

Substitution

“Look at here,” Riley said, showing Jarret his phone. “This is what I’m talking about. 62 out there as we speak. The high yesterday was 66.”

“So?” Jarret said.

“Dude, are you blind? Two weeks, we haven’t broke freezing.”

“Yeah . . . It were me though, I’d be looking more tropical than that . . . And what’re you planning to do out there, anyway?”

They were behind the front desk of the Super 8 in Fort Wayne, Riley coming off his shift, Jarret taking over and starting his. Out the window old snow that had turned grey lined the edge of the parking lot. Next door was a 7-11 with a beat-up garbage can in front that frozen plastic bags were sticking to.

“I don’t know,” Riley said. “Figure it out, maybe control something . . . To start off, they got a big casino, one of those Indian deals. They’re hiring. They train you for a couple months, paid.”

“What, dealing cards?”

“Yeah, that, roulette, craps, those Chinese games, the whole nine yards. You can make 80, in fact that’s the average.”

“Get out . . . *Grand?*”

“Yeah. 40 base and 40 in tips.”

“Fuck,” Jarret said. “Where’d you hear that at?”

“This is what I’m trying to tell you,” Riley said. “A guy I met in the snack bar line at the Jason Aldean concert. His cousin’s out there, she works for ‘em.”

“So why isn’t he doing it too then, it’s so great?”

“No idea. But they have these casino worker forums and shit? And I went on a couple, and everything I’m seeing, those numbers are real.”

“Whatever,” Jarret said. “You come limping back, you can sleep on my couch for a few days.”

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Riley was pretty sure Faith wouldn’t want to come to California but he’d stop by and see. She lived with her parents, in a 1960’s tract house off West Jefferson. Riley’d had four girlfriends since high school and Faith was the first one he didn’t argue with much.

Her mom was home, in another room with the TV blasting, and Faith brought him an iced tea. “I must say, I’m kind of floored here,” she said. “You just now arrived at this decision, is that how it works?”

“Right, alls we do, we get in the truck and don’t get sidetracked,” he said. “Three four days, tops, we’re poking our toes in the ocean.”

“Well where would we live,” she said, “what would I do?”

“Up to you,” Riley said. On the one hand it wouldn’t be bad to have some company, but on the other he was hoping she’d say no and he’d have a clean slate.

“Well . . . can you try it out, on your own, and let me know how it is first?”

“I can, absolutely,” he said, and gave her a peck on the cheek and that was the end of that.

Unfortunately he broke down where you passed through the salt flats between Salt Lake City and the Nevada line. The goddamn ‘98 Chevy Silverado, which had already drained him like a sieve and which he should have known better than to take.

The Utah trooper was friendly and actually gave him a ride to Wendover when Riley didn't have the \$175 the tow guy wanted up front. He asked what would happen to the vehicle though, and the trooper said it would go to a yard in Murray, but there would of course be surcharges for getting it out of there, which was fine with Riley because he wasn't ever going to do it.

The trooper, who by now said call him Jay, asked where he was headed. Riley told him near Santa Rosa, and Jay said he'd never been there but he did part of a mission in Redding, up near Oregon, meaning he was most likely Mormon. Which was fine, though Riley decided to leave out the part about going out there to work in a casino.

Wendover was in Utah but you walked a block and you were in Nevada, *West Wendover*, and Jesus, speaking of casinos the place felt like a mini Las Vegas. Middle of nowhere you had a Montego Bay, a Peppermill, a Rainbow, a Nugget, all luxury tower type jobs, plus a few mom and pop operations as well.

It was around dinner time. The good thing was he could hang out in a casino all night if he had to without

spending any money, and try to hook up with someone driving west. The two closest options, one had a big fountain in front that kept changing shapes and colors so he picked that place.

Riley checked his wallet and he had 90-some dollars on him. He had a few bucks on a credit card as well, but that had been for gas, no longer a factor, but also emergencies and he wanted to leave it alone. He saw a TV thing one time on a guy who walked into a casino, put down half a million dollars on red in roulette, the casino scrambling around to get special authorization to allow that big a bet, and they let it go and it came up red. That took some guts.

About half the blackjack tables were open and he watched for a while. One guy seemed to have a bigger pile of chips than most of the others, an old guy, kind of cool, wearing a leather jacket with an open collar dress shirt, and a small-brimmed cowboy hat with a black and white band.

Riley decided he'd risk 50 dollars, you only lived once. The table was a 5 dollar minimum, so worst

scenario you played 10 hands. Maybe the guy's luck would rub off, and he sat down next to him.

For twenty minutes he broke even, but the old guy was continuing to make money. What he was doing was mixing up his bets, betting mostly 5 bucks a hand but now and then up to 25. Riley was afraid to go that high, but decided the next time the guy bet big he'd add an extra chip and bet 10. He won the hand and continued shadowing the guy's pattern for a couple hours, and son of a gun was up \$165 when he decided not to push his luck and headed to the lounge for a beer. There was a band, a little loud, playing country songs he didn't recognize any of, but it had been an interesting day at least.

Pretty soon the old guy showed up too and took a seat at the bar. Riley went up to him and said, "I hope you didn't think I was mooching off you . . . Seemed like you knew what you're doing though."

The guy sort of laughed. "I used to. Not anymore. I got a little lucky out there."

"Used to . . . meaning one of those guys who tracks the cards?"

“Yeah . . . the idea is you bet the minimum until you have the advantage, then you stick it . . . though anything can happen in the short run.”

“Sheez. So you’re processing every hand? Mentally?”

“It sounds fancier than it is. A little arithmetic is all. Like I said, my effort these days, it’s half-assed.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” Riley said. “You helped me out though.”

“I seen you looking a tad concerned when you split the aces twice, and had to lay out another 20 bucks.” The old guy was smiling. “But you did the right thing.”

“It was fun, I can see how you can get into it . . . On a different thing, you wouldn’t be heading to California would you?”

The guy said he wasn’t, and introduced himself as Bum, and they shook hands.

“No worries,” Riley said. “If I keep playing next to you, I might make enough to stay right here . . . How much are rooms anyway, do you know?”

“I do. Midweek, 49 a night, plus they tack on a spa fee of 7 bucks. Weekends jump to 69.”

“Wow, lower than I would have thought. Place I was working, we were way over that, and it was in central Indiana.”

“Nothing much doing there for you then?” Bum said.

“I don’t think so.”

“Could be . . . My daddy was a big reader. Mostly dime store pulp novels and such. But he used to tell us, you gotta read enough junk to know when something’s good.”

“I hear you,” Riley said. “In my case, I’m looking at it pretty simple. Let me try some warmer weather.”

“My wife and me, we did the same thing. Had a trailer in a little community outside Needles. That’s highway 40. What we did though, we spent two months a year in Pocatello.”

“You wanted to, or it was too hot?”

“Oh yeah, couldn’t take the heat . . . 2012 they set a world record. 115 degrees and raining, if you can believe it.”

“Damn . . . you’re not doing that anymore?”

“Nah. Wife’s got health problems now. I got some too, not as bad though. I’m trying to figure out how to end her life the most practical way.”

Riley took a good look at the guy. Waiting for him to elaborate, or bust out laughing, but he didn’t.

“Well, where is she at the moment?”

“She’s upstairs. She’s fine.”

Riley said, “Pretty sure you’re messing with me. But if you aren’t . . . don’t do anything like that.”

“She’s got pancreatic,” Bum said. “She smoked for half a goddamn century, we both did. They’re telling us Alzheimer’s too.”

“Ah, that must be rough then . . . She walk out the door and stuff, not remember how to get back?”

“Nah, luckily. But her brain’s scrambled other ways . . . Thing is, do I shoot her in the head and then me, or carbon monoxide us both in the car, or what . . . This is what I wrestle with.”

Holy shit, this dude may be for real. Riley couldn’t place it, but there was a movie, a comedy, where a guy’s got a terminal disease and is trying to kill himself off, and his wife too while he’s at it. He keeps trying

different ways and they don't work. Finally he decides the simplest thing is drive out in the country at night and get going 80 miles an hour and run them into a tree, but before he can do that he hits a deer.

Riley looked around. They seemed to have enough privacy. He said, "You'd honestly commit murder? . . . Aren't there those doctors that can inject you?"

"Assisted suicide, yeah," Bum said. "You gotta go to Oregon, but even so there's a ton of complications. Plus that would only handle *her*."

"So what's wrong with *that*? You're still in good shape, why wouldn't you stick around as long as you can?"

Bum tapped his fingers on the bar. "We've been married 57 years. You'll understand someday, maybe . . . Funny thing is, you remind me of my son, except we don't speak."

Riley ordered another beer and waited a while. There were three or four college basketball games on, and a couple doofuses kept yelling out.

"The car way you were talking about," he said, "with the fumes? That still a possibility?"

“No, never really an option. I’d need a hose and all that. Meaning someone might interrupt it and rescue us.”

“Except do you have a garage at home?” Riley said. “That’d be solid, right?”

“Oh yeah, I got a garage . . . But this isn’t going back there.”

“You mean . . . you’re going to . . . resolve it here?”

“Uhn-huh. The room, one way or another. Couple of days. We’re comfortable here . . . Again, hard to rationalize, I know, but it’ll be a relief.”

“Ooh boy . . . so . . . the car then, what happens to that?”

Bum reached around in his pocket and pulled out a set of keys. “Here, take it,” he said. “It’s a Buick Regal, dark blue. You’ll see it out there, Idaho plates.”

“I’m not believing this,” Riley said.

“Don’t worry about it,” Bum said.

“Except, if they stop me though . . . what do I tell ‘em? I mean won’t they be looking for the car . . . after a while?”

Bum thought it over. “Tell ‘em I lent it to you temporarily, and you were going to bring it back when I need it.”

“Except I haven’t heard from you yet . . . That’s not bad, it might work.”

“It should,” Bum said.