

The Only Game in Town

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Denver Day

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Hipster Bricks: A Philosophical Novel

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Long Hot Summer Night

Miranda peeped through the blinds once. Again. She did it less often than she crossed herself, but let's face it she did a lot of both. Spending too much time in that apartment could lead anyone to do the same, such are the comforts in context, mass-produced off-brand light beer, cheap weed, prayer, dogma, thunderstorms and in this case, crack, among other needful trappings. Ahh, the nineties.

Richie wasn't religious, and he didn't cross himself. He did indulge in some of the blinds-peeping but that was mainly Miri's mania. They were waiting for their dealer Jojoslim. He was a stereotypical-looking crack dealer. His wardrobe featured things like pressed designer denim, high-end tracksuits and on-brand windbreakers, white tank-tee wifebeater undershirts, and all of it. He slid around the residential area behind the light business commercial district north of the university campus in a silver late model Honda Accord when making his deliveries to Miri and Richie. The neighborhood comprises bars, restaurants, book stores, coffee shops, gas stations, churches, private dorms, apartments, condos, parking lots and oak trees. The Brazos River valley

has more oak trees than people or anything else.

Slim the slinger blended into the late twentieth century urban east Texas diaspora which was as likely to yield a black high schooler in cowboy boots as a grungy white one in flannel. I offer even odds of encountering Asian or Tejano engineering candidates among the university students. Merchants from every continent. For any with eyes to see it, the wide range of ventures availing were a pick for both viceroy and virtuous.

Jojoslim was an exception to the rule that anyone on the landing of Richie's dwelling caused the second story to begin swaying like an antebellum oak, followed by a thudding on the staircase that boomed the waving concrete and rebar efficiency apartment like a 750-square-foot drumhead. So it followed, tiptoeing on approach provided the crackhead couple and their friends with a stimulating pass-time for all takers in-the-know. Unstudied arrivals were obvious dead ringers but certainly not Jojo. Unless Miri happened to spot him through the blinds first, which she never really did despite her frequent peeping through them, the first sign of Jojo was a

single soft one-knuckle rap on the sliding glass which served as the apartment's only door. Unless you think of the commode as a door which, depending on your background, you might.

Jojo went as quickly and quietly as he'd come. Richie and Miri put their evening's cheese and butter where the sun didn't shine, awaiting their returned from the Bar One North up the street. It was the dog days of summer, and a Friday night.

In the city of Harvey, summer is the off-season for the campus-adjacent bars. And any other bars if not pretty much all of the city's businesses including the Bar One North, which was a favorite haunt of Richie's and Miri's among various others on the same strip. The oscillating student population in suburban university settings causes a tide-like cycle on the order of tens of thousands of people arriving around Memorial Day and departing around Labor Day which, during 'low tide,' affects a sense of great urban spaciousness on the community's wide, grassy economic and infrastructural margins. The winter break between semesters yields a similar flux over a much shorter period, sort of like the eye of a

hurricane. The locals enjoyed a break from the co-eds during such moments of zen.

"It's getting a little late for 1998," Seamus Brown said, interrupting his own rant to Hank Midland about globular clusters being the most polite and self-aware galaxy type because of their apparent lack of indiscriminately murderous massive central black holes. "And I'm sober enough to write."

"Yeah. Anyway it's 1999," Hank said, "and it has been for a while, man it's August. But anyway, it could be the black holes of globular clusters remain in place, having already consumed all the galactic central mass." At that, Seamus grew silent for a while.

Out they walked, two of the Bar One North's faithful regulars toward their respective bungalows in order to carefully spend the remaining six hours of respite from the hot Texas sun on alcohol-fueled writing jags. On the back porch as they made their way out Hank, a mathematician confined to a public high school and Seamus, a writer bound to professing rhetoric and composition at a junior college, greeted fellow bar regulars Miri and

Richie who were arriving.

Glutton-for-punishment wingnut Jack "J.R." Ross who'd been sitting with Hank and Seamus at the bar, stayed another half hour before resigning his perch. As Richie and Miri walked up J.R. waved them toward the freshly available bar stools that Hank and Seamus had left warm and vacant. Richie sat, ordered two 32-ounce draft chuggers of Natural Light lager, and Miri excused herself to the ladies'.

"Those drunk bastards Seamus and Hank just left here walking but I have to sit here for another thirty minutes like birds in the wilderness to dry out a little before I get on my bike," J.R. grouched, as he whiffed a tuft from a little aluminum tin of Levi Garrett nasal snuff.

"You got any other dust besides that tobacco?" Richie queried him, because often as not J.R. had good coke. J.R. was like Santa Claus and pretty much always had been to those who knew him. Mainly, J.R. was a longhaired combat veteran, and they'd all known one another since grade school. He didn't sell it but he was consistently holding, so Richie always figured J.R. was probably some kind of

cop who had bigger fish to fry than the likes of his old local high school buddies, and Richie's' theory may well have been correct.

"Well, lemme check." J.R. patted himself about the various pockets of his vest and cargo pants. "Well I'll be damned sure enough! Here ya go." He handed Richie a glass salt shaker about almost full of some lovely, pristine powder.

So Jack Ross was a local longhair veteran of some Cold War black-budget-funded foreign escapade or another and Richie was a local crackhead, and they were all (Miri too) born but a few miles from the bar stools they were just then sitting on. Richie (or Richie Clean as he would come to be known) was a crackhead of the relatively functional sort with all due caveats. J.R. and Richie and Miri and for that matter the bar manager Carson West and barback Eldorado Marquez had all known each other since at least high school if not before, and so on.

Miri returned from the women's room, sat before her cold beer and lit-up a Marlboro Ultralight 100. I think icy-hot toilet whores like Miri are part of the great symphony of the

circle of life in harmony with the rise and fall of civilizations. And you know that.

“What’s goin’ on tonight J.R.?”
Miri quizzed him. Despite or maybe because of her dicey lifestyle, in J.R.’s eyes Miri always came across with some modicum of class and decorum. Such are some of the more battered ornaments. In her, he recognized certain hard-ass elements that he’d only ever seen before in other combat veterans. He’d taken her home a few times and she always shot him straight. Whenever he saw her, he always remembered the first time he ever met her nearly twenty years earlier, they were just kids. One of the hometown perks was that the old-school *local* locals, even if they were mortal enemies in virtually every other way, were all more or less thick as thieves having all come up together watching that river of transient co-eds ebb and flow for as long as any of them could remember. Of course that river always faithfully brought in some real characters, but they were never auditable in-a-flash, all the way back to the cradle like the true locals were.

As they were talking, old imagery

of that first meeting was replaced with one more recent in his mind's eye, of her big black bush as wiry as the dynamo motor on an old can-vac. Very 1970s.

"Likely all the usual little summer hotspots around the neighborhood. Eldorado Marquez probably has the three-eleven on that," J.R. reflected, responding to her question about any parties. He was thinking he'd better bail out immediately if he wanted to sleep at all. He took another toot from his snuff tin, hugged Miri, shook hands with Richie, nodded to Eldorado Marquez the barback and made his way toward the rear lot.

The Birth of the Clean

Speaking of Carson West. A piece of work with the standard attributes of a good bartender in addition to, or despite, his being a bond agent otherwise known as a bounty hunter or fugitive recovery agent. Carson didn't own the Bar One North but it was his to manage. His two vocations being complementary, he was a headsman and an adrenaline junkie with good cash-flow and liberal access to vice. Among other hobbies, Carson regularly partook of

women of various sporting lifestyles. In context I wouldn't describe his situation as out of the ordinary in that regard, as one eats to live.

In my analysis and retelling of these events long past, I don't particularly think Carson started out with bloody design for its own sake, as the key purpose in his plot, but I think he embraced it nevertheless when it became a necessary aspect of it. What exactly that indicates about Carson's mettle is arguable but it's quite a statement whichever.

What he did initially could be categorized as either vigilante justice or a thrill-killing. The whole thing from beginning to end was a real headscratcher regardless whether you're able or not, to apprehend a motive. Don't understand it? He must've been fucking nuts. Understanding his thought process? Still pretty much completely bananas.

It had been about 10 p.m. when J.R. left Bar One North. The barback, Carson's hire, the aforementioned Eldorado Marquez, was generally understood to be a wily and useful cocksucker. He sat and drank beer with Miri and Richie until the couple left

about midnight. Again, it was the off-season, a slow night.

Eldorado Marquez cast Carson in a little different light than any of the bond agents I ever knew, among the men anyway, though that same rough angle is clearly less categorically anomalous for bartenders. Anyway, so many young co-eds simply fuck anything that moves and the primary purpose of this whole story may be to increase that body of knowledge – that's as good a moral as any other I've been able to come up with so far. Labels are practical but Eldorado was cool and nobody called him a cocksucker to his face, not in hostility at least. He was generally well-liked. The nickname was really for my own use in distinguishing him from the innumerable Mexicans of Harvey, Texas. Well, that and he was literally a cocksucker, I think.

Richie and Miri were practically religious about not rolling dirty, even about not walking and holding. If you're not dealing, why run the risk? No self-righteous patriot dares otherwise. Miri could more naturally bend the rule as a lady and Richie didn't break it that night, crack-wise, but he did have that saltshaker in his pocket as they walked back home. Before

anybody could say boo, Richie was being patted-down on the sidewalk under a streetlight by one of Harvey's finest. Flat-footed, the officer plucked that shaker of mysteriously sourced uncut, longhair-foreign-war-veteran-supplied powder from Richie's front shirt pocket. Sometimes life's path turns so quickly, that not only doesn't anyone have time to physically move but time itself seems to halt, as if to get a stronger grip. Such moments often turn out to be of a gravity very deeply instructive.

Richie had planned to surprise Miri with it when they got home, so the little shaker full of el puro was a score she was not yet aware of. The purity of the powder fascinated the narcs. Police qualified the eightball of excellent quality as probable cause for a search warrant that was next executed at Richie's apartment, with dogs and all. They found some crack rocks, cooking supplies and a couple pounds of grass. It displeased the prosecutor when Richie refused to rollover on his source, and soon he was on a chain for a spell in the piney woods of east Texas. The plea bargain provided 28 months in TDC of which he could expect to do 12 to 18, and it ended up being 12.

Decades later in Texas among other various states, I'm told they've stopped prosecuting personal use marijuana related charges but that wasn't the norm down there in the late twentieth century and certainly not in the mix with two forms of cocaine. And I think they'll still bust you for powder, well, depending upon who you are which, now that I think about it, was generally the way of it in those days too.

So Richie spent the rest of 1999 and the first three quarters of 2000 in Huntsville, so he wasn't really able to party like it was 1999 when that long-awaited song played. Maybe next time. A few months before December 31, 2000, he came out completely clean, and he stayed that way. Hence the nickname, Richie Clean.

Breakfastando Grande

Around noon the next day, Seamus and Hank met at the bar for hair of the dog. Tequila sunrise for the writer and a cauldron of India Pale Ale for the mathematician. They had plates of huevos rancheros from the Tex-Mex Magician across the street. Eldorado

Marquez had the Bar One North coffee pot on full production, whose positive effects may be enhanced by a dash of single malt whiskey.

"The trick is to take all things in moderation," Seamas said, tipping his souped-up coffee.

"Huevos rancheros, si," agreed Hank. On topic of their respective underway writing projects, Hank further forwarded a running conversation:

"It's just number theory. Testing prime number sieves is old-hat, but looking for artful patterns stays tempting. For all the careers and reams of paper spent on number theory, I'll still succumb to the sirens of topology."

"That puts you next-door to functionalist architecture and hot avante garde," Seamus warned.

"That doesn't tempt me but I'll drink to it," Hank said.

"I have you beat in the existential crisis department," Seamus turned. "I'm a character."

"The hell you say!"

"Writing is like a gun Hank, and I've been pointing it at myself all this time because I had to work from something. That led to stream-of-consciousness prose and composite characters loitering in my bearded head. But now I have it solved, I think."

"Jesus!"

"Were he writing novels and maybe he was, he'd run into the same problem. Too much self-projection distracts from the novel's pursuit. The writer ends up projecting onto empty vessels which compounds the problem.

"Step one, I realized I'm obviously not, as a random example James Joyce or Robert Anton Wilson. That is, I begin with the assumption that I'm me and not another writer."

"A baseless assumption," Hank interrupted.

"I remind you, literature is a fine art," Seamus continued. "But of course, you're correct, I am making a metaphysical assumption. Also I'm assuming that if a truly novel character has always existed, at some

primordial Jungian fathom, even before an author writes them, then the most appropriate approach is forensic character development, much like legal discovery. And that's it: A rationalist school of character development.

"Just the facts, ma'am," Hank squinted. "Have you found the well of souls? This whole world of ours could be your fault."

"Or yours. Anyway I think it's working. But then, if pressed too far, these metaphysical literary assumptions implicate literature as the, or at least a, cosmological foundation," Seamus said.

"That is what the whiskey's for," Hank explained. "To all my friends!"

Seamus dragged from the tequila sunrise caringly crafted with Don Julio Anejo by the cocksucking Eldorado Marquez. Hank snorkeled within his cauldron of severely over-hopped ale. They'd already finished their singlemalt-enhanced coffee which nicely prepped their cardiac systems for a brunch of huevos rancheros and, respectively, tequila and beer. The auntie was too small for Eldorado to join them so early in libation, but the

barback had been following their reelings over the nexus of scheisskultur, literature, human volition and the origins of life with one ear while listening to sports news with his other.

"Speaking of characters, Richie Jones got picked up last night and speaking of math, he'll make parole in a year or two," Eldorado said.

"Richie is already a character, prison won't change that," Seamus remarked.

"But is he a philosophical reactionary?" Hank wondered.

"Let us wait, that we might see," Seamus said.

"Paul Erdős took bennies," Hank noted. "And when he stopped for a month after taking a bet that he couldn't stop, he was at a loss for ideas and declared the field of mathematics had been delayed by a month. Then he got back on the bennies."

"Seems like a very popular metaphysical assumption," Seamus said.

"It does. But was Erdős as a

reactionary?" Hank asked.

Their philosophy was briefly interrupted, as in walked Jack Ross carrying his very own styrofoam container of huevos rancheros from the Tex-Mex Magician across the street. He ordered a highball of alkalyzed ice, the which into Eldorado Marquez poured a justifiable foundation of single malt whiskey aged-twenty-years, then he topped the vessel to its rim with black coffee from the hot pot behind the bar. J.R. took a stool and began breakfasting, starting with a nice glug of his most brilliant coffee, which he followed by issuing an "ahhhhh," as he settled in.

"Anyway fifty bucks says Carson will take a ride on the Miri train," Eldorado continued.

"What?" J.R. asked.

The small convention explained to J.R. that Richie Jones was busted the previous night and that he'd be off to see the wizard thus leaving his old lady twisting in the wind, poor thing.

"Sheeeeeiiit. That ain't necessary to board the Miri train. Wonder where he got the coke?" J.R. laughed. Nobody

took the barback's action respecting that mystery.

The nascent Richie Clean declined Miri's bail offer, considering it to have been a waste of two-hundred-fifty Americanos for buying a stitch of ill-fated time under the circumstances. To get over an unavoidable less-than-two-and-more-like-one years, Richie figured, the sooner was the better.

Best Made Planz of Whores and Dopers

Bond agents typically have some combination of police work in their background, or private investigation, or the military. For an activity so rooted in the old common law, it is needful for them to have a working rapport about the local doors, like jails, sheriffs, courts, city officials, clerks, governors, reporters, bars, churches, whores, pushers and such alike. Any kind of investigations background is helpful, these days certainly to include the tech-related. Or as in Carson's case, having been born into it, which is the way of the gun in Saudi Arabia or Texas or anywhere else. He wasn't a retired detective or special forces vet or a scientist but his grandfather founded a

bail bonds company that his family still operated. Some bond agents freelance but a well-defined community does exist. Insurance repo, lawyers, process servers, skip tracers or any paramilitary occupation and even accountants, bankers, historians, news reporters, cab drivers and bartenders. As long, of course, as you're on the "right side of the law" and have the appropriate mind set, there's an in-road.

All in all, bartending is an excellent perch for it, which suited Carson on both sides of the line. He made good money both ways under good cover, with easy access to vice, and questionable taste in women. So it went.

About ten, Miri walked in, pulled up a bar stool and ordered one of what Eldorado Marquez was having, which was an ice cold can of PBR. The only patrons in the house besides Miri and Eldorado at the bar, and the dart team by the rear door, were several pool-playing regulars swilling longnecks and cueing away on the coin-operated tables. The classic rock satellite radio station excreted pentatonic bass lines, the NTN trivia network screens added a layer of sublime analog

television back light along with the glow of muted closed-captioned sports news and a spectrum of neon beer signs, altogether still a very sublime digital presence by today's norms.

At the bar Eldorado and Miri played network trivia, watched baseball and drank ice cold PBRs (they were only a dollar) until Carson and J.R. arrived separately about midnight. J.R. didn't stay for a drink but Carson scored an eightball from him. Eldorado joined the pod of regulars on the quarter tables to kill the last hour or two before the bar closed, and Carson eventually left on the Miri train.

Jojoslim made a little regular cash from Richie and Miri, but that wasn't the point of his crack-selling. Of course Miri had access to a certain currency that Richie didn't. Small operators like Slim are in the game for small reasons; in a broader sense he was just another consumer within the greater economy. He didn't smoke rocks, not on the regular anyway, just sometimes with the girls he controlled which, again, was pretty much the whole point of his crack venture.

Slim didn't get his stock from me,

but powder action was likely his main narcotics trafficking revenue. Incidental to his caper, Carson may have discovered Slim's source, but I don't think so, and it's a moot point now. I doubt such local intel is what fundamentally drove Carson to his swan song, but it does calculate as a good cover story that a bond agent would be sniffing around the vice markets of his area of operation.

Carson's ostensible motive was likely Jojoslim's 'beat.' In other words, I think Carson did it for sport. He took an immersive, no-holds-barred joy ride. Capital identity theft. For his own thrills to steal the soul of his mark. Cultural appropriation daresay? Car theft in the figurative sense? Not really horse theft. Maybe he was just feasibility testing within a limited context, i.e., to take over only Miri's account, and he didn't intend to fully appropriate Slim's operation. I believe Carson originally wanted part of, but not necessarily all of Slim's distribution network, client(s) or whore(s), just for the heck of it. Points for style.

On its surface, notwithstanding the shadiness of Slim's vice-riddled existence, what then of a man who

attempts to clone himself into such a station, moreover via cold-blooded murder? In answering that, "what's the difference?" was my first thought. On further reflection and at the risk of overthinking it, the nuance grew in my view. Both Carson and Slim were 'true believers,' so I think that's the bar for any philosophical analysis of the case.

From the Bar One North, Miri and Carson walked straight to Carson's condo where they were on the couch for no more than a half minute before he had *Bitches Brew* queued on the turn table and four big huge rails lined up on the coffee table. Flesh and fluids swirled for some hours until the couple met some vivid wall of unconscious predawn peace in a tangle of blankets under the humid, centrally cooled air. Behind thick black drapes it stayed pitch dark except for negligible blips on the stereo component switches and their bodies' sublime infrared.

In the hungry guilt-free dynamite sex preceding their stonelike respite, Miri and Carson iced their coked-up jets with stoffs from his large antique oak liquor cabinet. They shook and minimally bruised each straight shot

just enough to cool-off the liquor yet preserve the alcohol's straight bite. Miri went with a sweet New World rum. Carson chose tequila anejo with an agave plume earthy enough to please Carlos Casteneda. About noon Miri woke up, got dressed and scraped Carson's tonsils with her tongue on her way to the door, "thank you Carson. I'm late, I going to my mother's."

It was a five-minute walk to her apartment. She got in her car and drove across town to Jojo's. The walk was hot and humid no surprise, but the car's A/C blew cold and the stereo tided her over until she could catch a bath made of actual water. She knew Jojo would appreciate the hair of the dog.

Richie ate a protein bar and, undetected, he put a distant tail on Miri as she pulled out of her apartment parking lot. He tailed her out of curiosity, because he could. He did this sort of thing for a living, after all. Carson had predicted she'd make a connection with her dealer then, and it was the first he'd ever seen of Slim.

Tradecraft and Sidework

In preparation for Richie's

eventual parole, he worked a twelve step program at his unit in Huntsville. It put him in the orbit of the prison chaplain who opened a line of communication back home, to a clergy member with connections to his mother. Lifestyles like his are thought of as irretrievable, but jailers and ministers and psychologists and the like sometimes give honest accounts of amazing recovery stories if god's sprinkled into the mix. OMG indeed. Especially in Texas. Even secular psychology literature holds religion as a usually less-harmful or at least a more orderly manifestation of addictive behavior, as a practical displacement for deep-seated addiction and the consequent damage. Religion is an excellent tow-chain for addicts.

Richie's recovery counseling included weekly phoners with Reverend Bill Barlow back in Harvey. They discussed the wisdom of Richie returning to his old warehouse job, new vocational training options and the fate of Miri.

Those on his block started calling him Richie Clean. Six months in Richie didn't know what to expect from life on the outside or anywhere else. In abstinence he gradually became

increasingly less broken. That said, in the beginning he must've had some significant brain trust, that he was able to do so much damage yet still pull out with a decent peanut.

Miri was spirited in her own way, maybe mean spirited sometimes, whatever, maybe. Dainty as fairly well-worn bar leather, certainly a little on the trashy and dangerous side, just ask Jack Ross, she was more a bull ride than a barrel race. Falling in love with her would be ridiculous. I don't think Carson's motivation remarkably involved love, he ranked Miri as an old acquaintance who offered a minimally hazardous thrill which he considered to be one among the various of life's finer delicacies. Again I believe it follows, that love or sex were not what later drove Carson to disturb the eschatology.

Carson's 'joyride' appears to have been amoral from standard angles but standard angles are canny. A more agnostic perspective belies an opportunistic philosophical investigation on Carson's part. Maybe he thought of it as a phenomenological query. Considering his consequent path to have been purely in the service of his alternative choice, made as a

matter of exploring first principle, then the choice itself was not traditionally amoral albeit perhaps so objectively or rationally: Pure philosophical discovery but for the perishing of one crack dealer. His investigation being corrupted by one pesky murder seems, in my mind, about right for the likes of Carson.

From a couple of residential blocks away, Carson watched Miri go into Slim's apartment in the HUD housing not far from the city police station. It was about one o'clock. The units were more or less indistinguishable from the scads of multi-residential housing of a city so full of transient undergraduates.

A roll in the hay with me, Carson thought, some rare sleep, and then directly to her connection to top off her heavy fuel. Bitch. In. Heat. She was in there for an hour necessarily scratching those unavoidable itches about the crotch of humanity, and nabbed \$300 worth of rocks for \$50. From there she did in fact drive to her actual mother's house but Carson didn't follow. Instead, he waited where he was until about twenty minutes later, when Slim walked out and got into his little

Mazda.

Making his way on Highway 6 to the north end of town, Slim's first stop was a knock on an apartment door that some white girl answered. He was in there for about half an hour. Carson noted the address.

The tiny parade then made its way to a pool hall in the old downtown district, the neighborhood of the county seat with its antebellum-era courthouse and the jail complex next to the same railroad tracks that ran through the university campus in Harvey a few miles south. That old downtown is surrounded by a business sector which was rebuilt after the turn of this century via renovation grants. The urban remodeling didn't really change the deeper economic undercurrents, but it did seem to put a little new spin on that old scene. Life went on there in 1999, same as it would in '09 and '19, same as it had in '89 and '79, and on. A perfect neighborhood for pool halls, hotels and law offices anyway.

Slim's beat was fairly uneventful, all things being equal. This was just a random cross-section of it, Carson thought, but it seemed ordinary for the moment, even natural. A little like

Carson's own job insofar as being often boring or at least mundane, with only intermittent spikes of action. Then again, this is my job, he considered, with its places reserved for excitement and adrenaline but mostly repetitive motion, hurry-up-and-wait, which was exactly what he was doing.

Hence the women and other sporting ventures on the side and whatever other angles they sought for stimulation, both Carson and Slim, although the crack dealer possibly suffered less paperwork. Carson's breaking bad didn't really hinge upon Slim beyond their incidental existence on the same playing field at that moment in the game of life. Carson eventually peeled-off and returned to his previously scheduled late afternoon / early evening.

Pax Americana

Miri took about two hours at her mother's to visit her daughter. At dusk she returned to her apartment and made a dinner of saltines and peanut butter and iced tea. With the A/C cranked, she laid back on the couch and maybe watched *Cops* and *South Park* and reruns of *Martin* and the like.

Like everyone else in the nineties on Sunday nights, she caught the weekly episode of *The X-files*. After that, she felt like a nightcap or a light brunch, or whatever label best fit the hour. She spruced herself up a little while pondering whether to stroll over for a cold six-pack from the Big Whore Drive-Thru Liquor Barn, or to stroll to the Bar One North and get it straight from the nipple.

Sunday nights and often Mondays too end up being 'service industry night' at the wet bars in this district and ones like it, featuring drink specials and the commingling of restaurant / service industry workers trying to enjoy their delayed weekend. Industry night offers marvelous business-to-business networking and a fair amount of heavy drinking. In my experience, staff nights are de jure if not advertised or discussed. Local routines rhyme with the off-season and holidays. Regular patrons are welcome too.

The house-lodged dart team was there that late August night, and why not. At least two beer snobs, namely Seamus and Hank were unintentionally talking over people's heads at the

corner of the bar. It was about ten o'clock. They ordered two Tecate margaritas and two bottles of Red Stripe lager and discussed the canny implications of the approaching academic session, the fall 1999 semester. J.R. walked in, sat next to them, ordered an oatmeal stout boilermaker, poured it into his oak and iron flagon that hung from the rack above the bar among various others, and logged-in to the network trivia. Strolling in next was Miri who sat next to Jack Ross.

"Where's Carson?" J.R. queried. Eldorado Marquez shook his head and shrugged. Seamus and Hank didn't know either. Eldorado cracked-open two cans of PBR, one for him and one for Miri, who added "I haven't seen him since last night."

Richie's parole was still six months out, after which he'd begin working nights as a grocery store stocker while mulling options for vocational certifications, and gestating his writing habit by scribbling poems, lyrics, short stories and otherwise journaling into spiral notebooks he'd buy from the dollar store. He'd get into the habit, instead of logging regular downtime at the Bar

One North, of nursing Espressos
Americanos at the Kafe-24 next door to
the Tex-Mex Magician. Alcohol he was
done with, though it wasn't the most
salient of his previous addictions.
Straightedge completely, life was to be
for Richie. He'd go into that
caffeinated all-night venue sometimes
before a shift, sometimes afterward,
and sometimes both.

He found other lucid dreamers in
that smoky 24-hour coffee shop.
Definitely more than were to be found
at the wet bars on the same block.
That's not to say J.R. or Eldorado
Marquez or Seamus and Hank were all
dead ringers but you get the picture.
As a parolee he would not be permitted
in bars anyway, but he might find a
place in there behind a microphone and
guitar after his parole was up, if he
could stomach it.

It wasn't too long into his
recovery, though, as is typical of
those who survive it, for humanity and
its gods to disclose their myriad
hopeless failings to Richie. Ironically
he found some general black-pilled
angles to be not as stark from within a
correctional facility, because
expectations are extremely realistic
inside, and obvious constraints compel

a baseline of utility. But outside, bubble shock awaits. In Richie's experience, religion had been available to all and had generally served a practical purpose, as had everything else in the austere context of incarceration.

Beyond clearly defined black-and-white concepts, after his release Richie's sober eyes quickly beheld widespread rot and reckless disregard for human potential, civility and public trust, in a fallen and shameful world doomed and teeming with meaninglessness and filled with lost souls. He was permanently branded as a felon, despite those scales having fallen from his own eyes. Not necessarily everyone failed the smell test, but it was a real possibility.

Moral Drift

At first as a mere diversion, Carson kept an eye on Slim's routines. A point of order, a practically random piece of voluntary sidework, simply gathering local info about a local vice operator. It was valuable to him for the same reasons that managing the Bar One North were. Moving around the local rights of way by day and night, in the

middle of his own home turf, surveilling a crack dealer and his whores was within his operational purview indeed.

He branched out a little, exploring various rabbit holes while tracking Slim, including some interesting observation of a second one of the slinger's clients, a woman named Melany. Carson also took a cursory inventory of what-all came and went from the downtown pool hall frequented by Slim. He didn't aim to keep any enduring watch on any of these people or places, not even Slim, initially. It was just background work. He was a headhunter after all, not a policeman. He took in a good overview of people and venues of general interest to his work and filed it away between his ears.

Later, though, after Slim's mysterious death, Carson did maintain his relations with Miri, as the weeks and then months marched on. As matters eventually took a turn for the darker, Carson still hadn't intended anything beyond Slim, cold blood, simple. In retrospect, Carson's failure to let Slim's trail go entirely cold, and his persistence in tracking Melany, and his ongoing incidental relations with Miri,

probably over-tempted the fates. Maybe just maintaining relations with Miri as an isolated exception, although likely still would have been borrowing trouble, could've been workable. However, the symmetry of Carson's dabbling with both of (or at least two of) Slim's clients seems glaringly brazen in hindsight. This must have been (well, beyond the killing itself, of course) where he first began sliding into 'unknown territory.'

Meanwhile summer break was over and done, the undergrads were returned. Fall classes were back in session, and peak-crowd hours resumed at the Bar One North, Kafe-24, The Tex-Mex Magician and every-damn-where else in little old Harvey.

Some flatfoot in uniform might, or might not, investigate rigorously enough to discover and question Miri, were Slim found dead next to a half-baked batch of crack. Yet no investigator would likely get too wrapped around the axle in chasing the more subtle aspects of such an offing, considering the situation and its gutters, left open by an erstwhile Jojoslim.

Of course there was the connection

once-removed by way of Miri, juxtaposed between Carson and Jojo, easily auditable by anyone coherently working the most obvious angles. But, ah, well, Carson thought, that would still require a confession on his part, which he knew wasn't going to happen. So it was that Carson had decided to grease Slim for sport. He felt certain his conscience would never bother him, never through the end of his days, for eighty-sixing a crack dealer.

Anyway, as sure as the breath he drew, Slim's small-scale rock-slinging operation kept his libido and some of his petty cash needs at bay. It was simply a side business adjunct to an array of various other odd jobs, he was low-level, low-heat, not aiming to scale-up but always with an eye for new clientele to fend off the natural attrition of the jungle. At the time of his own passing, Slim had only two regular customers one being Miri. The other was Melany, a powder customer at least so far, although Jojo had her marked for full control with his magical stones.

Bricka Bracka Firecracker Sis-Boom-Bah

One Tuesday in October came a

thunderstorm, not an uncommon thing in eastern central Texas. It had been raining buckets all day and all night, swelling up the Brazos River and Carson's leaving the bar after he punched out the books had no mitigating effect on weather. Last call was 1:45, closing time was 2. Eldorado Marquez remained, doing the bar dishes, taking out the trash and mopping it all up. Miri sat at the bar playing trivia with bar flies on the west coast, waiting for Eldorado to get off work.

Carson's passive observation of Slim was about over with, there was no good reason to keep it up now, he'd sufficiently deciphered the man's routines likely to the point of diminishing returns and recorded his regular associates and geography.

There was relatively little in the way of beer busts on a school / work night, and the various otherwise dependable night owls did not linger out into the small hours because of the thunderstorm. It was a rainy mess, and a little chilly, resulting in minimal vehicle traffic on roads that would otherwise have been busier this time of year, this time of night, on any given day of the week.

A key exception to the night's non-lingering, Carson first did a little loop through the neighborhood behind his bar. He burned a Marlboro and decided on a last pass by Slim's apartment, killing some time in spite of the weather, enjoying the warmth and comfort of his big block Plymouth. With that thought, he began making his way across town. The storm cranked out some more godzilla thunder and lightning as it had been for hours. That season's turning weather had contrasted with the warmth and coziness inside the Bar One North that previous evening, and his patrons were grateful for a warm and dry place to quaff their ales, safely play pool, and watch football. As he walked up the steps to his second floor apartment, Jojoslim took a twelve-gauge slug in the back. Neither Carson's cowboy boots nor the thunder which covered the shotgun blast left any marks on the pavement.

Eldorado Marquez and Miri skittered through the weather to Eldorado's apartment. Eldorado actually did not do coke or any kind of speed, as Miri knew, so she went to his bathroom to get at her kibble discreetly. In defiance of his quazi reputation as a queer, Eldorado loaded the only pipe he had into Miri's bottom

purse a few times, in between slurps of PBR and tokes of handrolled cigarettes, which they both enjoyed greedily as the seasons changed loudly outside. Then they slept, aided by the deep comfort of warm and dry shelter. A faint trace smell of ozone from the storm seeped into the apartment. A cozy scene. Miri slept hard. Eldorado Marquez did too.

They say time flies when you're having fun. Before they could say final exams, the season circled back to the leeward side of the winter semester break. Teeming undergrads went home to haunt their hometown bars for a couple weeks, leaving the local rats alone in the granary.

Ahhh, Christmas in Christendom. Holiday spirit. No school. Business was slow, the bar was dead, so Eldorado Marquez and Carson West were dutifully comping a good volume of expensive imported lagers, winter ales and top-shelf liquor for themselves, the regulars, and whichever other locals blew-in, including the many homers who were briefly back to visit family for the holidays. It wasn't an unusual time for those who'd flown from the nest to pay a visit at their old haunts. And, can you even believe it, on Christmas eve it even snowed. Not outside, but

right there at the bar. Who says there's no such thing as Santa, who in this instance looked a lot like longhaired wingnut Jack Ross the regular. Then, I'll be damned if I lie, exactly one week later, it happened again same time, same place with many of the same witnesses. That was New Year's Eve 1999.

Speaking of rats, as the local fates had begun disclosing their murderousness, they also announced themselves to be horny as hot crotches. Murdering child of the universe Carson West had the serendipity of easily developing a personal relationship with one of Slim's other clients, not by further surveillance but in the flesh, as Melany had begun routing herself through the Bar One North a couple times per week. Ahh, the hand of God indeed. Anyway, Carson knew who she was, of course, as a result of his recent sniffing about. He was keenly aware that she'd recently lost one, if not her only, connection for certain materials. Carson began accommodating her with a little help from his ol' buddy Santa Claus.

Crosstown Traffic

At the time of his death, the woman probably most recently entered into Jojoslim's "sales funnel" was Melany, waitress at a poolhall called Eastgate Live, previously mentioned as another client of Jojo's. Miri's and Carson's north end wasn't the same neighborhood as Richie's, but it was similar: A busy bar among many others, with apartment buildings along the extremities of older residential areas now predominately rental properties, traversed willy-nilly by thoroughfares archeologically anchored by restaurants of every kind, strip malls of all ages, and an abundance of large, grassy, humid parks.

In the evenings, the Eastgate got leathery which complemented Melany's mode of living, so she'd kept that job for almost a year. Same as her doppelgangers haunting the north side, she wasn't here because of the university. But unlike Carson, Miri, Richie and Eldorado, Harvey was not her hometown. Melany was a poor girl from the middle of nowhere who came to Harvey when she turned eighteen because it was the nearest "big town." With a population of about 100,000 including perennial students, Harvey wasn't as

big or as far a drive as Houston, but it was bigger and far enough from the middle-of-nowhere trailer park where she grew up.

East Texas being East Texas geographically and the Deep South culturally, Melany per her sociological legacy, was off-put by the promise of so many, well, not-white people in Houston otherwise she might well have instead escaped the lot of her origins toward that direction. The egalitarian texture of Harvey impressed her with its worldly university, strutting cocks-men and -women of every color from every continent, yet the city certainly still featured all of the many local inland anthropological offerings of the Gulf Coast.

Certainly not at Eastgate Live, Melany had first encountered her neighbor Jojoslim accidentally, at the 7-Eleven convenience store across from their apartments, at a time she'd happened to be out of powder which was normally not an issue for a pretty Eastgate Live waitress. Jojo was obvious and so was Melany and there they stood face to face while gassing up their cars.

Melany's relationship with Jojo

was, by her "less diverse" cultural origins, a prominent irony in her mind and Jojo knew it. To him Melany represented the ultimate jewel heist, country girl straight out of the sticks, a rare blue-eyed catch, poor, young and dumb. But she was nestled within Eastgate's hive of bootleather and chromium, so he had to very cautiously groom her as a potential white-on-rice property of his. So, having her as powder customer was unorthodox but worth it to him.

It was forensically convenient for Carson that he was already acquainted with Melany by way of his standard swims through other bars in Harvey. Typically bar staff in a given district know one another and maintain polite regard as a standard among friendly competition in such a lucrative dram shop marketplace. Like, for example, say, on service industry nights flatout intramural pub crawls may occur depending on who's young and dumb or already drunk, or idle and willing to drive or has cash to burn. So for Melany the Bar One North was a perfectly natural spot for her to hide in plain sight from her regular business down the road at Eastgate.

Richie was still away, and ~~the man~~

Carson maintained an after-hours relationship with ~~skydiving queen of the ass whores~~ Miri throughout that year. As did ~~cocksucker~~ Eldorado Marquez. As did ~~Santa Claus~~ Jack Ross. All as was convenient and timely at the scheming pleasure of the heavenly fates.

There seemed always more to come. Carson, among others gently worked soft angles, for a piece of Melany, and with the somewhat undue success of the baselessly scheming and self-righteousness, for better or for worse. A year goes quickly in that scene with its rats and granaries, heavenly fates, winter breaks and so on.

Here in America, Better You Than Me

At parole the typical blind and standard rotation of the state apparatus deposited Richie in due course right back into the primordial corridor of his birth, the scene of the crime, but they could've let him loose in Nome and it would've been the same Disneyland. Anyway, that one man's trash is another's treasure is a sword that cuts both ways.

He was on a successful mend

regardless of his geography but it was a little socially awkward in the following way: Richie was the family's last child and a punk in the street. Everything he knew, everything he'd ever learned, was in the context of his erstwhile career, whether it was dating, friends, work, play, history, all social interaction and just every little thing. He couldn't return to that scene, that lifestyle, those people and their way of living. So he couldn't resort to what he knew, and he didn't have authentic enough experience to anticipate what he was facing on the straightedge. Richie didn't have much in common with many if not any other humans by now. He felt people often looked at him like he wore only a big white hat but with no other garments to cover himself. Rebuilding takes a lifetime.

To the straights and the biblefruit he was a con and a junkie. To the true believers, well true believers come in all forms, often lacking minimal objectivity whether cops or criminals. Richie Clean was beyond the providence of both the cocksucking glassy-eyed petite bourgeoisie and the Machiavellian proletarian chattel. He was stuck in the middle, at the bottom. Richie

Jones, an unlucky American Pierre.
Jesus was right, humanity at-large is
fucking retarded nevermind the whore of
Babylon.

Since he exchanged his hooks, rods
and weapons for a new lease on life and
he wasn't looking back, the bag Richie
was left holding contained a mixture of
harsh but valuable clarity, redemption
reinforced by general lack of common
ground with most humanity, and an
anchor of unyielding personal faith.
Those are excellent building materials
for immortal wooden ships but
admittedly it's not much in the way of
cheap thrills. In light of his limited
options to ply the auspicious hand he'd
been dealt, as destined, he took a job
as a nightstocker at a grocery store
near campus, in his old neighborhood.

After his shifts, he frequently
spent the small hours at the Kafe-24,
located, where else, across from the
Bar One North and next to the Tex-Mex
Magician. Conveniently the nearby bars
were all long-past closing time when
his shifts ended. Scribbling in his
notebook, reading, drinking Americanos
with no sugar and no cream (black
Americanos I suppose), sometimes
picking at his little backpacker
acoustic guitar, and conversing with

other caffeinated locals. His parole officer, Doris Day, took no issue with his daily routes and why would she, as for his part of it Richie made her job easy. Unavoidably from time to time, he did come across people from his past. Their hometown was all of theirs, after all. He kept his head down and mostly went unrecognized.

The conclusion to what was effectively his ten-year common-law marriage with Miri, transpired as informally as it had begun. Maybe the "breakup" could be backdated to the night of his arrest. It was over and done and didn't involve a gun or so he thought.

He'd been back some two months before he had a conversation with Miri which, technically he wasn't supposed to be doing as his parole forbade him from interacting with criminals (statutory or otherwise) or any of his previous partners in crime (statutory or otherwise). But it was brief and incidental contact which she initiated in a public place, and it was necessary for posterity. Turns out it was rather pivotal for Miri, and it was newsy for Richie who was way out of the local gossip loop.

Jojo was killed in October 1999, and Richie's parole was September 2020, so upon Richie's hearing of their old dealer's demise from Miri around Christmas 2020, it was old news. Daresay a cold case. Richie, most notably he thought, found himself not to be giving much of a shit, and possibly a feeling of relief on behalf of the dead man no less. Maybe a larger philosophical question involved the final judgment Jojo's soul which was outside of Richie's jurisdiction as far as he understood it in those days.

Maybe he'd envisioned it as his only and last sighting of her, but in the two months since he'd returned, Richie realized the town was too small to say never on that measure. The topic of Jojo made up most of their conversation, although Richie did mention he'd gone straight (implying confirmation that he and Miri were over). And, Miri mentioned that she'd been seeing a little of Carson West, here and there, in the past year. She didn't mention Eldorado Marquez or Jack Ross, probably because Carson was a new trick but J.R. and Eldorado weren't. Ahh, Miri and her hooks.

"It's none of my business," Richie said, when she'd told him about Jojo.

"Of course," Miri said. "Whoever did it got away with it."

"Any suspects?" he asked.

"Nothing specific ever came out in the news," she said. "Whoever it was shot him in front of his apartment. I remember it was storming like crazy that whole night."

"What about you?" Richie asked. "Do you have any hunches?"

"The cops asked me but I knew fuck all," she said. "They knew he was a dealer, so they probably felt like they were looking for a needle in a haystack. They basically were. Nothing more in the news, seems like they gave up."

"Well it could've been anybody, but it had to be somebody. It's always sorta open season on crack dealers. Users too." Richie said. "He knew the risks."

He paid for her triple espresso to go, and off she went.

He Said She Said Kill Kill Kill

That conversation with Richie had set Miri's mind to thinking more about what happened to Jojo. Hell, even a crackhead knows murder victims usually know their killers or if not then it's usually someone they're connected with just once-removed. In other words, it almost certainly wasn't random.

Miri was quite capable of thinking, in fact too capable, she'd admit. Such that it was exhausting for her, so she generally tried to avoid it. When she was set upon by thinking it ran in loops, over her head out of her control, which was a key factor for her cocaine hooks. Snorting coke transformed Miri's hanging thoughts into charming little zingers.

The stronger the medicine the better, as far as she was concerned. Smoking that shit more robustly transformed her thoughts not into little firefly zingers but powerful locomotives that didn't bother with conversation or language games. She put the broad strokes of those big engines into the service of heaven's own work. That is, basically, fucking. And whenever the tinkling winds or galactic freight trains ever got rude, she

tempered them back into submission with greens and blues, and rinse and repeat. This modality is not at all unique. Most people are not crackheads but most people are trapped in numerous addiction loops.

Anyway she hadn't previously given much thinking of any type to Jojo's violent end, because as Richie had in so many words accurately observed, babies cry, people die, crack dealers might be shot without due process and Jojo was well aware of such facts. Plus when the cops had first come around, it induced a strong chilling effect on Miri's thinking about it. Richie was also right, that it could've been anybody who killed Jojo but that it was definitely somebody. She didn't think it was the cops themselves who did it because Jojo knew the score, knew his place, and always watched his walk. He broke the law but he respected its power, stayed square with it, and always steered clear of it.

Of course Jojo and Miri had ongoing relations and some overlapping interests. Even Richie had known it. Jojo had talked to her sometimes, small talk, call it pillow talk I guess, so she had some minimal background on him. That's how Miri knew of Melany, her

name, and where she worked. Jojo was more of a general operator and only dabbled in dealing for his "friends," friends like Miri and Melany, so he had no direct competitors or apparent adversaries in the drug dealing game.

Of course she didn't trust the cops and she knew there would be no justice if it had been one of them who shot Jojo. Justice couldn't help him now anyway. But Richie was right, somebody had gotten away with murder. The more she thought about it, the more it agitated her. These thoughts skated around in her head. That conversation with Richie and even just the sight of him, albeit drastically different than her memories of him, brought a world of memories into her roller-rink brains during couples skate. The corpse of Jojo was speed-skating, limboing under the held-hands of herself and Richie, shooting-the-duck under the clasped hands of Melany and Carson; Jojo rolling along with a big hole blown in his back.

On her coffee table Miri set a big honker of some of the el puro from Carson, who'd gotten it from J.R. of course. It crystallized her vexed skating rink into a dazzling aerial display of a hundred little

bottlerockets framed against the clear night sky of the central Texas winter. I think she probably had the case cracked at that point, subconsciously at least. Steady now, she angled her narrow ass up to the Bar One North.

“So how did you meet her?”

The doldrums of January meant everyone and everything was back to work in Harvey. Slinging groceries deep into the night. Slinging rocks and everything else. Slinging drinks to the locals, students and stragglings professors. Slinging differential calculus to the engineering candidates, and slinging composition and rhetoric to the hellbound twenty-first-century humanities majors.

“I know everybody in this town. Anyway she works at Eastgate Live, you know.” Carson thought it was a little weird that Miri gave two shits about some other woman, if that was, in fact, what she was on about.

It was a Sunday night a.k.a. locals night + service industry night = a good time at the Bar One North for the staff and the regulars to relax a bit.

"I know. It's none of my business," Miri said. "Just curious though."

"No problem," Carson said. He grabbed two cold bottles of Lone Star from the display fridge behind the bar, handed her one, and cracked the other for himself.

"She and Jojo had a thing going," she said. He didn't answer. Carson and Miri had spoken very little about Slim and what happened to him. Miri knew that Carson knew that Jojo had been a connection of hers, because she'd told him a year earlier when and why the cops had questioned her about the murder. But Miri *didn't* know that Carson had *already* known of that connection, nor that he also knew of Melany's.

Carson did know, of course, that Slim and Melany were a connection, but Melany did not know that Carson knew. Still, Carson knew that even if Melany did know that he knew, it would be of no consequence because Melany could not know *how* Carson knew.

"Is Richie out yet?" Carson changed the subject, and Miri thought it was a little out of character for

Carson to be so sensitive about a girl.

Jack Ross rolled in, grabbed a trivia box and sat himself down at the end of the bar, so as not to disturb the conversation between Miri and Carson. Hank and Seamus had not made any appearance at the bar on this particular mid-semester work night. It was about eleven.

"Yep. He's been out since October," she said.

"You see much of him?" he asked.

"Nope. Only once, across the street at Kafe-24, last month," she said. "He's gone straight."

"Ahh, well. Goodbye Richie Jones, hello Richie Clean," he said. "Cheers!"

Incense and Peppermints

Compared to Miri's bottlerockets and freight trains, Carson's increasingly speed-addled flights of fancy felt more like ice picks stabbing into his temples, each time certain thoughts tickled his conscience. Indeed he had been smoking some rocks here and there where before he'd simply dabbled

with snorting a little too much coke just like most of everyone else he knew, then dunking it in alcohol and covering it with grass. Turns out that literally stealing much of the identity to include the crazy whitegirlz of, a crack dealer whom you've yourself murdered, is by any conservative assessment, a bad trip. Yet, he knowingly bought the ticket. It might be said that Slim the speedskating zombie crack dealer had been a bad influence on Carson over the past year.

So that nice, slow-business Sunday house-night in January, following the blind alley queries of Miri, had induced a little torture session in Carson's head. Of course from within that dark box Carson could easily spot any holes in it, no matter how tiny. Don't start tripping, Carson knew, was the key. The doubts weren't necessary, he shouldn't even be having them, yet he was, and he was having to spend energy squelching them.

Carson knew he'd killed Slim, but Miri didn't know it and could never prove it, but what of her suspecting it? If she were a homicide detective who knew exactly and precisely everything she already knew on the topic, no more and no less, it would

meet the probable cause threshold, Carson reasoned, to finger him as the prime suspect.

They were blind alley questions from Miri but she was thinking enough about it to bring it up. He wondered what she would do if she suspected, or concluded, that it was him? She might just resolve to let it pass. She had survived much in life, she wasn't so dainty herself. Or not? She and the dead man had been lovers, but she'd had so many. But so had Slim. And so had Carson and what would Carson, himself, do if the roles were reversed? But they could never be! And she'd naturally be scared, regardless of how she might feel about it. He'd never seen Miri scared and certainly not of him, so he reasoned that if he detected fear it would mean she knew. And if she knew, then what?

As I've said, at that point, Miri probably already had the case cracked, at least subconsciously, even if she couldn't prove it. There was enough circumstantial evidence in her head, even if she didn't have it all, and anyway what she did have was at least enough to investigate further were she an investigator, which she wasn't. But Carson was right that, even so, though

she might well not rollover, there would be fear. Obvious, detectable fear. He fixated on the tell-tale fumes of fear as his brightline test to see if she'd made him. He didn't really think beyond that, as in what he would or could do about it. Carson thought of his uncle, the chief of his grandfather's bailbonds company, and what he might think of it all.

The bottlerockets and ice picks did their best to cool down their respective toys in the attic with quality lager lubricants for another hour or so at the Bar One. They both felt the red itch that's so necessary to put a check on the blues, and slid out together in the rhythm and syncopation that she and Richie would have slid out with, for all the same reasons, a year or so prior.

Carson had been cooking up some of his powder, so unlike earlier in their liaisons, he and Miri were fueling it not with lines laid upon the coffee table and nice liquor from his cabinet, but with rocks - just like old times except that he wasn't Richie and he wasn't Slim. But she was certainly still Miri.

A very strong speed rush suspends

the veil of the ego, and that in tandem with the intimacy of lovemaking being intentionally turbo boosted by that very rush, makes it impossible to hide anything from the rider who knows where, when and how to look. That window is finite but it's definitely there. Typically, there is a trust even of course, during "drugless" sex on the natural, and it's easily enough agreed upon, because manipulative psyche trips are not the ideal way to occupy such beautiful, adventurous flights.

But, of course, Carson Freud decided he would use the opportunity to, well, analyze Miri's cognitive moment pursuant to the subject of his involvement in Slim's demise, specifically in search of fear which he'd deduced would be a certain indicator of her awareness and suspicion of him. Well, what else would you expect from a murdering crackhead?

Diver Down

On finer points, I realize comparing Carson with Sigmund Freud may seem fairly far afield. But old Siggy was a true cocaine advocate, a fact appreciated by psycho undergrads ever since, so I say it's close enough.

Carson, bartender playboy extraordinaire and fugitive recovery agent. Carson, nephew of old man West, the operator of the oldest bailbond company in Harvey. Carson, the newly minted crackhead. Carson found the fear he was looking for in the eyes of Miri as she took her second-to-last breath.

"She knows!" he thought. It wasn't a very sane thought. There might've been a shred of sanity there albeit very much diluted by the puddle of bat shit accumulating in his mind over the past year. Carson's brain had become a poisoned well in possession of no less than two tired souls put there against their will, lovers moreover. Going ahead, there were squirts of logic routed here and there, but any remaining taint of reliable sanity was plumb gone.

So Carson's logic, raw and untempered, everything he had left apart from pure madness, kicked into overdrive, which is the presumptive standard if clandestine corpus dilectus elimination suddenly supercedes all other imperatives.

From the depths of Carson's hat rack immediately emerged two options,

the first being utility incineration, the second being riverine submersion. Both strategies involved the sacrifice of the Persian rug under his coffee table.

Given thirty minutes notice, his Uncle West could have the basement incinerator of the local Hilton unlocked and unwatched. Carson knew this establishment method for solving "problematic" John Does was an option. For all practical purposes it was both official and anonymous for dispatching consensually problematic artifacts of the law, which Miri categorically wasn't. The option was a faster, more permanent resolution but it required some lack of faith, which Carson did not have, in his great uncle's integrity.

Option two involved a three-quarter hour drive south of town, to a deep and remote bend in the county's muddy namesake. It was a near-negligible little gauntlet of a drive but for the active perils imposed both to and from, upon the very mind of the driver in this case. The time of day was appropriate at least, that is, the small hours, the dead of night. He'd pack, load his cargo and weights into the trunk of his big block Plymouth,

and arrive at his destination about 2:45.

He was back home by four in the morning, a couple hours yet remaining before dawn. He washed himself, drank a tumbler of scotch, and left consciousness. Darkness.

"Hello," he answered the ringing phone by his couch.

"You working today?" the voice asked. It was Melany. He looked at the digital clock. Eleven in the morning, the absolute earliest polite time to telephone or visit unannounced upon someone who works graveyard shifts.

"Yep, you coming by before work or after?" Carson asked.

"Before," she said.

"No problem, see you then," he said.

She needed a lid. But of course. He'd catch-up with Jack Ross on his way to the bar.

Anthropocene Woman circa 2000 A.D.

Miri's mother was the first to miss her, but grown-ass women being out of pocket unannounced is not a matter of police business before several days' passing. She called the cops that Monday afternoon but it was mid-week before they would take a missing persons report on Miri's account. No official, active police hunt for her occurred, although she was put on the regional interagency missing persons list.

The situation did get a whiff from the Harvey city chief of detectives who recognized her name on the missing persons list. Of course Miri had been, or was, a 'person of interest,' more specifically a conjugal relation, to the victim of the year-old unsolved murder of a local crack dealer. Talk about free beer, he thought, might as well take a few notes and compare them with whatever loose ends the investigators had previously gathered from that crowd.

By the next weekend, there was no official man hunt and no press release, so no newspaper articles or mentions on the T.V. news of Miri, who was still missing. But the werewolves of Harvey's

finest were toeing the sidewalks of the north end with hound-dog boners, so roused by the lately incidental disappearance of the girlfriend of a yet-unsolved-murder victim. They had questions again, for almost everyone they'd previously had questions for when Jojoslim was shot.

Not everyone they'd previously questioned regarding the abrupt conclusion of Jojo was a regular customer or employee at Bar One, but at least half of them were. Nevermind the various known police assets in the district generally. Now that there was a possible lead, they pursued it cautiously.

Carson and Eldorado Marquez were both questioned of course, since they both saw Miri regularly as a bar patron, which also happened to provide a convenient alibi for Carson. The more intimate aspects of their respective relationships with her were ostensibly omissible as a matter of unrelated discretion. Both of them also had cause to interact with her regularly at the bar, and fair background information on her as they'd known her for nearly their entire lives. Richie Jones was questioned for obvious circumstantial historical reasons, but his exceptional

alibi was completely true: He'd seen her once since he'd gotten out, he was clean, they were no longer involved, and his P.O. Doris Day also vouched. Jack Ross was not questioned, no more than were Hank, Seamus or the dart team.

Questions directed among other of Jojoslim's old haunts, across the tracks on the other side of town, conjured sincere question marks floating from the heads of those, who answered, "Miri who?"

While official investigators were asking questions about a missing woman, they were hoping to make some connections with at least one murder and at least one missing person. In terms of finding Miri, well, that wasn't fated to happen. Closest they could get would be once-removed as a result of literally catfishing in the right place. So has gone the food chain in Rio Brazos De Dios since the Late Pleistocene. Alternatively, perhaps, if sufficiently submerged in the muddy river bed, distant-future anthropologists might discover her, fully fossilized.

Don't Stop Believing

Melany started sensing something fishy, pardon the pun, on account of Carson. She wasn't certain he was the last known person to see Miri. The police didn't know that because Carson had lied to them about her being at his apartment that night, he really hadn't had a choice, it was an omission made easily enough for lack of witnesses. Well, except for Eldorado Marquez who may have assumed they went home together, but he'd have been guessing. On the other hand, if Carson hadn't gone home with her, then Carson in turn, might've assumed Eldorado had. Maybe it's reasonable practice for co-workers on the graveyard shift to generally ignore their colleagues' day-to-day vice.

By then it had been two weeks since Miri's disappearance, with no official word on her whereabouts. Of course the killing of Jojoslim was already a cold case, with Richie having been in prison when he was killed, and his alibi was airtight respecting Miri too. Miri's forensic utility pursuant to Jojo's case (and her own) did not disappear with her, though.

Lacking a new break in the

investigation(s), at least a spare few things were already forensically obvious. No person knew Miri was dead, as an absolute certainty (except Carson), Jojo didn't disappear Miri, and if Miri didn't kill Jojo (which none had ever seriously suspected), one might now conjecture the same person was responsible for both Miri's and Jojo's situations. It wasn't an airtight theory but it was preponderant, and evident to anyone thinking straight and paying attention.

No one (but for myself maybe) prior to Miri's disappearance, seems to have included Carson West as a suspect in Slim's killing, because no one else had my specific access or perspective. But after Miri was gone, and continued to be gone, with hindsight being twenty-twenty, some armchair quarterbacking manifested in the bleachers. Maybe Eldorado Marquez didn't know if she went home with Carson that night, and maybe there was less heat for Eldorado if he didn't bother to speculate. It had been discreet but Eldorado knew who she'd been involved with, who'd been her coke connection (and, for that matter, who'd been supplying her supplier), and who'd begun joining her in smoking that shit.

Moreover, the onset and sequence of these events was not lost upon casual observers, capable of examining the timeline in reverse, to discover its proximity with what at the time had seemed to be the random murder of a local crack dealer. It was also discreet although not a state secret, that Carson moonlit (or daylit) for his family's bailbonds company, but that's not the sort of thing one advertises through the front door. Then again, the Bar One North was not a front-door type of place so certain people knew. Theory being, it's more plausible that an experienced headhunter would be capable of randomly killing some crack dealer, as opposed to some random bartender so doing.

So there was now a short list of people with heads full of plain-sight observations about circumstances pointing to Carson as a potential killer on the loose. This puts the observer on a stroll through uncanny valley, whether you're the one who did it, or if you're standing right next to them pouring drinks. That short list of suspicious minds comprised, minimally, Eldorado Marquez, Melany the Eastgate Live cocktail waitress, and myself.

It did not yet include Harvey's

homicide detectives, nevertheless, they were awake, vertical and proceeding, and if they kept asking questions, they'd hit upon it. Harvey's finest did know Carson was a headhunter for whatever that was worth, which for a time had likely been to the benefit of Carson's flight. However, one would expect the officials eventually, if sniffing around the scene long enough, to assimilate factors like Carson's vocational habituation mixed with his proximity and common ties to both victims, topped with a lack of other such capable suspects, the coalescence of which would rise to a probable cause threshold. Adding to those facts some discovery of Carson's sexual relations with Miri, and his having omitted or lied about it, would be an inculpatory coup de grâce. Carson realized all of this.

By that time, no list of straight-thinking people included Carson's name, but again some of his key logical functions persisted and he could see the loose ends as clearly as could anyone else with a close enough perspective. He still retained blanket plausible deniability, technically, which was originally what he'd implicitly counted on as a final backstop. But his head had become

compromised because of the excesses, the drugs, the karma and guilt, and the ghosts of his victims. The shiny vehicle that had been his hiding place was no longer the foolproof pope-mobile it had been. The self-righteous killer Carson, who began this caper a year before, was already gone.

Brass Monkey

Two weeks exactly. Sunday again. Carson and Eldorado Marquez behind the bar. Next to Jack Ross, Seamus and Hank, Melany waited for Carson to finish his business. The dart team and a few regulars strayed behind to cover any loose ends on account of the past week, by way of the quarter-operated pool tables. February. It was one month out, the home stretch, before spring break. Still no sign of Miri.

Carson was too far gone to keep running that bar. And he was well past any end-user, powder-only, recreational relationship with cocaine. Unlike the typical petty dooper bourgeoisie of Harvey he was armed, dangerous, well-versed in fisticuffs, and broadly unpredictable with the taste of blood already on his tongue. Technically, he was already a serial killer, and Melany

had him made.

Such a confluence of dark and dire progressions Mel knew, is a time where inaction is easily compensated with oblivion. With inertia in the wrong direction, staying buried in one's bowl of rice presents diminishing returns, hence are born the rules for playing murder in the dark. I think that's an actual quote from the Texas criminal code.

Recall, Mel was not a crackhead. Jojo would have liked her to be his property, but she didn't go for the crackwhore bait, and by that measure she'd also held her ground on Carson's account despite Carson's always trying to punk her out in the same way. Mel was too aware of what it was, and she was sufficiently averse to the notion that she wouldn't take the bait. But she did appreciate the powder, mainly to sell to her closest girlfriends in small fractions of an ounce. Heavier users, well, she'd send them on down the road to someone who was willing to work with coke heads. Not her animals, not her circus, as they say. With that, I suppose, there is certainly such a thing as patriotic, moderate coke users and peddlers, but like any other knitting bee, it's suitable for some

but not others. Perhaps it depends on blood type or maybe social caste.

Anyway, Carson failed the Pepsi challenge grandiosely. He ultimately failed to beat Slim at his own game which, as I've speculated, was his general plan. Mel knew Carson had been Miri's main man for the past year. She knew when he'd picked up that role and, in hindsight, she was aware of the killing that had marked those beginnings. She knew, in every likelihood, that Miri had gone home with Carson on the night she disappeared three weeks ago, and Mel knew things were obvious enough now, that if they were given a proper tip, the cops would immediately pinch Carson for good.

She also knew, that prior to Miri's disappearance, the large glass coffee table in Carson's living room had sat upon a large Persian rug, which was now absent as Mel and Carson entered his apartment that early Monday morning. She was there to score a little powder, which had been a weekly deal between the two of them now for several months.

Carson used to stow his guns more discreetly, but as she walked in she

noticed the shotgun leaning up against the entertainment center. Certainly not a crime in itself, but it was out of character. As they entered, he went directly into the kitchen and started rocking-up some kibble for himself, so it wasn't his grandpappy's bird gun anymore, obviously, even if it was.

"Jeez, what happened to your rug, Car?" she quizzed him.

"Oh, man, I spilled wine all over it, so I just threw it away," he said. "It's easily enough replaced. I'd rather not haggle with the dry cleaners. Hang on a minute, and I'll get your shaker."

"If something happens to you, who's my new contact?" she asked.

"Well Jack Ross, but you better stick with me, since you're not from here," Carson said. There'd have been a time, not long ago, when he'd have known better not to inorganically divulge such information to out-of-townners or anyone else.

She picked up the shotgun, racked it, and out flew an unspent three-inch high velocity slug load. It skittered across the coffee table and onto the

floor.

"Sorry about that, didn't realize you were a hair trigger. That's a nice Winchester, anyway," she said. "Do you happen to be of any relation to the Wests who run West Bailbonds?"

"Yep, that's us. Three generations now," he said. "Are you looking for that kind of work?" He brought the pipe to his mouth, and hit it. What a waste, she thought. After a minute, he walked out of the kitchen with two cold PBRs, and a salt shaker full of product for her. He handed her the shaker and a beer. She cracked the can, set it on the coffee table, and excused herself to the restroom.

Returning from the lavatory, she reached over and grabbed her PBR, took a slug, and sat it next to the record player.

"A line before you go?" he asked.

"You first," she said.

He laid out four on the table and took a dive. Then her turn. For his second turn, as he put his head down, she picked up a brass monkey from next to the record player, and brought it

down into the back of his head with every amount of force she had. It smashed the back of his skull in, and the front of his face was driven into the powder on the glass table which busted where his teeth had punched into it. She bludgeoned him once more, then a third time. No reason to leave him alive but retarded.

Mel glugged down the rest of her PBR and grabbed her purse. On her way out, she turned off the burner on the stove.

Additional Ales

Saturday again. By now, Carson had been missing for almost a week. It was President's Day weekend, a three-day holiday, and still within a week of Valentine's Day, no less! So, too busy for being shorthanded at Bar One. Luckily, they'd be fully staffed, as things turned out.

"Anyone seen Carson yet?" asked Jack Ross, as he peppered his late morning breakfast of Huevos Rancheros from the Tex-Mex Magician across the street, and his whiskey-adulterated iced coffee, the usual.

"Still no. I have not. But his uncle, the owner of this fine establishment, came through here this morning," Eldorado Marquez said. "Told me Carson went down to the Baja California, isn't sure when he's coming back."

"The man has ridden off into the sunset," Seamus said.

"But is that a philosophically reactionary thing to do?" Hank asked. "That's stock character behavior, if you ask me."

"In other news, Uncle West has put me in charge of managing Bar One," Eldorado said. "And he hired that chick from Eastgate Live to fill in. She starts today at three."

"I suppose sitting back there listening to us is easier than waitressing for a bunch of bikers," J.R. said, raising his glass. "To Mel!"

"Cheers!" they happily concurred. "Hear! Hear!"

#THE BITTER END#

QUIZ - WHO WAS THE NARRATOR?