

Cold Beer and Great Good

By Linda C. Wisniewski

The breeze pulls at the white plastic sign stretched between two white porch pillars, making a snapping sound. A Coors logo wrinkles above the words Cold Beer and Great Good. On a tall post at the corner of the building, a more permanent sign of glass covered with chicken wire reads: Caryville Hotel. Since 1732. Pizza and Sandwiches. Two roads intersect outside the Hotel, a grey stone building with white wood trim, two stories. Upstairs, rooms are for rent and below, a bar and dining room do a good business at lunchtime. The décor is 1960s with plenty of beer posters, trays and coasters. Banquet rooms at the rear open onto a large parking lot that today is nearly empty.

Inside, this Wednesday noon, a man asks the woman behind the bar for “some of that great good.” She is stocky and wears a full checkered-print apron over slacks and a shirt. Her hair is gunmetal gray. Her face is slack. She looks about seventy and walks with a cane.

Already the room smells of alcohol and every stale thing. The crisp fall air outside has not entered. In here, there is no season. The man who spoke drives a truck for the quarry down the road. He needs a shave, is paunchy and wears a flannel plaid shirt, jeans and tan work boots. He laughs and looks around the bar, but no one is there to share his joke except the old woman. She gives him a look.

He orders a beer and a burger and settles onto a stool. Soon a small group of hunters comes in, leaving a deer carcass tied to the roof of their truck outside. They look tired but pleased with themselves. All of them are wearing orange jackets and pants, and muddy boots. They order cheese steaks and beers. The old woman totters over to the kitchen door, opens it and

walks through. Sunlight streams through a dirty window at the back and lights a row of bottles behind the bar.

The front door opens and Judd, the auto mechanic from across the road walks in. Everyone stops talking. Judd has never been here before, although his shop is right across the road. He pulls out a chair and sits at a table. When the old woman comes back from the kitchen, he asks her for a Coke and a club sandwich.

The truck driver turns on his stool and bellows, "How about a cold beer and some great good?" Judd smiles wearily. The truck driver yells again, "Didn't ya see the sign? It says cold beer and great good!" He turns to the bar woman. "You should get yer money back from Coors," he says, laughing and shaking his head. "Looks bad, havin' a sign with a misprint like that."

The woman falls behind the bar, disappearing like a magician's trick.

"Hey!"

"What happened? What the...?" The men all jump from their stools and rush behind the bar, pushing at each other to see. Her head is bleeding and she is unconscious. Judd looks for the phone, sees it on the wall next to the cash register. He lifts it and punches in 911.

An ambulance arrives, siren winding down to a hum, just as the woman awakens. She murmurs an agitated speech no one understands, her eyes still closed. The EMTs comfort her as they carry her out on a stretcher. In the bar, after they leave, all is silent for a moment until the truck driver speaks.

"Hey, we could get a free lunch," he says with a nervous laugh that ends in a cough. The hunters chuckle then get back on their stools and finish eating. Judd's Coke and sandwich arrive from the kitchen in the hands of the cook, a man also about seventy, limping. After delivering

the food, he goes to stand behind the bar and looks at Judd. The hunters and the trucker put their money on the bar and leave with awkward waves and grunts.

“You really do have great food,” Judd gestures at his sandwich.

“Yeah, well,” says the man and runs a hand over his gray hair. He places a hand on each of his hips covered by a white apron, its bib folded down at the waist. Judd eats as the man wipes the bar.

“How’s business over there?” he asks, motioning toward the garage. Judd is surprised the man knows who he is. “I seen you across the street, workin’ on cars.” He lights a cigarette and brings a clean ashtray out from under the bar. “Been there ‘bout a year now, that right? Take over from Herman when he retired?”

Judd nods, his mouth full. The old man keeps talking. “Things are changin’ around here, that’s for sure. Traffic is good for business, lots of construction workers and truckers comin’ in cause of all the new developments. Some a them are Mexican; never used ta happen. Know what I mean? Some a them can’t even speak English, for Christ’s sake. Ya gotta serve ‘em, though, business is business. I don’t know. Live and let live is what I say but they oughta learn English if they wanna work here. Why should I bend over backwards to understand ‘em?”

“Ever have trouble with someone understanding your sign?” Judd asks. “Cold beer and great good?”

The man looks at him through narrowed eyes. “So what. People know what it means, so what if it’s spelled wrong. People know what it says. Everything has to be so correct. Political correct is what they say. Political is right. Politics is behind it all, I know that.”

“Right,” says Judd. “Here’s my card.” He pulls one from his shirt pocket and places it on the table. “Call me if you need anything, any help with the lady, I mean, if she needs a ride back home or something.”

“Yeah,” he says and looks down, stubs out his cigarette in the ashtray. “She owns this hole, lives upstairs. Damned if I know what to do next.”

Judd leaves a bill on the counter. “That should cover it, I don’t need any change.”

“Ya sure?”

“Yeah.”

The old man turns and walks back into the kitchen.

Judd goes back to the garage, but all that day and the morning of the next, he keeps looking out the window to the bar across the road. There is no sign of the old woman, but the place is open and as noon approaches, cars begin to fill the parking lot.

It’s been over a year since he left home the night before his sentencing, but you never know. Someone passing through could remember his bearded narrow face from the papers, someone from back east. He won’t go back now, it’s been too long and the penalty for drug possession in a drug-free school zone is a mandatory two year sentence. He won’t take that chance. Even so he grabs a rag and wipes grease from his hands. Then he goes to the washroom, washes up, and locks the garage.

This time nobody looks as he comes in. The customers are different from yesterday, but they are dressed the same, all male, all hunters or truckers. Behind the bar, a young woman wipes the shiny wood surface with a damp cloth and makes eye contact with each customer as she takes his order. Judd believes she has the plainest face he has ever seen, a blank slate on which anything could be written.

He takes the same table as yesterday. When she walks over, he orders, again, a Coke and a club sandwich. "How's the lady who fainted here yesterday?" he asks.

The waitress looks up, unsmiling. "She'll be okay, but she has to stay in the hospital for a few days."

The cook opens the kitchen door and walks through, carrying plates of burgers. "Hey, there, came back, did you?" he calls over to Judd. "Checkin' up to see what happens here next?" He is smiling, so Judd doesn't take offense.

"More like checking on your boss," he says. The waitress turns back to look at Judd.

"Actually, she's my grandma. She just fainted but they want to run some tests before they let her go." She gives Judd a little smile and walks back to the kitchen. The cook winks at him.

"She's helping out for a few days," he says. "Her name's Gretchen." He follows her back through the swinging door. More customers enter: a man alone, a young couple, a motorcyclist carrying his helmet, a snack truck driver who has just made a delivery around the back. Judd watches them all as they place their orders and make small talk with each other. Except for the young couple, he is the only one at a table. This feels odd, so he gets up and moves to a cracked leather barstool.

The driver of the snack truck nods at him then takes a swig of his beer. "Nice day," he says and Judd agrees. Gretchen returns with his Coke and sandwich, but after she puts it down in front of him she moves quickly down the bar to take the motorcyclist's order. Judd watches her as he takes a swig of his Coke. Her ponytail is held with a black Scrunchie and her jeans are clean but heavy duty, the kind made for work outdoors.

He thinks of his sister, an honest farmwoman who took in their grandma after their mother died. These two women are his only family, and better off without him. Still, the sight of

Gretchen has made him wonder how they are. His sister paid his bail and he'd left town without a word, and now she was out ten thousand and would likely never forgive him for that. He wouldn't if he were her. The sandwich is cold and dry and Judd no longer wants it. He asks for his bill.

"Something wrong with the sandwich?" Gretchen asks, as if she really wants to know.

"No, just not as hungry as I thought."

"Let me wrap it up for you. Take it home, have it for a snack later." She nods at the plate and picks it up from the table.

"Okay, sure." Judd reaches back in his pocket for his wallet. "Thanks," he says not meeting her eye.

Outside, the day has grown cold and wind blows dry leaves across the boards of the porch outside. Judd looks up at white clouds scudding across a blue gray sky, going somewhere. A scratching sound and the tang of tobacco smoke make him turn to see the old cook standing at the end of the porch. He nods at Judd and blows out a cloud of his own, hacking.

"Those things'll kill ya," Judd says. He looks both ways. No traffic, so he walks across the road, thinking all the while how lucky he is. Lucky old Herman gave him a job with no references and after a year, lets him run the place, only checking in once a month to pay the bills with the money Judd takes in. Lucky he has a small apartment a few miles away, and a car that still runs. "Runs" is a funny word, he thinks as he goes back to work.

The day ends with a sudden shower that leaves muddy puddles around the old concrete garage. At five, the sun makes a feeble attempt to dry them but soon retreats as if it is just too hard. Judd has locked up and is sliding behind the wheel when he hears someone call his name, so urgently his whole body freezes.

“Judd! Please! Come over here!” Gretchen stands in the alley behind the hotel, beckoning fast with one arm, the other pointing behind her.

Judd looks left and right and runs across the road. He follows her back to where a small man is lying, his shiny black hair in the dirt. He moans and tries to sit up.

“Whoa, hold it there, buddy,” Judd murmurs and stoops to get closer. “What the hell happened to you?”

“He doesn’t speak English,” Gretchen says, “I already tried. Looks like somebody beat him up, though.” The cook has been standing in the open back door, but Judd doesn’t notice until he hears him cough.

“More trouble here in the last few weeks than I ever seen,” he says and spits on the ground. Judd feels cold.

“Do you know who did this?” he asks, looking over at the cook.

“Not for sure, but lots of guys don’t care for these here wetbacks takin’ all the jobs. One of ‘em just might have had too much of it. Know what I mean?” He turns and goes back inside.

Gretchen and Judd check the man in the alley and realize he is not seriously hurt. The man says *Gracias* over and over as they help him to his feet. Judd uses hand gestures to ask him if he has a car or needs a ride somewhere but the man shakes his head no, and mimes a thumb-up hitchhiking gesture. He hobbles out to the road and they watch him walk away until he is out of sight.

“Oh. My. God.” Gretchen says and turns to Judd. “Where do you think he’s going?”

“I have no idea,” says Judd. “But he wanted to get away from here pretty fast. Must be runnin’ from somethin’ awful bad.” The words have no sooner left his mouth than he feels a line

of fear crawl up his back and lodge in his shoulders. Gretchen steps closer to his side and looks down the quiet highway.

“Yeah, but how long can he keep running?” Her question is soft, gentle and pushes a spot below his heart, where release comes in.

Judd takes a slow, deep breath and looks at the woman who reminds him of his sister, of family, of who he was, of who he still can be. “Listen,” he says. “I’m going away for awhile. I have some things to take care of.”

A sudden gust of wind shakes the mums in their pots beside the porch. Gretchen watches in silence as Judd crosses the road.