

Payday

By David Harrison

Payday.

Pink slip.

Son of a bitch.

Who knew?

You ask the woman with the blouse and the skirt, “Who even knew we had a HR?”

You’re more direct with the shop foreman; tell him, “Kiss my ass.”

Greasy black hair, navy Dickies, lifts in his shoes. Fat and mean as fat gets in the summer on a sweltering factory floor where the likes of him and his kind have been stamping, bending, riveting, for as long as there’s been steel in Enterprise goddamn Valley. “The Hell I will.” He works some chewing gum – hard – turns that thing on in his stare and stance, that thing that made him foreman to begin with.

Exit.

Tori’ll be at work, so you thumb – to a bar – where you’re made for cash poor too damn quick. Bartender suggests you best be about finding gainful employment and, short of that, him and a Louisville Slugger would like to see you parked on other premises good and pronto.

Some morning.

Homeward bound.

Enter.

Voices, but the stereo’s off and the TV’s still broken. Head to the bedroom, find Tori astride some doughy legal beagle you told her you thought’d been hounding her since she quit waitressing to take a job filing and answering phones for Cantwell, Hawkins and Welch.

What the Hell’s a LLP?

Look on her face about kills you.

“Lanny,” Tori spits.

Doesn’t matter, does it? But you spit back, “I’m outta here.”

You key Cantwell’s Beemer, wish the paint would curlie-Q, like when the English guy peels all kinds of fruits on that Ginsu commercial.

You steal Tori’s truck, frisk the dash and the glove and the seat for loose change. Smoke the roach in the ashtray. Wish you had more. Radio. Speed. Sixty-three, that is, in a twenty-five during school hours. It’s a mile before you even notice the flashers. Your luck it’ll be the new girl cop, built like a block of ice, colder though, bigger chips on her shoulder.

“License and--” And he stops – like that. “For shit’s sake, Lanny.”

“Sundance,” you reply. Pretend you’re wearing a hat; tip it.

He spits on the ground. “Cut the shit, Lanny.”

“Mikey.” Shake your long hair out of your eyes. “Whatever.”

He puts a small hand to the back of his big neck. Something cracks. The both of you eye a passing car. “Heard there were layoffs.”

You shrug.

“Got smokes?” he wants to know.

You pat yourself down, shake your head side to side.

“Take mine.”

Half a pack - menthol, though. “Been a long day,” is the half-assed thanks you muster.

A two-way clipped to Mikey’s starched shirt is clearing its throat, spitting out names and numbers - and again. Mikey splits. You peel the truck out in an opposite direction.

Rowland Tavern. Old oak. Stale smoke. And packed with other casualties; six from the lines, whistling the same sad Dixie, “...pennypinching mothers got no idea...” when the token middle manager herky-jerks back from the Men’s room, smacking his lips then smiling.

Smiling?

You follow him next time he gets up to go, pretend to check yourself in the mirror until he’s finished up in the stall.

“Gimme.”

He grins and pats your back. “Now it’s a party.” Palms you a small Zip-loc.

No credit card, but you never do leave home without Daddy’s old jackknife, the one with the boning blade and the chipped onyx handle where you messed up trying to change his initials into yours.

Cut and lay two lines out on top of the toilet paper dispenser. Breathe deep. Strong stuff. It doesn’t make life go away so much as things start seeming conquerable.

“Gimme more!”

You palm back to Smiley what you manage to leave on your way out the Rowland’s dark door. Start to hoof it, remember Tori’s truck, laugh ‘til you cry, climbing in, turning the engine, driving out of the lot. Into the street – fast - the speedometer needle looks like you’re at a one-armed bandit...

Daddy was a gambler, bet the farm that Mama would honor and that you, you little pissant, would obey. Like most always, he was half-right; only just had to touch his hand to the buckle and you’d tell him her whereabouts, your wishes no match for his command...

You leave the truck running beside the curb, brace for the heat of the place, for the ammonia stink of wet bedsheets and industrial-strength disinfectant. Time, time, time, just to wind up shivering under a shawl in the corner of a windowless day room?

Black and white TV is on. A handful are trying at cards. A bald man - liver spots blot his papery scalp – slumps, dozing or dead, in a lopsided chair. Attendant says, “Been a while,” then lets you off the hook, raising a chin to steer you across the room.

White hair, grey skin, silver wheelchair; ask, “How are you?” not expecting any answer that makes sense.

“Who, me?” Lost one leg to diabetes, half a lung to emphysema, a whole hard life to what? To kings and thieves, and the lies both tell someone’s daughter, someone’s sister, someone’s goddamn mother.

Yours.

You had a gun, you'd put her out of your misery; if the damn room had windows, you'd jump. Who's the magician on the tube, dresses up like a rock star, walks through glass without it breaking?

"How are you, Mama?"

"Who are you?"

Outta there, that's who, running hard, then back behind the wheel, back at putting your foot through the cab-floor, racing to anyplace – anyplace else.

Your former line has a half-hour to go. You smoke the last of Mikey's Menthols, kicking an empty Dunkin' cup, pacing up in the truck bed, then down in the asphalt lot.

Shift ends. Survivors approach: Raymond, Tweety, Ed... Vargas, Lanier, Two-tone

Tim... Guilt is alive in all their eyes. One or two say, "Sorry, man."

Something in your throat sticks, keeps you from putting them at ease. Shit.

"Shit." Manage a shrug, pace the black-top, look for the one they call "Crease".

Six-three. A hundred and fifty - maybe. Oily mullet. Slippery eyes. Rash on his neck and his arms.

"Sorry, man." He's grinning.

You get in his way.

"Whatever you need, Lanny, you know that." Licorice gums, candy corn teeth.

"Just, hey, it's been a while since you bought."

Screw it. Screw him. "Screw you, Crease-"

"Woah, boy. Like ridin' a bike, am I right? Step into my office."

A rusty van Crease bought second-hand from a dying electrician. Or so Crease tells you, sliding from the driver's seat, tripping on beer and soda cans, some newspapers, the old mattress in back, bracing himself on empty shelves that line the vehicle's inside.

Soon finds what he was looking for: Craftsman toolbox that he carries back to the front. Sits the big case on his lap. Opens it up and makes a show of the top layer's tray of nails, screws, nuts, bolts, pliers, hammer, a sixteen-foot tape.

"What's your pleasure, good sir?" Crease asks, hefting the tray to the floor of the van, exposing a mess of bags and bottles, of Zip-locs, Cello-pacs, pill jars and vials.

"I'm broke."

Like that, Crease's pharmacy closes.

"I'm good for it."

"Got a job already, do you?" And you've got to give due to the skinny SOB; he's not afraid to look you in the eyes.

The fingers of your right hand drum the passenger side of Crease's dash. Your left hand's in your pocket. Jackknife?

"You look like sewage, Lanny." Crease rolls his window down just long enough to spit. "Tell you what I'm gonna do. Put out your hand." He reaches into his jeans, comes up with pills. "One from column A and one from column B. On me."

You wind up with eight or ten, mostly different shapes and colors. Swallow something green, then something yellow, without water, pocket the rest, watch Crease rumble away, the cloud of exhaust like incense at five-o'clock mass...

Saturday always was the best time to sneak away. Mama must've prayed he'd get gone, but a kid doesn't want to risk being any more alone. You pinched the skin at your

wrist to make it seem like kneeling didn't hurt, told God or anyone listening you'd settle for getting home and finding your Daddy asleep...

Must be the green one - or the yellow; what the Hell does it matter? - 'cause you're cross-town in Tori's truck and you don't much remember the ride. Find two blue caplets shaped like flat eggs, chew one, chase the bitter taste with something white and time-released.

Leave the truck running.

Jog across a small parking lot, around to the front of a big Victorian.

Run your hand across some wooden signage on granite posts. The downstairs seems to be dentists. The rest of the house is Cantwell, Hawkins, Welch - and damn LLP.

You're taking stairs two at a time, wondering if you have a plan. Through glass doors: a beige reception area, where a dark-skinned woman looks up from some kind of typing, locks her brown eyes on yours.

Doesn't even bother with asking if she can help you.

You return the favor, tell her, "Probably not," as you head for an interior door.

You stumble, right yourself, proceed down a corridor. There's a wide stairwell at the end; calls your name, then you're on the next floor. Library. Two big tables. Ten small chairs. Shelves. Dormers. TV, VCR set-up at far end of the room. You pinball over.

Click.

No cable?

Everything's real clear...

Daddy liked his Sunday football best. Studied the lines, watched the weather to parlay last minute over-unders with his picks against the spread. Drank beer, switched to whiskey, rode his nothin's easy chair, cursing the zebras, kicking your dog. Mama'd steer clear, all right, but not you; out of sight over his shoulder, you kept your eyes glued to the screen, maybe like him in thinking the bashing around of those tiny-looking men had something to say about the future...

Rip the plug from the socket. Then, the TV is under your arm. Floor feels downhill. Stairs go all crooked. Doors open and pasty white ghosts pop their heads in and out. Tell one, "So sue me." You laugh; he ducks. Receptionist bites her knuckles, waits on the cruiser that 911 promised.

Outside.

Where to?

Truck steers itself. You remember some Discovery show about computerized robot cars that talk to each other, override drivers' dangerous turns.

Park in front.

Chew the other blue egg.

Nobody's home. Put the TV set down on the crabgrass, sit on the thing and study the small yard, the small house, the big front window. Same drapes. Same couch. Same La-Z-Boy.

Same goddamn empty.

All of a sudden you're tired in a way no pill has a prayer of undoing, tired in a way you pray will keep you from coming completely undone. Into your pocket, come up with the knife, feel its weight in one hand then the other.

Open the blade.

Stab the dirt and weeds between your feet.

Clean the steel against your pant-leg.

Drag that knife across one palm.

Blood.

Do you feel it?

"Boy."

You didn't notice him pull in.

Works some dip. Spits a thick loogie. Still carries a lunch pail and, you swear to God if there isn't a newspaper under his arm.

Those hands aren't really so big. And you're definitely the taller. His boots look beat, his windbreaker grimy, spider veins on his bulbous nose like webbing to tether his frown.

So tired you'll burst; put your head in your hands, smearing blood on your face.

Nothing.

Waiting.

You are, too.

"Your mama's son all right," he tells you. "You all can run, but you can't hide."

The knife. Show him. Stand up.

"That'll be the day," your daddy says, shaking his head, turning his hips, offering only his back.

You watch the door close behind him, make out lights turning on inside the house...

Dead of night, your mama tiptoed; pitch dark save for wee hour reruns reflecting off her teary baby blues, the silvery clasps of a suitcase, his pile of aluminum empties. You slept as long as you could, pretended for a while more after that - while your Daddy raved and railed and cussed, his steel-toed boots plenty noisy about the floorboards, at the walls, all the way through the tube of that damn TV. Took him five long years to track her down, plus one more to drag her back. By the hair...

Drop the knife. But the next thing you know, LLP TV is on your shoulder and you're running full steam toward that empty window. You heave the goddamn thing, only wishing it was bigger and heavier.

The glass cracks loud as a gunshot, seems suspended for a moment before it crashes and crumbles and rains, some inside with the TV set, some outside his house - this house - the house you were raised in.

Nothing, goddamn it.

Fumble pills, stumble back toward the truck, bend down for the goddamn knife -

"Don't, Lanny."

Mikey.

"He called you?" you ask.

“Don’t move.” Mikey’s right hand rests on the butt of his holstered service revolver.

“He called you.”

“No, Lanny.” Slowly stepping closer. “The lawyers.”

You barely remember. “I’m so tired.”

“I’ll bet.” He moves even closer. “Been a long day.”

“For sure.” You watch Mikey take the knife from your hand. “Mama told me there’d be days like this.”

‘Course Daddy said, “Your Mama’s a whore,” whilst he beat you the harder - and then some - the entire six years.

Grab Mikey’s gun.

“Lanny - don’t!”

Crack!

Hurts like a bastard.

Then it doesn’t.

Who knew?

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