

Derivative

975 words

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Monte said: “I’ve run into guys *myself* 20 years later, you know what I’m saying? It’s a crapshoot.”

“K where’s this again?” Louise said.

“Ah brother,” Monte said. They were driving cross-country, hadn’t got out of Nevada yet, and she wasn’t listening.

“What I’ll do,” Louise said, “I’ll close my eyes for a bit. But I’ll still pay attention.” Her headrest buzzed back.

Monte figured fine, I’ll take it from the top. Since what else do you got going? Local AM radio could be interesting out here but they were closing in on Wendover, and Utah stations were taking over, either junk pop or Mormon talk.

He said, “They meet by accident at the mid-New York library. You have Wayne and you have Bryce.”

“Yes I’ve got that,” Louise said. Not much oomph.

Monte said, “Lemme advance to the set-up before you drop off. Both are writers. Bryce is a big-time one. We’re talking airport best sellers type deal. Wayne is probably

the *better* writer, has made a modest living at it, but now can't catch a break."

"What was 20 years ago?" Louise said.

"You're still here. They were on equal footing then, both trying to make their mark. Obviously Wayne was aware what happened to Bryce, but it was tough running into him still."

"What were they both doing at the library?"

Dang, not too bad, maybe it wasn't an error inviting her after all. We'll see. "Research. This's like early '90s, before the internet amps up. Bryce looking up some place like Kazakhstan to set his next novel. He has writer's block bad, and he has a deadline. Wayne is looking up colleges to contact."

"For a job?"

"Right, he doesn't want that, he wants to be a writer. They go for bloody marys. Bryce sizes up Wayne and after the small talk makes him an offer--I jumped ahead, Wayne has a couple manuscripts in a drawer ready to go--so to give him one and they split the advance and royalties. The advance itself is over a mil."

"I see. As co-writers? Or Bryce pretends it's his?"

"Pretends it's his. Changes enough stuff here and there to make it his own."

“Okay?”

“So they work it. There’s a couple conditions thrown in but forget those. The book becomes another best seller and Wayne is happy, and it jumpstarts his own career through the back door.”

“He also gets 500 thousand dollars, you’re saying. That little detail.”

“That too. He and the wife, Susan, they start hanging with Bryce at Bryce’s country place in Connecticut. Bryce likes having the company and Wayne helps him with his next book--which is going nowhere, Bryce has lost it, but Wayne doesn’t tell him that.”

Louise said, “Okay I get it, Wayne writes him another one and they cash in.”

“Pretty much. Wayne is ripe with fresh plots. And by now he has Bryce’s style down pat. What fucks the whole thing is Wayne needs more printing paper--this is still at Bryce’s spread in Connecticut--and Office Depot is twenty minutes away and he asks Bryce to ride along and Bryce almost does but decides nah he’ll stick around.”

“So instead of going with--Bryce makes it with Susan.”

“That might have worked, story would have gone

different, but no, Bryce kills Susan. She's come out of the pool and is drying her hair."

"Kills her why?"

"She reminds him of his ex-wife, who was raking him through the coals in divorce court."

Louise thought about it. "It feels like you left things out. As is, it doesn't work."

"Yeah I skipped some stuff but don't worry about it. It ends there, with Wayne innocently on his little errand. My question to you--what next?"

"Gee. Well Bryce is gone when he gets back?"

"I don't think so. He's disturbed enough that he might take a dip in the pool like nothing happened."

"I don't like it ending there," Louise said.

"Yeah it sputtered."

"Well, hard to see him not calling the police. Wayne."

"Except Bryce has something *on* Wayne, that the police shouldn't know about."

"You're not a good story teller, you need to improve. So he helps Bryce get rid of the body."

"One extreme to the other then."

"Or he does nothing, drives back to the city, lets Bryce deal with it."

"Or--I'm thinking more, kills Bryce, to shut him up in

case, and then goes on the run.”

Louise said, “*I* did that too. A stalker ex-boyfriend. I tried all the legal remedies.”

“Sheeminy . . . You’re not saying--?”

“No no.”

“So like, where’d you go?”

“I went to Norman, Oklahoma. I heard it was nice, I enrolled in college.”

“Did you die your hair and stuff? I mean this is crazy to think.”

“No, alls I did was use my middle name. It took a semester and a half but he found me.”

“Hoo *baby*--then what?”

“Then I fucked him thoroughly.”

“You mean . . . what *do* you mean?”

“The real way. Then I told him move in with me. He left the next day, I haven’t seen him since.”

The Bonneville Salt Flats were appearing on the left, but Monte didn’t feel like pointing that out. “I see, reverse psychology,” he said. “So it worked?”

“I’m not sure.”

“What does *that* mean?”

“I sorta did want him to move in.”

“Oh no.”

“So I could pick the proper time, and cut off his balls.”

“Oh okay that’s a relief, I thought you meant it the other way.”

She said, “I was thinking the bathtub, he tended to doze off in there. But maybe not solidly enough.”

“So . . . the bedroom safer, you’re saying? Or what?”

“For sure. You’re gonna have the mess, but the upside is I can cut *it* off too.”

“Holy shit.”

“You asked,” she said.