

AN EVENING AT THE RITZ

Regis Grabowsky sat at the bar, cleaning out his wallet. Dean watched him, wiping glasses, wearing his white apron like some bartender in an old photograph. It was the last Thursday before Christmas. They were alone. The afternoon shift at the mill wouldn't let out until six-thirty. The neighborhood regulars wouldn't arrive until after dinnertime.

Regis sorted the photographs first. The picture of his wife Ginny was ten years old. So were the snapshots of his sons, muscular college men now, so different from the smiling, tow-headed boys in the school pictures from his worn billfold.

He made two piles - trash and keepers. He threw a small stack of bent business cards with his old title into the trash pile. Now that he was a vice president, he didn't need them. He paused, then fished one out and threw it on the keepers pile for perspective. He threw his country club membership card in with the trash. He knew that number by heart. On the keepers pile he heaped a small mountain of credit card and ATM receipts.

"It's like looking through one of those low-budget museums you see on the side of the road," he said, staring at a hundred-dollar bill he held in both hands. "You know-Bob's Exxon and Indian Museum? Something like that. The shithouse life of Regis Grabowsky."

"Uh oh," Dean said, "get out your handkerchiefs."

Regis smiled.

"The boys coming home for the holidays?" Dean asked.

"Nope," Regis replied staring at the pile of yellow credit card receipts. "Bobby's out West skiing with a college buddy's family. Jeff's in Florida on some fraternity thing."

"Lifestyles of the rich and famous," Dean said.

"Yeah," Regis snorted. "I raised a couple of playboys."

"It's a lot different from when we were growing up," Dean offered.

"Yeah," Regis chuckled, examining Ben Franklin's image on the hundred-dollar bill.

"Real different."

Dean shrugged and turned his attention to dusting the top shelf bottles and the neon Iron City Beer sign behind him. The silence was broken as a young couple entered the bar. They hesitated, a light dusting of snow clinging to their coats and hair. Behind them through the open door Regis could see the snow falling steadily. Most of it fell straight down, but some of it, carried by a gentle updraft, floated skyward.

"Well, come in if you're gonna," Dean growled.

Regis smiled into his beer, knowing Dean was just a big softie.

"Is this a hotel?" the young man asked. In his hand he held an overnight bag. The door closed gently behind him.

"We don't let rooms," Dean replied gruffly.

“The sign says Ritz Hotel,” the boy said.

“I know,” Dean replied, “but we don’t let rooms.”

"Are you full?" the girl asked.

"No," Dean replied, losing his patience. "This is a bar, we don't rent rooms."

"You don’t have any rooms?" the young man asked again.

Dean's face reddened.

"We have one room, always have. Never let it out," Dean said. He crossed his arms.

The young couple stared at him blankly.

"It’s there from the old days," Regis said. "To get around the blue laws against serving liquor on Sundays."

The girl looked at the two men as if they were touched. The young man nodded as though he only half-understood. His hair was curly and unkempt, shaved high and close around his temples. He was tall and thin with the face of a child. The girl wore his college letterman jacket. It was so big on her she almost disappeared in it. Her long hair was pulled back in a ponytail, revealing her fine, angular face. Her skin was almost white. She seemed to shine standing next to the dark young man.

They reminded Regis of the friends his sons brought with them from college on their infrequent visits home. They had an air of a world completely removed from the hollows and

the steel mills.

"We can't stay here but we can get a beer on Sunday. Right?" the girl asked.

"Look, honey," Dean said, "you can get a beer anywhere on Sunday nowadays. They changed the law."

"I understand," she replied, smiling impatiently. "It just doesn't make sense."

"Dean's not good at making sense," Regis said.

"Look," Dean said, softening up a bit, "there's one of them Knight's Inns by the highway. I can give you directions if you want."

"How much are rooms there?" the young man asked.

Dean shrugged and looked at Regis.

"Don't look at me," Regis said. "It's not like I'm a regular over there."

"Probably thirty bucks a night," Dean said.

The couple considered their options. The boy whispered something to the girl. Regis watched as she listened. When she replied, she gently took his hand in hers. He thought of his own sons and remembered how tender he and Ginny were so long ago. A sudden sense of sadness overcame him watching the boy and girl standing at the end of the bar.

He thought of the snow falling silently outside. It would fall in the hollows and on the hills, covering the road and the banks of McLaughlin Run, stained orange by the acid run-off from the abandoned mines. The snow would fall on the steel mill and the chemical plant on the

other side of town. And it would fall, too, on the wide lawn and the shingle roof of his five bedroom colonial house in the subdivision on the hill where Ginny was probably wondering why he was late.

"Look," Dean said to the kids, "have a beer while you think things out. It's on me."

"Could I have a water please?" the girl asked, almost apologetically.

"Sure, whatever," Dean replied. He drew a drought from the tap and slid it down the length of the bar to where the young couple sat. The young man smiled in appreciation of Dean's performance. Dean walked the girl's water to her. Sitting at the end of the long bar in the dark, brownish light of the room, the two of them looked impossibly small.

Regis watched them and wondered who they were. The girl hung the letterman jacket she'd been wearing on a peg. The leather was shiny and new. He thought of his sons' high school letter jackets that hung in the hall closet at home. They didn't wear them anymore. They were college men, they'd told him, college men don't wear high school letter jackets. Their mother had taken to wearing them to do outside work.

The young man sat up on his barstool, leaning toward Regis and Dean.

"We could pay you twenty dollars to stay in the room upstairs," he said.

"Look, you can't stay here," Dean said. "This ain't a hotel."

"Listen, I'll loan you the money for the motel, okay?" Regis interrupted, losing his

patience all of a sudden.

"We couldn't," said the young girl.

"Yes you can," he replied. "It ain't like it's a thousand bucks."

The young man looked at the girl.

"Give me your address then, so we can pay you back," she said.

"You don't have to," he replied.

"We want to," she said. "You're very kind."

"Yeah, whatever," he replied, looking downward and fumbling with the receipts piled on the bar in front of him.

By the time they stepped outside, about half a foot of snow had fallen. Dean stood at the front door as Regis and the young couple stepped onto the parking lot.

The snow fell without a sound, illuminated in the street lamp like moths circling the light on summer evenings. Large, sweet flakes stuck to their coats and in their hair.

The "Drink 7-Up" sign above the door flickered as Dean turned it on. Under the soft drink logo the words "The Ritz Hotel" were painted in faded block letters. A car passed on the road moving slowly, the snow a muffled crunch under its tires.

The boy wiped the snow off a ratty-looking two-seater sports car. It was the only other car in the small lot besides Regis' Buick. Regis gave the girl directions to the motel and pulled

the one hundred-dollar bill from his billfold, which he folded over several times before pressing it into her hand and turning toward his car.

"You didn't give me your address," she called after him.

"Forget it," he replied, his back to her.

"Give me a business card then" she insisted, making her way to where he stood.

Regis hesitated, then pulled out his billfold again and handed her one of his new cards.

She held it in both hands.

"Regis," she said. "King."

"Yeah," he replied, unsure of what to say

"I bet your kids think you're a pretty good dad," she said.

"Eh, I don't know," he muttered.

"No," she said, "I bet they do."

"Yeah, well," he replied.

She smiled then suddenly kissed him gently on the cheek before turning away.

"Be careful, with the roads and all," he called after her.

The car pulled away, the snow crunching under its tires. Dean asked Regis if he was all right.

"Yeah," he replied. "Goodnight," he said, though Dean had already headed back inside.

He stood alone, idly fumbling the coins in his pocket, looking up at the snow-covered trees clinging to the steep hillside. His feet were cold. The snow was melting through the soles of his black tassel loafers. He tried to remember the words of the poem they'd made them read in high school about the man and his horse stopping in the woods, but he couldn't remember.

Across the road and the creek that flowed alongside it, the pines on the hill were weighed down with snow. The woods were silent and beautiful, covered by the white blanket. As children he and Dean had romped among those trees playing cowboys and Indians. They'd stood lookout for their fathers trudging home from the mill with their lunch pails in their hands, their heavy work boots dragging on the macadam. The men always stopped at the Ritz for a shot and a beer, even when they worked the graveyard shift and got off at 9:00 a.m.

Regis thought of his big empty house up on Rolling Meadow Road, and of its wide, bare lawn. The saplings he had planted there would resemble the trees on the hill in a hundred years perhaps. It seemed he'd traveled a thousand miles since he was a boy growing up in the row house within walking distance of the mill and the mine. Instead he had traversed only three miles from the hollow to the subdivision up on the hill with its vinyl siding, its manicured lawns and Buick sedans.

For some reason, he wanted to wade across the creek like he and Dean had when they were kids and climb the hill and knock the snow from the pines. Instead, he stood in the parking lot watching the snow gently cover the tire tracks left by the young couple's car. The

large flakes continued to fall, filling the deep tire tracks. In twenty minutes they would be completely covered over, erasing all evidence that they had been there at all.