

Lovelandtown Tavern

by Matt DeVirgiliis

The Lovelandtown lift bridge lurched and stuck in place, the roadway stalled twenty feet above the street.

A man appeared, his orange reflector vest shining as the bridge's red and yellow lights blinked on and off. He pulled his wool cap on over his ears and spoke into a little black box, his breath a puff of smoke. Few cars idled behind the warning arms on either side.

One car, a Mercedes, pulled into the lot of the Lovelandtown Tavern, nestled by the bridge on the west side.

The dark bar forced your eyes to adjust. If you were lucky enough to have a companion, you could read their emotions but not see their flaws. Locals frequented, mostly roughneck types — fishermen, mechanics, lifelong waitresses from other establishments. Smoking had been banned years ago, but a lingering haze remained. You spent your night with mostly old-timers and those worn out from life, the salt of the earth. You left smelling like stale beer and black licorice but feeling wholesome.

James Hubert III sat at the bar. It was late. His wife and kids were long in bed and he knew he should be, too. But with the Lovelandtown lift bridge stuck in mid-air, a drink beckoned him. He sat next to Vince DeSantos, a small, stout man, with a bowling ball head and dry, cracked knuckles. Vince humphed when he walked. James and Vince grew up together.

“Really like this place,” said Vince.

“Me too,” said James. “We probably know everyone in here.”

“Me more than you,” said Vince.

“But they leave us to our Rolling Rock.”

Vince rolled his thermal sleeves to his elbows and drooped his shoulders as he ran his thumbs under his Carhartt coverall straps. “Things keep me warm on the job, he said, but make me sweat my ass off inside.” He tilted his green beer bottle and gulped as he drank. James drank, too.

"This beer brings me back," said James. He rolled up his dress shirtsleeves and tucked the cufflinks into his breast pocket. Both men leaned their forearms on the bar, their Rolling Rock bottles standing at attention before them.

"Brings you back from what?" asked Vince. "You only live over the bridge."

James held up the green bottle and peered through it like a looking glass. He stuck his nose on the opening and sniffed.

"Remember when we'd help my dad with yard work during the summer?" said James. "We'd help him cut the lawn and weed whack as he ran around and trimmed the trees and reposted the fence. Like teenaged boys are supposed to do, he'd say. Then we'd break and sit on the back step and he'd crack one of these. It was the only time he drank beer. He'd take a sip and then pass it to us and say, one sip each. Nothing better than the smell of freshly mowed grass and the twang of this beer. The best days I can remember," said James.

"Were they though?"

James peered out the window and watched the men on the bridge scurry like mice trying to find their cheese. "I was happy," James said.

"It was different, then," said Vince. "I have Desiree and little Vinny now. I worry now."

"My Jimmy fell off his scooter and split his forehead last week," said James. "Sheryl called me and my throat locked up. He's fine, she said, he's got a few stitches and a lot of blood, but the head bleeds. I wanted to run home and hug him. But I couldn't leave. Even if I did, I probably couldn't have found a flight home at that time.

"But you have it all," said Vince. "You parked your Mercedes next to a twenty-year-old pickup truck. You have a house with a bay view and another with a mountain view."

"That's not what warms me up, though, Vin. It could all go away. At least you enjoy what you do. Every day. And you're home to enjoy the important things."

"What would it have been?"

"Archeology," said James.

"There's no money in that."

"That's what my parents said. But there's learning and digging and exploring. No cubicles. No business class."

"Don't wish away everything you've got," said Vince.

The yellow and red flashing lights stopped flickering through the tavern's windows and the bar fell quiet. James turned to see workmen on the bridge climbing into their trucks. James stuck twenty dollars on the bar. "This one's on me," he said.

"I'll get the next one," said Vince.

They stood, shook hands, and hugged, slapping each other on the back. "Come see us sometime," said James, gripping Vince tightly as if not wanting to let go.

"I will," said Vince. "I work Saturdays and some Sundays. I'll have to get over the bridge to you. Tell Sheryl we say hello."

"Ride?"

"Nah, the fresh air is good for me," said Vince.

They walked outside. James climbed into his coupe. He watched Vince stuff his hands into his pockets and bury his chin into his coveralls and walk west, disappearing into the cold night. James Hubert pulled out of the parking lot and sped up and over the bridge, his Mercedes' lights fading as he passed over the top and down the other side.

