

Prologue

Today. At a truck stop outside Oklahoma City, a large oil painting hangs over the pass-through to the kitchen. Oddly out of place amongst the jumble of patriotic paraphernalia, 9/11 memorabilia and poorly executed posters of John Wayne and Willie Nelson, the painting depicts a young couple facing each other; his face is in shadow and hers is kissed by a setting sun. She has a view of the ocean that lies endless and placid behind him.

Manny, the truck stop's owner, doesn't know where the painting came from, or who painted it—it is not signed and was there when he bought the place—but Manny *does* know that the artist must have been deeply in love with the girl in the painting: her beautiful, strongly intelligent face is shaped so lovingly that not a brushstroke can be seen and her blond hair glows as if blessed by a halo.

Thousands of travelers have noticed the painting; Manny has been told that it was painted in the late '30s, that it is art of the highest degree, and over the years he has been offered much money for it.

The young pony-tailed Toronto art dealer on his way to Florida for the winter who stands spellbound by the painting had asked for the manager. Manny had reluctantly left his busy and understaffed kitchen where the orders were piling up. Wiping his hands on a towel, he scrutinized the painting's umpteenth admirer, knowing full well what was coming.

"Hey, man, you the manager?"

"Sort of."

"I wanna buy that painting."

"It's not for sale."

"Everything is for sale, man."

"Not that painting."

"Why not?"

"I like it."

"But it shouldn't be hanging in a truck stop, man!"

"Why not?"

"It's... it's too good! Who besides you sees it here?"

"Lots of people."

A moment passed as the art dealer locked his gaze on the painting. He resolutely turned to Manny.

"Okay, tell you what, I'll give you five thousand for it."

"Thanks, but it's not for sale."

"Okay, I'll give you ten thousand, but that's my final offer!"

Oh, gee... ten grand! That would pay for a new gas stove and then some...

Manny looked up at the couple in the painting and once

again marveled over it and the effect it has on those who notice it. He has seen road-weary and hardened men walk in and take a seat at his counter, silently sliding in as if they were Nobodies; then order their coffee and sit there seemingly reflecting on their lives, their days of glory; sometimes even revealing bygone dreams to whomever will listen.

He has seen the change that comes over them when they notice the painting; seen their faces soften as the painting draws them deep inside themselves.

He doesn't know exactly what they see in the painting, but he thinks the men see themselves in the young man so obscurely depicted, and recognize the girl of their dreams in the young woman with golden hair. He has seen them rekindle dreams they had when they were young and life was theirs for the taking but then slipped away; that a truth then engulfs them and holds them captive and somehow makes them feel important again.

He has seen them sit emotionally naked at the counter and stare at the painting, remembering when their needs were met with hugs and loving glances instead of the angry gestures and hostile glares they encounter on The Road.

He has seen in their eyes that they no longer feel all to be lost; that once again they actually *feel* something—and that makes them proud somehow, even more emotional. Their eyes become soft and wistful and he can almost hear them think that which he knows so

many take to their grave: ... *that girl sure looks a lot like Betty when we was young... before the divorce and things fell apart... I shouldn't have done what I did, that was dumb of me... I should get on The Road, got a long way to go... maybe I'll just sit here a while longer and think a bit more...*

They unbutton shirts that are stretched to the point of tearing over bellies bulging from eggs and bacon, biscuits and chicken, top sirloin with mashed potatoes and gravy; sip the last of their coffee, look up once more at the couple forever frozen in time, pay their tabs and leave the counter, now more ready for The Road, brimming with emotion and some kind of hope for a Better Tomorrow.

They head for the restroom and do what they have to, splash some water on their faces and look at themselves in the mirror; their shoulders become firmer, their backs straighter, their eyes brighter—as if they are thinking: *Life ain't so bad after all...*

Manny has seen them lift their baseball caps with visors bent just right to suit the wearer, check that some hair is still atop their pate, tug at their drawers and place their private parts where they are more comfortable and out of the way, give their image in the mirror another glance or two, before heading for the parking lot and their rigs, nodding to the whores and their buddies of The Road, all while feeling better about themselves.

He has seen them hesitate before climbing up into their rigs, seen them clomp the ground beneath the soles of their boots as if to reaffirm their connection to the Earth, seen them glance at their competitors' rigs and puff up their chests like roosters, seeking to be noticed, wanting so much to be validated as the persons only they know themselves to be; yearning to be somebody—not the unimportant and anonymous beings they are on The Road.

They climb up into their rigs, slip into the familiar surroundings they have come to both love and hate, turn the ignition and feel the shudder as the diesel ignites in all cylinders and the engine smooths out and once again they are ready for The Road.

Manny imagines he can hear what follows—

Okay, here I go...

But the first gear doesn't want to engage.

Something must be bent somewhere in the shift-linkage...I'll just push a little harder...ah, there it goes...

The rig eases forward.

Hey, make room there, buddy! Move over! Somebody coming through!

The eighteen-wheeled behemoths ease away from his truck stop and onto the highway and soon fade out of sight.

Manny knows they'll be back—there's certain comfort in that—and turns to the art dealer standing there with cash in hand.

“No, man, the painting isn't for sale—not for all the money in the world. ”

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