You mean other than your inquisitive nature, a little longer than regulation but still uniform haircut, and semi-aggressive but relaxed nature?" Jeff narrowed his eyes and cocked his head. The Man laughed heartily. "And the fact that

I had an uncle that was a career police officer and a brother that was career Army?" He gave Jeff a friendly pat on the shoulder. "It frankly oozes out of you Sir."

Jeff took this as a compliment and relaxed his shoulders and smiled. "Seems to me, you got one on me, partner. What do you do for a living?"

The whole bar was watching the exchange as if it were a play unfolding in dramatic fashion. For the Overtime, this was high entertainment. The man put his elbows on the bar and sipped his pint.

"Mr. Jeff, the Police Officer, I buy and sell things. Lots of things. Including drinks." Mr. Bartender, please?" Another shot and pint quickly showed up at the bar. Spending like this at the Overtime was as rare as Dave's upgraded response time.

Jeff stood uncertainly for several seconds. "What kind of things? Like old bars in old neighborhoods?"

The Man smiled again without moving. "Mr. Jeff, if it made sense, I would buy anything. But to cut to the chase, no. I'm not a carpetbagger. Not interested in this bar or this neighborhood, Sir. Just here for a drink. And conversation."

Jeff's face changed from interest to scrutiny. "What's wrong with this bar or this neighborhood, partner? It's just a

matter of time before someone with deep pockets comes in and buys it up and prices it out from under all of us."

The Man let out a bellow of a laugh. Jeff tensed. The Man turned a quarter and looked at nothing in particular, sipping his pint. "Mr. Jeff, do you remember that billionaire from the Bay Area who bought a bunch of property down the hill with the thought of building a big arena to go with the two stadiums?"

Jeff nodded. "He spent hundreds of millions buying up shithole properties, greasing the skids, coming up with plans, rallies, public relations. And he failed. Do you know why?"

"The communists on the city council!"

"Not quite, but politics is always part of it. He failed because he made an emotional investment. He grew up in this city. And he took a roll of the dice on emotion and good faith. You do that, you will lose. Every. Single. Time."

Jeff didn't know what to say. Fortunately, The Man continued. "Mr. Jeff, you see, I grew up in a city like this, in a neighborhood like this. My father worked at a plant, was a good union man like our friend Ray here." He motioned toward Ray with his pint. "One of my uncles opened up a bar not unlike this one. It was called 'The Cabin' only it wasn't a cabin. Never quite made sense to me. I worked my way through college by cleaning toilets and busing tables in that place."

The Man paused and finished his beer. "I've bought and sold thousands of buildings, blocks, and neighborhoods like this. You know why? Because they are a futility to the idea that working hard and following the rules will get you somewhere. Mr. Jeff, some places just don't need fixing. They need to die just like they are. Truth is I would rather go back to cleaning toilets than buy anything around here. You can't take the smell out of some things."

The place was a tomb. Jeff's face was red and he took a step toward The Man. "Listen you motherf---"

"Whoa, my friend." The Man held up both his hand in reconciliation. "No offense meant. Truth is, I owe everything I have toward growing up in that dive. It gave me the one gift that made me successful."

Jeff had stopped. Crossed his arms. Only a couple of feet separated the men.

"Everyone I grew up with had a work ethic, Mr. Jeff. The good it did them. But I can read people. Like they're the Sunday comics."

Jeff smirked and snorted.

"Make no mistake. How in the hell do you think I made my money? Anyone can make a good business decision. Ah, but knowing people. That's the key. For example, you, Mr. Jeff

were obvious. Retired cop, salt of the earth, maybe a bit on the hardcore side, but dedicated to your wife, I can tell by how long that ring has worn into your finger. You've never taken it off have you?" Jeff nodded like a child. "I can tell your friend here," he pointed to Tony the Barber, "cuts a damn good head of hair. I can see clippings on his Florsheims, and that haircut and mustache is the hallmark of a meticulous man." He pointed to the couple who were playing pull-tabs. "This beautiful couple is a keeper. Raised some good kids, retired to their little Craftsman here, but their pride and joy is their 5th Wheel that they snowbird in. Also, the last bastion of chicken gizzard lovers on the planet." They both smiled sheepishly. "Unfortunately, you're not going to fund your trip to Reno this fall playing that game." They chuckled.

"I'll skip the children in the back, that generation is literally all cut from the same exact fluffy cloth. So, let's move on. Our friend Ray here. There's more to Ray than meets the eye. Don't be fooled by that stoic exterior. Ray has seen _"

Sometimes in the mundane, extraordinary things happen that are talked about for years. Not showy things, or publicized things, but things that are so unexpected that they can never be forgotten. In the Overtime, on that day, it was Ray picking up

a whiskey bottle and hitting the man hard over the head. Things are never like Hollywood. The bottle didn't shatter in a thousand pieces. In fact, The Man didn't even bleed or lose consciousness, or die. He merely slumped over the bar and caught himself to keep from falling.

Several stunned seconds ticked by and Jeff simply said, "Ray, what the fuck?"

Ray put the bottle back on the bar where he found it and stood looking at The Man. Nobody offered help. Nobody said a word. The only sound was from The Man, and incredibly it sounded like he was chuckling.

The next surreal moment happened as the door to the bar slowly opened and the afternoon sunlight silhouetted a figure who materialized into a very large man wearing a dark suit and Oakley sunglasses. He walked over to The Man without looking at anyone in the bar and put one arm around his waist. He steadied The Man to his feet and asked, "Sir, are you okay?"

The Man smiled through his wince, one hand on the welt on his head. He nodded at Ray and looked around the bar one time with the smile. Then he looked at his guardian and said, "Yes, I am now. Never better."

Both men walked slowly through the door and out into the sunlight. Everyone in the bar crept toward the dirty flyer

infested windows and watch as the suited man helped The Man into the backseat of a large Mercedes limousine. He rolled down the window and smiled at the bar as the car pulled out in the street and disappeared.

Ray was the first one to move. He turned around and walked back to his stool and said, "Dave, I changed my mind. Think I'll have another one."

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