Late Nite

Brett Davis
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Third Place Short Story (tie)
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It hadn't really rained at all that day, but a near-constant drizzle had reduced the two hikers to soaked, trembling scarecrows.

They were standing on the side of the highway at the top of a small hill, with their hands jammed deep into the pockets of their ragged overcoats. Their faces were frozen into masks of boredom and irritation. When a car passed by, which was a very infrequent occurrence, the two would stand side by side and stick out their thin arms with their thumbs up, in the universal hitchhiker's sign. They hadn't had a ride all day, and it was almost evening.

"Albert, it looks like we ain't going to get a ride at all," the tall one said. He frowned and spat on the pavement at his feet. The spittle bubbled up white for a second or two, and then faded away, pushed into the pavement by the drizzle.

"Ain't you the optimist, though," the short one said. "Maybe the next car comes along'll give us a ride, Luke. We must look pretty sorry, I reckon."

The tall one laughed. "Yeah, you go on dreaming there, Albert. Maybe your dreaming will get us a ride." He looked at his partner. "You're right about one thing, though, we do look pretty sorry." He laughed again. "At least you do. I can't see myself, but I reckon I look just as bad."

Neither man had taken a bath in over a week, so they tried not to stand too close to each other. The tall one, Luke, had on a dingy khaki overcoat that hung down to his knees, over his dark brown trousers. He wore military boots with chewed-up laces. He had found them in a dumpster in Mississippi, and had evicted the family of rats that had taken up tenancy in them. His hair was long and black, and hung down in his face in greasy strings. He was only 35, but looked much older.

Albert, the short one, was a dumpy little man in a green coat who wore old yellow tennis shoes on his feet. He was goggle-eyed and pale, and pudgy in an unhealthy-looking way. He was over 40, but even he didn't remember how much.

Albert walked over to the side of the road shoulder and sat down on the guard rail. The ground cut off steeply on the other side of the rail, running down into what looked like swampland, with thin, gnarled
white trees poking up out of thick black water. The swampland ran as far as they could see, on either side of the highway.

Albert sat on the rail, unmoving, for several minutes before he asked, “Are you sure your sister’s gonna go through with the deal?”

“Yeah, ’course she is,” Luke said. He was still standing at the edge of the road, and he didn’t turn around to look at Albert when he answered him. “Why wouldn’t she? It was her idea, after all.”

“Aw, I don’t know,” Albert said. “It just seems kind of weird.”

Luke kicked at a loose bit of gravel, and sent it skittering across the road. “Well, it’s not,” he said. “It’s her business, and if she wants to call me out of Mississippi to do it, it’s all right with me. I ain’t got nothing there anyway.”

Albert rubbed his hands together and shivered. “I agree with you there,” he said. “And two thousand bucks is a lot of money.”

“More’n we got now, anyway,” Luke said. He was being sarcastic. He didn’t have any money at all. He sighed and peered down the highway, but there was no sign of a car.

“What’s wrong with the guy, anyway?” Albert said. “Does she just not like him, or what?”

Luke turned around and walked to the rail, and sat down about four feet from Albert. “She said he beats her. He won’t give her a divorce. So she doesn’t know what to do, and figured she’d call me up.”

They sat in silence for a minute. They had gone through all of this before, but they had nothing else to talk about. Talking about it, over and over, was a way of preparing for it.

“What’re you gonna do with him?” Albert asked tentatively.


They were quiet again. After a few minutes, Albert began to cough softly. “How far do you think it is to Birmingham?” he asked between coughs.

“Too damn far,” Luke said. “It would help if we knew where we are now.”
They both heard the rumble on the pavement at the same time. They jumped up off the rail and ran to the side of the road. A red pickup truck was approaching. Luke and Albert smiled, and their thumbs shot out at almost the same second. The truck slowed down as it approached, and it finally stopped before it even got to them. They ran up to the passenger side of the cab.

The driver leaned over and rolled down the window. He was an old man, with the lean, weatherbeaten look of a farmer. He was wearing a cheap-looking tan fedora with a green band around it. He had a big smile.

"Where you boys headed?" he asked through the smile.

Luke smiled back and tried to brush some of his hair out of his eyes. "Birmingham," he said. "But we'd appreciate a ride to almost anywhere."

The farmer laughed. "I ain't going as far as Birmingham, but I'm going close to there, to a place called Athens. I'll be happy to take you there."

He unlocked the passenger door and they climbed in. Albert sat next to the old man.

"Sorry we ain't too presentable," Albert said.

The old man laughed. His pink gums and white teeth showed when he laughed.

"That's all right, that's all right," he said. "Can't expect a man to be clean on the road, not on a day like this."

Albert smiled and settled back into the seat. He glanced at Luke. Luke was asleep.

They drove for two hours without saying much. It got dark quickly, so they couldn't see the scenery; not that there was anything to see.

Finally, just when Albert was about to doze off, the old man steered the truck onto a highway exit. Albert couldn't see anything worth exiting to. "What are we doing?" he asked.

"I'm hungry," the old man said. "There's a little restaurant down here that I always stop at when I'm through here." He looked at Albert and the still-sleeping Luke. "Ain't you boys hungry? I would be, if I'd
been on the road all day."

Albert smiled weakly. "Yeah, we're starving, but we ain't got no money."

The old man laughed again, and slapped his palm on the steering wheel. "Don't worry about that!" he said. "I got plenty of eatin' money, and if I can't help out some fellow travelers, who can I help?"

Albert smiled broadly. "Well, all right. We're with you, I guess."

Luke woke up when they pulled in the restaurant's parking lot. The restaurant was small but clean-looking, with a large neon sign above the door that proclaimed it to be the Late Nite Restaurant.

"Where are we?" Luke asked.

"We're gonna eat, Luke," Albert said. "Clifford here said he's gonna buy us some supper."

The old man stuck his arm across the cab at Luke. "Sorry, son, you went off to sleep before I could properly introduce myself. M'name's Clifford."


The Late Nite was a little bit larger on the inside than its outside appearance suggested. It was clean, however, with a hardwood floor, ceiling, and walls, and four ceiling fans that kept the air moving. The tables were clean formica, and their silver legs were still gleaming. The legs looked out of place against the wood decor.

They sat down at a table near the door, and a plump waitress came over almost immediately.

"Hi, Clifford, how ya doing?" the waitress asked, in a stiff tone that suggested that she really didn't care. Clifford didn't seem to catch the tone at all.

"Hi, Polly, how's tricks?" he asked, with his huge smile spread across his face.

"Not good," she said. "Ain't had much business tonight."

"Ah, don't worry about that," Clifford said. "It's early yet, only ten o'clock."
“Yeah, I guess so,” the waitress replied. “What do you guys want to eat?”

Luke looked down. The menu was printed on the table, right under the clear plastic finish. He hadn’t noticed it before.

“Hamburger and a Coke,” Clifford said, and Albert squeaked, “Same.”

“Yeah, that sounds good,” Luke said, without looking at the waitress. He was afraid that Clifford was going to introduce them to the waitress as old friends, but he didn’t.

They sat, mostly in silence, until the food came. The hamburgers seemed to make Clifford want to talk. He gabbed incessantly through the meal, pausing only occasionally to wipe ketchup off his mouth.

“So what are you boys doing out on the road?” he asked Luke at one point. “Albert said something about you two going for some work.”

Luke finished chewing the bite of hamburger that was in his mouth, and then said simply, “That’s right.” His tone indicated that he didn’t want to start up a conversation.

“Yeah, well, that’s fine, fine,” Clifford continued. “It’s good to see young people looking for work.”

Luke and Albert just nodded and continued to ignore him as they ate. Finally Clifford finished eating, and once again became quiet. When the waitress came to take the plates away, Clifford stretched and said, “Boys, I’m gonna have to make a pit stop. I’ll be right back.” He got up and ambled through the door marked Restrooms.

Albert watched him slowly, and when he was out of sight said, “What a damn weird old man! Talked all the way through dinner!”

“Yeah, but he paid for it,” Luke said. “He could get up there and stand on the table and pee on the hamburgers if he wanted to.”

“Glad he didn’t,” Albert said, and leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. “When are we supposed to be in Birmingham?”

“Dunno, the next day or two,” Luke said, idly crumbling a napkin up in his hands. “She just wants to get it over with as soon as possible. I just have to figure out what to do with his body, is all.”

Clifford sat back down in his chair in almost the same instant. Albert
Late Nite
(continued)

opened his eyes and sat back up in surprise. Luke's back was to the rest rooms, and he hadn't noticed Clifford returning either. Clifford looked at them strangely for a second and then said, "Well, are you boys ready to get back out there?"


"All right, y'all go on out. I'm gonna pay respects to the waitress," Clifford said. "Like I said, I come in here all the time, and she'd get right upset if I didn't say goodbye."

Luke nodded and stood up. "No hurry, we'll wait outside." They walked out the door, but Luke stopped at the front window and looked back in.

Clifford was talking to the waitress, but he was pointing at the business telephone on the rack behind the cash register. The waitress nodded, and Clifford reached to pick up the phone.

"Ahhh! He heard me and he's going to call the cops!" Luke said. "He probably thinks we're after him!"

"But we ain't, so what does it matter?" Albert said.

"They'd be on us, though," Luke said excitedly. His body tensed as Clifford continued to dial. "I gotta do something!" He opened the door and stuck his head in the doorway. "Clifford!" he shouted. "Come here, something's wrong with your truck!"

Clifford's head jerked around, and his fingers stopped on the dial. He was on the last digit. He looked warily at Luke, and then sighed and set the receiver back in its cradle. "What's wrong with it?" he asked.

"You got a couple of flats," Luke said. "Looks like someone's been slitting your tires."

He said it low enough so the waitress wouldn't hear, but she didn't seem to be listening anyway.

"Dammit," Clifford said as he strode past Luke. He walked out to the truck, which was parked on the far side of the lot, across from the front of the Late Nite. Luke and Albert walked up behind him.

"Looks fine to me," Clifford said. "Are you boys—"

Luke grabbed him from behind, around the throat. Clifford kicked and bucked, but Luke was strong. He tightened his grip. Clifford con-
continued to struggle.

"He's strong," Luke whispered through his clenched teeth. "I can't seem to shut off his air."

"What are you doing?" Albert asked, his eyes wide. "Why are you killing him?"

"Cause we gotta get rid of him now," Luke said. "He knows too much. And this way we get a free truck too, don't we, Clifford?"

Clifford just gasped. Luke began to half-drag and half-carry him around the truck, on the side away from the diner.

"Roll down the window," Luke said as he continued simultaneously to strangle and wrestle with Clifford. Albert rolled down the driver's side window. Luke stepped back from Clifford and kicked him hard in the chest. Clifford was still, the wind knocked out of him. Luke maneuvered him around into the cab, and stuck his head through the window.

"Roll it up," he gasped. His face was covered with sweat.

Albert rolled the window up, with the door still open, until Clifford's neck was firmly trapped in it. Clifford couldn't breathe at all now. His hands flopped uselessly against the glass.

"Shut the door," Luke said. Albert slowly shut the door. Clifford's head was still stuck through the window.

Luke looked back at the Late Nite, and saw the shadow of the waitress through the window. "This is taking too long," he said. He grabbed Clifford's head.


"Clifford, are you all right?" the waitress called from the doorway of the Late Nite. "What's going on?"

Luke waved to her. "He's okay, he's busy," he shouted. "He's checking the wiring under the dash!" He slowly rolled the window down, and shoved Clifford's body into the floorboard.

"He says he'll be back in a minute."

The waitress seemed confused for a moment, but then yelled, "Okay!" and went back inside.
“Let’s go!” Luke said. “Leave the truck!”

Luke began running across the parking lot, up toward the highway entrance ramp. After a minute Albert caught up with him. “Why don’t we take the truck?” he asked, gasping with the exertion of running.

Luke was sweating. His eyes looked wild and confused. “They can trace it. If we leave it there, it’ll buy us some time.”

Albert shook his head, but followed Luke anyway. He thought leaving the truck was stupid, but he didn’t say anything. They continued to run slowly toward the highway. The drizzle seemed to have stopped, making it easier for them to breathe.


The rest of the sentence dissolved into a series of gasps.

They slowed to a walk when they reached the highway.

“We could be out here all night, looking for a ride,” Albert said, “just waitin’ for the cops to get us. Did you think about that?”


Albert looked down the highway, and sure enough, another truck was approaching. This was a big one, a diesel rig. They stuck out their thumbs and waited. The truck stopped a little way ahead of them. It was a huge truck with a huge trailer, and it was painted all black. It was surprisingly clean. Luke ran around to the driver’s side and knocked on the door. A small round head stuck itself out the window. The driver was wearing a large black cowboy hat.

“Where you boys goin’?” the driver asked.

“Wherever you are,” Luke said.

“Come on, then,” the driver said, and pulled his head back in the window. Luke ran around the front of the truck, and scrambled into the cab through the passenger door. Albert was right behind him.

The driver was just as funny-looking inside as he had been outside. He was a fairly short man with a prominent beer belly. He wore small, rimless glasses, and was dressed in an all-black suit. He had black cowboy boots on his feet.

“Ready to go?” he asked. He had a big smile on his face.

The driver struck the gear lever into first, and the truck roared off down the road. After he was in top gear, the driver reached down into a large paper sack that was stuffed halfway under the seat, and pulled out a Black Label beer. It appeared to be hot, but the driver popped it open anyway and began guzzling it.

Luke and Albert looked at the beer longingly, but the driver paid no attention to them and didn’t offer them one.

The driver finished the beer and tossed the can behind him, in the strange space between the seat and the back of the cab. It clanked against other cans that were already back there. He belched. They rode on in silence for a few minutes.

Finally, the driver looked at Luke and Albert and asked, “So, have you boys got yourselves right with God?”


“Are you right with the Lord?” the driver continued. “If you died right now, right now, would you go to heaven?”

Luke looked at the driver for a second, and then turned to look at Albert. Albert shrugged.

Luke looked back at the driver. “Yeah, I guess so,” he said. “I don’t see why not.”


“You guess?” the driver said. “That ain’t good enough. You gotta know for sure.” He reached in the sack and got out another beer. He popped it open with one hand and took a swig.

“Gimme one of those,” Luke said.

The driver laughed. “You don’t want one,” he said. “You just think you do.”

Luke didn’t laugh. “I want one,” he said. “And what business is it of yours if I go to heaven or not?”

“Everything is my business,” the driver said, “and you are not getting one of these beers.”
Luke laughed mirthlessly. "That's just great," he said. "We just get picked up by one nosy bastard after another."

The driver slammed on the brakes, and Luke and Albert were thrown into the dash. Luke hit his head on the CB radio, and the handset came off, the connecting cord wrapping loosely around his neck.

The truck skidded to a halt. The driver was livid.

"I don't have no one using profanity in my truck!" he shouted. He took a quick slug of the beer.

"Get out! Now!" he shouted. Albert opened the door and jumped onto the highway immediately. Luke paused and looked at the driver. The driver's glare seemed to cut right through him.

"Go," the driver said.

Luke scrambled up from the floorboard and jumped down on the pavement. The truck pulled away immediately, and roared off into the night.

Luke and Albert watched its taillights disappear from sight.

A light rain began to fall.


"Where are we?" Albert asked. The rain was cold, and his teeth began to chatter.

"About ten miles from the damn diner," Luke said. He looked up at the sky, at the rain coming down, and shook his head.

"We're not far enough away, that's for sure," he said. He shook his head again, this time from frustration.

"Man, I can't believe it," he said. "Some people just don't have no mercy." He stuck his hands deep into his coat pockets.