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La Vache

Henry Knutsen

I spun circles on the restaurant floor, fueled on six shots of espresso. I tended to the needs of every customer in my section and manically typed in orders on the POS. The servers nagged for their drinks. Anxiety stirred in me as I brewed another pitcher of coffee. The general manager played Candy Crush on his phone in the office downstairs. The hungover supervisor smoked outside.

Once I got the bar cleaned up after the lunch rush, I saw Robert's white car parked out front, a small Romanian flag attached to the antenna.

Robert was my last customer of the day. He walked in wearing a floral printed dress shirt and blue jeans alongside his wife and her big head of black hair. She reached for his hand but missed as they walked inside. They climbed into empty bar seats. I walked over. "Morning."

Robert seemed like he was waiting for me to dance.

"How are we doing today?"

Silence. Robert looked at me like I'd just placed my balls on the table.

“Can I get something started for you guys?”

He looked at his wife then pushed his menu at me. “Ice for our waters. Two eggs easy over, a side of bacon so crisp it shatters. One croissant, jam, and whatever the lady wants. Don't forget my drink.” A 16oz almond milk mocha with one pump of chocolate instead of two and a splash of vanilla.

He spat his order at me as he scampered off to the bathroom. I recited it in my head. Robert was rarely appreciative, so when he was it felt well earned.

I looked towards Cheryl running her hand through her black hair. Her silver earrings dangled. There were little crevices on each end of her smile. A blue-covered book lay next to her water glass on the bar next to her. She handled Robert's demands and stubbornness with ease. Her words seemed to relax whoever they were spoken to. “I'll just have a medium grapefruit juice, please.”

“Coming right up.”

I entered the breakfast order into the POS, sneaking a look at the different customers. Robert came out of the bathroom pushing his cheeks away from his nose and snorting.

The clock on the POS finally said 2PM. I entered my tips and listened to the head chef yell at a cook in the kitchen. After cashing out, I went home to take a nap. Took a couple bong rips and tried to enjoy the window of time before my next shift.

Sammie was a server at La Vache. It was her birthday today and she had invited everyone at work to a club called L51. I didn't know her that well, but Lana and I had agreed to go together that morning. Lana pulled up at a quarter after nine in a black 2018 Mercedes that she couldn't afford. I hopped into the passenger seat. Lana was always complaining and negative but I liked her because she was honest, which is hard to find in the restaurant industry. I could relate to her feelings of unfulfillment. I'd be setting up the bar at 6:30AM and she'd come over and dump her stress on me from the day before. How her sister won't let her shower when she gets home from a night out. Or how her Tinder

date asked for head halfway through the first date. “What kind of girl does he think I am?” she’d say.

Lana found an empty spot on a brightly lit block. We walked together on the sidewalk, past the four-person tent in the bushes, towards the entrance. The club had been recently converted from a warehouse.

“I don’t want to stay for too long.”

“Me either, let’s just dance a little. I have to work in the morning anyway.”

“Okay. Me too.”

We waited in the line to the bar watching the lights flicker from blue to green to white. Lana ordered a Concannon Cabernet. I ordered the Breakside Pilsner. We headed over to a group of our co-workers gathered at a table. Our co-worker Tommy slammed his empty beer bottle on the table and chuckled. The two girls he was with giggled, greeted us, and gave both Lana and me hugs. We all wandered onto the dance floor except Lana who stayed at the table and scrolled through her phone.

I leaned forward trying not to fall backward as one of the girls pushed her butt against me. Tommy slithered off to sell some drugs. The girls eventually wandered off with random guys. I got another beer and went to go talk to Lana. She said she had to go and offered me a ride but I said I'd take a Lyft later. I kept dancing for about an hour, making trips back and forth from the bar.

I hunted for a bathroom in the dark warehouse. I found a set of stairs and stomped up them slowly. On the second level, I saw two figures making out in the corner. It looked like Robert. I walked along the wall with a full bladder. Once I got closer, I knew it was him. He had on the same floral shirt he'd worn earlier today. His nose was flattened like a boxer's. He had his black hair slicked back. Robert and the blond girl he was with got up to leave.

The electronic music felt like it was drilling into the side of my head. I lost my balance and steadied myself on the wall. They walked right past me. I decided to call a ride, but every time I entered my passcode the message, "Phone locked. Too many

failed attempts” appeared on my phone screen. I had changed the passcode to my phone the night before. In my drunken stupor, I couldn’t remember what it was.

When I asked the security guard where the bathroom was he escorted me out. He said I was clearly drunk since I couldn’t even get into my phone. I couldn’t argue with the guy.

I zig-zagged across the sidewalk. Phone locked. Friends inside. Street signs leaning over. The only number I could call was 911. I kept walking. I recognized the area I was in. The buses weren’t running this early in the morning. I kept walking. I called the police on myself and asked for a ride home. The operator said the police don’t offer that service, so I hung up.

I stopped at the corner store and managed to buy a Gatorade. Kept walking. Three miles down. Two to go. I walked down the street holding money between my fingers with my arm out. An Uber picked me up. He took my twenty but only drove me up the street because he had other customers.

Somehow, I acquired a bag of pancake mix. I kept walking.

3:50AM. I was passing by the restaurant. Someone finally took a chance on the drunk guy walking down the street. I had walked for long enough that I was finally able to walk straight. I filled him in on the night's events.

“Damn, dude, that’s a tough one.”

After parking on a side street by my house, he shared a joint with me. And I stumbled inside and crept up the stairs to my bed.

I woke up in the middle of the night and ate some Thai food then fell back asleep.

My alarm reminded me of the shift ahead at 5:45AM. A bag of pancake mix sat next to me in bed. I was ravaged by dehydration and laziness. I found a small bag of white powder in my jeans from the night before. I got dressed and brushed my teeth. I dumped a small pile of powder on the bathroom counter, broke up the clumps with my bank card and snorted three small lines. I pushed my cheeks away from my nose and snorted.

~

Every turn I made a turn in the car, I could feel the rice and beef sloshing in a pool of Pilsners.

I clocked in at 6:45 and went straight to the espresso machine.

I was polishing a mimosa glass with a towel when I saw the first customer pull up and wait in their car for the restaurant to open. I accidentally snapped the brittle stem of the glass. I went to dump it in the broken glasses bin in the dish pit. I offered Arland some coffee but he declined.

“I’m okay, thank you Johnny boy.”

Arland always looked so content as he washed dishes. He wore a Detroit Tigers baseball cap with a curved brim that he took off every morning and put on a shelf by the dishwasher.

Saturday mornings I made mostly coffee drinks, mimosas, Bloody Marys and took food orders. The morning lulled on. I felt dizzy but convinced myself I could make it just a few more hours. After every hour passed by I would walk to the bathroom and take a small bump of the powder in my wallet. The

conversation with customers felt more natural. All the pieces of the restaurant seemed to fit together better on cocaine. The dishes never piled up. Most importantly, the drug kept me awake after walking home last night.

Will and I smirked as the baker came up from the basement to check the pastries in the second oven. “Here comes the gremlin,” we chuckled to ourselves.

“Don’t touch the croissants with your fucking hands,” she yelled at the busboys and food runners, hands on her hips like guns in holsters poised to smack away any bare hands reaching for croissants.

The hostess threw two menus down on the bar. She had a tribal sun tattooed on the back of her neck that I studied when she walked away. Rachel had worked as a food runner then moved up to hostess. Don’t let the sequins around the eyes and the pink hair fool you. She was super rude. I saw her lose it one time and kick a hole in the wall when she was back in the food window. Two customers, heads cocked, sneered at her as she walked away.

The ticket printer swiftly ejected two tickets in a static-y rhythm. I glanced over at the pile of coffee cups, teapots, and saucers piling up in the sink. I made the drinks on the tickets and went over to the customers. They greeted me with a barrage of complaints and demands. “Extra ice. More napkins. Turn down the music. This isn’t ham! My coffee’s cold.”

I wanted to bring out a piece of ham and turkey together and show the lady. *What the hell is wrong with these two?* I eventually cashed them out and found a note on the receipt.

It read, “I asked our waiter if we could turn down the music. I could tell by their body language that they felt it was a request not worthy of consideration, and in fact the waiter came back and told us no, the music had to stay loud. What happened to customers come first?”

I grabbed the receipt and showed Will. If it weren’t for Will I would’ve walked out a while ago. Will leaned backwards against the counter by the espresso machine and stretched his arms out. They were scattered with traditional tattoos, his legs too. One time he showed me a tattoo of a small smiling sperm on

his shin. He grabbed the receipt and crumpled it up. “You should’ve smacked her with the ham,” he laughed.

Then Robert walked up to the hostess stand. Robert was a dick and he sure didn’t like everybody, but, like I said, something about his approval was satisfying. He pointed at me and looked at the hostess. He walked over. I downed two shots of espresso. My feet were swollen and heavy.

“Hey there, Robert.”

He looked sleep deprived. A blond girl who looked to be in her twenties walked up and sat next to him. The same girl from last night.

“You made it.” He kissed her on the cheek.

I felt bad for Cheryl. I imagined her deep in a book waiting patiently for Robert to come home.

“Leanne this Johnny. He’s a good server. What would you like, honey?”

Leanne contemplated the menu. I held my pen poised ready to write her order down and watched my hands tremble.

“Nice to meet you, Leanne. I’ll let you look over the menu real quick. Be with you guys in a moment.” I decided to bus another table’s dishes and gather my composure in the dishpit. I almost ran into Lana as she was coming out.

“Hey, how’d the rest of your night go?”

“Shitty. I’ll tell you later. You know that guy at the bar with the dark hair and the young girl next to him. Don’t you recognize him?”

“Who?” She peeked at the bar from the dishpit. “Oh yeah, him. He comes in with an older lady too, doesn’t he?”

“Yeah.”

“Awkward. Sorry, got to go. Table 24 is staring me down.”

I wiped my sweat with a paper towel. My hand twitched as I brought it across my hot forehead. I couldn’t remember why I had come back to the dishpit. Suddenly the steam was too much. It felt like the oxygen had been sucked out of the room. I tried to catch my breath. I walked back towards the bar and stood by the POS. I looked out the garage size windows at the people

on the street holding ice creams in January, the guy on the corner bullying the hipsters for change and cigarettes, the cars going 15 mph. Robert started to feed Leanne spoonfuls of seafood chowder. The chatter of the restaurant crescendoed and faded out.

When I woke up Robert was kneeling next to me with a couple EMT's. His hand rested on my shoulder. "The kid doesn't need to go to the hospital. Where's the manager at?" he barked.

An EMT felt my pulse in my neck and looked at my pupils.

The ticket printer ejected a ticket.

I tried to sit up, but my body was heavy and stiff. I felt something wet on the side of my face.

"Can you take a deep breath for me?" asked one of the EMT's.

"You're fine kid." Robert's voice was softer now. I surrendered to the firm and fatherly touch of his hand and lay

back on the sticky bar mats. The GM came up from the basement.

The Romanian flag on the antenna fluttered in the wind. The car ride was mostly quiet. The inside of the car smelled woody and spicy like Robert's cologne.

“You didn't have to drive me.”

“I needed a reason to get rid of Leanne.” Robert smiled.

I looked outside the window of the white car and saw bars, dispensaries, coffee shops and a music store. “What about Cheryl?”

Robert chuckled. “What about her? Relax, Cheryl and I are open.”

“Oh.”

“Anyone home to check on ya?”

“My roommates. It's right up here on the corner.” It felt good to be in Robert's passenger seat with the heat on while he drove. We pulled up to my house. I reluctantly opened the car door, but before I could step out Robert put his hand on my

shoulder. “Don’t turn into another one of these bums, kid. You’re better than that.”

I stood at the curb and watched as the white car disappeared around the corner.

I walked inside my house and the wind slammed the front door behind me. The sounds of my roommate’s TV crept down the hall. I put my keys and cellphone into the bowl by the door. I ran my hand through my hair. There was a knot the size of an acorn. I went to the bathroom to look at it in the mirror. I saw the deep bags under my red eyes.

I opened my wallet full of crumpled bills and pulled out the bag tucked inside. It was covered in smiley faces. I opened it and held it in my hand, imagined watching the powder dissolve into the toilet water. I stood there a long time. Then I flushed and climbed back into bed.

*There is no real ending.
It's just the place where you stop the story.*

— Frank Herbert