

It was a place to drive through on the way to anywhere else. The whole town, if it could even earn the name, had an air of transitory impermanence. Hunter thought it felt like that slow ooze of syrup out of pancakes before the painstaking crawl off the edge of the plate. That was his life. The unpleasant and surprising smear of stickiness across a table.

His mom claimed she named him Hunter because his dad had been a hunter. He knew that was a lie. The only people who came around here were truckers and migrants. Hunter didn't look Mexican, so it must have been a trucker. Sometimes, as he yawned over the register at a gas station just off the interstate, he'd catch himself searching them. The truckers. Checking their faces for some sign of himself. He never looked for long, though. He probably didn't want to know anyone dumb enough to screw *his* mother.

Whenever he looked at her, Hunter felt satisfaction that he was a man and knew how the world worked. She didn't understand the first thing about life. He could still remember when he was little and she would tuck him in to the pull out couch in their trailer kitchenette before going out to waitress at the bar. She would promise that soon she would get them out, to a real place, in a real house.

Sixteen years later, here they were, in the same damn tiny trailer, slung cock-eyed off the road a couple of feet back from a brow beaten tin mailbox. She'd given up trying years ago. Hunter hated being around her so much that the nights she was home he curled up under their scrap wood porch like a stray. At least that way he couldn't hear her and the latest trash fire in Levi's she'd brought home. Now that he could take care of himself, she'd turned back into the same stupid tramp that got knocked up in the first place.

He hated his name, he hated their house, he hated his job. He hated their life. The only thing Hunter liked was his secret. He knew it was the only thing that made him special. It was his magic.

He was afraid to tell anybody; they would think he was crazy. But it was real.

When he took money, the bills and coins would show him pictures from the people who handed it to him.

It didn't always work (he hadn't figured out why yet), but most of the time, when he had the money, he stole a snapshot. Intimate, hidden moments. Hunter felt powerful and stealthy, sneaking away those little gems, like the victory of catching a peek of girls in their underwear.

What he saw of course depended on who was doing the handing. The snotty soccer moms in their too-large too-shiny luxury gas-guzzlers wearing their too-tight pants usually had good stuff. Most of the time, he caught them in compromising positions, wrapped around men in ways he had only seen in the nudie magazine Charlie Heinz passed around in third grade. Once he had seen one of these women holding a hyper-realistic baby doll down in a sink, before she suddenly ripped it out of the water with her face a mask of confused horror.

When old people came in, the memories came in funny, kind of fuzzy and dimmed. Sometimes those snippets were even off-colored, like old timey pictures,

usually thoughts of sunny days and picnics and the kind of boring but comforting growing family moments that he would never know.

The truckers were the most unpredictable. One regular that he saw every couple weeks would always have the same thing in his head. The guy was always sitting at a diner counter holding a cup of coffee. Sometimes the seasons would change, or his shirt, but for some reason, he was always thinking about that diner. Some of the younger truckers would bring Hunter things they had seen on the road. It had taken Hunter weeks in the library to peg the Half-Dome at Yosemite Park after seeing it through an Old Dominion driver. Another had unknowingly given him a clip of some bustling west coast city ripe with palm trees in the background of a piss-stained alley he had been standing in. These illicit treats were the only thing worth living for in Hunter's life.

Of course all the *people* were really interchangeable. Sure, they came from different places and went on to more places, but the people were always the same. If he ever got out of this shit-hole, he knew he'd find the same people everywhere. But it was those places that interested him, and the money he needed to get there.

Late in summer, a soccer mom came in. Hunter leaned, half slumped across the counter, watching her daintily nudge the door open with the toe of her tennis shoe, holding a hideously fat blond baby on her spandex clad hip. He knew she would be trouble immediately. The look on her face said she had taken a mouthful of lemon by mistake but was too stingy to spit it back out.

Lemon Face disappeared into the bathroom with the baby, only to back out frantically like she'd seen a dead body. She threw Hunter a disgusted look before seething dramatically through her clenched teeth. Sure, the bathrooms weren't the cleanest, but they were good enough for the chicken-haulers and wiggle wagons and Hunter wasn't gonna wipe them down more than once a day.

Hunter watched as she sidled around the racks in the store, eventually flouncing up to his register pinching a bottle of water between two fingers. Lemon Face gave Hunter a once-over like she thought he might be carrying the plague. The pinch in her face grew so pronounced Hunter thought she looked like a constipated ferret.

"\$2.90" Hunter said.

Lemon Face slid three one-dollar bills across with two fingers, glaring at the counter and its invisible bacteria. Hunter saw nothing when he picked up the bills. Guess it was one of those times, and just as well. Trumped-up broad like this would probably be thinking about abusing a maid or something.

As he held out the dime to her, her face twisted in revulsion. "Uh no. You keep it."

Lemon Face backed away with her sausage roll child and water bottle just in time to catch a trucker holding the door open for her.

"After you, ma'am," said the trucker.

"... Thanks..." Lemon Face scooted past the gentleman with as much distance as she could manage without running into the door frame, and high-tailed it back to her car, where she could be seen scrubbing sanitizer furiously onto everything in reach through her windshield.

The trucker threw Hunter an amused look under raised eyebrows and Hunter shrugged.

Hunter didn't think much about the fellow as he made a beeline for the coffee canisters. Hunter was miles away in Tijuana, drinking tequila on a beach with half-naked Mexican girls swimming past. He had never had tequila before. He kind of imagined it would taste like sugary limes with the burn of cheap vodka.

He was pulled away from the daydream by the trucker plunking two huge coffees and a roll of chocolate covered donuts down on the counter in front of him. The guy was older, grey haired with the kind of moustache actors from the eighties would have killed for. His shirt said Carl and under his cream-colored ten-gallon hat, his clothes were oddly clean. Hunter thought 'Carl' looked a little too distinguished to wind up on the haul, but you couldn't always tell what happened in a person's life.

Carl smiled amiably at Hunter as he rang up his breakfast. "Hope that lady didn't give you too much trouble, son. Some people got sticks shoved so far up their ass they can't appreciate how real people live."

"Nah, it's fine. More fun to watch her think she's picking up diseases. Looks like \$10 on the dot."

As Carl rummaged through his billfold, he said "What's your name, son?"

"Hunter," came the reply.

Carl handed Hunter a twenty-dollar bill, studying him. As Hunter took it, he felt the warm touch of calloused fingers on his own before being momentarily blinded by sunlight. He saw the world through Carl's eyes.

He was lying, shaking, on some dusty plain. His eyes were watering with the dirt swirling around. He felt like he'd been in one hell of a fight. Soon, a beautiful pair of shiny black cowboy boots stomped into view, and high above him, he heard, "Like these pretty little boots you got here, Bubba. Was just about time for me to get a new pair of shoes anyways. Sorry I won't be seein' ya on the turn around! Shoulda known better than riding with the Devil to Tumbleweed!"

The thief rocked back on the boot heels, apparently still admiring his new acquisition. The well-shod feet turned to go as Hunter came back to himself. He could still hear the thief chuckling and was disturbed by the rattling feeling in his head, and the thought that his hands were still shaking uncontrollably.

"You did say ten, there, Hunter?"

Hunter blinked at Carl and shook his head to clear it. "Yessir, that's right."

As Hunter handed back the change, he leaned over the counter to look at Carl's shoes. It was the same gorgeous black pair of boots, although a little older looking. Whatever happened, Carl apparently paid the thief back.

"Nice boots, mister," Hunter said.

"Well thank you, son!" Carl seemed genuinely delighted by Hunter's interest. "What size you wear?"

"I'm an eleven."

"Good. So am I. Next time I come through maybe I sling you a pair. Strapping kid like you can go far in a decent pair of boots." Carl chuckled as he swept up his coffee and donuts and loped out the door, still inspecting Hunter.

That was a new experience, Hunter thought. Normally, he could see everything from outside his customers. He'd be standing in a corner, or looking over

their shoulders, just being an observer. This was the first time he had ever been with one, in one. Must have been a really strong memory to pull him in like that. He liked Carl though. Carl looked like the kind of man Hunter would like to be. And knowing he got his boots back gave Hunter a cheerful little lift through the rest of his day. Clearly, Carl wasn't the type to take a beating lying down!

The summer dwindled down, stale and sweltering in the usual routine. The same old people tromped in and out of the gas station, each day with different faces. Hunter did see his regular trucker from the diner. For once he came in with an almost ecstatic smile, looking for everything like a homeless man with a hot turkey dinner. When Hunter took his money, he saw the trucker back in the same old diner. The only difference was a prettyish middle-aged woman pouring his coffee and laughing with him over the counter. In the trucker's memory she had almost a glow around her. As Hunter passed back the guy's change he joined in on the contagious grin. At least Hunter finally knew why the guy was always thinking about that damn diner.

A warm day in late September found Hunter trudging back to the trailer after shift as a semi rolled up behind him. He didn't look back until he heard it slowing, and a window rolling down.

"Well hey there, sonny!" It was Carl. He was back and somehow found Hunter a whole half mile from the station.

"Hey!" Hunter was confused, but glad enough to see the man with the boots. He waited while Carl put the truck in park and hopped out of the cab.

"Why don't you come get a coffee and chat a while with an old-timer? I could use a little news from a small corner of the world. That and company outside of lot lizards." Carl grinned conspiratorially at him.

"Sure, I guess that'd be fine."

Ten minutes found Hunter sitting across from Carl in the only coffee shop in the tri-county area. Carl eyed him curiously across the booth before idly stirring creamer into his coffee mug.

"You know, I came from a place like this. Not much good happens to a boy in these kinds of towns." Carl looked up through his eyebrows at Hunter, who shifted slightly. "Tell me how you came to be here, young Hunter."

Hunter started slow, just with his mystery father and his trailer home. Suddenly, like a rig headed for a sand trap, his words flew out of control. He was telling Carl all about his mother, everything he hated about life in this town, and all of his dreams to be somewhere else, *anywhere* else. Carl turned out to be a right-good listener. He nodded and hummed and said "Lord, I hear ya," straight through three cups of coffee. Hunter came abruptly to a stop, panting slightly, realizing he had run out of words. Somehow he thought almost two decades would take up more space than it had.

Carl studied the dregs of his coffee for a moment. "Don't be getting the wrong idea here, son, but I find myself in need of lumper. You seem like a smart fella, and I bet after a few weeks of running turn-arounds, you might be able to settle out somewhere, do something better with your life. Wouldn't suppose you to take up trucking or nothing, but helping me unload would pay better than working that till."

Hunter felt his mouth go dry. Could this be happening? Was this man offering him a way out?

"Now I don't expect you to just fall in with an old man like me. I'll be running over to the West Coast before headin' back through. So you just take a bit and think-

"If you give me five minutes to grab my shit, I'm ready to go."

Hunter surprised himself. He didn't realize how willing he was to drop everything. This was it. This was his chance to go. To *places*. If he didn't go now, who knew if he'd get another opening.

Carl looked slightly taken aback, then smiled. "Are you sure you don't wanna think about this more? Maybe check in with your mama?"

"No. I'm ready. I'm ready to go."

"Well alright then!" Carl seemed pleased with how easily this proposition had gone over. "Got me a lumper even earlier than I had hoped!"

Hunter didn't even remember leaving the coffee shop, or digging up the coffee can under the porch where he kept every penny he'd ever earned. He didn't remember shoving his spare pair of jeans or three tee-shirts into a backpack. He didn't bother poking his mother where she was sprawled, drooling, across the bed in the back of the trailer, and he didn't waste a backwards glance on that singlewide corrugated hell that had been his childhood. Hunter found himself keying back into reality as he slung the pack into the front seat and used a try or two to lug himself up into the cab of Carl's truck. Carl looked at him sideways for a moment. "Alright now, you sure you wanna do this? Loading trucks is hard work. You'll pick up the lingo and muscle quick, but it's a rough road til you find your feet. You can still back out."

Hunter looked determinedly out the window. "I ain't afraid of hard work. If you're willing to teach me, I'm ready to do whatever you say to get out of here."

With that, Carl nodded and cranked the rig into drive.

Hunter didn't recall falling asleep, but woke up to bright sunshine pouring over a dusty plain. Remembering that he was finally out, that his adventure, his life, had finally begun, Hunter thought everything looked shinier, sparkly. Even the little dust devils whipping by seem to wave cheerily at him.

"How ya feeling, boy?" Carl looked over with an oddly toothy grin.

"I feel great!" Hunter was beginning to believe this wasn't some dream. He had escaped. And with the help of a man who was willing to teach him trucking and other manly arts. In time, Hunter let himself daydream, Carl might even be close to some kind of father.

"Well good. We're about hundred and fifty miles in, and I myself gotta take a piss. Ain't seen another rig or the bears for a while. Bears is what we call the law. If you don't mind, I'm just gonna pull over right here."

Hunter realized that he also needed to pee. He had peed outside before, but never on the side of a road like this. Just his first hurdle to proving he could handle the road, he figured.

Carl parked the truck and locked it, after they had both hopped out. He led them about a thousand feet off the road to a little stand of waist high brush. Hunter

managed an affected swagger, following Carl's lead, and when Carl turned his back on Hunter to face into the bushes, Hunter did the same.

Just as he was unzipping his pants, he felt Carl's thick, muscled arms wrap around him. Hunter grunted in surprise and thought he might faint. For an old fella, Carl was damned strong. His head felt like it was spinning away into another dimension, leaving his body dizzy and nauseous. Once he no longer needed to throw up, he felt Carl elbow him in the face, sending him reeling backwards and Hunter found himself lying in the dirt behind the bushes. His hands were shaking like an earthquake. His whole body felt off and foreign.

"Never had a switch so easy!" Carl didn't sound right. His deep, old man's voice sounded higher, younger maybe. Hunter felt tugging around his feet. Carl was taking his shoes. He willed himself to move, to prop himself up, to fight, to do anything. Instead he just lay in the dirt shivering.

Hunter heard Carl shuffle forward to his head and saw the black cowboy boots. Not on Carl's feet. In Carl's hands. Hanging, dangling there in front of his nose. Hunter thought his head might explode with pain and felt another wave of nausea course through him.

A young, bright face leaned over to peer at him. "Shouldn'ta left in such a hurry there, fella. Maybe then your mammy coulda told you about riding with the Devil to Tumbleweed." The face grinned and as Hunter blinked he saw his own sneakers under his own jeans disappear around the bush. Hunter reached out a heavy, calloused hand to the retreating feet, before everything went black.