

## The Road to Tomorrow

“You gonna get anything kid?”

Thomas Duarte blinked hard and shook his himself, looking up at the bartender who had inquired. The man was at least 6’3, bald, and had such a massive pot-belly that Thomas was genuinely impressed that he could navigate the cramped quarters behind the bar. The man raised a bushy, caterpillar-looking eyebrow at him at Tom, who responded by clearing his throat emphatically.

“No, sorry, not um- not yet.”

“Well this isn’t the place to be sight see’in kid. You need to order somethin or get out.” The bartender huffed, the caterpillars over his eyes coming in close as if to kiss one another. The whole thing made Tom want to laugh. The eyebrows, the bluntness of his speech, even the man referring to Tom as a “kid”. But instead of laughing, he pressed on with the conversation.

“Sorry sir. It shouldn’t be too long... I’m just- well I suppose I’m waiting for someone.”

The bartender grunted and placed the mug he had been cleaning with the rest of the drinkware stacked hap-hazardly against the wall-length mirror. It looked somehow dirtier to Tom.

“You got five minutes. Then I’m kickin you out,” the bartender said, shimmying his way away from Tom towards the far end of the bar.

“Fair enough.”

O'Leary's was a little dive bar on the edge of Darrington, Washington, a town of yesteryear that hung around for no other reason it seems than for the sake of hanging around. O'Leary's had been established by Franklin McNeal O'Leary himself, a pig farmer who had decided he was tired of the drive home from the bar at 4 in the morning and would instead just start his own place. It still wasn't clear which occupation ended up making him more miserable. O'Leary's bar was a disaster at first, with Frank getting drunk with his single investor every night, his Aunt Phyllis. The two had actually put O'Leary's up for sale in the 50's, but that was before the state government had sunk millions into overhauling the roadways around the Seattle area. The byproduct of this massive undertaking was several construction crews stationing themselves in Darrington, giving the town a substantial monetary bump, and O'Leary's a new lease on life.

That had been a prosperous time in Darrington's troubled past, the most prosperous time period anyone in town could even remember. It didn't last.

Eventually the construction crews moved on, the money dried up again, and the stench of a slow rot from the inside-out remained.

A logging town of about three hundred people, Darrington was used to the smell. Three hundred documented people that is, hardly anyone ever showed up for an election or a census. But three hundred still seemed like a high estimation. Darrington was less a town than it was a bunker for men who worked the surrounding areas. Miners, loggers, and the farming community made up the bulk of the town, and these people never were around much. They worked, fished the river, went to Sunday Mass every once in a while, and drank whiskey when they felt alone.

Tom wasn't surprised by this treatment. Frankly, he was used to it. This was Darrington, Washington, and if one thing never changed in towns like this, it was that temperamental rural rudeness. Tom suspected that was why most of the people who were born in Darrington didn't stick, not willingly at least. As soon as the youth hit 18, they were out the front door and into a new area code, doing their best to uncover muddled notions the American Dream. They didn't really know what it was, or even where it was. But they knew it wasn't in Darrington. That much was certain.

They usually came back, the tail of their ego tucked awkwardly between their embarrassed legs. That feeling of embarrassment, coupled with their newly printed ID would eventually lead the young folks to O'Leary's, because everyone went to O'Leary's. There were other bars in town, sure. A disproportionate amount, for a population of 300. To have 5 bars in the span of 6 miles, servicing such a small community was frankly excessive, but O'Leary's was where you went, the pinnacle destination in an otherwise highly competitive industry.

The obvious reason for O'Leary's success? Cost. Sheriff Daniels swore up and down that the O'Leary boys, were "watering the beer down", and that argument was hard to refute. O'Leary beer was never served from a can or a bottle, but produced instead from a backroom in pitchers or dirty glasses. One had only to drink a beer at O'Leary's, walk out to one of the establishments plethora of competitors, sample that same beer and know something was off. Fifty cents a beer though. If all O'Leary beer was only kegged H2O, that was still a bargain.

But O'Leary's wasn't even popular for its crap beer. It was popular for its illegal production of moonshine. Franklin O'Leary himself, having not been pleased by the net

income of his little bar, had cut a deal with the sheriff's station in the mid-eighties. For 20% of whatever he made off the shine, the sheriff and his sole deputy would turn a blind eye to its illegal production.

Franklin O'Leary distilled, bottled, and sold the moonshine to his customers out of a shed behind the bar. A shed that would come to be known as "The Shine Station", and even though the states surrounding would start legalizing the sale of moonshine in 2007, it remained the key to O'Leary's success until his untimely death in the mid 2000's. As far as corruption went, Darrington's moonshine obsession was perceived as innocent by most folks. And you never stood against the status quo in Darrington. Never.

The Shine Station was why Thomas Duarte deliberately sat himself at the grimy bar in O'Leary's that night. Tom was not from Darrington. He lived a kind of nomadic lifestyle, journeying from small town to small town, meeting the people, helping where he could, and moving on. But where he seated himself each night was of the utmost importance to Tom and he was always very careful about the research he put into every town he visited. He had to. His work required that the characteristics of each locale he visited be very similar to that of Darrington. Small. Quiet. And with more than a little of that bilge water flare so often seen in small-town USA.

He had come with just enough money to buy himself a couple drinks, maybe a pack of cigarettes, before he would have to be on his way once again, to another small town, another small venture, another big job. The life of a nomad suited Tom, and checking his watch, he made sure that he still had plenty of time to meet some more townsfolk before he had to press on. It was important to meet the locals, Tom thought,

to see how they lived before he confirmed a verdict that he was already secretly quite sure of.

He wore his favorite white cowboy hat tonight, the one that only had the faintest of sweat stains around the ears, a wrinkled and fading blue button-down shirt, and old torn blue jeans. The whole look gave him an air of pretentiousness that befitted him well. He had worn a yellow tie with this button-down once, a gift from his first wife, Sarah, but he had lost it somewhere along the road. It had smelled of lavender. He remembered that now. Maybe a hint of canola oil.

“The road to tomorrow is paved with misery son.” Thomas’s dad had said once, “The man who can best walk that pavement might someday meet the paver.” Thomas hadn’t a clue what that had meant at the time, but he always liked to think that he loved his father and all his wordy wisdom.

The bartender shuffled back passed Tom, caterpillars in close. Tom was now quite sure he didn’t like the bartender one bit. He cleared his throat again, ready to ask what the other man’s problem was.

Just then, a woman on her way towards the exit bumped Tom’s arm dramatically, almost bowling him off his rickety bar stool. She yelped and grabbed at Tom’s shoulder, trying to help steady him with an animation to her movements that immediately made Tom feel uncomfortable.

“I am so sorry honey. Didn’t see you there.” The woman said, a bit breathlessly.

Tom pulled back slightly, trying to get the woman to release his shirt from her vise grip.

"It's alright. I can be hard to spot sometimes." He said with a wink of his large, hazel eyes. The woman blinked.

"Maybe a cigarette to make up for it?" She asked, showing him a pack of Marlboro's in her leathery hand.

Tom shrugged, "Sure."

The two stepped out of O'Leary's and into the cool night. The temperature had plummeted even in the short amount of time that Thomas had been inside. He wished he hadn't ridden his motorcycle, but knew it was the only way. He had very little to budget towards gas.

The woman shoved a cigarette into her mouth before offering one to Tom, who took it and thanked her.

"What's your name anyways honey?" She asked, bringing a plastic lighter to her lips and giving it a seasoned flick of the thumb.

"Thomas. Yours?"

"You can call me Marg."

"Nice to meet you Marg." Tom said, shaking his head at Marg's outstretched lighter, "No thank you. I'll smoke after a beer or two if it's all the same to you."

Marg blinked once again, and shoved the lighter into her back pocket. "You just nabbed my cigarette for the hell of it?"

"No... I mean I would love to smoke, but not right now. I came out figuring you might want the company all the same."

Marg blinked at Thomas again.

"But you still took the cigarette?"

Tom shrugged, “thanks?”

Marg shook her head, “Rude. But whatever floats your boat.” she said, looking off into the night, as if she was seeing through the darkness to some far-off place that Tom couldn’t.

Tom placed the cigarette behind his left ear and studied Marg’s face. She looked much older than he. Not that he could really be positive. She could have been 40, she could have been in her late 50’s. Years of heavy chain smoking and a generally rough lifestyle had done a real number on Marg’s physical appearance. Her hair was dry and in some places, looked brittle, a faded blonde that must have been captivating once. Her eyes were a piercing blue, and when she blinked it was like Tom could see the gears of thought whirling behind them somewhere. Thomas thought she might have been pretty once, but was now nothing more than pitiable. A flower, without nourishment, always wilts. People like this that made him know that the work he was doing was for the best.

Marg puffed on her cigarette for a while longer before turning back to Tom, her mouth pulled into a tight frown, that just barely covered her overly large teeth.

“We don’t get a lot of visitors round here,” she said, matter-of-factly.

“I’ve gathered that actually.” Thomas said, nodding.

“You passin through then?”

“You could say that.”

“Wudda ya mean, *I could say that?*”

“I mean, yes, you could say that I’m just passing through.”

Marg locked her icy stare on Tom, the gears behind her eyes going hard.

“One of those cryptic types huh? Keep to yourself, don't talk to nobody. Just take a lady's cigarette and share nothin? Hidin somethin. You like speakin in riddles that no one but yourself understands, I've seen your type before, comin' through here all high and mighty.”

Tom forced himself to smile despite the sudden, undeniable urge to tell Marge off. “I meant no offense. Yes. I am just passing through here. I'm on business.”

Marg flicked some ash into a patch of old snow beneath her before taking another hearty pull, never looking away from Tom.

“And what business is that, Tom?”

“I'm a social worker.”

Marg snorted. “So you don't work then.”

Thomas frowned. “No... I do. I help people. My client list is pretty extensive.”

Marg shook her head and snorted. “No. You've never worked a day in your life hun. Social work ain't work at all. You ain't doin nothin the rest of us can't do.”

“You don't even know what I do exactl-”

“If you ain't putting a shovel in the earth, it ain't workin Tom. Beth come over to my apartment at least three times a week cryin' about this, that and the other, and you know what, I don't ask her to pay me nothin. Why should you get paid to try and sort people out hmm? That's just common human decency.”

“I believe you are thinking of psychiatry. I am not a psychiatrist, I-”

“What do you even do exactly '*social worker Tom*'?” She said, making quotations around his title and mocking his voice.

Tom flexed his hand.



“Well I was just about to say Marg, I help families in lower socioeconomic standing find... a better life.”

“And what is, ‘a better life’ Tom.”

Tom blinked, he had never been asked that before.

“Well it could mean any number of things really. No two clients are exactly the same.”

Marg snorted and dropped her cigarette into the snow where the remains gave one last puff before her boot crushed them into the white frost. Marg pulled another cigarette from her pack.

“So you're sayin you don't know. I bet you come from the city Tom. You reek of these damn city folks who always comin here tryin to spread the good word of modern livin. Like we're savages or somethin. Like y'all are some televanguailist gonna set my poor ass free.” She huffed a quick chuckle and continued, “Where ya go to school to help these poor people anyways Tom? You got a fancy degree tucked away in them britches you can show me? You lot should carry that crap on you to amaze us small timers.”

“It's Thomas. And I went to Hudson County University.”

“Where's that?”

“New Jersey.”

“Never heard of it.” Marg said.

“I wouldn't imagine that you have Marg.”

Marg chuckled and shook her head.

“So Hudson County gave you some papers that say you can help people huh? Good work Tom. I wouldn't mind takin a look at the big, strong-brained, east-coast-man's papers. Stuff like that's bound to make a lady swoon.”

Tom felt his face turning another shade of pink.

“So, what do you do then Marg? I mean, other than scouting out young strangers for a little warmth at night?”

Marg gave a gravelly hoot followed by a wheezing laugh, the smile lines in her face making her look even older than she had before,

“You bitter Tom Dootery? That’s your last name right? Tom Doo-R-Itty? Hush, before you get all pissy I wanna tell you somethin’. I’ve heard enough of you city folk preachin your heart out about helpin others that I damn near feel sick. Y’all should be damn near ashamed.” Marg said, flicking her second cigarette into the snow and stomping on it.

“I’ve done fine my whole life without you. I’ll do fine all the rest without you. Hudson County might think you can help me, but Hudson County ain’t Darrington County. They don’t know nothin bout us here. So maybe you should move along Tom, maybe you should find some other poor sap to peddle your *shit* at. Cuz I ain’t buyin.”

Tom’s face was flushed scarlet.

“Who are you to say Marg? I’ve spent the better part of my life helping people. Learning to help people. Not a single complaint in all this time. Not one. 100% success rate. My guaren-fuckin-tee.”

“Well then let me be your first complaint big fella. You. Are. A. Hoax. You don’t know nothin Tom. Your work ain’t helpin nothin but your own ego, boy.”

Tom turned back towards the bar and began to march away before turning and flicking the cigarette Marg had given him towards her.

“Thanks for the smoke. Good luck with your life Marg.”

“How much do your clients pay ya Tom?” She called as he reentered the bar, “Bet I could make that much in one night if I was about it!”

Thomas marched back to the bar and threw himself down on a stool, waving at the bartender to hustle over. He felt no sympathy for Marg anymore. How dare she, an uneducated woman living in these godforsaken backwoods, think herself high enough to criticize Thomas Duarte. He hadn't gone to school to get criticized in the bilge water he now serviced. The bartender shuffled his way over, eyeing Thomas as sweat ran in big raindrop sized beads down the sides of his head.

“Gimme a beer. Whatever's on tap.”

“We don't have a tap, and I don't like your tone kid. *One beer please.*”

Tom glared at him, almost spoke up, thought better of it, and slid a single, wrinkled dollar bill onto the bar.

“One beer. Whatever you want to get rid of. Please.”

The bartender nodded, swiped the money into his massive fist, and walked away. It took Tom a little under a minute before he realized that the man was idly chatting with another customer.

“Hey! Where's my beer!?” Tom called after him.

The bartender didn't even look at him. Just shook his head.

“You gotta simmer down kid. I know you ain't from round here, so I won't kick you out just yet, but I don't serve nobody that talks to me like that. You take a minute to calm down. I'll get you that drink just as soon.”

If he wasn't before, Thomas Duarte was now absolutely outraged. He had been in half a hundred towns along his trek, but none of them had shown him this level of

disrespect. He felt physically ill. Here he was, an agent of the people, only here to help, and it felt like the entire town was rising up to oppose him. He ran a hand through his thick brown hair before shaking his head and closing his weary eyes.

They just couldn't see sometimes. It happened. Sometimes people didn't understand what they needed. What he offered them. In the end, he would service them all. But sometimes they just didn't understand.

Tom got up and began to make his way towards the exit. He had had enough. "You hear about Greensville?" An elderly man was saying to a group of what looked like miners, all covered in dirt and disease.

"Yeah, I heard," one of them said, "tragedy."

"Sick." the old man replied, "Marg's sister lives up there. She's gone round askin' for people to donate to the families."

One of the miners nodded and took a sip of beer, "Maybe we should make a trip up there. See if we can do anything. It's only right."

The old man nodded his head, "It's only right."

Three solitary hours passed, and Tom would spend every one of them brooding over the wrongs that the town had committed him. He mostly thought about Marg, and the slander he felt by her hand. Eventually he went and found her. It didn't take long, Darrington was a small town.

She was smoking alone outside the grocery store, occasionally calling out to the people going in or out, asking if they had heard about Greensville. When she saw Tom approaching, she sneered at him, showing a row of yellowed teeth, and began to say

something he was sure was snide, before he clubbed her so hard over the head that she immediately hit the asphalt with a heavy thud, her skull cracking loudly against the sidewalk. Thomas stood over her for only a moment, breathing hard. Then he dragged her behind the store, and out of anyone's line of sight. Thomas couldn't imagine she weighed more than one-hundred pounds.

He had never personally assaulted someone like that, and he reflected on that fact as he stood over 20 glass carboys. His work, the real work, was about to begin.

Thomas stood in the shack behind O'Leary's. He was rubbing his hands together. It was late. Or early, depending on how you looked at it, probably a little past four in the morning. The Shine Station had been locked up, but Thomas hadn't had much trouble picking the lock and easing himself inside. The carboys stood in neat rows, each distilling the town's beloved moonshine, monuments to its corruption and wickedness. They were lucky he had found them.

From his pocket, Thomas pulled his flask and popped the top. It had taken him awhile to compile enough arsenic to truly service his lengthy list of clients. The first towns had received mercury, and that had been nothing short of an absolute nightmare. Mercury was not effective in Thomas's experience. Arsenic was.

Most towns had not had their own illegal enterprise like this to easily administer aid to such a large number of people. Greenville had been very challenging, ending when Thomas had been forced to plant arsenic in the town's water tower. It was truly a God-granted miracle no one had caught him that day.

Thomas tipped the flask over each of the carboys liberally until it was completely empty. Then he went outside, produced one of his two remaining flasks and dumped

that into the carboys as well. He would have to come up with another means of administering aid in the next town, or find another source of arsenic. That last flask wasn't going to treat an entire town. But Thomas was confident that he would figure it out. He always did.

Thomas Duarte stepped out into that cold November night and looked to where Marg lay in the snow. His aid should not have been that personal. But Marg had been a special case. She had belittled him, questioned him, and Tom had grown to really truly despise her.

He didn't like looking at her now. In fact, he hated dead bodies. So instead, he reached into the purse he had taken from her and withdrew her Marlboroughs and accompanying lighter. He found \$8 there, enough gas money to get his motorcycle to the next town. His next venue.

Thomas shivered. He was close now. His work was almost done. He felt it somewhere deep within himself. He had not the means to get himself a coat, and the weather was going to get much too brutal for a motorcycle soon. He suspected one of his clients would give him a jacket, but, once serviced, Thomas rarely stayed around to see them.

Thomas took Marg deep into the wilderness, and left her lying against an aspen tree in the unmolested snow. She looked strangely at peace. A crumpled, dehydrated flower against the pure white. Thomas blew her a kiss. She reminded him of his estranged wife, Helen, in some ways. Her blonde hair. Her thin lips. That agonizing condescension that was unbecoming of the uneducated. Helen had learned a lesson or

two from Thomas as well, and he couldn't help but wonder if she had realized it yet or not.

"The road to tomorrow is paved with misery Marg." Tom said aloud, taking one last look at her before he kicked his motorcycle into life. He flicked an unused cigarette towards the place where she lay, and thundered off down the road, the moonlight casting long shadows through the woods.

The night was dark, but the moon was bright and clear that night, and Thomas Duarte had miles to go before it would be light again. A pavers duty was never really done, not really. But he had done a damn fine job all the same.

