

THUNDERSNOW

by Eric Boyd

I know who done it. Them goddamn taters. I walked around the yard and started picking up pieces of the camaro, wondering if, from above, they'd laid the parts out into some kinda cult symbols or something. I've lived in Fairplains all my life, born there, played high school ball there (and still go see the Trojans every week of the season; they ain't been much of a team in a while, though), and been working up at the meat plant in Ottumwa like my old man did. What I'm saying is, I'm here for the long haul—and no goddamn hippies could change that.

It was '74, I think, when the Maharishi folks—we call 'em 'taters'—moved in. A few years before I bought that beautiful blue car. The old Parsen's college had gone under and they bought the campus; most people in town didn't think too much of it—if anything we were happy the old college wasn't just going to rot away—but in '81, when the Maharishi people built these giant gold domes for their meditation, the town took notice. They're pretty secluded at the school; they got their own shops and everything on-campus, but they're still within walking distance to the town square, and those bastards do come in every weekend, if not every other night, to drink at the bars. The school don't let them drink, and normally I'd feel bad for a kid in that position—hell, I remember going to the Flamingo Lanes back in the day; I'd sit right down at the bar, that old painting of John Wayne hanging right behind me, and I'd buy a Grain Belt right there, no problem—but these hippie kids at the Maharishi school shouldn't even be allowed on the same damn planet as the rest of us.

They're all goofy. I seen a kid unzip his fly down by the lake and take a leak into one of them plastic collapsible cups. Don't you know, sure enough, he drank it. I couldn't help myself, I asked him what the hell he was doing. He said it was a spiritual practice. I don't even remember what the hell else he said about it because I began reeling in my rod to get the hell outta there. They're all like that,

too. Maybe they don't all drink pee-pee, but they go around town and start trouble over the dumbest things.

It was a Friday night and I was at the HiddenAway on the square when it happened. I was just finishing up a fish sandwich when some of the students came in—two guys and a girl, and I'll be honest, I couldn't tell them much apart aside from one had long hair; those kids are on strict dress codes, like little peace nazis—and it wasn't more than two minutes before they began on some shit.

“You don't have organic vodka?” one of the guys said.

“And not grain vodka,” the girl hissed. “No grain.”

“You hear that,” I cut in from the end of the bar, “The tater wants to get schnookered on potato vodka! Ain't that, uh,” and I couldn't think of the word.

“Ironic...” the other guy finished for me. “That's the word you're looking for. Irony, like the fact that you're probably some idiot farmer, yet you're stupider than an ear of corn.”

“What'd you say?”

“Irony again,” he smiled. “The ear of corn can't hear. Ha.” He didn't laugh. He said the word ha.

Louis, the bartender, looked at me. “It's alright Henry, leave it be.”

To hell with that. I stood up. The guys creped back pretty fast; the girl started to, but don'tcha know they had her stay put so when I walked towards them, they knew I wouldn't swing right away.

“I can't believe I'm actually in a place with townies,” the one guy said. He was the taller of the two, I could see that.

“I know, I thought that was just in movies,” the other one laughed. They both had little rat eyes. “And look at him. I bet you're the one with that ugly gas-guzzler parked outside.”

“That's a 1977 Z28 camaro you little sonofabitch,” I said, closing in. “I've driven that old V8 longer than you been alive, and you say one more thing of it I'll be driving it after you aren't.”

“You take a single step more and I'll scream,” the girl said with tight lips.

"Government cheese," I laughed. "Who you screamin' to? You're the ones aren't welcome here."

Louis stepped up. "Look kids, I'll serve ya, but I'll serve ya what I got. I got beer and I got whiskey. I can do a little besides, but that's the long and short'a it. You wanna stay? Fine. If not, go."

"We'll leave," the girl said. The guys looked relieved, like they were committed to prove how brave they were if she hadn't let them off the hook. "Jai Guru Diev!" she shouted. I don't know what that is.

They went out and Louis gave me a beer on the house.

The next morning I found the camaro out on the lawn. It'd been taken apart, piece by piece, and spread out all over, pretty neatly. A part of me couldn't even get angry; I mean of course I was, but it was more confusing than anything else. Almost impressive. How the hell did they do that? I'd been up most of the night watching TV. I can't ever sleep. I even sat on the porch for a while before it got too chilly. Even if they'd had the time to do it, I don't know how they did it was so quiet.

I stormed all the way to that campus and, after getting the runaround by some little secretaries, found the dean. I waited in his office for an hour before he showed up.

"Hello Mister..?"

"Campbell," I said. "Henry."

"Mr. Campbell, first off, let me apologize for making you wait. I was in my morning meditations. As soon as I was done my secretary had someone waiting to tell me you were here."

"That's cute and all, but you know why I'm here?"

"Your car, sir. I heard, yes."

"Then you know it was some of your students?"

"Mr. Campbell, I don't need to tell you that you don't, from what I understand, have any real proof of your claim; nor must I inform you that, in every one of the lawsuits this...town...has brought against the Maharishi and the school, we have won."

"Except the murder," I chuckled. The dean, long and thin like an insect, looked shocked. "You let that crazy kid into your school

because ain't nobody else enrolled here but crazies. He stabbed one boy—didn't kill that one, though—and you let him in your own goddamn house to 'relax'. Well, maybe it was real relaxing for him when he took a knife outta your kitchen and stabbed some other kid. Better that second time.”

“How do you know about any of that?”

“My wife, Laura, she was the nurse working the ER. She tried to revive that boy for over...”

“That issue was settled,” the dean said quickly. “Mr. Campbell, whatever complaint you have regarding your car can be taken up with the proper authorities and whatever issues you may have with the school you can take up...elsewhere. At this school we are interested in global issues; things like world peace, things you wouldn't understand. We meditate here, twice a day, and believe me, it's benefiting even you. When we meditate, the good spreads all over town. If something's happened to your car, maybe you weren't allowing that goodness into your Self.”

“What in the hell are you even talking about?”

“When we meditate it sends vibrations all over this town. Granted, some people...can't take it. They don't understand the good things happening within them and they fight it...But Mr. Campbell, if that sounds like something you're experiencing. Don't fight it. I don't need to tell you that Fairplains' suicide rate is nearly ten times the national average, and that's from people in town...Even some nurses, yes?”

He had no goddamn right to bring up Laura in that way, and how'd he know about that to begin with? I was ready to break his neck but before I could do anything he'd opened the door for me to go, then kneeled down in front of a painting of some bearded guy in a chair. He started praying. Two big security guards were waiting for me, hands bigger than briskets. I walked out, cursed the secretary, and started off. The guards didn't follow. Anyone on the campus that saw me looked away. I passed one of the big gold domes and spit on it. After that everyone that saw me really looked. Hard. One lady wearing Indian clothes tripped over herself when I

walked by, then a bunch of students ran over and helped her up. They all started muttering something towards me but I couldn't hear what. I never felt so weird in my life. After that I went home and spent most of the day picking up the pieces of the camaro.

I saw the three kids again that evening. I went up to the Kum N' Go to buy a pack of Winstons; as I was leaving I saw them sitting outside on the curb around the corner, next to the free air pump, all sharing a 40 ounce of Mickey's.

"Y'know," I said to the girl, "there's grain in beer. Pretty sure that's all that's in it."

She looked at me as if I'd stabbed her. "Shut up."

"What are you doing at a gas station?" the taller guy asked.

"Yeah," the other one laughed, "because you don't have a car."

"You fuckers! I knew it!" I lunged toward the little bastard but he scurried away from me and I fell on the curb.

All three of them got up and took off. After they were a few yards away the girl threw the bottle towards me, but she didn't have the strength to toss it further than maybe ten feet. I watched them as they ran away and was sorta fascinated at how they were all perfectly in step with each other.

Once I got home I sat on the porch for a while, looking at the last photo of her I had left, the only one I didn't have the heart to throw away. It was a quiet out, barely even a cricket in the night. All I could hear was my holding back sniffles and the creak of the porch when I shifted in my chair. I looked up at the sky. It was cloudy. When I started to look back down at the photo I saw the three kids at the end of the lawn. Once my eyes focused, they weren't there. People have said I ain't been well since it happened, but I don't see things. That much is sure.

I decided to call John up. He's been the sheriff of Fairplains since I was a kid. He knew my old man and was like a second father to me. "John, I need you to do something about these damn taters."

"Henry you know I'd love to, but I was actually gonna come see you tomorrow. That dean gave me a call. What are you doing spitting on their magic domes?"

“Ah hell, are you serious?”

“Oh don't worry,” John laughed. “If that weirdo had his way I'd be calling in the SWAT teams and sending you to GitMo or something. He told me that, aside from having to thoroughly clean that entire building, they're going to have to bring in some specialist that can take the ‘negative energy’ you put on the thing, if not the entire campus.”

I was silent for almost a minute. I went over to the gun cabinet and took out my rifle. “They're fucked up, John.”

“I know it, but what can I do? Every time the taters get pissed off something happens in town but I never have any proof. I heard about the car, but I don't have nothing on that; I've got twenty eyewitnesses on you. You'll get a citation and I'm sorry to have to even do that. I told the dean I could have you give a public apology and clean the spot yourself, but he sounded terrified at the idea of even looking at you.”

I put the phone between my shoulder and head, started cleaning the gun. “Oh christ. So you don't think you can dig anything up on those kids with my car? Don't you have video cameras and everything?”

“Com'on Henry, I got two cameras in the whole town. One pointed over the square we had to put up after someone put a clay wiener on that statue of the old mayor, and then one by the train tracks which don't even work. That's it. Unless they took a piece of the car with them and happened to cut through the square, I got nothing.”

“But you can pull footage from around town, right? Like from Wal-Mart or anywhere else?”

“Yeah, sure, but I gotta have a reason.”

“How about public intoxication outside the Kum N' Go?”

“I'll see what I can do.”

“John,” I said, “that dean up there, he mentioned Laura.”

“What do you mean?”

“He knew. He said it just to mess with me.”

“God,” John sighed. “Don't let it get to you. I'm going to pick up the tapes from the gas station right now. We'll talk tomorrow.”

I hung up and went back outside; thought about taking the rifle out me, but I didn't end up seeing anyone or hearing anything the whole rest of the night, not even a dog or a paperboy or a truck. It was like I was in some closed off bubble.

I got maybe two hours of sleep before I went to the station and paid my citation. Then I went ahead and filed a complaint against the girl for throwing the bottle at me. I had to declare that I feared for my life and I could barely keep the giggles back as I wrote that down. John said he probably couldn't do much about the bottle thing, but it'd at least keep the kids on their toes. As I was leaving he gave me a wink and I saw him letting the kids out the holding cell; he told them he didn't want to see them around town and that, if he heard about them drinking in public again, he'd hold them a helluva lot longer than a night. They nodded their heads as John spoke but they stared straight at me the whole time.

That night, I was in the garage, most of the camaro sectioned into parts. Transmission, electronics, body, etc. It needed fixed, sure, but I couldn't even begin to imagine what putting the thing back together would be like. I finished off a six pack of Busch Light, grabbed another from the fridge, and sat on the porch, rifle in my lap. I was hoping those tater bastards might show up again. I'd give John and that dean all the proof they needed. Maybe three proofs if they all showed up.

I was halfway through the second six pack when I started feeling funny. Not the beers, though. My head got light and my body felt frozen and hot at the same time. It was familiar somehow. Suddenly I saw them. My hand started trembling on my rifle. I couldn't even see how many were out there, they seemed to fade off into the night. They all had their dress-uniforms on like they were going to class. Somebody rang a little bell—the same bell I dreamed I heard the night Laura died—and then somebody said, “Jai Guru Diev” again; they all started muttering. My insides turned in on

themselves. It was like thundersnow going through me in the dead of winter, some dark thing. I couldn't explain it. My head bent down and I started gagging so bad that my eyes welled shut. Everything felt like a dream.

I picked up the rifle

