Dylan Reed

jeepsters

You're still talking like you always do, but I'm not really listening. I'm gambling my soul like I have since I was a kid, back when I would close my eyes when I would ride along in Dad's green pickup. He'd hold the inside lane and get on down the road, and I'd just plain open my eyes again bang! just all at once, not peeking first, and if there happened to be another car alongside of us, well, the devil wins; if it were empty road, then I get to keep my soul, and I'd usually try again. Same way with baseball on TV, but I didn't go by batter, I went by pitch, so fair or foul didn't matter, as long as the swing really connected, I was damned, and if he whiffed or watched the ball go by, I was good as born again. I don't remember ever losing, but I can see now that it's not very likely that I really never did, so chances are I lost my soul from time to time, or asked for a double-or-nothing, or maybe I just let things slide until I got bored again someplace else.

Like now—and bless your heart—but you're boring the hell out of me. So I'm staring a little bit at both your eyes, but really at the one that's all white like a peeled egg and when I hear the door ding behind me and I slide off the counter and I bet: the next one's a woman, or the next one's a man, coming to pay for his gas. Or—man or woman—this one will just pay me for the fuel, and not pick cigarettes or candy or else something up off the shelf, and

they'll be back out the door and you'll be back to talking about how you'd give a million dollars just to drive a Willys Jeepster again or about the V.A. hospital or the alternators in General Motors station wagons. But most likely the Jeepsters.

Willys Overland,

you say,

you-ever-see-one-you-get-holdst of it.

You keep it, Jack.

Thing is, my shift's two hours from up, and I haven't seen probably forty different faces all night, it's been so quiet, so I've found something else to go on: maybe it's on account of you being Irish, but you don't say each word by itself, and they come out in lengths, like

No-you-don't-see-the-Willys-now,

so I'm betting on the words you'll breathe, now: evens are for me, odds are for the devil.

They said my brother learned to talk like this, not like an Irishman exactly, but in windy hunks like this, on account of I didn't talk until late, and so he talked for both of us, and Dad had him saying

Me-and-bub's-hungry,

and Mom had him saying,

God-is-great-God-is-good,

but Dad swears up and down it was

Papaw put him up to,

Mama-we-hate-dem-Goddamn-ol-grits.

He died when I was four — Papaw did, my brother's fine — but I figure that the two of you'd have been the same age if he didn't

because I said,

Korea

once and you said,

That was my war.

and I thought,

No, now: it was his.

I don't remember if it was you or somebody else, but I think it must've been somebody else told me one time you were a tank commander and so you might've had a couple of years on him because Mamaw finally hunted up her pictures not too long ago—but I bet she'd never mislaid them in the first place, it's not in her—and before he was her husband and long before he was my Papaw he was a Marine and a young man, and clean and handsome, dark and hollow, and I'm about the same age now that he was in the pictures, but I just look old or mean somehow, but I swear to God I'm not that way, and I know I've had it good compared to you and him.

I do remember asking him, one time, about the war. Or it could be I was standing there, when my brother asked for both of us. I remember though. We asked him what his job had been when he was in the war. I remember that he'd tell us,

I peeled potatoes.

Every time. And the only other thing that I remember about Papaw was the one time he pulled me up on his lap when I was crying. My ear'd been hurting something awful with an earache and he fixed it. He smoked and that's what killed him but that day he threw one arm all the way around both of my shoulders—I was little—and blew smoke back in my ear, and he'd said

Dry it up.

And then I thought that he was telling me—stop crying, dry it up—but just this minute it occurred to me that wasn't it all. I'd bet anything that he was talking about my ear and really only meant to say

The smoke will dry it up.

And he was a thousand different things one time or another, and he'd played baseball and run beer and a little bit of whiskey, and after the war, he'd gone with his brothers to make cars up in Detroit. They'd work one shift at one of the plants up there and punch out just to punch back in at another. It was money then, I guess.

I think maybe you are like him in the way that you are both hard men to know about. You were a soldier and a constable, and someone said government-check crazy. Reverend Big-Cup, of all people, was one of them who called you crazy. He came in with that bucket of a cup of his that's not even from our station, and looked down at the end of the counter for your stool, and I knew what he was looking for. I didn't tell him that you keep the stool way back in the walk-in freezer, since it is your stool, and you are the only one allowed to loaf here, as far as I'm concerned. The preacher craned his neck down there, and asked me where was Irish.

I asked him,

You know Irish?

He said that everybody knew you, and you were crazy. It wasn't that time, but the next time when I told him I was sorry but,

You're going to bring that cup in here to fill it up, we're going to have to charge you more.

He said he'd always filled the cup up, and that he'd always paid the large he said he'd used the same big cup for years. I told him

I guess it's been a good run.

And I haven't seen him since.

I never really thought about it, how come most of my friends to be old men like you, but now I think it's because I don't care to let you talk. I'll just sit and listen, or not listen, and do what I'm doing now, because I can say

Huh,

and it's an answer and it says go on, or

Huh?

and it says back up, because you are an old man and your world isn't here anymore.

Sometimes I lay it on thick, I say it too often just to give you hell, and you caught me doing it before and you got pissed. You said

Jack-I'll-take-you-out-back-and-roll-you-around.

And we both laughed to beat hell, because I don't know what you believe, but I think you know more than you let on.

You know good and well my name is John, but you've said Jack since Day One. It was because you walked in on my first shift working alone and you took your baloney sandwich straight back to the walk-in freezer and then put your stool at the end of the counter like you owned the damn place. I learned years ago that the best way to talk to old men is just to holler at you all—and swear, too, if I can see right off you're not a Baptist or a Pentacostal—and get it over with, so I said

We don't allow buckeyes in here. We don't go by it.

They'd told me you'd be in, my cousin who got me on here and the other ones that work during the day, because we are all from across the river, but I would have known you were buckeye by

looking at you. Don't ask me how. So I called you a buckeye and you started in on calling me hilljack and wouldn't hardly let up, and finally did. And then you asked me what it really was and when I said it was really John, you like to have fell sideways off your stool. Finally, you said

Jack, then.

Fine, then.

That's how come you to call me Jack.

When you laugh and the good eye about closes shut and your mouth purses up like you're trying to kiss to keep the tobacco from running down your chin. It don't bother me, tobacco—your laugh don't either—but I don't chew it, and I'm the only one works here who don't smoke, but I'm just liable to rot my teeth out of my head one day with this candy and slimjims and I'm sick as a dog of them, anyway. I remember there was one time I drank so much coffee here my jaws hurt and I couldn't sleep and when I finally did I was sweating and it stunk, now. That's the last time I do that.

Fact is, I figured out a trick: if you go back to the Lipton tea that they bottle, there's a contest on now where one in every so many bottles gets you a free one. If you hold the bottle kind of on its side, you can read the print on the bottom of the cap plain as day, and it makes the one that you've got free.

On my side of the river it's called "Extra-sweet, No lemon," and tastes just like the kind that my aunt Marcy makes or at least it's the closest you can buy, but on your side of the river, it's called "Southern Style," and if you go far enough up toward Amish Country, they don't have it anymore at all. They have the other ones, with lemon and things, but just "Sweet, No Lemon" is as far as they're willing to

go with it. Aggravating is what that is.

That's one thing I like: is being able to go where you want and still get something that you know what it tastes like. Like Wendy's. I don't care a lot for it, it's alright, but we have tacos on one side and Wendy's on the other, so you and I eat junior-bacons about every night that I work, which might as well just go ahead and say every night, lately, anyway. You pay your own way, too, and that's a good thing, and you shuffle over and pick it up for us, not on account of being nice, but just the opposite of that. I know that you want to raise hell with those folks if they don't get the bacon all the way done. And they don't, and so you do. One of theirs come in here after you've been gone before—gone from here and gone from there—and said,

Are you the one he says eats with him?

I am.

Well, I wish you'd just keep him over here, he gets on our nerves.

And I said,

Wish in one hand and shit in the other, hoss. See which one gets full first.

But I can't afford to lose this job, so I only said it in my head.

But because it was you that said to me, the evening before, after we'd had to pull my Chevy to a garage because we couldn't get the fuel to run, and you'd said, don't let them put in a pump, it's likely the fuse, and it was—the fuse—because of that, and because of everything else, after he left my eyes started watering and I like to have punched a hole through the counter and I don't know what I'd have done if the customers didn't start through the door right then,

and by the time they'd gone, I just felt dry and sick.

And best I can remember, that wasn't long after you'd drove up to the V.A. since it was free for you, and you'd come back from there, but while you were there, they told you that you had a spot on your lung and they wanted to take more tests and you told them that you'd die before you'd go back in there. And they said, "yes," that you probably would. I remember you brought in plum brandy that day, and damned if it didn't taste like moonshine and we both weren't about drunk as piss, time we were done with it, and me still on the clock. I remember going home because I remember I was driving that green '74 truck then and it would just kill off sometimes at sixty miles an hour, no steering or brakes or lights or anything, but the good part was that you didn't even have to slide it out of gear to just turn the key again and start it up again and get on down the road, again. But that was scary, now, since it was after midnight, and there I sat, smelling like a West Virginia funeral. I remember how I just screamed, I guess, between my teeth,

Just let me get across the river.

Because unless it was a stateboy, then we could fix it there.

I was driving that one on account of the Blazer was in the votech then to be painted. I'd told you that, and you asked,

Is it gonna look good, Jack?

Hell, I hope.

Pussy-gettin good?

No, now: you can't drive it.

I can keep up with you, you see. You're old and it's slowed you down and I started out that way—but not stupid, I mean, just not in any hurry—and we both sit and think a little bit, but you'd just

as soon have your mouth running while you think, and I'd just as soon let you, since when you're not here it's quiet, and I can't stand it when it's quiet.

Another thing about Reverend Big-Cup and the people that come in here: they carry on like they know you, and I don't know what it is about that but I guess it just absolutely bothers the hell right out of me.

And it's not on account of me knowing you any better, I guess, but it's how when my cousin Jeff played for the Wildcats that all of the sudden everybody knew him, and to them he became a big blue and white cartoon version of himself and he'd never change no matter how many times you walked in or out of the station, or damn near any station, the white and blue poster would be hanging there with Jeff and the coach and the black ones on it and he had a basketball under his arm and everybody would think, *that's Jeff, I know him*, and I would think back,

the hell you do.

The hell they knew that Jeff was just twelve years old once and stole rum off my uncle—his daddy—before we went out in the woods, and he was talking his big ballgame about being a drinker already—Jeff was—and I swear that with a stopwatch you couldn't have timed the instant between when you could say "there's Jeff gulping" and "there's Jeff puking." They didn't know—the ones that say "I know Jeff"—that he was the one farted in the back pew one week when we were even littler boys, and it whistled teapot and we all got to laughing but, after, we wouldn't tell Mamaw which one of us had done it, so all of us like to have got the hell beat out of us with the flyswatter, and Jeff felt so bad about that—all of it—that

he cried the next week and got born again, and I mean born again, right there in front of everybody. We were scared to death to laugh that time, with somebody up front being saved, that it might make God mad, but worse that it might get Mamaw started in on us again.

These people that say they know so much don't know that they talk like they talk because of television, and that you don't, and you say "dogues" for "dogs." That you tell me your dogs are tired and you're talking about your feet, and that you tell me you need to water your dog and you're the only one that's allowed to use the employees' restroom, because you have to walk through the office to get back there, so and the ones that say they know you or say that they know Jeff, I make them have to ask me for the key that's chained to this big stick that makes sure they bring it back and they have to use the one outside. They don't know that when that says "out of order" that just usually means somebody's shit it full, and I haven't got a break to go and hose it out. They don't know that the honest-to-God Jeepsters weren't made but from forty-eight to fifty.

They've never heard you say

They-made-cars-and-called-them-Jeepster-in-the
nineteen-sixties,
but-they-weren't-like-the-Willys.

The ones that think they know you don't know one thing, sure. They don't know it like to kills me when you say

Don't-know-about-you, Jack.
When my head screams,
But you do.

And I'm gambling my soul and gambling in my head on the words that you're saying, but I hear you and you're right, when you

say that there won't be any more Willys Jeepsters and that it's a damn shame, but I don't tell you that you're right, because you'd think I was just giving you hell and making fun, because you know that I am young and that I've never even seen one, and don't know what they were like. And you don't know what I believe, maybe, but just maybe I know more than I let on.

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