

Party Ice

3300 words

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Like he did nearly every morning, Buck got up at 7:30, had a bowl of shredded wheat, read the sports page, took a shower, put on a fresh sweatsuit, and limped down the hall to the elevator of his hi-rise co-op building on East 73rd Street.

He took the elevator to the end of the line, which was **B**. Two floors below the lobby. **P** was one floor below the lobby and that was the parking garage.

B was lockers (each apartment had one, not much bigger than junior high school lockers, pretty useless), equipment storage for the maintenance guys, and the main thing, two good sized laundry rooms.

One room had the washers and dryers. The other was a big lounge. You had tables in the center for folding your fresh stuff, and chairs and couches where you could wait out your load and read magazines. There were a couple TVs.

Until about five years ago when they got rid of those big tables and moved the chairs and couches against the walls and stuck in two ping pong tables.

There were complaints at first but those died down. What helped was having a few co-op board members who liked to play.

So that's where Buck went, to play ping pong. He spent most of the day down there. Sometimes he came back to the apartment for lunch, but the laundry room had vending machines and the lounge had a coffeemaker and microwave setup and the food choices actually weren't bad.

One of the chairs in the ping pong room was a nice comfy recliner, and if no one else was using it Buck tended to fall asleep in it early afternoons.

At the end of the day, around 5:30, he'd go upstairs for the night. People in regular work clothes boarded the elevator at L and Buck said hi and asked how their day went.

Down there the regulars were Larry, Sol, Bob, Stu, Danny and Pat.

They were either retired or had sufficient side hustles going to free them up to also mostly spend all day in the basement.

These guys greeted you friendly, always started your day nice. Buck looked forward to it. They played hard but no one took the outcomes seriously, no one trash-talked anybody, you moved on.

They talked sports, politics, TV and women, and nobody dug deep into what each other did. Stu had a stock tip now and then and the others did pay attention to that so you figured he knew his stuff.

They did know that Buck played pro ball once. They asked him questions for a while and then it became a non-subject.

Buck had lasted 6 years with the Denver Broncos in the 1980's at left defensive end. He latched onto the Giants for a season and a half when he was on the way out. He liked it in New York--the alternative was moving back to Colorado or his hometown in southern Arkansas--and he stuck around ever since.

He did have to downgrade apartments 20 years ago. He was on Central Park West, living above his means. He had some deferred money from the Broncos but when that ran out he ended up here. It was a junior-4, a little roomier supposedly than the standard 1-bedroom, but still tight. Buck didn't mind, it did the job fine.

His fingers were messed up from playing ball, either getting stepped on when you were on the ground, twisted when you made the tackle, or catching in people's face masks, the metal bars. Three crooked ones on his right hand, the left hand not so bad, though the straight ones ached about the same when they felt like it.

He had to make an adjustment with the ping pong paddle, the grip. He tried playing lefty for a while but he kept nicking the ball off the edge of the paddle so he switched back and did his best.

And of course the knees--they had their good days and bad.

It was getting to be early May and he's upstairs watching some golf after a full day of action and the phone rings.

It's his old college buddy McAndrew. For whatever reason they always called him Macadoo.

'Yeah *man*,' Macadoo says. 'I'm gonna stop you before you get started with why you can't.'

'Come again Mac?' Buck says.

'We emailed a big announcement,' Macadoo says. 'Naturally you never reply. You're not the only one, not

gonna crucify you. We're having a reunion the end of the month, the long weekend.'

'Memorial Day?' Buck says. It was true, he didn't always check his email.

'K look now,' Macadoo says. 'Get your sorry little butt out here. We're counting on you.'

Mac says he's sending over the details--again--as we speak and don't be a party pooper if you want the guys to remember you favorable.

Buck says all right then I *will* take a look, you can count on it.

Mac says all right then himself, and before he hangs up he says anything interesting going on lately in the Big Apple?

Buck says you know, the usual, and they end it on a friendly note, Buck figuring Mac felt a little bad coming on strong.

He made himself some tea, decaf, had to watch that stuff, and a bowl of vanilla ice cream. He switched out of the golf, found some tennis, a women's tournament in Rome, and you couldn't pronounce half the names but God *damn* the girls hit the crap out of the ball these days. How did it keep staying in?

No need to check his email right now or even for a while. He got the gist.

Mac or someone else called him every 7 or 8 years, same business. Buck had attended one of them, out of about five. It was okay. They had a few laughs. What Buck didn't care for was reliving the games.

This was the University of Louisiana but not the big main campus in Lafayette, the small Monroe one. They were in the Southland Conference then, no great shakes. They were the Indians. Now that's out obviously so they changed it.

In fact the whole experience was pretty grim, Buck questioned it a few times back then, should he say forget it. But you did have some scouts in the stands and he did get drafted out of the deal so you can't knock it entirely.

Admittedly, Mac's last question there--what's up in the Big Apple--he didn't have a great answer for.

Buck tried to think, when's the last time he went for a walk, or jumped in a cab?

Jesus Christ.

He had a dental cleaning appointment card on the fridge, an old one, he hadn't removed it yet . . . and that was, let's see . . . February?

Had he been out of the *building* since February? That's ridiculous, he *must* have obviously.

But he rolled it around for a while and couldn't come up with what he might have been doing.

He had his basics on automatic pilot. There was a gal came in once a week and cleaned up, part of a service, and she took care of his grocery orders and sent out his laundry and occasional cleaning. Holy Smokes.

Buck didn't sleep great and in the morning he asked Sol and the ping pong guys if it's possible he hadn't left the building in 3 months, or if he's losing his mind.

No one said they saw him outside but they didn't *not* see him out there either, and Larry said it happened to a friend of his's kid once. Not a real kid, like 25, but the guy got addicted to video games, one in particular that Larry couldn't remember the name of, and according to Larry's friend didn't go outside for a year. Though Larry said that'd be an exaggeration.

Buck mentioned the get-together and they all said don't even think about it, go.

At 5:30, when they wrapped it up, Buck got off at L and went outside and wandered up to 3rd Avenue. There was an Irish pub that had Guinness on draft and he spent an hour in there and it was nice. The bartender

said it was good to see him again, though Buck wasn't placing the bartender from before, which already wasn't great. People did tend to remember Buck because he was big and because of the accent.

Buck made it a habit, when ping pong ended go straight outside and do *something*, otherwise you get comfortable upstairs and that's it.

After two weeks he felt like he'd lost a few pounds, and he called Avis and reserved a rental car.

The plan was, fine, show up at thing in Monroe, drive out there, see a little countryside. Get off the interstate and eat in the local cafes, see what the other half is up to these days. Never fly anymore unless you have to.

So Buck gave it a week to get out there. The way back, you leave it up in the air, maybe divert and take a chance and visit his cousin Rulon in Cookeville, Tennessee, though based on some stories the last couple decades that guy may have gone bipolar.

Or who knows, maybe go the *other* way after the thing, head to Vegas for a while.

Avis told him pick up the car on East 11th Street, and what a mess that was, they didn't have the car on hand that you reserved. There were other disgruntled

folks waiting around, same deal. Buck remembered someone told him once you need a car in NYC take a cab to LaGuardia and do it there, it's worth it.

He got the car eventually, they had to downgrade him and the headroom was tight, but now you were set, couldn't back out of this, and in the morning he took off.

The directions started you 78 out of Newark, then 81 to Knoxville, then 40, 59 and whatever else.

Three hours along, the middle of Pennsylvania, Buck was getting hungry. Specifically it'd be nice if there were some ribs somewhere. Better to wait obviously, for the real McCoy, don't jump the gun, but even so.

He got off near Fredericksburg and checked. They showed you a few places in Lebanon, 10 miles away, hard to tell and you'd probably be disappointed--but one, dang, the name at least was solid.

Pudgey's Pit Bar B Que

Some guy in a review called something there (maybe it was the collards) the best he'd found north of the Mason-Dixon line, so Buck was sold.

The place wasn't a home run but you got your money's worth. The ribs were tasty and tender and they cooked the sausage right.

He came out of there a little sleepy and and a couple miles down the road he realized it was a bad idea to decline that coffee when the gal offered.

Buck was driving slowly, he was aware of that, he couldn't help it, this was a 2-lane and there was a fair amount of oncoming traffic and you needed to be careful until you got back to the Interstate.

It didn't take long for some guy to be riding his ass.

This was one reason Buck was happy to live in New York City and not require a car very often. Even in Colorado when he was still playing, in his physical prime, his doctor suggested he was under too much stress off the field, and that traffic could be one of those triggers and to take it easy if it was for him.

The posted speed limit was 50. Since he came out of the restaurant Buck had been going about 35. Now, with this guy in a tan pickup continuing to ride him good, he dropped it to 25.

That was how you did it. Going too slow for some guy's liking--fine, go slower. Buck never believed in the finger, that was undignified in his view. This was always better, you didn't give anyone the satisfaction of you reacting to them . . . and meanwhile were able to cut loose some of the old competitive juices.

They limped along for another few miles. Other cars were passing both of *them*, giving *Buck* the finger on their way by. The pickup guy unfortunately didn't flinch, evidently didn't have to be anywhere. Curious when the whole issue is you weren't driving fast enough.

Bottom line this wasn't great, and Buck started looking for somewhere to turn off. It was all countryside and farms, there were crossroads but you couldn't tell where they went.

Eventually there were signs for a farm stand. Those ones that built up to it three times, spaced out. When the arrow directed you to the actual place Buck was relieved to turn in there, thinking again about the coffee, if he'd had one this probably wouldn't have happened, and maybe they even sell coffee here.

Unfortunately, the farm stand was closed. There was no one around. Just the shack with painted plywood shutters and a couple padlocks, and rows of some kind of crop in back, Buck had no idea what, but acres of it.

And here was the tan pickup guy turning in now too.

Buck's first thought was, if he shoots me they may not find me for a while, since they made us hang the sweeping right turn to get here--which effectively hid

the farm stand, and the guy and him, from passing traffic and everything else.

The guy didn't waste time getting out. 'Pops,' he said. 'What do we got Pops?'

The guy was a pretty big boy unfortunately. Backwards baseball cap, tee shirt too small, and of course the tattoos. A gym rat, Buck figured, and maybe on the juice too.

But did it matter.

Buck got out, his palms facing the guy. As down-home as he could do it he said, 'I apologize there, Pardner. I don't see as good as I used to. Don't trust the reflexes neither. You need to concede me that. You'll understand yourself some day.'

Buck thought about it later. He may have squeezed off the hook there, except for bringing the guy into it at the end like a do-do bird.

The guy didn't say anything more and came straight at Buck, and Buck reacted, all those years on the gridiron, and threw a shoulder into the guy.

It drove the guy back a step, surprised him, that was it, didn't come close to knocking him down . . . and the guy smiled and here he came again and Buck didn't see

it coming and the guy landed a straight right on Buck's temple.

Buck was suprised *he* didn't go down, though he stumbled. The guy made a comment that he was just getting started Pops . . . and Buck couldn't hear him that well, it was like an echo chamber, but he was scared for real now if that wasn't enough . . . and he dug deep in the old body and swiveled and stepped into it and caught the guy square on the forehead and that seemed to take care of things.

The guy was face down on the dirt, not moving anything, and Buck figured the guy'd come around, he got his bell rung which had happened to Buck a dozen times.

Buck had to admit the act felt good, it was a clean strike, plenty of lower body behind it. The only negative being, there'd been a crunching sound, which may have been partly the guy's head, but Buck was thinking more that he broke his hand.

Either way, good to get a move on now, and he got back in the rental car but then thought of something, the guy's phone.

Buck had never stolen anything in his life, at least his adult one, but Gee. What if the guy'd been taking

pictures while he was tailing him for example. And the license plate got included.

So, he didn't want to but he felt around in the guy's pockets. No sign of the thing so he checked the guy's pickup and it was on the seat and he grabbed it. The guy's engine was still running and Buck hopped in the rental and drove out of there.

What he needed bad was ice. There were exits off 78 where you'd find a convenience store but it didn't seem wise to stop, so he waited until he got back to New Jersey.

Buck drove the rest of the way and through the Holland tunnel with his right hand dunked into the middle of the ice bag, which was labeled *Party Ice*, and then he got worried you couldn't return the car this late but the Avis on East 11th had an after hours procedure and he took a cab home.

The damn hand though, it throbbed all night and finally around 4am he couldn't take it and walked over to Lennox Hill.

They x-rayed it and surprisingly he didn't break anything. The doc gave him a prescription for Hydromorphone and told him be sure and ice his hand.

Buck said all right then, and he felt marginally better that he wouldn't require a cast or worse, surgery.

As he was getting up the doc asked how this happened. Buck was tempted to say none of your business, but these days that wouldn't work, that would only put you on the radar. As would telling them he hit some guy, even if you kept it non-specific. So Buck told the doc he got mad and punched a wall. They could believe him or not.

Buck kept an eye on TV and checked the papers, not just the New York Post but the Lebanon Daily News, which he found online, and they did a decent job. Nothing about some guy expiring at a pullout. He gave it three days, and on Wednesday eased back into his ping pong routine, though this time he had to play left-handed.

Sol and Larry and the guys asked him what happened--not just with the hand but the reunion. Buck figured what the heck, now that he was hopefully in the clear, and explained there was a road rage incident and he lost his cool.

Danny said he can relate, he's had a few of those, and Stu said you bet, drivers are the worst they've ever been. The others agreed, they blamed electronics.

Buck said he didn't think his guy was on a device and Stu said that didn't matter, it's the anticipation of getting on one. They're experiencing withdrawal, Danny explained.

That night Buck was feeling a little low and called his sister Shelby in Seattle. He told her what happened. First she said, well, it's good they're not ready to put you on the shelf quite yet. Then she said so? Start over, go anyway.

Maybe she was right. He googled it, 19 hours and change, Manhattan to Monroe. You put your mind to it, you knock it out in two days. He estimated the halfway point. Lenoir City seemed close enough, and he booked a room at the Best Western.

The Avis rental was smooth this time, and a roomier vehicle. He reminded himself to stick with the Interstates for all your needs, don't dink around with the side roads at all.

Everything was fine until 6 hours in, 3 in the afternoon on Thursday, a little ways past Harrisonburg, Virginia.

You could take 64, over to 95. If you wanted.

Buck decided he'd never been to Disney World, and that made more sense.

