

Sunday, Late Night

CARSON OPENS HIS EYES in a mottled-gray world, halfway between sleep and actionable consciousness, the air inside his apartment heavy and dull and choking. He wiggles his fingers, and they feel electric; they tingle and spark and threaten to ignite in the stilled air, and he worries that he's gotten himself mired in a dream. The streetlamps off his balcony dust the darkened room like fine glitter that's tossed into the air and never comes down.

When he breathes in, it's at half capacity, and he slides a finger into his left nostril and dislodges the mass of hardened mucus and blood, and air fills his lungs on his next inhale. He uses his thumbnail to flick the booger away.

Carson props himself on his elbows. The room reeks of must and blood and dog farts and the beer-tinged sweat still pouring off him. On the end table sit the culprits, the four bottles of fast-expiring PBR he'd cracked open and poured on an empty stomach as he'd told his troubles.

"You were lucky to be born a dog," he had said to Hector,

who sat patiently to receive the bountiful wisdom. “You’re born a dog, you remain a dog, you die a dog. That’s it. That’s your duty. That’s your only expectation. Now, don’t get me wrong, you’re good at it, boy. Nobody’s more qualified than you. But I’m just saying that when you’re born a dog, you don’t have a destiny. You’re a dog. You lick your asshole, you eat, maybe you get lucky once in a while—oh, Hector, I’m so sorry I had your balls cut off. Can you forgive me? Buddies for life and all that. I have to tell you, that was a dick move by me. I shouldn’t have done it. I should have just allowed you to mount indiscriminately. My bad. Truly.”

The drunken-ramble tedium had compromised even Hector’s charitable nature, and he had stretched out along the bed while Carson, listing right and slurring words right and left, had hammered one bottle with another in a visual demonstration of the corporate-employee relationship in this lamentable century.

“We define the rules. You do the work.” *Clink*. “We decide who stays and goes. You do what you’re told.” *Clink*. “You thought you had security? Fuck you!” *Clink*. “You thought you could save yourself? Fuck you!” *Clink*. “We will shut you down. Don’t like it?” *Crash*. The neck of the bottom bottle sheared off in pieces, large chunks of brown glass that fell to the floor and micro-slivers that settled fine and invisible on the bedspread, on the computer table, into Hector’s fur.

“Shit,” Carson had said, and he’d collected the larger pieces and disposed of them, then used his hand, unwisely, to sweep the finer leavings off the surfaces of furniture and Hector, who’d already shaken most of them to the ground. As Carson did this, the slivers embedded in the softer places, the webbing between fingers and the flabby sac at the base of his thumb, where the blisters always rose after eighteen holes with his dad. Dots of red formed in these places, and Carson ran to the kitchen sink and its cold-water salve.

As he returned to the larger room, darkness moved in at the edges of his eyes and the room tilted and spun, and he barely made it to the bed before the collapse overtook him.

JUMPIN JACKS HOLDS DOWN THE CORNER where Julep Street dumps into downtown proper and widens into a roundabout that takes in the county courthouse and the main police station and the Josiah Rathbone Performance Hall. Tonight, it's a light that guides Carson in with precision (11:18 p.m.) and trivialities (Hostess cupcakes, assorted, 3/\$1) writ large in LED, and he picks up the pace—more of a sideways gallop, really, his muscles not quite getting the full signal from his sleep-baked head—so he can return to Hector with some food.

This, he thinks, is the problem with a late-coming conscience. It's so damned inconvenient. In Tell City, he'd stopped along the Ohio and heaved the case of dog food into the water, as if to make his transgressions literally sink to the unseen river bottom. The tossed-off act was among a series of devotionals he'd recited on the drive home from Louisville, solemn vows to put the foregoing week behind and start taking things head-on. He'd felt a lifting when the pilfered dog food made contact with the Ohio and burbled down into the muddy drink, a sort of hopefulness he hadn't experienced in a long time, a revival of spirit. That had lasted a few miles. And now, dammit, he needed that food and didn't much appreciate having to hoof it to the corner store to get some.

Inside the store, in a white-light intensity that renders everything in high-definition clarity, Carson grabs a small can of the beef liver, and he knows Hector's going to raise hell until he can get to the grocery store tomorrow and buy some more of the dog's preferred flavor.

"Anything else?" the clerk asks.

"Two Powerball tickets."

He gathers three packages of the on-special cupcakes. “And these.”

“Big jackpot was yesterday. A hunnert and fifty-four million. Do you want to pick the numbers?”

“I don’t care.”

In the face of indifference, the clerk goes the easy route. The automated sheet comes off the printer, and the clerk hands it to Carson. “Good luck, man. Hey, what happened to your nose?”

“Too much cocaine. Have a good night.”

“**B**oss! Yo! Boss!” Carson squints through the darkness, trying to get a fix on the voice across the street. The figure drops a cigarette, its orange end staring out at Carson as it hits the steps of the Cheerio Lounge. A foot stamps it into nothingness.

“Jolly?”

“The same.” Jim Jolly waves him over. “Come have a beer with me.”

Carson drops into the street in the wake of a passing car and crosses the divide. The men shake hands like long-separated buddies, with Jolly gripping Carson’s shoulder and squeezing.

“You look, well, God, you look terrible.” Good ol’ Jolly never put it any way but straight up. Carson shakes his head at the memory that tumbles in, of him and Jolly standing on the loading dock after shift one night, Jolly crushing out three cigarettes while they talked about the damndest thing, how the kid from Wesleyan had shown up for his first shift on the desk, a freshly pressed holder of a B.A. in English, and had never come back from his dinner break. A few hours later, Carson got a one-line email: “It’s not for me.” And there was Jolly, leaning into the wind, putting it all in proper perspective. “The kid’s a piker, Carson,” he’d said. “Of course, you’re the dumbass who hired him.”

Jim Jolly, truth to power.

“Jim,” Carson says now. “It’s been a week.”

“Come on in and tell me about it. I’ll buy you a beer. The good stuff. Not that horse piss you drink.”

“I can’t, man.” Carson nods at the sack in his hands. “Gotta get back.”

“Come on. A whole bunch of us here. Dobber, Drumley, Boone, Burt.”

“No shit?”

“No shit. Just one beer. Those fellas will be happy to see you.”

THE CHEERIO IS INTO IRONY.

Carson and Jolly step into a darkened dungeon of a place still strangled by ancient tobacco smoke ten years after the city imposed a smoking ban. It’s an act that’s still a source of great consternation among the citizenry, many of whom grew up on tobacco farms and remain devoted customers of the product. The *Argus-Dispatch* did a great series on the cultural shift when the city fathers decided, in their wisdom, to impose the ban. Carson had been proud of that one, proud of his staff for connecting the Kentucky his father had grown up in, the elder of two sons of a sharecropper in a tarpaper shack in Breckinridge County, with the coming Kentucky—a bit more urbane, a lot more fitness-conscious, and, at least in this city, utterly unwilling to breathe toxins emitted by barstool neighbors.

The Cheerio is a little handbox of a place, a long bar fronted by stools, washrooms in the back, single black-felt pool table in the middle. Carson is reminded of the George-Bailey-less Bedford Falls and the eponymous Nick’s, where they serve hard drinks to men who want to get drunk fast. From the looks of his friends festooned on the far end of the bar, he’s way behind.

Behrens spots him first, and the response is as Carson might

have expected. He pokes Dobber in the ribs and points at Carson and Jolly advancing on them. That catches the attention of Drumley and Tomison, and the three of them, with Behrens hanging back, file to the middle of the floor to greet Carson with backslaps and neck hugs and alcohol-imbued breath. Carson, having spent almost a week running away from the corpse of the *Argus-Dispatch*, can't and wouldn't want to hide his happiness at being back among them.

"You girls want to move it along back to the bar? I'm trying to shoot here." The guy with the cue stick waggles it menacingly, and the flock of expatriated journalists moves back to the bar, squawking apologies.

"Angry young guy, ain't he?" Drumley sidemouthes when they're safely out of earshot.

"Guy like that oughtta be at Skinny's, not here with us oldies," Dobber says.

"Old, my ass," Tomison says. "I could take that guy." The old cops reporter puts up fists, his hands liver-spotted and brittle, and the rest of them shout him down in a chorale of "yeah, yeah" and slaps on his hamster-cage back.

"Hey, boss, what happened to your nose?" Carson doesn't hear the question. He keeps pulling furtive glances at the pool player, certain he's seen the guy before and just as certain that he knows not where. It gives him no solace to realize that the guy definitely knows him, a fact made clear by the well-practiced staredown he employs between shots. Carson takes to ducking his head back into the conversation flowing around him, turning around only when he senses that the guy's back is to him.

Dobber tries again. "I said, what happened to your nose?" Carson looks up, and his erstwhile crew is waiting for an answer.

"You guys really want to know?"

Affirmation comes from grunts, and from Behrens' declaration that he'll listen if it means Tomison will shut up.

“OK,” he says, “it was the damnedest thing. I went to Louisville”—the city name comes out in proper Kentucky dialect, “Luhvuhl,” as if Carson has said it with a sheet of paper balled up in his mouth—“and I got jumped in the parking lot of my hotel. Two guys. The first one cracked me good in the snout. I was able to fight the other one off, and they both ran.”

He shows them the cuticles on his right hand, the outer layer of flesh torn away, patches of angry red in its place. He tells them he did that punching one of his assailants in the damn head, the truth being considerably more mundane. He’d chomped them down to the nub on the nervous drive back home just a few hours ago.

“What were you doing there?” Jolly asks.

“Just getting away, seeing some friends. You guys know how it is. Instant, unplanned vacation.” The mumbling acknowledgments come again. “You guys remember Cara Echols?”

“No.” The flat denial is understandable from Drumley, who rarely dealt with her. Jolly and Behrens, regular night-shift denizens, nod in remembrance.

“I went up to Cincy and saw her. She’s looking good, doing well.” Carson’s heart drops away at this, at the inadequacy of his description of her. Why can’t he tell them that she looks as if she’s slipped into the years like a Saturday T-shirt, that he could feel his heart springing leaks the moment he saw her? For starters, it’s unfair that she should be so breezily unaffected by the passage of time, that he should pine for her after one damned email, that she should not feel anything at all for him. To say those things to these guys would be to lay himself bare in a way he never could. But he knows. Whatever’s going on with Cara, it’s beyond good and well. She’s fourteen years gone from here, and it’s as if the planet they once occupied together is now his alone. That’s how vast her horizons seemed to him, and how small his measured up in comparison.

“You guys getting back together?” Jolly says. It’s a wicked strike of a question, one that Carson answers only in sheer silence. He’d never told anyone at the *Argus-Dispatch* about the thing with Cara, and he was sure she hadn’t said anything either. That had been their compact, the agreement that had given them cover to pursue something together. They’d talked about it that first night before he had taken her down on the riverbank, after everybody else had peeled off for home, and they’d negotiated the ground rules. This—whatever they wanted to call the lunches in quiet pockets of Daviess County and the brushing touches that happened beneath the workstation and, especially, below the water surface that long-ago July—was to remain theirs alone. Neither one needed convincing that bringing it into the workplace would cede ownership to everybody else, and everybody else’s definition of what they were, collectively and independently. It’s why Carson had to swallow his pain when she said she was leaving, had to take it and then go back into the office and do his work as if his heart hadn’t just been shredded. Why he had to stand alone at her going-away party at Skinny’s and shake hands with her like he would with anybody else leaving for some greener grass. And why, when he arrived at her apartment the next morning at six to say goodbye, as she told him that night to do, she was already gone.

Carson wants to lie and deny it, a spit-take-style “what the hell are you talking about, Jim?” but he can’t bring himself to it. The lies have grown old already.

“No,” he says, “we’re not.”

THE NIGHT GRINDS ON into early morning, and Carson sticks to the diet cola that has made him a joke to the bartender, certainly, and to his buddies as well as they slither deeper into inebriation. It’s worth the grief, he figures. His head still hasn’t cleared from the beers he poured on his

barren stomach. *Haven't done anything about that, either*, he thinks, *nor for Hector, who's liable to be pissed*. The played-out air in the Cheerio provides just the barest of sustenance. He's going to have to go, and he keeps inventing reasons to stay.

"You guys find any work?"

It's all "shit no" and "don't want any" and "haven't looked," but soon enough, the deeper answers come. Drumley, as Carson expected, is ramping up a commercial photography business. Tomison, whose final decade at the *Argus-Dispatch* was marked by a desire not so much to keep working but to keep from having to go home to Marnie, is being maneuvered hard by his bride in the direction of an RV and a life of eternal travel (and eternal Marnie). Dobber is up for a job in the county's code enforcement division, a place he'll do fine, knowing more about the city's laws than anybody currently in the office. Jolly says he's trying to line up some freelance book editing.

Carson looks to Boone Behrens.

"I'm interviewing for the sports editor job in Hopkinsville," he says.

"Isn't that where you worked right out of school?" Tomison says.

Behrens, eyes downcast, affirms it with a nod.

"That's cool," Jolly says. "Complete the circle."

Each guy wears his bravest smile for Boone, but they all know it's about as far from cool as it can be, that a man at his time of life has to go asking at a place he's already been, at a job some twenty-something should have as he starts his climb up the ladder. That's what the deal used to be in this business. Carson would hear from time to time about the fortunate ones, like Dempsey, who started at a big paper and stayed there, slowly coming up the ranks. But most of them were like Behrens: They put in their time in the backwaters and the sweatshops, learned how to write a little and sketch out a page, how to

beat a deadline, and they knew they'd eventually get called up to somewhere better. The *Argus-Dispatch* was one of those somewhere betters, a place smaller than the *Louisville Times*, to be sure, but where a guy could make enough scratch to buy a house and raise a family. And if there were something more he wanted, he could follow the ladder. But now the ladder's gone, the whole idea of linear progression in their business is gone. The *Argus-Dispatch* is gone.

"I wish it could have ended differently than it did," Carson says.

"We all do, boss." Jolly drains his bottle and signals the bartender for another one. "But, you know, we were in a death spiral for a while. Eight, nine years at least. Probably clear back to when Benny sold us."

Carson shakes his head. "Benny's a money man. I'm not quibbling with that. I'm talking about the work. We still did good stuff, even when things got really lean."

"Lady that lives next door to me sure misses us," Drumley tosses in. "She's eighty-seven, read us front to back every day, says she's just wasting away in front of the TV now."

"Eighty-seven," Jolly says. "There's our target audience. Pretty small. And past the expiration date."

"Nah, the hell with that," Carson says. "If we'd been unshackled just a little bit, we could have been more vital than that. Dobber, you know. You think anyone else but us would have filed FOIAs on the school finance stuff, would have been able to figure out how Steener was milking that teat? Shit, man, I had to practically threaten the suits in Paducah to free up the lawyer time for that one. Think what we could have done if somebody who gave a shit ran the place."

"Ah, but there's the problem." Dobber's floppy-eyed and more than a little drunk, and he sloshes his latest Jack and Coke in Carson's direction. "We're the ones who give a shit.

Somebody else has the money to actually run a newspaper.”

Carson wonders, just for a moment, if he should get into it, if his general policy of what’s said in the walls of his office extends this far out, if he shouldn’t just bag that final-day conversation with Haller as the spoils of being nominally in charge. And then his untethered tongue makes the decision for him. “Benny told me I could have bought the *Argus-Dispatch* with what was in my 401(k).”

The jaws drop, all of them, right in a line, like something out of a Stooges two-reeler.

“What did you say?” Jolly, having shucked off the role of witty naysayer, looks at Carson with eyes bright and intent.

“I told him he seriously overestimated my 401(k).” Carson laughs, or tries to. It comes out tentative, gaspy. He should have kept his hole closed. These men, only a moment ago all too happy to marinate their discontent in alcohol, now look gaunt and drawn, hungry and desperate, and he’s just unwittingly suggested that an opportunity passed right under their eyes. Carson has seen the look before—from Dobber when he got beat on a story by some schmuck in Evansville, from Jolly when Reardon retired and the top job went to Carson, not him. Jolly got over that, eventually acknowledging over a half-dozen the beers that it had been the right choice. Carson thinks they’ll have to get over this, too.

“But what about all our 401(k)s?” Behrens says. “What if we went in together?”

“Benny has plans,” Carson says. “Big plans. Plus, he’s already sunk, what, a couple of mil into it, that on top of whatever he paid for it? And shit, maybe he was just yanking my chain.”

“Will you talk to him?” Dobber asks. *Jesus, Dobber, too?*

“Tony down at First Commercial, he’s my sister’s boy,” Tomison says. “I bet he could hook us up with some financing.”

Carson looks to Jolly, the reliably sensible member of

the bunch, for a discouraging word, some context, anything. This thing they're talking about, it's crazy. Nobody starts a newspaper. Not now. The stories of sputtering, coughing, dying papers are legion, the conventional wisdom across all segments of publishing that paper is burning out fast. Carson could sooner breathe rosy cheeks into a corpse than start a newspaper.

"I don't think it can be done," Jolly says at last. "I don't think Benny will let go of it now. I certainly don't think any of us have the first clue how to handle the business end of it. I think we're in the second stage of grief here, and we're kidding ourselves if we think we've still got the fuse to do what we might could have done in our twenties—"

"This is what I'm saying, mostly," Carson says.

"But I also think this," Jolly says, and he looks at Carson, a crooked grin hanging off his cheeks. "I think you might as well give it a goddamn whirl and talk to the man. Because what the hell else is there to do? Boone here doesn't want to go back to Hopkinsville, and from the looks of things, you ain't movin' in with your lady friend."

CARSON LEAVES, a wave at the door and a promise that he'll take this crazy-ass idea to Haller. What the hell? Gotta talk to the man anyway about this other thing I don't want to do. Oh, and by the way, Jim Jolly can shove a crawdad up his ass for that crack about Cara.

The side streets are quiet now, brooding and glass-sparkled under lampposts. Carson counts the lights ahead of him, three of them, fluorescent beacons drawing him home to a spartan apartment and what will surely be a livid dog. Carson reaches into his bag and removes a cupcake container, lifting it to his teeth and chewing open a corner. In the rustle of plastic, he doesn't hear the encroaching footsteps.

A chopping blow to the liver drops him, breathless, to the

pavement. Carson falls forward, crushing his pastries beneath his girth. The pain, immense and unyielding, blots out the sound. He rolls on his back, arching it as the agony spreads inward, and when he opens his eyes, he finds the pool player from the Cheerio standing over him, and utter clarity follows: It's Bradley from the Ford dealership.

"What the—"

Bradley rears back and kicks Carson in the side. It's pervasive pain in triplicate now. "You're a real smart guy," Bradley says. He pulls back for another shot, and Carson rolls toward the approaching foot, trying to take it in the gut. The force knocks half-chewed cupcake from his mouth. "I know where you live, asshole." Another kick. "I know where you fucking live."

Carson holds his hands out, pleading. "Just—"

"Bet you thought it was cute, filling out that survey, giving me zeroes across the board." Bradley kicks again, and Carson, covering up, takes the brunt of it on the bony parts of his hands. "That's my job, asshole. Probation. No bonus." Another kick lands square in the gut, and Carson's breath is gone again.

"I know guys like you. No honor. No character." Bradley rears back to kick again and then comes up short. He reaches down for Carson's bag, rifling through it and taking the cupcakes and the lottery ticket. "You're done." He spits at Carson, hitting him dead on the mouth. "You're lucky I didn't kill you."

Carson, at last, finds his voice and begins to scream, and Bradley moves up the sidewalk a piece and into the alley, and that's it. Even if the cops were to show up now, right this second, Bradley's gone. But nobody's coming. Nobody sees. Night drops in again. The pain sears Carson's innards.

Carson lies back on the pavement, cupping his forehead in his hands, and the booted ribs scream at the imposition. Sweat beads on his face and forehead and rolls toward his eyes, salty and stinging. The pain from the other shots ebbs ever so slowly,

a tide moving out to sea. But, oh, the ribs. Every breath, and they're coming fast, is a reminder.

And there's this, as the haze clears: *The cops? Yeah, that's not going to happen. Can't happen.*

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