

Sheep

"Fuckin' med students," muttered Mel. "Son of a bitch." My buddy Davy watched the bar owner, his green rag slung over a shoulder as he poured a beer. I had been coming here after my shift ended for a few years. Melchiore's had its regulars but it seemed like a different crowd dropped in every night. Tonight was a med-school party. A big banner proclaimed CONGRATULATIONS MED SCHOOL STUDENTS.

"Original," I said, nodding over at the sign from our perch at the bar. I had no idea what they were being congratulated for, and didn't care. It was winter, so it wasn't graduation. Davy and I just came off our shift at the newspaper down the street and wanted our usual few beers before heading home.

"Hmmpf," Mel grunted.

"what's your beef with them?" Davy asked.

"They show up, act like they are regular people, can't wait to leave and tip like shit," Mel answered. "And don't get me started on the state of health care." I definitely

didn't want to get Mel – or anyone, for that matter – started on the state of health care.

"I'm just here for the beer," I told Mel, who gave me a rare half-smile as pool balls slammed into each other near the front of the bar.

Mel and I weren't exactly friends, but we got along a hell of a lot better than he did with virtually anyone else at the paper. Mel used to work at the paper until he famously took a buyout and bolted. I say famously because as the story goes, a day or two after leaving, someone snuck into the production chief's third-floor office and tossed his TV out the window. It shattered near a dumpster. It was no secret Mel hated that guy. And when they cleaned up the mess they found the boss's framed photo of his wife in the dumpster with a giant dog job on it. No one accused Mel, but it happened right after he left – and right after his buyout check cleared.

As we heard the laughter at the table behind us ebb a bit, we saw Famer walk in. It was a quiet night, snow falling gently, and Famer shook out his scarf as he took his usual seat at the end of the bar. ESPN SportsCenter was on, sound

off. Mel's waitress Denise was cleaning up glasses and bottles at the med students' table. Most had left, stragglers still there finishing their drinks. Famer Hawkins was an old guy who worked production at the newspaper, making sure the plates got on the presses. He and Mel had worked similar shifts. Famer was a classic but efficient drunk. Mel left us, slid down the bar, and had a glass of beer and a shot of Ten-High ready for him. The busted jukebox to his right stood like an old robot next to a newspaper rack that held a bunch of junk. Mel said something, Famer looked up briefly, nodded, and Mel's knuckles rapped the bar. Mel walked back over to us. Famer was, as they say, a classic loner.

"Hey Mel," I asked, "What's the story on Famer? I mean, he works in the basement with the presses, we don't see him. We hear things."

Mel looked up.

"You hear things. Who the fuck are you, Starsky and Hutch?"

"Kind of ornery tonight there, Mel?" Davy said.

"Nah," he answered, almost sorry he snapped at two well-tipping customers at this semi-dump of a bar who didn't cause trouble and who just liked to unwind after second shift. "Long week. These med-school assholes piss me off."

Being that these guys weren't really the fight-starting type I didn't know what the problem was but kept my mouth shut.

"Ahh, Famer," Mel said. "Been coming here for years. I worked with him in plates." Mel looked down for a second, then back at us. "You fellas know the sheep story?"

"No, nah" we uttered in unison like a pair of bobbleheads.

Mel smiled a rare smile. "This one's a good one," he said.

"Seems Famer--"

"Hey why do they call him 'Famer'?" Davy cut in.

"Cause he's in the Hall of Fucking Fame, how the hell do I know?" Mel barked. "Who's telling this story?"

Boy, Mel was in a piss, I thought. "Go on," I said.

"So Famer lives out on a big plot of land. I don't know, an aunt or someone left it to him. He gets this bright idea a few years back to have a side business. Decides to buy sheep. Gets four of 'em."

"Sheep?" I asked. "That's a helluva side business."

"Yeah, sheep," Mel said. "Decided they don't need much looking after. He could let them roam the back yard while he was at work, learn how to shear, and sell the wool."

"Good plan," Davy said.

"Well, sort of. Except he don't know nothing about sheep. Hell, he wasn't raised on a farm. Didn't know how to shear 'em, nothing. But he figures, 'Hey, side gig, plan B in case the paper goes belly up.' So one night he's gotta work a double-shift. Figures he'll put out a little extra feed, water, then re-fill when he gets home. So Famer puts in the hours and, of course, makes his bee-line right here."

"To Melchiore's," I interrupted.

"Home away from home," Davy piped.

"Hey, who the fuck are you, Ace Ventura? You two guys want to shut the hell up and hear the rest of this?"

"Go ahead, Mel," I say, ignoring the odd reference to the Jim Carrey movie.

Mel gave me a look like a disgusted mother who has a pile of dishes, a husband who stays out late, and who is in dire need of a drink. "So Famer tosses back a few. OK, more than a few. Then he staggers the hell out of here. Doesn't live too far, and frankly I seen him worse. So he gets home and decides to have a nitecap, you see? The nitecap turns into three or four, then he passes out." Mel paused for a second to pull the tap down on our glasses. That's one thing I liked about Mel. He always knew when to refill. He always kept the bill straight, too.

"That's it?" Davy asked. Mel stared at him incredulously.

"Yeah, numnuts, that's it, that's the whole fucking story." He turned to me, "You know, he really ain't the brightest bulb you've hung with, you know that?"

I laughed. Davy grimaced.

"Go on, Mel," I said as Davy's face looked like a dog that's been beaten with a rolled-up newspaper for doing nothing.

"So he wakes up, and the sun is coming up. The TV is on – and I remember Famer telling me this right after it happened – 'I wake up and the first thing I see is Babar. That fuckin' elephant kids show. Always on.' "

Davy and I chuckled. "You know the show, the one the shitlets watch?" Mel said, making sure we know who Babar was.

We nodded as Mel sauntered a few feet away to check on two women who came in for a glass of wine. They couldn't know wine, because I saw what passed for wine at Mel's. You got pink a lot easier than red or white.

Davy turned to me. "Gotta way with words, Mel does."

I nodded and sipped my beer as Mel came back. "So where was I. Oh yeah, he wakes up, sees the damn elephant, and goes back to sleep. Then he gets up and remembers, 'Hey, it's been a while since I fed the sheep.' So he goes outside and that's when he sees it. A giant pile of sheep. They're all dead."

"What?" Davy asked.

"Yeah, dead. Famer decided to leave a bunch of feed and water for them in the pen. Problem was, one of the sheep busted through the fence and tipped over the feed. So they all start feasting. The damn supply that's supposed to last a while is gone in no time flat. Animals, you know, if you give 'em food 10 minutes after you just fed them they'll eat again. What the hell do they know?"

"Now," Mel continued, looking almost scholarly. "Sheep gotta eat, you see. But they didn't, so they died. Famer had been gone a while, between the double shift and the bar and passing out."

"Holy shit," I said.

"Yeah, holy shit is right. Here's Famer, hung over with a yard full of dead sheep. So he goes out to bury them. Gets a spade and starts digging. Said he had to stop to puke a couple of times, but he kept at it. So he gets the job done, cleans up and then has to go back to work. Spent his whole time between shifts passed out or digging a mass grave for sheep."

Davy and I sipped our beers. "That's a helluva story, Mel," I said.

"Wait, you ain't heard the kicker yet," Mel said, leaning in toward us as he glanced down at Famer, who was staring at the TV, his shot still in front of him. "He gets home that night, passes out--"

"I'm beginning to see a trend here," Davy said.

"-- and then gets up the next day. He starts the coffee going, gets a cup and sits down for a sec. Then he remembers this bad dream about digging a giant hole. His days and nights are turned upside-down, you see. He takes his coffee and drags his ass out to the back yard, and lo and behold, what do you think he finds?"

We shake our heads.

"Legs – all 16 of 'em – sticking straight up through the ground. Fucking rigor mortis had set in. Can you believe it?!" Mel's laugh came out like a grunt, even causing the two women to turn toward us for half a second, sneer, then go back to their white zinfandel or whatever they were drinking. "Fucking legs sticking straight up!"

"No shit," I said. Davy was staring, then starts laughing so hard he starts crying. "Ha! Legs ... Ha! Sticking ... up! Ha!"

"Hey settle down, don't let him hear you," Mel said. We stifled the laughs. "Yeah, he probably thought he dug a hole halfway to Cuba, and he didn't even get to East Brunswick," Mel chortled.

Mel went to check on the women and three guys who were sitting on stools at the front, under the giant, cursive sign that said MECHIORE. Not MELCHIORE'S. Mel picked it up at a yard sale. Once I asked him about the lack of apostrophe, and he said "They were all out. How often am I

gonna come across a sign that has my name? Not exactly the most common thing, you know." It hung over the front window, over a small sill and near the lone pool table.

"I gotta hit it," Davy said. I agreed. It was late, so we dropped some bills and grabbed out coats. Mel walked back behind the bar. "Thanks Mel," I said. "Yeah, thanks for the ... story," Davy said. I knew he wanted to add 'sheep' but we were walking by Famer, who nodded in our direction and went back to his whisky and beer and staring at the TV set. Had I had a few more I might have added "baa-baa-aaa" but on occasion I try to grow up.

The snow continued falling as we walked to our cars. I looked inside through the front window and saw Mel leaning over to talk to Famer at the end of the bar.

Inside, Famer stared straight at the screen. "How's it goin'?" Mel asked.

"Fine," Famer said. "You tell them the sheep story?"

Mel looked down at his bar and wiped the top. "Yeah," he said, not looking up.

"You tell him it was your idea to buy the sheep and we were gonna split the profits?"

"No," said Mel, as he poured another shot and beer and placed them in front of Famer.

Famer's eyes never left the muted SportsCenter screen. Mel was still for a moment, then rapped his knuckles twice on the bar and went down to check on other customers.