

Mid-Morning

On Routes six and two, the whir of car wheels slid from black night into sunrise. The stars were withering in a frosty sunrise, even as a sliver of the moon yet hung in the sky.

The diner, R &R, shut its door on opening's earliest customers; their cars grumbled out of the parking lot onto a busy highway. R&R was opening to midmorning. At 9:00, in strolled Ray Clark.

"Mr. Clark, here, here now."

Teeth-rattling greetings rumbled through R&R to land on Ray Clark, as he stood in the doorway; his skeletal face agape with a new day of hope.

Clark's hope was precarious, like a tattered coat in which he daily wrapped himself. So many times had he patched his coat with the good intentions he hoped would conquer his dark nights. There hadn't been many conquered nights in the past, but within these last four weeks he's kept his heartfelt intentions; not one patch in an entire month.

"Mr. Clark, Mr. Clark, my man."

"Gentlemen," Clark acknowledged in a scholar's exactness of tone. He accompanied his greetings with a slight bow. Up he came; his hand shaky and grazing the brim of a derby hat that sat a' top his head.

"Good morning to you, my dear," he said to Julie.

Julie looked to see ... a terrorized man holding up his arms to shield his soul from demons. The demons that groped for Clark's soul waited in his puffy skin, and in the sweat that seeped from his pores with a sour stench of alcohol; an odor that Clark detested even as he felt it luring him. Alcohol, the insidious fiend that lived inside Clark, mapped the takeover of his soul. It could be detected in the broken veins that zigzagged

across his nose, and seen too in his bloodshot eyes of defeat.

"Good morning to you, Ray," Julie said back. "I am busy this morning. Why don't you sit down here in *this* stool."

She nodded with her head to the stool directly across from her. "If you sit right here, I can talk to you at the same time that I make a pot of coffee."

Casual words, at odds with her intense scrutiny into his face. Breathing a sigh of relief, she concluded that she did not see red lines of defeat.

'Sober again last night,' she deducted. 'Four weeks running.'

"Did you go to class last night," she asked aloud, even as she turned to slap a coffee pack inside the filter compartment.

His reply came while she was pouring a pot of water inside the machine. "Yes, indeed I did, Julie. Last night was Sociology, 101." He gestured his enthusiasm with long, thin arms that broadened out, as though to reach across the counter over to her.

"You don't say! Exciting, huh?"

"Indeed it was, my dear," he replied with an important lift of his head.

Straddling the stool that Julie pointed out, he slid down in it. "Indian customs and modes of behavior were last night's topic. A most stimulating class."

Clark's words were growing louder so that they might pierce the dark and cold restaurant, and travel on to be heard by the numbed creatures who sat slumped over their coffee cups.

But hearing not one comment coming back to him, Clark cleared his throat so that he might speak even louder. "For instance, did you know, dear, that the tribes of North Dakota were so primitive that they hibernated during the winter months. Come spring, they were so weak from their long fast that they crawled out on all fours from caves to eat grass?"

Interest began and peaked. R&R's clientele picked up their chins to sharpen their

hearing. A pregnant hush traveled with the shivery waves of cold through the hollow diner.

"My, that really is primitive!" Julie exclaimed.

Round, rude chuckles cut in to crest into peaks of rollicking laughter. The porkpie hat that perched on top of Jonesy's shiny, circle head shook in vibrating rhythm. "That musta' given 'em some green piles," he yelled out in words that came between peals of his own, deep-down laughter.

The coffee counter and the booths reverberated with muted morning chuckles, even as Clark felt a lump of ire rising in his chest.

It wasn't Jonesy's amusement that found humor in something as pitiful as starving Indians, that caused Clark's anger. What infuriated Ray was Jonesy's rude hilarity; it seemed a curtain thrown over his narrative. But though the sparkle in Julie's eyes and the interest peaking around Ray were given over to laughter, Clark checked the scathing words he felt rolling around on his tongue. Instead, he smiled thinly in a grimace that caused his lips to quiver while guffaws erupted around him. But he remained silent; he knew that anyone who tried trading jibes with Jonesy would have about as good a chance at toppling him, as they would at hustling him with a cue ball ... for at both, billiards and wise-cracking, Jonesy loomed undisputed king.

With his sidekick, Timmy beside him, every morning at seven this positively degenerate, jolly old hustler chortled his way into R&R. Weaving his fat body between small, overburdened feet, his wicked eyes flashed with pool-hall decadence. The porkpie hat jiggling on top of his shiny head vibrated with the chuckles that rolled upwards from his belly to his irreverent mouth.

Today, he had stopped first by the sign that read 'HOSTESS WILL SEAT YOU.' It was there that he had paused, and cleared his throat until the sleepy patrons of R&R

looked up. When he had their attention, he covered the S in *SEAT*, and joined in the laughter that began with his; a drum roll rollicking into thunder.

Subsequently, he took a seat as he did every morning in a booth with Timmy across from him. And after Jonesy moved Clark's Indians to the backburner, he and Timmy began to piece through Jonesy's yesteryears.

"It was Jackie more 'n anybody helped me get going," Jonsey told Timmy while they slurped coffee, and watched lost snowflakes search for directing winds.

"Jackie, he's the only one who helped me along. The rest of them said, 'Figure it out for yourself' when I asked them how I could improve my game.

But Jackie, he was working vaudeville then, and hustling cause he hadn't made to big time yet," Jonesy continued. "Yea, Gleason, he showed me, but he warned, 'Don't you be telling anybody what I'm showing you.'

"Yup, Gleason's, he's only one helped me along." Jonesy's sensual voice cradled his words.

Hollow-faced ... eyes and mouth pinched and sitting so far back in his face that they seemed to be sinking, Timmy blinked like a robin. In contrast, Jonesy was rounded out with the winds of memory, and life like a hurricane ramming through his corpulent body.

"Bellevue was a steady cash flow back then. Railroad crews came into the bars and pool halls from all shifts to drink and play pool, and the more they'd drink, the bigger wagers I took. I'd be waiting for them. In Bellevue, I'd average three, four hundred a night."

"That was a lot a' money in them days," Timmy said.

Jonesy laughed with resounding booms. "Still is, Timmy," he thundered.

The restaurant door whisked open again, but this time it stayed open. Gusts of harsh winds pushed themselves into R&R while an jumpy intruder stood suspended in the doorframe. He wasn't sure if he wanted to be here; unsure if he wanted to be anywhere

actually.

"Hey, shut the door."

"Chrissss-be Sal, it's ten below and the heater ain't kicking in; have a heart!"

So through the hollow door, fingerprinted and sticky with fryer grease and cigarette smoke, in strode Sal Esposito. His sharp, Italian face consisted of twisted lips and bushy eyebrows that jounced over his darting eyes; his expression harried, disheveled.

"Heh-heh," he strained in joyless mirth.

Unbuttoning his long coat, he peeled it open, murmuring, "Cold, cc-cold, cc-cold in here. Umm-mmm, cold."

But Sal couldn't make up his mind: should he take his coat off or leave it on? So it fell to hang across his shoulders with the coat sleeves dangling. Sal's comments he more or less addressed to himself. But he couldn't focus even on himself for long, and danced his jittery legs over to the coffee counter. The coat loosely dangling around his ankles, kept tripping him.

"Ss-say here."

Dancing an impatient jig on the soles of his feet, he snapped his fingers. "Here, here I am," to Julie as she pitched a used coffee filter in a trash can that sat under the coffee machine.

"So?"

Julie's back was turned towards Sal: she was snapping an order on the revolving wheel in the pick up window. She jiggled a bell to alert the cook, even as she kept her back to Sal. Consequently, he whistled an annoying signal that rushed up and down the scales in jarring cacophony. Sal was as determined to grab Julie's attention, as Julie was determined to ignore

Sal.

"C-coffee, coffee," he stuttered, as he rocked from his toes to the balls of his feet.

His fingers clutched the back of a stool that swung back and forth at the counter.

Scooping a jelly doughnut from the pie case, Julie called out without looking up, "In a minute, Sal."

She scampered out from behind the coffee counter. Over she flew to the back booth and slid the doughnut in front of Timmy. Then back up to the counter she flew; she snatched the coffee pot. With arms close to her sides, as though to hold the warmth of the coffee steam to her body, Julie poured while she moved across the restaurant. From tables to booths, she splashed fresh coffee into half-filled cups. Up to the front to the counter she sped, and once there she poured the dregs of the pot down the drain.

Sal was waiting for her. Fidgeting, he rocked on his toes. His arms were trembling. They remained half in and half out of the wide-checkered sleeves of his coat: the fedora on his head shivered in the shaky rhythm of his body.

"I know what I want to eat too," he called out as Julie proceeded to make another pot of coffee.

"You knew *that* before you left the house," Jonesy boomed out brazenly with the words that brought forth the laughter that sang out. Up and down the counter, at the tables, and within the booths, the laughter echoed. It rolled across the piercing cold of R&R to hold together the walls of a moment in time.

Craning his neck, Sal looked around while choking out his joyless mirth, "Heh-heh."

He danced a *one-foot-to-another* jig that took him over to the booth of Timmy and Jonesy. In one side of the booth Jonesy sat. His fleshy stomach was tightly wedged between table and booth. On the other side of the booth, Timmy wavered on his hollow haunches: he squinted up at Sal with faded eyes.

"Heh, heh, say boys?" Sal greeted them in a frazzled way just before his head

swiveled to see Julie flying past the booth.

Having forgotten a bowl of oatmeal that was waiting for her in the pick-up window, she heard the repeat of the pick-up bell. She was sailing towards the window to pick up the neglected oats.

"T-t-t-two eggs pouched," Sal stammered to her fleet-footed form.

His long arms tried flailing the air to signal her. He had forgotten that they were being held captive by his coat still positioned between on and off. Jonesy and Timmy laughed uproariously while Sal fought himself within his own dangled grip.

"Marilyn bastes; she doesn't poach," Julie yelled back to Sal without turning.

"PP-Pouched on wh-whole wheat toast."

"I told you ____" Giving up, she said- "I'll be over to explain to you in a minute, Sal."

"No, no, no bb-butter on the toast," he finished frenetically.

He explained to Jonesy and Timmy, "No, no b-b-butter. Ch-cholesterol, Doctor says ch-

cholesterol."

"And a g-g-glass of or-orange juice," he shouted to Julie rushing with the oats.

"Be right there, Sal." Julie's words skipped over to Sal, even as she skipped up to a front booth to drop off the rescued oatmeal.

"S-s-ay boys," to Jonesy and Timmy. Sal had forgotten that he was repeating.

"I say, I said, *hello*," Jonesy said ... while Timmy was mumbling something incoherent under his breath; it sounded like bees humming in angry clusters.

But Sal wasn't hearing Timmy's mumbling disgust. He couldn't: Sal was listening to the frantic voices inside of him; spastic voices that were giving him slip-shod commands that jumped him from one direction to another.

"Bb-better get started on those eggs," he shouted to Julie, who was standing red-faced by the booth and getting a scolding for the cold oatmeal.

"I'm in a h-h-hell of a hh-hurry today," Sal murmured. "Gg-gotta' get goen, pp-pretty soon, pp-ppretty soon."

"What is your hurry?" Every word of Jonesy's has its own space, and his words took their places in steady paces.

"Th-the bank," Sal gasped. He fell forward with his coat falling around him like a vampire's cloak.

When he saw Sal's secretive face grimaced, Jonesy, fully expected to see his eyeteeth grow longer.

Sal whispered to share his conspiring secret. "I-I-I gotta' a-arrange a ll-loan s-ssomehow," he under-toned thickly.

Timmy's head jerked up in indignation. "Yer gamblen' again," he proclaimed with revulsion.

"Not again ... yet," Jonesy rectified.

"Gambling and losen." Jonesy's words punctuated the end of his blasphemous guffaw.

"Yy-yup." Sal admitted while nodding frenetically. "Yyy-yes sir, that's what I did: th-that is what I did."

He leaned closer towards Jonesy; his features pinched in morose distortion. "Bb-bbut this time they'll rr-rub me out," he hissed hysterically. "Rr-rub me out."

"Serves yah right," Timmy pronounced. Dipping a doughnut in his coffee, he gummed it between his toothless jaws. He grimaced up at Sal with deep-gullied scowls.

Meanwhile, Jonesy was clucking and tsk-tsking his way to his back pocket. His face was troubled when he slid out his billfold, but his features relaxed when he flipped through the bills. '*There is plenty in here, and I can spare some,*' he told himself.

Timmy watched the entire procedure with his face wrinkling and his features sinking

to crumble in his face. "Whatcha doen that fer?" he demanded of Jonesy.

Jonesy shrugged.

Timmy smacked his toothless gums. "Yah already lent him cash you ain't never gonna see again."

And while Timmy was filling the air with grunts of disapproval, Jonesy was sliding the folded cash into Sal's, sweaty, shaky palms.

"Heh, heh, I-II cc-can't do this, uh-uh, Jonesy." Sal rebuked, even as his hands, that seemed to be dipped in butter____ slid the bills from his palms into his billfold.

"Yah hadn't oughta' that's fer sure," Timmy snorted.

"You-you a-already helped me oughta' a couple a jams, J-J-Jonesy, and I ... " Sal's words seemed choked off, as though invisible hands were tightening around his neck. He wrung his palms together and visible drops of sweat dripped from them.

"Now yah owe him four hundred," Timmy reminded Sal with a fiendish scowl.

Sal slipped the now-filled billfold into his back pocket while Jonesy's, wild green eyes spun rapidly. He laughingly inquired of Timmy when it was that he became his bookkeeper.

"Hh-hhey Jonesy, I, I, I'm gonna' g-g-get this back to you. That there is something you can wager on. I-it, it won't be long either. I-I-I'm on a winning streak."

"Efen yah's winnen, how come yah got yer grubby paw out fer 'nother take?" Timmy demanded.

"Th-this here's, this here is an old debt from the races. L-L-Last night, night before I was gg-golden."

Sal's head bobbed up and down in a jerky rhythm. "I-I-I got 'em for tw-tw-twenty apiece. Y-Y-Yes sir, I'm on a winning streak. II-I-I'm gg-golden" His eyes fever bright; his lips pinched.

"I hear that one before: what is it now, the heavyweights er the horses?"

"I won't miss what I'm giving you. What I'm giving you is extra," Jonesy maintained calmly between chuckles. "This is what I picked off of a' couple of studs who never heard of me. One of 'em was fair to middling. The other was a pimp over on the East Side. The pimp, he was the one thinken' he was so good."

Jonesy laughed heartily. "Well, maybe he was good at pimping, but when it came to pool he wasn't so hot."

"Heh, heh." Sal slapped Jonesy on the back. "N-N-Not like the champ; hey champ?"

His voice, his laughter, both perched on the edge of hysteria. He tipped Jonesy's hat and rubbed him across his shiny, bald head; his voice took on a patronizing tone. "S-S-Smooth as my wife's bottom, heh?"

Jonesy patted his own head. His eyes spun circles of wickedness: a malevolent smile broke across his face and spread like syrup across his fleshy cheeks. "Not quite," he averred on ball-of-thunder laughter.

Timmy joined in with soundless guffaws: they shook his body of bones and slack skin: his eyes sunk back further until they disappeared within his goblin face.

But Sal was fighting back a sick ire that played around his mouth. A malady of green bile was stuck in his throat. It was a well known fact around town that Sal wore a pair of horns. He wondered if Jonsey could be one of his wife's many lovers.

"Heh-heh," he laughed, even as he held onto his sick grimace. Clamping his jaws together, Sal dangled uncertainly between his feet.

Meanwhile, Julie was sitting a bowl of cereal and a pitcher of milk in front of Red. Only moments before he had maneuvered the cab of his semi into the back of R&R's parking lot.

Her eyes traveled over to Sal, and that's when she saw him pulling his coat up to his shoulders.

Julie's hand flew over her mouth; her eyes widened. At that very moment, she remembered that she forgot. Hastily she pulled out an ordering pad from her apron pocket. She rushed over to Sal, who was hopping up and down like a marionette with broken strings.

With shaky fingers he finally managed to button his coat. "G-g-gotta' go." After pulling on his gloves, he slapped his hands together.

"I am so sorry, Sal," Julie said in a solicitous way. "But I didn't take you seriously: you didn't even sit down."

"G-gget my eggs later, uhhh, Marilyn, er ah Molly, ahh, J-J-Julie."

Giving Charlie a hearty slap on the back as he passed him at the coffee counter, Sal slanted his body over his feet and gingerly stepped out the door.

Meanwhile, Julie was fretting to herself, "I forgot Sal's eggs."