

There's Beer If You're Thirsty

The old man who sold him the beer told him it hadn't rained in years.

"Years?" Clovis repeated.

"Yes, sir. That's why ain't nobody left but me and a few dried up sugartrees."

"Years," Clovis repeated, like the chorus of a ballad. "I don't know how anything can survive without rain."

"Can't say to that," the old man admitted. "I can tell ya that the last time it rained, Margaret was still here."

"Margaret?"

"My Margaret."

"What happened?"

"Stopped raining. Then it got lonely."

Clovis nodded.

"I understood loneliness," he said. "What do I owe you?"

The old man looked around the store.

"Was a gas station once," he said. "This is what's left."

Clovis held his wallet open.

"How much you got in there?" the old one asked.

"Not much."

"You got fifty?"

"For a six-pack of beer?"

"For the whole place. Time for me to move on. Ain't seen rain in years."

"I don't want your store. Just some beer. I'movin' on, too."

“No, sir. You ain't ready. Give that five spot.”

Clovis handed him the bill.

The old man took the money, put on his hat, and walked out the door.

Clovis took the six-pack. He leaned against the front wall, popped the first can, and watched the old man walk away. The long, empty road spread like a thin wing; one side ribboning to his right, lay like an impassive macadamed flat bread left too long in the compost and baked dry. To his left, it rose up and over a slight ridge, disappearing in the distance. By the time the old man disappeared behind the ridge, Clovis finished the last of the six-pack, the sun left for twilight, and Clovis fell asleep on the gray boards of the walkway.

When he awakened, Clovis sat up and rubbed his back muscles against the wall of the abandoned gas station. He slapped the dust from his sleeves, raising a light vapor of chalky gray that floated away, glinting in the early morning rays.

It had been forty days since the old man left. On the morning of the forty-first day, a murky haze, like a gauze curtain, sheltered the horizon against the brewing yeast of another in an endless parade of sweltering days. Within minutes the rising air stirred as if water boiling, and the shimmer made the roadway shine. He went to grab a breakfast beer from the cooler.

The cool can felt blunt, solid in his hand. He raised the can in salutation to the emergence, and as he lowered his hand, something moved within the road shimmer, too far away to identify, but certainly a life-form of some substance. The creature wandered off the road and across it and back again, as if searching. It took another beer before Clovis identified a dog. As it came closer, he noticed it had long, black fur, almost like hair.

He retrieved another beer and watched as the dog closed in, its pointed snout sniffing, its eyes darting, until it noticed Clovis, and it stopped. They looked at one another, questioning, one

uncertainty paralleling the other.

Clovis raised the can and sipped. The dog, as if in response to the gesture, walked toward him. It was a medium-sized dog, thirty-five or forty pounds. It came closer, and without hesitation, it stepped onto the wooden walkway and sat, its chin up, looking directly at Clovis. The dog was a female, and she had blue eyes.

“Do you have a name?”

The dog did not change expression, but it did seem to relax a little.

“You need a name, of course, if we’re going to talk. What’s a good name for a girl dog?” Clovis sipped the beer. “I know. I’ll call you Margaret, for the old man. His love. His Margaret.”

Clovis relaxed a little, too. He sat against the wall, stretched his legs, and took another sip of breakfast.

“So, Margaret, what’s a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?”

Clovis closed his eyes. Memory met him.

“Her name was Catrina. Catrina Marie. I actually said that to her. In the backyard, near the fence.”

He looked at the dog.

“You sure you want to hear this? It’s getting hot, and you must be tired.”

The dog rested its chin on its paws.

“Okay,” Clovis said, and he sipped his beer. “By the way, Margaret, there’s beer if you’re thirsty.”

Margaret, the dog, got up and went to the store entrance. She grabbed the handle, pulled open the door, and went in. She came back to the door, pushed it open with her paw, and returned to Clovis with two cans of beer in her jaws. She set them on the walkway. Clovis took

one and pulled the cap. He set it down in front of Margaret who nosed it onto its side and drank the contents as it spilled.

Clovis popped his can and continued.

“We met at my Aunt Sylvia’s house. We were eleven. That’s eleven human years by the way, not dog years. We always went to visit Aunt Sylvia on Sunday after Church. Catrina’s family had just moved into the house next door.

What do you mean by a place like this?

It’s kind of a joke.

What kind of joke?

I’m not really sure. My cousin, Nick, he told me. It’s what he says.

I don’t understand, so it’s not a funny joke.

“Later, we ate ice cream. That was it. How we met.”

Clovis kept his eyes closed. He could see the past better with them closed. Dull memories sparkled, and forgotten events re-shaped, sanitized like marble, buffed bright and clean.

“Beer for breakfast. Not the most healthy choice, Margaret.”

Still with his eyes closed, enraptured in the melancholia of the past, he exhaled a sound. Not a word, more an emotion, or, perhaps, the faint sound of regret.

“Choices, Margaret. Choices.”

The heated sand clusters released a light brown, translucent dust, like an obscure cloud of unknowing.

“I kissed her, you know. Well, I kissed her a lot, but our first kiss, that Christmas, at Aunt Sylvia’s. Aunt Sylvia’s holiday decorations always included a sprig of green mistletoe hung in the doorway to the living room. Understand, Margaret, if two humans accidentally meet under

mistletoe, they must kiss. It's a rule of magic.

"I know dogs don't have magic. You don't need to remind me. I know. Dogs lay around. Sniff stuff."

He opened his eyes and looked at Margaret. She lay, like a dog, transfixed and loyal.

"I hardly know you, and, yet, you behave like you know me. How can a dog make such a decision based on no evidence? How do you know you can trust me? You don't know. You hope, though. Right? It's not magic for you. It's instinct.

"Mistletoe only grows in shaded forest areas. And it only grows in the branches of trees. Its roots grow in the air, not in dirt. So you see, Margaret, it's a rare phenomenon since its roots are not bound to the earth. Magic.

"After we ate, people milled around getting ready to say good-bye. I went looking for a last piece of pie. Just as I walked into the living room doorway, Catrina, carrying a piece of pumpkin pie on a paper plate, came around the corner, and we met under the mistletoe. Can you picture us? Struggling with childhood, stretching toward adolescence, heavy with Christmas magic, and caught in the adult trap of mistletoe?

"We knew we had to kiss. That's how humans are, Margaret. They want to kiss, but they're afraid. Afraid to touch because if you touch someone, you feel it past your skin, into your blood, and it makes you weak with tenderness."

Clovis lifted the can, but it was empty. He grunted a mild displeasure, but when he began to rise to go after another beer, Margaret walked out the door with two cool cans in her mouth. She set them down. Clovis reached for one and clicked it open. He caught Margaret looking at him, her blue eyes expectant.

"You're a good dog, Margaret."

Margaret took a step toward him. She leaned her snout up to his face and stared at him, at his eyes.

Clovis reached out mechanically, like an instinct, and touched the dog.

“Thanks,” he said to her. “It was like that. The eyes. Dogs, they don’t have pretense. If they like you, they say so with the eyes. Not humans.”

Clovis put the opened can on the floor, and Margaret the dog drank. Then he snapped the ring of his beer and drank a surging mouthful.

“Humans use their eyes to pretend. It’s too much work, loving, so you hide charity behind indifference. Well, you don’t. You’re a dog. But people do. But we didn’t. We couldn’t. The magic. When we looked into one another’s eyes, we saw each other. Then we kissed.”

He paused to endure the pleasure-pain of reminiscence.

“I wish I could describe that kiss. That inexperienced, willful act of courage. Yes, courage, Margaret, because truth overcame us. We each declared with our eyes, this is who I truly am. That is a gift so rare, that one hardly ever hears of it. A choice to share your true self. Scary, because what if she rejects you? But she did not. Instead, she, too, offered herself. I miss her. Here, in my head, and here, in my heart.”

The memory held against his eyes, and he squeezed the lids to bind it. Margaret moved closer and placed her head on his leg. Clovis rested his hand on her fur.

“We fell in love that day. We did not know, of course. We were too young, but that kiss, that magic, brought us together, and from that moment we were no longer alone. Imagine, Margaret, not being alone.”

He stroked her rough fur, and the dog accepted the affection.

“You and I were alone, and now we are not. You are kind to share time with me, but you

are not Catrina. No other is Catrina. I cannot go on without her.

“Our youthful years were uneventful, except that all through school everyone knew we were paired. Even through the joyride of adolescence, we knew each other, grew closer. Everyone knew we would get married, and we did.

“A June bride. Of course a June bride. Humans do things like that, Margaret, explain magic with ceremony. June is the bride's month. It's high summer. Nature has blossomed. Trees are quilted in leaves. Birds, deer, rabbits, all life is alive, healthy. A bride's time of high vitality. Strong and optimistic.”

Clovis stopped talking. He cried. The dog sat up, and Clovis held her and cried into her fur, and the fur grew wet with his tears.

“She was not healthy. She did not know. We did not know. Who knew? Why did no one know? It's not fair.”

He flung his eyes open to the misery of the dusty, amorphous day, the unending sorrow of missing her, and the loneliness.

“What could I do? An aneurism. Do you know what that is, Margaret? Me neither, really. Something breaks. In the brain. Breaks it open. You know, it leaks. Then the brain turns off. Shuts down. And the body follows. Stops talking. Stops smiling. Stops seeing.”

He cried more then; cried with the forlorn grief of a man who has lost his way, a man isolated and unrooted. He sobbed breaths of anguish that in their agony sometimes heal.

“Catrina. . . White lilies. . . Bride's veil. . . Marriage kiss. . .”

He whispered these last sounds into the quiet of exhaustion and fell asleep.

Sleep heals. That's its job. Live life; sleep. But some sleep is better than other sleep, and Clovis the sleeper slept the sleep of dreams. Not a long dream, but one saturated with fear.

When he startled awake, he took a moment to recognize his circumstances.

“I had that dream again. I’m riding a great rhinoceros into a cave. He charges headlong, armor clanging against the enclosing walls, until we reach a tunnel. The beast cannot continue for its size. I jump off and run into the tunnel that leads downward to darkness. Down as if into empty space, until I come to an abyss beyond which I cannot see. Everything is incomprehensible, and the fear seizes me. And I awake in fear.”

He noticed the dog was gone. At the same moment he recognized her absence, she arrived with beer.

“I know what you’re thinking. It’s a hero quest, right? Violent beast. Clanging armor. Running into danger. Exactly. That’s what I thought, too. But the black abyss. What about that? I ask you that question because if it is a hero quest, what’s the quest? Something new, you say? Something in the darkness of the great beyond?”

“You might have something there, and I’ll tell you why. Today the dream changed. Really. Yes, truly. Okay. I’ll tell you.

“I came to the abyss as usual. Instead of waking, trembling with fear, I peered into the black nothingness of dread, and in the distance, I saw an island, the island of the dead.

“Well, of course it has significance. Aren’t we all going to die one day? At this point, I don’t know what significance. Let me continue.

“I braved the darkness and stepped off the edge. Yes, I know, brave, hero, and the hero must die. But I did not die. I stepped off the edge into the blackness to discover that the water leading to the island was shallow enough for me to cross.

“On the island, several yards inland, I came to a crater. I peered over its edge and discovered a lake filled with heads of the dead. Two of them floated over to me. One was the

ancient head of Atlas. You know Atlas, right? Carried the weight of the world on his shoulders, the ponderous weight of life and death, of history and oblivion?

“The other was the head of Catrina, youthful and beautiful. But her eyes were closed.

“The panic in my face must have shown because the head of Atlas said – *calm yourself*. I felt his ancient voice like one feels history repeating itself, a voice like a mountain of stone, profound and living, full of snow and rain, of trees and flowers, of rivers and streams, and somehow I knew it. I knew that voice, that mountain. Inside me. Here.

“You think that’s one of those adjustments of re-awakening? The unconscious freeing repression? I don’t know. Maybe.

“Then Atlas told me to open the egg at my feet. I cracked the white shell and a white dove flew over the lake illuminating all. The water of death was calm and red, and Catrina’s death mask smiled.

“Of course I know the obvious interpretation. I must allow Catrina to settle into the peaceful sleep of afterlife. But I resist.”

He looked at the dog.

“What about me?”

He slugged half the beer.

“She died in the hospital. Sterile fluorescent white lights. Disinfected machines. Stainless steel rails on the bed. A bleak, impersonal, frigid box. I held her hand, warm and soft. At the end, she looked at me. With her last exhausted breath, she whispered, ‘Don’t forget me.’ And her breath whispered off into the cool frigidity of the sterile room and her eyes saw me. Knew me. Eyes of the mistletoe. Eyes of the marriage lilies.

“I held her, then, and I felt her soul release from her body, rising up, away from her,

away from me.

“I leaned away, lost. I looked at her. Of course I expected her to still be alive. Wouldn't you? But her eyes. Her open eyes, spiritless, vacant, except for the unblinking message – ‘Don't forget me.’

“Do not look at me that way, Margaret. I know what you're thinking. This is Katrina, come back from the dead, releasing me. That's backwards, I tell you. I must let go of her.”

This last he shouted, and the dog stepped away from him. Clovis raised the can, but stopped. The half-empty can became a question in his hand. Half-empty or half-full?

“Choices, Margaret. Choices.”

He stared a moment longer.

“The cup you're served. You have no other. Chose.”

The can bespoke the ponderous weight of forgiveness, and the dog Margaret, brought from the cooler one can of beer. She punctured the can with a canine and licked the escaping brew, allowing Clovis to ponder the half-empty, half-full dilemma of choice.

“No wrong choices, the philosopher once proclaimed. But, if you will pardon the rudeness, Margaret, that's dogshit, and you and I both know it.

“Alright, damn it. Half full,” he declared. “I'll savor what's left.”

And he drank. One long swallow. Filling his mouth. Savoring his breath. Letting go. The last few drops trickled from the side of his mouth, and he threw the empty can into the dusty air just as a startling clasp of thunder pounded open the sky and rain fell rampant on the dust.

Immediately, the old man appeared against the peak of the rise in the road. Through the cleansing downpour, he came. When he reached the walkway, the dog offered him a beer. He sat next to Clovis.

“Rain clears the air, don't it?”

Clovis nodded, and gestured. “Made a rainbow.”

The old man took a slow drink.

“Did you find Margaret?” Clovis asked.

“Of course not,” the old man said “Found myself. You ready to sell the station?”

“Sell?”

“Yes, sir. Time you was movin' on. I'll give you three dollars.”

“But I paid you five.”

“With every loss, a lesson.”

He handed Clovis three dollars, sipped his beer, and let the dog rest its muzzle on his lap.

“Named her Margaret, you say? For me? That's a fine gift. I'll remember you for it.”

Clovis accepted payment. He stepped off the wooden planks onto the re-awakened earth and walked west toward the rainbow into a gently gathering day.