

The Friendly Skies

1950 words

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Mort graduated from college with a journalism degree and went out to the Midwest and wrote for a small town paper.

The strategy back then was get your hands dirty not only covering stories but helping produce the thing, which included driving the early Sunday paper around in the dark filling newsboxes.

Then you'd hopefully have some decent clips built up and you could say goodbye and latch on with a larger and more legit paper.

And so on up the ladder.

Except Mort thought the small paper was plenty legit. You had a dedicated editor who'd been there 30 years, the assistant editor (the guy's step-brother) who'd been there almost as long, and 2 reporters.

So Mort got comfortable and stuck around. He bought a house and got married and divorced. He grew to love the parades and festivals and auctions and barbeques that he used to think were corny.

One afternoon he's at his desk and a guy walks in with an old airline ticket, says he had some business in Topeka so he made a little side trip.

Guy reaches his hand out to Mort and pulls up a chair without being asked. 'Long story short,' he says, 'I'm looking for a Jasper Patrick Arthur. Google's suggesting he lives in your town, but I can't find him. Would *you* have any suggestions?'

'Have to say,' Mort says, 'the name sort of rings a bell. Though I could be way off, I might be thinking of someone years ago, *last name Jasper.*'

Mort tells the guy it's a slow day and offers him a cup of coffee.

The guy says: 'So here's the deal. I wrote a book 20 years ago. I got lucky, I'll admit, Harper Collins fell for my mostly BS coming of age novel. Full of contrived sex scenes in Baton Rouge, which probably did the trick.'

'I give you credit either way,' Mort says. 'Very tough to get a trad book published, especially a first-timer.'

'Like I just told you, this's a while back. Right on the cusp of publishing falling apart. No way that thing would see the light of day if it was now.'

'What was so bad about it?' Mort says.

‘You really want to know? Main thing bad, the central character’s penis doesn’t work.’

‘Ah. So a touch of Hemingway then.’

‘It doesn’t work, so he muscles in and watches all the racy scenes unfold as a spectator, and describes them. First person. I cringe thinking about it now.’

‘Well you were a younger author then. That was your take.’

‘You know something, you’re not a bad guy. Plenty of positive spin. You ever teach a class? You’d be effective.’ The guy introduces himself as Warren.

Mort says no, he never taught a class.

‘There’s one section in the book where I go off on a tangent. Two thirds of the way through. I introduce a short story that the narrator--the penis guy--’

‘Let’s hold it down just a little bit,’ Mort says.

‘Fine. The guy claims he is an aspiring writer. See, the setup is, the guy rode the rails--meaning jumped on those little landings they have between the freight cars--from Tuscon to Jacksonville. He was finding himself. Kept a diary, turned it into a series of vignettes.’

‘I see.’

‘I know. It already sounds ridiculous.’

‘Not necessarily.’

‘So anyways he’s in the book, reflecting on why he’ll never fully be with a beautiful woman.’

‘A low point.’

‘Yep. So to spice up the narrative, he injects one of the stories he developed hopping the trains.’

‘John Irving did that,’ Mort says. ‘A mixed bag, for me it fell flat, disrupted the drama . . . though someone 180 degrees saw it the other way.’ That was Mort’s ex-wife he was thinking of, and they didn’t agree on anything.

‘Interesting,’ Warren says. ‘I thought that was my best work. Certainly compared to the shlocky novel. I ended up tweaking that story later on, submitted it to the Iron City Review and they loved it, even nominated it for a Pushcart award.’

Mort looks at his watch.

‘I’m keeping you?’ Warren says. ‘I know, I get long-winded, I apologize.’

‘I’m okay,’ Mort says. ‘A farm board meeting tonight. Boundary lines and issues with creek irrigation on the agenda. Could be contentious.’

‘Not sure you’re pulling my leg but like I say, you *are* a good sport to hear me out. This Jasper person, he stopped reading the novel in the middle.’

‘Hmm.’

‘Right, so. You’re going to think I’m very strange. What it is, the thing being long out of print, I’ve been buying up used copies online.’

‘I thought you said you’re not proud of it.’

‘For sure. It doesn’t make sense . . . except when she’s gone she’s gone.’

‘I hear you. Friend of mine years ago, I spot him at a Barnes and Noble in Kansas City grabbing all the remainder copies of a book he wrote, wasn’t real proud of it either, on a Big East basketball game between Villanova and De Paul.’

‘Whole book? The one game?’

‘Yeah, seriously. I tried reading it but it got out of hand quick. Still, lot of work behind it, so understandable I guess, him hoarding the copies.’

Warren says, ‘At any rate, *my* guy, the one I tracked down to residing here--though maybe I screwed that up--he sticks a US Air ticket in my book, as a bookmark. My interpretation, but I’m pretty sure I’m on target, that part.’

‘Okay let me process this,’ Mort says. ‘What I’m seeing roundabout coming--one of your online copies

arrives with the ticket stuck in it, and you're concerned he didn't finish the book.'

Warren looks at the ticket he's been holding. 'You're not bad my friend. Has him traveling Denver to Charlotte. February 12th, 2004. Flight 1898. Boarding 3:35pm, Seat 12E.'

'How long was that flight?'

'See you're curious too now. I looked it up, I got 2 hours 42 minutes.'

'Not gonna challenge you,' Mort says, 'but that sounds a little short. The important thing though, apparently keeping you awake at night--the son of a gun stops not just anywhere, but in the middle of that story you added in, where the character reflects on his vagabonding.'

'Yes sir. And not only stops while up in the air, stops period. Donates the sucker to Goodwill, like frozen in time.'

'How you know it came from Goodwill?'

'You can figure it out, the used book game on the internet, don't worry about that.'

'Well how far along in that inserted story was he?'

‘You ask good questions. They’re in Santa Fe. There’s a saloon, and a barkeep, and a woman, and a gunfight.’

‘Wait--this isn’t current.’

‘No. The novel’s not either, forgot to mention that. 1892, is your backdrop. Where my guy stops reading, Yolanda has told the first guy to get lost, and a few men help run him out of town, and he hops a freight.’

‘But resurfaces.’

‘Sure. But my guy, he stops reading way before then. Doesn’t give it a chance to unfold, even for Yolanda to start missing him.’

‘She misses him? That doesn’t ring true.’

‘Okay, regrets driving him off at least. Kneejerk reaction.’

‘Well . . . *I* might regret this, but do you have the book on you?’

‘Oh sure. You want to check it out? Very kind.’

‘I thought read the short story part. How long is it though?’

‘Ah, 20 some odd pages. Pretty big print. Take you a half hour.’

Warren gets the book out of his car and Mort tells him to get a sandwich down the street and recommends the tuna melt.

When Warren is back Mort says, ‘There’s something there. I mean it kind of blew me away, the scene after the duel. You felt the sweat on the guy’s neck, you really did.’

‘Gee Whiz. So nice.’

‘Yeah. And I skimmed the novel part. Just enough that I see what you mean, it’s pretty junky. James Patterson-y set in the Old West, but worse.’

‘So you get it now. I wasn’t a great writer--still am not--but my character did okay.’

‘He out-wrote you for sure,’ Mort says, picking up the phone. ‘I’m trying City Hall, see if they’ve heard of your airplane guy.’

Mort’s on the phone for a minute and hangs up. ‘Sheila’s on it, she’ll call back. What would you ask this guy though? If he *were* around?’

‘Just the obvious . . . why do you halt it there, if you took the trouble to get that far.’

‘Like I alluded to--*World According to Garp*--I was ticked off that he broke the flow.’

‘But you finished it.’

Mort admits that's true, and Sheila calls back and Mort takes a note and says are you sure, and he listens some more and says thanks.

'Bumpy ride it sounds like,' Mort says. 'Owned a house until '08, it got foreclosed. Sheila found a sister in Milwaukee, listed as paying the property taxes back then. Sheila called her up, says your guy is still around. Currently tends bar at the *Twin Palm*. Half a strip club is what you have there.'

'Jeeminy,' Warren says. 'First of all, what a nice contact you have, going with that extra step.'

'Routine,' Mort says, 'why I'm tied to this place. You want, we can run over there, maybe catch him.'

'Well yeah.'

Jasper Patrick Arthur is a big burly guy like Mort pictured. It's quiet in there, no strippers yet, that picked up around dinnertime, and Jasper answers right away with a 'That's me'. Friendly.

They sit at the bar and order drinks and Warren lays out the book and the US Air ticket and lets it ride without adding anything.

Jasper looks it over and says, 'I remember this. I left it on the airplane.'

'On purpose?' Warren says.

‘Oh heck no. I’s into that one. Gal next to me, we got to talking and she teased me enough that I forgot the thing. Most likely in that front pouch deal with the elastic.’

Mort's reporter radar is up. He wonders do airlines donate books left on board to Goodwill, instead of just dumping them? Maybe some do, it's possible.

‘You get anywhere with the woman?’ Mort says.

‘I did indeed. For a while. Then all hell broke loose.’

‘Tell us about it,’ Warren says.

‘How much time you got?’ Jasper says.

Warren says, ‘Your story there, it sounds more promising than my book.’

‘No. Your story was money. I found me another copy.’

‘Gee,’ Warren says, ‘and finished it off?’

‘Course. Probably still own it. Though things turned around on me, had to get one of those storage units.’

‘Interesting,’ Mort says. ‘My new friend here, he had it stuck in his head that you abandoned the book because he changed up on you in the middle.’

‘Huh?’ Jasper says.

‘Not important,’ Mort says. ‘I’ve seen you around town. Never put it together, obviously.’

‘Until this adventure,’ Warren says.

‘You need a few of those,’ Jasper says.

‘You don’t think,’ Mort says, ‘it’s going a little too far . . . finding a guy from 20 years ago, to ask a couple questions?’

‘No I don’t,’ Jasper says. ‘I’ve seen you too. In here chasing some tail.’

Mort explains to Warren that is true, and they can stick around for the action if he likes, the farm board meeting will survive without him.

Jasper refills their drinks. ‘Maybe you get an idea for a follow up,’ he says. ‘What’s that word?’

‘Sequel?’ Warren says.

‘Yeah, one of *them*,’ Jasper says.