



Thursday , 20 March



Bald Wig

[Stephen F. Anderson](#)

Carter stepped off the bus and, looking each way, crossed the sidewalk. I let down my pint of amber and watched him through the smudged front glass. Nothing bothered Carter, I thought. He took his time. He opened the door with a creak. Dusky sunlight glowed in his blonde flat top.

"Carter," Marty said from behind the bar.

Carter sneered at him. This struck me, since Carter was not the sneering type. He came in every Tuesday and always said something. Hey, he'd say. Hey.

Marty smoothed the ponytail frizz around his ears. "So what'll it be? Usual?"

Carter said nothing, just kept on coming. As he passed I smelled fresh scent sport stick. His jaw was sturdy, his arms thick and pinkish. He looked like a workout trainer. He didn't fit here, I'd always thought. He belonged in a suburban sports bar. I sipped and lifted the newspaper, stuck my head in. "Gunman Massacres Three at Elms Road Amusement Park," read the headline. "Boy in Critical Condition."

Carter found his usual stool, on the opposite end from me. He laid his keys about a foot in front of him, his wallet a half inch to the right of that. He set out a stubby chocolate-colored cigar and rolled it under his right hand, the clipper hidden inside his left like he wanted to do a magic trick with it. Then, he nodded to me. He never did that.

I nodded back. Hey.

"No usual," he said to Marty. "Not today."

Marty wiped at his ratty, eight-pocket hiking shorts. He slid Carter an ashtray. "No pint a bock?"

"No!" Carter snapped. He cleared his throat. He showed a smile. "No, I'd like a pint of wheat berry, a bald wig, and a ball peen hammer," he said. His delivery sounded balanced, as if rehearsed.

"Very funny," Marty said chuckling. "You hate berry beers."

"I'm dead serious, champ."

Marty shrugged. As he poured, Carter clipped his cigar. But he didn't light it. He slid half the thing in his mouth, and bit down hard. It cracked, crunched. He chewed and swallowed, chewed, swallowed. Flakes stuck to his lips; others floated to the bar and found his fuzzy arms.

Marty's smile dropped away. He set Carter's wheat berry on the bar with a pop. Foam crept down the glass. "What the hell you doing?" he said.

"Eating my cigar," Carter said, a gritty brown slime on his teeth

Marty frowned with caution, as if fishhooks hung from the corners of his mouth. I felt for Marty. What a spot he was in. Only he and I knew Carter was a cop out in the suburbs. A corporal. Once a year, Marty told me, Carter played a clown in the County Sheriff Charity Circus.

Carter gulped and chewed. I watched from my newspaper. Act normal.

"Want a bald wig there's that novelty store a block or so around the corner, always been there," Ellis said as he took his stool in the middle of the bar. Ellis' narrow, stubbled jaw was the color of lead. He had crow's feet for eyes and a gnarled, flat nose. Lived in his old tan ski coat.

"Do your crossword, Ellis," Marty said, and Ellis laughed a little too loud, like a weary department store Santa to a brat. He tore open a pack of Dorals and said, "Come off it, Martin, hey, got no truck with you ..."

Carter stared into his beer, holding it with both hands. I pitched Ellis the crossword and opened the sports section, thinking this will end soon enough. Happy Hour was next, seven to nine. So long to our orange and gray afternoon haze in which newspapers rustle, men in the booths speak low, and old friends vow to quit their jobs. The pub fills up. Marty's new halogens send the long day shadows to corners, crevices, under the stools; and he turns up the music -- his music: moody old Tom Waits and Leon Redbone, Sarah Vaughan. Kurt Weill tunes when he's bummed. Marty's dictatorial about his mix but it works: depressing, then elating, daring you to try and leave.

Carter looked up. "Don't be scared," he said to Marty. "Really, don't be."

"Leave it alone," Marty said, "all right? Got happy hour soon."

Carter peered through the swirling blue rays of smoke and thinning dusk -- he'd found me. "Do you know what I'm saying, Karl?" he said.

Carter never talked to me; I never talked to him. Especially since my accident. I gave my sports page a shake. "Huh, know what?" I said but I was too late.

Carter said to Marty, "I just thought I'd warn you. Once things get a little wilder in here? I plan to stand on your bar and do a little dance -- when I score that wig and that hammer, that is."

Marty groaned and pulled himself away. Carter chewed down the rest of his cigar and popped the stub into his mouth. I watched openly now; he seemed not to care. He gathered flakes from his arm hairs and emptied them into his wide-open mouth as if it was trail mix. He washed this down and sounded a belch of approval.

Marty returned. He stood farther back, not touching the bar, his hands half-balled at his sides. "Carter, you gotta, you know, get a hold of yourself or you'll have to go."

"Why? Am I hurting anyone?"

"Yeah, he's not hurting anyone!" shouted one of the bicycle messengers in the far corner. There were two of them, smoking in the dark. Always.

Marty ignored them; he faced Carter. "Look, you've always been mellow. Quiet, polite, good tipper." Carter said nothing. "Serious, it's good to have a regular who's a cop," Marty added, but

serious, it's good to have a regular who's a cop," Marty added, but he jerked back. "Sorry, you probably don't like strangers knowing you're a -- yeah."

Carter's eyes caught mine, then he glowered at his lighter, keys and wallet. "Doesn't matter now," he said.

"Oh? Oh, got ya. Man, I'm sorry."

"You want a ball peen, got the one out in my pickup," Ellis said. As he spoke he stared straight ahead, at the taps.

Carter shook his head. "Just want to be my own man anymore, you know?"

"Shore do kid," Ellis said.

Marty snatched up Carter's empty pint. "Now the both of you are creeping me out." As he said this the first of the happy-hour crowd pushed their way through the door, three and four at a time -- men in new suits, fraternity boys in shorts.

"Jesus, I'm behind, the new help's late." Marty set another pint in front of Carter. "I'm gonna leave you alone, let you simmer down. This is your last chance; I mean it now." And he turned away.

The suits took booths; the frat boys filled my end of the bar, surrounding me. They yelled for Marty, who was in back turning on his music. One of them barked in my ear, "Dude, k'l borrow the sports page?"

I didn't know what was worse: our new Carter or the outside world. I surrendered my spot for a quick game of video poker down the hall ...

I returned four games and twenty lost dollars later. The place was packed. Marty's new help had never showed. He was pouring pitchers four at a time. Ellis was gone. Carter sat alone, his pint still full. Next to him was the only open stool.

I could have chosen the door. Yet I pushed my way through to Carter. Sweat beads lined his forehead and upper lip, and his neck was blotchy. His eyes darted as I mounted the stool. He looked away. "I thought you'd left," he said.

"Left? It's Happy Hour."

"Good. Ellis is coming back."

Marty saw me and slid me a pint. I sipped for courage. I waited a few beats, looking around. "You pulled me over a long time ago," I said.

Carter stared, as if trying to recall the name of a song. "I pull over lots of people."

"You told me, my burnt-out tail lights were a traffic hazard."

"Did I let you go?"

"With a warning. Thing was, I was drunk. I feel like an ass getting away with it."

"Comes around."

"Yes, and it did." I tried to chuckle; I snorted. "Few months later? Got hit by a drunk. Shattered a shin, busted my jaw. Sent my girl -- ex-girlfriend -- through the windshield."

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Carter only shrugged. Comes around.

I took another sip. I said: "Marty told me, you do a mean clown in that circus charity. I just think that's great."

Carter pulled his pint close. "Ever since I could remember," he said, "I liked helping people. Kids, you know?"

"Me too," I said. "Tried to find a permanent teaching job, yet every year they hire fewer full-timers. And pay less." I lifted my pint.

Carter let out a sigh. He turned to me. "We're not the only ones. Did you know Ellis was a fireman?"

"No. I don't know Ellis."

"Took a fall in a burning apartment building, went back for a hamster or some stupid shit. Screwed his back. His wife left him."

"Guy does seem a little bitter."

"He's not as bitter as he sounds." Marty passed. Carter stabbed a finger at him. "Then there's Marty. Know he has a Master of Fine Arts? That's right. In music. Wanted to teach and write it -- compose, you know? But who'd pay a guy to teach music, let alone write it? Compose it. Now he says he's not talented enough."

"Maybe he'll find the guts someday," I said, hoping all this was bringing Carter around.

The speakers pulsed above us. A silky voice crooned, "I'll Buy That Dream." Carter's head swayed, just a little. One of the frat boys shouted; others chanted a drinking song.

Carter said, "Karl, don't you ever give up."

"Yeah, I know." I slid my hand along the edge of the bar -- it felt dry, and dusty, from ash and tobacco flakes like the ones melting away in Carter's stomach. "You told me about Ellis, Marty. I know myself. So that leaves you."

"Me."

"What's with the wig crap? Freaking out Marty like that?"

Carter gazed at me -- through me. The frat boys were shouting to a Johnnie Rivers' tune. They danced; they moshed. Heads bounced and elbows flew; beer spilled.

"I used to do that," Carter said, watching the bodies slam. His eyes had narrowed, and suddenly I could sense his mood, as if I'd been around him for years. The guy was getting edgy.

Marty had rushed up. He pointed at the moshers. "See that shit? Carter, need your help. I'm gonna threaten to kick em out but I need a backup."

"Say the word," Carter said. He squared his shoulders. He gave me a sideways glance.

The last thing Carter needed was an adrenaline rush. I wondered if he carried a gun off-duty. Yet after five minutes of explaining, and pleading, the frat boys went back to their pitchers and Carter returned. He took a deep breath, chuckling. "Glad that was easy. I hate violence."

"So do I," I said, shaking my head, "So do I --"

Carter scowled. The fat vein at his temple bulged red. He slammed a fist on the bar. "Don't freakin patronize me. I really do

clammed a fist on the bar. "Don't freakin' patronize me! I mean, we hate violence."

"Okay, it's cool, I know."

What had I started? Carter threw back his full pint and panted, as if trying to breathe. I drank my beer but couldn't taste it. He starting bouncing; his knees banged the wall of the bar.

"I gotta tell you something," he said, "I gotta tell someone... This morning, I got one of the first calls to Elms Road Amusement Park."

At first I didn't understand. Then it seized me, scraping at the back of my throat as if Carter had forced one of his dry cigars down it.

"Gunman Massacres Three at Elms Road Amusement Park. Boy in Critical Condition."

My gut pinched and rolled, my heart tumbled in my chest like wet sneakers in a dryer.

"First thing I noticed was how still it was," Carter said. "The elms made the air fresh. Sunlight on the scrubbed paths, smelled like salt. I heard a muffled shriek and a sob, far away... Heading on, I hear on the receiver they'd apprehended a suspect at the other end of the park. But me, I found something else. I found the boy -- the five-year old. He was lying on his back, in the grass. Front of the Haunted House. Funny thing was, you couldn't see any blood unless you turned him over -- damp grass soaks up a lot."

My heart had stopped tumbling; it had lowered to my stomach, all warm and squishy. My mouth opened but nothing came out.

"He told me his name," Carter said. "Zack Arthur. He was staring upward, he didn't blink the whole time. Like he was searching for fun shapes in the clouds, you know? He had these green eyes that twinkled." Carter cleared his throat. "Little Zack kept saying, 'Zack is short for Zachary, Zack is short for Zachary...' He began to wheeze. Then, looking up at me, right freakin' into me, he says, 'Don't be scared, mister.' To me! Then his eyes lost their sparkle. He had trouble even blinking --"

"Wait. He didn't die." On the bar were stray newspapers. I grabbed at them. "He's alive, the headline --"

"Is wrong. Zack died about the same time the afternoon edition hit the stands. I heard it on the radio."

"How?" My eyes stung. "Who could do that? Where you holding the bastard?"

Carter opened his hands and stared into his palms. He said, "You know, I've seen a three-year old stop breathing by the edge of a pool, her little lungs full of water, face pale. Eyes waiting to turn off. In a driveway, a baby under a station wagon. Seen the Horror on a mother's face." He sniffed. "It's funny, though. All that's left for me now are these... impulses. Urges to make someone -- anyone -- pay."

"I know. Wait, you don't mean that. Not like that --"

"Don't you preach to me," Carter said. His eyes had glossed over. He brushed a hand through his flat top. He smiled. "You don't get it, do you? Karl, I did Little Zack's killer."

I looked around, to make sure no one was listening.

"I called the EMTs, sure I did. But as I sat there with my man Zack, I hear this clicking noise. So I turn around. And the bastard's standing there."

"The gunman? But --"

"Must have been in the Haunted House. Believe me, an amusement park's a bitch to search."

"But they apprehended him. You said."

"They said -- the papers said. Turns out they'd snagged a homeless from the woods."

"No."

"Yes. Talk about hinky. I am screwed. He keeps pulling the trigger but he's out of rounds. No go. So... So he tosses the gun, drops to his knees, and he waits for it."

It? I did not want to hear this. I stalled. "What... did he look like?"

"Like me, you, Marty. It wasn't so bad. It was as if someone was doing it for me. I moved behind him and nudged his head forward slightly -- like the barber does when he trims the back of your head, you know? Then I walk off into the trees. Took a cab home. Showered, ate, changed, came here on the number 70 like I do every Tuesday."

"Jesus. You think anyone knows?"

Carter nodded. "Oh, yeah. If Marty would ever get a TV in here we could watch it on the news."

"This isn't funny." I grabbed Carter's arm. "I mean it. And how could you leave that little boy?"

Carter pounded at the bar; I let go. Faces turned. "Don't you get it? Wasn't anything I could do." He lowered his voice. "Anyway, anyway, won't take them long to find me here."

He was right about that. There was nothing more to say. We sat and sipped our beers, Happy Hour blaring all around us. Carter in a world I could not fully grasp, and me in wonder and horror at the same time. For Carter and the gunman had arrived at the same destination, yet from far different origins.

"Did it make you feel better?" I said finally.

Carter drank; he licked his lips. "Nah. More like I was cleansed."

"Set us up right, boys!" Ellis had squirmed his way through the crowd. He shoved a cracked, vinyl Pan Am bag under our stools, pulled out a bald wig and held it up to the light. The sheer, salmon-colored rubber smelled like glue. Next, Ellis produced a ball peen hammer and placed it on the bar. "Damn right," he said, snickering at us.

Carter stretched the bald wig over his head, snapped it on tight. It fit well; it concealed the edges of his flat top.

Ellis handed Carter a red nose. "Threw this in for effect," he said and winked at me.

Carter slipped it on and Ellis cackled. Carter lit a cigar and thick blue-gray smoke gathered above us like a thunder cloud. He chugged his beer and yelled "Whoop whoop!"

"Keep it down," I said, "Marty'll call the --"

"Let him," Ellis snapped. "Let him."

"Carter the Clown, Carter the Clown!" Carter screamed and I heard myself laugh -- anything to kill the panic. I saw Marty retreat to the kitchen.

Carter stopped; he lowered his cigar. Behind us, the bike messengers and frat boys stood arguing. Facing off. One of the messengers pushed at a frat boy.

Carter bolted over. He gathered the messenger's ragged T-shirt in one fist and the frat boy's soccer jersey in the other and slammed each against the wall, holding them there -- wearing the bald wig. He whispered something in their ears then let them down, and the two disappeared through the same gap in the crowd.

He dropped back onto his stool, dazed. He read the look on my face. He said, "All I told them was, I was going to take them out with me if they don't behave."

Marty had bounded over; he'd heard every word. "That's it," he said to me. "The guy needs help. I'm calling."

He didn't need to. Carter saw the flashing lights before any of us. He flung his keys, wallet and lighter down the bar. He threw his pint at the taps. Glass shattered; beer poured out. Grabbing the ball peen hammer, he climbed onto the bar and almost slipped, kicking at air.

Happy Hour had stopped dead.

Marty started for Carter but Carter pulled a pistol from his sock, the chrome sparkling. All dropped; Marty crawled away. And Carter danced up there like some monster automaton: one leg up, then the other; the hammer up, then the gun.

Cops -- Carter's friends, I assumed -- filled the front doorway. Their eyes white and wide.

"Drop it, Carter."

"Do it dammit!"

"No joke now..."

Carter pranced up on the bar, swaying like a drugged circus bear then hopping like a rabid monkey, swinging his gun and bashing at his bald wig with the hammer, the blood seeping out and racing with sweat. The cops crouched.

I stood; I screamed waving hands. "Wait! Don't!" My lips moved but I didn't feel the words. I said: "I know him. He knows me. And I think... I can make him stop."

Carter lowered the hammer. He grimaced downward, at me.

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