

SMOKE BREAK

“Jesus, I hate this friggin job,” Wanda said. She pulled an old kitchen chair into the alley and dropped onto the red vinyl seat.

Lester upended a packing crate and sat down. “It ain’t so bad,” he said.

She lit a cigarette with a small green lighter, inhaled deep into her lungs, blew lines of smoke through her mouth and nostrils. “All I do every night is clean toilets and urinals. That sucks, Lester—big time.”

Trying not to breathe in the sweet smell of the smoke, Lester opened a new pack of hard candy and laid one on his tongue. He gave up smoking in prison, when trading cigarettes became more important than smoking them, and he never took it up again. He went through several packs of the hard candy every day instead. Butterscotch and peppermint were his favorites.

The light above the door buzzed and threw out a weak yellow light that barely reached the building across from where they were sitting. The alley smelled like garbage and piss. Sirens rose and fell in the distance. Cars glided by out on Pennsylvania Avenue, windows flashing under the street lights.

The rain had stopped, but the alley was wet and cold. Shivering, he pulled up the zipper of his jacket. Wanda was like all the white girls he’d ever known, always finding the worst in everything. The job wasn’t the best, maybe, but it was all right. They cleaned office buildings. Five nights a week, 9:00 at night to 5:00 in the morning, with three twenty-minute breaks. He emptied trash cans and vacuumed, while she scoured and mopped the bathrooms.

Wanda made her mouth into an O and sent ragged white rings up into the damp night air, squinting at the smoke as if it held the answer to something important. Her jeans were worn out at the knees and the yellow tank top didn't cover much, but the cold didn't seem to bother her. How old was she? Twenty? Twenty-one? It was hard to tell with girls like her. Their round faces and baby-fat chins hid their stories from the world.

"I won't even *tell* you what I found tonight," she said. "Fifth floor men's." She made a face and stuck out her tongue. A tiny stud winked at him. Wanda had two studs in each ear, but the one in her tongue made him uneasy. He studied the abandoned warehouse across the alley. Water dripped from the windowsills, seeped down the brick walls. The windows were boarded up with plywood, and somebody had painted black and red swastikas across the panels. White boys with shaved heads and nothing else to do.

"I washed my hands with plenty of hot water after that," Wanda went on. "I *felt* like I needed a shower." She flicked the end of the cigarette with her fingernail. Ashes drifted onto her jeans. "I've got to find a *decent* job."

"Go ahead," Lester said. He hated the way she spat out that word. "Don't make no difference to me."

She scowled at him through the curling smoke. "Damn, Lester, don't get pissy on me, I'm just talking."

"Sometimes you talk too much."

"Well, if you don't like it, why the hell you come out here with me anyway?"

He had no answer for that. Wanda came out to smoke. You weren't supposed to smoke in the building, and Wanda needed to smoke, so she came outside. But he could have stayed in the

shiny cafeteria where it was warm, where there was hot coffee in the vending machines and plastic chairs with contoured seats.

“Must be for the pleasure of your company,” he said.

“Yeah, right.”

She thought he was disrespecting her, but there was some truth in what he said. Even though he liked working alone, and he liked the quiet, sometimes these damned office buildings got *too* quiet. The thick carpets on the floors swallowed up the noise of the vacuum cleaner, and the sound-proofing in the walls and ceilings made the buildings seem dead. All that deadness got on his nerves after a while, and he needed to hear another voice, even Wanda’s. But break time was long enough. Twenty minutes of listening to her carry on—endless stories about her baby, blow-by-blow replays of what was happening on “Dancing with the Stars,” gossip about which movie star was on drugs or in rehab—and he was ready for the quiet again.

Still, she was better than his last partner. Lakeesha. Nineteen years old, coal-dark skin, reddish-brown hair braided tight against her scalp. She used their breaks to stick needles into the backs of her legs and the fleshy parts of her arms. He didn’t want to be around that shit, so he stayed in the building while she got high. One night she didn’t come back inside, and he had to call 9-1-1. The police looked up his record, took him down to the station house. They kept asking was he supplying the girl with drugs. He told them no every time they asked. They had nothing on him, so they finally let him go. The girl didn’t come back to work, and he never found out what happened to her.

For weeks after that, his gut churned and he had trouble sleeping at night. Every time he closed his eyes, he was back in his prison cell, the air that smelled of urine and vomit, the rough

cement walls and cold iron bars, the lumpy mattress, the endless shouting of the inmates up and down the row. Those nights, he tossed in his bed, sweaty and fearful.

So he was being careful with Wanda. He'd only been working with her for two weeks. As far as he could tell, she didn't do drugs. Talking was her way of getting by.

Damn, it was cold. He kneaded the scar on his side. A flick-knife, the boy who cut him called the switchblade. The wound was long healed up, but the scar pulled on him in the damp weather. It was a reminder of the bad days after high school when he thought he knew everything there was to know—until he got himself into trouble, served thirty days in the county jail and had to work off five hundred hours of community service hauling leaves and trash. He smartened up after that, got a degree in computers at the technical college, found a good job with a government contractor. Then he met Raynelle, married her, and before either of them really understood what was going on they had three kids.

Pushing those thoughts out of his head, he blew on his hands and stuffed them in his pockets. What the hell was he sitting out here in the cold for, anyway? Right now, he wanted to be away from this alley, away from Wanda and her chattering. Back in his warm apartment, sitting in the worn leather recliner, reading a book. An Easy Rawlins novel, maybe, or one of the Spenser books. He liked detective stories. He could lose himself in their worlds and forget about his own.

“You'd feel different about this goddamned job if you had to clean bathrooms every night,” Wanda said.

“I've cleaned my share.”

“Then you should know.”

“I do know,” he said. “People act like animals sometimes.”

“Worse,” she said. “Animals don’t know any better.” She shook her head and a clump of corn-yellow hair slid down in front of her eyes. “Nights like tonight, I think to myself: if I have to clean one more bathroom, if I have to wipe the shit off one more—”

“Damn, Wanda, can’t you just shut the fuck up for one minute?”

She tucked the hair back over her ear and stared at him, her dark eyes burning. “I’m just making conversation,” she said.

“I don’t need to hear your ‘conversation’ all the time,” he said.

“Jesus, who put the pole up your butt?”

“You did,” he said. “You don’t like this job, go on and quit. Just shut up about it.”

“Maybe I will.”

“Yeah, what’ll you do then? How you gonna pay your rent, feed that baby of yours? You’re always tellin me you got no money. You gonna work two, three jobs? Go on welfare? Or maybe lie down on your back with your feet in the air and let the smackheads and the college boys take their turns with you?” He spat on the ground between his feet. “Nah. You wouldn’t be any better at that than you are at cleanin shit outta the damn toilet bowls.”

“Screw you, old man!” She popped up out of her chair, and her middle finger shot up, pointing right in his face. “I never fucked anybody for money.”

The anger rose up in his throat, spilling into his mouth, but Lester somehow held his tongue. He swore at himself. He knew better than to snap at her like that. Even if she had sounded like his ex-wife. Raynelle was always bitching and moaning, especially after they had the kids. Seemed like non-stop sometimes. Made wonder what he ever saw in the woman, made him forget the good times they’d had before they got married, when they were crazy in love with each other.

When he walked out of the prison three years ago, he swore he would do nothing that might land him inside again. He rented a small apartment from his cousin, saw his parole officer when he was supposed to, kept mostly to himself. He got this job cleaning buildings at night. He didn't drink, didn't do drugs, didn't mess where he shouldn't. His life wasn't much, maybe, but he was free—and he wanted to keep it that way. Talking trash to a white woman just because she couldn't keep her mouth shut was stupid. No matter who or what she sounded like.

He took a deep breath. "I never said you did," he said.

"You might as well have." Wanda slumped back on her chair. The cigarette still burned between her fingers, the red glow nearer the filter. What brand did she smoke? "You don't understand," she said.

"Understand what?" Maybe from now on he would stay inside during their breaks, like he had with Lakeesha. He didn't need this shit.

The ash on the cigarette had lengthened into a long grey-black snake. Lester watched it, wondering how long it would get before it fell apart. Then Wanda moved her hand and the snake exploded and ashes floated down to the ground.

"Before I started here, I worked for an escort service," Wanda said. "I went out on dates with men who—needed a companion. You know, business dinners, award ceremonies, stuff like that. The escort people gave me nice clothes to wear, shoes, even jewelry. Sometimes I got to go to really fancy restaurants. Hell, one guy even took me to the opera; that was boring, but he was nice to me."

Escort service? What kind of bullshit was she throwing at him now? That didn't make sense. He looked her up and down. She wasn't all that bad, he had to admit. Her blonde hair was stringy and greasy tonight, but he'd seen it clean, and he liked the way it fell onto her shoulders

and hid the acne scars on her forehead. He liked the plum-dark color of her eyes—when she didn't put on the heavy black eyeliner that got smeared while she worked, making them seem bruised. And she had a decent enough body, even if it was on the skinny side. Maybe if she cleaned herself up and put on some nice clothes ...

“Anyway, I never fucked any of them,” she said. “I had my chances, though. The people who ran the company wanted me to go to these so-called parties, said I could make a lot of money.” Her mouth puckered like she'd just sucked on a sourball. “But I knew what that meant. I didn't need any AIDS or STDs or whatever, so I told them I wouldn't.”

“Yeah? What'd they do about that?”

“What'd ya think? They fired my ass.” She laughed, but it was a bitter sound that had no humor in it. “So then I got this job,” she said. “And here I am —the queen of friggin Paradise.” She waved her arm around the alley, taking in the dumpsters and the trash cans, the dripping walls, the boarded up windows, the cracked pavement.

With her arm stretched out like that, Lester could see she wasn't wearing anything underneath the tank top. Something stirred in him, something he didn't like. You got an itch, old man, he told himself, you know where to get it scratched. And that ain't here. He aimed his eyes at her feet. Black rubber-soled shoes, scuffed and scratched, no different than his, except his were wider. When he was a kid, his father told him he had feet like a duck.

“Didn't matter,” she said. “I wouldn't have lasted much longer anyway. I was pregnant.”

Lester had to smile at that. Maybe this was why he spent his breaks with her; you never could tell what she would come out with. “A pregnant escort.”

“I wasn't showing,” she said. “And I needed the job. My boyfriend—my ex-boyfriend, I mean—took off soon as he found out I was knocked up. Said he wasn't the father, the dickhead.”

She scuffed her shoe on the ground as if there was something stuck to the bottom she couldn't get rid of. "I sure could use some of that money now. I barely make enough to feed us— did I tell you my mamaw lives with me now? She's almost seventy and she's got diabetes and her legs are bad, so she can't work. Her medicine is covered by Medicare or Medicaid, one of those, but there's nothing left after that. But at least she can watch Danny for me while I'm at work, so I don't have to take him to daycare – that costs a fortune."

Lester told himself to get up, go back into the building, finish his work. He didn't want to hear any more about her life, how hard it was.

While he was deciding on that, the light over the door flickered. In warmer weather, bugs flew around it, throwing jittery shadows out into the alley. Too cold for bugs now; bulb must be about to go.

Wanda took a last drag on the cigarette and flicked the butt into a shallow puddle. It sizzled then floated on the oily surface like a dead cockroach. She tipped the chair onto its back legs and let her head rest against the brick wall of the building. Her eyes closed and her face went slack. Without the sourness around her mouth, she looked young, almost innocent. The tank top rode up her belly, showing a band of pale skin that lapped over the waistband of her jeans. He wondered again how old she was, then shook his head. Don't be so goddamn stupid, he told himself. She's young. She's white. That's all you need to know, fool.

Sliding another butterscotch candy into his mouth, he glanced at his wrist watch. Mickey Mouse grinned up at him, the black arms with the white gloves pointing out the time. The watch was a Christmas present from his kids. He thought about them every day, wondered how they were and what kind of people they were growing up to be. Were they dark and handsome like their mother or lighter-skinned and solidly-built, like him, with broad faces and ears that stuck

out from the sides of their heads? Did they do well in school? Did his boy play football or baseball? Did the girls dance and sing? Sometimes his heart ached with wanting to see them, and at those times he hated Raynelle almost as much as he hated himself. Six years and not even a damn picture. She owed him that much. No matter what had passed between them, he was the father of his three children. And he didn't even know where the hell they were. They'd left DC, that much he'd heard, but nobody who knew where they went would tell him anything else.

The garbage cans at the end of the alley clattered. A movement caught the corner of his eye, and an orange cat streaked across the wet pavement and jumped onto his lap. He came up off the packing crate fast, grabbing fur with both hands and heaving the animal away from him. The cat flew up into the damp air. It landed square on all four paws, arched its back, and hissed at him.

Wanda jerked awake. The front legs of her chair slammed down onto the uneven pavement, splaying out wide. The chair wobbled, but she raised herself up off the seat and let the legs straighten. "Jesus Christ," she said. "What the hell's wrong with that cat?"

"Fuck if I know."

The cat paced back and forth out of Lester's reach, watching him with its bright yellow eyes. Lester raised his foot to kick at it, but Wanda scooped up the animal. She cradled it and stroked its matted fur. The cat bumped its head against her chin and purred.

"Put that damned thing down," he said. "It's got to have some disease or other."

"Get a life, Lester," she said, but she wrinkled her nose and set the cat down on the ground. "You go on, cat, you stink like fish. Get yourself cleaned up, then come back."

The cat wound itself up like it was going to jump onto her lap, but she put her hand out. The cat gave her a resentful look, then it turned and dashed away like it had urgent business someplace else.

As the orange-striped tail disappeared behind the dumpsters, Wanda said, “When I was a kid I used to nurse sick animals—cats and dogs, mostly; once a turtle that got hit by a car. I had my heart set on being a vet when I grew up.”

Lester sat back down on the crate. He wished she’d let him boot the damn thing to kingdom come. “So why didn’t you?” he asked, eyeing a long scratch on his forearm.

“It’s not easy getting to be a vet. It takes a lot of school.”

He squeezed his arm, lifted it, and licked the blood that welled up. “Nothin’s easy,” he said.

“You don’t understand, I was never much good at school.” She shook her head again and the same clump of hair dropped in front of her eyes. “Truth is, I never finished high school.”

Lester shifted his weight. Why was he still talking to her? He wasn’t a goddamned social worker or a minister. He wasn’t her father or her boyfriend. Hell, he wasn’t even her friend. Besides, he had no patience with people who were their own worst enemy.

“You want somethin bad enough” he said, “You find a way to get it, that’s all I’m sayin.”

“What about *you*, Mr. High and Mighty? I suppose *you* graduated on the honor roll.”

Lester stared at her. He hated that tone of voice and what she was thinking. “No, but at least I graduated,” he said.

“Well, if you’re so goddamn smart, why are you cleaning buildings for a living?”

“I like this job,” he said. “Suits me fine. You’re the one can’t find a *decent* job.”

“This job pays shit, Lester,” she said. “And you got no idea what it costs to raise a baby.”

“I guess I do.”

“Yeah, right. I suppose *you* got kids.” When she saw the look in his eyes, her eyes widened. “Shit, I didn’t even know you were married.”

“Was.”

“Oh,” she said. “Well, how many kids?”

He hesitated. “Three. Two girls and a boy.”

“Really? Three? How old?”

Clapping his hands to his knees, Lester pushed himself onto his feet. Enough was enough. He’d said more than he wanted to. There was nothing but trouble could come of this type of talk.

“Time to get back to work,” he said.

Wanda’s dark eyes narrowed to slits. Her mouth opened, as if she wanted to say something more, but then she closed it again and shrugged. One of the yellow straps slid down her pale smooth shoulder. “OK. Have it your way.” She pushed the strap back up and jammed her hand in the pocket of her jeans. “You go ahead,” she said. “I’m gonna have one more smoke. I can’t smoke at home any more.”

Pulling out a crumpled pack of cigarettes and the lighter, she shoved a battered cigarette between her lips, thumbed the little wheel on the lighter. Once, twice, three times. When it didn’t spark, Lester reached into his pocket and brought out a small box of matches.

“I thought you didn’t smoke,” she said.

“I don’t.”

“So why do you have matches? In case a cigarette accidentally jumps into your mouth?”

He flipped the box to her. She reached out, but it hit the heel of her hand and fell to the ground. Wooden matches that spilled out. As they both bent over to pick them up, the tank top fell away from her chest. Her breasts were bigger than he'd thought and white as powder, except for the nipples that poked into the thin cloth. His hands twitched. He could easily reach out and touch those breasts, cradle them, caress them

"Damn!" Wanda said. She stood up fast, crossing her arms over her chest. "You keep your eyes to yourself, old man!"

Lester rocked back on his heels, his face hot. "That didn't mean nothin," he said. "Sometimes a man can't help where his eyes go, that's all."

"Bullshit! Wasn't just your eyes, either. I saw your hands. I know what you want. Who the hell you think you are, some big black stud can get what he wants?"

Lester ground his teeth together. His hands clenched up into fists. He straightened slowly, deliberately, and stood over her. Wanda flinched. For the first time he saw how small she was, and he wondered why he'd ever felt threatened by her. "Tha's right," he said, the words coming out in a low growl. "Ole Lester's jes the big bad nigger man sniffin round the woodpile, can't wait to get his hands on the white woman."

"That's not what I meant," she said. Her eyes flicked around wildly, like a trapped animal's. She stepped back, took hold of the chair, and moved it in front of her.

That deer-in-the-headlight look stopped him cold, knocked the anger out of him like a kick to the chest. He'd seen that look before. In Raynelle's eyes, the night he stopped her from going out on him. The kids were away, spending the night with their grandparents. She stood on the other side of the kitchen table. She had on the slinky red dress she wore for special occasions. He noticed the perfume even above the smell of diapers and sour milk. Before he had a chance to

open his mouth, she told him she was fed up. “If I have to clean one more diaper,” she said, her head high, her jaw hard, her green eyes holding him in his place, “If I have to clean up one more mess, stop one more fight, cook one more meal—” She didn’t finish. She said she was going out with friends and she didn’t know when she’d be back. She tried to walk around him to the door, but he blocked her way. He knew where she was going and why. Who she’d been seeing during the days when he was at work and the kids were at school and she paid the teenager downstairs to watch the baby. She fought him, slapped his face and scratched his jaw. He lost control of himself then and did what he did to her. Broke her jaw, they said at the trial. Crushed her esophagus. He lost everything because of what he did that night – his wife, his kids, his job. And part of his soul.

The fine mist that surrounded them was thickening into a light rain. Wanda’s hair had slid down over her forehead. The top of Lester’s head was cold and wet, but he did not move. He stood there in the rain, as stupid and stiff as a dime store dummy. His arms dangled uselessly at his sides. He tried to think of something he could say that would ease her mind, but nothing came to mind. He held out his hands, palms up, like he was waiting for her to cuff his wrists. “You got nothin to be afraid of from me,” he said finally, as gently as he could. “You have my word.”

“Your word,” Wanda said, like she was trying to figure out what that meant. Her hands gripped the back of the chair like it was a life preserver and if she didn’t hold on to it she would drown. She watched him like a mouse watched a cat. Her breath streamed white clouds into the air, thicker than the cigarette smoke. He’d knocked the spunk out of her, at least for now.

“I shouldn’t have gone off like that at you,” he said. “That won’t happen again.”

“No?” She moved her head from side to side. “I guess it won’t.”

Fear clawed at Lester’s gut. He knew what would happen now. She would make some

excuse to not go back into the building with him; as soon as he turned his back on her, she'd be gone. Tomorrow she would tell the bosses that she couldn't work with him anymore. They would want to know why. They would check up on him and find out that he lied on his application, and they would fire *his* sorry ass. The cops would show up at his apartment and take him down to the station house again, and this time they wouldn't be so easy on him. Bile rose up in his throat, gagging him. He blinked hard and swallowed hard.

When she spoke again, he started. "You have joint custody of your kids, Lester?"

He shook his head.

"How long since you saw them?"

"A long time," he said. He shivered violently; he could see where this was going.

"Why?"

He raised up his shoulders, let them fall. "I made mistakes."

"What kind of mistakes?" Her eyes were hard, glittery, like coal cinders. "What happened?"

His heart stopped for a minute. He could not answer that. She would never understand, she would see only the rage in him, what he'd done. What he might do. He shook his head and said nothing.

"You miss them?"

He stared back at her. He understood suddenly that he would miss Wanda when he was gone. "Every day of my life," he said.

She looked away. "I'd miss my baby, if something happened to him. Or me. You understand."

He wasn't sure that he did understand. He realized suddenly that she'd never told him her baby's name. He thought about asking, but he didn't. He waited for her to say something else, but she just looked at him. Or through him, maybe, like he wasn't even there.

"It's getting late," he said finally. "I'm goin inside and finish up."

"You go ahead," she said. "I—I'm gonna have that smoke."

The trembling in her voice told him all he needed to know. He hesitated, but there was nothing more to say. She would believe what she would believe, do what she had to. Turning away from her, he walked to the building, listening for the sound of her footsteps fading away. But he heard nothing, not even the sound of her breathing. He reached out his hand. The door handle was cold and wet. He pulled open the door. Warm air blew into his face. Ahead of him, the hallway linoleum gleamed. The building waited for him, brightly lit and empty.