

Last Call

by Clifford Garstang

It's last call for the Class of 2001, their five-year reunion drawing to a close, and Brenner, in his standard t-shirt and holey jeans, has just arrived. Dora won't be there, but he's come all the same. Elbowing his way to the bar, he bumps big Sean's arm. Beer sloshes on the ex-fullback's boots.

Sean glares at him. Brenner remembers Sean—a bully who headed into the Marines after graduation—but there's no sign Sean remembers him. Why would he? Sean's folks have a big-ass house across from the football field. School wasn't Brenner's thing, all that rah-rah bullshit. He's the same cipher he always was, runt offspring of no-account parents.

Brenner downs a whiskey, mutters, "Sorry," and reaches for his beer. Sean's sledgehammer hand pins Brenner's wrist to the bar.

"I said I was sorry, Chuckles," says Brenner.

The heel of Sean's other hand blasts Brenner's chin, and he crumples to the tavern floor. Sean brushes his palms on his camouflage jacket, and pushes outside. Brenner peers at the faces spinning above him. One comes close, someone familiar, a guy he used to know, arms reaching out, pulling him up.

"Jesus, what was that about?" asks Jason.

Brenner has heard that Jason is home for the summer, having dropped out of college for the third time. They used to hang out some, get high, in the old days.

Brenner turns, jaw on fire, sees no sign of the bigger man. "Sean's still an asshole," he says. "Iraq didn't change shit."

Nothing's the way it was supposed to be. Brenner has a kid he rarely sees. Dora wouldn't marry him, and the only thing they talk about now is child support. Jason says his folks split up and his dad moved in with some girl who's barely out of high school.

Jason grabs a twelve-pack at the 7-11 on Frontier Drive. They pull to the side of a dark road and sit in Brenner's pickup, drinking and

smoking a joint, reliving old times. Brenner wishes he had a picture of the kid to show Jason. He rubs his wrist. It's bad news. He works construction when he can, plays bass in a Ramones cover band; even if his wrist isn't broken it'll hurt like hell.

"What a jerk," Brenner says, jaw throbbing. He tastes blood. He thinks a tooth is loose.

"Remember when he beat the crap out of that band geek? What's his name? Toby?" Jason opens another beer.

"Grade A, number one asshole," Brenner says.

A bulky guy in a camouflage jacket staggers past on the gravel shoulder and they both watch. Brenner's head spins from the beer and the dope.

"Hey, that him?" Jason points to the guy. "He thinks that jacket makes him somebody. Fuckin' Marines."

"He was a prick then and he's a prick now."

Brenner chugs his beer and tosses the can out the window. He jams the pickup into gear. Tires spin in the gravel and the truck swerves when the rubber grabs the road. Brenner stomps on the accelerator. The engine whines. Sean's in his sights.

"Teach him a lesson," Brenner says, ready to swerve at the last second, put the fear of God into that bastard.

"Jesus," says Jason. "No!" He grabs the wheel.

Brenner steers left; no time to explain it's a joke.

He smacked into a buck once, nearly totaled his mom's Cavalier. The impact is like that, maybe louder. Blood spatters the windshield.

As they speed into the dark, Brenner pounds on the dash. What has he done? He didn't mean to hit the guy, just wanted to scare him. Jason sticks his head out the window and looks back.

"It's not him," he shouts. "I don't think it's him. What if it's not him?"

Brenner drives faster, he can't think, and Jason vomits onto the floor of the truck.

"You're crazy," Jason yells. "Go back! I think you killed him."

Brenner runs a stop sign and then another, Jason shouting at him to go back, but when he gets to the light at Lee Highway just before the Interstate, he stops.

"This is bullshit," says Jason. He jumps out of the truck and runs.

"Good riddance," Brenner mutters. It wasn't his fault, anyway. It was an accident. Was it Sean? He's pretty sure it was. "The asshole deserved it."

He drives on. The smell of Jason's vomit is awful, like a skunk in the road, snaking down his throat, and his own stomach turns, but he opens the window and lets cool air batter his face. Then it's not so bad. He drinks more beer and that helps, too. He keeps driving.

He's on the edge of town, not far from Dora's place. He hasn't been there in a while. He stops out front, watching. It'll be light soon and he wonders what time the kid gets up, if there's a chance she'll let him see her. The truck idles rough and the rumble seems loud, loud enough to wake the neighborhood, so he drives away. The vomit smell is worse and he can't stop thinking that he's going to puke, too.

Under a street light he sees the blood on the hood, on the windshield. He tells himself Sean will be okay, that they weren't going fast, that somebody will find him and take care of him. But the blood tells a different story. Brenner's cheeks are wet, he's never done anything like this before, he's holding down the vomit, and now there's light in the sky.

He's near the high school. He thinks about ditching the truck, breaking into the school, trashing the gym, hiding there until he figures out what to do. He should go away, leave this hopeless town, he's got nothing here anyway. But that's no good. They'll know. Jason will talk, the faggot. Everyone will know.

He calls Dora on his cell phone. She'll know what to do. He can sleep there on the couch and see the kid in the morning and then all will be clear. But Dora doesn't answer. Why the fuck doesn't she answer?

He passes the school and now he's at Sean's folks' place. It's his truck in the driveway, it must be, with the fucking Semper Fi

bumper sticker. Why is that truck here? Jason's vomit is finally too much and he can't stop his own from spilling out and he tries to open the door but it splashes on the window and his thigh and now he's out of the truck and kneeling by the front tire and the smell of rubber makes it worse and he heaves until there is no more. He stumbles to his feet, hands on the hood, and he sees the blood. Is it Sean's?

He needs to know, so he goes to the door. It's dawn, the birds are loud. He rings the bell. No one comes and he rings again. What difference does it make? He's killed someone, Sean or some other fucker.

He hears movement inside, a voice, and the door opens.

It's Sean. He's wearing a t-shirt and sweat pants, no blood, no injury. It wasn't him. It wasn't him. Jesus, what has he done?

Brenner thinks he might throw up again. He tries to look past Sean into the house, as if the other guy might be there, too. There's no one there. He doesn't know what to do, he's just killed somebody, maybe, fucked up big-time, and he has to do something to make it right. He looks up at Sean.

"My wrist," Brenner says. "You hurt my wrist. You're a fucking asshole."

Sean steps outside. "You woke me up to tell me that? You woke my parents up?" He pushes Brenner backward, moves with him.

"That's right, you bastard. You stupid, shit-for-brains bastard." Brenner pushes back as hard as he can and Sean fires a rocket into the center of Brenner's face. Blood gushes from his nose. His feeble swing at Sean is blocked and Sean hits him again and again, in the head and gut. Brenner goes down, but struggles to his feet.

"Bastard," Brenner says, already flagging. He can barely see now. "Stupid." Sean knees him in the groin and the pain is glorious, like the fucking sun exploding inside him. But he doesn't go down, he lunges at Sean again. "Stupid, stupid bastard."

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