

“You’ll be back.” Joe is smiling at me as if to add, “With your tail tucked between your legs,” but he knows I’m hurting, so he holds his tongue.

“I don’t think so,” I reply. “Pam’s been cheating on me the whole time we’ve been together. Says it’s a ‘lifestyle choice,’ whatever the hell that is.”

Joe extends his right hand to me. “Sorry. Let me know when you settle somewhere. I’ll give you a good reference.”

I thank him; we shake hands, and I walk to my car.

At six the next morning, I head south.

After about five hours of traversing Indiana, I cross the river into Kentucky. An hour south of Louisville, I’m hungry, so I take an exit marked *Waynedale*. The County Courthouse is ahead, sitting in the middle of a large roundabout. People on the sidewalk waiting to cross the street wave to me, a stranger. It’s your typical town square, with the whittlers and spitters sitting on benches, the law offices circling the square, and the clock tower with the bell. I’ve often wondered what it would be like to live in a small town. As pleasant as Waynedale appears, I think I’m going to find out.

I make a mental list of things to do: Find a place to eat, find a furnished room, find a job, forget Pam. The first three should be easy. The last one...

There’s a small café about a block off the main square. A flashing sign in the window says it all, *EATS*.

The café is empty except for four people. Two men and two women sit at a table together, talking quietly. When I open the door, they all look up, expectantly, but disappointment covers their faces when they don’t recognize me.

I slide into the second booth on the right, where I can sit and watch who comes through the door. Maybe Pam got up at five this morning, trailed me 355 miles south on the interstate, and is about to come into this café. I move to the other side of the booth.

One of the men appears to be about sixty, as does one of the women. The other woman, about my age, stands up and walks over to me with a menu. She is wearing one of those waitress dresses used in small cafés everywhere. The hem of the dress hits her above the knees, but not so high nor so tight as to attract attention. She doesn’t wear stockings, and her legs are pale. She is attractive without makeup. Her dirty blonde hair is pulled up on top, and she has a

pencil sticking out of it. Force of habit more than curiosity leads me to check her left hand. No ring. Why do I care?

“Hi, Hon. What can I getcha to drink?” She smiles at me. It’s a pleasant smile, just not as pretty as Pam’s. A few crows’ feet gather around her eyes.

“Tea.”

“Sweet or unsweet?” I hadn’t realized how far south I have driven and wonder if the sandwiches will be served with grits.

“Unsweet. No lemon.” Does the expression on her face say, *Yankee*? No. It says, *Damn Yankee*.

When she leaves, I am alone with my thoughts until I hear the older man ask, “You ain’t from ‘round here, are ya?”

News travels fast in small towns. I turn my attention to the source of the voice. He is a big man, and his gaze is steady. I can see it isn’t going to leave me until he gets an answer, even though he already knows I “ain’t from ‘round here.”

Even seated, it’s obvious he would tower over me. I gauge him to be about six feet four, maybe five, a good eight inches taller than my five feet eight. His hair is snow white and he has a scraggly beard that might have a bird’s nest in it. He doesn’t have a single tooth in his mouth, and I remember a joke we used to tell in school about the toothbrush being invented in Kentucky because if it had been invented anywhere else it would be called a teethbrush. His belly is massive and pushes hard against his coveralls, which could use an oil change. Under them, he wears a long-sleeved shirt that appears to be the top half of a set of long underwear. Something is odd about his glasses, but I can’t figure out what it is until, as if on cue, he reaches through the left pane to scratch his eyelid and I realize the lens on that side is missing.

“No, I’m not from around here. I’m looking for work, and a place to live.”

“Well, there ain’t much work in this town, but if you want a room, when you leave outta here, go left two blocks to Lincoln Street, turn left and watch for the ‘Rooms’ sign on the right. They got a room available. Damn good people, too.”

“Thanks. I’ll check into that. My name’s Bob.”

“Hey, Bob. I’m Steve. This here’s my wife, Lou.”

I nod at Lou; she returns it.

She’s as round as she is tall, with dark hair that has to get its color from a bottle.

Although much shorter than Steve, she is still tall for a woman, about my height. Her clothes are as old as Steve's but much cleaner. She appears to be a person who takes great pride in her appearance, and she gives me a smile which resembles the waitress's.

Steve jerks his head toward the other man and says, "This here's my brother, Squat. We call him Squat 'cause when he was about five I told him, 'Boy, you don't know squat.' He told me, 'Do so. I Squat!' After that, he wouldn't answer to anything else. Been Squat so long I don't reckon I remember his real name."

Squat looks as if he's heard the explanation of his name a few too many times but seems totally at peace with his surroundings, the company, and me. He waves without looking. He's a little heavy, with a short haircut and muscular arms and appears to be about ten years younger than Steve. It's hard to tell, though, since my view is from his side. I suspect he might be mentally challenged, especially after Steve's explanation of his name.

As the waitress approaches my booth with a large glass of tea, Steve proclaims proudly, "And that's our daughter, Sally. She owns this place and makes a good livin'. Purty thang, ain't she?"

Sally shoots daggers in Steve's direction and says, "Papa, hush!" She, too, seems to have heard that introduction a few too many times, and she *does* take offense. She lays a menu in front of me and cautions, "Don't mind him." Turning her head so her voice will carry to the rest of the room, she raises it and continues, "He's a cantankerous old cuss." Then, looking at me, she says, "I'll give you a minute to decide."

She walks back to the table where her parents and Uncle Squat are sitting, and I can hear her quietly fussing at her father for the way he put her on display. "Like I was a cow in the county fair," she grumbles.

Steve tells her that she needn't worry; I didn't look interested in her, anyway. Her fussing rises an octave. If I don't order soon, we might have a full-blown family night at the fights, so I wave to Sally to come back over.

"What's good?"

"My specialty is fast. If you want good, there's a steak house eight miles over in Grove's Point. You want fast, I can fix you a chicken sandwich with chips, an' it'll fill ya up."

"I'll have a chicken sandwich with chips."

"Good choice." Did Sally wink at me? Didn't matter, Papa was right. I'm not

interested in anybody this soon. She turns and walks to a counter where she puts my order on a spindle, spins it around for the cook, then goes back to the table with her family.

Steve isn't ready to let go of me yet. "What in the world brings you to Waynedale without a job?"

"I wanted to get away."

"From what?"

Sally glances at me. Her expression says she knows exactly what I wanted to get away from. "Papa," she says, looking back at Steve, "let the man alone. He don't owe you his life story."

But I feel comfortable talking to this man who is so accessible, so I reply, "I've always wanted to live in a small town. I thought it was time I tried it."

"Where you been livin'?"

"Chicago."

"Yeah, we're a little smaller than Chicago." Despite his gross understatement, Steve's expression is impassive.

Without even looking in my direction, Lou announces, "Chicago's too big for me. I'm a small-town girl. Always have been, always will be. Ain't that right, Stevie?"

Steve neither confirms nor denies her statement. He is on a fact-gathering mission, and he hasn't gathered all his facts yet. "What kind of work you do?"

"Auto mechanic."

Squat immediately turns and stares at me, a smile creasing his cheeks, which are wrinkled in a way that only comes from smiling a lot.

"Best place in town for repairs is Jacob's about three blocks from here. Come to think of it, it's the *only* place. Don't think he's hirin', though." He looks at Squat and asks, "Jacob hiring?"

Squat shakes his head and returns his attention to his sandwich.

Sally and Lou have their heads together, talking low, so Steve and I chat back and forth.

"I don't know how you stand all that snow in Chicago," he says.

"You get used to it."

"Small towns are better. When you need help, everybody's there."

“But there are more people to call on in Chicago.”

“You better learn to hunt.”

“I’m a city boy.”

“Not if you’re gonna live here.”

The cook appears behind the counter between the diner and the kitchen, places a plate on the counter, and calls, “Order up.”

As Sally sets the sandwich in front of me, I thank her then mentally go over my to-do list. I am about to eat and have a lead on a room and a job. The job lead isn’t good, but it’s a start. I’ll have to wait on solving the fourth item.

Squat is content to wait, too. He glances around without ever making eye contact with me then finishes the sandwich he’s been working on since I walked in.

Steve, Lou, and Sally resume their quiet conversation.

Sally is right. The sandwich won’t win any awards, but it was fast and it fills me up. Just as I finish it, Steve, Lou, and Squat get up to leave and Steve reminds, “Don’t forget to see about that room on Lincoln Street.”

I wave and say, “I won’t.”

Sally, not the least bit scarred by Steve’s attempts at matchmaking, kisses each of them on the cheek.

As they go out the door, Squat raises his arm and waves at me without a word or a look.

I wave back, but he has his back turned to me, so I call out, “Bye, Squat.”

He again waves without turning.

Sally and I are alone in the diner except for the unseen cook, but before either of us can say anything, another group comes in. They could be the coffee klatch of Waynedale, turned loose for the afternoon. Five women, all appearing to be in their sixties or seventies, laughing, talking, and glancing at me, pull two tables together in the middle of the café and proceed to hold court, with many a sideways glance at me.

As Sally walks around them passing out menus, she is the recipient of a few nudges designed to send her in my direction.

After the third push, she informs them, “Next one of you that sticks her bony hand in my ribs is gonna pull back a bloody stump.”

The women cackle.

“Sally, you’ve got to be out there. You gotta strut your stuff.” This from the one whom I would guess has strutted more stuff than the other four combined.

“I tell you every time you come in here, I don’t have any ‘stuff’ to strut, and I got no interest in struttin’ it, anyway.” It’s good-natured teasing, but Sally appears in no mood. I wonder if she’s ever been in the mood.

I can understand where she’s coming from, though. I haven’t been in town an hour, and Sally’s father, and now this gang of five have tried to push her into my arms, figuratively and literally.

I don’t revel in all the attention, either, although I had encouraged Steve when I answered his questions. But I am embarrassed for Sally. I get up and walk to the cash register to pay my bill.

“I’m sorry for all the commotion,” Sally reveals as she takes my money. Her eyes show nervousness.

“Not your fault. People sure are interested in your private life, though.”

“Yeah, welcome to Mayberry. You can’t smoke a cigarette without someone talkin’ about your breath. You sure you wanna stay here?”

“No, but I’m sure I’ll give it a chance. Besides, I don’t smoke.”

She laughs a self-conscious chuckle, and for the first time, I think that she may not be put off by attention from me, just from the unsolicited advice from Papa and the women on how to get that attention.

The one I’ve identified as the gang leader is telling the others, “So I told him, ‘Honey, if you’re gonna get engaged, get her a flawless diamond. They hock for a lot more!’ ”

Laughter, interspersed with comments like, “Land sakes,” “Lawdie,” and “Oh, Clare, you are the darnedest” fill the café.

I smile again at Sally, who is holding my change out to me. I tell her to keep it and turn toward the door.

As I pass the table where the ladies sit, I hear, “Bye, now,” “Her name’s Sally,” “Don’t be a stranger,” and “Y’all come back,” the last one despite me being by myself.

As I close the door, I hear gales of laughter. I walk to the car, smiling.