

Old Pains, New Pains - by Lee Russell

1 - The First Day

It was pouring with rain on that Tuesday when I first saw Harry, although it would be three days later before I knew his story. I was already behind with my weekly deliveries when the heavens opened with such ferocity that I couldn't properly see the road ahead. The van started to mist up and I decided to stop for a rest at the Halfway House pub until the storm passed.

It was lovely and warm inside; there was a good fire going to ward off the October chill. Sitting in a booth near the entrance to enjoy my pint of Shepherd's Walk and a home-cooked beef sandwich, I settled down to watch the world outside go by.

A man of indeterminate age walked past without even glancing towards this little refuge from the elements. I could not imagine a more wretched sight than this poor soul marching through the rain with such apparent disregard for his own welfare. His upper body was bulkily wrapped in at least two brown overcoats that flapped around his knees and seemed to be making a poor job of keeping him dry. His black trousers clung to his legs in the way that only thoroughly soaked cotton can manage. His feet splashed in ponderous repetition through puddles while a steady stream of water poured off his uncovered head and into his sodden black beard.

In moments he moved beyond the entrance to the pub forecourt. I shook my head and carried on with my lunch.

The weather cleared a couple of hours later and, although it was still very cold, the evening was dry.

2 - Another Sighting

I had travelled some twelve miles down the road by the following afternoon. A grey, angry sky hung over the villages near Elham. I had a parcel for Mrs. Hodges who lives at No. 34, just across the green where bored men play a type of cricket on summer afternoons. Judging by the parcels she must be a compulsive TV shopping channel viewer and I seem to deliver something to her little cottage every few weeks.

This week's package was an unexpectedly heavy and oversized box that I struggled to manhandle off the back of the van. I had seen her curtains twitch as I pulled up and I knew there was no need to knock. As I approached the door it opened before me and her friendly voice welcomed me in with "Hello again, Mr. Jessop. Could you please bring that through to the parlour, to save me having to lift it?"

Who could refuse to help such a lovely old lady? She's seventy-four, as she proudly told me in the summer, and the nicest person I've ever met.

"Do you have time for a quick cup of tea and some of my Victoria sponge?" she asked.

"Of course I do, Mrs. Hodges. You know your cakes are irresistible!" I reply. In fact my expanding middle reminds me that I should be resisting, but I know this moment of company means a lot to her.

As we sit talking in her lounge, which overlooks the green, I see the figure of a man appear slowly in the distance. He takes my attention because he walks straight across the middle of the wicket. People tend not to do that, even in the winter; it's a norm that is bred into villagers. As he gets nearer I see the coats flapping around his knees and realise that it is the tramp from yesterday's storm. He's still walking, head down, like the weight of the world is pressing on him. He looks dry but definitely bedraggled and weary.

"Oh dear," says Mrs. Hodges.

The tramp is carrying an obviously heavy, canvas holdall. The narrow handles must be digging into his shoulder because he switches it to the other side without breaking his stride. I wonder how he can carry such a load, mile after mile.

"We get all sorts walking through here. I hope he's safe," Mrs. Hodges says in a gossipy tone of voice.

I suspect she is not worrying about *his* safety.

3 - A Good Turn is Always Returned

I had a good run this morning and there are only a few more deliveries left to make. There is a narrow rat-run that I know will take me through to the final drops. I'm travelling a bit too quickly. As I follow the curve of a long bend I suddenly have to swerve out in order to avoid a pedestrian.

I look in my mirror and I can't see him - 'Oh, God, don't tell me that I hit him!'

I pull in to a layby and hurriedly run back.

I find a man climbing out of the hedgerow. His coats have snagged on the branches and he is struggling to pull a canvas bag out.

"I'm very sorry! Thank heavens I didn't hit you! Are you alright?" I shout as I run up to him.

"Do I look alright?" he spits back at me. "Why don't you watch where you're going?"

"I am very sorry," I say again. I hold out my hand: "Here, let me help you."

"I can look after myself," he replies, and then he slips back into the hedge.

I grab him under the arm anyway: "Here....," I say gently.

He climbs out of the hedge and brushes an assortment of debris from his clothes. When he has finished sorting himself out we face each other for a moment.

"We can't stay here, it's not safe," I say.

"Are you trying to be funny?" he asks gruffly.

"No, no I'm not. Look, my van is parked around the bend. The least I can do is give you a lift," I say.

"Don't need no lift," he answers curtly.

"Please, it's the least I can do," I tell him.

He hold his hands up; "You don't understand. I don't want a lift. I'm on a walk. I started this journey on my feet and I'll end it that way. Don't want no help in between."

"All right, but at least let me see you safely along this road. It is very narrow and I would be happier to know that you were safe when I left you."

He sizes me and down before slowly nodding: "All right then," is all he says. Then he picks up his bag and stomps off ahead of me.

We reach the van and he gets in without complaint. He smells of dirt, sweat and mud. I wind my window down as we pull away.

"I saw you yesterday crossing a green near Elham, and the day before near the Halfway House pub," I tell him.

"Hmmm," he answers noncommittally.

"Yes," I continue. "You are obviously very determined to reach your destination. Where are you headed?" I ask.

"Dover." One word. Harsh. Like the town.

"Oh?"

"Umm."

Talkative chap, but then I have just nearly run him over. "I'm Graham," I tell him.

"Umm," he *seems* completely disinterested.

I decide to try a more direct approach: "You've been walking in some pretty harsh weather. What got you on the road?"

"The wife."

"Oh?"

He's quiet for a moment and then pulls a photo from a pocket buried deep in the folds of his clothing. He doesn't show it to me.

"She left me."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that," I reply, not really feeling it but unsure of what else to say.

He points to a secluded layby in the road ahead. "You can drop me there, Graham," he says.

As I pull in he is rummaging for something else in his pockets. I pull up the handbrake and turn the engine off. "Well, there you go then," I say.

He looks at me properly for the first time: "My name is Stephen," he tells me.

"I'm glad to have met you," I tell him, "and pleased that I didn't run you over!"

"This is the wife," he says and passes me the crumpled photo. It is clearly a Christmas scene and Stephen has his arm around the woman's shoulder. They're both smiling and, judging by their hair styles, it looks like the picture was taken a few years ago.

Then I recognise her.

I suddenly feel very cold and the blood drains out of my face. He's noticed that of course.

"That's Gina," he says, all matter of fact. "Of course you know that, as you've been shagging her for the past year."

I cough and squirm anxiously, trying to increase the distance between us in the cramped van.

"Look, Stephen... I'm, uh, I... I don't know what to say..." Then the realisation crashes over me: "This can't be a coincidence, what are you doing? WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON HERE?" I shout. "GET OUT OF MY VAN!"

He takes his hand out of his pocket and very deliberately points a worn black pistol at my chest.

"I'm afraid I can't do that, Graham," he tells me very calmly. "It took me months to track you down. She took all our money and fucked off with the car. You wouldn't believe how I have suffered to reach you. Now, I want you to hold the steering wheel with both hands and look ahead."

"You're crazy! What, are you going to kill me?" I whimper.

He whips the gun across the side of my head. "Hold - the - fucking - wheel!" he coldly commands me.

I place my shaking hands on it: "Please, don't kill me!" I beg.

"It's worse than that, Graham," he says...

... and that's when he shoots off my...