

Blind Man's Bluff

This is how the game always goes. About an hour in, Norm and Theo lose and won't buy back in, because they'll regret it, and I don't have the drive to keep playing. After the three of us are out Francis or Clark ups the ante on Harris. Clark usually has an edge though. His strategy is to buy extra beer before the game, which might sound like a thoughtful gesture until you realize he hardly drinks, just makes sure the rest of us keep our glasses full. More than once he and Harris nearly came to blows over who took home the pot.

One time I went head to head with Harris and the showdown lasted nearly to dawn. That night Harris was his usual self, treating the game like a blood sport. I wanted to call it quits but he wouldn't split the pot. He knew he could outlast me. He also knew I was too damn chicken to go all in unless I had something good. I lost that game but awoke the next morning believing I had an unusually vivid dream, that is, until I felt under my pillow and there were the four crumpled up twenties I found while stumbling home. It was as if some bizarro world tooth fairy paid me a visit in the night.

Starting with my morning coffee, I am reminded that if Jay had stayed in Gilbertsville with us there would be better things to do than play cards night after night. It was fall of the millennium when Herk Avery showed up and told Jay he'd traveled across the country on a tip about a boy who made *the best damn cup of joe this side of the Mississippi*. Ask around, everybody knows Jay brews a mean cup of coffee. And we were kids back then. I was 17, Jay was three years my senior. We talked about college when Jay graduated and decided it wasn't for us. Sure we might like the classes or the professors, but spending the next three decades paying down the loans wasn't for us.

Jay could have done anything, he was *that* guy. The kind who pick up a guitar and can start playing Stairway to Heaven just like that, only for some reason he took to making coffee. Go figure. In those days we talked a lot about things that were worth getting serious about and agreed most were better left as hobbies—that way they didn't get ruined. Back then I wanted to be the jack-of-all-trades and if I told you my job responsibilities today you'd get a pretty good idea how the cards fell.

Herk Avery lured Jay with talk of grand opportunities in Portland for a fine barista like himself. Avery said people in our town didn't have "the palate" to appreciate Jay's "refined talents," but he could get him in touch with the right people.

The day Jay rode out of town with Avery I was at the station. As the train departed, I remember wanting to run alongside like in the movies. That day I wore a Cincinnati Reds ball cap Jay gave me and had I chased after the train I like to imagine it would've flown off.