

Long Drive to Fort Buffalo

Colin Sweets, March 2020

Dear in the distance... Please forgive the seized kees on Mick's old Smith-Corona – in particular the letter that's sometimes a vowel. I'm writing this as I bide the hours before night falls, so's I can get maself on the road nice and safe. I'm fitting to pare down to just the essentials, and leaving the rest to the land. It's a long drive up to Fort Buffalo, but it's time well-spent. And besides, what have I got besides truck loads of time? Heck, even before it all went down, I reckon I had time for a night so nice as these ones have been. Course, nights so nice didn't come around so often then. Thing is, apart from the night itself, things don't appear all that different after dark. Maebe that's what I like about it – I can understand it better. U were alwase so good at explaining to me the things I couldn't understand. I've needed u here to explain to me how come all this happened. I can't sleep without knowing. But then, at least I don't mind the night. The moon still comes along, the critters still scatter, and the sweet wind still drags the lake into the boardwalk where folks wouldn't be out walking n-e-wae.

The onlee difference at night is the stars stand out just a little better, just slightlee more crisp against the healing black. And still onlee the rarest moments bring the sound of roaring motors, and when thei do, u watch with ur guard up, wondering who on god's broken earth it could be. Heck, I felt the same when I was driving reefers long-distance. I had the business of a huge, barbaric rig – that told the night drivers who I was. But I'd often sit up in that nest, the insomniacs jibber-jabbering over CB, and wonder to maself who the other lonelee drivers were down there, and what could be pushing them along at such an hour. Of course, I don't drive something so imposing no more – can't get the fridges to run after all, and driving one of them is just inviting trouble. No, me, I drive – that is, when I do drive, it's a crude flatbed with wood panels I afixed maself, and no one ever has reason to assume but that I'm taking back home what I rightlee found. We don't look at that as asking for trouble, that's just surviving, and dang if survival ain't a worthwhile goal.

Other thing is it's all too e-z to frig with potential companee come nosing around ur truck. To give an example, old Mick (u remember ma brother Mick don't u?). He made it through the woods just like I did, and his innate sense for getting through was alwase better than mine. We sort of reconnected, and he told me all about how he was doing what he had to do to survive. Seems to me, his fate helped set the bar for our current thieves' code. So, Mick was coming back from Green Rock with 50 cases of Evian – taken straight from the shipment, dated clear before the incident, safe to drink. That was Mick's water, he went for it, he earned it. But some dudes stopped him on the highwae, threatened him with shotguns and demanded he hand it over. As Mick told it, he kept his cool – and if I knew him as I

think I did, I bet he was cooler than a big glug of Evian in the times before u had to check the date – and he told those toughs, “U can take all the water, or's u can just take some of it, but u should know I already cracked the seals on all the bottles and replaced half of them with water from the taps.” As u know, we don't mess around with the water from the taps – not after seeing what it can do.

Their leader sez to Mick, “How come u'd go and waste half ur good water?”

And Mick sez, “So's I can protect the good half against the likes of u.”

And the leader sez, “Well, maebe I'll just kill u if u won't sae what's the good half.”

Mick sez, “Oh, u'll kill me with ur big mean guns, I guess?”

The dude sez, “It wouldn't be the first time.”

So, now old Mick's getting savvi to this fella. He sez, “So, u've killed for before. Well, tell me something, skip. When u killed dudes in the past, how'd u feel after?”

The dude sez, “Felt nothing.”

And Mick sez, “Besides thirstee. Right?”

Sure enough, didn't Mick drive off with his 50 cases of water, not onlee untarnished, but seals unbroken too. The idiots never even thought to take a closer look. Instead thei just went in the other direction, their guns limper than leftover spaghetti. That tale's the stuff of legend round here. I reckon it's how Mick helped set the bar for who u do and don't take pokes at when u're driving the ashen stretch between long forgotten towns. Course, Mick bit it a few months later when he'd gotten cockee enough to steal hooch from a camp that, let's face it, for sure needed it more than he did. I found him in the brush near the river, just down from where I happened onto his truck one afternoon. He was already bug-ridden. That's how else u frig with troublemakers – u shoot 'em point blank. I pushed his truck into the woods. It was a nice one but I can't be seen driving nothing from someone with all those enemies. I did take some skoal from his glove-box, and this here tipe-writer. Seemed someone should have it, even if it sticks.

But I'll admit, I ain't been lili white. Survival can't be all decent, in these times. It's blotched and stained with the sins of a man desperate not to slide n-e further down the food chain. Not to sae that I was such an angel before the bad water neither. I never told u about it so's u wouldn't worree, but I more than sometimes would allow third partee business out of the back of ma rig – that's not uncommon in the game – u give a minimal effort to help some working joe conduct his business, and u're compensated fair. No, the government's not involved, but that won't kill 'em. Course, now we know what'll kill 'em. And u might look at ma life and see that the dase of suits calling shots and little old me earning life on the books wasn't half as honest as ma current operation. Couldn't be simpler: I drive out to an agreed-upon destination, no hiding it from no cops or whatever, and I load what one dude's got in

his truck into the back of mine, and there's a handshake between us, and on we go. That's mostlee how it happens, I mean. When I'm moving regular provisions, sure, it's a friendlee transaction. Tonight, unfortunatelee, it's a little more complicated.

Tonight, it's the good stuff. U might not believe it if I told u, but it's going to be ma ticket to u again. It's not clean water, I got enough of that for a lifetime – at least a short lifetime, and that's the onlee kind I've seen round here. It's not guns or fuel or dope. Nope, it's the stuff we've all been clamoring for since the beginning. And when I section off and market the portion I don't keep, I'll run this town. Heck, I'll run all these towns. There won't be a shooter sharp enough to nail ma high tower. Course, u understand, the high stakes mean I can't be quite so cordial, on account of ma survival and all. The fella I got coming into Fort Buffalo thinks I can pae him what it's worth, but I can't. So, alas, I'll have to pae him in lead. Shame, but I guess old Mick would be proud. Besides, I'm just doing it so's I can come and find u. It's a risk, sure, but it's worth it to hear ur voice and feel something like normal again. And heck, I need u to explain to me how come all this happened. I've been so lost without u.

It's a long drive up to Fort Buffalo but it's good cause I've got some thinking to do. Speaking of Mick, I've got to come up with some plan in case I should get pressed bi n-e-one on the wae back. Mick was so good at coming up with stuff quick, but I tend to need a little thinking ahead. I've got lots of time to mull it over, and no distractions but the wonder of other lonelee drivers, just everee so often fading in and out of the night. Take that time with Mick and the toughs and the cases of Evian: he lied and told 'em he'd meddled with half the water, so's thei wouldn't know what part was ok. I'm not going all this wae for water, it's higher demand product than that, trust me, but I need a similar lie to get me out of trouble should n-e-one come give me guff.

Looks like dusk is setting in and, man, she's something of a beaut. I won't sae I like things better now, it's viscious now, but heck, if there ain't a silver-lining in everee rain cloud. We're well past the rain clouds now, and life goes on, that is if u're up for it. It's quieter, and some like it quieter. There's no suits making calls, and some like that better too. I miss ma brother Mick, I'll give u that much for free. And I miss some other good people, the kind of people u can learn from and look up to. And I miss the unpreciousness of a free drink of water, and simple chats with strangers that don't have their guns at the readee. I miss when the things we've got to do were things we could do simplee. And I miss u most, with ur all the time fretting about me and ur hair like an impossible morning. All I can do is hope u're still out there. All else, I can leave it behind – to see things fade is the cost of surviving, and I'm driving out to Fort Buffalo tonight to survive, goddamnit... But I'm also doing it to get to u.

It's looking about dark enough now that I can hit the road. Wish me luck with the trigger. U know I was never so great at hitting ma target. And wish me luck with ma lie, in case I should need it.

Never was much for that neither. I'm soore for this mess, but all our technologic out here's been dead for months and, as u know, ma handwriting's never been n-e good. If this letter finds u sooner than I do, just know I'm coming fast as I can. We're going to survive, u and me. And we can lie us in the flatbed and look at them stars and u can tell me how come all this happened, so's I can finalee get some sleep at night. When I'm next to u's when I'll love the night for real. U and me, lost at last in the same place, getting through it all together. U and me, dear in the distance. Just u and me.