

From the Road with Love

I'm shaving in the bathroom when I hear a light knock at the door. He's early.

With lather still on me, I go to the peephole to make sure its not a police sting or a do-good reporter (both plausible hazards of my trade). I then open the door.

He's gaunt and has his own two-day stubble. His shirt is half tucked, and a clump of white mayflowers flow out from his chest pocket. A blue tie only adds to his disarray. It's loose and crooked, with stains on it that look to be blood and tree sap. One of his suspenders is unbuttoned and dangling behind him.

He startles, perhaps surprised someone has answered his knock so quickly. He says nothing at first, only staring. I can smell alcohol on him.

"Yes?" I ask.

He looks around quickly and lowers his head. "Oh, uh, hi. I think I have the wrong room."

"Raoul?"

"Uhh, yes."

"You're in the right place. A bit early, but that's fine. Come in."

"I didn't expect- well, I guess I did expect- I don't know really know..."

I have little time for indecisiveness. I move to close the door on him.

He thrusts a limb inside to keep the conversation going. "Please don't. I- I want to be here. I've just never done this type of thing before. To be honest, I need to be here. I'm at the end of my rope. Please."

I reopen the door. He takes one last look around the vacant parking lot. Sensing it is ok to proceed, he steps into my room, and I close the door behind him.

His acrid breath hangs heavy and I'm happy for the fragrant smell of his flowers to counter it. I regret not getting a better room with proper air exchange in the newer hotel across the street.

"Thanks," he says as he makes a feeble attempt to tidy himself up.

"You've been drinking," I answer. I don't normally deal with drunks. It breeds indecision and regret which can draw attention. Attention is bad for business.

"Huh? Oh, really, it's nothing. Not compared to what I usually have. Honest, I'm fine."

I size him up and after a moment point him to the armchair. It has flowered print and was in fashion forty years ago. Due to unuse, it's as comfortable as the day it was bought. People don't come to motels like this to sit in chairs. Mind you, running a black light along one may tell otherwise. Regardless, it's much more comfortable than the spare bed.

"What do you want?" I ask. I always want to hear it said out loud.

"I- I want you to cut me." In the privacy of my room, he has found more voice.

“You’re sure of this?” I ask.

“Certain. I’ve saved up for it. It took a while, I don’t make much, but I was able to scrape along with the pay and tips in my job as a-“

“Cash up front,” I interrupt.

“Oh. Of course,” he mumbles as he blushes.

He pulls two folded envelopes out of his pants. They are crumpled and padded thick with bills. He counts out twelve hundred dollars in front of me. Mostly fives, with some tens and ones. I thank the powers of my god when eight twenties show themselves to help speed up the accounting.

“That’s too much,” I say.

“We’ll get to that,” he promises and hands me the refilled envelopes after he’s done.

I nod and put them on the table in the dinette.

I see myself as a doctor of sorts and even studied medicine before switching to arboriculture a long time ago. I found instead of keeping you together as healers of accreditation are known to do, I was better at taking you apart.

Like the doctors of today, I also have all but ended making house calls, opting to take my black briefcase of implements with me from motel to hotel. One client, one town, is my rule, and I only advertise in the classifieds of local newspapers. Those that wish to see me will find me.

I grab my case from the closet and set it on my bed. It's unclasped and opened, black velvet curtains still covering both sides, when he speaks again.

"There's something we need to discuss."

I pause with the unveiling of my armory and look at him. Here we go.

"I- I don't want you to stop once you start."

I consider what he is asking and wonder if he has done the same.

He clears his throat and looks directly at me. "However you start, and whatever you normally do, is up to you. As I've said, I'm not used to this type of thing. Honest, I'm not. That's all fine. All I ask is that once this is said and done, I'm completely spent. I don't care if it's kindling, axe handles, or even toothpicks you want to do with me. So long as you do it. And once you start, regardless of what I say or do, continue till there's nothing left. That's what the extra money is for."

"I don't know if I can do that," I answer. "It's a lot of extra work. And others will come looking for you. Someone always does. I don't need the heat."

"No one's coming looking for me. Not anymore. And any extra work not included in the money I just gave you can be made ten-fold if you decide to sell the wood you end up with. I'm sure you know what cocobolo is worth."

I do know. I had thought it as soon as his request came out of his mouth. And whereas I'm usually just hacking off a few limbs or unwanted growths, it's not like I've never done this type of thing before- finishing a job right to the end. Still, his possible loose ends worry me.

“How do you know no one will come look for you? Job? Family? People say that and people are usually wrong.”

He looks down for a minute then stands up. He takes the mayflowers from his pocket and tosses them to the floor. “I tell you- there’s no one left to come looking for me. There’s no one left to care. If you can’t help me, I’ll simply have to go figure something out on-“

I cut him off for the second time. “I’ll do it.”

He stares at me. “You will?”

“Yeah.” I motion him back into the chair and continue unveiling my tools. There are knives and saws; some very small, others of considerable size. All are very sharp. I even have a brace and bit and a telescopic axe. The handles of my tools are of various woods, all jobs from throughout the years. Ash and spruce, pine and hickory. I don’t discriminate. The only tool currently off limits is a two handed chisel that has a considerable crack in the handle.

As an added insurance, I carry a large wedge and ten-pound maul in the trunk of my car but leave them there unless absolutely needed. Discretion is important in my line of work.

“Once we get to a certain point, I won’t be able to stop even if you change your mind,” I caution.

“I know,” he says with a deep breath and takes a swallow. “But I won’t.”

I walk to the curtains, pulling them further closed than their track's intentions are designed for, then turn off all lights except for the bathroom. I take a lantern from another case and fill it with kerosene before lighting it. It's bright and the smell of the burning fuel dances in my nostrils. A lantern's light during my procedures is how I started, and how I will remain. Next, I unfold newspaper and lay it on the floor in the center of the room. I take one of the two wooden chairs from the dinette and place it on the newspaper. I tell him to take his clothes off and have a seat.

Every motel room worth pulling into has at least two things- an alarm clock radio, and a bottle opener fastened to a wall jamb. I always make sure my room has both, and I turn my radio on. This room even has a television, so I turn that on too. Not loud enough to receive complaints or a knock on the door, but loud enough to think any subdued crying or moaning is coming from a movie.

I take a mid sized saw, lithe but menacing in the proper hands, and touch the blade. It's cold and wants to work.

"I don't have all day, but do you need a minute before we begin? I can finish shaving if you like." I ask.

He shakes his head. "The sooner we do this the better."

I nod. The bathtub would really be the best place for this. Unfortunately, the cramped environment, especially in the road-side motels I frequent, more than counters the ease of washing sins down the acrylic.

He has cuts all over his body- some old, some new. I start with a few branches, outer at first then working my way closer to the trunk. I always start with a small

undercut before sawing on the top. This allows a clean break when the wood severs. He doesn't have many leaves, but the ones he does have, vibrate with my sawing. If he feels pain, he doesn't show it. I take my lantern and hold it near to survey the carnage I am submitting him to. He blinks as my light passes his eyes.

"I have sunglasses if you want," I offer.

He shakes his head. "When I was young, my father, who was blind in one eye, told me he never wore sunglasses because he would rather see colors for what they were, even on the brightest of days. I haven't worn any since."

His words stick with me as I continue.

Sap, thick and sticky with sawdust, runs down him and onto the chair and newspaper. I recall my earlier snub I had given him.

"You were starting to tell me what you did for a living. Please. Resume."

At first, he doesn't know what I'm talking about. Then clues in. "Oh. I'm a chimney sweep. Was a chimney sweep."

"Seriously?" I think out loud. "I haven't seen a chimney sweep on my travels for a good eighty or ninety years."

"Yeah. It's certainly not glamorous work, but it's honest," he explains. "The job ran in the family, so seemed like the right thing to do. It soon became all I could do. I worked more when I was younger and smaller. Mornings hurt more for me now."

“Mornings hurt more for all of us. There can’t be many of you left,” I say as I drop a large limb to the floor. A spurt of sap shoots out, some hitting my face. The rest of it hits the wall. A true money shot.

He winces at the sever, then apologizes for the mess. I shrug it off. One thing about the hardwood trees, they always blame themselves for the mess. He then speaks again. “No, there sure aren’t. And by this time tomorrow, there will be one less.”

We don’t speak much after that. I continue to saw, and my sweat causes some of the shaving cream on my face to trickle to the corner of my mouth. Its bitter taste contradicts the overwhelming scent of cocobolo sap that has filled the room.

His eyes are closed, and I am uncertain he’s even conscious, when he mumbles an apology to someone named Steve. He says nothing after that.

At some point I take notice of his mayflowers on the floor and pick them up. Brushing them off, I set them on the table.

We are far past the point of no return when I get an overwhelming feeling of nostalgia. I want to go home, or as close to a home as I’m ever going to get. A thought comes to me. “Would you by any chance know where I could find mayflowers like these around here?”

His speech is now slurred and spotty and I pity him for having to try to speak. These may be his last words and I’m forcing him to go out weak.

“May. Flowers. Flowers. Ah, yesss, side of town by the train station. West side. No, I think...East, maybe. There you’ll find the, the...” and with this he is unconscious.

I continue sawing for another hour, maybe two. My right arm is sore from the movement, but I don't switch sides as my dominant arm's cuts are smoother and cleaner. Eventually all that's left of him is blocks on the floor, and I take my axe and split most of him into small pieces of kindling. The one chunk I save looks handsome enough to fashion a two-handed chisel with. The concrete subfloor bears much of the carpet's abuse as I split. This, along with a contingency plan for any necessary rapid exits is why I stick with the ground floor. Always.

I open a warm beer on the bottle opener and sit on the other chair from the dinette. The opener isn't necessary with the twist off caps of today, but I fashion myself to be old school and honor tradition.

By now, it's dark outside and safer to take what's left of him out to my trunk. I leave the residual wood shavings, along with the sawdust and sap on the floor for when the cleaner comes in tomorrow. Good luck to whoever's dealing with that. There's a reason I pay cash and only come through towns once every fifteen or twenty years. And without a loved one to take this personal and connect the dots, the authorities aren't likely to feel compelled to track me down.

I change out of my clothes and try to wash up to avoid being asked where I was cutting wood this late at night. I then stuff my soiled clothing along with his in a plastic bag. As I'm on my last scan of the sullied room, a single sock hiding under my bed catches my attention and I leave it. I don't think it's even mine. I get the car fully loaded and am gone by eleven pm. On the way out, I take Raoul's mayflowers with me.

I drive to the east side of town, only to find out the train station is on the west side. On the way I stop at a coffee shop and a guy with Steve on his nametag sells me a crème mocha latte. It's hardly considered to be a conventional drink, but this is one exception where I don't hold myself to what was. It doesn't taste quite as good as beer, not even warm beer, but at least a crème mocha latte while driving won't land me in the clink.

I consider asking Steve if he knows a cocobolo named Raoul- knew a cocobolo named Raoul. But decide I'm not sure I want Steve asking questions if he does. While at the coffee shop, I get rid of our old clothes in the dumpster.

I spend midnight to one am on my knees at the deserted train station, gnawing on a new cocobolo toothpick picking my own mayflowers. Of the five lights in the yard, three are burnt out, leaving the best patches in darkness. It's times like this I'm grateful my sense of smell is what it is. By the time I'm done, my back seat is filled with clumps of mayflowers.

Instead of heading north out of town as initially planned I go back south. To home.

I drive through the night and as the dawn breaks, I put my sunglasses on. I then take them off, reseeing the sun's vivid orange natural colors for what they are. The chimney sweep's one-eyed father had been right, and I toss my sunglasses out the window as I continue.

Over the next few days, I sell his wood as I travel, profiting heavily as predicted. There's a market for everything.

It should go without saying, my bouquets of mayflowers, sweet and fragrant with a hint of cocobolo, were a hit. And desperately needing water.

End