

Welcome Back

by Jack Swenson

We sit at a table with a tablecloth so white it hurts my eyes. She isn't drinking; she has to go back to work.

Sometimes when I am tense or excited my foot jiggles. She sighs. She tells me that my tic is giving her a hard time.

She decides to have a Rob Roy. I drink Diet Coke. "No more drinking?" she asks. "Never, ever?"

I nod and raise my glass. "Here's looking at you, kid," I say.

I sit there thinking about the common room at Murphy's. Sitting there in my bathrobe. Staring at the dirty carpet. Seeing spiders. Big ones. Big, hairy spiders. Crawling towards my slippers.

She wants to know if I've seen Janet since I got back. I tell her no. "I don't believe you," she says. I lean forward and take her two hands in mine. I look into her eyes. "It's you and only you," I say. She starts to cry.

I hand her a handkerchief and tell her about the guest speaker at the rehab. A woman. She fell asleep smoking a cigarette and burned down the house. Her two kids died in the fire.

My friend is looking at herself in a small mirror she had in her purse, dabbing at her eyes.

"How could you live with that?" I ask. She shakes her head.

We leave the restaurant together. Her car is in the lot; mine is across the street. She turns left out of the parking lot and honks the horn and waves as she passes by. I look back to make sure there are no approaching cars, then pull out and make a screeching U turn in the middle of the street.

