

WHERE THE STARS SNATCH THE TROUBLES FROM YOUR SOUL

A little less than three hours earlier, Tom Rafferty's self-made empire crumbled. He'd entered the negotiation well-aware (perhaps *too* aware, in retrospect) that the stakes this time were make-or-break. But, unlike the confidence and formidable negotiating skills that once crowned his business reputation, he had allowed his desperation to pierce a mortal chink in his armor.

The call came on his mobile phone as he was driving back to his office. Stark confirmation the eggs that Necessity had placed all in one basket had turned rotten instantly. Quite simply, Tom Rafferty was ruined.

He'd chosen the most deserted road he could find and driven aimlessly through the countryside, his destination as uncertain as his future had suddenly become, until he ended up in this hole-in-the-wall bar alongside a railroad track at the edge of a town he'd never been to before.

After two quick shots of the bar's off-label brand house whiskey to calm the panic he'd felt building since the call, he ordered the next shot with ice and soda, a drink over which he could properly agonize about his future.

When the raspy voice interrupted his brooding, Rafferty had been staring into the top of his glass as intently as if the soda and the whiskey and the ice cubes could mystically reveal

why a man who has just lost everything should want to continue living.

"You're gonna' think I'm just a crazy old coot sticking his nose into a stranger's business, but you look like someone whose luck has run out." The voice belonged to a squalid-looking old man occupying a stool in the shadow at the end of the bar. "Reckon you've either lost your woman or your job," he continued. "Those are the usual reasons a man drinks whiskey in a beer place like this."

Rafferty acknowledged with a nod in the man's general direction, not wanting to be impolite, but not feeling like striking up a conversation with the ragged old man either. He took a sizeable belt of his drink to keep from having to offer a verbal reply.

Neither bluffed nor discouraged, the old man abandoned his perch and sidled onto the stool next to Rafferty.

"Theo Willis," he announced, extending his bony right hand between Rafferty and his drink. "But my friends call me Willy."

Rafferty caught a whiff of nicotine on the sleeve of the old man's tattered corduroy jacket, noticed the dirt beneath his fingernails and in the cracks of the dry, scaly palm extended him. Hesitantly, he returned the handshake, touching his hand lightly and quickly, the way one touches a sick person, conscious of whatever real or imaginary microbes might lurk on the person's skin.

"Yours Truly is considered the resident shrink in our little watering hole here," Willy announced while tapping his own chest with both thumbs. As if to qualify this, he added, "That's just FYI, in case you feel you need to talk about what's

troubling you." He flashed Rafferty a toothless smile before continuing.

"Now I know you're thinking in most saloons that's what the bartender does. That it's considered part of the job." He gestured toward the man drawing a draft beer from a keg behind the bar. "But as Ed there will vouch, he doesn't much go in for listening to other peoples' problems and such. That's why Willy's the designated listener whenever a customer needs a sympathetic ear or a bit of an old man's worldly wisdom.

"So, my friend, how about buying old Willy a beer and telling him what's got you down? I'm not saying I have all the answers to your problems, but I'll guarantee you'll feel better afterwards for spilling them out to me."

Up until a couple of hours ago, Rafferty would have been repelled by a bum moving onto the bar stool next to him. And striking up a conversation with him would have been out of the question. But, then again, if his life had not hit rock bottom today, about this time he'd be leaning on an upholstered bar, boasting with his colleagues about how much money they'd made that day and running up a four-digit drink tab on his American Express Platinum Card. The irony of it all, Rafferty realized, is that old Willy here is probably more financially liquid than I am at this moment.

As Willy waited patiently for a reply to his offer, his wide, clear blue eyes penetrated Rafferty with a convincing sincerity and a suggestion of hidden deep knowledge. He would have expected those eyes to be cloudy and yellowed, to go with the purple capillaries, ruptured by alcohol and age, that lined Willy's nose and cheeks. But now he could easily believe they were, indeed, windows into the old man's soul

Hell, what harm can it do, telling this old man my problems, Rafferty rationalized. Makes his day, and I get a bit of homespun therapy for the price of a beer.

"Sure, Willy, I'll buy you a beer," Rafferty said, "and honor you with the distinction of having a drink with someone who woke up this morning on top of the world and will go to bed tonight a ruined man."

Rafferty ordered them each another drink and poured out his story to the old man. He told Willy about how he had made a ton of money in a very short time. How he had invested and reinvested that money in increasingly riskier opportunities that promised quick and meteoric profits.

"Here's the thing, the mistake I made," Rafferty said. "When you're riding a wave of success - I mean *huge* success - the way I was, getting by with what you already have no longer becomes an option. The notion you might someday fail is so far removed from your ambition that you get stupid. And, brother, did I get really stupid."

Willy's attention to Rafferty's story never wavered. Without turning away or looking down at his mug on the bar, he managed an occasional sip of his beer. At several points during the narrative he shook his head knowingly, giving a sense he'd heard - and understood - this story many times before. Not once, though, did he interrupt its telling.

"You know what the worst part of all this is, Willy? At some point I'm going to have to leave this place, face my wife, face my friends and colleagues, and deal with the reality that I'm a failure. And that scares the hell out of me. I guess that makes me a coward, too." In recounting his misfortune, his

original scorn for the ragged man sitting beside him had morphed into a genuine envy of the simplicity of Willy's life.

That's when Willy told Rafferty about the first time he hopped a freight train with his father.

His daddy, Willy said, had lost everything during the Great Depression and had jumped a boxcar one night and gone north to look for work. He would come home every couple of months with just enough money for Willy and his mother to get by. Then he'd go off again.

"I was fourteen years old and pissed as hell at him," Willy said. "I'd overheard some other boys talking about how lazy my daddy was - *theirs* had found work again - and how he couldn't hold onto a job after the mill shut down."

Willy lifted the half-full mug to his lips and, tilting his head back, swigged the remaining beer in it. Like a metronome, his Adam's apple registered each gulp. He lowered the empty mug emphatically onto the bar and wiped a mustache of foam from his lips with the back of his hand. Rafferty expected the old man to ask him for another beer.

Instead, Willy continued. "One night when he was home my daddy asked me to take a walk with him. He knew I was upset, but he wasn't the type for those sit-down father-to-son talks. I figured this was his way of showing he wanted to make things good again between us.

"We didn't say much to each other until we got to the tracks that ran alongside the deserted mill. Even then, my daddy stared silently at the dark, brick building for what seemed like a long time. The mill had been his livelihood, his

whole life really, and in the glow of the nearby security light I could see him blinking back tears."

Willy paused and lowered his head, as if to hide his own tears from Rafferty, before going on with his story.

"That night my daddy told me how when you're lying on your back on the top of a boxcar, the stars just seem to drop right down out of the sky and snatch away the troubles from your soul.

"He knew the nightly Illinois Central with a long string of boxcars would be slowing to a crawl along this stretch of track by the mill - it was the one he usually jumped when it was time to head back North again - and he led me across the sidings to the main track as he described for me the 'art', as he called it, of hopping a freight."

Willy told Rafferty how you choose a place where the train slows, and how you pick out a boxcar towards the back of the train and then run alongside the track until that car catches up with you. He explained how you grab hold of the side ladder and pull yourself up onto the sill step.

"Sure, the idea of grabbing a hold of that moving boxcar seemed pretty scary at first. But it isn't nearly as hard as it sounds." Willy grinned, as if to assure Rafferty of the veracity of his assessment.

"When I had pulled myself to the top of that boxcar and lay there on my back looking up at the sky, I knew exactly what my daddy meant about those stars. We only rode that freight five or six miles up the tracks, 'til we came to a good place to jump off. But I remember feeling I was the luckiest kid alive. We walked home afterwards, chatting and laughing together as the inky sky turned to dawn above our heads. Like good buddies

coming home from a night on the town, I suppose. Anyway, after that night I was never angry with him again."

Though the sun had set by the time Rafferty and Willy walked out of the bar, night had failed to cut the thick summer heat from the air. Rafferty removed his suit jacket and offered it to Willy. "I don't suppose I'll be needing this anymore," he said.

"You'll want to keep that on," Willy replied. "It's gonna' be damn cold up there. Even on a clear summer night like this."

Willy led Rafferty to where the railroad track made a big curve about a quarter of a mile past the bar. Rafferty heard the moan of a distant train whistle.

"She'll slow to make this curve," Willy told him.

In the bar, with his whiskey-induced courage, Rafferty had readily agreed to Willy's 'guaranteed' cure for the blues. But now, faced with the actuality of climbing aboard a moving boxcar, he began to have reservations about his hasty and, possibly, impaired decision.

"I'm not sure I can go through with this," he said.

"It's like my daddy told me that night along those tracks by the old mill. 'When a man is angry or down on his luck, he can either lie down on the rails in front of the train, watch it pass him by, or hop it and see where the ride takes him.'"

They could now see the light of the approaching freight train. "The choice is yours in the end," Willy told Rafferty.

"But, if you're going to hop it, you better make up your mind real soon."

The diesel engine was now plainly in sight, its wheels squeaking as the brakes were applied to negotiate the curve ahead in the tracks. What the hell, Rafferty thought. It's illegal. There's a chance I might be severely maimed or killed. But what do I have to lose at this point, really?

He went over Willy's instructions in his head, picked out a boxcar near the end of the train and, seconds after the behemoth engine passed, gave Willy a thumbs-up sign and began running alongside the slowing train.

"I wish I was going with you," Willy shouted behind him, and Rafferty could imagine that toothless smile, those wide, clear eyes, and an animated Willy offering further encouragement, his words muffled now by the deafening roar of the train.

Rafferty's leather-soled shoes slipped on the loose gravel as he ran. Cinders, blown up from underneath the train, stung his eyes. And, sooner than he had expected, the yellow Southern Pacific boxcar he had chosen was alongside him. He reached desperately for the hand rail.

He hadn't anticipated the strength required to pull himself up onto the ladder. The forward motion of the train threatened to rip his hold from the ladder and throw him beneath the train's metal wheels.

That fear of falling surged adrenaline through his arms as he clutched the side ladder, his feet dangling just inches above the stones of the railroad bed before finding the ladder tread. He climbed to the top of the boxcar.

A million stars enshrouded Tom Rafferty. As he lay on his back on top of the boxcar, beneath the breathtaking spectacle in the cloudless sky above him, he imagined himself wrapped in an astral cocoon, awaiting metamorphosis.

Far ahead, the engine blared its shrill whistle, which drifted across the long string of boxcars - across his boxcar - before fading into the dark tracks behind.

"WOOOOOO..." echoed Rafferty. The sound came from deep within him, escaping through his pursed lips as if it had been trapped inside him for way too long.

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