

## DUDE DROP INN

It was Saturday night and the smoke-filled Dude Drop Inn bustled with activity. Oaken had cranked up the jukebox and had to yell to be heard over the laughter, music, and chatter.

Victor and Paul leaned their backs against the bar, both drinking beers and watching the crowd. Bobbie and Isabelle had taken a small, round table, talking girl-talk. Bobbie motioned to Paul and waved her empty beer bottle. Paul instinctively knew to what order.

“Oaken!” he called out, motioning toward Bobbie. Oaken nodded in recognition and Paul continued his conversation with Victor.

“Been in Locust all my life,” he said. “Hell, I’m probably related to half the people you see here and don’t even know it.”

“I’ve never settled in one place,” Victor said, taking a swig from his bottle. “Dropped out of high school and joined the army as fast as I could. Been moving ever since.”

“You don’t want to settle down, find a girl?”

“Never seems to work out,” Victor answered. “They never last long.”

Oaken dropped a fresh bottle on the counter next to Paul’s elbow, and he picked it up.

“Delivery,” Paul said as he walked the bottle over to Bobbie, while Victor motioned for Oaken.

“Shot of Kentucky bourbon.”

Oaken poured a glass, and Victor slugged it. He hissed, straightened his back, and stretched his shoulders. Don’t poke the bear, he thought, as he nevertheless motioned for another. He downed that one and felt the stirring within. I done poked him now. Screw it. This feels good, the Beast in me hasn’t been out for a long time, and this dive is filled with opportunity.

Victor ran his fingers through his hair. He faced the bar, leaned his elbows on the counter, cocked his head, motioned for another glass, then guzzled it, too. He stood erect, and sank further into the Devil’s lair.

Paul returned and slapped Victor on the back. “I think me and her are going to hook up tonight. Maybe go skinny-dipping at the lake. Izzy might be up for it too. You in?”

Victor seemed to not hear Paul. “I just got in the mood,” he mumbled.

“For what?” Paul asked as Victor turned back toward the crowd.

“Kicking some ass.”

Paul chuckled. “Plenty of ass around here deserving getting kicked.”

“Anybody here you want me to take care of for you? I got this sudden urge.”

Paul looked at Victor, unsettled, not sure if his friend was joking. “You feeling alright?”

“Never met a man I’ve been afraid of,” Victor volunteered. “Anyone. Just show me somebody.”

Paul looked around the tavern. Smitty, drunk, was paying at the bar. Paul quickly swiveled on the balls of his feet and raised his hand to shield his face.

“Fuck. Smitty. Recognize him? The asshole banker trying to steal my farm?” Paul said under his breath. “I didn’t see him when we came in.”

Unsteady on his feet and barely aware of those around him, Smitty lifted himself off the stool and headed for the door. Victor glared at him as he passed. He turned back to Paul and rapped his knuckles on the bar.

“Time to tune him up,” he said.

“Wait, what’re you planning to do?” Paul asked, but Victor was already heading for the door. “Shit.”

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Smitty shuffled across the parking lot to his car, feeling sorry for himself and muttering incoherently. Ever since his wife had left him he hadn’t been able to get laid, and that was going on two years. And she’d left him for the manager of a convenience store of all things. “Damn Thrifty Mart,” he muttered as he tried to figure out which of his pockets had the car keys. Or were they in his jacket? He’d heard she had a heart attack but felt no sympathy. Serves her right. Well, actually he did feel sorry for her, even if she had dumped him for a two-bit weasel. A bad ticker wasn’t good and she didn’t deserve it. But not his problem. His problem was, once again, he was going into the Dude Drop Inn alone, and leaving alone. Why don’t women like me? I have money, I’m the fucking banker! I can do things around town!

He stepped up to the Lincoln Continental and, having found his keys, started to fumble with them.

“Hey, your name Smitty?”

He turned and saw the vague shape of a man approaching him with hands clenched. Something was off, he thought, as alarms rang in his head. Sometimes a client from the bank would approach him for an update on their loan or some such thing, but his sixth sense told him this was not one of those times.

“Yeah,” he answered, hesitatingly.

“Remember me?” the man called out.

Smitty thought he should explain that he was slightly drunk and not in the best shape memory-wise, but decided the best policy was to keep his answer short. “No,” he said. “I don’t. Come by the bank tomorrow.”

“Sure you don’t remember me?” the guy growled, stepping closer. Smitty looked at him, confused, searching his memory but not able to connect the face.

“Yeah. I mean, no, I don’t remember you.”

A blinding punch to his cheek knocked his teeth together, causing a flash of white in his eyes as he rolled against the hood of his car.

“Of course you don’t remember me!”

His mind scrambled, and Smitty tried to make sense of what had just happened.

“You hit me!” he cried out. “Why did you do that? I don’t know you.”

“You guys never remember fucking guys like me, the ones you leave on the street.”

Smitty felt himself being grabbed by the collar and pulled up, almost nose to nose with... who was this again?

“Remember me now?”

Smitty stared him in the face, which didn’t register, and his eyes watered as the pain in his cheek spread down to his chin. The full realization that this attack could quickly spin out of control became clear. The man was loud and close now.

“I hate fuckers like you. My ma lost her home. My home!”

“Who are you?” Smitty whimpered.

“How many kids like me you throw out?”

Grabbed again, Smitty felt himself thrown over the hood of the Lincoln. His attacker

looked back at the parking lot, checking for any witnesses who might be coming by, but no one was there. Smitty put his fingers to his cheek, pushed against the swollen, spongy tissue, and felt a drip, starting from up in his sinuses, down to his nostril. He thought, his cheekbone might have gotten cracked. Looking up at his attacker, standing over him, he became fully aware that he was alone and helpless, and at a loss to understand this guy's beef.

"I don't know you!" he insisted. "Did I do something to you?" he pleaded, his voice cracking.

"You kicking anybody out now?"

Smitty felt the fist slam hard again, his eyes flashing white as he stumbled backward. That didn't hurt so much, he thought. My face is becoming numb.

"Tell me you're kicking someone out! I want to hear you say yes, motherfucker! Just say it."

Smitty, spent, wanted this to end. Lacking any thoughts of defense, he looked down at the ground.

"That's what I thought."

The man leaned in close enough for Smitty to smell the bourbon on his breath. "Next time you hang a notice, I bet you remember me then."

One last punch and Smitty was unable to think. Blackness was taking over. "Who is this fucker?" he thought to himself. But as he lost consciousness the answer didn't matter.