

When I Met the Mountain Man

by Javy Gwaltney

The year is 1995. I am young. I have hair so blonde it's white. I'm wandering around the local diner as my father pays for the meal we just devoured. The diner is a small place on the edge of town. You've seen it before in every small-town movie you've ever seen. This one is no different: A long counter aligned with stools where customers sit, and Phil and Bill, the owners of the place, talk to their customers as they refill cups of sweet tea. Around the counter are clusters of brown wooden tables where families and sometimes loners come in to have a decent southern meal.

On this particular day a gaunt man walks into the diner. He's big, real big, like Mount Olympus big. I'll call him the Mountain Man. The rays of the sun blast through the threshold as he steps inside, momentarily illuminating the place with blinding light.

I am young. This is years before I start to hide my accent.

The Mountain Man takes a seat at the counter. Even as he slouches, his neck cranes like a giraffe. I am afraid that if he sits up straight the ceiling fan may wack off his head and send it flying into one of the corners of the restaurant, landing on top of some poor southerner's plate of potato wedges.

I am young. I have an overactive imagination.

My father pulls out his checkbook. If he were paying attention to me, he would say something like, "Stop starting at other people, little lad, it's rude." The Mountain Man turns to me and grins. His skin is rough and tan, and he's wearing overalls and a white T-shirt smudged with oil. He's missing some teeth on the left side of his mouth probably 'cause he got in a nasty fight when he was younger, or just chewed too much tobacco.

The Mountain Man opens his cave of a mouth to say something, but Phil pats him on the shoulder and says with a hearty laugh, "Billy, how you doing, boy?"

The Mountain Man turns to Phil.

"Fine, Phil. Just fine. Yourself?"

"No complaints, no complaints. What can I do for ya?"

"Just my regular."

"BLT," Phil says, taking out a thin little notepad and pencil. "No mayo?"

"Yessir," The Mountain Man says.

My father pays the bill and turns to tell me that it's time to go, but one of his golfing buddies walks up to him and slaps him on the back. They begin to talk about professional golf. I want to tell you that they're talking about Tiger Woods, but that would just be a lie of convenience on my part. I continue to listen in on Phil and the Mountain Man.

"You're off for an early lunch ain't you, Billy?"

"Mhm," the Mountain Man says before taking a sip of his coffee, "Danny done hired a new colored boy. He can take over my shift when my legs start acting up and shakin' and shit."

"Well, that's convenient," Phil says with a smile.

The Mountain Man issues a low, guttural sound from his throat, "Yup, guess them darkies are good for something after all." He grins.

Phil notices I'm watching their conversation and bites his lip nervously.

"Now Billy, let's watch the language please."

"Sorry, Phil," the dirty man replies. His voice is void of emotion.

"I mean don't get me wrong—don't get me wrong—I agree with you. It's always nice when one of those," he pauses, looks at me once again, "freeloaders gets off their butts and starts to make something of themselves instead of living off food stamps and sucking the economy dry like a vampire."

The Mountain Man nods slowly as he sips his coffee.

I feel someone loom over me. I look up and see dad staring at Phil and his giant customer. My father is dressed in a nice white collar shirt with a designer tie and black pinstripe dress pants. He's stuffing his checkbook and pen back into his pants. His expression is one of necessary friendliness.

"How you doin' today, Mr. Prospero?" Phil asks my father.

"Just fine, Phil," my father says in his exaggerated southern accent. "Yourself?"

"Can't complain. Good Lord's been kind to me as of late."

The Mountain Man and my father's eyes meet. The man's expression contorts itself into a sneer. The smile on my father's face flickers.

"Well, I hope you keep on having a good day. Thanks for the food."

"Thank ya for the business. You and your boy have a good day as well."

"Oh, we'll try," my father says jovially as he gives me a light push through the door.

Back in the truck, as we drive home, my father looks over at me.

"If I ever hear you talking like either of them, I'll tear your hide out, got it?"

I nod. We don't say anything for the rest of the way home.

I look out the window as we drive toward home. We pass the postal office where a mother and daughter, whose names have been lost to the degradation of my memory, are arguing about something. Driving by the gas stop, my father sees someone he knows. He waves but I don't think the other person sees him. We hit one of the two spotlights between the diner and our house. Sitting in the traffic, I hear the jingling rhythm of my dad's keychain as it swings back and forth beneath the wheel. He stares out the window bored, possibly tired. Maybe he's thinking of golfing later, or playing some postal chess with federal prisoners.

The light turns green. We lurch ahead.

Eventually we come to a fork in the road. To my right, a local black church is letting out. I watch as they leave in ones, twos, and threes. I observe as they kiss one another on the cheek and greet

each other with smiles, as they shake the pastor's hand, and as they walk to their cars and drive off to live their lives.

My father puts on the turn signal.

We turn left.

