

Poortown Pool Hall

The Tangled Tales of Prichard County

Danny Wayne Cotton

The in betweens aren't filled, but I'm just getting the story in chronological order

- I'm seeing if the story still flows w/out Fitch's story
- Joe's campaign blog isn't inserted
- The Judge's story isn't inserted
- Two Jake and Jenny stories aren't inserted

PROOFREAD COPY

Poortown Pool Hall

The tangled tales of Prichard County Kentucky

Danny Wayne Cotton

Turn at the rest-stop...

Poortown, as those of you familiar with the Mountain parkway, the location of the Victor Tussie Visitor's Center and the Rockytop Family grocery are all aware, sits on the western edge of Prichard County Kentucky. It was originally a settlement of miners and shiners and magic bean buyers too poor or too wild to live on the nice clean streets of Garvis in the shadow of the Prichard County Courthouse. It's grown into a community far too poor to have any Berea types want to move in and sell shellacked frogs and a little too rich for any Americorps hippies to come down and make a documentary. Well, a couple did at least come down and mingle once. Two sweet girls, who'd never had good mountain grass but liked it and they swung both ways and queued *Uncle John's Band* into the jukebox mercilessly. The hippie girls are gone, but the Jukebox still stands at the corner of the only two streets there really are in Poortown, Silt lane and Slurry road (**note: lame?**), across the street from the Poortown Revival Temple of Salvation, and caddy corner from Carl Von Ehrich's grocery, inside the Poortown Pool Hall.

In keeping with reducing tedious exposition, all you need to know is that the Pool Hall houses one bar, one bar tender, two antique pool tables, the buckets for the broken leather nets on a few of those pool table's holes, good ole boys, ne'er do wells, honky tonk angels, the occasional farmer, a cat named Jameson, a country lawyer, an autographed photo of Tom T. Hall, and that old jukebox...playing, at the moment, D-54, *Whiskey River*.

Why it never hurts to know the Prisoner's Dilemma...

"You have to understand, Therule, I know 'at's Stonewall Jackson's toe, you know 'at's Stonewall Jackson's toe, and yer whole damn family is certain Stonewall Jackson's toe came witt'em across the Virginia line. But in my capacity as your attorney I'll have to tell ye the will isn't quite legally binding until an *appraiser* says it is, indeed, beyond a shadder of a doubt Stonewall Jackson's toe."

Welcome to the life of a country lawyer. It aint all pot possession cases and tortuous coal company torts, sometimes I have to write up my bartender's will to pay a slow month's tab.

"Rhett, there aint no damn need gettin' it *appraised*," he said the word with such venom. As if I'd just propositioned him to watch Oprah and go scented candle shopping

with me. "It's a gonna stay in my family ferever." Therule, without knowing it, had given me an out.

"If 'ats the case then there aint a real need to posit a monetary value on it and put it here in the will. 'Ataway th'bank cain't take yer toe...or his toe...the toe in question."

"Well I don't want m'younguns arguin' over it when I'm gone." He seemed genuinely concerned that the value of this relic could tear his family asunder once he passed. I could sympathize, I suppose.

"I'll see what I can do. I'll have Miss Bethann do some lookin' for me tomorra at the office. I'm sure there's toe precedent. But," I shifted with a lawyer's ease, "I don't come here to work Therule, Turkey and an Ale8." I lit a store bought to ease my mind; thankfully Poortown hadn't succumbed to the health zealots of Fayette and Jefferson counties. As I laid down my bills I settled in to my place as the "pool catfish" and watched a game at the near table. The sweet strains of *Keep on the Sunnyside* singing to my inside pocket seemed to suggest I would have no such luck.

"Yer telephone playin' that?" Therule asked, curious.

"Nifty, aint it," I answered lifting the phone to my ear. "Rhett Sparrow, Esquire and all that entails, how may I hep ya?"

"Rhett," a familiar feminine voice seemed nearing a breaking point.

"Ma'am?"

"It's Tammi," the wife of a close personal friend, former coworker and sometimes client of mine.

"Sounds like some'n somewheres is wrong," I posited.

"You," she cleared her throat, and tried to calm herself, "know where Virgil was tonight?"

I did, but for legal reasons answered, "Tammi, I am not my friend's keeper."

"Cut the shit Rhett," well, she'd had it with me. "Something went wrong, bad wrong, come over, now!"

"Virgil in trouble?" Therule was awful good at overhearing what a close enough patron said.

"Not chet," I answered. I hurried along the winding county roads, thankful I was well connected, driving a Cadillac and in the general .08 to .11 blood alcohol range. When I reached the house I realized just how stressful the night might be.

"Drmnit, ar kint," followed by a sputter of coughs erupted from the man on the couch. From the copious amount of blood flowing onto the dish towel he held over his mouth I figured he was lucky enough to get that out.

"Virgil, DAMMIT!" I knew what my friend had done to the man on the couch, another acquaintance. "What in th'shit happened tonight?"

Virgil emerged, shirtless and doused in sweat, from the kitchen. An imposing mountain of a man, towering at six foot four or five and three hundred some pounds, Virgil could supplement his income and stifle some damning rage by fighting at the toughman contests promoted in Rogerstown, on the other end of the county from the Poortown cockfights. And I was well aware that he was probably participating in just such an ancient rite of combat tonight. "Friendly" competition had somewhere crossed a line; I was desperate to know when and how.

"Listen," Virgil began, tense, "the fight was like normal but the stakes got high, real high, on thissun and I thank they wanted me t'kill him."

“And you?” I was not ready to drag a client, and friend, who had recently completed a court ordered anger management in front of a frosty district judge and attempt to explain the history of gladiatorial combat all the way back to ancient Sparta.

“I kept goin’...fer a while, but,” he paused and shook his head, “I called it, I couldn’t do it.”

“And he thinks Denny and his boys might be right pissed about this.” Tammi added, unaware that she had given me my first little bit of relief that night. Denny, you see, would be “Tubby” Denny Tussie, the son of Congressman Victor Tussie, placing the fight on the expansive, and luxurious, Tussie homestead. A bit of good news I had little time to explain to my comrades.

“Tammi, you get t’ car, Virgil you get Rocky,” the vanquished fighter, “a new dishrag, and make sure as shit he don’t get no worse. I need t’ make a call.” On call, in Whitesburg, was a northern Kentuckian I’d met at the gala opening of the Blanche Tussie/ Allied Coal/ Rogerstown reclaimed land park and swimming pool. He was an unassuming, bespectacled Md. who enjoyed Jimmy Buffet tunes and Canadian television, but was somehow crippled by the demon vice of gambling. For this he worked graveyard at a UMW hospital and owed many favors in the area, a few to me.

“Doc,” I was as cordial as could be expected.

“Yes?”

“Rhett,”

“Oh, Rhett how are you? Comin’ over for the Reds, Braves?”

“No, no,” I chuckled, “I have neither th’ stomach nor the th’ pocketbook for baseball. I need ta call in a favor from ya.”

“Rhett I,” his hesitance, while expected, was annoying.

“All I got to say is ‘Poortown Pool hall,’ Randy.” Every so often, us lawyers do cut to the chase. Thankfully the good doctor couldn’t play pool for shit, hard to see over the glasses I guess.

“I got this boy,” I continued, “he’ll be there in about ten or so. Had him a mishap at, a,” I paused to phrase myself delicately enough, “Rogerstown sporting event.”

“A what?” Not being a Prichard Countian Randy was unaware.

“It’s a Poortown sporting event, without the poultry.”

“A,” he gulped, like a Catholic school boy who just learned that no, UFC is not the most brutal sport in the market today, “a, uh.”

“Yeah, that.” I finished, “he just needs him a little checkup, y’unnerstan?”

“Call me when you get here.” With that I hung up.

“Why aint we on the road to Whitesburg?” I yelled, trying to summon the necessary sense of urgency in the rest of the group.

“Whitesburg?” Tammi was incredulous.

“UMW, ER, know a doctor, let’s boogie.”

“This gone get taken care of?” You know a situation is dire when a man as big as Virgil takes a tone as worried as that one.

“So long as we DRIVE, now does anybody wanna listen to th’reddyo?” I rolled down the window, turned the radio on with the volume low and lit up. “Now Rocky, you know in the end bein’ in this fight could be as much trouble for you as Virgil. So nobody needs to know nothin’ about zactly why you happen to be there, just that y’are and that y’aint gonna press no charges on nobody.”

“Mrrffmm,” it sounded like an agreeable response, whatever it was.

“But Tubby,” Virgil began, spitting on a hated name.

“And Tubby’s goddamned friends,” Tammi continued for him.

“Shouldn’t be a problem and I’ll explain to you why along with the legal advice I give you later.” I reassured them.

“Shouldn’t be a problem?” Tammi seemed unconvinced.

“Pris’ner’s dilemma,” I answered coolly.

“Law school thang?” Virgil asked, figuring I’d said something else that went over his undereducated head.

“More a psychological, economical, game theory kind of thang,” I explained.

“Still as good as can be expected Rocky?”

“Jrfff”

“Keep, uh, pressure on that there, we’re bout to th’hospital.”

“Grrfp”

“Well what does this pris’ner’s dilemma say?” Virgil had an admirable thirst for knowledge, one time I spent a week getting him close to the correct pronunciation of “facetious.”

“I’ll draw the whole thang out fer ya later tonight, but in a nutshell it says we all got t’trust each other. And Tubby’s gotta trust us.” We were nearing the hospital, I rang Randy back up.

“Doc we’re bout here, now this boy has had him one hell of an evenin’ so y’ might want to procure him some two wheeled transportation and,” looking back at the bloody mess I realized I should warn the doc, “yerself a pair a gloves and some scrubs y’aint gonna miss.”

“You and I, we’re even now?” He hoped my response would be a simple yes and, for a favor like this, it probably should have been, but being one to pour gas on a fire I just answered,

“Til the next time you ferget JT’s always stripes.”

“Not funny.” He growled before hanging up.

With the brunt of the night’s stresses taken over, I had worked myself an appetite.

“Wanna go t’Long John’s?”

“I got blood on my pants,” Virgil answered, indignant.

“After all this?” Tammi couldn’t understand my nonchalance. I just thought a shrimp dinner sounded nice.

“We’ll go t’the drive thru, I’ll pay, then we kin all sit in the kitchen and I kin explain how everthang’ll be fine. Sound good?”

Virgil couldn’t help but laugh, “you crazy sonfabitch. Fish sounds good.” It was a rare concession from the gladiator.

“Now,” as we settled down at Virgil’s kitchen table, I with my briefcase, I decided to gather exactly what my friend was doing in Rogerstown, “what the hell drug you back into the toughman fights? Weren’t’cha goin’ t’OVW?” I thought he had found a legitimate, creative outlet for his temper and abilities in the form of minor league wrestling.

“The school’s too expensive right now. If Garvis gets that Supercenter my raise’ll be enough to cover some of it, but right now it’s all slow and they don’t wanna give no raises and Gina,” Tammi’s kid, “was sick.”

“Alright, alright. But still, Rogerstown?” A killer detail then entered my mind. “And kids out all night, right?”

“At her mom’s,” he took a piece of fish, “yknow I’d been out to Rogerstown, I can hold my own if I got to, it seemed like old time easy money.”

“Old time easy money gotcha in PCDC and on the shelf and outta one a th’better minin’ jobs.” I reminded him.

“What’s this pris’ner’s dilemma thing you was talkin’ about?” I guess mentioning the jail reminded him of that.

“Oh,” I scarfed a few shrimp before enthusiastically grabbing my trusty yellow pad, “Now y’got pris’ner A and pris’ner B.” I wrote up the two on the pad. “Now, they’re both down for the same thing. If they each confess, it’s two years for both.”

“Shit.”

“Gets better, if one confesses, but the other shuts up, the quiet man gets ten years,” I underscored this point in my makeshift graph.

“So you wanna rat the other guy?” Virgil hadn’t heard the fundamental principle at work before, so I excused that shortsighted deduction.

“Nope, cuz if they both shut up, meaning they trust each other, they serve six months each.” I announced, underlining ‘six months,’ before taking a couple of shrimp.

“And no hard feelin’s,” hard feelings being something Virgil had neither time, nor inclination, for.

“Cuz they was both quiet.” I smirked.

“So there’s a big picture I’m missin’?” I could tell he was beginning to understand, but I, luckily, wasn’t finished explaining.

“Everbody has t’trust the other guy. The question is; can ye? The thang that’s a workin’ fer ya, though, is that if he snitches and you snitch yer both screwed, so if he does it, he has to hope t’hell you don’t. It’s...it’s like an arms race, mutually assured destruction. If ya both cool it and quit makin’ bombs and sendin’ spies, well ya both do better in the long run. But if neither can trust t’other, well, then ya keep on a makin’ bombs and sendin’ spies, his motivation for altruism is the possibility of yer deception. And his motivation for deception is the possibility of your altruism.” I paused to make sure Virgil was, at least reasonably, following, “and big dog, when has this sumbitch known you to be all-tru-istic?”

“Altravistic?” Virgil was never a verbose man.

“Do good thangs for him.” Webster would disapprove, but my friend understood.

“Never,” Virgil had an abiding hatred for Denny Tussie.

“Zactly.”

“This is complicated.”

“Imagine learnin’ it from an econ professor.” I laughed.

“And this keeps Tubby off me,” at this point he was beyond understanding, and looking for certainty. I was ready to offer as much as I could.

“Because by placing you there, he has as much to lose as you. Really more. You’re an unloader with some dinky priors and a nice new wife. He’s the son of a congressional representative. It’d be like hell not to place a Rogerstown fight on Tussie property, bad, bad PR, especially in a year where big daddy Tussie is an incumbent with a, ahem, party on th’brink.”

“Politics?” Virgil was never interested in anything as petty and mean as politics.

“I know ya hate it, but it’s gone keep you out of PCDC, keep Rock quiet, keep Tubby Tussie off yer poor ass and, if I’m good, win me a case.”

“Win you a case?”

“The good ones are just like toughman fights, Virgil, only more brutal.”

Virgil thought over that as he and I ate in silence.

“Yeah,” he finally pondered, “*you* cain’t let ‘em live.”

For those of you new to Prichard County...

Not an abnormal night in Poortown, for those of you unfamiliar. Well, ‘cept for the drive to Whitesburg. Once we got wet/dry by precinct wasn’t much reason to visit the heart of the hills. And you’ve come to understand a little about those precincts I suppose. Poortown, on the western end, indeed has a pool hall. It’s wet. Poortown people are workers, but they aint never been too proud to play. And you may thumb your nose at the tradition of a little innocent cockfight, but what glory for a species otherwise relegated to the center of the Sunday dinner table. Certainly it isn’t anything like those toughman fights Rogerstown is so known for. Rogerstown, past the eastern outskirts of Garvis, barely inside the Prichard line is an old settlement town full of families loyal to Allied Energy. Some joke that Poortown is named such because it’s all the rabble rousers, union men, and lazy drunks who Allied kicked out and swept away during the coal wars moved there, leaving them, well...poor. Only folks from Rogerstown think that’s a joke. And one thing Poortown can always say for itself is that it’s farther from Fugate. Fugate, a little north of Rogerstown is dry. Bone damn dry, for in Fugate you keep your nose down in a bible and your asshole so tight you shit diamonds. Nobody leaves Fugate and the people of Poortown couldn’t fathom anyone wanting to move there, so we wonder if there might be blue people wandering into Garvis sometime soon. Garvis would just chuckle at it for Garvis, which can’t decide if it’s sorta wet or sorta dry or wet on Saturday and dry on Sunday, is where all the people too uninteresting, or too eager to get one step above their raisin’ decide to call home along with, with a few exceptions, the more industrious and entrepreneurial of Prichard Countians. It has a courthouse and a Wal-Mart and a Dairy Queen and Prichard County High and they say it might get a Wendy’s next year. That Indian Restaurant in Garvis made the Herald Leader...

Round up the good ole boys...

The very next day, after a few calls, my office had an important visitor. Seeing as I had perfectly worded the legitimate details about Therule’s sentimentally valuable civil war era heirlooms, I was settling down for Indian takeout in the office. An Indian restaurant was a novelty in humble Garvis, but the son of our local Doc-in-a-box had taken an interest in culinary exploration and was teaching the folks in Prichard County

that there's more than one way to season a goat. As I enjoyed my lamb vindaloo, an imposing figure in a striped black suit, crisp shirt, silk tie and-not-a-button out of place ensemble strolled in. His receding black hair was slicked back just like the *Just-for-Men* box its color came from. I saw no need to get up, stop eating or put on my jacket.

"Victor, take ya a seat. Get comfortable. To what do I owe this esteemed pleasure?"

He grinned wide, "cut th'shit ya Poortown lawyer."

"Well hell, and here I was gonna offer you a candy or a bit of this garlic naan. It's good bread, really. By the way I grew up on Third street in Garvis, it's the Mamaw, Papaw and Kinfolks out in Poortown."

"Why you really got me here? Campaign check?" I have to admire a man who doesn't even hide his dagger, or his disdain.

"Aw, not quite chet," I got up to close the door, "just t'have a friendly conversation about somethin' of our mutual interest."

"I cain't make Allied cut a settlement check t'yer toothless kin."

"That's y'all Rogerstown people's problem," I grinned wide, "y'all don't know when somebody's bein' friendly." He didn't look convinced. I rested in my seat and put my hands on my head. "I would just like to be friendly and pass along to you that I've become keenly aware of some of the more, oh, I don't know, competitively zealous events goin' on downerr on yer property in Rogerstown."

"What?" He clearly didn't take delicate understatement well.

"The fights dumbass," sometimes eloquence fails.

"You got a damn set a balls on you hillbilly. I don't guess old Judge Clyde ever taught you anything about respectin' yer betters." He had, but I didn't see Vic as any better than me. "I am a United States congressman, an esteemed member of my community, a power forward who..."

"...Played for Joe B Hall, a man elected six times to represent Kentucky's fifth district and the father of a boy dumb enough to have a toughman contest on y'all's land." I finished his sentence for him. "And that really is a shame, what with this crucial election in the coming months. But you kin trust me, s'long as I kin trust you. Really we do both stand to lose if anything about that little fight gets out to anyone with, oh, I don't know, a *Garvis* mindset."

"What're you about to be gettin' at?" He seemed curious now. He knew he was in a corner.

"Well, me and my boy and you and your," I cleared my throat, "boy, we're lookin' at a situation of mutually assured destruction, unnerstand?"

"Mutually assured destruction?" Victor Tussie could enjoy many of the finer things, but verbiage was hardly one of them.

"Seen Dr. Strangelove?"

"No," a surprise considering he'd probably been in a war room or two, "now would you please cut all this bullshit?"

I get that question a lot.

"I'm sorry congressman. I'm a lawyer, I deal in bullshit. But, hell, so d'you."

"Get to the goddamned point!" He enunciated, exasperated. Nothing quite as fun as irritating your local congressman. But, it was time I laid out the situation.

“We both have friends, acquaintances, probly even family that would suffer a great deal should the events that transpired become public. We have a stockpile of bombs we could sit and lob t’each other until our lives, and the lives of everyone we know, got blowed all to hell.” He gave me an understanding look. “So, Congressman Tussie, it b’hooves both of us t’sart trustin’ each other.”

“I spose it does.”

“Now my poor client, with unfortunate blood on his hands and fear to even step into Rogerstown, insures my trust. I sure cain’t go against the best interests of a client.”

“That’s good to know,” he grinned wide, “y’sure wouldn’t want t’hurt th’poor boy.”

“But somewhere down the line he might wanna hurt you,” wiped that grin off his face. “That’s why we need to insure your trust. Our boy on the rack, yer boy on the rack. Yer gone have t’make a necessary sacrifice, a favor to insure everyone’s trust,” I leaned in across the desk. “Rex Buford.” I spelled out the sacrifice.

“Rex Buford? That punk deputy? What about him?” Evidently he was familiar with Rex. Should’ve been, Rex’s Myspace (a popular internet destination in the Poortown set) had two pictures of the young man meeting his idol, Big Vic Tussie.

“He’s crookeder than you, he goes after Poortown boys, Mexikins, weak young ladies and, though they’re sometimes hard to find, black folk. He’ll pull over a long haired redneck on suspicion of bein’ a Democrat, he’ll pull over junk Hondas on suspicion of Spanish as a first language and he’ll pull over pretty, innocent young women for going thirty-five in a thirty-four because his fiancé has a thicker mustache than him and he hardly ever gets to play the man in bed.” The unfortunate part was that I wasn’t finished. “Victor, there are plenny people in this county plenny pissed that he’s even allowed near a box of bullets, much less a gun ‘n badge. County boys have gotten him outta trouble before and he has them. And don’t get me started on his unbecoming conduct out in Rogerstown shorin’ up yer base on ‘lection day.”

“I hardly know the boy.” He needed to disavow knowledge of campaign favors that needed to be rolled in a cigarette paper or run through a still.

“Good, then y’on’t care to let us get rid of him.”

“I aint lettin’ you kill a deputy! How’n the hell is that even?” I’d raised his dander back up, I could see, “Look, you have leverage and I have leverage and I certainly have yer trust and I aint afraid to show you have mine. But killin’ a deputy could bring us into a feast of shit sandwiches I don’t intend to share with you.” He laughed to belie his fear.

“Did I say anything about murderin’ an officer of th’law? I don’t b’lieve I ever suggested anythin s’rash.” I figured I’d at least better feign being incensed.

“You said get rid of him.”

“As in get his ass fired!” I said continuing a faux indignance. “God, Victor, here y’are playin’ with Warshington chips at the Prichard County table.” I smiled.

“Alright,” Victor rubbed his chin, “he’s gone. Then it’s over. You’ve got a deed, I’ve got a deed, and nary a word needs t’be spoken ‘bout either one.”

“You have my word,” I raised my hand in a scout’s honor.

“And you have mine.” He warned as we shook hands.

“Good, good, Skittle?” I pointed to my candy dish.

“Skittle?” He spat, confused. I guess he didn’t like candy.

“I love the lil buggers,” I said, taking a handful, “chewry.”

“No thank ye. I’ll be on my way, nice to talk, nice to do business, nice cufflinks.”

“Oh,” I looked down at my sleeves, dice, “got ‘em in Lost Wages.” I reached down at the intercom, “Miss Bethann after seeing Congressman Tussie out would you please come to the office?”

“Sure will Rhett.”

“Thank ya sweetie...oh and would ya be s’kind as to bring me an Ale8...”

“Well yes master Rhett, I’sa be right on ‘at” Miss Bethann had a wonderful sarcastic streak to her.

“Aw hell, get yerself somethin’ to.” I chuckled. I cleared lunch from my desk, grabbed the trusty yellow pad and a file that had been, for reasons personal and professional, irking me recently. Miss Bethann sat across from me in her usual seat with notepad, surely eagerly awaiting tedious dictation after my meeting.

“No need to take notes hon, I’m actin’ as counsel, not boss.”

“Excuse me?” She was slightly confused.

“S’bout Hank,” her husband, a fine fellow and aspiring poet laureate of the hills. He’d come to me after an unfortunate post New Year’s party traffic stop wielded a cocaine possession charge. Especially unfortunate since he’d never even seen, much less snorted, cocaine. We all had our theories, it’d been dropped on him at the party, the “residue” wasn’t turning up in lab tests, et cetera. But the most prevalent theory was that the arresting officer, realizing he’d just burned a New Years eve traffic stop on a sober, albeit Arab, driver with an academic, a legal secretary and a pregnant woman in the car, needed to plant something on somebody. He picked the poor schlub who, ever so slightly inebriated, wasn’t driving but had a mix up from a traffic ticket’s court costs.

The arresting officer was none other than, “Buford just might see his uppance come, if ye catch m’meaning.”

“Oh really,” I love spreading happy news, “how so?” When Miss Bethann is happy, and she asks you a question, her enthusiasm shows clearly in her face and her voice. It’s uplifting.

“Well, I’ll just have to round up the good ole boys downerr t’the pool hall to flesh out all the particulars. But I do believe before your husband and I go before Judge Axlerod Miss O’Shaughnessy,” Prichard County’s beautiful Commonwealth’s attorney, “will consider dropping all charges against him.”

“That is GREAT Rhett.” Miss Bethann was from up north so her curious dialect served to emphasize her happiness. “I’ve got to call Hank.”

“Well when y’do, tell’im to meet me at the house around eight. We’ll be headed down to Poortown tonight. You don’t mind him goin’ to Poortown t’help me hammer this out d’ya?”

“No rooster fights?” I was aware of her discomfort with the sport, and her tone did nothing to hide it.

“No rooster fights.” I reassured.

“Then ok,” she agreed.

“And could y’fetch me Tucker Patterson’s file? Oldham Cooley’s boar broke the fence and found Tucker’s sow again.”

“Got ya,” she offered a thumbs up as she headed out, stepping a little lighter than before. I popped the Ale8’s top, took a swig and felt satisfied for a moment.

Around eight o'clock, when Hank showed up, I began putting the gears in motion to earn that satisfaction.

"What be the haps Hanky?" We had a tradition of whimsical greetings.

"Not much, hear you're gettin' me off the hook, hoss." He said as we shook hands.

"Oh it gets better than that." I laughed.

"How so?" He looked at me quizzically, his being off this particularly sharp hook having been near the front of his mind for too long.

I finished my drink and with a smirk, and some characteristic dramatic flair, told him, "I'm also gettin' Buford off the force."

"Oh you are gonna bring that..." he paused to find the right word, "...pigfucker down?"

"I am, and you're gonna come with me for the first step."

"Which is?"

"Roundin' up the good ole boys, to Poortown," I told him as I opened the door.

"To Poortown," he followed out.

On the way, understandably curious, Hank asked just how I had brokered this deal. Being scant on any incriminating details I told him Tussie pretty much owed me, and everybody with an elected position pretty much owed Tussie and that spells the end of Rex Buford as an officer of the law. Slightly making the connection, but wanting to be sure his defense strategy was adequately thought out he asked the question most dear to any client.

"So how does this win it for me?"

"Well, Hank," I explained lighting a cigarette, "if a corrupt officer is implicated in a drug addled crime it becomes much more believable to a jury of your fellow Prichard Countians that said corrupt officer would be so nefarious as to plant the shit on ya."

"Well," he began lightning quick deduction, "couldn't you just pack a jury with Poortown people who know he's a prick?"

"I could try, but I'm related to about a fifth of 'em, the judge might see through what I's doin', bout half wouldn't know not to express their opinion of Deputy dumbass and behind Kate's beauty and," I paused to take in a vision, "fiery locks lies a mind that can quickly see through my simpler bullshit."

"Besides," I ventured, "I don't like putting Therule on the spot and you know from force of personality he'd be jury foreman."

"Yeah, hey," he had an idea, "doesn't Kate know he's a corrupt fucker?"

I loved that Hank was a thinker; it made him a very stimulating conversationalist. But, though by no means unintelligent, he was a poet, not a lawyer. "Kate is probly keenly aware of the corruption in Prichard County, in general. But as a young rural Commonwealth's attorney she idn't powerful enough to take it head on, and has too much t'lose takin' it on my way."

"Yeah, she seems ambitious."

"Oh," I paused like a smitten teen again, "wonderfully so. Mebe she'll get dem bastards when she's the fed'ral prosecutor for this district."

"I'd vote for her." Hank said, flicking away his smoke.

"She'd be happy t'hear that, only y'don't vote on fed prosecutors." A minor detail, really.

“Then I’d write other people’s congressman.” He smiled.
“Eloquent letters I’m sure,” I chuckled as we arrived at the Pool Hall.
Therule greeted us as we meandered toward the bar.
“Rhett, Hank, what’ll it be?”
“My usual,” I ordered.
“Yer when ya got money usual or yer ‘just gimme rye’ usual?” He knew me too well.
“The first one, I’m doin’ alright and I’m in a celebratin’ mood,” I told him getting out my money.
“Good t’hear,” Therule slapped me on the shoulder, “why ya feelin’ good?”
“Cain’t tell ya yet, privileged court stuff.” He offered an understanding nod before turning to Hank.
“Bud light,” Hank ordered.
“Can or bottle?”
“Can’s fine.”
“Our best seller, one dollar, funny shirt y’got der. Where you even find one like that?” Therule mentioned Hank’s t-shirt, Shakespeare with “prose before hos” written across it.
“Internet,” Hank smiled, lifting his beer in toast.
“Love that internet, I’ve found so much shit...”
Fearful he may launch into a long and pointless story I feigned inspiration, “speaking of your shit,” I pulled his will from my pocket. “I got the whole toe thang worked out, your grandmamma’s library table, these pool tables, yer,” I took a drink while searching for a word, “arsenal. It’s all in there, all like ya said. Keep it close, the other copy’s at th’office. Now,” I surveyed the room, “where’s the Poortown Rat pack?”
The Poortown Rat Pack was a group of four affable country guys who’d run into a fire for a friend and at least offer some deer meat and a hit of weed to a casual acquaintance. They’d grown up on the two streets of Poortown and attended Prichard County High School together and were all around my and Hank’s age and never held being Garvis people against us.
“They’re out havin’ a smoke break,” Therule winked.
“Just missed it,” Hank joked, exaggerating a disappointed finger snap.
Soon enough this Rat Pack was swaggering through the doors of the pool hall and picking up their sticks. “Poortown Rat Pack” sounded great, but they were really more like the Poortown Beatles. Personality wise at least.
Entering first was their John, J.R. or Johnny Fitch. Since there were so damn many Johns, Johnnies and, curiously enough, J.R.’s (Dallas *was* a hit around the time of our birth), he always went by Fitch. Fitch was the smartest of the group, a creative mind and a hit with more intellectual redneck girls. His family owned a nice patch of land that served as the rest of the group’s second home and his first.
His cousin, the group’s Paul, came behind. I call Aaron Lee the group’s Paul because of a panty dropping singing voice we witnessed him taking advantage of in high school and a slightly swarthy charm from Italian, Melungeon or Cherokee blood, depending on whom in Poortown you asked. He was usually followed by his dim but well meaning girl, but he was, thankfully, unburdened this evening.

The other cousin of the group, JT, was the George. Being as he was a little larger in stature and reputation he was a little quieter. He was also a little more married, so his nights at the pool hall had slacked, but a Friday like this the kids would be safe at home with mommy. JT had the distinction of being the best damn player to ever walk into the Poortown Pool Hall and, for whatever reason, always shot stripes.

Finally, stumbling, came the group's Ringo. Frog, though not quite as endearing as Ringo, had a slight disconnection between mouth and brain. But it's doubtful that affected him too much because in dealing with Frog it always seemed there was little going on upstairs in the first place. Except when it came to guns, Frog knew guns, Frog knew shooting, Frog loved anything to do with pointing a gun at stuff. For that very reason, the rest of the group tended to discourage him from carrying one.

The four, as always, made a bee line for their table. The one with the nets broke on one side and three corners and a second 10 ball that doubled as the nine. Fitch, without taking his eyes off the table, picked up his personal cue and started giving it a chalk.

"Who's got next?" Fitch asked.

"I, uh, I...I do?" Frog raised his hand.

"1,2,3 notit," Fitch instigated

"notit," JT and Aaron followed in unison.

"Yer rackin' em froggie," JT smiled.

"Shit dude," Frog muttered groggily.

I had taken to cuing the jukebox in order to get the boys attention. B-13 seemed a good selection for our purposes and their condition. As it began playing, Fitch began preparing to break. He glanced up momentarily.

"Green grass and High Tides, alright," he and I shared an affinity for southern rock's golden era. "Hey, Sparrow, man, t'sup?" He broke with devious force and deadly accuracy, "stripes."

"Ma-ma-ma-dude, I wanted t'be stripes." Frog was disappointed.

"Whatcha been up to?" Fitch asked me, surveying the table and getting himself a cigarette.

"Cloaks, daggers, courts and intrigue," I answered. Noticing he'd misplaced his lighter I tossed him my Zippo.

"Fuck the Vietcong?" The inscription confused him.

"Antique, John Wayne gave a bunch to servicemen, Clyde gave his t'me." I explained

"Right on," he returned it and shot, sinking two balls.

"Nice one," I decided to get down to business, "I'm on need to talk some daggers and intrigue with y'all tonight, headin' back to th'farm?" I asked.

"Later," he answered as he surveyed the table.

"14 ball," I recommended, Fitch sank it. JT noticed Hank at the bar.

"Sup Hank?"

"Nothin' much man, me and Rhett lookin' to talk some business tonight."

"Cool," JT had to ask the pertinent question, "smoke business or plumbing business?" That being the two businesses JT was well acquainted with.

"Y-y'always leave me, like, th'worst lays man." Frog loudly complained after Fitch's first missed shot. As Frog, perhaps too meticulously, surveyed the table, Fitch turned his attention to me.

“Daggers and intrigue, huh?”

“Ain’t it always with me?” I winked as I took a sip. “But it’s for a good cause, helpin’ Hank.”

“That shit with Buford?” He asked, my nod confirmed, he continued, “man Hank’s too good a dude for that kind of shit. Now if it was the two of us,” he raised his hands in a gesture that indicated how expected it was that he or I would find trouble.

“That’s us, though, could fall in shit and smell like a rose,” Fitch toasted in agreement with my remark.

“Shit! Why. Do I. Always. Scratch?” Poor Frog.

“But I won’t trouble y’s’early in the night,” I told Fitch, “lay it a little left, give it a little english.” I advised.

“This,” he said sitting down his cigarette and aiming his cue, “is why,” he pulled back to shoot, “you use,” he shot, “english.” The shot, after a beautiful spinning bank, rattled in two balls and left poor Frog few clear options.

“English,” I nodded in understanding.

The shots continued rattling, the drinks continued flowing and the intellectual mumblings of Frog springing forth until late into the night. Then, mercifully, it was agreed that the festivities, and business discussion, would continue out on Fitch’s land. Fitch’s land was, by Prichard County standards, expansive and flat. Well suited to growing vegetables and a little tobacco, raising a few hogs, and training the next generation of championship roosters. Being that we were the only ones without a four wheel drive, Hank and I were parked at the top of the hill in the gravel and had to stroll by these rooster’s pens.

“Mean lookin’ bunch, aint they?” I surveyed as best I could in the dark.

“JT, and Fitch when he’s angry, but I don’t think anybody’s afraid of Frog.” Hank answered, giving me pause. I turned around to him.

“The roosters, Hank,” I said, as if my meaning were obvious.

“I’m a poor judge of mean cock.” Sometimes, even I get set up.

We entered the double wide abode of Fitch’s and settled onto the couch. Keeping vigilant watch over Fitch’s living room were the heads of two slain wild boars, Cheech and Chong, and an impressive eight point buck and hat rack. A massive television with pirate satellite sat at the far end of the room, where Fitch was standing.

“When entering Chief Fitch’s wigwam,” Fitch began, “we smoke-um peacepipe.”

“Smoke-um, haha,” Aaron Lee confirmed, laughing. Fitch then pulled out a bent cardboard coathanger piece decorated with a couple of long feathers, a few cheap beads and a bandana I’d given him. In the shorter end, Fitch had stuffed the bowl from a now deceased bong.

“Ah, th’peace pipe,” I saluted Fitch.

“How, friendly palefaces,” JT waved at Hank and I, while Fitch filled the bowl with the sweetest smelling stuff you’ll ever encounter. From across the room, Hank and I could smell it.

“Fifty?” Hank enquired.

“Bout forty five,” Fitch explained.

“Outdoor?” I had to ask.

“And pretty damn good for it,” JT explained.

In a grand dramatic gesture, Fitch chanted in a faux native accent, “need a bic please, need a bic please,” and, upon acquiring one, held his piece of mountain folk-art to his lips. After a, surely hellacious, hit he looked at JT and Aaron Lee. Being that JT was a little more laid back, Aaron Lee beat him out.

“Neighbor, man,” Fitch passed the pipe to Aaron Lee who, with a craftsman’s precision, lit the bowl and deftly bent the cardboard, allowing an optimum amount of smoke to enter his lungs.

“Where’s Frog?” Hank asked, as the pipe made its way around.

“Man,” Fitch chuckled, “we took his little ass home.”

“Probly better fer what we’re about t’be discussin’,” I explained.

“Daggers and intrigue?” Fitch asked, with a humorous gesture.

“Riddin’ Prichard County of the Rex Buford menace,” I began.

JT coughed on his hit at that name, “Rex,” cough, “Buford,” cough, “is a fucker man. Put me in jail, made my damn daughter cry. I mean,” he passed the pipe to Hank, “he didn’t have no choice but t’take me, but he followed me home, no lights or nothin’ like’at. Stopped in my driveway and was yellin’ at th’kids when he cuffed my ass. It was a bad scene.” JT shook his head, incensed at Buford’s insensitivity.

As that story ended, the pipe came to me. I filled my lungs with the sickly sweet strong mountain grass and flicked the feathers for a little flair. “Well, that’s where I get y’all boys t’help me out.” I explained, exhaling a cloud.

“How?” Aaron Lee asked, eyelids drooping slightly.

“We need his ass in the pool hall, make sure,” I explained, “Therule’s cool with everthang, don’t break a one of his rules.”

“Should be easy to do,” Fitch pondered as he got the pipe. “Lighter?” I passed him my Zippo.

“Be careful,” I warned. “Once he’s in th’pool hall I need all y’all t’trap him behind th’eightball,” I paused, “in a manner a speakin’.”

Aaron Lee, after taking his second hit, seemed to be in agreement. “Trapped behind th’eightball,” he shook his head and smiled.

“Yknow,” JT piped up, interrupting himself to take a good hit, “y’aint,” he began, holding in breath, “got t’trap’im.” He finished, exhaling.

“See, trappin’ is mighty hard,” JT began to explain. Being the best pool player, he’d have the best grasp on the simple turn of phrase. “I only trap on th’very best players, shit, only have to.”

“So what you’re sayin’,” I could tell that a little was starting to set in on Hank, “is you just have to shoot your game, man?”

“Yeah, if he aint that good, just shoot yer game,” JT explained.

“But don’t leave him nothin’” Fitch added as I took another hit. I held in the smoke as I began to understand the rat pack’s meaning.

“Th’game is all in what y’leave’im,” I seconded, exhaling.

“Don’t leave him shit, man,” Hank said, a note of vengeance in his voice.

“Never, man,” Aaron Lee chuckled, passing the pipe to JT.

“Y’just have t’make sure he cain’t find an angle,” JT said before taking a hit.

“Make sure his options aren’t clear,” Hank philosophized, as he got the pipe.

There was a silence in the room, and an understanding among gentlemen of what all this meant. The bowl was rolling when it came to me and I took in my biggest hit of

the night. As the smoke flowed over the rivers of my mind, I began to understand our methodology.

I exhaled and proclaimed, “that’s why,” I pantomimed a cue, “you use,” and began to shoot...

... “English,” Fitch and I said in unison, as our minds started to bank and spin.

“English,” the room agreed.

First impressions of Prichard County...

The directions were clear; turn off the Mountain Parkway and don’t make another turn until you reach the Victor Tussie Visitor’s Center. I, then, expected to encounter a Shell station with “Rockytop Grocery” in a large marquee promising “Farm Fresh produce, 3 miles back,” and turn right, because the produce wasn’t worth it. Just keep going straight, I was told, until you hit a four way stop. On one side of the street will be a church, which I saw, “Poortown Revival Temple of Salvation.” What denomination, I wondered, is that exactly? Across the street was the suspected crime scene, the “Poortown Pool Hall.” At the other side of the street seemed to be the only one of these landmarks that was open. “Friendly’s Grocery Store, Poortown, Prichard County, KY, USA,” read a hand painted sign. Underneath was a crudely drawn wildcat and “Go Big Blue, Poortown loves Billy Clyde,” in blue paint and a very small sign reading “Carl Von Ehrich, Proprietor.” The signs were flanked by a large American and Kentucky flag, respectively. There were a few pickup trucks in the front parking lot and another hand drawn sign with an arrow pointing to more parking, only the g on parking had been, curiously, omitted. I saw two men exiting a silver, late model Cadillac sports car. The two were an unexpected sight. Both wore suits and, it appeared, cowboy boots. The car’s passenger, a bespectacled man, appeared to be between the ages of fifty and sixty five, with close cropped white hair and a lanky, tall frame. He left his grey suit’s jacket in the car, but was wearing a vest, white French cuff shirt and a green necktie. I deduced that he was some sort of professional, the subtle touches of his finery suggested he may have been a coal executive, local politician or, possibly, a lawyer.

His companion was a much more curious sight. Slightly shorter than the older man, and wearing a black suit, blue shirt and vibrant striped tie he appeared to be a professional. However, he wore a strange variation on a goatee and braided pigtailed, both flame red. Upon exiting, he removed a silver Zippo and lit a cigarette, offering the Zippo to his older companion, to which his companion declined.

I exited the car and was greeted by the pigtailed man as I headed towards the establishment’s door.

“Hidey stranger,” he greeted me with a smile. I had noted that in some investigations, even before I revealed myself to be a detective, I had encountered more adversarial people. Often I was seen as an outsider, dangerous in this neck of Kentucky.

“Aint seen’t ya in Prichard County b’fore,” he continued his greeting, I remained silent. “Gotcha a name?” he asked as I headed toward him.

“Jamal Brooks, Kentucky State Police investigator,” I flashed the shield.

“What a kinkydink,” he smiled at his companion, “we’re men a th’law as well.”

“Beg pardon?” I didn’t quite understand his meaning.

“Michael Rhett Sparrow, Esquire and all that entails,” we shook hands, “well,” he continued, “ ‘ats what th’old business card reads, most folks call me Rhett.”

“Rhett?” I’d never met a lawyer with pigtails and a strange name.

“As in,” he gestured with his cigarette hand, “Miss Scarlett, Clark Gable, Atlanta’s burnin’, all that shit.”

“Rhett,” I confirmed.

“And this here is Popeye, he gets thrown in jail a lot.” He introduced the older man, clearly making humorous reference to the reason he wore glasses.

“Popeye,” the old man immediately dismissed, and extended his hand to me, “don’t pay no attention to Pipi Longstocking there,” Rhett chuckled at that, “Judge Clyde Winston.”

“Judge?” I figured him for some mildly corrupt local circuit or district magistrate. This was my first assignment in this new region, and I was unfamiliar with everyone on the bench.

“Federal court of appeals, EDKY,” the old man explained, I had heard this district had a particularly fair and honest federal judge.

“Good ole Clyde,” Rhett interjected, which he seemed to do often, “got th’best job in th’damn world.”

“How do you mean?” I had to smirk a little at this clowning.

“Cain’t get fahred, aint got t’get elected,”

“And I kin rule my way til I die or retire.” The Judge explained.

“Glad to meet you sir,” first impressions aren’t always correct impressions, “I look forward to working with you sometime in the future, I’ve heard of you before.”

“Hopefully it was from th’right mouths,” Clyde smiled.

“Jamal,” I was surprised Rhett held on to names so well, “you like t’join us fer lunch, tell us what brings ya t’ole Prichard County.”

“I’d like that,” I conceded.

“I’ll buy,” Rhett offered.

“That probably wouldn’t be prudent at this juncture,” he raised his eyebrow at that response. But he had to be aware that, at this point in my investigation, I could hardly accept anything from a lawyer who may or may not be intimate with the case.

“Y’aint gonna bribe me with a ham biscuit, Rhett,” Clyde quickly dismissed.

“Clyde, I aint got th’friends or th’pocketbook t’bribe you.” Rhett dismissed back.

Upon entering the establishment’s back door, I noted seven or eight aisles of consumable groceries. On the far left wall was a large cooler, presumably for frozen and dairy, with produce toward the front door. Immediately in front of me was a large display of Coca-Cola, immediately to the right was a lunch counter with a hot case. Farther up, there were three booths, one of which was occupied by four gentlemen and, across from those booths, sat what appeared to be the grocery’s counter. The counter had some impulse items in front of it, along with a few on small racks, a strip of inexpensive University of Kentucky T-Shirts and hats, three basketballs in collector’s cases, a sign reading “if you aint 18 then don’t ask for cigarettes,” and a bulletin board with a few pictures of men and women with hunting and fishing trophies. Behind the grocery counter sat a man, of probably fifty five or sixty, reading a Lexington newspaper.

Rhett and Clyde headed towards the lunch counter, where they both got Coca-Cola, in an old fashioned bottle, from a cooler. Standing at the counter was a short,

elderly woman with salt and pepper hair, chubby build and glasses. She was reading from a Harlequin paperback.

“Like country ham?” Rhett called out to me.

“No,” I declined, “I don’t eat pork.”

“Shame,” Rhett said, adding, “chicken?”

“Grilled?” I asked.

“Fried,” Rhett stated as if it were patently obvious.

“No thank you,” I declined, getting myself a bottle of water.

“Whatta ya eat?” Clyde laughed.

“Just a little health conscious, that’s all.” I assured him.

“Shame,” Rhett shook his head. “How are ya Miss Ruth?” He greeted the lady behind the counter.

“Oh, I’m fine I suppose,” she answered, chewing gum, “still here.”

“Cain’t do much better than that,” Rhett confirmed. “Ham biscuit, BBQ chips and a Coke,” he ordered.

“Three dollars,” he gave her his money.

“Got any,” Rhett leaned back in exaggeration and almost sang, “fresh vegetables?”

Miss Ruth laughed, and sang, “fresh vegetables.” Rhett must’ve noticed the way I was looking at this curious exchange.

“When I’s little,” he explained, “she’d bring my grandmomma some produce from time’t’time and she’d sing ‘at in the winder as she come up.’”

“Ah,” I said, informed.

“Still makes me laugh,” Rhett chuckled.

“Who’s yer friend?” She asked him, pointing at me.

“That’s, uh,” he paused, “Jimmy. He’s a detective.” I had never been called “Jimmy” before, but I think I understand why Rhett used that derivation of my name.

“Hidey detective Jimmy,” she waved.

“Hello ma’am,” I raised a hand to wave.

“What th’shit d’you want Judge?” She turned her attention to Clyde, with what seemed to be sarcastic animosity.

“A t-bone,” Clyde answered, “but I guess I’ll have t’settle fer one of them damn ham biscuits.”

“I guess you will,” she retorted.

“How’s Bobby been doin’ lately?” Clyde asked her.

“He comes n’ goes, he still remembers me. I keep on prayin’ for’im.”

“I do too honey. Lissen,” it appeared Clyde knew her well, “if y’all need anything gimme a holler.”

“I shorely will, but all I need right now’s two fifty.” Clyde paid her.

“Glad t’see you back up and healthy,” Rhett added.

“I aint about t’sit around no damn hospital gettin’ fed that food, you never seen the like,” Ruth said, disgusted.

“I’s in th’ Army Miss Ruth,” Clyde laughed.

“What’s them gentlemen of Poortown,” Rhett pointed at the full booth, “up to today?”

“Same old,” Ruth raised her hand in a “yack-yack-yack” motion.

“We do love t’ talk,” Clyde smiled as, after I paid, he, Rhett and I headed for a seat. Upon taking our seats it was difficult not to overhear the conversations of the men in the adjacent booth. Two were dressed in khaki pants and checkered shirts, with graying hair combed back. The man who appeared to be the eldest of the group, probably into his eighties, wore a fedora, white shirt and grey flannel pants. The man who appeared to be the youngest, only middle aged, a poorly maintained fifty or so, wore a large beard, hair back in a ponytail and a bandana with a stars and stripes design. They were discussing one of the checkered shirted men’s dietary choice.

“I thought y’ went t’ th’ heart doctor today, David.” The youngest said.

“I did,” he answered.

“Then why you eatin’ that fried chicken?” The other, slightly larger and gruffer, checkered shirted man asked him.

“Christine said,” David answered, “that if my cholesterol drops I get t’ treat m’ self to some fried chicken or a sausage biscuit, and I had work t’ do between my appointment and breakfast time bein’ over.”

“Aint like our family to miss out on pork,” Rhett said to David, taking his first bite.

“I didn’t even see you come in, Michael Rhett, Judge,” he looked to me.

“Jimmy,” I feigned a smile.

“Well, Michael Rhett, them hogs don’t feed themselves,” David explained.

“I know Uncle David, I know.” Rhett answered.

“It’d do y’ good t’ deal with some hog shit ever now and then Rhett,” the middle aged, bearded gentleman said.

“He’s a lawyer,” Clyde smiled, “he deals with plenny a shit.”

“You got Poortown hog pen shit,” Rhett chuckled, taking a sip, “I got Garvis courthouse shit.”

“How is that old courthouse?” The fedora wearing man asked Rhett.

“Same old, same old, Judge,” Rhett answered, evidently the man formerly worked in the law himself.

“Dexter Pollard still kickin’ around there?” The gruff old man asked.

“Toothless ol Dex,” Clyde’s smile hadn’t left his face, “crazy old coot, but right funny.”

“He’s still around. Gettin’ use t’ somethin’s pretty as Kate O’Shaughn’ssy strollin by him everyday,” Rhett pointed with what was left of his biscuit for emphasis.

“She any good?” The fedora wearer asked.

“Real good,” Rhett said enthusiastically.

“Been in my courtroom a time or two,” Clyde said, his tone seeming to second Rhett’s opinion.

“Wish I could get her in my Cadillac,” Rhett slapped Clyde’s arm. The group laughed at that.

“Wadn’t ye takin’ Jessica Banks around in that thang?” The middle aged man asked.

Rhett seemed to almost choke on his Coke, “Jessie Banks, psshew, Ricky Lee that girl had the wildest hair up her ass,” Rhett sounded exasperated at even the thought of whoever this girl was.

“I’ll bet, I’ll bet,” the middle aged man laughed.

“What brings y’ friend down here?” The gruffer old man asked, not masking any opinion towards me.

“Jimmy?” Rhett, finished with his food, lit a cigarette, “Jimmy here is investigatin’,” he realized he’d failed to ascertain that detail, “well I’m guessin’ he’s investigatin’ what went on up’t’ Therule’s pool hall. That what yer investigatin’ Detective Brooks?”

“The attempted murder of one Seth Burdette outside the Poortown Pool Hall on the night of...”

“Yeah, th’kid Buford shot at Therule’s bar.” Rhett interrupted me.

“Shoulda kill’t heem,” the gruff old man offered his opinion.

“Come on, Oldham,” the middle aged man, Ricky Lee, tried to stifle some rage, “off duty deputy didn’t have no business throwin’ his gun around at no bar. Therule,” he turned to me, “is gonna be right glad t’know yer here. Them county boys aint never gonna help nobody in Poortown.”

“Not s’long as county boys are Republican,” the fedora wearing former judge said knowingly.

“Could you explain that, please?” I asked him.

“Hell, let the Garvis boys tell ya how Prichard County gets run,” Ricky Lee pointed to Rhett and Clyde somewhat dismissively.

“We don’t run Garvis or Prichard County,” Rhett pled.

“It’s been a good few years since I run anything in Prichard County and all I run then was my courtroom,” Clyde explained.

“I’ll break it down bout as best as I can, though,” Rhett began, turning to me and extinguishing his cigarette. “Victor Tussie,” a familiar name, one of Kentucky’s eight congressional representatives, “runs everthang.”

“Representative Victor Tussie?” I asked, clarifying.

“Sonfabitch Victor Tussie,” Ricky Lee scoffed.

“You gone let me finish?” Rhett asked Ricky Lee.

“G’on’ahead,” Ricky Lee invited.

“Yes, representative Victor Tussie, fifth district, of Rogerstown Kentucky,” Rhett explained, “ever since he’s been county judge executive he’s had plenny pull in Prichard County. He cherrypicks candidates and hands out ‘lected positions like they was weddin’ gifts.”

I didn’t quite catch his meaning, “and this is pertinent how?”

“This is how this is pertinent,” Rhett explained, “one of his dumbass buddies is sheriff,” Rhett explained. It seemed Mr. Sparrow carried some degree of bias in the information he was giving. “That buddy hires other lil Victor Tussie wannabes t’be his dep’ties.” He looked over at me to make sure I was still following. “Then th’lil buddies, gun and badge in hand, think they’re walkin’ gods so they walk into a place like Therule’s where aint nobody causin’ trouble, cause some, and stroll out knowin’ that until a fella like you comes along, highly unlikely with ole uncle Vic watchin’ over ‘em, they aint never gonna have t’face the consequences.”

“Guess y’ didn’t ferget them Poortown roots,” Ricky Lee seemed satisfied.

“Pud raised him good,” David seemed satisfied.

“I learned y’ rhetoric, even if I cain’t be sure I learned ya law.” Clyde seemed satisfied.

Thing was, I wasn't quite satisfied yet. "So there's no doubt in your mind a Sheriff's deputy would willingly commit an illegal act with his duty weapon."

"Ricky Lee," Rhett turned away from me and towards Ricky Lee, "Therule's yer friend, what'd he say bout all this?"

"Buford was actin' a damn drunk fool," Ricky Lee looked me straight in the eyes, "said Fitch, onna th'reg'lars had t'hold back his cousin JT after a pool game cuz he's ready t'stomp a mudhole straight into Buford." I noticed Rhett, while seeming to agree wholeheartedly, shook his head no and sighed when he heard that detail.

"Therule figured Buford and his bunch had gone outside t'smoke a little," Ricky Lee continued.

"You cain't smoke inside Th'Pool Hall?" David asked, as if he'd just heard you couldn't pray in church.

"Cain't smoke what he figured they was a smokin'," Ricky Lee's candor surprised me.

"That shit," Fred, the gruffer old man, dismissed.

"Anyway," Ricky Lee continued, "come t'find out that lil whigger, pardon th'spression detective," I raised a hand to indicate it did no harm to my psyche. That's what I would probably call him, too. "that lil whigger was givin' 'em th'OC, strongass ones, and they was a snortin' a storm of it. Well, not too soon later, heard th'shots and that violates a cardinal rule."

"Cardinal rule?" I stopped Ricky Lee.

"You'll unnerstan when y'go in th'Pool Hall," Rhett explained.

"And, swear t'god, it just rips Therule up t'think about it." Ricky Lee finished, so exasperated, it seemed, he had to light a cigarette.

"That was actually helpful Mister,"

"Cooley, c-double o-l-e-y," He spelled for me.

"Ricky Lee?" I asked

"Richard Lee Cooley, friends call me Ricky Lee," he explained.

I thought over the information offered; nothing worth writing down, but much worth remembering. "And you got this information from the establishment's proprietor?"

"Straight from th'bartender's mouth t'my years," he swore.

"Look at the time," Clyde exaggerated. "I need to be back in chambers here soon."

"I spose," Rhett continued casually, "Miss Bethann might be startin' t'wonder where I am." He looked over at me, "nice meetin' ya detective Brooks," he handed me his card, "I got no testimony or firsthand knowledge on this here debacle, but Therule's officially my client s'hold on t'at fer me."

"Will do Mister Sparrow," I looked over the card.

"Gimme a call if anythin' seems t'stall on ye. I know plenny a people in Prichard County," he winked. I was sure he did, but not quite sure, yet, how many I could trust. That went double for this Rhett character, who had led me to a witness who shares his opinion. Lawyers are, usually, honest, but never tell the whole truth.

Still, if any number of the details Ricky Lee gave me turned out to be true, this could prove to be an open and shut case. If any one of those details fell apart, I wouldn't

want to be the nigger state detective hated for persecuting a fellow officer of the law. In Prichard County, it seemed, I would have to tread carefully.

As you may've guessed...

Word has a way of traveling fast in Prichard County. Word of that fateful night in the Poortown Pool Hall having already traveled, it was with greased lightning speed that everyone knew a State Police detective was in Prichard County looking into something everyone knew a deputy did. Freddy Walker was looking to shoot him, Victor Tussie was looking to play friendlier than that. Fitch was ready to see a plan come to fruition, Therule was happy somebody finally might get that little drunken deputy. The little drunken deputy was scared out of his wits, but not as much as the man he shot. Amanda Abel, Prichard County's cub reporter, was, along with Katherine O'Shaughnessy, staring down the barrel of what was sure to be an immense workload. Detective Jamal Brooks didn't know where to start, but good old Rhett Sparrow was sure which direction to point him in.

Detective Brooks makes his move...

The investigation, Jamal Brooks had always been taught, must begin at the scene of the crime. It was more than textbook, it was first page of the textbook. Motivations, actions, and the driving forces behind what took place all become clearer if you know where and how they took place. "The where," Jamal had been taught, "does much to inform the what." With that in mind, the third place in Prichard County, after the grocery and the "bed and breakfast" he'd be staying in, that Detective Brooks visited was the Poortown Pool Hall.

He entered the establishment right around dusk. The detective was surprised, first, by its sort of ramshackle nature. There was an unfinished wood floor, two pool tables with broken nets and plastic buckets to catch the balls, an unassuming little bar in the corner and, in his ever present cowboy hat, overalls and neatly trimmed t-bar mustache, the humble looking bartender. Another, bigger, surprise to the detective was his reception upon entering. There were two men, regular local country types, Fitch and Rock, quietly shooting pool and discussing a day's work. They looked upon Detective Brooks with caution and suspicion, but no more than they would anyone else who had just walked into a country tavern for the first time wearing a blue suit and neatly clipped skinny necktie.

Brooks walked up to the bar with an opening question, based simply on the fact that no pool hall he'd ever been to had tables that weren't coin operated.

"How much to play a game?" The detective asked the bartender, unassumingly.

"Free if yer just havin' a sip and behavin' yerself, dollar if yer bettin', ever how much I decide if y'don't behave," Therule, the bartender, answered, cleaning a glass. Therule had heard about the detective's presence and was frankly glad to hear about it. He was still, however, weary of any law enforcement that would just come wandering into his establishment asking questions.

"Most people behave themselves?" the detective asked.

"Almost everbody," Therule answered.

“Heard somebody didn’t,” Detective Brooks offered.

“S’been a lil while,” Therule explained.

“Jamal Brooks, Detective, Kentucky State Police,” he introduced himself, discreetly drawing his badge.

“On duty?” Therule asked.

“Yes sir,” the detective calmly assured him.

“Well, then yer fine. Off duty law don’t always wanna follow my laws.” Therule told him.

“What do you mean?”

Therule pointed to a small sign on the wall above the bar, next to an autographed picture, it read “Guns behind the bar, or you meet the gun behind the bar – Therule Dulex.”

“Interesting rule,” Detective Brooks began, “most people follow it?”

“Most, I mean,” Therule began explaining, “these are country boys, mostly, comin’ into my place. I aint gone tell’em they cain’t have their guns. Just while they’s a drinkin’ and carryin’ on I want ‘em t’check ‘em with me behind th’bar.”

“And if they don’t?”

Therule motioned for the detective to take a look behind the bar, there was a shotgun propped close to where Therule was standing. “My lil’ loaded bouncer. I have a right t’defend m’safety and m’property.”

“Was he out on the night of August third?” The detective began a more strict line of questioning.

“Just made an appearance,” Therule said, “didn’t do no barkin’.”

“Well,” the detective chuckled, “when did he make an appearance?”

“After I heard shots around the corner,” Therule began, “and immediately after I gave the boys who had follered th’rules and were, t’the best of my estimation, of sound mind, their weapons back from behind th’bar.”

“Any of them discharge their weapons?”

“No sir, but skeered as everone was I’m surprised they didn’t. These Poortown boys, usually, have their heads screwed on straight, if not always tight. They wasn’t gonna start nothin’,” Therule assured, “but dey needed to be ready t’finish it should somebody else.”

“I understand,” Detective Brooks nodded.

The thinner and shorter of the two young men playing pool came up to the bar. He wore a brown western workshirt, blue jeans and a distressed pair of boots. “Two beers Therule,” he ordered, to which the bartender obliged, paid and, looking at the detective, asked, “everthang alright?”

“Fine by me,” Therule smiled. “This here’s Johnny R. Fitch, d’tective.” He introduced the young man to Detective Brooks.

“Go by Fitch?” The detective asked, remembering the name.

“Sir,” Fitch answered.

“That,” Detective Brooks pointed to his companion, “JT?”

“Huh,” Fitch chuckled, slightly, “naw, ‘at there’s Rock.” Rock waved at the two.

“Was he here the night of August Third?”

“I dunno, detective,” Fitch hadn’t caught Detective Brooks’ name.

“Jamal Brooks,” the detective introduced himself. “So you don’t remember the night of August third?”

“Dates are kinda,” Fitch gestured toward his head, “woo-hoo.”

“The night of the alleged attempt on the life of one Seth Burdette,” the detective jogged his memory.

“Oh,” Fitch’s brain started firing, “he was early, but not when th’shit went down.” He said, handing Rock his bottle of beer and lining up to shoot. Detective Brooks followed him over to the table.

“You were?” Brooks asked, watching Fitch deftly sink a ball into the corner pocket.

“I was,” Fitch thought, “me and JT. Earlier in th’night,” he explained, “we’d been drinkin’ with a few friends.”

“Who?”

“Rock, Rhett Sparra, m’cousin Aaron Lee and his girl, Cassandra.”

One of those names was already familiar to Detective Brooks, “and they?”

“Left,” Fitch said, matter of factly, “Rhett first, real early, had t’be somewheres in th’mornin’ I think.” The lawyer was safe, for now.

“And your cousin and his girl?”

“Screw like rabbits,” Fitch answered, missing a shot, “left not too soon after.”

“Rabbits is right, dude.” Rock laughed, “s’a wonder Aaron Lee aint a daddy.” Fitch grinned and shook his head in agreement.

“And you left as well?” The detective turned to Rock.

“Six day a week schedule with Allied, didn’t have the money or the time to stay,” he answered, sizing up a shot.

“So who was here?” Brooks was trying to steer this back on track.

“Me, JT, two girls we’d never met were at th’bar. Roundabout twelve, twelve thirty, Rex Buford’s group came in.”

“Group? Who was in that group?”

“Rex Buford, Seth Burdette, Denny Tussie,” Fitch seemed to be thinking a little hard. The detective figured he either couldn’t remember a name or keep straight a lie.

“Hey, Rock,” Fitch asked, “who’s that blackhaired deputy with th’little mustache?”

“Stephens, man,” Rock said, shooting.

“And Deputy Stephens,” Fitch finished. Making it, at least, look like it was a simple case of forgotten identity.

“Why such a large party?”

It was Fitch’s turn and he took to sizing up the table, “I aint fer sure,” Fitch began, “but I think it was his bachelor party.”

“Mr. Burdette’s?”

“Rex Buford’s,” Fitch shot, sinking one more.

“Deputy Buford,” detective Brooks needed clear details.

“Yeah, dude,” Rock interjected, “he just married that chick with the mustache.”

Detective Brooks smirked. “And, Mr. Fitch, you heard him discharge a weapon from inside.”

“Yeah, well, here’s how it goes,” Fitch began, momentarily losing interest in the pool table, “he played a game with JT. JT beat him but he was kind of...”

“A sore loser?” the detective asked.

“T’say th’least,” Fitch continued, “I don’t even know how he and JT got so irritated at each other, but I held JT back.”

“No physical altercation?”

“None,” Fitch assured him, “Denny Tussie was holdin’ Rex back, whispered somethin’ to ‘im. Then they kinda shook Seth outta his seat and went outside.”

“Why would they go outside?”

“Cain’t say.”

“Venture a guess?” The detective needed an eyewitness to back up the rumors.

“Coulda been t’smoke up a little. Lots of people do that and Therule don’t care as long as he don’t see it and you don’t cause problems.

“Good bartender,” detective Brooks said, playing a part, illegal drugs had always made him supremely uncomfortable.

“They coulda been doin’ somethin’ else,” Rock added, “Seth sold a lot of shit.”

“Seth a known pillhead?” Brooks spat on that last word.

“Couldn’t trust ‘im further than you’d throw ‘im,” Fitch confirmed.

“And this is when you heard the weapon discharge?”

“Yeah, I got JT a shot to calm him down, we heard three loud thuds, well,” Fitch ventured, “yer a cop, you’ve heard a nine discharge before.”

“Sure have.”

“You kin recognize th’sound. Anyway, after that, Therule was mad. I got my nine from behind th’bar and Therule called law, pulled his shotgun out and we left.”

“Your nine?” A curious detail to the detective.

Fitch, with one hand in the air, pulled his wallet and showed Detective Brooks his conceal-carry license. “Good t’have if y’live out in th’country and hunt.”

“One would imagine,” Brooks agreed, “or carry a nine millimeter everywhere you go.”

“I’d been shootin’ out at th’farm and didn’t wanna leave it in the truck,” Fitch told him, “ask Therule if I have it tonight.”

“Alright,” Brooks decided to change his direction, realizing the young man would’ve at least been warned of his presence in town, “know how I can get into contact with Mr. Burdette or Mr. Buford?”

“Buford’s still a deputy,” Fitch explained, disgusted and surprised enough for both men.

“Seth turned pussy and ran off t’Vegas.” Rock explained the other gentleman’s whereabouts. “That’s going to be a problem,” Brooks thought to himself.

“The other members of his party?”

“Not friends of mine,” Fitch told him, apparently in all honesty.

“Well, thank you gentlemen,” Brooks said, taking a few notes in a notepad. “I might be back in touch.”

“Anytime, man,” Fitch grinned, writing a cellphone number down for him. Brooks took it, happily.

“Rock?” The detective looked over at his other subject.

“Rocky Anderson,” Rock answered.

“Nice to meet you,” he extended a hand, Rock shook. “Mr. Dulex,” the detective turned towards Therule as he was exiting, “I’d like to thank you and your patrons for their cooperation. I may be back.”

“Anytime Mr. Brooks, we all want justice served s’much as you.” Therule told him, pleading, “and kin you clean up my establishment’s name? This here shit’s bad fer business.”

“Time will tell, Mr. Dulex.” Detective Brooks told him, exiting.

The next day, around noon, Jamal Brooks was waiting on his appointment with the Prichard County sheriff. He was strolling the streets of Garvis trying, with minimal success, to find something to occupy his time. A young lady, clearly an adult, but easily under five feet tall, tapped him on the shoulder. She wore a black t-shirt, a mock-pearl necklace and Capri pants. Having never seen her before, Jamal was surprised when he saw just who had tapped on his shoulder.

“Ma’am,” he looked at her, unsure.

“Are you Detective Jimmy Brooks, investigating the shooting at the Poortown pool hall?”

Jamal was taken aback, he figured word traveled in a town this small, but was amazed that someone would stop him on the street. “Actually,” he told her, wearily, “it’s Jamal Brooks, Kentucky State Police, and, yes,” he conceded, “I’m investigating the events that transpired on the night of August third.”

“Good,” the young lady answered, extending her hand, “Amanda Abel, Prichard Plain Dealer. I’m the reporter covering the shooting,” she shook hands with Jamal. “Everybody around here calls me double A.”

“Double A?” Jamal looked at her quizzically.

“Amanda Abel, A.A, double A,” she explained.

“Ah,” he answered.

“I was wondering if your investigation and,” she smiled deftly, “my investigation might be able to,” she looked for the correct word, “coordinate.”

“Whom, exactly, did you say you worked for?” Jamal asked her, holding back as best he could in the presence of such effervescence.

“Prichard Plain Dealer, weekly local rag, voice of the Prichard County mountaineer, friend to this fine community,” double A explained energetically.

“The weekly local,” Jamal said, understanding.

“The weekly local,” she confirmed.

“Well,” Jamal began, “my investigation is only in the opening stages. I’ll meet with Sheriff Walker,” he stared down at his watch, “a little later today and ascertain some of the more pertinent details pertaining to the shooting.”

“Oh,” double A began, “you’re going to make me translate copspeak aren’t you?” “Pardon?”

“Copspeak,” double A explained, “none of you guys talk like what a regular person reads.” She lamented. “Jeremiah is about to have a field day with me.”

“Jeremiah?” To Jamal, it seemed, familiarity with Prichard County was the first step in any understanding of it.

“Boss, editor, mentor, asshole when he wants to be,” double A informed him.

“Listen, Miss Abel,” Jamal began.

“Double A, please, I’m use to it.” She smiled.

“Double A,” Jamal conceded, chuckling a little, “I need to find myself a lunch that isn’t fried, over salted or pork. If you help me do that, I’ll tell you what I know.”

“Like Indian food?” She asked.

“Indian food?” in this tiny Eastern Kentucky County, that response confused Louisville native Jamal.

“Indian food, yknow, curry, lassi, goat, tandori, vindaloo, clear your sinuses food from the Indian subcontinent,” double A had a problem with getting too in depth.

“Here,” Jamal seemed astonished, “in Garvis?”

“Doc Brijraj,” she explained, “he runs the little walk in, family doctor clinic. He’s much of Prichard County’s GP and well respected.”

“Alright,” Jamal didn’t know where this was going.

“His son,” double A informed him, “Giriraj went to culinary school and adapted the techniques he learned in his mother’s kitchen, the entrepreneurial spirit inherited from his father and opened a restaurant in his hometown. Like, well,” double A explained, “a regular mountain boy.”

“Indian sounds good,” Jamal said, again surprised at this peculiar little county.

When the two arrived at the restaurant Jamal was surprised they weren’t the only people there. They were invited to seat themselves and did. Soon enough, a waitress came to their table.

“How y’all doin’ this afternoon,” she greeted them in a charming accent.

“M’names Becky Lynn, well,” she pointed at double A, “you know that honey. I get y’all anythin’ t’drahnk?”

“Mango juice,” double A ordered, quickly.

“Tea, unsweet,” Jamal smiled.

“We got spiced, it’s real,” Becky Lynn paused, “diff’ernt.”

“Unsweet’s fine,” Jamal said.

She left to fill the two’s drink orders. “An Indian place in Eastern Kentucky,” Jamal laughed, surveying the menu.

“Aint we a gettin’ so-fist-ta-ma-cated,” double A mocked a stereotype.

“Sofistamacated,” Jamal laughed, “yeah, positively cos-mo-politian.” He hadn’t had practice imitating the accent.

“So,” double A began, “whatta ya know?”

“At this point in the investigation I’ve interviewed two eyewitnesses, one the proprietor of the establishment that was the crime scene,” Jamal informed her, “along with hearing third hand, potentially biased information from local residents,” Jamal said, almost lamenting his first trip to the grocery.

“Mr. Brooks,” double A explained, “most of what you hear in Prichard County is third hand and,” she paused to take a deep breath, “potentially biased.”

Becky Lynn returned with the drinks. “Y’all ready t’order?”

“Number forty-four,” double A smiled.

“Like always, try fitty three once’t in a while, it’s sim’ler,” Becky Lynn informed her.

“But Beck,” she explained, “I like forty-four.”

“Alright,” she dismissed double A’s unadventurousness and turned her attention to Jamal, “how bout you sir?”

“What’s good?” Jamal asked, unaware where to begin at an Appalachian Indian restaurant.

“Well, don’t order sixty three,” she began, “Georgie...”

“The proprietor and chef,” double A explained.

“He don’t want me t’say, but he didn’t get good shrimp this last shipment, somebody in Lexin’ton playin’ dirty pool wit’eem.” Becky lamented the seafood supplier. “But,” she began with some positivity, “fittyone’s always real good. Georgie’s real partic’lar about th’quality of his goat.”

“That goat fried?” Jamal asked.

“Noooo sir, he cooks it inna slightly spicy brown curry sauce. S’kinda like a gravy, real good on goat, my daddy shot one once’t, couldn’t cook it like this here.” Becky explained.

“I’ll try that,” Jamal smiled, wondering if he was being too adventurous. Becky left to fill the orders and Jamal looked over at double A.

“So what do you know?” He asked.

“I don’t want to steer your investigation one way or the other,” she began.

“Unless you saw Burdette get shot and someone pull the trigger, you won’t.” Jamal informed her.

“Well, here’s what I can gather,” double A began, “Burdette was a known dealer, not one of the big money guys, but higher up on the street level chain. For whatever reason,” she explained, “he was out carousing with a few deputies. Buford’s wedding announcement ran not too long after this incident, so I’m guessing it was his bachelor party, last night of freedom, what have you.”

“Testimony,” Jamal explained, “suggests it was his bachelor party.”

“See, I got a knack,” double A smiled, “anyway, somehow or another they wandered into the pool hall. Most of the deputies are from Rogerstown, eastern northern Prichard County, but,” she resigned, “Poortown is the only wet precinct in Prichard County, and it isn’t exactly a hopping row of bars and restaurants.”

“So it was the only place they could go?”

“Right,” double A confirmed, “anyways, nutshell, they were probably imbibing something more than spirits. Either that or Burdette suggested it, somewhere down the line Buford got offended.”

“At the suggestion of the use of illegal drugs?”

“Umm,” double A smirked, “probably not. Just to take from many Prichard Countians unconfirmed experiences with the Prichard County Sheriff’s department. From there,” she launched back into her explanation of events, “Walker got called. He arrived at scene, took Burdette to a hospital in Whitesburg for treatment, no arrests were made and if Mr. Dulex was ever afraid of anyone,” she emphasized this point, “this probably would have never even been reported.”

“Sheriff’s department usually operate that way?” Jamal asked, surprised.

“Prichard County usually operates that way. I usually end up with nobody to confirm a story and Jeremiah runs something on an elementary school choral concert.” Double A lamented.

As Becky brought the food, another patron entered. He looked different than the first time Jamal had encountered him, abandoning pigtails for a slightly more subdued

ponytail. Still, he wore a suit that, to Jamal, seemed a tad flashy for Garvis and a pair of alligator boots.

“Double A, detective Brooks,” he greeted the table.

“Detective?” Becky smiled at Jamal, surprised, “honey, you single?”

“I am,” he laughed.

“You need t’come here more often,” Becky smiled suggestively. Then, realizing she may have caused offense, “unless yer with double A.”

“Aint my man,” double A winked at Jamal.

“She’s a heartbreaker,” the ponytailed man warned.

“Shut up, Rhett. Yer just mad cuz you cain’t get me.” Becky nudged.

“Yer right, doll,” Rhett laughed. “I was wonderin’ if y’could get me a mango shake...”

“Lassi, Rhett. Like th’dog.”

“Lassi, shake, whatever, one of them n’a number four t’go, tell Georgie I said hi,” Rhett told her.

As Becky went to fill the takeout order, Rhett made conversation.

“Goat good?”

“Yes, actually, very good,” Jamal answered.

“So what d’y’all two fine investigators know?”

“Not much at the moment.” Double A explained.

“Don’t hold back on me now,” Rhett pled.

“We really don’t have much information right now,” Jamal assured him. Noticing a book, Jamal was curious, “what’re you reading?”

“Poundstone, Game Theory and th’Puzzle of th’bomb,” Rhett smiled.

“Rhett enjoys game theory,” double A said, between bites.

Jamal wasn’t surprised; Rhett seemed like the kind of man who would be interested in scheming his way through a conflict.

“Honey,” Rhett expounded, “I’m little more than a simple country lawyer. If I’m t’be successful it b’hooves me t’know what more scholarly minds than mine have t’say about settlin’ a conundrum of a conflict.”

“Anything in there about catching a deputy who shot a small time drug dealer outside a pool hall?” Double A asked.

“Not directly,” Rhett pondered, “in a manner of speaking, I guess yer sittin’ on a volunteer’s dilemma.”

“Are you gonna start drawing on the napkins?” Double A asked, teasingly.

“Just tell ya that if only one person does th’right thang everbody benefits.”

“Obviously,” Jamal said, momentarily turning away from the first good meal he’d had in a while, “the right thing is beneficial.”

“Well, yeah, but only one person’s gotta do it,” Rhett explained, “but if nobody does th’right thang they aint no worse off. And people have a persnickety way a not wantin’ t’do th’right thang or figurin’ that somebody else, somewheres else, will eventually.”

“What would keep them from the right thing, the correct course of action?” Jamal, through all he’d witnessed as an officer of the law, was still sometimes naïve about human nature.

“Doin’ th’right thang always cost ya. It might cost ya a little, hell even be worth it in th’long run. But people don’t wanna lose money, or in y’all’s case, time and trouble, if their other option is t’be as bad off as they would be anyways.”

“So,” double A began, “what you’re saying is?” Double A always had fun humoring Rhett, it usually had entertaining results.

“Y’all two gotta find whoever’tis that’s gonna do th’right thang,” Rhett grinned, getting his takeout from Becky and paying her, “put th’coins in that Karma jar, Beck. Got me a long damn deposition, I need a little of it.”

Jamal noticed Rhett’s cuffs as he headed out, “nice cufflinks.”

“Eight balls,” Rhett said, looking down, “they’re lucky.” Rhett winked on his way out.

With curried goat filling his stomach and Rhett’s little theory filling his mind, Jamal headed to the Sheriff’s office. Double A seemed cooperative and easy to work with, unlike some of the reporters he’d encountered during his time on the Northern Kentucky beat. And Rhett seemed curiously, if cryptically, interested in helping him. What he’d been told was obvious. But, like all detectives, Jamal could sometimes forget the simple math buried in the complicated equation. It helped to be reminded, especially when preparing to walk into a potentially corrupt Sheriff’s office.

The Sheriff’s office was in a large, presumably multipurpose, metal building with concrete floors and a number of posters that encouraged following the law and voting. The Sheriff’s small office was right next to the coffeemaker. It housed a metal desk, two metal folding chairs across from a seventies-era metal desk, two filing cabinets, a computer and a telephone. There were a few plaques and pictures on the wall, along with a NASCAR themed girlie calendar, and a family picture on the desk. Sitting at the desk was a chubby, black haired, black mustached man of fifty, Freddy Walker, three term sheriff of Prichard County.

“You Brooks?” He asked the detective as he entered.

“Detective,” he pulled the badge, “KSP,” Detective Brooks read the nameplate on the desk, “you’re just the man I was looking to meet.”

“Shurf Fredrick Jame’son Walker,” he extended his hand. Detective Brooks shook, a bit distracted and offended at the calendar on the wall. “Whatch’ye here fer?” Detective Brooks noticed an absence of a few front teeth. “Well,” he thought, “might not hurt you in an election here.”

“Are you unfamiliar with the investigation?” the detective asked, certain that the Sheriff would know exactly why he was there.

“Naw, I jes don’t see no need fer yew t’be here.” Sheriff Walker leaned back in his seat.

“Well,” detective Brooks began, unbuttoning his jacket and taking a seat he wasn’t offered, “it seems two of your men were present the night of a shooting at the Poortown Pool Hall.”

“And y’ont’t’close ‘at lil place down and get our county clean and dry like it orta be?”

“I’m a detective, Sheriff Walker, I don’t share your interest in politics. I’m only interested in who discharged a weapon, why they discharged it and what it did to the young man in the line of fire.”

“He runned off, he’s a scummy lil pillhead that’t aint never done nobody no good. Been in n’out of th’Prichard Detention center more times than I kin count. That lil woman lawyer up’t th’courthouse had’im rat somebody with a lab, like I couldn’t a got ‘eem, so th’boy didn’t go off bein’ sent upt’th’castle on th’Cumberland. Hardly surprisin’ t’folks round here that he didn’t get in a dep’ty’s line of fahr sooner.” Sheriff Walker gave his opinion of the victim.

“I’m aware of Mister Burdette’s prior convictions, I’ve read his record. While,” detective Brooks explained, “that makes it more logical that he’d get shot, it doesn’t make shooting him any more legal.”

“He’s a lawbreaker,” Sheriff Walker explained, showing he was upset, “he needed t’be dealt with, he got dealt with. Yer fer justice, dealin’ with lawbreakers,” Sheriff Walker invited, trying his best to be as cordial as Representative Tussie demanded he be.

“I’m for dealing with lawbreakers, and seeing justice served. However, Sheriff Walker,” the detective remained firm, but measured, “I am bound in my duty to the citizens of Kentucky to see that justice is, indeed, served. Now,” detective Brooks launched back into his questioning, “what happened on the night of August Third?”

“An officer, attempting to make an arrest...”

“Wait, on duty?”

“Yer dafacto always on duty in Prichard County. I only got three dep’ties. I aint th’sate post.”

“Well, if you’re de-facto on duty twenty four seven then wouldn’t you, de-facto, not be intoxicated in a pool hall?”

“He wadn’t intoxycated.”

“Not according to two eyewitnesses.”

“Who?” Sheriff Walker knew all of the crime’s eyewitnesses were to be on lockdown.

“Two people who were inside the pool hall, that night. Their names are irrelevant.” Detective Brooks explained.

“Naw, they aint,” Sheriff Walker was beginning to lose his cool.

“And why not?” detective Brooks was beginning to gain some swagger.

“Th’Poortown hillbilly trash that traipses through ‘at place mostly kin’t be trusted n’further than th’end a my arm. Them Poortown people don’t respect th’law, don’t respect th’common rules of behavin’ yer damn self and aint never had no damn respect fer authority.”

“The first man I met from Poortown was a judge,” detective Brooks explained, “who is well respected among his peers.”

“Aint a damn sittin’ judge in this county from Poortown,” Freddy spat the name of what appeared, to the detective, to be a quaint little community.

“He’s on the federal bench.” Detective Brooks explained, raising a finger to silence whatever Freddy was about to say, “and I’d rather you leave it to me when it comes to determinin’ the value of my eyewitnesses. One of the witnesses I talked to certainly didn’t seem too happy with what transpired, and had no reason to hide anything from me. And to be honest,” the detective was rolling, “Freddy, you aint comin’ off thataway. So you better get your tune in harmony with mine.”

“I just thank I aint gonna sang no more, Mister Tibbs,” Freddy was sure that’d get detective Brook’s goat.

Detective Brooks laughed at an insult that asinine. “Don’t call me Mr. Tibbs.” With that, Detective Brooks buttoned his jacket and left the office. In the parking lot, he noticed a deputy getting out of a marked Bronco. The deputy, at glance, met a familiar description, black hair, black mustache. He was young and skinny. Brooks made sure to pass him closely so that he could read the nameplate on his uniform.

“Deputy Stephens,” the detective stopped him, softly raising a hand to his chest. “I’d like to talk to you.”

“I aint talkin’ t’ya,” the deputy said, without making eye contact.

“You better,” detective Brooks explained, “you’re a suspect.”

“Suspect?” the deputy made eye contact.

“One of the three people allegedly outside when Seth Burdette was shot,” Brooks informed him, “there’s two deputies and someone who sounds like he’s some relation to a congressman. That means all three of you have a hell of a lot to lose. Now,” remembering the spirit, if not the meaning of Rhet’s little lecture, “do you want to volunteer to lose it?”

“I got nothin’ t’say,” Deputy Stephens tried to stand firm.

“So, your friends, they’ll say the same, huh? Their water’s as hot as yours.”

“Why doncha ask ‘em what they got t’say?”

Jamal didn’t like deception, but sometimes he had to play the nature of the game, not himself. “You’re friends already said it was your gun.”

“What?” Stephens was visibly surprised, and nervous. “Naw, Tubby wouldn’t sell me down like that. Even if his daddy told’im to.” Stephens didn’t know how much he’d just told the detective.

“Well, if Deputy Buford corroborates the story, you’ll be in a world of shit.”

“Rex’d never turn on me like that.”

“Maybe not,” detective Brooks conceded, “but your Sheriff didn’t confirm or deny.” Detective Brooks was back to, carefully, telling the truth.

Stephen’s looked like his world was collapsing around him. “Naw, y’aint trickin’ me,” he proclaimed, trying to hide his nervousness.

Brooks had been around Northern Kentucky racketeers, Louisville drug dealers and suave, white collar Lexington criminals; after those experiences this deputy wasn’t a stag in his sights but a deer in his headlights. “I’m not trying to,” and detective Brooks wasn’t going to run over him, “but we need to talk, tonight, give me a call,” but he might slow down to shoot him. “And Stephens,” he explained, giving him his number, “in a situation like this, I’d advise you not to let anyone you can’t trust know what you might be thinking. They close ranks fast,” he needed him at the end of his arm, at least until he could actually speak to whoever Denny was. Stephen’s seemed to be receptive, which was very promising to detective Brooks.

“You don’t want to lose that badge, do you?” Deputy Brooks asked. A cop himself, he knew to aim for the badge.

“Naw,” Stephens said, still a little tense, “I worked too hard, I aint goin’ down for what I didn’t do.”

“Then later tonight, when you aren’t,” he looked over at the door where Sheriff Walker was standing, “under such scrutiny, give me a call.”

That night, around sunset, Jamal had decided to take a walk. He needed a little exercise and time to philosophize. As he walked down one of Garvis' streets he heard a familiar voice.

"Detective Brooks," he looked up to see Rhett, clad more casually than usual, sitting on a rocking chair on his front porch holding a book and kicking back with a glass of some sort of whiskey.

"Mister Sparrow," he acknowledged.

"Sit a spell? Glass a bourbon?" Rhett invited.

"I'll take you up on the sitting," Jamal told him, "but I seldom drink."

"Cryin' shame," Rhett sighed, "such good whiskey should be shared with pleasant comp'ny."

"Game theory?" Jamal asked, looking at Rhett's open book.

"In a matter a speakin'," Rhett answered, "chess tricks and tips. You a chess player detective?"

"From time to time," Jamal smiled, "it can get tedious."

"I can see," Rhett said, marking his place and closing his book, "where y' might feel thataway. See, detective Brooks, I'm a lawyer, I play zero-sum, sequential."

"Zero-sum sequential?"

"Winner and a loser," Rhett explained, "and I kin see the moves as their made. Court, chess, pool and flirtin' are m' favorites, in reverse order."

"Right, more game theory?" Jamal chuckled at this mountain eccentric.

"M'mind's kinda workin' in 'at mode tonight," Rhett told him taking a sip. "But you, bein' as yer a detective n'all, play non-zero sum. Jus cuz you gain, doesn't mean they lose, just cuz they gain, don't mean you lose. And you, detective, play a simultaneous game as well."

"Doesn't that," Detective Brooks recalled an economics course he'd taken in between criminology and more criminology, "mean all players are moving together, without the other's knowledge?"

"A well learned man," Rhett toasted, "ahh," and took a good swig, "but you'd have t'be t'get yerself in th'mystery solvin' game."

"That a compliment?" Jamal asked.

"Indeed, t'is. With a lil' addendum," Rhett smiled, "make sure that, whatever y'think th'other man's move is, that'ch'know th'other man's move."

"I know it," he assured Rhett, "before the other man moves."

Stephens' Dilemma...

I'm not going down for this. Rex shot him, Denny was there and Freddy told me big Vic wants us all quiet. Well, all quiet has me boiling in the hot water. I'll do anything for the badge and I'll do anything for Rex, but I won't go off, former cop, to the Castle on the Cumberland for some no account dope dealer Rex got fired up and shot at. It aint fair. So I arranged a meeting with Detective Brooks.

I didn't want to, but for my sake, my wife's sake, and my son's sake, I had to. God, I hope Rex and Freddy understand. I just have to look out for ole number one and make sure nobody puts a shiv in my back.

I arranged the meeting at a little place in Fugate I knew nobody'd think to watch us at.

"Deputy Stephens," Brooks greeted me. He was still in a suit and tie, I guess black boys like to get above their raisin'.

"D'tective," I looked around.

"You don't have to worry who might be watching," he told me, "I have my duty weapon. Besides," he dismissed, "I don't think any of your buddies want the world of hurt that would come down on them if I was dead."

Boy didn't know Prichard County, that's for damn sure. Freddy could bring you down if Freddy wanted to. He had a gun and a badge, so all he needed was Victor Tussie's blessing. I was surprised he hadn't sent us after some of those Garvis lawyers. Big Vic said, though, that Kate was no trouble as long as Judge Axlerod was sitting and, for whatever reason, told us not to even touch Rhett Sparrow, said he had dangerous friends.

"So," Brooks began, "let's get down to brass tacks. What happened August Third?"

"It was Rex's bachelor party," I told him.

"Deputy Buford?"

"Deputy Buford," I confirmed. "It started out with me, Rex, Denny, Rex's brother, Josh, Joey Roe and Seth Burdette. Rex's brother and Joe partied a little with us up in Richmond, but they split when we was headin' t'th'Pool hall."

"So," Brooks asked, "who witnessed the shooting?"

"Me and Denny," I told him.

"What was Mr. Burdette's relationship to Mr. Buford?"

"Really wadn't one. I mean, we all knew Seth. He was a small timer. I'd picked him up a time or two. Once Freddy said we dropped charges. He's friends with Denny, kinda. Denny got him t'come along, said he could make th'night fun."

"How's that?" Brooks smirked.

"Denny likes t'well," I tried not to rat him out, "he likes certain thangs I aint s'fond of."

"Booze, hookers, pot, pills, what?"

"Uh," I stopped, "yeah." Brooks looked at me, confused.

"Alright, so Denny invited Seth Burdette."

"Yeah," I explained. "Seth, though, he was out of his gourd on'em OC pills from th'minute we picked him up. It was his idea t'go up th'Pool Hall when we was on our way back from Richmond. And see, we're all from Rogerstown, and county law, so we didn't know that we'd be quite welcome in 'at Pool Hall."

"Pool Hall have a reputation?"

"S'a bar in Poortown, s'bound t'have a reputation," I laughed at him. He hadn't been around Prichard County very long.

"Seemed like a quiet place," Brooks told me, "Mr. Dulex seems to keep it under control."

"Yeah, he pulls a damn gun on you," I told him, "he orta be 'rested fer that."

"He has a right to defend his property and had reason to believe his life was in danger, no jury in Prichard County would do anything to him, even if he had fired."

Brooks said, a little cocky for my tastes. “Now,” Brooks started in, “what happened once you got to the Pool Hall?”

“Well, Rex played him a game with Jimmy Davies,” I told him.

“JT?” Brooks asked.

“I thank th’Poortown boys call ‘im that. Anyways, Rex didn’t take to kindly t’losin’ at pool. Thought JT was just leavin’ him bad lays.”

“Part of the game,” Brooks said.

“Not if ‘ats all y’do,” I told him, “ ‘ats all them Poortown boys did. Swwhy he was able t’get th’eightball in. From’err, Rex got a lil angry at’im and me n’Denny tried holdin’ him back.”

“So no physical altercation?”

“Naw, none, we wadn’t about t’get inta onna them off duty,” I assured him.

“Denny said Seth had somethin’ t’calm us down. Now,” I told him, “I don’t do nothin’ like that, but it aint too out th’ordinary for folks around here t’look fer somethin’ relaxin’.”

“But you were relaxed?” Brooks asked.

“Naw, jus, I don’t like th’way ‘at stuff messes with me. They had some OCs and Seth said they was (**higher dose**) well, Denny and Rex took a whiff witt’eem and they was sure them was (**lower dose**) and they’d both kept quiet and paid a pretty penny fer’em.”

“This precipitated an argument, I’m assuming.” Brooks said, liked to talk above his raising too, I guess.

“Yeah, well, Rex said he’d been real easy on Seth b’fore cuz he’s friends with Denny. Seth started talkin’ shit...”

“Shit?”

“Said that he weren’t skeered a no deputy, that he knew Poortown people at’d bury’im ‘at his bossman...”

“Who is?”

“I don’t know,” I lied, “I aint involved in ‘at kinda thang. I know he gets th’pills from his grandmomma and a Whitesburg doctor.”

“Keep going,” Brooks was taking notes.

“Well, he asked Rex if he needed t’get out his equalizer.”

“So he pulled a gun on deputy Buford?” Brooks asked. “Testimony from the pool hall suggests his gun was behind the bar.”

“Didn’t mean he wadn’t about t’go get it,” I couldn’t believe a cop wouldn’t have caught that.

“Do you think Mr. Dulex would’ve given it to him?” Brooks asked me.

“Hell, I don’t know, he owns a damned Pool Hall,” that ought to be enough of a suggestion right there.

“Exactly, wouldn’t seem to want to be liable for Mr. Burdette’s actions.” Jamal told me.

“He don’t think like us cops,” I explained, “anyway, Rex pulled first. Give him two good shots, then th’bar went apeshit.”

“Apehit?” Brooks was chuckling at me like I was a dumbass hillbilly, “how’d it go apeshit?”

“I’ll tell ya how, D’tective, th’Poortown boys got their guns and split, Therule called Freddy, at home, and waved his around ‘a tellin’ us we had t’stay.”

“He detained you, why didn’t you shoot back or tell him he was obstructing?”

“We did, but Freddy said Therule’s man in Garvis wadn’t nobody we wanted t’be in court with.” I told him.

“Who’s his ‘man in Garvis?’” Brooks was awful curious.

“Rhett fuckin’ Sparrow,” I spat, “no damned good hippie lawyer. He’s a snake, d’tective, get ya on th’sand admittin’ you did thangs you didn’t even know y’could.”

“I’ve heard things about him,” Brooks told me.

“Then yknow he just wants t’bleed Allied and Prichard County dry and have all them drinkin’ ass Poortown boys walkin’ th’streets?”

“One man’s opinion,” Brooks said quietly.

“Th’t ruth.”

“Well, Rhett isn’t on trial, at least not yet. What happened when Sheriff Walker arrived?”

“He tried t’calm Therule down. Therule would hardly lissen. Him and Freddy hadn’t got along since’t he opened that pool hall after they had th’wet dry vote.”

“What about with Mr. Burdette?”

“Sheriff took him t’th’hospital in Whitesburg.”

“No arrests made?”

“Naw, on neither side,” I told him. “Course, Freddy wadn’t bout t’rest Rex. Told Rex t’lay low, take a coupla days off...”

“Administrative leave,” Brooks smirked.

“If y’onna call it that,” I said, confused. “Tried t’get Therule not t’complain anythin’ formal, but he’d answered th’call and Therule was wavin’ his damn gun around all crazy like so he didn’t have no choice. Really,” I told him, honestly, “this shoulda been settled like gentleman.”

“But it wasn’t,” Brooks looked at me scornful, “that’s why I’m here. Now is this all you know?”

“Yeah,” I fibbed a little. Wasn’t any reason to tell him more than he needed to clear my name.

“You’ve been helpful Deputy Stephens.” He told me, “we’ll be back in touch.”

“God,” I thought as he was walking away, “I hope to hell not.”

Nighttime in the Cumberlands...

I didn’t quite trust Deputy Stephens. But the other evidence I’d gathered seemed to suggest he wasn’t armed at the scene. I needed a warrant to go any farther with Buford. God, this was going to be a long, sleepless night. These things get on my mind, and I refuse to dull my senses and drug my mind just to get a little precious sleep. Some things are worth tossing and turning for, justice is certainly one of them.

This wasn’t even something I expected to toss and turn over, it was a simple shooting in some backwater little town. In and out, real quick, I’d figured.

Wrong on that one, Jamal that disquieting voice in the back of my head teased. Maybe it was my own conscious, or maybe it was my father, a proud officer on the Louisville Police Department, and proud of me for going down the path of defending

laws and justice. Pop wouldn't believe that this one was shaping up to be harder than taking down that Northern Kentucky crime syndicate. My C.O. back at the post had already told me Drug Enforcement had an open investigation into Freddy Walker, that's what brought me here. He said that Walker was too well connected and too well protected, by whom, he wasn't sure. It pained me to imagine it might be the very man chosen to represent the people of Eastern Kentucky, but if it was, so be it. No man is above the laws of Kentucky, the United States or God.

I read a little from my bible, as my mother had suggested I do in trying times. "Jamal, baby," she told me, "the word of the lord will offer you comfort and clarity in your hour of need. That's why we have the scripture."

But something told me my answer wouldn't be in the red words. Still I read. **(I got to pick a really good verse about law and justice and whatnots. Damn, I should've paid attention in Sunday school. I need to defer to my catechism memorizing momma or whip out my concordance bible on this one)**

That offered me some comfort. The young reporter, Miss Abel, had asked me during one of our meetings if I was a churchgoing man. I told her I was and she had invited me, this Sunday, to go with her.

"I could use a good sermon," I told her. She smiled. I liked her very much, she seemed keenly aware of and, like me, genuinely disturbed by an inability to expose all this rampant corruption. But my mind was still churning, deducing, moving, whether I wanted it to be or not, my brain was never off-duty. I needed something even the good book couldn't give me. I needed fresh air and space. I put on a shirt, gathered my things, and decide to take a walk.

Garvis, it seems, closes at nine thirty, a stark contrast to Louisville, where I had grown up, and greater Cincinnati, where I had cut my teeth. It was nice to have some peace and quiet every now and again, and I was thankful I was in a city where I could find it. I meandered past a beauty shop, wondering just how much pertinent information or useful, if biased, gossip, wandered through its doors. Youthful trips to the beauty shop with my mother taught me that, if I'm quiet, I can learn a lot. But I wouldn't be stopping there during the course of my investigation. I strolled by that curious Indian restaurant and chuckled.

How little, my mind told me, *you know about these hills*. That voice certainly was right. I would've never suspected a coal county, hillbilly town to have well prepared ethnic cuisine. As I walked by a row of neatly maintained older houses in the looming shadow of the county's courthouse, I noticed a man sitting on his porch, smoking a cigar. I'd seen him there before. He raised a glass at me. It was that lawyer, Rhett Sparrow.

"You a child of th'night too D'tective Brooks?" He called out. His friendliness had always been surprising to me, if not suspect. But, that's just me thinking the worst of people, I dismissed. He must be, at least, a decent fellow to show this kindness. And what I'd gathered didn't suggest he had any hidden daggers, at least none pointed towards my back.

"No, I'm just," I took a deep breath, "in need of a little peace and quiet. Time to think," I told him.

"I unnerstan," he said, partially inebriated, "I'm fightin' a losin' battle on th'ole peace n' quiet front m'self. Sit a spell," he invited, "I don't thank," he began, "I ever seen't ya without yer necktie."

“I’m not on duty,” I explained, “in the most technical sense,” I hastily added.
“Duty don’t never cease, does it Jamal?” He’d never called me that before, “s’alright I call y’that? I mean, aint no need fer formalities at this here hour.”
“That’s fine,” I chuckled at him. He was an entertaining eccentric, to say the least.
“After all,” I told him, “you let me call you Rhett.”
“Yeah, hell,” he said, downing a swig, “only people ‘at still call me Michael are my momma and m’relatives over seventy and only people ‘at call me Mister Sparrow are in a formal courtroom settin’.” He told me, continuing, “whatall you come t’find in this here investigation?”
“Well,” I informed him, “all I can tell you now is that I’m at the point I need a search warrant.”
“Then you’ll need t’see,” he took a long draw off his cigar, “our Commonwealth’s attorney, Miss O’Shaughn’ssy.”
“I will,” I told him, “she connected to the larger Prichard County machine?”
“No sir,” Rhett began, “a rose ‘at beautiful don’t grow in Victor Tussie’s red strip mine runoff.” He told me, with characteristic flair.
“You like her,” I smiled at Rhett.
“Vurry much so, Jamal, t’aint often ‘at somethin’ that brainy, ballsy and beautiful finds it’s way down t’Prichard County.”
“Crush?” I laughed.
“Aw,” he dismissed, “jes a little. Get you,” he continued, “an appointment witt’er. She’d probly be glad t’hear what y’have t’say ol’ top.”
“I’ll do that,” I told him. The bell tower on the courthouse chimed, dull, but loud enough to cut through the blueblack sky.
“Shit,” Rhett said, “midnight. And I gots t’be in th’office at nine in th’ole A M,” he said, “I spose I’ll take my leave. I’ll see ya round, D’tective.”
“See you around, Rhett,” I waved, leaving his porch.

The Crown Jewel of Garvis...

Is right there on top of Garvis hill, in the center of town; constructed in the thirties, restored in the mid-nineties, with a huge clock tower that rings the hour throughout the hills of Prichard County. It is the John Marshall Harlan Prichard County Courthouse; so named because of a tale that the great dissenter had once argued a case in Prichard County. The courthouse had, usually, served her citizens well, even when the people working inside didn’t. And all Prichard Countians were proud of the gigantic marble staircase that led to a bas-relief of lady Justice standing over the mountains and rivers of Prichard County with “Pro Populi Prichard County; Justitia es Caecus” inscribed at the bottom. The irony of such a sculpture, sometimes, made old Rhett Sparrow chuckle when he walked by, en route to one of Prichard County’s two courtrooms. But one person always found it stirring and inspiring, even though she wasn’t a native Prichard Countian. Katherine O’Shaughnessy, who had worked in the Prichard Legal Aid office and lucked her way into this, her first, term as Prichard’s Commonwealth’s attorney, thought it was a beautiful piece. The first thing in her new office she showed her mom and dad. Jamal found it interesting that, in a coal county, surely wracked during the depression, they somehow found a way to build such an opulent courthouse.

Inside the Hallowed Halls of the Prichard County Courthouse...

Katherine O'Shaughnessy, after the morning arraignments, had a meeting. This was nothing out of the ordinary for Prichard County's Commonwealth's attorney, but this meeting was shaping up to be a doozy. Jamal Brooks, a state police investigator, had informed her that he wanted to meet with her about bringing charges against the Prichard County Sheriff's department. Being one of the three elected officials in Prichard County who owed nothing to big Vic, she had no qualms about bringing a legitimate legal complaint against his handpicked Sheriff. But, being a young woman who wasn't even native to the hills of Eastern Kentucky, she knew that no matter the evidence, she'd be facing an uphill battle.

Jamal was facing a much smaller hill in trying to find Miss O'Shaughnessy's office. He saw an old man, reclining by the door, doing a word-search puzzle and wearing what appeared to be a uniform.

"Excuse me sir," Jamal got the old man's attention.

"May I hep ye?" The old man offered an almost toothless grin.

"I'm looking for the office of the Commonwealth's attorney," Jamal informed him.

"Oh, yeh, Miss Kate," the old man smirked. "I kin tek y'to'it young feller," the old man invited.

"Thank you." Jamal took the invitation.

"M' name," the old man started to introduce himself, "is Dexter Pollard, lifelong resident of Poortown Kentucky."

"Jamal Brooks, KSP."

"KSP?"

"Kentucky State Police," Jamal explained.

"Oo, you de boy what's lookin' inta 'at lil dep'ty and Freddy?"

"I am," Jamal confessed, hoping he wasn't going to have to explain himself.

"Gettim boy," Dex smiled, tapping Jamal's arm. "Y'from round't'here?" Dex asked, making small talk.

"Louisville," Jamal told him.

"Y'aint a cardinal fan, now is ye?" Dex ribbed him.

"I went to ECU," Jamal laughed.

"Got a granddaughter goin' up'err, mighty fine lil place, moves too fast fer me though," Dex told him.

The two found their way into Kate's office.

"Mornin' Missuz Mary," Dexter greeted the middle aged secretary.

"Mornin' Dexter," she smiled back cordially.

"This here fella," Dex pointed at Jamal, "he's from th'state police, set t'meet with Miss Kate."

"Oh, Detective Brooks," she smiled at Jamal, "I'll tell her you're here. Need a cup a coffee?" She asked sweetly.

"No thank you, ma'am, just a glass of water," Jamal answered.

“Thanks fer bringin’ ‘im by Dexter.” The secretary said, as Dex headed out.
“Aint nothin’,” Dex waved on his way out.

Mary escorted Jamal into Miss O’Shaughnessy’s office, where the attorney introduced herself.

“Kate O’Shaughnessy,” she extended a hand, “you must be detective Brooks.”

“Yes ma’am,” Jamal was surprised by her handshake, she wasn’t a shrinking violet.

“Need anythin’ Kate?” Mary asked on her way out.

“No, thank you, pull the door to (**how do you spell that to?**)”

“O’Shaughnessy, very Irish,” Jamal made small talk.

“Goes with the red hair,” she laughed. Jamal noticed her necklace.

“Catholic?”

“A little lapsed,” she laughed, “four years at an all girl high school can do that.”

“In Prichard County?” Jamal was confused.

“Assumption, I’m from Shelbyville,” Kate explained.

“Ah, I went to Manual,” Jamal informed her.

“So I’m guessing you aren’t here to reminisce about growing up in the greater Louisville area.” Kate said.

“No, the investigation into Sheriff Walker and Deputy Buford,” Jamal explained.

“Whatta ya got?” Kate asked, bracing for what she was about to hear.

“I have reason to believe that Deputy Buford is guilty in the attempted murder of Seth Burdette.”

“Does that mean I have to deal with Burdette again?” Kate said, exasperated.

“No ma’am his whereabouts are unknown, though testimony suggests he’s in the Las Vegas area.”

“He was always a gambler,” she joked, “Rhett wouldn’t even defend him.” She said to herself.

“Are you prepared,” Jamal began, “to ask for a warrant for Deputy Buford’s arrest?”

“I need to see your evidence against him, but I don’t doubt the validity of your investigation. I just need to be airtight if I’m going to ask Judge Axlerod for a warrant against a Prichard County deputy.” Kate explained.

“Right now I have a preponderance of evidence against him,” Jamal told her.

“I need beyond a shadow of a doubt,” she informed him. Kate wasn’t a native of the hills, but she knew what she would be up against in trying a deputy. “The corruption in this county is, at times, very far reaching Detective Brooks. Many of the involved parties work together. Now,” she explained, “not only do I have to be able to show a Prichard County jury a deputy, indeed, deserves to be jailed for attempted murder I need to be able to keep any of the deputies friends from stopping this before it even gets to trial and,” she emphasized her last point, “using his arrest as fodder to get a more friendly face in this office.”

“I can understand where you’re coming from. This probably goes all the way up to Representative Tussie, but he’s too well connected and too smart to be connected on the intimate levels.” Jamal explained, adding, “and if you had no connections to Tussie how were you able to win this position?”

“I ran unopposed, firstly,” Kate explained, “and I had become known through the legal aid office. Vic couldn’t afford the bad press that would come from sniping after a young, lady attorney with an immaculate record.”

Jamal laughed, “lucky you.”

“Lucky me,” Kate rolled her eyes.

“And Sheriff Walker,” Jamal began, “personal friend?”

“Hardly,” Kate dismissed. “For Prichard County’s chief law enforcement official he seems hell bent on getting in my way or keeping me from doing my job.”

“Adversarial relationship?”

“Not on my end,” Kate explained, “I’ll work with law enforcement even if they are, off the record,” Jamal nodded to her and she continued, “inbred, dangerous and functionally retarded.”

“And under investigation from my buddies in drug enforcement,” Jamal finished.

“Drug enforcement?” Kate asked, dismayed.

“Yes ma’am,” Jamal began, “that was my next question. Would you be willing to indict and try a sitting sheriff?”

“Who won three elections, is the county Republican Party chair, a personal friend of Victor Tussie’s and currently unopposed?”

“All that,” Jamal said, “and intimately connected with the methamphetamine trade in Prichard and surrounding counties.”

“Bring me the evidence, if it’s good enough I’ll have no trouble selling it to a judge. A jury,” Kate resigned, “well that’ll be a tough process. This county’s pretty divided on Sheriff Walker, but too many people are afraid to go up against him in any official capacity. Although there are some properties he’d probably rather not drive on to.”

“Eastern Kentucky?” Jamal asked.

“Very much so,” Kate confirmed.

“Well, my investigation suggests that he is, at the very least, obstructing the investigation into the shooting and committed some very questionable acts in his dealing with it. Drug enforcement is waiting for him to, inevitably, slip up. I’ll have the boys at the state post get with you about that one. But, at this juncture,” Jamal explained, “the information is so sensitive that they may not be inclined to divulge any of it to a county official who may warn Sheriff Walker.”

“That wouldn’t be me,” Kate said sternly, “he thinks my lack of testicles translates to a lack of intelligence.” She informed Jamal, bluntly.

Jamal looked at the diplomas on the wall above her head, “well, first impression, he’s sadly mistaken.”

“I don’t like to toot my own horn but, toot toot.” Kate joked.

“You know,” Jamal chuckled, “I’m surprised to find you so receptive.”

“Listen, Detective Brooks, the people of this county are, largely, decent, hard working and generally law abiding. The officials, however, come from a culture of corruption seemingly ingrained in this county’s body politic. Weeding out such corruption, while difficult, is the key to better enforcement of the law.”

“Eloquently stated,” Jamal said, impressed.

“It’s just a bitch to bring it in front of a jury,” Kate moaned.

“But our duty Miss O’Shaughnessy,” Jamal said, as if he was reading from a state police handbook.

“Duty can be a pain.”

“I suppose, sometimes,” Jamal had never felt any pain in doing his work. Then again, he hadn’t been in Prichard County very long.

“Since you, at least, seem friendly to my investigation,” Jamal began.

“Trust me, I am,” Kate laughed, “I most certainly am. Nobody wants a better Sheriff more than I do.”

“Good. Well, could I ask you about some of the people I’ve encountered along the way?”

“Go ahead, shoot.”

“First of all, I’ve been cooperative with local media. I’ve kept little from the reporter...”

“Jerry?” Kate interrupted.

“Amanda Abel,” Jamal answered.

“Double A.”

“Yes,” Jamal said, “double A. I have given most of the pertinent facts over to Miss Abel and said that I could go on the record. You have no qualms with this?”

“The public has a right to know,” Kate began, “but it could filter my jury pool a little if I can’t have any *Plain Dealer* readers. But double A is careful, especially when Jerry’s hovering over her shoulder, as long as the reporting, which you can’t control, doesn’t get sensationalistic we’ll be fine.”

“Good,” Jamal seemed pleased, “and one more thing. Are you familiar with Michael Rhett Sparrow?”

“Rhett?” Kate held in a chuckle.

“That’s what he seems to go by.”

“What about Rhett? I know he doesn’t have any friends on the Prichard force. He calls them the ‘Rogerstown PD.’”

“Well, Miss O’Shaughnessy, that’s just the thing. He seems eager to help in the investigation. But I’m not sure he can be trusted.”

“Rhett is, generally, trustworthy. Just listen closely to what he DOESN’T tell you. Rhett is,” she smiled, “kind of like a magician sometime.”

“How do you mean?”

“When you think he’s doing something with his right hand, his left is stripping the deck.” Kate had been up against Rhett in the upstairs courtrooms.

“I thought so,” Jamal seemed to confirm his thoughts.

“But he isn’t a bad guy and he’d have too much to lose feeding you false information. Just do what most of us do around Rhett,” she explained.

“Which is?”

“Watch the show, have a laugh and don’t take him too seriously.”

Two Lawyers and Judge Walk into The Pool Hall...

“Just gimme rye Therule,” I ordered.

“Three ice cubes and a cherry, right Rhett?”

“Yknow me too well,” I informed him, paying.

“Long damned day, huh?”

I had to laugh at that one. “Spent all day dealin’ with Allied,” I explained, “motion t’ dismiss, low ball settlement offer, motion t’ change venue, they hate gettin’ their ass drug in a courtroom.”

“Specially one yer in?” Therule, at least, had faith in me.

“Naw, just one in general,” I resigned, lighting a cigarette. “You’re a Poortown boy Therule, you know how crooked Allied can be when dey’ont to.”

“Shore do,” Therule agreed, going back to reading his paper.

I just settled into my seat. Some people take a bath with candlelight and soft music, some people shoot a round of golf, but when I really need to unwind, it’s rye whiskey, a pack of cigarettes and *All My Rowdy Friends* on the pool hall jukebox. A few sips and I was beginning to forget the woes associated with sitting across the aisle from coal company lawyers when Clyde, not a regular regular, but a known Pool Hall patron, came in.

“Hidey Judge Clyde,” Therule greeted him.

“Yer here too, huh?” Clyde looked at me.

“Yer honor, I’ve been cross’t th’ aisle from five head,” a particularly annoying Allied lawyer, “all damn day. I’ll pay th’ premium t’ let Therule pour my drinks for me.”

“Know th’ feelin’ boy,” Clyde turned to Therule, “Russell’s, on th’ rocks,” he ordered, “been in federal grand jury all day.”

“Fun,” I toasted.

“Hell this one almost got me longin’ for Nha Trang,” Clyde informed me. I had to laugh at that one.

“That bad?” I asked.

“Clay Massey was up b’fore ‘em,” Clyde explained.

“Aw sheeit,” I dismissed, “‘at mouthpiece for Allied?”

“No, no, lobbyist fer Kentuckians fer Energy Research Problem Solving Solutions,” Clyde explained.

“Kerpssh,” I tried to sound out an anagram, taking a drink.

“Allied thinks if they throw enough letters at it, nobody’ll know it’s ‘em.” Clyde explained.

“Ah,” learn something new every trip to the pool hall. “Jury return?” I asked.

“Yup, gonna be a long buncha shit I have t’ listen to. It’s ever bit tied into that big scandal in Warshington, th’ prosecutor’s got too damn many stars in his eyes and Allied is puttin’ some big guns b’hind this.”

“Godspeed you, mighty judge,” we toasted. “Therule, Jeopardy,” I motioned to my bartender, who, thankfully had no objections to changing his one television’s station and allowing Clyde and I to let Alex Trebek rest our troubled minds.

“Polon’yus,” I attempted to answer the question on the screen.

“Whanow?” Therule didn’t understand.

A young lady entered the pool hall, immediately dismissing a whistle from either JT or Aaron Lee, and sat down between Judge Clyde and me.

“Miss O’Shaughn’ssy,” Clyde greeted her. I could just muster a wave.

“You guys too, huh?”

“Mmmhm,” Clyde said, a little more haggard than usual.

“Marshall Plan,” I addressed the television.

“What’ll it be prosecutor?” Therule asked Kate.

“Soco and lime juice, double it up for me Therule,” she ordered casually. I can always admire a woman who goes straight for the double.

“A diamond b’tween two lumps of Prichard County coal, y’are,” I smiled at Kate.

“She aint gonna ride in yer Cadillac,” Clyde chuckled, both of our remarks being true.

“This diamond’s feeling rough,” Kate complained.

“We orta start a club,” I informed her.

“How did people elect a sheriff so stupid? How do I get a jury to convict a sheriff so stupid?” Well, I could tell what Kate had been doing all day.

“Honey, I’ve asked myself th’same question before,” Clyde explained.

“But yer a lot better at either of us at settin’ a trap,” I complimented Clyde.

“Detective Brooks’ evidence has him trapped. Now it all falls on my shoulders,” Kate lamented.

“Troilus and Cressida?” I first addressed the television, then turned my attention to Kate, “I’m sure a young attorney as intelligent as you can get ‘em t’convict ol’ dumbass.”

“It’s an uphill battle, Rhett,” she explained. “I even overheard someone say ‘well everybody makes mistakes, give’im a chance. Th’Walkers was nice boys,’ god,” she took a good swig, “some people. Everybody makes mistakes?”

“Yeah,” Clyde said jokingly, “a sheriff in th’methamphetamine business deserves a second chance. We’ve all made little mistakes like launderin’ thousands a dollars.”

“I sure have,” I kidded, “Coriolanus? Naw,” missed a Jeopardy question, “dang, Titus Andronicus.”

“What are you babbling about?” Kate asked me, I pointed toward the television.

“Oh,” she perked up a little, “I love Jeopardy.”

“You get more beautiful ever time y’open yer mouth,” I informed her.

“Not ridin’ in th’Cadillac,” Clyde kidded.

“You jus go’t’hell Popeye,” I dismissed lighting a cigarette.

“Oh,” Kate stopped me, “can I get one of those?”

“I didn’t know y’smoked. Yknow honey t’aint good for ya,” I teased.

“Only when I drink,” she told me, with enough force to indicate she really needed the cigarette.

“I see my ol’ Zippo’s been good t’ya,” Clyde said, “Ulysses S. Grant,” he was correct in both statements.

“Yup, still kickin,” I lit Kate’s and sat it down.

“Fuck the Vietcong?” Kate read the inscription. “Why does your lighter say ‘Fuck the Vietcong?’”

“Ask th’judge,” I told her.

“Gift from John Wayne, bunch of us got ‘em.”

“I need t’get me one ‘at says ‘Fuck th’Prichard County Courthouse,’” I decided, “hurling,” I told the television.

“Here here,” Kate toasted.

“And th’federal courthouse too,” Clyde added.

“And all y’all lawyers with an IQ of fifty,” I told him, earning a middle finger.

The Prichard County Plain Dealer...

In Prichard County, our source for news and information has long been the Prichard County Plain Dealer. Hitting most Prichard County mailboxes every Thursday, the Plain Dealer serves as an informative, and usually fair, guide to the important (and sometimes unimportant) goings on in Prichard County. Always locally owned, in recent years it has been managed, edited and filled with the reports of one Jeremiah Noe. An astute, intelligent man who pledged his time, effort and the health of his liver to such esteemed news outlets as the Herald-Leader, Cincinnati Enquirer, WKYT, WYMT, 59 AM, 84 AM, 630 AM, The Screaming Mountain Eagle and a number of other esteemed institutions of journalism. In recent years, after drying out and becoming a devout family man, he moved back to the hills to the beautiful county his friend Clyde had always remembered so fondly. Since then he has offered can't miss it coverage of the yearly country ham fest and served as a Rosetta stone, unlocking the confounding world of the Prichard County body politic for the common man. All the while, staying a well known man-about-Garvis, loving daddy and deacon at Garvis First Baptist church. Jeremiah, though, isn't always loved. To those who would rather their clandestine activities remain so, and those insulted that anyone would make it appear Freddy Walker's force contained corruption, Victor Tussie's election finances were suspect and Allied Coal might slurry a house into a creek, Jeremiah Noe was seen as a serpent and a pariah. But to most of us Prichard Countians he was a decent enough fellow who could make the yawn inducing events of a week in Prichard County interesting enough to sit down and read and worked, tirelessly, with us to ensure that, from birth, to graduation, to marriage, to golden anniversary, to death, our records in the annals of Prichard County history were correct. So without further ado...

A word from Jeremiah Noe...

It has been an eventful few weeks here in Prichard County. Unless you've been in an Allied mine since July you are aware that Sheriff Freddy J. Walker's department has been under intense scrutiny, resulting in the resignation of Mr. Walker and the arrest of former Deputy Rex H. Buford. Around Garvis, I've heard some complaints that I have reported negatively on Mr. Walker and Mr. Buford. I say, readers, that I have no personal quarrel with these men. I have only reported the facts about an ongoing investigation, as they were reported to me by state law enforcement agencies. Whatever your opinion of the case, it is of local interest and I would be derelict in my duties if I did not report them. I don't know if Mr. Walker and Mr. Buford are guilty or innocent and leave that decision to the court. I hope justice is served and would be happy, for these men, their friends, families and Prichard County, to see these men exonerated. Such negative stories are as difficult to report as they are for you to read. I will be pleased to resume reporting on events such as the uplifting Annual Garvis First Baptist pancake breakfast, the inspiring Prichard County FHA food drive and the ever popular upcoming Country Ham Festival (my oldest daughter is thrilled that she is finally old enough to participate in the Country Ham Princess pageant).

I would also like to offer one heartfelt apology. In one of the reports on the investigation into Mr. Buford readers may have walked away with the impression that the

Poortown Pool Hall was a “shady,” or even dangerous, establishment. I learned from a mutual friend of the proprietor that he was offended by this characterization of his business. So, to Mr. Therule Dulex I extend my deepest apologies and say, if I was still a drinking man, I’d stop some evening and buy a drink.

Break time at SG Trucking...

Seven AM meant first break for the mechanics at SG. As it was at most jobs, break time was treasured. For Jake and Merle it meant a reprieve from their toils with diesel engines and unwieldy coal trucks and a respite from truckers eager to get the speed regulators kicked up a notch or two. The two took their customary seats outside the garage with, this being a Thursday, a copy of the *Plain Dealer* Jake had bought at the gas station on the way. Jake lit a cigarette as he read the front page and Merle opened a pack of gummi bears as he read the sports.

“Gummi bears?” Jake remarked, a little surprised.

“They’re good,” Merle informed him.

“I know they’re good, but aren’t you on a diet?”

“Naw,” Merle informed him, “had t’quit that diet.”

“Why?” Jake asked the leading question of his portly companion.

“I tried it yesterday, made me sick.” Merle gave a nauseated shiver.

“How’d it make you sick?”

“All I could eat was meat,” Merle began.

“Yeah, I saw the seven pieces of baloney.”

“And I started gettin’ full, but it said t’eat that much, so I kept eatin’.” Merle explained.

“It meant t’eat that much in th’whole day dumbass. Besides,” Jake had to ask, “why would you keep eating when your full?”

“It said to,” Merle argued.

“When ya get full, quit eating,” Jake treasured his friendship with Merle, but there were moments when his friend and coworker could be trying in a “bless his heart” sort of way.

“Excuse me,” Merle overblew the offense taken, “I didn’t get t’be tall and skinny. I been growin’ out since’t I was thirteen.”

Jake shook his head and turned back to his newspaper. It was, as most recent issues of the *Plain Dealer*, filled with reports on the corruption in Freddy Walker’s Sheriff’s department. While Jake, like most Prichard Countians, was glad to see Deputy Buford get his, as a law abiding citizen he couldn’t stand the thought of a police force so corrupt. He read about the meth-lab kickbacks, the pill snorting, trigger happy deputies and the selective enforcement every week and was starting to get tired of it. It wasn’t as if he wasn’t aware, it was nepotism and corruption that forced him out of a decent job guarding the Prichard Detention Center and into dirtying his hands beneath Mack Truck hoods.

“This bullshit,” Jake lamented.

“What bullshit?” Merle asked, mouthful of gummi bears.

“This Freddy Walker bullshit,” Jake explained, “says here he’s indicted on four counts of money laundering stemming from bribes taken by meth dealers.”

“Sorry sonfabitch,” Merle spat. “At least that girl at th’ courthouse is bringin’ him up on charges.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Jake explained, “she’ll get a jury full of dumbass hillbillies that won’t convict him. And ya wanna know what’s worse?”

“What?”

“The next sheriff’ll be just as bad.” Jake understood Prichard County all too well.

“Wouldn’t hafta be,” but Merle was an optimist.

“It’ll be whoever Tussie and Axlerod want. They’ll probly just hand the job over t’ that deputy that ratted.”

“I dunno,” Merle pondered, “I bet he pissed greasy Vic off.”

“You’re probly right,” Jake agreed.

“Y’orta run,” Merle decided to throw out there. Jake, in the process of lighting his second cigarette, pondered the weighty thought.

“Said last week,” Merle continued, “there’d be a special election. You were a sworn officer when ya worked at th’ jail.”

“I don’t think I could win, though,” Jake told him, honestly.

“Yeeah,” Merle dismissed, “Jake Cooper, loving dad and husband, hard working man, former peace officer, veteran who almost got his ass shot off six times in Iraq,” Merle continued taking on a poor impersonation of a voiceover artist.

“People’d eat that up with a spoon, man,” Jake laughed.

“Yeah, Sheriff Jake Cooper, the right man fer Prichard County,” Merle gazed into the future knowingly.

“But whoever Tussie decides t’ run’ll have all th’ money,” Jake began thinking.

“Fuck Tussie,” Merle quickly dismissed, “people in Prichard County are tired of ‘im.”

“Yeah,” Jake agreed, “but people in Prichard County are stupid.”

“Stupid people don’t vote, too stupid t’ register and half of ‘em are felons.” Merle argued.

“No,” Jake countered, “some stupid people slip through the cracks.”

“Y’ don’t gotta carry th’ stupid people,” Merle said optimistically.

“Would Jen sign on for it?” Jake pondered.

“Shit,” Merle came back immediately, “gonna make more money there than y’ are here.”

“Yeah,” Jake was now brimming with confidence, “I’m gonna run for Sheriff.”

“Good,” Merle said as the two got up to head back to work, “that means I’ll get t’ be a deputy. Always wanted a gun n’ a badge.”

Buford Stories...

Everybody in Prichard County has one. Some people have two or three. If you add in all the folks who have secondhand tales, most people’s total rests somewhere

around five. Stories of ignorant, corrupt, or just plain dumb shit that Rex Buford did abound in Prichard County. With his recent arrest and the front page news he'd been making, a lot of Buford stories were getting re-told. The Cooper's back porch, in Garvis, was no exception to this phenomenon. Jake and Jenny Cooper had, for a long while, hosted friends every Thursday night. In the younger, rowdier incarnations of the party it was often a contest between Jake, his friend Fitch and his other buddy Rhett, to see who could get the most intoxicated. Lately, with the arrival of Jake's daughter, the parties had slowed a bit and even Rhett was able to go home fairly sober. The group, had, as usual, finished watching and offering commentary to an asinine reality dating show, when the party meandered to the back porch.

"Did y'all see the Plain Dealer today?" Rhett asked, casually, sipping on a mixture of Buffin recipe moonshine and sweet tea.

"They got Walker, aint they?" Merle laughed, answering his buddy.

"Aint gonna convict him," Fitch said, pessimistically.

"Now, now," Rhett explained, "don't ch'all count Miss Kate out. If anybody can get dat jury to return..."

"Listen, Rhett," Jenny began, as she burped her daughter, "just because you have a crush on her."

"Hey, now, hey now," Rhett interrupted, "she's a good lawyer."

"Cute," Fitch remarked.

"And supremely intelligent," Rhett defended his fellow lawyer, "and honest and real, real astute in th'ole courtroom."

"She beat ya, didn't she?" Jake smirked, lighting a cigarette.

"Only once," Rhett explained, "and I still believe my defense was pretty ingenious."

"That's true, a horse can decide whether or not it wants to go where the drunk points it," Fitch chuckled at his buddy.

"Thank you," Rhett said.

"Who even pulled over a man on a horse? I mean, even if he's drunk wouldn't the cop have better things to do?" Jenny asked, putting the baby in her bouncy swing.

"Shit, it was Buford," Rhett informed her.

"Man," Jake began, "fuck Rex Buford."

"I've only lived here for three months and I haven't heard anything good about him," Merle's girl, Charlene added.

"That's because there isn't anything good to say about him," Jenny said. "He's the one that pulled over Joe Lavassaney's car, when Joe was sober, and Joe is so nervy and careful there's no way he went over that line."

"I dunno," Rhett offered, "I been in th'car with Joey, sometimes he's a little swervy."

"But you were drunk," Merle chuckled at his buddy.

"I'm allowin' fer that," Rhett dismissed.

"Either way," Jenny began, "that's what got Hank in all this trouble."

"Kate's askin' t'dismiss in light of recent evidence. Never even got t'th'grand," Rhett informed the group.

"Things work out good, don't they," Fitch gave a knowing wink to Rhett. "I'm glad they got that little SOB," he continued. "Yknow he pulled JT and Rock over once in

town. They told him they had a roach in the ashtray, that was it. JT had his knife, on his belt,” Fitch emphasized the unlikelihood of the weapon being used, “and told him it was there. Didn’t reach for it or nothin’. He called th’ whole damn Sheriff’s department to the car with a dog.”

“Th’ dogs, on one roach?” Merle asked, in disbelief.

“Yup, him, Stephens, Walker, Wiley, ever one of ‘em, plus th’ dog on Lonepine road headed towards Poortown.”

“That’d’ve been the perfect time t’ rob a bank,” Jake laughed.

“They make any arrests?” Rhett asked, seeing as he’d defended JT before.

“Naw, didn’t even cite. Said Freddy fuckin’ Walker,” another villain of local law enforcement, “was even mad at him.”

“That’s nothing,” Jenny began, “when I was in high school I got hit by a car.”

“Hit by a car?” Rhett asked, in disbelief, having not known Jenny back then.

“Hit by a car, in the middle of Second Street. There was like, five of us on a scooter thing,” she explained.

“Tequila was involved,” her husband added.

“That’s not important to this story,” Jenny told him.

“Yes it is,” Jake laughed.

“Whatever, scooter, tequila, hit by a car,” Rhett wanted to get down to the actual story.

“Well, the car hit me,” Jenny explained, “and drove off.”

“Hit and run.” Merle said, jokingly ominous.

“And Buford was the officer on the scene,” Jenny continued. “He asked for a description. I said it was some junky little Japanese car, about ten years old, with a driver who was kind of skuzzy looking and Hispanic.”

“Decent description,” Rhett conceded.

“Especially since I had a fucking concussion and could barely remember my name,” Jenny joked. “And do you know what that fucker said to me?”

“Tough shit?” Merle ventured.

“I aint never seen’t a girl don’t have a mustache?” Fitch joked.

“What, pray tell?” Rhett asked.

“You want me to find a dirty Mexican in a junk car in Prichard County?” Jenny told the group, who reacted with a collective, surprised laughing gasp. “That racist prick said ‘you want me to find a dirty Mexican in a junk car in Prichard County.’”

“You could *think* that,” Fitch admitted.

“But y’ don’t say it!” Rhett exclaimed. “I mean, damn, what if yer momma was Mexikin or somethin’ like ‘at?”

“Her mom’s not Mexican,” Merle interjected.

“I said what if, Merle, like ‘at’d offend some people yknow.”

“It offended me and I’m not at all Mexican,” Jenny said.

“He pulled me over,” Charlene began.

“When?” Jenny asked.

“A couple of days ago, I was headed to Garvis from Poortown and I turned on to Lonepine, where it switches from forty five to thirty five and he pulled me over for going thirty seven.”

“I wanted t’ slash his fuckin’ tires when I heard about it,” Merle added.

“Glad I advised ya’gainst that partic’lar course a action,” Rhett said.
“Wait,” Jenny began, “he pulled you over for going thirty seven?”
“Two miles,” Jake said incensed, “over the speed limit.”
“I believe it,” Fitch nodded.
“That’s th’kind a shit Buford does,” Rhett also didn’t seem surprised.
“He came up,” Charlene set the scene, “holding his belt and puffing his chest and asked me if I knew what I’d done. I was on the way to Doctor B’s to get my checkup for the baby and I was worried that the tags were expired or the insurance or something.”
“None of which was a problem,” Merle added, “and it was daylight, so he couldn’t tell ‘at th’headlight was busted.”
“And he said I was going thirty seven in a thirty five.”
“Yer th’scourage a Prichard County, Charlene,” Rhett laughed, “some say th’meth trade is killin’ us, some say hillbilly heroin, but we all know it’s pregnant women drivin’ ten year old Buick’s two miles over the speed limit.”
“Did he give you a ticket?” Jake asked, “if he’d’a given me one I’d’ve ripped it up in front of him, gave him th’five dollars and told him I paid th’fuckin’ fine.”
“No,” Charlene explained, “he said that since this was my first offense he was going to let me off with a warning.”
“How fucking generous,” Jenny laughed.
“Y’know,” Rhett began, lighting a cigarette, “I’da had him write th’ticket.”
“Yeah, so I could rip it up in front of’im,” Merle said, angry.
“Or pay the five dollar fine,” Fitch laughed.
“Naw, naw,” Rhett explained, “so he’d hafta waste his time comin’ t’court on a woman who went thirty seven in a thirty five. Even if he was so bored he’d show up,”
“Which Prichard County deputies just might be,” Jenny laughed.
“Once’t y’got him on th’sand y’could ask if his machine is calibrated to that sophisticated a level. One would presume there’d be a margin of error in the radar gun. And if it t’was y’could ask him if he’s the one calibrated it.”
“He’d have to calibrate it?” Merle asked.
“To ensure it worked, right?” Fitch added.
“Yeah,” Rhett said enthusiastic, “how could he be one hundred percent sure th’tang wasn’t off by a mile here or there.”
“But if y’lost,” Jake added.
“Well,” Rhett explained, “if he did all that, which is highly unlikely, you’d still only have t’sleep through traffic school and wouldn’t cost ya but a little time, of which you’ve cost him plenty. Y’cain’t lose, really.”
“Yknow Buford was at th’horse show last week,” Jake told the crowd.
“This little girl fell down,” Jenny began, “having a seizure or something. And Buford had to rush over to show his ability to,” she waved a hand in the air.
“Be completely fuckin’ useless?” Fitch asked.
“Exactly,” Jenny smiled.
“Ya’d think in his volunteer fireman training he’d’a picked up some medical stuff,” Rhett pondered.
“No, that isn’t the funniest part,” Jenny explained, “there was this old man behind us.”
“With one of those voice box things,” Jake laughed.

“Smoker’s lung,” Rhett put a fist to his throat, imitating the malady.
“And he says,” Jenny began her imitation, “gett’im Buford. Boy’d pull y’over fer shittin’ in yer own house.”
“He would,” Fitch toasted with Rhett.
“Even old men with voicebox thangs know he’s a sumbitch.” Rhett chuckled, finishing his drink.
“S’why I think I’m gonna run for Sheriff,” Jake informed the group.
“Here, here, no more possession cases fer me,” Fitch laughed.
“I’d get t’be a deputy,” Merle seemed proud.
“That aint a half bad idea,” Rhett pondered.
“Don’t encourage him,” Jenny shook her head.
“I dunno, Jen,” Rhett said, “he’d be a better Sheriff than Walker. Wouldn’t have no sympathy fer’em meth dealers. I could call up a buddy from Lexington t’help with th’campaign.”
“Who?” Jenny asked, knowing who many of Rhett’s buddies in Lexington were.
“Joe Lavassaney,” Rhett told her.
“He’s certainly knowledgeable about politics,” Jenny remarked.
“He the a-rab?” Merle asked.
“Half a-rab,” Rhett explained, “and damn smart and inta all this political shit. He’d love t’help, proly. Have ya,” Rhett shifted his attention to Jake, “filed yet?”
“Nope, me and Merle thought this up on break today.”
“This sounds a lot better than th’Playstation buyin’ plan,” Rhett said, referencing another one of Merle and Jake’s schemes. “No get-rich-quick in thissun either.”
“Yeah,” Fitch chuckled, “I’m still waitin’ fer my cut from that.”
“Seriously though,” Rhett thought, “y’orta run. A good Sheriff fer Prichard County.”
“Right man fer th’job,” Merle seconded.
“I’d vote fer ya,” Fitch toasted.
“Your daughter’s awake,” Jenny informed her husband, noticing the baby had started stirring, “and wet.”

Virgil’s Night Out...

Rhett said t’me “Virgil, it t’aint always th’best way t’be, but y’gots ta be mock-a-vill-i-ain about this,” or something like that. “Keep yer friends real close, but keep yer enemies closer. If he,” ‘Tubby’ Denny Tussie, “wants t’take y’up t’Lexington t’make amends that you damn sure aint gonna make, go anyways.”

Fine.
Tussie wants me and Rock t’vote for’im.
Fine.
He thinks takin’ us up t’Lexington t’go drinkin’ and actin’ like dumbasses’ll do that.
Fine.

But I aint under any obligation not t'punch that sorry, rich, sack of shit if he pisses me off.

I'm just sayin'.

They know I don't drink, anyways. And I damn sure don't go to those damn titty bars. It's wrong, it's disrespectful, no way, no how. I only went once. And that was with Rhett. Back when he's too young and poor t'have his attitude straight and was seein' Jessie Banks. But Rhett wasn't Denny Tussie.

I pick up Rock first.

"Hey, dude, what's up?"

"Not much, man," damn fuckin' cell phone. I hate this thing. I hate every time it rings, every time I have to be a dumbass and text 'ok' as a response, every time it interrupts the conversation I was about t'have with th'real person sitting there next t'me.

"Hello," I raised a finger, told Rock I was sorry. "Listen, boy," it was the boy, he'd better behave, he was at my mom's.

"If I get called again," I explained, "hearin' y'aint actin' right and beatin' up on yer cousins," had t'leave him with mom, "you'd better get use to sittin' cuz I'll break both yer legs." He got th'message.

"Damn, dude, who was that?" Rock had t'ask.

"The boy. He won't b'have hissself when he's at my momma's, so she says he cain't stay. Pisses me off," I explained, "cuz she lets m'damn pillhead sister's kids go apeshit all through th'house."

"Crazy, dude," Rock agreed with me.

"Now we gotta fuckin' drive outta th'way t'Rogerstown." I had t'bitch a little.

When we got to Rogerstown it wasn't far til we was on Tussie Road, Tussie property and, soon enough, outside Denny Tussie's trailer. I didn't feel like getting out of my car.

HONK

Denny came out, fat little sonfabitch. Never quite looked like the devil; but with th'narrow eyes and dopey ass goatee he looked like a demon that needed some horns on his head. He had close enough.

"Naw, dammit, not in my car, not with you wearin' that," I informed him.

"What," great, he was already half drunk, "what am I a wearin'?"

"That fuckin' hat," he should know not to wear a Tennessee hat around me. "Take it off, I aint takin' y'round Lexington in that damn thing."

"Why?"

"I don't fuckin' like Tennessee." Rock was laughing at him, or me. Prolly Tussie, Rock knew what happened last time we fought, and that wasn't even personal.

"Aight," Denny wasn't dumb enough t'disagree, "s'gone." He threw the hat in th'open winder of his truck.

"Let's get some Lexington pussy, boys," Denny smiled, taking a seat in the back. I just held my tongue. I hated hearing shit like that, besides, I had Tammi at home and Denny fuckin' knew that.

"Lexington pussy's too expensive, man," Rock had reservations too.

"I got an Allied credit card," Denny shined th'silver piece of plastic around.

"You kin use that huntin' poon?" I asked

“My daddy’s Victor Tussie,” he explained, as if I didn’t know, “I kin use this doin’ n-e-thang.” He seemed real proud of that, for whatever reason.

I just turned up some country on th’reddyo. We listened for a while.

“I’d like t’check yew fer ticks,” Rock sang along, “when’d you start listenin’ t’country?” Rock asked, after a while.

“I dunno, I just been in a mood fer’it th’last few days,” I explained. “S’a funny song,” I smirked a little.

“Yeah, dude,” Rock laughed, “I’ve got her back, and I got her front.”

I laughed a little.

We drove along th’parkway fer a while.

“Hey,” Denny piped up from th’back, “how y’all feel about,” he seemed t’be pondering on th’last word, “drugs?”

Shit.

“Well I got a joint on me, dude,” Rock answered.

Shit.

“I’d do ‘roids if I could afford ‘em and find ‘em,” I admitted. “I cain’t really say nothin’,” ‘cept that it’s my damn car and my ass if we get pulled over.

“Wanna do a line?” Denny asked, not realizing that th’last guy who asked me that ended up with a broke nose, courtesy of my left fist.

“Man,” Rock seemed unsure, “I gotta work tomorrow.”

“I don’t do that shit,” I explained, completely sure.

“Well, pull off this next exit, y’need gas?”

“I got a full tank.”

“Well, y’need t’pull into a gas station.” Classy, Denny, real class guy, snortin’ in an Appalachian gas station bathroom.

“I’m pullin’ inta Dairy Queen,” I told him, “I’m fuckin’ hungry. If you,” I began, “get us caught or get in any damn trouble...”

“Don’t worry big dog,” Rhett could jokingly call me big dog, Tammi could jokingly call me big dog, guys at work could do it on a good day. I wadn’t happy t’hear it outta Denny’s mouth, “I’m fuckin’ Victor Tussie’s son. I kin make possession charges disappear real fast.”

“Fuck up yer chance at bein’ Sheriff, though,” Rock thought, hell I hoped he was right.

“Naw,” Denny seemed too calm, “they’d hafta have pictures of me with a dead girl or a livin’ boy t’keep me from bein’ Prichard County’s next sheriff. Cooper motherfucker don’t stand a chance,” he was damn sure of hisself.

“He’s a vet’ran,” I explained, “lot of people respect that,” I did, “he aint tied t’Walker.”

“I don’ even know Freddy Walker,” Denny laughed, lyin’ worse than m’seven year old.

We pulled inta Dairy Queen and I got me some chicken fingers and a milkshake and had t’wait outside while dumbass powdered his nose. This was gonna be too long a night. Rhett said Denny’d put hisself right where I wanted him. I wasn’t so sure. Rhett thinks life is a big game and all y’have t’do is strategize right. He said it’s like in basketball, playin’ zone.

“Lissen, Virgil,” he’d explained t’me earlier that day, “y’never play zone on a team that kin shoot.”

“I press out of principle,” I’d told him.

“Yeah, yeah,” Rhett explained, “but dat’ll drain ya if y’aint careful. And besides, y’do ‘at ‘gainst Duke er Luahvull, y’don’t need t’do ‘at when yer playin’ Alaska Anchorage.”

“Guess not,” I agreed.

“Jus set a good zone, let ‘em take dumbass shots and get d’ball back down d’floor.”

Well, Rhett, I saw the first dumbass shot of th’night. He’d better take more. And I’d better not get called fer th’cheap foul.

“Wooo,” I could tell the line had set in when Denny got in th’car, “let’s go t’Lexington and see sum titties!”

Dammit.

“What?” I asked him.

“Peppermint Zebra,” Denny explained, “courtesy of Allied Coal. I wanna get somethin’ rubbin crosst this here gut,” he rubbed his stomach.

I had t’keep from vomiting.

“No,” I explained, real direct like, “I don’t go t’places like that. I’ll take y’all t’the bars. I’ll drive. I aint goin’ t’no place like ‘at.”

“Lighten up,” he chided, “mebbe one’ll let y’do a teabag.” He started laughing at himself, “hundred bucks, boom, teabag.”

Before pulling out of the Dairy Queen I stopped and looked back at Denny, “this is yer first warning,” I explained, “t’quit talkin’ like ‘at, quit actin’ like ‘at, or I’ll throw yer ass in my trunk.”

“Ahright, man,” he was a little scared, “didn’t mean no harm. We kin jes see if downtown’s hoppin’.”

“Fine,” I told him.

Rock wasn’t dumb enough t’try and inject himself into that, I was in no mood t’talk and Denny, in spite of the white horse he was ridin’, wasn’t ready t’talk back t’me after a coupla toughman fights he’d witnessed. It was relatively silent on th’way t’Lexington. When we got downtown I parked by a court building, where Rhett told me it was always free. We had t’wait behind as Denny got another dosage of his medicine.

“Man,” Rock began, “we’re gonna have t’watch his ass all night.”

“I aint his daddy,” I told him.

“He’s gonna do somethin’ stupid.” Rock seemed certain.

“S’long as he don’t do it to me,” I was certain. I cracked my knuckles t’make sure my meaning was clear.

Tussie got out of the car.

“Woo, doggies, let’s get us sum Lexington wimmens,” it seemed like it might be time for warning number two. “I wanna get me one that’ll play th’ole rusty trombone,” he made some sort of dying elephant noise.

“Shut yer damn mouth,” I said, disgusted. Why anyone would think it’d be pleasant t’have a young woman, willing enough t’be in bed with ya, do that, was beyond me.

“Yknow what yer problem is, Virgil,” Denny started t’spell out fer me. “Is’at y’never thank in terms of what’s fun.” He explained as we crossed th’street.

“We got diff’reent definitions of fun,” I told him.

As we started walking, I realized I’d have t’speed up t’the Lexington pace of things immediately. I heard a girl in a nice lil’ expensive dress yelling about her purse and, directly in front of me, a short lil’ punk in clothes ‘at didn’t fit was running full speed. I stood in front of him and braced. He might s’well have run into a wall. I took the purse with my left hand and rared back my right. He looked for an escape route. He saw Rock, who looked at him like he was a fly on a picnic table. And Denny, who looked at him like he didn’t know where th’big money was. I was already angry.

“Get th’fuck outta here,” I explained, “lil’ punk.” Punks back down when somebody big as me has a fist rared back and a clear problem with anger. He ran like a scolded bitch t’his buddy’s car. I spat his direction and may’ve hit him.

“Run pussy,” Rock yelled at him.

“Thank you,” the girl seemed happy as I handed her the purse. “Let me buy you a drink?”

“Naw,” I explained, “I don’t drink.”

“An appetizer,” she invited.

“Naw,” didn’t figure I’d want anything at these hoity Lexington places, “I done eat.”

“Why’d you do that?”

“Just figured it was right,” I shrugged. “He didn’t hurt you or nothin’?”

“No, just, snuck up behind me,” she explained.

“Well, be more careful,” I told her, walking away, “and come down t’Garvis sometime. Stuff like ‘at don’t happen.”

As we were walking away, Rock and Denny had t’give me a little shit.

“Man, she’da been all over you tonight,” Rock said, surprised I didn’t take her up. “Coulda had all that you wanted.”

“I got Tammi,” I told him, “don’t need no rich, young Lexington girl. I’d burn up all m’gas comin’ t’see her. Besides,” I explained, “she’s got a man.”

“And you coulda stole her away!” Denny yelled at me like I was a damn dumbass.

“Naw,” I told him, getting myself a dip, “s’better that he hasta hear about it all night.” I told them, pondering t’myslf why that little pissant didn’t chase him in th’first place. Guess he was one of them college fags that folds like a card table when things get too interesting.

We came on to a promising selection of bars. I’d let th’boys pick, all I wanted was a table and some peace. I laid some spit on th’ground and surveyed the many establishments.

“Lotsa girls ‘at that one,” I pointed to one of them, spitting, “must be ladies night or somethin’.”

“That,” Denny began, “Virgil, is a dyke bar.” He kind of laughed at me. Like I was supposed t’know where all th’lesbians in Lexington drank.

“Maybe some of ‘em swing both ways,” I shrugged.

“Dude,” Rock began, “if they do, and they’re in that place,” he shook his head, “they aint swingin’ our way.”

“ ‘At place looks nice,” I pointed at the place across th’street, “Rhett always says Irish places are good.”

“Rhett Sparrow. Is full. Of shit.” Denny spelled out, not realizing Rhett’d cleaned up the mess between me, him and Rock, “but he aint wrong in this partic’lar case.”

“Irish bar?” I asked.

“Long as ‘ey got beer,” Rock said.

We walked towards the place. For all I always heard about bein’ a hillbilly and Lexington being this nice, rich town, it sure looked like shit underneath all these lights on a Saturday night. College fags wanderin’ around, girls dressed like sluts, street people talkin’ t’themselves and goofy lookin’ underage punks were crowding th’streets. I wished I was back home in Garvis, watchin’ a movie with Tammi and drinking a Mountain Dew.

“Cain’t always have peace and quiet,” Rhett told me earlier that day, “sometimes y’gotta deal wit noise and bullshit.”

We went into the Irish place; I wasn’t about t’give th’kid at the door the satisfaction of looking over my ID. He’d have to trust that I was, indeed, thirty five.

And unhappy.

When we got there, the place was packed. Being six five, (**ever how much Billy weighs**), I didn’t like having to move through crowds. I really don’t mean t’bump into anybody, but I can’t help it. Although, I have t’admit, nothing is quite so fun as bumping into some drunk with a little too much piss and vinegar and watching him instantly back down when he sees me.

I took a seat at one of the tables outside; Rock brought me a water when he took his seat beside me.

“Didn’t have Mountain Dew, dude,” he told me, apologetic.

“Where’s,” I almost spat the name, “Tubby?”

“Inside, some of them college boys were from the fraternity he use t’be in.”

I rolled my eyes at that one, “tappa kegga bud?”

“I guess, man,” Rock chuckled a little.

“Think she’s single?” He pointed at a girl.

“I don’t care,” I informed him; he got up to talk to her. I sat there and drank my water. I flagged down a big dude in one of the bar’s tshirts and motioned him to my table.

“Hey, dude, kin y’get me a paper cup?”

“Paper cup?” Don’t make me explain why, man.

“Yeah, paper cup,” I told him.

“You gonna dip on my patio?”

“Yeah,” it couldn’t be as irritating as all the people smoking.

“I’ll let that slide tonight,” he chuckled.

“Good,” I thought, “you’d better.”

He brought the cup and I got a dip. I guess he was as bored as I was, so he decided t’make conversation.

“Just water?”

“Don’t drink,” I told him.

“DD?”

“Yeah,” I settled the dip.

“Where you lift at?”

“God,” I thought to myself, “I hope he aint flirtin’ with me.”

“Home,” I answered.
“Lexington?”
“Prichard County.”
“Where’s Prichard County?” He’d, evidently, never heard of it.
“Close t’Whitesburg n’ Hazard,” I explained.
Rock walked up t’the table. He made a smoke motion and I waved him off. He went to find some dark corner, I guess. I needed t’ask him somethin’ before he ran off.
“Where’d Denny go?”
“Shit, man, drinkin’ shots a Crown,” he informed me.
I rolled my eyes, “shit.”
“Sure y’aint comin’? She,” he’d found his girl, “has a friend.”
“I got Tammi,” I told him.
“She won’t know.”
“Don’t care,” I said, before spitting.
“He aint gonna be a problem is he?” The fella I’d been talking to asked me.
“Not s’long as I’m here. If y’don’t want him smokin’ shit somewheres,” I began.
“Naw, he can have fun, so long as he don’t start nothin’,” the guy told me.
“What’re you, a cop?”
“Bouncer,” he told me.
“How much ‘at pay?”
“Fifteen an hour on a regular night, twenty on a Saturday at a place like this.”
“Need t’start bouncin’,” I thought aloud.
“‘Ey, ey, ey, Virigible,” Denny came by th’table, drunk as ever. “Aint no,” he leaned in, “good pussy innis bar.”
“I aint movin’,” I told him, “til you find Rock. And he aint movin’ cuz he found him a girl.”
“Then,” he thought to himself, “I’ma find me a sure thang. See if I can drop me a farthammer.”
“A what?” I asked, having never heard that one.
“You’ll get mad if I tell ye,” he smiled. I grabbed him by the arm, gave a little force to it.
“Lissen dumbass, if you wanna go slut it up through Lexington y’kin do’at on yer own time. But I aint chasin’ yer ass down in Lexington, late at night.”
“I’ll be ahright, Virgi, Virgil-man,” he told me, stumbling.
“You’ll’ve a broken damn nose,” I told him.
“Y’aint no fun, man, I’m gonna find me a sure thang. I’ll hit it, finish’er off with a cherry Danish,” I didn’t want to know what that meant, but he punched my shoulder, so it couldn’t have been good, “and be back at d’car.”
“If you aint,” I told him, “I aint waitin’ fer ya. Jus leave yer lil ass in Lexington, unnerstan?”
“Psshit, I can’t afford more than an hour with no Lexington bitch,” he dismissed. Goddamn, I wanted to punch this sonfabitch. Bad. I could take th’drinkin’ in some people. Rhett was kind of funny when he got that way, and Tammi kept herself under control when she was. I could take shit talkin’ because too many guys do too much of it. What got my fist clenched was that he wouldn’t shut up about all th’disgusting shit he

wanted to do to some woman. Only a low sonfabitch puts himself up against a girl. I just remembered what Rhett said.

“Kick his ass if y’ must, but please, please, please, doncha do it in public,” Rhett laughed, “I hate havin’ t’go up t’th’ Lexington jail.” I figured I should take my friend and lawyer’s advice on this one.

“I’ll call ya in an hour,” I warned, “you’d better answer.” He strolled off to do whatever it was he intended on doing.

“Friend of yours?” The bouncer asked.

“No,” I told him, “some dipshit I got duped inta drivin’ up here.” The bouncer laughed at that one and walked away, I guess to bounce, or see if someone needed bouncin’. I asked if I could get another water.

Then I saw the girl, and her man, from earlier.

“Hey, big dude, you got ta let me buy you a drink,” he told me.

“I told yer girl I don’t drink.”

“Naw, man, you saved me from havin’ t’kick that dude’s ass.”

“Sure,” I thought, “you was gonna get yer teal, two-sizes-too-small polo shirt dirty with that punkass’ blood.”

“I just do th’right thang,” I told him. “Y’could get me a water though.” He had his girl bring it. She still had th’purse. Rock came up about that time, eyes all bloodshot.

“Gonna get y’some?” He whispered in my ear.

“Shut up,” I told him. He just went about drummin’ on th’table and periodically whispering at the girl next to him.

I got another call on the cell phone. Th’boy had better be behavin’ hisself.

“Hey’err big dog,” it was Rhett.

“Hey.”

“Aint kicked Denny’s ass yet, hev ya?” He laughed.

“Actually I’m in th’ Lexington jail. You gonna come up here?”

“I’m glad I know yer shittin’ me,” Rhett said, relieved.

“Yeah, Denny ran th’fuck off somewheres.”

“Well, I’s just checkin’ up, call me if y’need anything,” Rhett told me.

“Yeah man, you gonna be over t’th’house Sundy, watch th’pay-per-view?”

“Shit yeah,” Rhett answered, enthusiastic, “I aint missin’ a bullrope match.”

In the time it took me to talk t’Rhett, some fake redneck college fag had decided to inform Rock that the girl he was hitting on belonged to him.

“Hey, dude,” Rock was, clearly, still pretty high, “I aint tryin’ t’steal yer chick but I didn’t make her do nothin’.”

The fag’s friends were coming over.

Dammit, dammit, dammit.

“Look, dudes, I didn’t come here t’fight nobody, but if I got to,” ok, Rock was in a corner. I don’t know how many of those college boys it would take t’whup his ass, but I saw how many they planned on using. I got up from the table, put in a dip, and strolled over there quietly.

“What’s up Rock?” I asked him, casual.

“Nothin’ dude, I got it under control,” Rock lied.

“Ahright,” I cracked my knuckles. I didn’t wanna start any shit, but I knew how t’finish it. “Just checkin’ man,” I laid a spit across th’ground.

“Hey, man, just, yknow, watch who yer hittin’ on,” one of the frat fags said t’Rock, cooling down a little bit.

“Why don’t we head somewheres else?” I asked Rock. “Mebbe get some food, I’m hungry.”

“Can we get tacos?” Rock asked.

“We’ll get what’s open.” I told him.

When we got on th’street I gave Rock a little shit for getting so damn stoned and teased him about the girl.

“Shit, didn’t say she’s with ol’dude,” he informed me.

Then I called Denny, “where th’hell are you? We’re goin’ back t’Prichard County, now!”

“Dude,” Denny answered, trying my patience a little, “I got me a sure thang here a waitin’ fer me. High class, Lex-vegas,” Lex-Vegas? “poon.”

“Tell it y’need t’head back t’Rogerstown,” I told him.

“Gimme thirty minutes man, y’kin pick me up, in fronna Rupp.” I just hung up on his ass and called a more strategic mind than mine for advice.

“Rhet Sparrow, Esquire and all that entails, how may I hep ya?”

“Rhett,” I barked into th’phone, “Denny’s at a hotel with what he said’s a ‘sure thing’, I got Rock, he said t’get him in thirty. Now I’m inclined t’kick his ass all th’way back home or leave his ass stand on th’street. Which one shouldn’t I do?”

“Ahright, ahright, hoss, y’got t’lissen now,” sounded like he was drinking dinner, “there’s a place over on Limestone, know how t’get on Limestone?”

“Yeah.”

“Well over’err y’got a twenny four hour place, close t’Kennedy bookstore.”

“Whattabout it?” I didn’t know where the lil SOB was going, but he’d never steered me wrong before.

“Get you n Rock somethin’ t’eat, wait on Tubby t’call, when he does, get’im.”

“Rhett, I aint in no mood...”

“T’go t’jail. Y’got a congressman’s son, Virgil,” he explained, “y’cain’t leave his ass, as much as y’ort to and y’damn sure cain’t kick his ass.”

“So?”

“So get’ye some biscuits and gravy, think about how pretty Tammi is and keep Rock outta trouble.”

“I swear little man,” I bitched into th’phone.

“I know, I know, fer all we know ol’Tubsy could be writin’ his own obituary right now.”

“I hope t’hell so,” I said, hanging up.

I found the place Rhett was talking about, though taking a stoned, drunk redneck like Rock in there was a good way for Rock t’lose a paycheck. I got myself a Mountain Dew and sat, pissed. Then I got a call.

“Hey, uh, Virge?” It was Denny, callin’ me, again, something I didn’t like t’be called.

“What?”

“I kinda got arrested, soo...”

“I’m goin’ back home, have yer daddy bail yer ass out.”

“Vote Tussie fer Sheriff,” with that, I hung up on him, and drove Rock home.

Sheriff Candidate Denny “Tubby” Tussie Arrested on Charges of Soliciting Prostitute...

LEXINGTON KY- Denny “Tubby” Tussie, of Rogerstown, Republican candidate for Prichard County Sheriff was arrested last night in Lexington on charges of soliciting a prostitute. Tussie (pictured), the son of Representative Victor Tussie, is accused of soliciting an undercover officer in downtown Lexington around 12:30 last Friday night. He was arrested at the Radisson Hotel where he had offered to pay for the room the officer had reserved with an Allied Incorporated credit card. “Mr. Tussie,” said Police officer Irene Davis, “asked the price to engage in oral sex and used vulgarities when enquiring about another sexual act.” When asked to elaborate, she told reporters, “you don’t want to know and you probably can’t print it.” Tussie apologized for his actions saying, “I know I’ve disappointed a lot of the folks back home who supported me. I only hope the people of Prichard County are as forgiving as they have been kind.” He has not, as of press time, withdrawn from the election. Tussie’s opponent, Jake Cooper, of Garvis, has said he “hopes (Tussie) does the right thing and drops out, at least until this is solved in the courts.” Tussie’s father, Representative Victor Tussie, who was in Washington, could not be reached for comment.

AMANDA ABEL- PLAIN DEALER STAFF

Curiosity...

... “you don’t want to know and you probably can’t print it.” Now when I read that anyone who knows me could guess that, yes I do want to know. The first person I called was Virgil. He had been there that fateful night, though Tammi reported he got home around three o’clock, cursing poor Tubby.

“What n’t’hell’d he say t’at lady cop Virgil?” I asked, probably a little to enthusiastically for a man as understated as Virgil to understand.

“Rhett, honestly, I don’t know. I staked out a table at this Irish place and talked to the bouncer.” He reported.

“Learn anything?” I inquired.

“I need t’move t’Lexington and start bouncin’,” he answered, honestly.

“Rents high,” I told him.

“Pays better,” he made a valid point.

“It’d go great until ya broke a frat boy half in two.” I laughed.

“Probably, one of them college fags was tryin’ to start shit with Rock until him and his friends realized I was with him and,” he emphasized an important point, “I was sober.”

“Got Rock home ahright?”

“Yeah, but he needs to quit smokin’ that shit. Gums up y’mind.”

“They say it’ll do’at after a while.” I posited. “Well you tell Tammi I said hello, and I said she’s on valid legal authority takin’ Sam’s cell phone from ‘er.”

Virgil laughed, “aight man.”

I needed to make yet another call.

“Jerry,” if anyone would have read the full police report, it would be the editor-in-chief of the *Plain Dealer*.

“To what do I owe the pleasure Mr. Sparrow?” He even answered the phone like a man trained to broadcast.

“Read d’ police report?” I asked, figuring he’d take my meaning.

“Which one?” He let out a bellous laugh. Good point though, there had been a few important ones recently.

“Tubby Tussie’s,” I answered, “I’ont me some lurid details.”

“Can’t say I have,” he seemed apologetic. “I had double A interview the arresting officers. He got caught pants around his ankles, no real need to read the reports. It aint,” he reminded me, “a deadbeat dad case.” He continued, “besides, she seemed pretty certain whatever the idiot said wouldn’t be able to run.”

“That’s precisely why I wanna know what the dumb SOB asked her to do!” My curiosity was killing me. “Jerry you and Bonnie,” the lady who cut my hair, “are where I go for tawdry entertainment. I cain’t watch daytime shows and my own life, thankfully, quit havin’ any when Lindsay and I finally broke it off.”

“Well you’re either going to have to start TiVoing *As The World Turns* or date another horse farm heiress.” He joked.

“I think I just threw up in m’ mouth,” I responded.

“Well I’ve got to get back to work. The Fugate senior quilt contest won’t cover itself.”

“Punny,” I groaned as I hung up. This was getting me nowhere, but I was distracted from my overly simple case of projectile rock hitting rural house. “Miss Bethann,” I called through the intercom.

“What can I do you for Rhett?”

“You very busy at th’ moment?”

“Not presently, typing up that last deposition.”

“Great read, aint it?”

“More than I ever wanted to know about pigs having sex.”

“Speaking of which, could you come in here, bring a notepad.”

“Oh god,” she groaned.

“Now,” I said as she entered the office, “I need ye t’ call up the Lexington Police Department, s’in the uh,” I had to think which of my many phonebooks held that number, “blue book.”

“Blue book, Lexington Police,” she spoke as she wrote.

“And do a foya, that’s F O I A,” I spelled

“Didn’t start this job yesterday, Rhett,” she reminded me.

“Aight, well do a foya, unner yer name, on the September twennyninth arrest of one Denny Tussie. Need the police report,” I finished.

“You are not,” she began, both incensed and surprised, “defending Tubby Tussie?”

“What?” I couldn’t believe she’d ask such a despicable thing, might as well ask if I had a sixteen year old Taiwanese slave chained up in my garage. “Shit naw. It says right here,” I picked up the front page of the paper, “on the front page of the *Plain Dealer*, th’ voice of the Prichard County mountaineer, that he propositioned something s’ filthy it cannot be printed. Nahw, aintcha just a dyin’ to know what it was?”

“Not really, Rhett,” she shook her head.

“Well I am, so foya me that when y’ get a spare few minutes today.” I realized a pocket was empty, which meant I had one more question as she headed out the door, “and one more thang,” she turned around, “kin I bum me one of them menthols y’ smoke?”

“I suppose,” she drew out as she headed out the door.

“Yer a princess among secretaries, anyone ever tell you that?”

“Every time you run out of cigarettes, Rhett,” well it was still true.

That night, at the pool hall, I was tacking my sheets towards the wind and generally conversing with Rock when I was reminded that he was with Virgil and Denny that fateful evening.

“Ey, ey, ey, man,” this was around whiskey five or six, mind you. “What’ t’ hell’d ol Tubsy say t’ at lady cop?”

“Dude,” Rock began, in his laconic drawl, “I don’t know, but said it turned her bitch real quick. That was right b’fore he arrested her.”

“Y’ mean, uh, she ‘rested him,” to tell the truth I was actually inebriated enough to be slightly confused.

“Yeah, yeah, man. He’d talked shit all night though man.” Rock assured me.

“Whatcheh mean shit?” I drunkenly cross examined.

“I’m gonna teabag me this, I wanna do me a cherry Danish, she’ll be blowin’ my rusty trombone. Man the shit got disgusting after a while,” he shook off the disgust, “I think Virgil was about three seconds from punchin’ him in th’nose but he started talkin’ to that bouncer at McCarthy’s.”

“Herd jew almost got yerself in a dusty lil dustup that night.” I remarked. “Yknow back when I’s tomcattin’ in Lexington I stayed outta McCarthy’s on Sardies.”

“Good idea man,” he confirmed. When a young lady walked in his attention shifted, and his voice quieted. “I’m wingmannin’ for Fitch, I got work t’ do.”

“Aint she a tad hefty?” I asked. I didn’t hold anything against the lady, just wasn’t sure I’d hold the lady against me.

“Fitch is after her niece, man.” He pointed to the table, where Fitch was helping a comely young brunette sink the five ball.

“You two have fun,” I raised my glass.

“Always do,” he smiled and proceeded to buy the lady, ever so slightly older than Fitch’s brunette, a drink.

The next day I was slaving over a hot pen and yellow pad when Miss Bethann came into the office.

“Hot off the mojo for you Rhett,” she held the police report in her hands.

“Oooo, gimme,” I said enthusiastically, casting my pen aside.

“Am I the only one here who does any real work?”

“Miss Bethann,” I informed her, “rock hits house, rock damages house, Allied blasts hill, blasts make rock fly, Allied owes owner of house, Axlerod is right pissed at Allied, this case wins itself.”

“Boar fucks sow,” she noted another pending case.

“Sow’s owner settles it out of court by killing boar’s owner’s dog, thus ending conflict until one, t’other or their livestock leaves their land again.”

“Mr. Patterson killed a dog?” I couldn’t believe she was surprised.

“They say he killed a judge back the crazy old days.”

“This county,” she said, exiting the office.

“This county,” I agreed. Grabbing a handful of Skittles, I hunkered down to read the report and finally know just what horrid thing leapt from Denny’s mouth.

“Blah, blah, blah, suspect was intoxicated,” well, no shit detective. Finding “Tubby” Denny Tussie sober would be a feat.

“Blah, blah, blah suspect propositioned for oral sex.” Salacious but, in this modern clime, hardly salacious enough. Then, I read it. “Suspect asked officer quote ‘How much to stick it in yer pooper and then do a good fart hammer?’” OH, damn, there it is. “After ascertaining,” the report read, “the nature of this as a sexual act.” Guess she needed a diagram, “arresting officer revealed herself and advised backup.” Them Lexington vice boys evidently got sophisticated all the sudden. Good thing I only ever went to legal places like the Peppermint Zebra, behaved myself, and didn’t make it a habit. I had to share this information with one person, whom I immediately dialed.

“Jenny,” my enthusiasm had to be showing.

“What’s up, Rhett?”

“Remember that detail about Tussie we was all wonderin’ about?”

“The thing too fucked up to print?” She asked.

“Yeah,” I confirmed.

“What about it?” She wasn’t quite sure why I’d call on such a subject.

“I did an open records thang and found out what ‘zactly it was he said.”

She perked up, “you have to tell me.”

“He asked her to do a fart hammer.” I said, unable to contain my laughter.

“Ok, Rhett, I’m not a fourteen year old pervert or a frat boy, you’re gonna need to explain that a little.” She chuckled.

“Well, he’d pull out and fart a big ol’ stinky Denny Tussie’s fatass fart right near her nose.” I explained, perhaps in too much detail.

I could hear the face Jenny was making, “ewww!” She yelled into the phone.

“That sick twisted motherfucker! He wanted to pay to fart on a hooker?” She asked, in disgusted disbelief.

“Well, his daddy and his employer shit all over everbody so maybe the Tussies are gettin’ refined.” I’ve always been an optimist.

“I can’t believe my husband was losing to this man.” She said in contemptuous disbelief.

“Well he done fucked up. All the Tussie machines and Tussie money cain’t save ya once somebody at Bonnie’s Beauty shop knows y’onted to fart on a hooker in Lexington.” I confirmed, happy that, for once, that the right man was going to win a Prichard County election.

Local UMW, Poortown Pool Hall, The Fugate Old Regular Baptist Quilting Circle and Bonnie's Beauty Shop...

These institutions are the most popular of the many, largely informal, social clubs of Prichard County. Prichard Countians, as unpretentious people, tend more towards unofficial social clubs. The most intriguing of these informal institutions is the wonderful Miss Bonnie's beauty shop. Proudly serving Prichard County for over fifteen years, it is where Garvis', and the surrounding area's, more discerning beautiful women get their hair done along with, periodically, their fingernails. Bonnie even got a tanning bed last year. That's been a big hit.

Oh to be a fly on the wall at this, with the notable exception of Rosie, enclave of femininity. A man could learn much about the wiles, perceptions, problems and innermost thoughts of the beautiful mountain women who populate this establishment. .

An Afternoon of Pampering, at Bonnie's Beauty shop...

What, with the stress of pregnancy and the recent election, and a seeming end to the latter, Jenny Cooper needed a day devoted to her. A day to kick back, beautify herself, converse with friends and drink some really good iced tea. For most of the ladies in Garvis Kentucky, that meant a trip to Bonnie's Beauty shop. Right there on Lonepine Rd., either right after or right before it becomes Courthouse Lane, depending on which direction you're coming from.

Bonnie's had become a regular institution among Prichard Countians, and rightly so. Bonnie's was clean, crowded and usually serving some of Bonnie's trademark, and delicious, mint ice tea. Its three chairs served as the launching point for most of the knowledge common to the people of Garvis and its three stylists held a, deserved, reputation for excellence. In the farthest chair from the door, the only chair at the shop's inception, was Miss Bonnie's station. With a framed photo of Dolly Parton, a few cans of various hair stiffening products, and a "Standin' on a Corner in Winslow Arizona" postcard, it was a reflection of Miss Bonnie's professional personality. Next to her was a station devoted to the artistry of Frank Frazetta containing the only jar of old fashioned barbicide and, underneath the old fashioned "ear jar," all the tattoo magazines in the establishment, which served as the office for one William "Rosie" Rosemond. And in the third chair, working her way up, worked Raylene, with her G.R.I.T.S decals and few photos of her beloved Kenny Chesney.

This comfortable atmosphere was where Jenny, leaving Trent happily playing gay nanny to little baby Caitlin, had decided to make a day of it. Luckily, as she sat in Rosie's chair under his watchful professional care, Jenny had something to important to gossip about.

"I found out what Denny Tussie said to that cop in Lexington," she gushed, as Miss Bonnie brought her a glass of tea.

“Ooo, honey do tell,” Miss Bonnie answered, “if it aint fit t’print, it is shirly fit t’hear.”

“I don’t know,” Jenny warned, “it’s barely fit to hear.”

Rosie usually stayed quiet, understanding that gossip was a necessary occupational evil, but this had even the motorcycle riding tattooer intrigued.

“Well now,” he said reaching for some sprayable hair product, “even I’m curious. What,” he pondered, “could be so horrible that a cop who poses as a hooker was even disgusted to hear it?”

“That disgusting son of a bitch,” Jenny emphasized her story’s subject, “asked how much it would be to, quote,” Jenny wanted to make explicitly clear these words weren’t her own, “stick it in yer pooper,” she underlined the invisible word with an index finger, “and do something called a farhammer,” she punctuated the absurdity of the last two words, “on this cop he thought was a hooker.”

“What’s a fart and hammer?” Raylene asked, lighting a spearmint cigarette.

“Fart hammer,” Jenny corrected.

“Honey,” Miss Bonnie explained, pointing her perfectly over manicured finger skyward, “I have been around the block and heard my share of thangs but I never heard a that one.”

“Should I explain it? Or you want to?” Rosie smirked, deftly removing an offending end.

Jenny grinned widely, “you may go right ahead.” She invited, not wanting to be the one who said what Rosie was about to.

“It’s where, after y’get done, y’put yer ass right in her face and let a big ole fart.” He explained, perhaps too calmly for the impact of the material.

“Omigod that is the most disgustin’ thang I thank I ever heard,” Raylene said in such disgust she almost dropped her cigarette.

“Lor-dee-be,” Miss Bonnie exclaimed, words failing her.

With that the bell above the door rang and Miss Bonnie’s next appointment, one Kate O’Shaughnessy, entered. The lithe, ivory skinned, scarlet locked young beauty had decided she needed a short break from dealing with prosecuting Prichard County felonies, and that an appointment with Miss Bonnie would help her look better for her many upcoming dates both private and professional.

Recognizing Jenny, she waved and offered some words of congratulations, “hey, it looks like your husband has that election in the bag.”

“As long as Prichard County voters aren’t as stupid as they seem,” Jenny, ever the pessimist, commented.

“You’ve never had to explain complicated legal procedure to a group of twelve of them,” Kate moaned.

“I do not envy your job,” Jenny said, conveying condolence and understanding as only a Kentucky woman can.

“It can feel thankless.” Kate sighed, taking a seat in the shampoo chair.

“I don’t even think the stupidest of Prichard County stupids could vote for him after what you just told us,” Rosie smirked, assessing the symmetry of his work in progress.

“I cain’t even look at heem now, I damn sure aint gonna vote fer’eem.” Miss Bonnie proclaimed, deftly handling a sprayer.

“Something I missed?” Kate asked, already feeling a little better as Miss Bonnie carefully massaged in crème rinse.

“That thing Denny said to the cop that was posing as a hooker,” Jenny began.

“How much fer yew t’put in yer mouth,” Kate interrupted, in her best Tubby Denny impression.

“No,” Jenny smirked and chuckled, “what the cop said they couldn’t print.”

“And they shirly t’goodness couldn’t.” Miss Bonnie warned.

“Woul’n’cha know already, seein’ as how yer persecutin’ on him?” Raylene asked, a little uneducated on the legal systems fine points.

“He was arrested in Lexington,” Kate said, unsure where the confusion came from.

“But he lives in Prichard County.” Raylene still wasn’t getting it.

Jenny’d had enough, she looked over at Raylene with a “you’re so damn stupid” scorn, “you go to trial in the county you’re charged, Raylene, duh.”

“Well that aint really fair; what if you cain’t get a ride?”

“Then y’don’t get a hooker.” Jenny answered deftly.

“That’s bad, cuz I show my boobs all the time in Florida and I’d hate to have to drive back cuz I got caught and had t’go t’court.”

The room momentarily stopped with the heft of that one.

“That teaches ya t’keep yer titties in yer shirt unless there’s plenny a money not to.” Miss Bonnie warned, internally reminding herself that Raylene can cut hair and is only a niece by marriage.

“The Jessie Banks method,” Jenny’s comment got a knowing laugh from Rosie.

“Former Country Ham Princess, current Melonfest champion” Jenny mocked.

“Both on the strength of my hair and makeup,” Miss Bonnie reminded them, holstering her sprayer.

“Ok, ok, I have to hear this,” Kate gushed, taking a seat in Miss Bonnie’s esteemed chair. “What did he say already?”

“It’ll traumatize yew,” Raylene warned, as she flipped through a country music magazine.

“He wanted to fart in her face,” Jenny cut to the chase.

“Gross,” as did Kate’s terse one word response.

“Could you imagine anybody wantin’ t’do that. If Mark ever asked t’dew that I’d kick ‘eem right square.” Raylene shuddered.

“And the thought of Denny Tussie’s ass alone,” Miss Bonnie had to lift her scissors away from Kate’s head to even ponder that one.

“This far,” Jenny held her hand in front of her nose, “from your face, letting a big wet,” she paused for emphasis and thought, “fart,” the word oozed from her mouth.

“Oh nothing could cure a thought so vile,” Kate said, shutting her eyes.

“But we shore kin try cain’t we? Get her some tea, Raylene.”

After taking a sip of the wonderful minted concoction Kate confirmed, “that’s a start.” And proceeded to ascertain a crucial detail, “who told you this?”

“Guess,” Jenny answered, trying to nudge which mutual friend would come across such information.

“It shore wadn’t th’angel Gabriel.” Miss Bonnie posited.

“Well I know you aren’t friends with any Tussies,” Kate correctly deduced.

“Rhett,” Jenny answered as if she were stating the patently obvious.

“Rhett Sparrow?” Raylene attempted to clarify. Rosie, in disbelief at his coworker, paused momentarily, looked Raylene in the eye and asked.

“How many damn Rhett’s d’you know?”

“Wait, wait, how did Rhett come into this information?” Kate asked, emphasizing the name to suggest the improbability.

“He foya’d,” Jenny paused on the word, a little unsure it was the correct one.

“Foya’d,” the lawyer confirmed.

“The arrest report,” Jenny finished. “It said it right in there.”

“That sounds like something Rhett would do,” Kate said, “he gets the better of his curiosity.” Kate so eloquently put it, adding “and the freedom of information act,” she had, after all, been across the aisle from Mr. Sparrow on a few occasions.

“He gets his hair cut here,” Miss Bonnie interjected.

“He has th’prettiest hair for a man,” Raylene added, “and he never lets me touch it.”

“Cuz y’smoke while you cut hair.” Jenny reminded her.

“I don’t get ashes on nobody,” Raylene defended herself.

“It bothers some people,” Miss Bonnie sighed, “havin’ t’stop is half the reason I quit altogether.”

“I’m having dinner with Rhett tonight,” Kate dropped.

“Hot date?” Jenny playfully patted Kate’s arm.

“I’ve had dinner with Rhett,” Rosie said casually, he was, after all, the man’s trusted tattoo artist.

“I tell ya, if I was a lil younger I might let him slip them gator boots of his under my bed and pull on his pigtails.” Miss Bonnie smiled.

“It’s nothing like that,” Kate dismissed the crowd, “I’d just been stressed out with all this sheriff’s department bullshit and he said,” she paused and cleared her throat, “wha doncha lemme getcha a lil tandori somethin’ t’ease yer troubled mind.” She mocked an accent she secretly found somewhat alluring.

“Friend of th’court?” Rosie asked

“Friend of the court,” Kate confirmed.

“Prolly for the best, honey,” Miss Bonnie cunningly informed her, “they say two redheads can only end up doin’ two thangs that start with f...one’s fight n’t’other aint fryin’ bacon.”

“What’s t’other?” Raylene asked, giving Rosie pause to silently inform her.

“Oh, I think she could get along with Rhett. He’d keep you entertained.” Jenny prodded, always hoping to help friends find romance.

“Edge of your damn seat,” Rosie’d been to the Poortown Pool Hall a few nights.

“And neither of y’all are bitchy redheads,” Miss Bonnie thought, going back on what she never really meant.

“You’ve never been across the aisle from me,” Kate informed her.

The bell above the door chimed again when, baby and diaper bag in tow, a coal-truck mechanic and candidate for sheriff, entered, cooling Kate’s seat a bit.

“There’s yer handsome man n’ pretty baby,” Miss Bonnie complimented Jenny.

“Yeah, yeah, pretty baby’s fussy, handsome man’s tired.” Jake complained.

Eager to be near any infant, Raylene rushed over, “kin I hold her?”

“If you put out that cigarette,” Jenny answered.

“My momma smoked while she was pregnant with me,” Raylene protested. Jake wasn’t so harsh as to say “and...” but he was harsh enough to think it, and harsh enough to wonder exactly what Raylene’s mom smoked. After extinguishing her cigarette, Jake was relieved to hand little Caitlin over to someone else.

“Beautiful baby,” Kate smiled at Jenny.

“Thank you, her name’s Caitlin, she’s seven months,” she informed her.

“As a ‘Kate’ myself, I approve,” Kate laughed.

“She’s probly smart enough t’do yer job one day. Got Jenn’s book smarts and my common sense, I reckon.” Jake liked to brag on his daughter a little.

“I’d love to mentor her, but I wouldn’t advise her to work in Prichard County.”

“Aint that shit right,” Jake haggardly agreed, “can I get some tea?”

“H’ep y’sef hun,” Miss Bonnie told him.

“I finished that design fer ya Jakey. S’in th’sketchbook there,” he directed Jake to a diary sized notebook proclaiming a love for “Ass Kicking Southern Rock.”

“That’s gonna look killer man, like the way the snake coils around.” Jake said, surveying the design and taking a sip, “good tea, is that mint?”

“It most cert’nly is.” Miss Bonnie confirmed.

“How y’make it?” Jake asked, innocently.

“Wouldn’t’chew and ever woman in Prichard County like to know.” Miss Bonnie answered.

“Alright, darlin’ yer done,” Rosie told Jenny, brushing some hair from her shoulders.

“Great job, feel like a million bucks.”

“Then ‘ats a real value. Wash and cut’s fifteen.” He informed her.

“Pay the man, Jake.” She commanded her husband.

“Hey, Jake, when you come over kinya lookit the kickstart on the other wife fer me?” Rosie’s custom job had been a little temperamental of late.

“Sure, fifteen?”

“Fifteen,” Rosie confirmed. Jake handed him a twenty and waved him off when he went to the register to make change.

“I swear,” Jake complained, picking up the diaper bag, “you are gonna bankrupt me, woman.”

“It takes two things to look this beautiful, honey,” she began as she, with some relief, took the baby from Raylene, “time and money, right Caywynn? Time n’ money.” She seemed to be imparting the lesson to future generations.

“Time and money,” Jake repeated, earning a kiss on the cheek.

Every fall...

Prichard County plays host to something called the “Country Ham Festival.” We love it, we really do. It’s a fall festival with carnival rides, something generously called an “art exhibition” (commemorative plates and whittled ducks are a sort of art), pageants, a parade, goofy shows, funnel cakes, a “seriously kick ass” (Merle’s description) demolition derby, and a contest to see which Prichard Countian managed to cure the best country ham you ever tasted. It’s a can’t-miss event on every social calendar and a crucial campaign stump in a year like this one. So with that in mind...

A somewhat disappointing Fair...

Sometimes, even for Rhett Sparrow, nothing seems to go quite right. This was the case on an October night that he ended up spending the beginning of in a courtroom.

“So, in yer estimation, the damages to this house couldn’t’ve been caused by an errant blast?”

“In my expert opinion,” the witness informed Rhett.

“Really now?” Rhett was, to put it mildly, skeptical. Already perturbed that he was missing one key event of the festival, that he had been dying to lend his support to, Rhett was about one lie over the line.

“Let’s look at plaintiff’s exhibit A, photograph of the residence b’fore y’all started blastin’ in Toadavine Holler,” a tiny pocket of Prichard County. “These pictures, I remind th’court, was takin’ by an Allied employee. Whatta you see Mister Rudolph?”

“No visible structural damage, but that doesn’t...”

“I just asked y’what y’saw Mister Rudolph. Now, these pictures, taken by the homeowner, two and a half weeks inta blastin’, which I’ll remind the court, was approximately 3,000 feet from th’house, lil’ over half a mile, what d’ya see Mister Rudolph?”

“Damage to the awning, broken left window and...”

“Slight sinkage?”

“Objection, leading,” Allied’s lawyer didn’t have any love lost for Rhett Sparrow.

“Ahright,” Rhett didn’t give Judge Axlerod time to sustain, “strike that Missuz Mary. Uh,”

“Watch yourself Rhett,” Axlerod warned.

“In this area,” he used a pointer, “does there appear to be damage to the foundations of the home?”

“I can’t be certain with the angle of the picture, they could’ve been taken at different places.”

“So we orta be suin’ th’photographer?” Rhett got a few chuckles from the jury.

“Mister Sparrow,” Judge Axlerod interrupted.

“I got no further use fer’im yer honor,” he hated calling Axlerod that.

“Good, recess until tomorrow afternoon,” Axlerod wanted out as bad as anyone in the courtroom.

Except maybe, Rhett, “thank father God!” He exclaimed, sitting back down at the table and gathering his things. “We orta have this here one in th’bag Sandy,” he

addressed his client, “our expert puts this fella t’shame, has experience with Allied and is a high flutin’ UK mining and min’rals researcher. Y’just head t’t’h’fair, eat y’some ham, let me do th’worryin’.” He told her.

“Ahright Mister Sparra,” she smiled.

“Rhett, honey, call me Rhett.” He told her, for perhaps the millionth time.

Upon exiting the courtroom and making his way down the steps, Rhett lit himself a cigarette and started speaking, to himself and his one track mind.

“Baby show,” he said looking down at his watch, “baby show, baby show, baby show.” Rhett made it to the fairgrounds and the ticket booth; under ominous skies.

“Aw, please,” he pled with the sky, “doncha rain on ol’ Rhett Sparrow.”

“If it keeps on a rainin’ there aint gonna be no demo derby, and I comed t’see th’cars a wreckin’,” the man in front of Rhett was arguing with the ticket lady, “if there aint gonna be no demo derby, I want a refund.” The ticket lady began to argue, when Rhett decided to speak up.

“Jimmy,” he began, “as yer legal advisor lemme tell ya. Y’pay fer th’whole fair, th’rides, th’contests, th’ambiance; th’demo derby is jus a parta that. And, ‘at bein’ said, I really don’t have th’inclination t’bail yer ass outta PCDC once’t I’m done judgin’ th’Elvis’in contest.” That seemed to calm the man down a little bit, and put Rhett first in line with the ticket lady, as the drizzle started to trickle from the dark Kentucky skies. He showed her a piece of paper that said he was, indeed, an esteemed judge in the evening’s last event, an Elvis impersonation contest. She stamped his hand with a rubber “J” and Rhett headed towards the pavilion stage.

“Baby show, baby show, shit,” the speakers were blaring a mediocre amateur version of Deanna Carter’s “Strawberry Wine.” Rhett realized this was an annual byproduct of the Country Ham Princess pageant’s first round. “Damn,” he said to himself, “missed th’baby show.” He decided to call the friends that he’d hoped to support in the evening’s first contest.

“Hello,” Jenny’s voice answered Jake’s number.

“Hey Jen, sorry I missed th’contest, damn court went all night. Y’all up’t’t’h’campaign booth or th’Democrat booth?”

“We would be at one of those,” she told Rhett, “but Jake got himself arrested.”

Rhett knew Jake would be angry not to win, but didn’t expect he’d actually be angry enough to spend the night in jail.

“He kinda threw a chair,” Jenny informed Rhett, “he’s in jail.”

“Aw, Jenny,” Rhett said, exasperated, “You gots ta be shittin’ me.”

“No, he threw a chair at a judge.” She informed him in a tone characteristic of her description of the stupider things her husband has done.

“Threw a...SHIT,” Rhett didn’t want to believe her, “please tell me yer a shittin’ me Jenny, I’m burnt out on legalisms.”

Jenny chuckled into the phone, “I’m shittin’ you.”

“Thank god,” Rhett was relieved, “y’all not win?”

“No, we should have,” Jenny explained, “but Blanche Tussie got to be a judge so Lauren Trapp’s baby won it.”

“Well,” Rhett wasn’t surprised at this particular corrupt dealing, “‘at sure is a shame. Y’all kin tell me all about it when we go through th’ham contest. I’m hungry as hell.”

“We’ll meet you there,” Jenny told him, “as soon as Charlene comes back to watch the booth.”

Rhett headed up towards metal building one which was, usually, where citizens of Garvis voted and got their driver’s licenses, just as the rain started to come down. He got inside just in time.

“Howdy Rhett,” Raylene greeted him, “it’s two dollars t’get in and sample th’ham, this is a citizen’s ballot fer th’people’s choice reward.” She explained. Rhett paid and took his ballot.

“Thank y’darlin’, but I think m’votes been cast by force of genealogy,” he told her.

“Huh,” Raylene didn’t get his meaning.

“My great Uncle David’s booth five,” he explained, making his way over to Jake and Jenny at booth three.

“So y’all didn’t win?” Rhett asked, conveying some condolence.

“We should have dude,” Jake informed him, as Rhett began making faces at baby Caitlin. “Fuckin, th’baby that come in second was real cute, I could see losin’ t’her.”

“That was a pretty baby,” Jenny conceded.

“Say ‘not as pwetty as me, she was a pwemadonna bitch,’” Rhett said, getting a smile and chuckle out of Caitlin, of course that could’ve been from tickling her arm.

“No,” Jenny said, “she was a pretty baby. But Lauren was a former cheerleading captain and runner up in the Country Ham Princess Pageant and her mom is friends with Blanche Tussie,” Jenny explained.

“There aint no fair contests in Prichard County is’err?” Rhett asked Caitlin. “Them Tussies won’t give you a fair deal, no dey won’t.” The group strolled up to booth five. David, Rhett’s great uncle on his mother’s side, had entered his ham in both biscuit and bean soup form.

“I look forward t’this ever year,” Rhett said to his Aunt Christine, David’s wife, who was serving the food. “You got a pie in th’contest doncha Aint Christine?”

“I do, punkin,” she told Rhett.

“Cain’t lose,” he smiled.

“Here, Michael Rhett,” she gave him an extra ladle of bean soup, “eat plenny, yer too skinny.”

“Aww, honey,” Christine turned her attention to Jenny, “y’all got robbed. That lil girl has th’prettiest smile I ever saw.”

“Thank you ma’am,” Jake smiled, taking a biscuit.

“That’s very sweet,” Jenny smiled widely, loving a compliment to her pride and joy.

“Well its easy t’see why,” Christine explained, “pretty momma and a handsome daddy.”

“Thank you so much,” Jenny beamed, almost blushing.

“Well,” Jake told Christine, “we beat th’one person I really wanted t’beat.”

“Whozzat?” Rhett asked.

“Jessie,” he informed Rhett.

“Beam or Franklin?” It was a popular name in Prichard County for a few years.

“Franklin,” Jake explained, “I dated her before I shipped out. She met th’dad while I was in basic.”

“Ooo,” Rhett responded, “good y’all beat her.”

“Shoulda won,” Christine told them. “She old enough for a piece of cornbread? It’s real soft,” Christine inquired, pointing at Caitlin.

“Yes ma’am, thank you,” Jenny said cordially.

“Such a pretty lil girl, yes you are,” Christine smiled at Caitlin, getting a big grin in return.

“Vote Jake Cooper fer Sheriff,” Jake smiled at Christine.

“I shorely will,” she assured him.

As they walked away, Rhett reminded the group to vote for that booth.

“Shit,” Jenny said, “I’ll vote for her just because she complimented my whole family.”

“She wasn’t lyin’ about lil’ Caitlin,” Rhett assured her.

“Or how handsome I am,” Jake chuckled.

“Country Ham Festival goers,” the loudspeaker cracked, “on a count of th’evenin’s rain and an expected front movin’ in, this evenin’s demolition derby will be cancelled.”

“Bet Merle’s pissed,” Rhett said, finishing his bean soup.

“This was gonna be his first year,” Jake agreed.

“Wouldn’t all those rednecks WANT to play in the mud?” Jenny asked.

“Yeah, but th’festival committee’s attorney’s wouldn’t want one of ‘em t’come t’me after he snapped his neck in two in ‘at mud bowl.” Rhett explained.

“I’d also like t’call all judges fer this evenin’s Elvis impersonation contest t’th’pavillion. Once again Elvis impersonation judges t’th’pavillion.”

“Well,” Rhett told the group, “I’m off t’judge me some Elvis’in.”

When Rhett arrived the other two judges were present. Miss Bonnie, in a western shirt she’d purchased at the Graceland gift shop and Judge Clyde’s sister, Anita, festooned with Elvis memorabilia, were watching the finish of the Country Ham Princess Pageant.

“Hidey ladies,” Rhett waved, “we get t’see Carl Gibson again this year?”

“Naw, Rhett,” Miss Bonnie said, somewhat disappointed, “he aint in th’contest this year. Had t’be down t’Gatlinburg fer somethin’.”

“Shame,” Rhett resigned, sorry the perennial favorite Elvis wouldn’t be performing, “he always seemed t’nail it. Specially on ‘I Cain’t Help Fallin’ in Love with Yew.’”

“It’s cuz he’s Melungeon.” Anita explained. “They say Elvis was Melungeon, s’why he was such a beautiful man, even later on.” Anita had always been a fan of later years Elvis.

“Uh-uh honey, it’s all in them hips,” Miss Bonnie seemed to be daydreaming a little. “Put them thangs in some leather, oo wee,” Miss Bonnie preferred the comeback special Elvis.

“Am I th’only one who judges th’sangin’ and pickin’?” Rhett asked, being the best judge of Sun session era-Elvi.

“Rhett,” Miss Bonnie began to explain, “Elvis Aaron Presley was soo much more than pickin’ and sangin’. And where’s yer Elvis necktie?” She asked.

“I’s in court all day and Elvis hangin’ offa my neck don’t convey lawyerly gravitas,” Rhett explained, picking up a program, “least this tie’s paisley,” Rhett offered.

“Anybody else think it’s ironic that our best candidate so far is a coroner that does the very fat Elvis?” Rhett asked, a little disappointed in this year’s festival.

Somehow, Rhett Sparrow is still smellin’ like a rose...

“And Mr. Sparrow, in spite of some of your antics,” Axlerod was a crusty old jackass of a judge, crusty in appearance, crusty in mindset and crusty in voice, “this jury has decided to rule in favor of your client.” But I knew how to play him, and twelve Prichard Countians, when I had to.

“Judgement t’the plaintiff,” hot dog, now on to my client’s money, “I am suggesting the jury award damages in the amount of four thousand compensatory, fifteen thousand punitive and ten thousand...”

“Th’original amount requested,” I had to interrupt.

“Was pushin’ it, Rhett,” I wanted to remind him he’s the one who has to get elected, but nickling and diming my damages was showing at least one constituency was running through his head. “Where was I, oh yes, ten k pain and suffering. I don’t want to see Mr. Sparrow or anyone representing Allied arguing anything similar in my courtroom again any time soon,” bang, over and done, tomorrow they award, tomorrow the check gets cut, the day after tomorrow I get paid.

After congratulating my clients and sending them on their merrier, soon to be richer way, five head came over to piss and moan at me. Five head, Mitchell Parkinson, was Allied’s shit hot young gun, so nicknamed because of his tremendous forehead. He was supposed to be one of the brighter minds and bigger assholes to be practicing in the state of Kentucky, and couldn’t fathom having the misfortune of losing today to the brightest and biggest.

“Another win for the Appalshop hippie set,” he seemed in a congratulatory mood.

“I coulda sworn it was for a family in Prichard County,” I didn’t even look up, “but if y’onna write Appalshop a check they’d probly,” I pondered a second, “turn ya down.”

“Appalshop, a check,” he scoffed, “please.”

“God,” I thought to myself, “please let this fantastic asshole shut up. Or at least go practice the craft of assholing somewhere else.”

“I simply,” practicing a little assholing of my own, “fight for the god and government given rights of th’finer people of Prichard County.”

“Nothing worse than electricity, a job and a reclaimed park for your kids to play on,” Five Head, Allied’s mouthpiece in the field.

“Where’d ya go’t’school five head?” I asked casually, not caring that I interrupted whatever was spewing out his mouth.

“Duke Law.” He answered; I guess he was proud of that.

“Kentucky,” I picked up a wad of paper, “outscores Duke,” shot for the waste basket, “once again,” thank god it went in. Drama would’ve been lost. I decided to get up and start walking; assholes can’t hit a moving target.

“Make no mistake, I’m a Kentuckian, I’ve seen what Allied has done for Prichard County.” He seemed adamant enough to follow me.

“Lissen,” I stopped him at the courtroom door, “where y’live at five head?”

“Lexington,” he seemed proud of even that, for whatever reason.

“Prichard County,” I smirked, slapping his chest, I really was proud of that.

On the way out I ran into old Dexter, old Dexter was just general courthouse security and watch. At something like nine thousand years old he was really just a retired guy we figured we might as well pay to sit around the courthouse, he wasn’t going to stop any homeland security threats to the Courthouse any time soon.

“Whach’ye say ol’ Mister Sparra?” He knew I was in trial that afternoon.

“Not t’much Dex. Won me a case,” I smiled.

“Well ‘at’s good Mr. Sparra, yer a winnin’ ‘em left n’ right.” For that, I lit his cigarette.

“Yeah, squeezed some money outta ol’ Allied Coal.” I told him.

“Dey say in Prichard County a man kin walk two paths,” Dex began an old rhyme.

“Go be a Poortown union man,” I quoted the second.

“Or a dirty Allied scab,” we finished in unison.

“Y’take it easy ol’ Dex,” I told him.

“Always do,” he grinned wide and nearly toothless.

“Oh, Dex,” I had one last thing, “Miss Katherine?”

“Oh she still heauh,” he grinned, knowing my intentions. I winked back at him and headed for her office.

I saluted her secretary as I headed for the open door.

“Knock, knock,” I goofily said as I took in a vibrant vision of what the goddess Brigid must’ve looked like. Or, at least if the goddess Brigid wore businessy skirts, had Miss Bonnie do her hair and read the Prichard Plain Dealer.

“Hey, Rhett, to what do I owe the pleasure?” She smirked. God I loved that little Shelby County accent of hers, slight lisp, but it was a cuter imperfection and such careful enunciation. She’d somehow hit on country charm and Louisville propriety all at once.

“I was just lookin’ to congratulate our pretty,” she looked at me with a little disdain, “and supremely intelligent,” which quickly disappeared, “lil Commonwealth’s attorney on her conviction of one Mr. Freddy Walker.”

“It was an open and shut case, really.” And modest!

“Honey y’ got twelve Prichard Countians with enough damn sense to convict a powerful former sheriff. If only fer jury selection ‘at deserves congratulations and an invitation to a little hillwilliam soiree this evening.”

“I’d love to Rhett but I’m already invited to a party tonight,” DAMN, damn, damn, damn. At least she was sweet when she turned me down.

“I’m going to the Poortown Pool Hall. Jake Cooper’s having a victory party.” Oh she plays with my heart and mind, but I’ll admit to loving every second of it.

“And ya thought there’d be two parties in Poortown on a night that aint Sardy?”

“I’d love to go with you,” she smiled.

“A glorious diamond in Prichard County coal, y’are, anybody ever tell y’at?”

“Every time you ask me out, Rhett,” well, it was still true.

“So, what’re Jerry and double A coverin’ this here week?” I asked her, seeing an open newspaper.

“Actually, I don’t know, I just had Mary,” her wonderful secretary, “get me the sudoku.” I loved how she carefully said every syllable of sudoku. Insignificant yes, but sometimes those are the sexiest things.

“Well gimme see th’front.” I told her. She obliged and I began to read. “I’ll be goddamned,” I couldn’t believe what was in front of me.

“What?” She asked, worried.

“Tussie, he did his own self in,” her reaction showed as much surprise as mine.

“No way. No way, no how,” and a little more disbelief.

“Says right’cheer, in the face of new evidence in the trial of Clay Massey, Judge Abraham “Clyde” Winston has handed down an indictment to Representative Victor Tussie.” I read it with disbelief, and pride in my mentor.

“Clyde got him?” She smiled.

“Naw, Clay Massey ratted his ass out.” I laughed, even better. “Guess he didn’t know the prasn’er’s dilemma.” I thought aloud.

“You read too much game theory, Rhett. Y’nerd.”

“Nerd with a pretty date,” she blushed at that one.

On the way to the car I informed her that I had, again, defeated Allied in a humble Prichard courtroom.

“That’s nice to hear, I heard you were in some shit on that one,” she said, referencing the difficulty of even getting the case to trial.

“Yeah, but when it’s Axlerod on the bench and Five Head cross the aisle I know how t’come out smellin’ like a lil rose.”

“You always do, don’t you Rhett?” She grinned, knowingly.

“Hell, honey, I try.” I told her.

“Where do you even find a car like this in Prichard County?” She said, admiring what I lovingly called Loretta.

“Not in Prichard County,” I explained, “when I was servin’ under Clyde Winston one’a th’most important pieces of wisdom he imparted was that a fine automobile should be driven off the line in Bowlin’ Green and,” I paused to emphasize a key point, “if ya cain’t do’at, then it aint a fine automobile.”

“Sound advice,” she faux pondered; her slight sarcasm both deftly delivered and cute as a damn button.

“Now, lemme show y’what a fine Kentucky Cadillac car can do.” I announced, pointing my way toward Poortown in my best Steve McQueen.

When we arrived at the Pool Hall, the joint was already crowded and jumpin’, I attempted draw Kate’s attention away from the fact that, round the side, the Poortown Rat Pack had a different joint rolling. Luckily someone had invited Jessie Banks, so it wasn’t that difficult.

“Wooo, this here aint a party,” she held one of Therule’s two martini glasses aloft, “I wanna see some tit-tays!”

“I’m sad t’admit I dated her,” I whispered in Kate’s ear.

“I dated Five Head,” she confessed.

“Yer too good fer lawyers darlin’,” I smirked. “Hey there Country Ham Princess, e’rbody inside?” I cautiously greeted Ms. Banks.

“Yeah,” she answered, clearly still as lightweight as ever, “fuckin’, they fuckin’ dunno how t’have...” she paused, searching what brain was left for the right word, “fuckin’...” almost found it, “FUN!” She looked Kate over, “hey cutie.”

“Well, I’ll see if I kin liven it up,” I told her, drawing Kate away from the line of lipstick lesbian fire.

“Is she?” Kate began to ask.

“Don’t know, don’t care,” I informed her.

Upon entering, I saw, in his new uniform, Jake along with his visibly pregnant wife. I inspected his badge.

“Prichard County Sheriff,” I read, giving it a tap, “yup, ‘at’un’s real. Cain’t buy that at’ d’ country ham fest.”

“No sir,” he smiled.

“Congratulations,” Kate shook his hand, “I look forward to working with someone that has a brain.”

“I’ll do what I can,” Jake smiled, lighting a cigarette.

“Who invited twinkle tits?” I asked Jenny, pointing towards the crowned princess of Prichard County.

“I can’t drink, I needed some entertainment.” Jenny answered. “We’re trying,” she told me quietly, “to convince her Merle and Charlene’s baby is Fitch’s.”

“Fitch sign on fer that?” I asked.

“Not yet,” Jenny grinned wide.

Passing a table on the way to the bar, I noticed Merle, also wearing a new uniform, was entrenched in a game with Jamal.

“I’m a dep’ty. Dep’ty gets a do-over!” He pled his case.

“Already abusin’ yer office, I see.” I greeted Merle with a slap on the back.

“Hey,” he shrugged, “gotta see what this badge can do,” he grinned a huge toothy grin.

“Baby with her grandmomma?” I asked.

“Yup, lil lady’s first chance t’have a beer,” he pointed to Charlene, sitting at a table with double A.

“As a state police detective,” Jamal began, seeming to have loosened up to Prichard County, “I pull rank and jurisdiction, my shot.”

“Lawyers?” Merle pointed his cue at Kate and me.

“I believe Mr. Brooks has you on that one, deputy.” Kate ruled.

“In my capacity as yer friend and legal advisor, let th’detective shoot.” I advised Merle.

“Shit,” he dismissed. Kate and I headed for the bar.

“Hidey Rhett, Miss O’Shaughn’sy, what’ll it be? And remember,” Therule seemed to plead, “I’m out of martini glasses, nobody here orders anything with more than two ingredients very often and beer’s fifty cents in honor of Sheriff Cooper.”

“Merlot?” Kate ordered, unfamiliar with what was behind Therule’s bar.

“From a box?” Therule asked.

“That’s fine.” He fixed her drink.

“Usual,” I gestured towards my favorite bottle.

“I’d like t’tank you two for keepin’ it easy on an old bartender.” Therule told us, his gratitude showing.

I handed him a ten, “hold on t’the change Mr. Dulex.”

“I can,” Kate began, reaching for her purse, I waved her off.

Sitting at the bar, with Hank and Miss Bethann keeping watch, was Joey Lavasseny getting himself good and soused.

“Hey’err Michael Rhett Sparrow Esquire and, uh, all that entails. How are YOU?” He asked.

“Not as fine as a man with a pivotal role in winnin’ this here sheriff’s election.” I told him, clinking glasses.

“Ahhh, I didn’t win it,” he drunkenly dismissed, “that dirty Republican fucker just lost it.”

“No,” Hank carefully reassured him, “Joe you won it.” Hank was good at dealing with drunks, had practice from being my friend for so long.

“Rhett,” Joey asked, “did he really want to,” he paused, took a deep breath, and found his words again, “FART on someone? I mean, FART? To expel gas upon a,” he again needed to gather himself, “person?”

“I really cain’t be sure, ol’top.” I winked.

“He can’t be sure,” Joey turned to Miss Bethann laughing and adjusting his glasses, “he can’t be sure. Mr. Therule Dulex,” Joey motioned for the bartender, diverting his attention from the conversation.

“You two,” Kate, a little worried, asked Hank and Bethann, “are taking him home, right?”

“Yes,” Miss Bethann strongly assured her.

“He’s got a place in the guest bedroom.” Hank informed us.

“Good t’hear, and y’all,” I remembered a crucial detail about being out with Joey Lavasseny “don’t let’im drink anything else that ends in boilermaker or bomb.”

“As always,” Hank began, “way ahead of you Rhett,” Miss Bethann finished.

“Gonna put anythin’ hilarious in his bed?” I leaned in to ask Hank.

“Blow up goat,” Hank whispered in my ear. We toasted that and I escorted Kate to a table. Picking up on natural rhythm, I was able to light her cigarette.

“Only when I drink,” she assured me, taking a draw.

“Course,” I assured her. At the neighboring table Jamal and double A took a seat.

“Glad t’see ya here Detective Brooks,” I raised my glass in honor.

“He’s got a date,” double A quickly informed me, winking at Kate and grinning widely.

“Picked a good’un,” I told him.

“Very astute young reporter,” Kate said. We got double A grinning wider.

“Thank you Miss O’Shaughnessy, Mister Sparrow. I’ve come to enjoy this little community.”

“Glad t’hear it.” I smiled.

“You saved it on the stand today.” Kate reminded him.

“All in the line of duty,” Jamal was a man bound tight to his obligations as an officer of the law.

“You a fishin’ man Jamal?” I asked him.

“From time to time,” he answered, unsure of where I was going with this one.

“Well make sure and take somebody else if y’take lil double A there,” I pointed to the young reporter, nursing her first beer.

“Why’s that?” Jamal still didn’t know where I was going.

“If y’just take one Baptist,” I informed him, “she’ll drink all yer beer.”

Kate looked at me like I was an idiot, but a charming one, and double A made her defense.

“That’s a really old joke, Rhett.”

“Yeah,” I grinned wide and took a drink, “but it’s a good ‘un.”

Eventually the old jokes and young merriment found its way outside the bar, to the middle of the street, where Merle and Jake were indulging in a favorite pastime.

“As the top dog in Prichard County law enforcement,” Jake began, “I would like to explain that, though I bought these in Gatlinburg,” he raised the firecrackers in his hand, “they are legal in the state of Kentucky.”

“Th’illegal ones are all in Merle’s trunk,” Fitch belted from the back.

“Mister Fitch, do I need t’search yer pockets?” Jake’s deputy demanded. “Didn’t think so,” he finished, tapping his hands on his belt.

“I’d like to thank all of you for coming out, and especially Joey there for all his help.” Jake continued.

“Bess man for the schob,” Joey raised one fist in the air, his other arm holding on to Miss Bethann, who seemed to be all that was keeping him from making contact with the asphalt.

“But,” Jake’s speech continued as he raised his cigarette to a fuse, “I’d especially like to thank Denny Tussie, for making sure I ended up sheriff of Prichard County.” He laughed, lighting the fuse and dropping the firecrackers. They popped ferociously, getting applause and cheers from most of the crowd.

“I told you not to shoot off the loud ones, faggot!” A slightly perturbed Jenny yelled to her husband.

“Faggot?” Kate was confused at that insult.

“Between how much it irritates her,” I explained, “and how much it irritates th’baby that’s her stock insult for anyone with loud guns and fahr crackers.” I explained.

“T’Denny damn Tussie,” Merle lit a few and let them pop, “and Freddy Walker,” a few more, “and fuckin’ Buford,” it seemed as if he’d gone through a whole box.

“He bought enough of those to last about six July fourths,” Charlene, standing next to Kate and I, informed us. “He’s burned through almost all of them in a week.”

“FARTHAMMER!” Merle yelled his newly learned obscenity, throwing down a few more with Jake.

“Are ya really surprised?” I asked Charlene.

“Do they do this a lot?” Kate had to ask.

“Naw, honey, they got wives to keep ‘em reined in most a th’time.” I explained.

“Those two faggots,” Jenny came up, cursing her husband and his friend, “I mean assholes,” she said, to a slightly offended Trent. “You’ve woken up all of Prichard County,” Jenny yelled.

“Not like anybody’s gonna call the cops on us,” Merle reminded her.

Therule came to the door, “th’more time you two dumbasses spend out here the less I make in tips n, by god,” he continued, “the more fahr crackers I let y’shoot th’more shit I hear from that damn preacher.” Merle hadn’t counted on the law calling himself.

With that, the party meandered either to their cars or back inside. I was outside, staring at the Prichard County sky with Kate, a fine place to be.

“Ready t’call it an evenin’ Miss O’Shaughnessy?” I asked my date, sensing that if I stayed any longer I may be unable to drive her home.

“How ‘bout a night cap, Mister Sparrow,” she smiled at her, admittedly unexpected, response. I looked over at the smiling, young lady and unable to contain myself, moved in for a little kiss. Being as I had been up against Kate in the courtroom I was surprised at the reciprocity she showed when I was up against her now. I was, half unwittingly, lighting my own celebratory fireworks.

“Mmm, you smell really good Rhett,” she informed me as our lips unlocked.

“I try, Right Guard spray and Old Spice stick,” one trick it didn’t hurt to give away.

“Well it smells good,” aint that just my Sparrow luck? Even if I fall in shit, I always end up smellin’ like a rose.

I suppose from the time I was a small boy I had lived in an atmosphere in that county where it was almost a sport or a game to monkey with elections.
-Ed Prichard

Truth is stranger than fiction, but it is because fiction is obliged to stick to possibilities, truth isn't.
- Mark Twain, "Following the Equator"