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Just Another Customer

Joe Maslanka

This little hick town is just what he needed. Parking his car in front of a small café, he scans this dirt road town, seeing no one. He pulls a guitar case from the back seat. He steps into the café. Black boots tap on the dirty linoleum floor; he can smell the lingering aroma of the lunch rush. He’s hungry.

“Where’s the local talent in this place? I need me somethin’ to chew on.”

“Cool your britches, boy. Just had to straighten up some stuff in the back. What can I do for you there, hotshot?” The short, rotund proprietor, Ginny Bea, wipes down the counter.

A toothpick protrudes from the corner of his mouth. Giving his greased-up pompadour a quick comb, he takes a seat at the counter.

“Otis, come check this boy out here.” A large black man steps out from behind the grill.

“Miss Ginny, we done got us Elvis right here in your place.”

“He’d be what, Otis, like the fifth Elvis this month?”

They both laugh as Otis returns to the grill. “Who might you be, ducktail?”

He watches the large negro man return to the grill. He stares back at Ginny Bea. “Names Skeeter Watson, ma’am.”

“Skeeter Watson, how bout that? The next big star. Let me guess, Skeeter Watson, you be on your way to Memphis? Got your guitar wit ya and everythin’."

“Got a cousin just outside Memphis. He got a recording of me to a Mr. Sam Phillips. He agreed to hear me play some songs. Elvis is on his way in the Army. I got out over a year ago. My turn now.”
“Alright then, how bout fillin’ that belly? We’ll get ya up some strength for the big time. I can tell everyone I done served, The Skeeter Watson,” Ginny Bea laughs. She sets a place mat in front of Skeeter. “Sorry, you got no company. This is our dead time, ’tween lunch and dinner; won’t be no one in here for a spell.”

“No problem, ma’am. I’ll enjoy the solitude. Maybe play me a tune on that juke?”

“Man, what kinda guitar you got in there?” Otis stares at his guitar case.

“Don’t be touchin’ that.”

“Come on, I play a little guitar. Let me have a look at that.” Skeeter places his foot on top of the case.

“Now, see here Cookie, I asked you polite-like not to touch that guitar. You grill me up a burger, real good. I’ll give ya a peek. Deal?”

Otis steps back, staring Skeeter in the eyes. Skeeter grins and pushes the toothpick to the other side of his mouth. “Get that burger a sizzlin, Cookie or Otis, whatever. Man, just grill it up—we’ll talk about this here guitar.” Otis is a big man, but Skeeter sees the fear in his eyes. It’s fear that only the old south can instill. Otis returns to the grill.

Ginny Bea returns to the counter. “You make your mind up there, Mr. Watson?”

“He be wantin’ a burger, Miss Ginny. I’ll get to it.”

“Mighty kind of you, O—tis. I’ll take some french fries with that burger, if you don’t mind?”

“Otis, add some fries to this man’s order.”

“Miss Ginny, come back here a minute.”

Skeeter watches Ginny get pulled from his view; he chuckles. Shaking her head, Ginny walks away from the grill. “Just another customer,” Skeeter hears her say.
Skeeter delights as Otis flips his burger over, smacking it with his spatula. Dropping the basket of fries into the hot oil; they sizzle and smoke billows out from the hot fryer.

Peripherally, Skeeter can see he has shaken Otis. It becomes a source for his amusement.

“So you say you got out the Army, where you serve?”

“You writin’ a book there, Cookie?”

“Just curious is all. Had a cousin who got out, bout a year ago. Thought you might a known ‘em?”

“Now, Cookie, I highly doubt your cousin ever crossed paths with me. Hell, I’ll play along. Daddy-O, where was your cousin?” Like a boa constrictor with his prey, Skeeter squeezes every moment out of this encounter.

“24th Infantry in KO-rea, but he done stay in for some years after they was dissolved. He got moved over to a unit in Germany, but I can’t recall which.”

“So how am I to know, Cookie?”

Otis pounds at the beef patty as it sizzles. “I wish I could recall there, guitar man. Sorry, was about that time I be sent to Mississippi State Pen. You wouldn’t be familiar with that now, would ya?” He gives the patty one more solid whack.

Skeeter drops his smile. He reaches into his pocket. He retrieves a nickel and begins flipping it. He throws an eye at Ginny Bea. She is counting up her till; setting the register for the dinner crowd.

Ginny Bea returns her money to the till. She takes the order to Skeeter. Skeeter gets up, dropping the nickle in the juke box. He plays “O Lonesome Me” by Hank Williams. “Thought this might be a favorite, Cookie?”

“What is it with you two boys. You know one another or somethin’?”
“Good burger, Cookie. Come on out here, gonna let you pick my guitar some. I mean, deals a deal, right?”

Otis steps from the grill, clutching his spatula. Skeeter pulls a beat up old Martin acoustic, from his case. “How you like that, Cookie? Good guitar with some miles on it. Go ahead, play me somethin’.”

Otis pushes his spatula into his belt. He takes the guitar, along with an opportunity to show up Skeeter. He places his right leg up on a chair to steady it. He begins hammering out a blues rhythm. He runs through blues riffs. He starts singing a few verses of “Midnight Special.”

“I betcha you like that one, don’t-cha Mr. Skeeter, guitar man?”

Otis has walked him to that moment he longs for. Skeeter reaches into his leather jacket. He pulls out a .38 Special. He points it at Otis. “Think you’re smart there, grill boy?”

“My Lord, what is going on here? Put, that gun away.”

Otis says, “This ain’t no guitar singer, Miss Ginny. This ain’t even no soldier. This be a common criminal. I spotted you right away. You done time in Mississippi, ain’t ya?”

“Ain’t you somethin, Otis. Hey man, I can play that guitar; ain’t got time to give you a show now. Real slow, put that guitar back in the case.” Skeeter grins as Otis does what he’s told.

“You got one-a-them photographic memories, don’t cha Cookie?” Here’s what’s gonna happen: the fat lady there is gonna fill a bag with that loot. The two of you? You’re gonna watch me walk outta here, with it.” He pulls back on the hammer. He giggles. “I just love that sound, man. Pull them dead presidents out that till, ma’am. If you be kind ‘nuff to stuff a bag, I’d appreciate it. You got 30 seconds to make it happen.”

Otis pulls his spatula and swings it. He catches Skeeter on the side of the face. Stumbling backwards, Skeeter pulls the trigger. He hits Otis in the heart. Skeeter hits the floor; losing his
grip on the gun. Otis drops to his knees for a short moment. He folds at the waist, rolling to the tiled deck like a hunted bear. Skeeter gets back on his feet, heart racing as he steadies himself.

“Damn, I didn’t see that a comin.’ Sorry lady, nothin’ personal.”

“Oh my Lord, Otis! You done shot Otis.” Ginny begins to run to the back. Skeeter grabs the spatula and jumps the counter. Chasing Ginny Bea into the back kitchen, she slips on the greasy floor. She’s just inches from the back screened door.

He pounces, pushing the edge of the spatula to her juggler vein. “Like I said, ma’am, nothing personal.” He tears at her throat until it is lacerated. She bleeds out as he watches.

He walks back to Otis’ body, and places the spatula in the corpse’s hand. Skeeter returns to the counter and finishes his burger. He places another nickle in the juke box and hums along to “Crazy.” He cleans up his dishes and utensils, tiding up his spot at the counter. He gathers up the money from the till. He finds his gun and returns it to his jacket. He takes one last look around. He places a fresh toothpick into his mouth.

He returns to his black, 1949, Oldsmobile and starts up the engine. “It’s good to be free.” He turns up the radio. He enters the freeway. Getting distance from the café, he pulls his car to the side of the road. Skeeter parks by a sign: Memphis 50 miles. He looks at his guitar next to him and checks his pompadour in the rear-view mirror. Smiling, he pushes down the accelerator.