

THE CASTAWAY LOUNGE
(an excerpt from the novel by Jon Boilard)

Applejack sits in the truck and watches Hoyt light his uncle's pond ablaze using matches and a gas can that's supposed to be for his lawnmower. The fire smokes and burns, somehow smells like birch bark, doesn't do much else but kill mosquitoes and catfish. A cold wind strips leaves from the trees across the way where early swamp maples bend and a picket fence snakes along the hillside.

Good enough, Applejack says through the open window.

The two men drive around with cigars, stop at the Conway Inn to drink beer and play cards with the Jablonski brothers, whom everybody in town calls the mental twins. Hoyt wins ten dollars and they go to the Castaway Lounge for amateur night, billed on the marquee as *five beautiful girls and one ugly one*. A new blonde named Suzanne sure isn't the ugly one. Applejack takes her out back behind the curtains and gives her a fistful of money. Once he's settled in the chair Suzanne makes a face and says he smells like her daddy's old mechanic shop. He tells her, yeah, he just got done wrenching on his MGB. His hands are so dirty she won't let him touch her and he wishes he'd showered. But she does a pretty good job to a couple songs by Hank Williams Jr. and by the last line of "Whiskey Bent and Hell Bound" she has dropped her bra, slipped down her panties to a tease, and turned, looking back at him over her shoulder.

Jesus fucking Christ, Applejack thinks. It's way more than he has paid for.

He gets cleaned up the next night and goes back and she's there again. She doesn't recognize him. He reminds her and she says she's sorry, must have been nervous or something.

They talk a bit and then she has to go on the main stage. Applejack orders a beer and sits up front. The waitress delivers him a foamy jelly jar. Even though it's only her second night, Suzanne moves around like a real professional and makes a lot of tips. After the set, Applejack buys her a drink, Jack Daniel's with a splash of tap water, and she settles in his lap.

She grew up in Bernardston. He knew a couple of her cousins from knocking heads with them in high school football. They played dirty and talked trash on the line. She tells Applejack she wants to be a teacher and plans to someday learn how at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. From behind the bar Stavros is giving them funny looks so she gets up and makes the rounds. When she returns Applejack asks if she wants to join him for something to eat after her shift.

A little grub, he says.

Twenty minutes later she goes to clock out, changes her clothes, and comes back.

Well, Applejack says. You sure look like a schoolteacher now.

Suzanne's eyes narrow, wondering is he fucking with her. She decides he isn't and they leave the club together, holding hands, and get into his car, parked beside the pines.

The BP Diner is open all night. It's mostly truckers in there at this hour. They get a booth and he orders biscuits and gravy. She orders a short stack of blueberry pancakes. She plays some of his favorite Elvis Presley on the jukebox and she about knows all the words. Boy Country sees Applejack from across the diner and despite the fact that he can barely keep his legs under him from drinking too much vodka, he comes over and tries to be some kind of joker. Applejack

slides across the vinyl seat and stands up out of the booth, puts his hand on Boy Country's shoulder and leads him a couple steps away.

I get it, he says, making a face like they're in cahoots over his secret plans for this babe. Boy Country smiles, puts his chin against his chest, looks at his shoes. Applejack turns Boy Country around, gives him a gentle shove to send him on his way. All right, Boy Country says as he heads out the door.

Nothing seems to faze Suzanne. She says she has an apartment in Bucktown but she doesn't want to go there just yet. She wants to show Applejack where the flying saucer picked her up the first time. It was Mark Wesoloski's cornfield, out past the drive-in movie theatre.

They park on the side of the road and Applejack can hear the shush of the river as she describes the experience to him. She doesn't remember everything because that's the way they wanted it, and what she does recall is like trying to piece together a dream. Things kind of move around, she says. She told her story on *Oprah Winfrey* and that's when her daddy threw her out of the house. She asks Applejack if he thinks she's crazy and he tells her he can think of worse things than crazy.

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Mike Mercier pours himself a cup of yesterday's coffee and makes a face as he drinks it. There's a woman sitting in a foldout chair near his desk. Her ankles are crossed and her purse is in her lap. Janice McElvey keeps the books for several local businesses. Mercier sees her in town, at the pharmacy, Frontier Service Station, the tailor, someplace almost every day. Mercier has known her and her ex since high school. Janice ended up leaving the man because he never did

change his violent ways, even after she birthed him two sons and a daughter. It's her daughter, Kristie, that Janice wants to talk about today.

Mercier sits behind his desk and regards her.

You sure I can't get you nothing, he says.

No, Janice says. Thank you.

He takes another sip, makes another face, and puts his cup on a stack of papers.

Janice shifts in her seat, nervous. Most folks get like that in the town's only police station, such as it is. They sit in a small open area that serves as the office. There's a bathroom in the corner and a drunk tank out back that'll sometimes play host to two or three guests, but this morning it's only Scotch Padykula, who is just waking up. He hollers every few minutes, mostly the incoherent ramblings of an inebriant.

Mercier waits for Scotch to finish a fresh rant and then turns toward Janice.

So, he says. Tell me about Kristie.

They call her Peanut. She's gone missing.

Missing.

Janice nods her head.

Since when, Mercier says.

I ain't seen her since May.

Mercier sneaks a glance at the calendar on the wall.

So a couple months already, he says.

That's right. Figured maybe she'd run off again and was giving her time.

How old is she now.

Seventeen next month.

Jesus Christ, Mercier says, smiling.

He remembers her crawling around in diapers and he says as much, but Janice makes it clear she isn't in the mood to reminisce just now. Mercier says of course and apologizes. He looks at his cup of coffee, oily black and cold. He won't drink it, figures he'll put on a new pot when Janice is gone. Or maybe cross the street to the pharmacy, get ham and eggs for a change, drink coffee somebody else brewed.

Janice clears her throat and leans forward, separates her ankles.

Mercier looks at her and sits up straight. His wood chair creaks.

She still working over to the pharmacy, he says.

Yeah.

Does she have a boyfriend or anything, Mercier says. I was just thinking.

I know what you were thinking hey.

Or maybe she's with Thomas, he says.

I already checked with him and her brothers.

Mercier heard that her ex-husband and the boys lived way up in the hills now. All right, he says.

She's gone missing, Janice says. And I think something bad happened.

Why do you think that.

It's just a feeling I got. Janice starts to cry.

Mercier thinks oh shit here we go. He gets up from his chair to find her a tissue. There's a box of them somewhere, and by the time he finds it under some papers next to the coffee

machine, he feels more like a damn fool than any kind of gentleman. He brings the box to her and she takes one out and he half sits on the corner of his desk. Janice blows her nose.

You all right now, Mercier says.

Yeah.

He waits for her to collect herself, figuring she's got more to add.

Janice clears her throat again and Mercier folds his arms across his chest.

You think it could be that flying saucer, Janice says. Like that took that other one and brought her back, she adds. I saw it on *Oprah*.

Mike Mercier closes his eyes, lets out a breath, and shakes his head. That's all anybody wants to talk about these days. Ever since that dancer went on the television and ran her mouth about getting abducted by aliens or some such nonsense. Now if your chicken coop is raided it must be Martians—never mind the fox turds and bloody feathers. Mercier opens his eyes again and Scotch lets loose a string of obscenities from the back, something about another stale bologna and cheese sandwich, an apple with a brown spot, something else about the Kingdom of Heaven. The lawman stands and apologizes to Janice, smiles, tells her to hold that thought.

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