

JACKPOT

Beth Meko

Last beer. This is really the last one. I shouldn't even be having this one. I'd told myself I'd have one, and tell the man who insisted I meet him here what I'd seen. I'd give my condolences, tell him I still thought all the time about seeing his son kill himself outside the Thornberry Casino all those years ago, and then we'd shake hands and be on our separate ways. Yet now my third beer is almost empty and here I sit, staring this man dead in the face, in this hot foul-smelling dive that sits in the crook of a curve in the highway, rattling on in a loud voice that sounds obnoxious even to my own ears, saying everything I'd already said to all those reporters.

This man is quiet, and he's drinking fast. He's drinking both whiskey and beer, which I'm doing too, but for him the beer seems more like a filler between glasses of the harder stuff. He's smoking cigarette after cigarette with

long noisy puffs, stabbing them out in the dirty ashtray. I'm about keeping pace with him, I guess.

In my mind I've named the bartender Ol' Red. He has a big mess of red curls on his head and tufts of wiry chest hair that poke out from his torn tank top. He calls the man I'm there with by his last name, March, and tells him a couple times to take it easy. March just waves a shaking hand at Ol' Red and keeps ordering more for both of us. Ol' Red gives me hostile glances every time he limps down the bar and plunks my beer down. I feel like maybe I should leave.

There aren't many bars in this town and this one's probably my least favorite. It's the little dumpy one beside Highway 19, butted up on the edge of a steep hill and held up on stilts in the back. The front has a little dilapidated sign that says Uncle Frank's and there's a big American flag sticker fading to pastel in the window. Really, you would think it was closed down if you didn't know better, but inside there's the crack of billiard balls and the live smell of sweat. And then, a dead smell too. Did I mention this place smells bad? It doesn't seem like anything that anyone can help. A sewage problem, maybe. It's not that bad if you're not sitting next to the restrooms, and we're a little further from them, over by the front door.

March's Iraqi Freedom hat is pulled down low over his bloodshot and scattered eyes. It's mid-afternoon now, and I knew as soon as I saw him that he'd been drinking all day. His breath already reeked of whiskey when he shook my hand, and he sways a little on the bar stool when he turns to look at me. Now I'm saying something about the kid's boots, of all things. "I always thought he came from a military family," I'm saying in a talkative, approving voice. My neck feels oil-slick with all the sweat gathering there. I really should just shut up and give the guy a chance to talk, if he wants to.

But he's dark and silent as a big hole on the barstool next to me, hands gripping his drink and a cigarette. The cigarette was the second one that he'd accidentally taken one out of my pack of Camels, but I wasn't going to make a big deal out of it. I had more in the car.

"I just mean, well, he was a prison guard, and I figured he probably wanted to do something in uniform even if it wasn't joining the ranks. Sons look up to their dads. Hell, I wanted to be just like mine. He's the reason I wanted to become a mechanic." Why am I even saying this? I never wanted to be like my old man. I make a grand gesture at the stitched-on name on my chest. I drain the rest of my beer and signal Ol' Red.

I guess I just want to make March feel better. Maybe he thinks he was a bad dad or something and that's why his son offed himself. I ain't no psychologist, but even I know you really got to watch what you're saying with a guy like this. I can almost hear that man ticking beside me. I've had a few beers now and I'm thinking if you cut him open there would be something mechanical in there, like a delicate clock, maybe. It would still be ticking, but maybe not for much longer. I half expect to see him falling further apart still as we sit there, a blackened spring popping out here, something rattling from within, a spare part hitting the floor underneath his bar stool

"Kid was diabetic," March says and coughs, a brittle rattling sound.

"Oh, I see," I said, as if that explained a lot. But in fact I had already known that; his kit with the syringe and reader had rolled out onto the ground that night while the security guard and I grappled with his leaden body in the snow. I've relived that moment a million times in my head, trust me.

The next time I look at March he's pulling out his wallet, fumbling it in his hands, shuffling through it with slightly shaking fingers. I really hope he's not about to pull out a picture of the kid. But his fingers find what they're looking for, and it's a picture of the kid.

He had to have been in high school here, maybe 5 or 6 years younger than he had been that night at the casino. He's wearing an ROTC uniform and standing in a kitchen with paneling the color of butterscotch and a lace-covered table behind him. His hair, the color of wet sand, which was lighter than when I saw him and surely must have been a bright shock of blond as a boy, was cropped close to his head. He still had the plump, meaty cheeks of a kid, and they had that sort of red glow that make you think he had spent time on the back of a tractor, and a lot of it. I can see the hard, trim outline of his body underneath the crisp green lines of the uniform. He's frowning severely.

All the dry words are caught in my mouth. I only say "Nice," as if the man's showing me a picture of his new dog. I ask him when the picture was taken, and if he had been the one who had taken it. He doesn't answer. He just turns the photo over, maybe looking for a date on the back, and then stares at the blank white back for a full minute. I have to peek a look over at his eyes to make sure he's still awake. I'm sure there was something he had meant to tell me about the picture, but now it's lost.

That morning three years ago, I remember saying that he seemed like a nice kid, over and over. The news lady, who I recognized from TV but who had her hair in a ponytail and baggy pits under her eyes at that time of the

morning, kept nodding and making sympathetic noises come from her throat. I told her that we'd had a drink together at the bar but the kid hadn't been drunk. "I wish I could have helped him," the newspaper had said that I said. I don't really remember saying that. I remember squinting into the bright lights of the news cameras as the sirens lazed around and the weak fingers of the morning sun pried through the dark lumps of the hills in the distance. The snow had been peppering down all morning.

As my wife Vicki and I wound our way down the mountain in the snow I had vowed repeatedly never to return to that damn casino. I had said that in the newspaper interview, too, as if I had received bad service at the bar or something. "I'm never coming back."

We never did go back after that. Even Vicki didn't want to go back, and she was the one who always dragged me there. I've never really liked the Thornberry. It's just a place where people with money to burn go to show off to one another their ability to toss that money into holes. Don't get me wrong; I'm not saying I'm above throwing my money down into those big sucking holes myself. When I lived down in Florida there was a time when I liked going to those little racinos, the ones that are clouded with smoke and smell like old B.O. and lost hopes. Most of those are closed down now. Once, I saw

them carrying a dead greyhound out the back, his bloated tongue lolling out the side of his mouth, and that was the last time I went there.

There's no sense of overwhelming despair at the Thornberry, which should be a positive thing, I guess. But sometimes when I was there I'd just pace the halls wanting to go home because I couldn't relate to a damn person there. Bored men in sports coats who look like their hair just came out of a Jello mold playing magic tricks with their money, mostly. Vicki was the reason I would go there once a year, because she liked getting her hair done and sitting in the sauna at the resort. And she liked leaving with more money than we came in with, although that didn't happen too often, especially when you consider the cost of a room there. More than anything though, she liked coming back and telling her coworkers at the dentist office that she had spent the weekend at the Thornberry. She liked mentioning it on the phone with her sister, who couldn't afford weekends at the Thornberry.

I get it—money makes some people uncomfortable, just to have it. Feel like they have to spend it. Maybe Vicki was one of those people. Kenny, my little brother, was always like that. He would toss money from his allowance that he hadn't spent on candy into the stream near our house, flipping the pennies and nickels like it was a game. I cuffed him for doing that more times

than I could remember-- *what a goddamn waste, you stupid fool*, I always told him. You know, someone should probably do the same to the rich folks at the casino.

I was just feeling really grumpy that night—there was nothing there, nothing possible, nothing available. I'd lost interest in gambling but there was nothing else to do. Even the Pac-man machine over in the game room was broken and that should have been just a minor thing, but I was bummed because I didn't even have that. Vicki and I had had a fight before she went up to bed because she didn't want me to bet all our money away. I had told her I didn't know why she insisted on taking me to this casino on top of a godforsaken hill then. She'd gone to bed angry and I'd lost \$500 at roulette since then. Now it was almost 3 a.m. and I wasn't sure whether to try to win the money back or just give up.

A lone pit boss wearing an emerald-green vest was walking around between the tables, yawning behind his hand. At that hour, there were only a few groups of revelers still hanging around in their rumpled jackets and backless dresses with outbursts of laughter going off like small bombs all around the place. The kid was sitting at the bar. I'd thought he was police at first when I'd seen him over at the blackjack table. He was wearing a crisp-looking black

jacket that looked like a loaner from the front desk over a navy blue guard's uniform, and I realized that I knew that uniform. My brother had been in that prison for five years: The Hill, the state penitentiary 45 minutes or so to the north.

I don't know why, maybe because it was nearly 3:00 a.m. and he was the most interesting looking person around, but I sat down beside the kid at the bar. "The Hill huh?" I said.

The luminescent fountain in the corner of the room sparkled behind his shoulder and he looked up at me in faint surprise. He had his chin cupped on one hand and there was a long purplish scar on the side of his cheek that looked like maybe he'd been cut with the blunt edge of something. The heel of his hand was smushing his chin up and his lips were full and kind of chapped and crusty. He said, "You wouldn't believe the kind of day I've had." Or maybe he said, "What a fucking day." I don't remember. The kid's face was sober but he had a double malt whiskey in his hand and he ordered another one while we sat there talking. I did too, even though truth be told I had already had more than enough.

"What, you do time there or something?" he finally asked in the kind of tone that was kidding, but serious.

“Brother did,” I said. I ordered my drink and the bartender sat it down, amber and glowing with all the reflections of the bright slot machine lights flashing around behind us. “Younger brother, went in oh maybe 6 years ago.”

The kid’s eyes moved upward as he did a short calculation in his head, and he nodded. He was turning his drink around and around in front of him, leaving dark circles on the mahogany bar. “Your brother still in?” Around and around.

“No,” I said, “he got out a couple years back.”

“Well,” said the kid, “hope he’s doing OK on the outside.” He downed the rest of his glass and asked for another.

I thanked the kid and said my brother was A-OK, doing just fine, had a baby on the way and he’d found Jesus to boot. “Doing freaking great; I can’t believe it,” I told the kid. He said, “Good to hear.” And that was it; that was the end of the conversation.

Of course I was lying. My brother had overdosed on heroin the year before, and his body had been bloated and purple by the time it was discovered in his apartment a week later. Man, when I tell lies I really do it up. I just can’t stop my mouth when it gets going.

But you know one thing? I do wonder sometimes whether the kid and my brother ever met on the inside, guard and prisoner, before my brother was paroled. I guess I'll never know that.

It's now 5 p.m. in the dark bar where I'm sitting with the kid's dad. The blinds to the long, low window are shut and only one long ray of sunshine comes in through a missing slat. The jukebox in the corner has finished the pop country song it was playing and keeps trying to retrieve another record, but something's wrong with it. It's just going click, click, click and making a spinning sound. The bartender starts wiping off the table in the corner where an old couple had come in and had a beer each.

Then all of a sudden there's a big clatter from across the bar. The kid's father has suddenly pulled his arm back and lobbed his empty glass into the bin where the dirty dishes are. He does it with a force that makes me almost lose my seating on the bar stool, and as it shatters he's already shouting over the noise, "Another one over here!"

Ol' Red wheels around and shakes a pink, heavy fist at March. The faded tiger tattoo on his massive upper arms shakes around with the movement. "That's all for you, March," he calls down. "You just done been cut off." He's shaking his head, slapping at the table with his dish rag.

March laughs, then starts banging on the bar with his fists. I can feel the vibrations all through my body. I just sit there looking. Click, click, spin, the jukebox continues. Then it finds a record and some pop song from the 70's starts playing.

“What’s a matter man,” he said, hanging half off the stool as he leaned forward to look down the bar with those unfocused burnt-out eyes. “You know I’m just joking. Was making it easier on you and all. Now give me another round.”

He starts patting the pockets of his shirt and pants, making a bicycle movement as he fights for purchase, then nods at me as I push his cigarettes over that lay forgotten just beyond his elbow. He opens his mouth to say something, but only a long belch comes out. He goes to take a cigarette out of the pack and I move to help him but before I can, March is sagging over and to the left. Before I know it the stool is clattering off to the side and March is on the floor. I just sit there, like maybe he’ll get back up on the stool and we can pretend it didn’t happen.

The bartender stands over March, sticking out his big slab of an arm to help. I notice that he’s wearing long cargo shorts and that one of his legs is a

thin metal prosthetic. I realize that I'm sitting here watching as a one-legged man helps up a drunk man.

But I can't move. I'm pretty drunk too, and the way March sagged down made me think about the kid, the way he had been sitting on the pavement and then fell to the side after the loud popping sound. I was thinking about how I'd thought he had been setting off firecrackers.

I'd noticed him sitting out on the curb with his shoulders slumped down when I came out, lit my cigarette, and perched on the cold bench outside the casino. This was after I had played a couple more rounds of roulette after last call, and apparently the kid had lost his last game of blackjack. I thought of calling out to him, but for whatever reason I didn't. Likely, I just wanted to sit there and nurse my wounds, without having to rearrange my face into something socially acceptable. I just wanted to sit and watch the snow start to bury the place before I went upstairs and burrowed into the warm, plush hotel bed upstairs as Vicki made annoyed sounds under the covers at being disturbed.

Then I heard the loud *pop*, and the kid sank down, and down, listing to the side with his head nodding like one of those bobblehead dolls with a worn-out spring. My logic, on the case as ever, started to insist that not only had the

kid been setting off firecrackers, but he was so drunk that he was passing out there on the curb.

Finally, I jumped up from the bench and ran to him, yelling something in that booming voice Vicki always hated. I don't know what I was saying. I was probably saying something like, "Hey now!" and I'm sure I sounded angry. I always do, when I'm scared. I stayed tough and loud throughout the whole thing, while approaching the kid and seeing the snow falling and melting on the bloody hole in his head, while almost stepping on his hand which had relaxed and released the gun onto the snow-covered concrete, while wrestling his limp body around so the security guard could try CPR, while talking to the EMTs and the police, while being interviewed by the news stations. My voice had been steady and booming through it all; it hadn't cracked.

And there came a time pretty soon afterward when I felt like I wanted to burst into tears, but it would have just made everyone uncomfortable. You know? Vicki sobbed all the way home after we got down from the mountain but I didn't. I mean, I was the one who saw the kid perform the big Adios, and here I was, trying to comfort her while driving through the snow and pushing the picture of the hole in the kid's head out of my mind.

March is sitting up again, back on his bar stool and getting in a big stink with the bartender. “You already have my keys,” March is saying, leaning over the edge of the bar. His words are slushing around in his mouth. “Just one more. Give me one more, you cocksucker.”

An old guy in a Marines cap who had been sitting holding on to his belly and downing Coors Lights at the end of the bar stands up and hovers around like he might intervene, but the bartender is saying, “No Mike, I’ve got him.” And I guess I could help; I could do something, but you know what I do? I slip off my stool and outside into the blistering summer air. I take a steaming piss in the dark corner of the building against the dumpster, and then I head to my car.

But I can’t start my car; I can’t even put the key in the ignition. I just sit there with my eyes closed for a minute, and I do something I’ve gotten in the habit of doing. I start from the point where things went wrong and I imagine it going different. Like in one of my scenarios maybe instead of drinking so heavy March had taken up birding or something, and he’s going to therapy. I’ve done this—imagining how things could go different-- I don’t know how many times and it’s given me a lot. It’s given me a younger brother who checked himself into rehab years back, and now, in my scenarios, I visit him

at Christmas and tease him about finding Jesus and bounce his drooling baby around on my lap. It's given me a wife who didn't leave me for some yoga instructor because he was "in touch with himself" and I wasn't. Things like that. Dreams, really.

And I have one about the kid, of course. In fact, I have a few. In my hazy vision he still loses every last bit of the money. He still turns to everyone at the table and says, like the guys at the blackjack table reported he did, "It's been nice playing with you guys."

That still happens. But in my version, instead of going out to his car for the gun he goes up to the ritzy room he had paid for when he arrived at the casino that night, but had never entered. His boots sink into the plush carpet as he tosses the loaner jacket onto the desk. He strips down to his underwear and falls into a disturbed sleep, his smooth face with the red-purple gash on the cheek smashed into the fluffy white pillows. He wakes up late the next morning with the maid knocking on the door and a nose-heavy feeling in his face, and he thinks of the 900 dollars he had lost the night before. Three games in all, three losses, and he would remember the rough thing he had been trying to swallow in his throat as the remainder of his paycheck disappeared behind

that rake. That morning, he thinks again of the Colt in the glove compartment of his car, but the spirit has left him.

He gets out his neatly packed diabetic kit--the reader, the swabs, the hypodermic needle in a plastic baggie. He always fixes his blood sugar in my scenarios. It's just a practical thing--I know his numbers must have been all out of whack, what with those whiskeys the night before.

Then he would be off. Maybe he wouldn't go back to his next shift at the prison--maybe he'd make a break for Chicago, or Cleveland. I imagine the kid battling his way down the mountain in whatever rattletrap car he drove. The snow would have been deep by then. The gun would be knocking around in the glove compartment, unloaded, and maybe he would stop at a scenic view, and take out the gun, look at it, and consider throwing it off the side of the mountain. Then he would do the smart thing and decide to pawn it and the ammo and get 50 bucks, give or take. Maybe he would find \$10 in his coat pocket lining too. In any case he would drive and drive, crossing state lines, until he came to one of those tiny casinos in some unknown place, one of those little places like the ones I used to go to that smell like piss and despair, with blank-eyed elderlies making their savings disappear as their hair grew paler and their shoulders sunk in on themselves.

He would go up to the bar, order a cheap beer, and show his license and the waitress would remark that he looked just like a baby. He would smile at the bartender and tell her she wouldn't believe what kind of day he'd had. Or maybe he'd say, "What a fucking day." He would take the rest of the money, maybe it would be \$2.50 in quarters, and he would walk over to the jukebox and put a couple quarters in. Something jazzy would come out of the tinny speakers, singing "*Eaaaaasy money, keep it all away from me...*" He would sway his hips a little as he walked over to the row of blinking slot machines.

He would sit on the cracked to hell bar stool with the jagged cigarette burns and the yellow-stained stuffing coming out of it and he would light a cigarette. Then he would start putting his money into that machine that was older than him, that had sat there the day he was born flashing its infantile lights and getting kicked by a long-gone drunk. And he would watch the icons flip over and around, all wrong, of course--the bananas and the cherries and the oranges never lining up the way they should. Until the very last quarter, when they did, 3 bananas in a row and the machine would tremble, like it was rejoicing from deep inside and JACKPOT would come across the screen and the boy would sit, watching the display in disbelief as the money started to tumble out.

Sweat's coming off my face sitting out here in the bright sunshine, and I still can't make myself start the damn car. I look back at the blank building, the one long window on the side just reflecting light, telling me nothing. I get out of the car and walk back toward the door. I don't know what I'm going to do. Maybe I'm going to tell the man that it's OK, that in some alternate reality his son is alive and has won a jackpot in a dive casino. It might be that I'm going to just sneak in and grab the hat that I'd left on the bar and mosey on out again. Or maybe I'll look the man in the eyes and then embrace him, pulling him to my chest, as he first resists and then grows loose in my arms. I think that might be what happens. That's what would happen in one of my scenarios, I'm sure of it. I stumble a little as I go up the ramp, and then I open the door and it's dim and cooler inside. My eyes smart from the sunshine as I walk in.

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