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3910 wds

Clean Break

Alessa wakes to the sound of bickering and with no idea where she is. There's a television on somewhere and the bickering is really just two CNN pundits arguing about the deficit. She grabs a handful of her sleep-snarled hair and brings a strand to her nose. Ugh. Smells like ashtray. You can ban smoking all you want, but people in pool halls are never going to stop.

Where is she? Winnemucca? Black Mountain? Is she even in Nevada? Looking around the room doesn't help—every motel room looks like every other motel room. At least she knows who she is, knows that last night had been a carbon copy of just about every night over the past decade. Whatever town she is in, whichever state, Alessa McHenry's been hustling pool.

She gropes around the nightstand, under the pillows for the remote and then stacks the pillows under her head as she flips through the channels looking for a local one. Finally she finds *Tahoe at Twelve* with a pretty Hispanic woman explaining that while the day will be cloudy, it won't be too cold to enjoy Tahoe's fantastic outdoor experiences. Weather, news and travel ad all at once. Tahoe. It comes to her now. She left Winnemucca two days ago, her pockets not quite as full as she would've liked, but she hadn't been on a losing streak either.

Hustling pool these days isn't easy. There are fewer hustlers out there, male or female. The popularity and big money to be made playing in televised tournaments, or trick shot specials, even the sort of yuppification of the game makes it harder to make a living by traveling from pool hall to pool hall, drumming up games for money. Alessa finds that lately she's been settling for less: less money, less sex, less fun. More booze, though. She guesses she's always

known the day would come when she'd lose her edge, for pool, for wandering, for all of it, but it never occurred to her that it would be so confusing, that she'd feel so lost.

She gets up and starts the little coffee maker going, wondering if the wheezing machine will live long enough for her to get her morning caffeine fix. This will be about the billionth cup of bad coffee she's drunk since leaving Jimmy. She doesn't know the last time she had a really good cup of coffee, sitting in someone's kitchen, smelling the settled life, sitting in a room where real people live, people who don't smoke too much or eat at Denny's or out of vending machines, who sleep in the same bed night after night. Does she envy or hate them? Looking in the scratched mirror at her tangled, going to gray hair and the darkness under her eyes, Alessa can't decide.

The coffee maker gurgles and spits, steam puffing out the top and water leaks out from the base. At the end, after all that noise and mess, the dying machine manages to produce a few spurts of bitterly weak coffee. Alessa likes it strong—Jimmy used to say you could stand a spoon in her brew—and even though she's drunk a lot of bad coffee over the years, she can't make herself drink this.

Half an hour later, showered and with the knots worked out of her hair, she's on the street looking for the diner recommended by the meth-head front desk clerk. She wonders if this is some kind of omen, that she's taken to getting tips from drug addicts. "Try *The Wheelbarrow* on Elm," the kid said, looking like he either needed his pipe or had spent all night on it.

Meth-Head hadn't known why the diner was called *The Wheelbarrow*. "Just is," he'd mumbled and Alessa doesn't care anyway. The place is where he said it would be, and it turns out that drug-addled or not, the kid knew what he was talking about—the coffee is great. Black, strong, and smooth. The place itself is a bit strange; the décor is . . . eclectic must be the word

she's looking for, although that is not a word you'd expect to find in her Midwestern brain. She's picked up a lot of things since she took up this life. Hell, she's become a bit eclectic herself. On the walls, packed together willy-nilly, are hubcaps and license plates, movie posters and magazine covers, nailed and tacked, taped and even glued it looks like; there's no rhyme or reason to any of it and when she asks the waitress who is grumpy but consistently refills her cup, what it all means, she wonders if the waitress and hotel clerk are related.

As she leaves the diner she again has a moment where she can't locate herself geographically, can't remember which direction she needs to go to get back to the motel. Doesn't know if it's left or right. This never used to happen, or maybe she didn't used to care where she was. This is a new feeling, this not knowing, but even more, this worrying that it matters. There's only one reason for a hustler to know where she is and that is so that she knows where to go next. It's all about timing, kind of like shooting a good game of pool or picking a sucker. How many games to lose before the sucker is hooked and the stakes can be raised. When to call it quits before getting in real trouble with the locals.

She's almost managed to convince herself that she doesn't remember why she started hustling pool, this town-to-town, smokey pool hall-to-pool hall existence, this life in motels. For a long time, she told herself it was because Jimmy started talking babies. She'd told him from the start of their marriage that this was one conversation she never would have. "No kids. I told you that on day one," she said to him when he started in. But that wasn't the real reason.

This is what did it.

It had been like any other night at Dom's, the bar with the best Brunswick tables in town and the cheapest beer. They hadn't been playing seriously, just messing around trying trick shots,

drinking Pabst and MGD and Bud, just another working class night out in boring old Owensdale, PA. Up to that night, Alessa'd always played it honest. She never misled anyone to think she was any better or worse than she was; anyone who took her on, straight pool, eight- or nine-ball, whatever, knew they were up against a better-than-good player. She never thought of pool as anything other than a hobby, something to do to alleviate the boredom of working all week as a receptionist for an orthodontist who spent most of his free time trying to grab her ass.

But that night at Dom's something happened, and once it happened, she couldn't turn away from it. There was this guy, this blowhard talking loud, talking shit, and nobody in Alessa's group knew who he was. He kept drifting over while she was shooting, making comments, puffing himself up, using the same dumbass come-ons Alessa'd heard since she started growing boobs. She wouldn't have done anything about it except Janice and Babs got to heckling her: "C'mon 'Lessa, show that shit-head how it's done," and "You could so take him down a peg," and then it was Jimmy and his brother, drunk and laughing: "That's right, girl, show him whose town this is," and on like that, and she probably still wouldn't have done anything, except the blowhard heard them and swaggered over to their table. He challenged her, probably thinking he was on his way to a hot night between the sheets; she never wore her wedding ring when shooting pool, and Jimmy was okay with that because she always went home with him. Also, she was more than half-lit, and Jimmy and the gang were egging her on, fueling the fire.

He didn't know what straight pool was, so they played 8-ball, and maybe that's partly why she did what she did, because he wore *sucker* like a hat, even though she wasn't consciously aware of that. That was the moment she stopped being the best female pool player in town. That was when she became a hustler. She lost the first two games, coming back at the end of the

second to almost win, missing a bank on the eight (a shot she'd made hundreds of times, and it was then that the look on Jimmy's face changed—a look of bewildered near-understanding, as if he were looking into a crystal ball that showed him a future he'd never suspected could happen). She won the next game, but made it look like luck, and when she said, "I need to get going. One more, double or nothing?" he agreed, already counting his money and his chances with her. She broke and in a series of fluid strokes, ran the table.

It was epiphanic.

The second she pocketed her winnings, she was halfway gone, and Jimmy seemed to know it before she did, except he wasn't sure what it was that he knew. She didn't seem unhappy, or angry with him, just . . . on her way out the door. When he woke up one morning to find that she'd left, taking her one big suitcase and the five hundred dollar custom-made Balabushka cue he'd given her on their first anniversary, he couldn't work up much surprise. It was like waiting for a train you've heard coming for hours, waiting for it to finally rumble by so you can say, "Well, at least I don't have to wait anymore." It was only later, when he realized that she'd withdrawn all of their 'savings for a house' money that he got angry. It seemed unfair, but then he thought, "Now I won't have to worry about buying a house, either," and it was like the not-waiting anymore.

At first, she mostly worked the Midwest, trying to find the best places to play, pool halls where she would be noticed but not too much. She quickly figured out the strategies that would work for her. There were rules, of a sort, that she learned to follow. If she walked into a bar or a hall, or even the local rec center where she'd heard there were good tables and competent players

and everyone looked her way, she might as well give it up. She wanted one or two of the less competent players to notice her, then she could start to play her way up to the better players, because those were the ones with enough ego to put money on the table.

College towns paid best—young men, mostly, with more money than sense who liked to be seen playing a sexy woman (and she had been sexy then). They paid off like defective slot machines, and sometimes she'd let one win so afterward she could take him to her motel room. Those were the win-win days, the days of the successful hustle and a good fuck. Alessa loved the life. She felt free and although at first it surprised her, she didn't miss her old life or the people in it. She'd gotten away clean, and until the incident in that stupid little bar in Wyoming, she never thought of calling Jimmy.

She hadn't meant to stop in Wyoming. The only other time she had done so, in Rock Springs, she lost several hundred dollars to an old bowlegged rancher who could barely walk. She never did figure out if *he* was hustling her or was just some kind of pool savant. Anyway, she had a rule: never return to a place where you've lost and you don't know why.

Her plan this trip was to make the I-80 run through Wyoming in one go, get to Salt Lake City and set up some games there. But it was August, thunderstorm and tornado season on the high plains, and just east of Cheyenne the sky turned slate from a clear-glass blue in what seemed like seconds and the wind that had been buffeting her car stopped. There was no dwindling, just a stopping, and she felt the engine relax and quit fighting. She sped up, thinking now she could really make some good time. Then the hail started. She'd heard of golfball-sized hail, but had never seen it until it attacked her car that day. She found herself in a long line of vehicles pulled over to the emergency lane, the hail pounding divots into the roof, trunk and

hood as semis plowed by like tanks. If it had just been the dents, she'd have continued on to Utah, but one of her headlights was shattered, the hailstone sitting inside the broken housing as big as the bulb it had ruined. Later she regretted that she hadn't risked the run, one-headlighted, through that bad-luck state.

She pulled into the first garage she found off the interstate and as Hank the mechanic *hmmmed* his way around the car, marveling at what the hail had done, she wished this was one of those times in her pool hustling career when she was flush. She'd just buy a new car during those times. But her luck had been bad lately and she couldn't afford to abandon the wounded car. It would have to be fixed, and while the mechanic had the bulb he didn't have the right housing, which meant she'd have to find a place to hole up in Cheyenne.

This was six years into the life she'd begun as she did her early-morning tiptoe out of her and Jimmy's rented house, and although superstition forbade her from running the hustle in Wyoming, she found herself looking for a pool table in the bar down the street from the Little America where she'd found a room. She meant only to have a drink and practice, not even to engage in a game, friendly or otherwise. She took her second-best cue with her because she didn't want to attract any more attention than she was bound to anyway—a good looking woman carrying her own cue stood out. Alessa toned it down as much as she was able: jeans and a decent but baggy t-shirt, sneakers, a light jacket; she tied her hair into a simple ponytail. Later, after it was all over, she wondered why she'd gone to all that trouble to appear nondescript. It sure hadn't worked, sure hadn't mattered to the man who ended up breaking her cheekbone.

Alessa'd been at the table for a while, nursing a gin and tonic that made her wonder if the bartender knew what tonic was for or what a slice of lime might look like; she worked on an especially tough two-railer she'd lately been missing. The table wasn't in great shape, so she

wasn't taking the practice very seriously, although it never hurt to be able to make hard shots on a bad table. The music on the jukebox was decent (this was before most places went to satellite radio, which she despised; there was nothing quite like jukebox music, as far as Alessa was concerned, but that might just have been her blue collar upbringing showing through). So, she was lazily practicing her shot, taking small sips from her glass of gin, when a guy peeled off from the bar and approached her table. She saw him coming, and for one of the few times in her life, she totally misread someone.

She regained consciousness all of a sudden, but at first she couldn't open her eyes. A voice reached down into her pain and she managed to winch one eye up. It snapped shut as bright light rushed in. Alessa groaned. Her face hurt so bad she wasn't sure where exactly she was broken. With every third or fourth heartbeat, her head seemed to lift away from her body. The next time she opened her working eye, the light was dim and she could keep it open.

"There you are," said the voice from before. A straw came from nowhere and she sucked, and the water in her throat was beautiful. Now she could see a woman in lavender scrubs leaning over her, holding the plastic cup in one hand and bending the straw into her mouth with the other.

"How ya doing?" Lavender Scrubs asked. "Head hurt?" She withdrew the straw, and stood back, clearly expecting Alessa to say something astounding.

"Where am I?" Not astounding, and the act of speech made her face throb in a new and nauseating way.

"ER, of course." Lavender Scrubs sounded disappointed.



“No.” Alessa wanted to go back to sleep; she did not want to talk or be judged by Lavender Scrubs. “I mean, *where?*” That didn’t sound any smarter, but Alessa’s brain was now pounding in counterpoint to her face, and the working eye kept sliding shut.

“Oh, yeah, I gotcha. Well, hon, you’re in Cheyenne. Wyoming?” Alessa heard her, but she was already ebbing back into unconsciousness and the words barely caught hold.

Later that night, when the x-ray tech asked her, in that western leave-off-the-subject way, “Not from here, are ya?” Alessa just shrugged and smiled with half her mouth. And then, even later after they finally gave her painkillers and her head joined the rest of her body floating nicely around the room, when the Cheyenne police officer asked her what had happened, she didn’t bother with the shrug. She didn’t bother to keep her eye open and after a while he left. By the time he returned, Alessa was gone, in one hand an ice pack pressed against her swollen cheek, a prescription for Percoset in the other, and an objecting nurse trailing after. She left because she finally remembered the answer to the x-ray tech’s question. She wasn’t from here. She didn’t want to explain herself, explain that she wasn’t from anywhere anymore. She didn’t know how to explain what had happened to get her face broken.

His name was Georgie. If it had been George, Alessa probably wouldn’t have remembered. What adult man calls himself Georgie? It was ridiculous; he was a bit ridiculous. Maybe that was why she didn’t get the correct read on him. He was good-looking—a lopsided grin, little-boy crooked teeth, clear blue little-boy eyes—and he held himself in an easy slouch, leaning toward her enough to seem interested but not threatening. In fact, until the moment he made a fist and slammed it into her face, Alessa had no warning that he was anything other than the good-ole-boy he appeared to be. They played a few games of 8-ball, innocent games. She

didn't try to win, she didn't try to lose, she just played and drank another of those awful gin and tonics, paying for it herself, not letting him pay, not teasing him, not leading him on, not hustling him in any way. And then, after they'd finished a game, one he'd won as it turned out, she'd said something, something that seemed like nothing. Or maybe it was what she did as she said it. "Not bad, Georgie," she said, and she patted him on the back. The next thing she knew she was waking up in the Cheyenne ER, her face like concrete, heavy and thick. Later, after she'd put a lot of miles and some time between herself and Wyoming, she'd dream that Georgie was standing over her, slowly uncurling his fingers, the lopsided grin and clear blue eyes unchanged.

For a week after leaving the hospital, Alessa stayed in her hotel room, leaving only to shuffle down the hall to the clanking ice machine. The Percoset dulled the pain but it also made her nauseous, so she didn't bother to eat. She refused to let the maid in even after the manager called and asked that she do so. "I'll be out in a day," she'd promised him, that first time, and then again two days later.

One night, late and after she'd taken a double dose of Percoset, Alessa called Jimmy. She hadn't expected to reach him, didn't know if she remembered the number or if he'd still be living in that house, or even Owensdale. But her face hurt and the pills confused things, and for the first time in a long time, she felt alone. Jimmy answered and he sounded just as he had when she was Mrs. McHenry. There was no tinge of bitterness or disappointment in his voice. Even with her cloudy brain, Alessa felt a pang at that and wondered if she wanted him to sound angry, to sound as if she'd broken him. But he was just Jimmy and although she knew his voice, he did not seem to recognize hers. When she finally convinced him that she was indeed Alessa, there was a sudden and definite silence, as if the telephone lines had been sucked into a vacuum, or one of

those black holes she'd read about somewhere. Or seen on TV. Things were all out of focus, and the deadness of the telephone between herself and Jimmy scared her. She wondered if she'd all of a sudden gone deaf. She felt that she too had been sucked into that soundless void, and that she'd been there starting the moment she won the game at Dom's all those years ago. Alessa McHenry was just a name. A name for a wandering pool player who got herself beaten up in the middle of nowhere.

Probably, if she hadn't had so much painkiller pumping through her bloodstream, she would've hung up, but then Jimmy's voice floated up out of the void.

"Lessa? You still there?" He still did not sound angry, but now she heard the sadness. What on earth had she wanted from this call? How would it help?

"Hi Jimmy." Good lord.

Of all the things he might have said next, of all the questions she expected he might ask, he managed to say the one thing she hadn't anticipated.

"You're still my wife, Lessa. We're still married." And when she didn't respond, "Do you care?" The impression that Jimmy was shaking, maybe on the edge of sobbing, came through like cymbals crashing.

"I got punched in the face by a guy called Georgie," was what she managed, and then she hung up. That was the last and only time she reached back through the void she'd created and could not un-create.

A few days later she left, wobbly, ten pounds lighter, her face no longer swollen, but looking like a cross between a ripe plum and an over-ripe banana. It was ugly, but as soon as she picked up her car and was heading west, she felt better. She would never set foot in Wyoming again, taking intricate and circuitous routes to avoid the doubly-jinxed state.

Alessa McHenry stands lost in Tahoe, and it could be anywhere, and she wonders what would have happened if she'd stopped that morning so long ago, stopped before she put her cue into the car, before she'd stolen money from her husband, stopped and turned around, taken up her life as Mrs. Jimmy McHenry. What would have happened if she hadn't made a clean break?