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DOUBLE FAULT

HECTOR FRITCH MIGHT HAVE SIMPLY punched in late. On a Friday evening, the absenteeism at Fisher Body-Pontiac was usually so high that his foreman would have kissed him. He'd been indecisive all the way down Route 24 because the late September day seemed like summer. Probably the last of summer. Going into LeRoy's Bar for a quick draft was the final, critical hesitation.

He'd picked up Route 24 after coming west from Celeryville, the air so warm and the light so silken that he held the Comet GT well below the speed limit. A mile south on 24, he wheeled into Mirror Lake Grocery. He intended to eat a snack, have a beer on the way down, and maybe just give a little thought to his participation in this particular night shift.

He didn't have the heart to put spurs to the 302 engine as he slipped back into traffic. A Schlitz Tall Boy rode between his legs in a slender bag. A red-hot sausage and a pickled egg sat in a cardboard tray on the passenger-side bucket seat. The first of three pretzel sticks was clenched in the corner of his mouth like a stogie. He realized that he'd left his coffee thermos at home on the kitchen counter. Another omen.

LeRoy's Bar was strategically located on Baldwin Avenue across from Employee Gate 2. Ten acres of parking lot stretched behind it. Night shift cars baked and pinged as evening fell. Both entrances to LeRoy's were propped open with wedges of wood. A floor fan in the corner behind the pool table stood silent. Only a small, oscillating table fan on the end of the bar churned the dark, stale air. Above it, the television had been muted during the local news from Detroit. Wayne, one of the bartenders, worked on the kitchenette

side. He pulled a chain to turn on a fluorescent light. Fritch soon smelled the browning meat of the chili stick they used to start meat sauce for Coney dogs. This began to displace the accumulated funk of stale beer, tobacco, and day shift body odor.

There were only three customers in the place—two guys he didn't recognize nearly sprawled over the bar but still slurring back and forth. Probably from day shift. Then he saw Curtis Baffle from just up the assembly line in the door glass build-up operation. Curtis studied the juke box. LeRoy Petty sat further back, reading something on his desk. His girth did not quite fit the creaking swivel chair, which protested as he readjusted his buttocks. A stack of long-neck cases decorated the back wall of his small office.

"Fritch! Y'all comin' or goin'?" Curtis turned, cupping a fistful of quarters that he hadn't dropped yet. Conway Twitty "bomp, bomp, bommmmed" behind him.

"Haven't decided," Hector said, lifting himself onto a stool. "Let's see how I feel."

"It's like cookout weather. Bet they hadda shut down for relief."

"Wouldn't wanta spoil that, would I? On the other hand, I don't wanta end up with them paying me on Fridays." He waited for Wayne to notice him.

"Ya'll don't hardly miss no time no ways," Curtis said. "Me, I already got a verbal warnin'. Ya'll decide to go in, you never seen me."

"Goes without saying." Hector could not fathom why Curtis didn't simply go in, build up his door-glass then skip out at lunch. Those guys worked their asses off for four hours then clocked each

other out at the end of the shift. Maybe the first part of the process was too hard or it wasn't his turn to leave.

The bartender bounced down to Fritch's end, wiping his hands with a linen service rag. "What'll it be?"

Hector hesitated. A quick shell or a longneck of Stroh's and some more food to start soaking it up? "You gonna have the Tiger game on?"

"I dunno. They ain't catchin' the Orioles," Wayne said. "Ain't you got any money on the old guy and that woman libber? Big tennis match."

"Oh! I forgot that was tonight. Billie Jean King and Bobby Riggs."

"That ol' boy sounds like he's about half a queer his own self," called Curtis.

"Anyways. I think LeRoy wants to watch him whup her ass."

"Well, damn. O.K. Guess I'll have a Stroh's and... how about a bag of that cheese popcorn?" Fritch sighed, his mind clawing for rationalizations. The house payment had been made for the month. Check. They were starting to get some overtime as the '74 models were introduced. Check. Car insurance, though, next week. Three hours overtime already, versus missing eight hours straight time tonight. Would they dare work nine while shutting down for relief? Quality would be lousy. But if they really needed the jobs? He had to think management wouldn't hesitate. They'd bring people in tomorrow or even Sunday to make repairs out in the yard. But something was lurking, something he'd forgotten. When was the house insurance due again?

Wayne brought the beer. Fritch opened his bag of popcorn.

George Jones finished groaning out of the speakers about some guy who died and finally stopped pining over an old girlfriend. Then, why should he be surprised, “Born to be Wild” started up. Curtis Baffle, without the support of the big Wurlitzer juke, weaved toward an empty stool. “Well, shit! It *feels* like summer, don’t it?”

Fritch smiled and nodded. Summer, fall, they had run in together for him. He earned six credit hours in one Summer Session at University of Michigan-Flint Campus, then three in the next. He took Gwen on exactly one long weekend to Traverse City just before the end of the model-change break. That was their summer vacation unless you counted the two weeks Wesley spent at his grandparents’ down by Litchfield.

They went to a dinky zoo in Traverse City and then to a play at Cherry County Playhouse. Buddy Ebsen and his daughter starred in *Our Town*, then came out to tap-dance for the curtain call. It was bizarre to watch Jed Clampett hoofing around on the stage. Then Gwen couldn’t *quite* have an orgasm, so she got pissed off at *him*. He got up, cracked another Bud out of the cooler while she wept. She shed more tears back at the motel than she did when the Ebsen girl’s character died in childbirth. Wesley came home spoiled and was just now getting squared back around to bearable.

Maybe that’s what was bothering him. It was either that Wesley needed a chunk of cash to start pre-school or his own tuition refund might be ready at the front office. Just as well he hadn’t picked it up. He might have walked right back out with it. The Chief Pontiac Credit Union was just across the street from Gate One. It was closed by now.

“What channel’s that supposed t’ be on?” Wayne dragged a stepstool under the television.

“ABC’s promotin’ it. Channel 7,” LeRoy called. He stepped out of the office and closed the door, carrying a white box with “Koegel Meats” printed on it in the crook of his arm. That would be foot-long franks for the lunch rush. “They’ll be playin’ just about the time Trim Shop lunch comes in. Don’t go crankin’ that dial for the dog-ass Tigers. I don’t care what nobody says. The customer ain’t always right when I’ve made a wager.”

Fritch could see the snub-nosed handgun on LeRoy’s straining belt as he lifted the counter bridge and entered the kitchenette.

“Got it, boss,” Wayne said. “You know anything about tennis?” he asked Fritch.

“Enough to knock it back and forth. I’m O.K. up ’til forty. I get confused when it gets to tie breakers, who’s advantage it is and all that.”

“Ya’ll got to win by two, though, right?” Curtis rested his face in the palms of his hands, watching the channels go by until Wayne stopped on channel 7. Sergeant Carter shouted right in the face of Gomer Pyle, so the rerun after the news was showing. It wouldn’t be long before the preliminary jawing for the big *Battle of the Sexes* began. “Like in ping-pong?”

“Jesus H. Christ,” LeRoy muttered. Already, steam had begun to roll up from the footlongs in a broad, stainless steel pan. This was placed in a countertop space next to the meat sauce. LeRoy squatted with some difficulty to fiddle with the gas burners underneath. Then he switched on the yellow warming lamps above the service

counter. "They'll explain it on the broadcast. Don't hardly anybody watchin'll know anything 'cept it's an old hustler an' that uppity bitch. They're playin' for \$100 grand, winner take all. What more d'ya need?"

"Well, I was jus' astin,'" Curtis whined.

Wayne winked at Fritch. "You never woulda believed ol' LeRoy been divorced three times."

"Only three?" Fritch had nothing against women's rights or liberation. But then, he'd been exposed at school to the ideology and politics behind it all. He was younger, and anyway, maybe from a different cultural background than many of the auto workers.

He had never wished to be in charge of anybody or to lord it over anyone in the first place. Least of all women, of whom, he understood, he was sometimes too much in awe. Freedom was freedom, right? And shoprats were always going on about their rights and freedoms. What was good for the goose should be... well, he *thought* he believed that. Plus, look at the benefits: feathered hair, skirts any length they wanted. Or, those tight jeans that showed off their navels and pelvic bones. Hey, would anybody be bra-less without the Movement? Even Gwen left hers off and went bobbling around when she didn't have to work. Women in bars were asking men to dance. He'd seen it.

"Yeah, he got burned a couple times, for certain. Last one got a piece of the damn bar." Wayne began to set up shot glasses and other pre-ordered drinks for the lunch rush. "He can't say, no longer, 'he's a lover, not a fighter.'"

Fritch did his best to pace himself. After a second Stroh's, he

tried a glass of club soda. He didn't need to get stupid and end up with a drunk driving bust. No more days off if that happened. There were back roads he could navigate through northern Oakland County, but they weren't entirely risk free. He'd been followed before, observed by the law but still able to drive well enough for long enough while crapping in his shorts, more-or-less figuratively. His route into Lapeer County would then track along narrow gravel back roads where glare-eyed possums and coons looked him over with the same skepticism. Or, he could still go in after lunch and plead car trouble. He knew someone would see him at lunch. Luckily, his foreman was a regular at Ventura Lounge down the street. Fritch could also do the next best thing and just go on home. Send the babysitter home early and at least save Gwen a few bucks.

On the screen, preliminary buffoonery had commenced in the Astrodome. Riggs entered in a rickshaw drawn by a team of well-endowed models. Billie Jean played along, riding into the arena on a Cleopatra-throne litter held aloft by four bronzed, oiled pretty-boys.

"Turn it up!" LeRoy yelled.

Wayne put down the industrial-size bag of footlong buns and climbed up to reach the volume. It was already twenty after eight. Deanne and Toni, the lunch-rush barmaids, were just putting on their black change-aprons. Toni took over laying buns into a steamer. A row of paper sleeves waited on the top of the serving counter.

"She ain't that pretty," she said, cracking her chewing gum.

"I wouldn't sleep with either of 'em," Deanne sneered.

Now the two adversaries exchanged gag gifts. Billie Jean delivered a struggling piglet into her opponent's embrace. Then Riggs

gave her a giant Slo-Poke sucker. Fritch understood the symbolism of the pig. But, could the guy possibly be that obtuse? The sexual suggestion would be as far as LeRoy's customers would take it but it had to mean something else. Well, but he was a hustler, after all, and she was supposedly the mark. That had to be what he was getting at.

"She got some legs on her, though, huh?" Curtis mumbled. Merle Haggard was challenging someone's patriotism, still on Curtis's money, when LeRoy shut off the jukebox.

"She's a big gal," Fritch agreed. He didn't bother to waste such adjectives as 'lithe' or 'feline,' though he was reassured of his sobriety level that he'd thought of them.

A few workers had straggled in as Body Shop lunch began. Those guys had to walk from way in the back of the plant, so most of them went out the south entrance to Bonneville Lounge. Pretty soon, as the first volleys were hit between Riggs and King, the horn blared across the street. The sound, with many of the plant's windows opened, tugged momentarily at Fritch's conscience. Then the hoard came thundering out the gate as uniformed Plant Security stepped aside. The assault on the Coneys and alcohol was broken only by traffic on Baldwin and the crosswalk signal.

Drinkers tended to pile in the front door, shouting their orders or snatching drinks that were set up on the bar. Wayne and LeRoy had already added these to the tabs of regulars. Eaters lined up from the kitchenette out the back door and onto the sidewalk. The girls took their money while working between tables to bring out orders. LeRoy tonged out another armload of footlongs and added

sauce. He lifted a basket of onion rings out of the deep-fryer. After a forkful of minced onion, each customer added the condiment of choice—usually hot sauce or cayenne pepper seeds from a shaker. Some exited immediately, against the flow. Others stood against the wall, trying not to block the view of drinkers who hogged the round tables.

"Oh c'mon, you ol' bastard! Stay back!"

"She runnin' him all over lots."

"He ain't got the legs no more!"

"An' that ain't all if he's anything like my ol' man!" a lady worker cackled.

"This here's about age agin' youth much as male versus female!"

"There! There! She wudn't getting' t' that soft shit hit behind of her! That's what he's gotta do!"

"It's called a lob, dip-shit! Can't you hear the man?" another lady shouted.

"Christ! Ten minutes more 'n' I gotta run!"

"She ain't playin' his game's what they're sayin'. She's mostly layin' back."

"'Bout all they're good for though idn't it?"

"That old man ain't no fair test."

As abruptly as the lunch rush began, the shoprats stood, draining their longnecks and shells of draft. Hard-core individuals at the bar on both sides of Fritch knocked back shots of whiskey before heading to the door. Most carried their footlongs with them for later consumption.

"Fritch! Hey, I didn't see *you* when I come in!" Marty Boulanger

reached over Hector's shoulder to place an empty bottle on the bar. Marty installed tail-light moldings in an adjacent work group. They sometimes car-pooled from Celeryville when Fritch wasn't taking classes. "You was smart to skip. It's too damn nice of a night. Why don't you be a buddy and call me out? We're gonna be in there past last call."

Fritch turned halfway around on the vinyl stool cushion. "You sure? What's my story supposed to be?"

"Uh, shit. You ain't never gonna sound like my wife and she sure won't call me out," Boulanger said. "O.K., here it is. You're my brother-in-law Melvin, because Susan had to take Jr. to the Emergency. It's, it's... lemme think. O.K., make it just, like, a allergic reaction or somethin'. Uh... like a hornet sting."

"Is there anybody even *in* South Trim Office to answer the phone?"

Boulanger frowned. "They're so thin they got a couple of foremen on the line. We're writin' a shit-load of grievances. Just give it a shot. Let it ring. If it don't work out, well, ain't nothing lost."

"I can try."

"If I get clear, I'll buy a round. Stay here."

"They'd have to cover you pretty quick. I'm gonna pull out when this is over." Fritch hiked his thumb at the television where Riggs was mopping his brow as the players switched sides.

"Well, thanks anyway. I'll owe ya one."

"O.K. Just let me see if I've got this: Junior's sick. Allergic reaction. I'm Melvin, your brother-in-law, calling for your wife 'cause she's gone to Emergency. In Lapeer?"

"There it is. I better haul ass."

When the patrons from South Trim had gone back to work, Fritch remained, now finally committed to his stool and a full night of truancy. He ordered another Stroh's, his fifth at LeRoys, he believed, though well spaced. He'd been in the place nearly four hours. Then he remembered the Tall Boy guzzled on the way down. But his trips to the men's room were still made in a steady manner.

There were a few additional bodies gaping at the tennis spectacle—sub-assembly workers who had built up enough door glass or other components to allow them to skip out. Riggs, forced by King's defensive strategy to come to the net, had lost the first set, 6-4. The old hustler increased his clowning for the crowd. He clutched at straws to delay the inevitable, calling time-out for an injury. A trainer animatedly massaged and manipulated his wrist.

"Stick a fork in 'im," Curtis Baffle mumbled, before swallowing his last bite of Coney. Head unsteady on a neck in need of shaving, he wiped his mouth on the blue sleeve of his work shirt. "He's done."

Fritch tipped his beer for short sips. He dug the number for South Trim Office out of his wallet and waited for Toni to get off the pay phone which hung on the wall between the restroom doors.

As he suspected it might, the South Trim phone rang and rang. He knew that a loud buzzer above the door should alert anyone in authority out on the shop floor. Someone would answer it eventually—the General Foreman would finish putting out some fire somewhere or a line foreman nearby could dash in and take the call when he had a chance. Finally, a voice, short of breath, responded.

“Yeah, what!?”

“This South Trim Office? This where Marty Boulanger works?”

“This is where a whole buncha dumb sums-a-bitches works!”

“Who am I speaking to?”

“Who’m I speaking to? You sound familiar. This is Arnie Forfah, Assistant General Foreman except tonight I’m working repair. Even our clerk isn’t here!”

Fritch knew Forfah from when Arnie was foreman of the water-test inspectors. Fritch used to hang shields on the front of the car bodies before they entered the spray booth. The inspectors, armed with clipboards and black-lights, boarded the cars halfway through to check for leaks. Forfah was the foreman to gripe at when the shields didn’t come back fast enough on the monorail.

“Oh. Well, I need to get a message to Marty Boulanger. You don’t know where he works?”

“Yeah, I heard of him. All I can do is look him up and notify his boss. I don’t have time to chase him down in person.”

“That’s fine then. His kid got a hornet sting and swelled all up, tell him. I’m Marty’s brother-in-law. My sister had to drive the kid to Emergency in Lapeer.”

“Wow,” Forfah chuckled. “That’s a pretty good one. That one took some thought. You sure I don’t know you?”

“Listen, it’s on the up-and-up. Something bad happens and Marty wasn’t told....”

“Yeah? You a shop lawyer? Spare me the dire warning. I’ll get in touch with your... brother-in-law. No way in hell are we getting him out of here, though.”

“That’s all we’re asking, sir.”

Forfah chuckled again and hung up.

As long as he was back there, Fritch peed again before returning to his stool. Riggs had lost the second set, 6–3. Winded and perspiring heavily, he had been forced to a precarious 5–3 score in the set that could end his evening. He managed to hold serve after first double faulting, but was soon forced to deuce. Wayne tried to wake Curtis Baffle.

“C’mon now, I’m gonna have to 86 yer ass, you can’t stay in a upright position.”

“Jus’ restin’ my eyes. Ain’t this over with yet?”

“Yer just in time.”

Fritch agonized whether or not to have one more for the road. He compromised by ordering a draft. Wayne brought it as Riggs returned service of match point into the net. Billie Jean flung her racket toward the Astrodome roof. Riggs, clearly played out, managed gamely to jump the net to congratulate her. The neon buzz of beer logos behind the bar, the hum of the coolers, and the soft pulse of the fan were silenced by the pair of athletes and the cheering throng around them on television. Only the scraping of LeRoy’s steel spatula moving used grease off the grill continued unabated.

“I underestimated you,” Riggs told King. The words seemed to hang in the warm bar where none of the drinkers could mistake them.

“Well, ain’t that the shits,” said Curtis.

After finishing the draft and settling his tab, the night air Fritch stepped into was nearly sultry. The beginning sliver of a harvest

moon had climbed high enough to be seen beyond the edifice of the plant. He strolled casually in the opposite direction, happy to have parked far in the back of the Fisher Body lot. It gave him time for a walk and deep breaths.

He looked at his watch in the light of a security lamp. There was plenty of time to sit in the Comet before the night shift came out; maybe listen to the radio awhile just to make sure he was O.K. for the road. He wasn't going to get home before Gwen now, anyway, but it probably wouldn't be a good idea to fall asleep. He turned the ignition key. He would get home too early, his clothes reeking of smoke, to have worked a full shift; but not so late that he'd been out trolling. Short pay, no help with the babysitter, and he probably dropped \$20. He could only hope that Gwen had a good night of tips and that she'd buy into his rationalizations. The weather in Celeryville would have been just as fine. And if she saw the end of the tennis match that the cooks at Titus Family Restaurant had likely watched... well, she had to love *that* underdog.