

A Hard Bet

Mary rose from sheets so sopping with sweat they felt like rained on garbage bags wrapped around her. His voice came across the room out of the dingy morning shadows. “You know, you make one shitty T-Bone.”

She hurled the top sheet from around her, the straight jacket removed, sending it to a clump on the floor. “I didn’t make it. I just served it.” She was still wearing the navy blue waitress uniform from her shift the night before at The Broken Plate, the polyester sliding greasily over her thighs with the same texture as one of the Alaska sized pork tenderloins fresh out of the fryer still shiny with liquefied lard, served for seven bucks to fish who’d been emptied out at the sawdust card houses two blocks over and had the sense to forgo one last hopeless bet for one last meal, but rarely budgeted in any money for a tip or even managed not to be an asshole to the person serving them for free. Last night she had delivered a T-Bone to a guy who had sent it back twice because both times it had failed to spurt blood onto the plate when he cut into it. The last steak she served surely had been basted with snot snurgled up from the back of the cook Carl’s throat before he waved the raw meat over the grill, called it done, warned Mary not to come back again. The guy at the table with the wraparound buzz cut, shag of hair up top, and tunnels burrowed through his earlobes finally accepted it, and his girl sitting next to him finally let the tightness fall out of her cheeks, somebody who’d probably never sent a meal back in her life.

“Maybe you should’ve cooked it. Couldn’t do any worse.” She couldn’t see his ratty face in the shadows, but she remembered it well enough. The only light in the room came from behind him, a bubble shaped TV screen showing an animated sardine sashaying down the road

with an Empire top hat and fat cigar between his fish lips. Somebody needed to play with the vertical hold on the T.V, which must've been purchased sometime around when Ford was president, because the picture only held for a second before flipping upward, holding and flipping again, the motion adding to the roiling of her stomach and the flopping between her temples.

She didn't know this T.V, didn't know the chunky carpet under her feet, and didn't know the mattress she had just slept in balanced on milk crates probably stolen from behind some convenience store. She could just remember that T-Bone and him making her wait while he rolled the first bite over in his mouth to make sure it was edible, exposing a collection of blue fillinged molars that looked like he'd just been chewing up bullets. That moment was the last she could remember, from there to here just a long black road.

“What happened to your girl?” She might've asked him something more pressing, but she didn't want to let him know she had no idea how she got here or exactly how far she'd let things go.

“What happens to every girl? She hangs around for a little while, for a free meal or two, a few laughs, and then finds something better coming her way.”

She began to feel through the bedding for her purse, keeping the conversation going, but not so it sounded like she gave a damn. “Better than you? That seems unlikely.”

He was smoking, the ember showing itself every minute or so. “Maybe she felt too much competition. You were really turning it on at the end of the night, and she knew she didn't have a chance. You got something she'll never have - no fear. You're not like any of the rest of them at all.”

“Why didn’t you take me home?” It was a dangerous question because he might go into detail about what happened here in the dark, but asking it was a place to start. Start there and work forward or backwards, depending on which direction this answer took her. She could’ve walked home from the diner, didn’t need a ride for that, but had she been home at all last night, the first thing she would’ve done was strip off this polyester rag.

“Oh girl, that was the last place you wanted to go. After serving lowlifes all night - present company included - you needed to cut loose and needed some help doing it. That’s why you were so good to me in the first place. Most gals throw me out after the second steak. I’ve never been served a third.”

She could suddenly remember settling up for the night, and him still being there in her section as she went to wipe down her tables, his gal long gone.

“You were a little hard on me at first, said you didn’t want company, but you loosened up enough and let me stick around. Once you got a couple in you, you didn’t want me to leave.”

“I doubt that.” The clank in her head was a crowbar being repeatedly dropped onto concrete, metal on stone, over and over again. And where is the door out of this place? Her eyes were beginning to adjust to the darkness. The morning light streamed in through the crack at the edge of the drawn curtains, illuminating the doorway. She sidled toward it, but kept her eyes on him, wanted his recitation of last night to end there. She tugged down on her dress, though it was down as far as it would go, and he couldn’t see her boney knees in the dark anyway. “How close am I to a bus stop?”

“Where do you think a bus is going to take you?”

“Home, unless I’m close enough to walk.” She hoped this required a bus ride, didn’t like the idea of him living within walking distance of her place.

“You are.”

“I am what.”

“You are home.”

She headed for the doorway. “That’s very nice. Can I just have a glass of water before I split? My head...” She couldn’t think of a way to describe it, just knew she would dissolve into dust on the bumpy bus seat if she didn’t get a drink first. Her face felt like donut glaze. Being thirsty brought on wrinkles, made you older than you should’ve been.

“Go ahead. It’s your water too. We go halves on everything now.”

She rushed out of the room and found a kitchen no bigger than the inside of a Civic, light coming in through a window overlooking a stream of trash and sewage. She filled a crusty glass from his cabinet, gulping down the water and hunks of dust. He came up behind her.

“What are we doing today?” His breath was all cigarette smoke and broth, shreds of last night’s steak probably still jammed between his teeth and rotting there slowly.

She finished and brushed past him without looking back, didn’t want to see him in the light. She headed into the living room of discarded take-out wrappers and Goodwill furniture. “I’ll find the bus myself.”

She found the front door and opened it as he went on, stepping out onto the second floor concrete walkway overlooking the streets, a line of apartment doors running in either direction. “That’s going to be a mighty long trip.”

She expected to see somewhere out there the strip twinkling through the morning. No matter where she drove in the city, she could never get fully away from it, even if it was just a glow rising up from the horizon to attract all the world’s bugs to the flame. The only light she saw now, though, was a rotating Texaco sign across the street offering \$3.79 for unleaded.

Beyond the station was a road of filthy looking, one room businesses - convenience stores, Laundromats, doughnut shops - providing for all the nearby clapboard apartment complexes as crappy as this one. The world out there was too flat and grim to be hers.

She wanted to ask how the hell she'd gotten here, but she already knew the answer: her mother dying before Mary knew her and her dad dead in a car accident when Mary was in seventh grade, leaving her in the care of Grandnan who was just too old to make her do her homework or keep her grounded after she was caught smoking a joint in the school bathroom or get her to care about anything beyond who was having a party next weekend because all she had left was an old lady who wasn't long for this world and was going to leave her to a future all alone. Then there was Charlie who straightened her out enough that she squeaked through to graduation, so into his church that their weekends consisted of the two of them going door to door and sharing the word, saving the ones who didn't slam the door in their faces, saving the world and saving Mary in the process, until, that is, she missed a month and he rewrote the history between them, claiming that they had never been anything more than friends, had never once slept together, that his parents and church never would've condoned such a thing, but when she tracked down the real culprit, Charlie would certainly pray for both their souls. There she was to raise Eric on her own with the help of Grandnan who ended up being around after all and would watch him in the day when Mary worked a temp job filing patient sheets in Dr. Garrison's office and eventually in the evenings when she started taking nursing classes. Five classes away from graduating with an LPN degree when Eric got leukemia and died four months later. Only five classes, but what was the point anymore? The only thing to do was drive away from everything to someplace else entirely, and where better than a place with so many lights to wash away the darkness and so many people with so many sins and so much pain worse than hers.

He answered the question she'd never asked, "You got to be careful. A few too many tequilas and you might just let somebody drive you 200 miles from where you started. You might have to leave it all behind and start over from there."

She came back inside and turned away from the door to face him, his lips white and fractured from being as dried out as she was. His complexion was all pocked and pimply and prickly. She found the wall, the door shutting to a sliver. She liked him better wrapped up in shadows. Her head.

He went on. "That place you came from would suck out your soul sooner or later. Girl on her own has to take a gamble if she wants to survive. It's called a hard bet." He brought a hand up to her face, every finger including his thumb wearing a spikey pewter ring that with a backhand could rip somebody's cheek apart. "I told you there weren't two ways about it, that if you decided to come with me, meant you were mine. And here you are. Now shut the door, and let's have our breakfast. I like steak with my eggs."

She knew he did. His hand left her face, and she could've made a dash for the street, probably could've made it too. She knew how to run.

Instead she fell back into the apartment where inside the fridge she found them freshly wrapped in butcher paper and tied with white twine, not one but two, as if he expected her, or somebody, or anybody, but here she was.

She set them on counter and went about looking for his frying pan.