If You're Driving Your Husband to Drink, Drive Him Here

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It was a slow afternoon at the Pontiac, especially for a Saturday. Not much subway in the jar. Georgie and I were watching the ballgame until this tall, thin guy about my age comes in asking for a drink. I look at him and I couldn't believe it, he looks just like a guy I grew up with on Niantic Avenue, haven't seen him since we were kids. "Could that be Joe Canavan?" I say. He looks at me and puts out his hand.

"Herky," he says, "I thought it was you, for Christ's sake. How ya' be?" which is a way my father used to talk. Turns out Joe got married when he was in the service, moved to New Hampshire with his wife, became a plumber, had three girls, all now with kids and grandkids. He still remembered the day old Mr. Raymond, the black carpenter who lived across the street, saw me taking off my shirt to show my muscles and called me Hercules, which is how I got stuck with the name Herky.

"I hope you lived up to it, Herk."

"Not any more I don't."

Joe was always a great guy. Very tall, very quiet. But I couldn't believe it when he told me that he was here in Providence to bury his mother. A hundred and seven and sharp as a tack, he told me, till last Tuesday. Had a place over on Cranston Street. I remember her. She was a close friend of my Aunt Clara, who's been gone at least thirty-five years. They were always baking something together. Mrs. Canavan was a tall, gawky woman with a hoarse little voice. You could hardly hear her. She had to lean down over you to say something. Very thin. Nothing to her. I can't believe she went on whispering all these years.

Joe and I talked about the old neighborhood, which they turned into an industrial park. I forgot he almost married my sister. That was a close call for him. About two o'clock, while he was still there, Moose comes in looking for McDermott and has a ginger ale

because he's on the wagon, but McDermott never shows up, so after an hour or so Moose goes off in a somewhat agitated state. As usual. Meanwhile this very dark fellow with a moustache, looks like some kind of an Arab or Pakistani maybe, comes in. Not that old, forties maybe, with that sort of chiseled, noble look they have, but kind of shot, like he spent too much time in the wind. He asks me if I'll do him a favor. He's doing a job across the street, he says, building a set of steps, and they'll pay him at the end of the day. "I was wondering, sir, if you'd give me a beer until then. I'll leave you my wallet here with my license so you know I'll be back." Very polite. I take a look at him, and he looks alright to me, so I give him the beer and tell him to forget the wallet.

"I appreciate your kindness," he says. Now Georgie doesn't approve of my giving away drinks like that. "How do you know it was *his* wallet anyway?" he whispers to me. But I liked the guy's way of asking, and I happen to be a retired bricklayer myself. The guy sits there quietly and drinks his beer, doesn't bother anybody, and when he finishes it he thanks me and leaves.

By this time that pest Tiger Ted has arrived. In the salvage business and is a salvage display in himself. Ten layers of clothes. Curly beard. Looks more like a lion than a tiger. Always puffing on an empty pipe. "Herky," he says, "you seen that college boy of yours?"

"He's not a boy anymore," I tell him.

"I got another question for him. Who invented the phrase <u>Sticks and stones will break my bones but names will never hurt me</u>?"

"That's an easy one," I tell him. "You don't have to go to college to know that. It was Ben Franklin."

"That was Ben Franklin?"

"Sure, he said it to the King of England."

"I never heard that," he says, going all red.

"My son and I were just talking about it the other day."

"I don't believe it," he says, but he's not quite sure.

"Absolutely," I say. "The king called him a traitor and that's what he answered. That's how the revolution got started."

"You ask that boy about it," he says, but I can see I've got him this time.

The peace doesn't last long though. Bernie the Cab is in, little guy with a big voice. You always know he's in the place because he lets you know. By this time George and I are watching a documentary about World War Two, and they're showing the picture of Hirohito surrendering to MacArthur. George is saying, "Herk, that was one of the best days of my life." George was a Marine, in the landing at Iwo, as we've heard many times, but before we can hear it again, Bernie comes out with one of his special observations.

"You know," he says, in that squeaky, loud voice of his, "I gotta say I never liked MacArthur. I never liked MacArthur, gentlemen, and I'll tell you why. When he went to meet Hirohito, the Emperor of the Japanese, he couldn't even put on a tie. He couldn't put on a tie for the fucking Emperor. He had no respect. And he had no respect for Truman either, the president of the United States."

I knew this would get George going. "Are you telling me that after all we went through with those god-damned Japs, Douglas MacArthur was supposed to put on a tuxedo to meet the Emperor?"

"I'm not saying a tuxedo, George. I'm saying show some respect. Those people looked up to that man as an emperor. To them he was like a god. So MacArthur couldn't take two minutes to put on a tie?"

"I never heard they were wearing formal dress at Pearl Harbor," George says, getting loud himself. "As I remember, they showed up without an invitation. And they weren't too friendly at Iwo either, I can tell you that. They didn't stand on ceremony. You know what I mean?"

"Calm down, Georgie," I tell him, but I know that won't work.

"I know what you mean, George," Bernie says. "War is war and I'm not saying it isn't, but once the enemy is down, you don't kick him. When he surrenders the war is over. Grant let the rebels keep their horses at Appomattox, didn't he? You look at the photos. You got the Emperor in his formal garb. You got MacArthur looking like the Maytag repairman. Those people looked up to Hirohito as an Emperor."

"What about the way Hirohito was dressed?" George asks him. "He wasn't wearing his little white emperor suit that day. No more uniform. All of a sudden he's a civilian. He's a socialite ready for dinner. No divine wind tonight, thank you."

I'd say George won this round, though it took him awhile to finish it off. By then it was four o'clock. Kenny Lopez comes through the door with Kid Genovese, a fireman and a cop, both in their dress uniforms. "Now this is what I like to see," Bernie says as I'm pouring them a drink. "Providence's finest showing respect to the public. That's how you dress for a formal surrender."

The two of them had just got back from seeing Ground Zero down in New York. "I have to say it was impressive," Kenny tells us. "It really makes you think, what those guys went through. Carrying those people all the way down those stairs. The dust and all kinds of shit flying and everybody panicking, not know what the hell's going on."

So George, being the eighty-nine-year-old diplomat that he is, makes sure he tells them about how they're not inviting the families of the 9/11 responders to the tenth anniversary because they don't have enough room for them, apparently. That really gets Kenny. "Chop my aching balls off," he says. "Who are they inviting, Hilary Clinton and the King of Siam?"

"It's just the victims, naturally, and their families, along with the usual grandstanding politicians."

So of course Bernie has to get into this. "I'm so sick of those fucking 9/11 victims anyway," he says. "You'd think they were the first and last people that ever died. We're all gonna get there, aren't we?"

"Are you kidding me?" Kenny says. He can't believe it. "We're not all gonna jump out of fifty-story windows and end up like a piece of meat on the sidewalk. That's not a pretty exit. We're talking about three thousand people here."

"Sure, sure," Bernie says, "but do you know all the people that are suffering and dying at this moment in hospitals all over the place, fried with radiation, tubes sticking out of their noses, dicks, what-else, scared as hell, everybody waiting for them to kick? Those people are as fucked as any goddamn 9/11 victim. Worse, in fact, because they're going the slow way. And let me tell you, nobody will be giving them a special memorial service ten years later. If you ask me, all this publicity is a tribute to the terrorists. They're the ones who enjoy it."

"So you're with the terrorists now?" Georgie says.

"No, I'm not with the terrorists. I'm just saying, these lunatics blow up a building. They make a symbolic gesture, give their lives for a holy fuck-you, and sure, they would have done a lot worse if they could, but okay, they make a big splash, and everybody gets squishy about the victims, but the actual damage was no worse than a month's worth of car accidents, and who gets excited about that? Do you think the terrorists are as hazardous to your health as the drunk drivers I see every night? And another thing," he says, "is there a victim's fund for all the people who get hit by drunks on the road? I'd like to see that."

"Goddammit, give him another one," George says.

"So alright," Kenny comes back, "let's say it's no worse being killed by a car than an airplane. How do you explain all the hoopla about 9/11?"

"That's easy. First of all, New York is New York. It's the most plugged-in city in the world. You don't see people carrying on about the victims at the Pentagon, do you? They turned the Pentagon into an octagon and nobody batted an eyelash. Second, this is a country full of victims and people out on a case. These families are looking to profit, as if everybody owed them. Third, and I hate to say this in present company, but the police and fireman have colossal unions that never miss a chance to capitalize on publicity."

"Now wait a second," Kenny says. "We just came from a gravesite. Was that a publicity stunt?"

"I'm not saying it was, but once something happens, they make the most of it. They capitalize, like everybody else."

By this time Kenny is getting really hot. "You've got a big mouth for a little guy," he says. "Do you think you'd be ready to run into a burning office tower, sixty stories up, and pull somebody out?"

"I'll admit to you," Bernie says, "I've never faced that particular moment of truth."

"That's right, it's a moment of truth, that's just what it is," Kenny says, getting right in his face, and I thought he was going to sock him. But Bernie doesn't back down. He looks around for reinforcements, points to Bill Dunleavy, who's down at the end of the bar listening to this. "I'd like to ask our insurance salesman here a question," he says. "What's more dangerous, being a fireman or a cabbie?"

"A cabbie," Dunleavy says, "no doubt about it. In New York they're getting roughed up or bumped off every couple of months. Statistically, it's much more dangerous on average than being a fireman, or a cop either."

"That's right," Bernie says. "Statistically, you've need a helluva lot more balls getting in a cab than a fire truck. The trouble is we don't have the union. So we don't get the PR and the weeping widows on TV. And another thing, we don't get to retire after twenty years and work a second job while collecting a full pension either. And we don't go out on a case the year we retire to collect disability on our way out the door. And I'll tell you something else. Our wives don't have cushy jobs waving kiddies across the street in the afternoons, with a pension and benefits to go with that too. That's another reason why I can't take any more of this 9/11 crap. They should thank their lucky stars for Osama bin Laden."

So then Dunleavy, a young fellow with funny, patchy hair, not the brightest guy in the world, says, "You know, when I saw those towers coming down, I thought, holy crap, that could happen to me. Someday I'm gonna be dead, just like that."

Bernie gives him a cock-eyed look. "You never thought of that? Aren't you supposed to be an insurance salesman?"

"Yeah."

"You sell life insurance?"

"Yeah."

"And it never occurred to you you're gonna die sometime?"

"Sure, but it never really hit me, you know?"

"It's going to hit you, believe me. It's just a matter of when. What did you think all those policies were for?"

"Sure, sure, I know, but I never connected it directly to myself, you know what I mean?"

"So you've had your awakening, so now what? Are you turning into Albert Schweitzer? Or are you just screwing your wife more often?"

"You'd have to be Schweitzer to screw my wife," he says. That got everybody to laugh and things calmed down again. The kid surprises you every once in awhile.

At this point my bricklayer friend comes wandering back in. "That was short work," I tell him.

"I was wondering if I could trouble you for another one," he says. "It's a hot day out there."

"I bet you've seen some hot days in hell," George says to him.

"More than a few," he says, though I could see he wasn't quite sure where that was coming from. "But a beer takes the edge off," he says.

A beer does take the edge off, so I give him another one.

"Where are you from?" George decides to ask him.

"From India," he says, "from Delhi."

"So you're not an Arab," I say.

"No," he says, "I am a Hindu."

I introduce myself and ask him his name—"Ashok."

"Does that name have a meaning?"

"It was an emperor's name," he says. "But I would like to ask a question. What is the meaning of that sign you have in the window?"

"*If you're driving your husband to drink, drive him here.* It's a sign somebody gave the owner," I tell him, "when the place opened up again right after prohibition and drinking became legal again. Based on an old expression, *She's driving me to drink.* It means your wife is driving you crazy. There were no women in bars in those days."

"That is the way it should be," he says.

"You got that one right," George tells him. And he buys him another one.

As soon as he leaves Bernie bets me five I'll never see him again.

So my buddy Al Ryan is fetching me another keg, because at my age I can't lift them anymore, and just as he's setting the new one in place these two detectives come through the door, Daley and Seagram. Daley's a nice guy but Seagram's a big shot, big little man, always something to prove. Usually they come in late, practically close the place, but today they're on business, looking for McDermott, of all people. I tell them Moose was in here waiting for him but he never came.

"Moose who?"

"Moose. Just a guy who comes in now and then. I don't know much about him."

"What's his real name?"

"I don't know. I've only heard him called Moose."

"Moose and squirrel?" Seagram says. He thinks he's funny.

"Just Moose."

"Big guy?"

"No, not really."

"Then why do they call him Moose?" Seagram looks at me as if I'm not telling him something. This guy was drunk out of his mind at the bar just a couple of nights ago and now he's quizzing me like Joe Friday.

"I have no idea," I tell him. "Maybe it's because he's not a big guy."

"If he's not a big guy why don't they call him squirrel?"

"That's the only thing I ever heard him called, and that's what he answers to," I say.

"So you don't even know his real name?"

"No."

"Do you know why he was waiting for McDermott?"

"No idea."

"Did he wait long?"

"No," I said, "he's a nervous guy, impatient. And right now he's on the wagon."

"What's he nervous about?"

"I don't know."

So the two of them ask around the bar, but nobody else knows anything about Moose either, including his real name. About an hour after they leave, the phone rings and it's the man himself.

"Did McDermott come in?"

"No, and you're not the only one who's looking for him," I tell him. "A couple of detectives were in here awhile ago asking the same question."

"Detectives?" Now he really is nervous. "What did they want?"

"They were looking for McDermott."

"What did you tell them?"

"That I haven't seen him, naturally."

"Did you mention me?"

"I said you were waiting for him."

"Geez, you told them that?"

"You're not robbing banks, are you?"

"What did they say about me?"

"They wanted to know your real name."

"You told them?"

"I have no idea what it is."

"Oh yeah."

"Why do they call you Moose anyway?"

"My brother was Big Moose so I turned out to be Little Moose."

That figured. I tell him I'll let him know if I see McDermott and he hangs up. I doubt this Moose is actually up to anything serious, but as far as McDermott goes, nobody knows how he makes his living.

By this time the crowd is turning over. Georgie's daughter comes in to get him, Bernie's back in his cab, but Charlie Welsh comes in for a beer. Bald, fat guy, in his fifties, has only two topics. One is the baseball strike in the nineties and how he's still mad about it, won't even look at a screen with the Red Sox playing. Baseball was his favorite game, and now you can't trust it anymore. It's all money. The other topic is how stupid his wife is. "That woman will believe anything, Herk, no matter what I tell her. I can come in at three in the morning, four in the morning, and say I was working late, and she believes me. I'm a shoe salesman, and she believes me. Who the hell can I be selling shoes to at three, four in the morning?"

"The woman's playing Mickey the Dope," I tell him just to get his goat. "She must have something in her back pocket."

"But she's always there, twenty-four hours a day. The only time she leaves the house is to go shopping."

"You're sure of that?"

"I'm sure. Do you know she's only read one book in her whole life?"

"Shakespeare I assume."

"Are you kidding?"

"The Bible?"

"A Tree Grows in Fucking Brooklyn."

"That was a popular book."

"About forty years ago."

"Did she like it?"

"Who knows if she even understood it. Though she actually was from Brooklyn. The Bible was a good guess, though, because a nun gave her the book. That's the only reason she read it. She loved the nuns. They were so beautiful in their outfits."

"That was the old days."

"Sure."

"Those nuns gave me a whack now and again," I told him.

"I'll bet they did."

"They were pretty fair on the whole, though. Sister Agnes, the principal, called me in and told me I was wasting my time in school."

"Why'd she do that?"

"My mind was elsewhere. She said I'd be better off getting a job. Which I did."

"Maybe she was right, then."

"She was, though I regretted it. But she said to me, 'You were always a good boy, Leo. No matter what you did, you took your punishment.'"

"Then how did my wife get through school with her brain? They should have knocked her head off."

"It was different with girls."

"You can say that again. You should hear her talk to the goddamned cat. You'd think it understood every word she was saying. 'Stay right there, Francie dear,' she says.

'Don't you worry, now. I'm just going up to the store.'" He imitates the wife in a whiny baby voice. "'I'll be back, Francie, before you know it, Francie. Don't you worry, Francie.' You'd think the cat was a fucking hypochondriac."

"Francie's a funny name for a cat."

"Don't you know, that's the girl from *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*!"

"Geez," I tell him, "Must be a pretty old cat if your wife got the name from a book she was reading in school."

"Hell no," he says, "it's at least Francie the Eighth."

Now I could ask Charlie why he married this woman in the first place, but that would be against my Hippocratic oath. And by this time my shift is over. But just as I'm wiping up the bar for the next guy, in comes my man Ashok to pay for his drinks. I wouldn't let him tip me because he brought me luck, but I introduced him to Charlie as a witness. Bernie owes me a fin on account of my trust in human nature, but prying it out of him won't be easy.