

A DAY IN A LIFE

The vibration of a big rig, the hard repetitive thud/smacks of the rubber hitting the uneven concrete separations on the interstate, pulsed through the earth to the stools and seats in the restaurant. It was enough to remind him of the softer click/clack sound steel wheels of rail cars rolling along had made before the tracks had been welded together.

The restaurant was visible on the side road that ran parallel to the interstate. Kirk could tell the truck was big, heavy and moving fast. The pipes, too loud for a local rig, blew a well tuned harmony in a timbre that held a melancholy sound as it faded in the distance.

Airy Metta's was a roadside diner just off the interstate, twenty miles east of the last of the sprawling subdivisions that surrounded the box canyon city. It was only open for breakfast and lunch seven days a week until 2 PM. Then it was closed. The diner served as a meeting place for the locals to conduct business in an informal manner, and truckers knew it as a good place to get a cheap, decent and filling meal. For those lucky enough to discover it by accident, it was a diner without all the pretensions that had become the hallmark of current roadside cuisine and ambiance. It was worth the drive.

Fred was the cook and owner. Fred kept a 44 wheel gun. The grip poked out from under his apron. Kirk also knew that there was a loaded over-and-under in the store room, just in case. It might have been the 21st century, but this far out from the city the law took its time getting to places like Airy Metta's. Things were just a bit different out here and a trooper's cruiser was a rare site.

Gloria, who had worked there for as long as the earth rotated on its own axis, was about to put Kirk's breakfast on his tab, which he paid on an irregular basis. She had

warned him that Fred was getting a bit annoyed with her generosity on his buck. “Kirk, things are kinda tight,” she said as Fred stared at her. Kirk always paid, eventually, when his retirement check finally arrived. Things were tight for the government, and he was a witness to that. Even though the money was guaranteed, she couldn’t keep putting his breakfast on the tab. Today might be different.

“I’ll have a short term assignment soon,” he said to her. He liked to call part-time work ‘assignments’. It made him feel better. It was a throw back to his past when he did have assignments, when he was younger and “perky” and not “so over qualified” as the HR managers would phrase it, hiding their desire for a younger person who wouldn’t increase the company’s insurance costs, and would do whatever they were told to do - no questions asked. It was the legal manner of really stating that he was too old for any job he applied for. Of course the other manner of rejecting his attempts at gainful employment was to ignore the application completely.

Kirk wasn’t desperate but he wasn’t happy either. The ‘little’ he did collect from social security and his pension, when it did arrive, kept him alive in a rather decent manner. But he spent most of it on rent, books, fuel, and food and not necessarily in that order.

Yep, it sucked getting old in an economy and political system on the skids. Then, as he was thinking about that a bit more and not paying attention, he bit into his lip chewing a piece of toast. Butter was now running down his lip to his chin. He wiped the butter from his face. That hurt. I must look like an old fool.

He continued to reflect upon his past. He remembered that day in his civics class, realizing the country had been founded by rich men for the benefit of rich landowners and merchant men. Universal suffrage was a political maneuver that allowed them to tax everybody, pretending that the people really had a say in the government. He laughed to himself, remembering how his favorite novel character Milo Minderbinder was prescient when he phrased all activity was all done in the name of the syndicate, and everybody

was part of it. It benefited everybody. What was there to complain about? Joseph Heller nailed the real world on the head. What was it about the WWII writers? They saw things that most others appeared to be blind to. No one ever addressed that in any depth as far as he ever knew. Or those that did were eliminated or ignored, thinking of Chomsky and Vidal.

Though Kirk had that figured out early on in life, he still played the game. What else was there to do, become a martyr? For what? He found a way to work within the system on his own terms, to a degree. *We can bomb the shit out of a country, and then use our tax dollars to rebuild their infrastructure, hospitals, schools and medical facilities but we can't do that for the people who pay for it - who died for it? Something was very wrong with this picture, he thought, all for the syndicate.* He wasn't an academician; he was an "event planner." *They* actually categorized him as that for his title. *Forget it, he thought.*

He reflected upon the fate of others. What was there to complain about now? Not having a decent job especially for someone who wanted to work, or medical coverage, or a decent place to live was reason enough. However, that led to the fact that he had worked all his life helping to support the M.I.C. He didn't mind the work. He was allowed freedom of action. In fact if he didn't have to work he thought he'd go crazy with boredom. Maybe he'd get a call for an easy one, just something to do with the thrill of the hunt.

He sat on the stool, slightly hunched over his coffee, facing the grill which was half filled with hashed browned potatoes. His toast, over buttered, was smeared with the runoff from the eggs done over light. He watched as Fred scrambled two eggs done well with an order of bacon, crisp, for a rather large someone in a booth at the very far end. His back was to the rest of the place. Something about the body shape and the droop of his shoulders looked familiar. Kirk couldn't tell, and really didn't care, so he let it drop as the aroma of a full breakfast made him think back a few years to a better time.

He looked up. Gloria was staring at him. It was time to go. He actually had the money he owed Fred. He left it with the check - a twenty under the plate sticking out so Fred could see it too. He should be even or close to it with that.

That gave him some time to sit there, just a bit more.

“Thanks Kirk,” she said in all sincerity. It hurt her to see him like this. She had known him when he was on top of his world. *At least he keeps fighting* she thought. *He’s no quitter.*

“Thanks Gloria,” he replied meaning every word. She was a god-send, and a friend with benefits, at times when either one needed it. Kirk turned to Fred, “And thanks Fred, I appreciate your patience.”

“Yeah don’t mention it. See you tomorrow.” The ‘see you tomorrow’ was Fred’s manner of saying you’re up to date and you’re welcome back.

“I may be out of town for a few days. See you, maybe later,” said Kirk hoping a quick pick-up job would come through. He fooled no one, though he really was waiting for *that* call. He was always waiting for *that* call. But did he really want to go back in, even on assignment? That thought had been in and out of his mind for a while as he analyzed what he did in the past, as he had never actually done before. Back then he was too busy planning and carrying out the events that had been requested.

Upon his exit interview from the agency he worked for, the head of medical told him that those in his line of work had a high rate of suicide when they came to realize that the political kool-aid they swallowed was not all that it was cracked up to be. Kirk told her, “I had that figured out in grammar school. I’m simply working a skill I am gifted with to the best of my ability. And my good doctor, most importantly, I am covered by the very system.” He picked his coat jacket off the back of the chair, shook her hand and left. She never called him back in, but he knew others had been for deeper

psych reviews. Then again maybe that was why he was retired. *Maybe I'm too cold for them. What a joke, me too cold.*

Kirk left the diner and turned right outside the parking lot noting one ratty brown truck parked there. *Must belong to the guy in the booth, the plates are local.*

Walking up the hill on the sidewalk to the town, Kirk viewed both sides of the two lane road which were guarded by walls of cypress. The side closest to the interstate was populated by a thin line of trees and the highway could be seen through in places. The other side, the side with the paved walkway on his right, was thick with trees and shrubs that arched up and back to a ridge top that was now bare from the last fires. The fire had stopped at the ridge as if it had run into a wall.

The residential area acted as a defacto buffer against the desert winds and fires, surrounded the town center and extended outward, in no discernibly planned manner. Most houses were in a moderately decent state of disrepair. Kirk learned from some of the residents the most egregious issues were attended to first. And even in the town center it was rare to see fresh paint on any wood. Outposts, official or otherwise, were the last to feel the largess of the government, especially in rough economic times. And retired government workers were the first to have their payments lost, misplaced or mistakenly terminated.

The well-worn path which paralleled the sidewalk ended just before Kirk entered the town proper where he rented a small clean 2 bedroom apartment on a street behind the post office. For some reason the vibration of the trucks couldn't be felt as he walked. Only when he was sitting on a fixed seat, a bench, or in bed would the pulse carry through to his feet or body.

The town center was internally horseshoed by the asphalt road that outlined all the office, business and post office buildings leading to a public parking lot. The center section was a plot of brown, poorly watered grass, or weeds or some type of growth. The

road went nowhere other than giving access to various parts the residential areas. The horseshoe led back to the road out of town. It was just a turn around.

With that he turned North West and from this higher elevation viewed the brown-blue, smog incrustated hills of LA that acted as a temporary barrier - although not an effective one against the eastward winds that would push the foul air toward the cities in the east. Much of the pollution came from across the ocean on the tradewinds. It was a one way trade. The region's legal limit of pollution would soon be exceeded to which there was no possible response. However a response was called for. Instead of addressing the actual origins of the pollution, more legislation was enacted for those urban areas.

Others welcomed what they believed and had faith in: the combined knowledge of bureaucrats in the capital. Kirk laughed to himself at that thought. Most people had no clue that the majority of the legislators had little to no technical expertise and that most were the puppets of the highest paying interest, only bowing to the supposed power of the people during election times - whereupon all the machinery of the state came into play, reinforcing the 'freedom' and 'best country in the world' propaganda. And the circus would come to town. The big screens touted free admission to all citizens as long as you paid your poll tax and had the proper ID, thought Kirk.

"I must be going crazy. I talk to myself all the time," he said.

This town served as a quasi-administrative point for the county and the state. It was close to the desert and had the feel of an outpost, the last stop before no-man's land. The offices were barely staffed and open a few hours each day during the week.

It was clean but not sharp. The paint on the buildings was faded, and that included the government offices.

He strolled past the post office. He headed toward the small library to read the paper, get his email and who knows, strike up a conversation with someone while he waited for that call. The building had a bench in the front.

He walked in, looked around, there was no one there. *Too early* he figured. He waved to the librarian who was on her cell, scanned the headlines on the paper, and left. “Oh well no one to talk to, now what?” he said to the air as he headed for the bench out front. He sat down on the bench and slid to a slouch forward, his feet acting as brakes.

Feet extended in that fashion, Kirk surveyed this place, his current home town, *the last location before civilization’s end. Or, conversely, the first outpost you come to, letting you know that you’re close to you are almost safe.* “Ha,” he said to no one.

Who stays here? The answer was staring at him in the face. A fat chocolate tabby cat was cleaning itself next to the park bench. It stopped its ablutions for two or three seconds and gave him a glance when he sat down. It didn’t run away.

“Hello puss,” he said. He looked at his phone to see what time it was, not that it mattered, he wasn’t going anywhere. Gloria had also let him charge his phone while he ate. *She was a good egg.* He smiled at the thought.

‘Good egg’, the thought called up a memory of when he was about thirteen. He remembered being in a foul mood when he woke-up that morning, and hating the idea of going to school. He had been embarrassed. That mental crap stayed with him all his life. He had been put back in a lower reading group due to surgery he had undergone the year before. It was brain surgery, and back then the methods of operation consisted of ether, pick axes and dynamite, or so it felt to a kid. They never discovered why he became paralyzed. It lasted for a time, came and went, and then never reappeared. All he knew was that the experience had left him not right in the thinking department with a weaker dominant right side. On top of that, his math skills were terrible and his vision was never

good after that. The vision issue was correctable but back then there was no way he was going to wear coke bottle lenses with those awful thick black frames.

He shook his head remembering the effects of his foolish pride. Pride equated with poor grades. Only the kiss-asses and the cute budding girls sat in front to flirt with the teachers. Kirk would pretend to get sick the day before the eye exam and memorize the eye chart in the nurse's office. *What a jerk I was, a prideful jerk.*

But back to that Tuesday morning: he remembered walking down the 13 steps and thinking, *I'm going to get mom.* He was in a real ornery mood for no reason his young mind could figure. He wondered, why do this? The kitchen was a right turn after one step at the foot of the stairs. He pivoted into the door opening and just started berating and trashing her.

There was no reason or maybe there was a test that day or maybe it was Tuesday. Yes it was a Tuesday and Tuesday was Boy Scouts. Troop Three was brutal especially if the scout was short, young, and not part of the 'in' gang. Kirk would start to steel himself for the weekly ordeal every Tuesday morning. The scout master was known to chase the boys through the woods on camping trips with a belt for any infraction. The scout master would also beat his two sons with abandon. "Makes men out of them," was his answer to anyone who questioned his actions or even looked at him askance. Complaints and pleas fell on deaf ears. Both the scout master and the assistant thought it was rather amusing to watch their sons dish it out to these young newcomers from the big city.

His mom was cooking bacon and eggs in a large steel frying pan. The pan was big enough to hold four full-sized pancakes. He and three of his sibs would be leaving for school at roughly the same time. The two others were too little to be part of this morning ritual and were probably still asleep. He kept taunting her. Mom was about to crack another egg into the pan. From across the room instead of cooking it, she pivoted and pitched it at him.

Tumbling in midair the egg seemed to fly in slow motion. Flip, flip, flip, flip, straight at him it flew and this is what he remembered most, that seemingly slow motion tumble that actually took only a second or two to hit.

Mom had a good arm. She had beamed him a number of times with her missiles. She was especially good with a moving target as he remembered. And Dad, well Dad had been a hole-puncher with a rifle. Kirk always assumed he must have inherited those skills. His previous job 'Event Planner', the details of which were classified even to this day, capitalized on that almost innate skill that he honed it, making him one of the best. Since he was a natural with certain tools of a trade dealing in precision, with one shot opportunities, he was much sought after. And now was out to pasture and probably forgotten. *Maybe that was a good thing.*

This time, as quick as he could, he moved his head out of the potential impact zone, which would have been dead center - right between his eyes. He heard the egg crack and splatter against the wall socket behind his head, and then start to sputter and smoke. Shorting electrical wires had a specific odor.

He remembered running downstairs to where the circuit breakers were located, and quickly turning off the power to that part of the kitchen. He was lucky, the rooms and circuit sections were listed. That got him grounded for a week, and worse, in his room, solitary. Kirk cleaned up the scorch marks on the wall socket to hide the evidence without being told to. He touched the wall to see if it was warm, put his ear to the wall to detect any untoward sounds and inhaled deeply to detect any smoke. It smelled bad but that could be explained as a short that happened due to something being splashed. Mom never said anything to Dad.

He got grounded. Kirk hated that.

Getting grounded was the most maddening form of punishment. Getting hit was a lot easier to deal with. A whack, or three, or five, got it over with, done, drop a few tears

and you were free to go. Sometimes a nasty chore, like dishes for a week, or clean the garbage cans or mowing the lawn, would be added to the punishment. It was a form of internal community service, though it was never called that.

He had to laugh and wonder. *It was a miracle his parents let him and the others live. His Mom's answer to 5 boys who were always causing trouble* was a simple request. One day she lined them up in front of her in a rough semicircle, looked at all of them and said, "Please, I'm tired of people coming to the door reporting your asinine behavior. Please, you're not stupid. Quit getting caught." And as a reminder of worse she added, "I hate to tell your dad, you know that."

Her plea worked. It got them all thinking a bit. And out of consideration for her, and the realization that she realized they weren't really going to stop being boys, and the fact that eventually Dad would get wind of their antics, they actually backed down some. Thinking about it today, remembering how he had been called 'chicken' more than a few times, and how that took standing up with that mind set. A strong sense of self-preservation stayed with him all his life and paid dividends. Kirk realized his Mom's frank discussion may have saved them from becoming like many others in the neighborhood, dead-end jobs, or dead, in jail, addicts, or caught/uncovered.

However, and he laughed aloud at the memory, it still did not prevent him from undertaking really dumb "projects". Kirk remembered he would be into something stupid like once painting 'God Is Dead' on the church wall and thinking what a dumb-assed thing to do, but did it anyway. After he and his two buddies did that late on a Saturday night, only then did he think of the consequences. Mom will be so pissed and Dad, I might as well just hand him a gun. So instead of talking about his exploits, which was his usual MO in school, he kept his mouth shut but never did anything like that again.

Well, not completely. He spray-painted on the side of the local sweet shop that "Charlie was a Christian" to see what response that would elicit. The sweet shop was directly across from the school. Charlie, the owner of the sweet shop, and not a Christian,

but was a pretty fair and decent person. Kirk sipped on his morning coke and munched on an apple pie and took notice as people shook their heads, pointed to the spray job, and just laughed.

The principle of the school, Mr. M. was outside one day looking at the spray job on the wall of the sweet shop. He never wore sun glasses and used his hand to shield his eyes from the glare of the sun. Kirk was standing behind him watching and wondering what Mr. M would say. Mr. M had a lot to say about most things.

Mr. M turned to give him a knowing and very dirty look. Mr. M then repeated something Mark Twain had said about people keeping secrets as long as all the others involved were dead. He was about to say something else. Mr. M shook his head and walked back into his office. There was an outside bell so Mr. M could hear the office phone when he was making his rounds of the grounds. It was ringing. Saved by the bell?

The phone was ringing.

His phone was ringing. It woke him from his day dream with a startle and a jump. He saw the name ID. It wasn't blocked. He smiled to himself and thought they must be hard up, but only said, "Hello Lautz. It's been a while." He knew Lautz would be in the vicinity, maybe even watching him. He reached into his jacket pocket and took the tool of his past trade off safety. Be prepared.

"No need to do that," said Lautz. "If that were my aim, you'd never have heard the shot."

Kirk grinned at the pun. It also let him know Lautz was near. Good or bad, this would be a fair exchange, at least in the beginning. He was sure this was not a social visit. He looked around for the unobvious obvious. The lights flashed on an old, slightly rusted and faded, almost chalk-like brown, Toyota 4 Runner. He didn't get up. *If it was a snake it would have bit me.*

A few more trucks could be felt hitting the concrete slabs and the hum/whine of their tires on the interstate could be heard as he sat there on the bench. “I wonder where they’re going,” he said aloud. The cat was still there cleaning itself and looked up if only for a few seconds when he spoke. The thought of going, again, anywhere...and then Kirk realized he liked where he was for everything it was and especially for what it was not. He got up, waved, palms up to the Toyota, bowed a slight bow, and walked away.

The End