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The Store

By Mike Augusta

Bill had already arrived by five minutes to eight, and was wiping down his new Grand Prix when Stanley pulled in next to him. Stanley's rusty Datsun sputtered stubbornly, refusing to quit, even as he hauled himself stiffly upright and out of the car. "Sounding kinda rough," Bill vollied across the gleaming expanse of the Oldsmobile's hood. "Oughtta check out that carburetor." Stanley quickly edged in a broad, tired "G'mornin." to Bill's cool greeting. There was a pause as they fumbled in trouser pockets for keys and scanned the empty palm lined street. "You know, it's damned cold," Bill said, almost bitterly, as they began unlocking the steel grating that covered the two little display windows and the front door. After Bill had stuck the faded American flag's flimsy aluminum standard into its slot in the crumbling stucco wall, another working day started, indistinguishable from any other working day of the ten years that they had been operating the little army-navy store for the boss up in Chicago. "Yup, down to fifty two last night," Stanley chided, bravely unzipping his parka.

As the cowbell on the front door signalled their arrival, a two inch long palmetto bug scurried across the concrete floor, disappearing beneath a counter of \$1.99 Taiwanese work shirts. The store was divided into two small, rectangular rooms, each one crammed with piles of dungarees, cowboy shirts, surplus fatigues, boots, hardware, plumbing and camping supplies, and the handguns, locked up in the glass case behind the cash register. The few bare bulbs failed to cast light into the many recesses where the helmet liners, candles and machetes lay stacked in dusty disorder. Bill pushed a dust mop through the narrow aisles while Stanley retrieved the loose bills and change from their overnight hiding place under the step that led to the warehouse. The warehouse was Bill's domain, where he struggled with his calculator and price tags to get the 33% markup for the boss. Bill's only diversion was the stack of old Playboys under a case of ammunition. Once Bill had opened the delivery door, and the air-conditioner and transistor radio were turned on, they were ready for the first customer.

At eight-thirty the cowbell jingled again, but it was only Toby, the boss's nineteen year old nephew. Bill and Stanley greeted him with disinterested courtesy, and Toby assumed his position at the knife case, already engrossed in his newspaper and orange juice. Bill eyed him with contempt, then, shaking his head and muttering "Oh me," went back into the warehouse to get a can of diet soda out of the refrigerator.

"You breaking into those already?" Stanley ribbed him on his return.

"Yup, Safeway's got 'em ninety nine cents an eight pack," Bill responded defensively. "Have to pick me up a couple on lunch hour."

At five to nine the cowbell chimed again and an ancient, bent black man entered slowly, wearing knee length rubber boots and carrying a long, thin bundle wrapped in grey, brown paper.

"Got any shawgun shayls?"

"Sure do, Watcha need?" Ben straightened from writing a letter on his counter and went over to the ammo shelf.

"Shawgun shayls. Uh. boyd shot,"

"What kind of gun you got?" Ben pressed further. The black man began unwrapping the bundle, revealing a rusty old .410, a Pierce, out of production for half a century. Stanley and Bill casually took in the gun, veiling their interest with throat clearing and head scratching. Bill took it confidentially in his hands, turning over the little single barrel and smiling at the pocked steel and the butchered stock. Without comment he pushed past Stanley to consult the used gun digest. Keeping his back to Stanley and the black man, Bill pored through the obscure brands, the Sinter's and the Appletons, until he found the Pierce Sporter, available from 1926 to 1928 in .20 and .410 gauges, original retail, \$11.95. The price for one in excellent condition was put at \$300 and up. Bill figured he could clean this one up and get a C-note out of some tourist for it. "Yup. Pretty beat up," Bill said, turning around.

"We could go twenty on it."

"Oh no suh, I need shayls. I doanwan sell it."

"You shot that thing?" Stanley chimed in, wanting a piece of the action.

"Oh yeah, I gest some rabbit. Yeah, down Immokalee they's lotsa rabbit. Gimme boxsa shayls."

"Sevens or tens?"

"I take sevens."

"OK, that's five and a quarter."

"Whooe, five an'a quotah? Shee." The black man reached deeply into his pocket and pulled out a thickly layered stack of wallet. Ben Franklin emerged from a strata of U.S. mint green, and was tossed casually on the counter by the shellac smooth hands. Bill and Stanley's eyes followed the trajectory from billfold to counter with several blinks. Bill coldly counted out, "Change is six, seven, eight, nine, ten, thirty, fifty, thank you, sir."

The bills disappeared into the deep pocket and the black man flashed a grin of several strong thick teeth. "I be gettin some rabbit now."

Stanley walked over to the door when the old mn was gone and muttered, "Jeez, ya see the wad that ol' bugger had?"

"Yup, them old timers always got the bankrolls," Bill replied icily, stalking off to the warehouse to put price tags on a new shipment of field jackets. Stanley went back to his letter, a long, carefully penned message to his sister back in Ontario, where Stanley had been born. Stanley had spent his first twenty-five years there, through some good, but more often lean, times in the shadow of the London Smelting Company's towering stacks. He escaped to the Merchant Marine just in time for World War Two, and rose to Ensign on the corvette 'Chrysalis', escorting freighters full of Lend Lease C-rations and blankets to Glasgow, and twice Murmansk. Stanley survived the war

to join the Canadian liquor control board, and while he couldn't control it in his own life, he and his wife Noan were meeting ends in the industrial pall of Ingersoll, getting by until his older brother called from Florida and filled his head with warm sun and tropical exotica, and he and Noan were packing for Lee County, Florida to find their place in the sun. Stanley had started out at Guy's Army-Navy in 1969, at two-ninety an hour six days a week. Ten years later, having moved up to four dollars, he was still in the store every Monday through Saturday. Stanley took care of the books and bank deposits and left Bill to himself in the warehouse, only consulting him about ordering. Stanley spent most of his days leaning on the showcase that held the holsters and other leather goods, smoking his Kents and drinking ice water, his short body bent over the counter as he rubbed his bald head with both arthritic hands. Stanley would occasionally fall asleep in this position until the cowbell jangled and he would groggily snap on a cordial smile, looking for the right opportunity to slip in an easy going "Hep ya?"

Stanley must have been dozing when the bell jangled. He readied for the strike, but the customer, a high-schooler with a crew cut, stopped right at the knife case where Toby always perched. The crewcutted boy was hard line R.O.T.C. and was out to equip. He stared longingly at the Ka-bar fighting knife and asked with wonder if it really was Marine issue. Toby assured him it was and began pulling out knives; folding knives, drop points, Gurkhas and even the brass knuckle bayonets issued to doughboys in the First World War. The crewcutted boy had two hundred dollars in his sweaty palm and Toby knew he would probably blow it all. Off to the side, Stanley and Bill silently wished they would get to ring up the sale. They listened with disgust as Toby began his spiel about .223 ammo, rip stop camouflage, rocket boxes, military insignia and the latest faigue caps. "Look at him tearing up the whole damned store," Bill mumbled in Toby's direction, not intending it for Stanley to hear but just for the pleasure of saying it out loud. When Toby was ringing up the Ka-bar, jump boots, an ammo belt and a jungle fatigue suit, Stanley and Bill eyed him contemptuously from the boot department.

Bill left for lunch at eleven thirty. "Gonna pick up my Fury," Bill mumbled as he walked out the door. Stanley and Toby didn't look up. Bill walked down the street to Roger's Used Car Emporium, as he did on most of his lunch hours.

When Bill had gone an uneasy quiet came over the store. Stanley didn't like being alone with Toby and dreaded his smart assed conversation. At least Bill could respect a man's silence. Stanley began doodling on a scrap of paper, rearranging the letters of PENITENTIARY to form new words. He was soon stuck, so he went back to the warehouse to refill his ice water. When he returned, Toby was hastily scribbling in words, "Irate, tenet, tapir, oh man, can't get striate. Oh hey Stanley, got a few more for you," Toby said and shuffled back over to the knife case. Stanley grabbed the pocket Webster's when Toby was out of sight and checked off the

additions. He crumpled up the paper and glumly lit a Kent. Holding his head in his hands, he almost wished Bill would come back. He pictured Bill down at the car lot, looking under hoods and feeling for rust in tire wells. Bill sure was car crazy, Stanley thought, wiping the damned thing off after it rained, bringing the hubcaps into the warehouse to steel wool the tar off them, taking into the shop at the slightest sign of trouble. Although he'd worked with Bill for ten years, Stanley rarely saw him away from the store and they had never been to each other's house. Stanley's main interests were his two orange trees, his hydroponic tomatoes and the Shriners, while Bill and his wife Rene took care of her eighty year old mother, watched television and traded cars. They had heard each other's life stories so many times they knew all the punch lines, climaxes and let downs, so lately their conversation centered mainly on the weather, the day's paper, and Toby, when he was away at lunch. Their mutual dislike of the boss's nephew had become their common cause. Bill relished telling Toby about the hardships of his life; Cuba, Missouri during the depression, having to leave college after one semester when his Baptist minister father died, sitting out the war in a flak battery in the Aleutians, losing his jewelry store when his first wife divorced him, fleeing to Florida. Stanley didn't like hearing Bills' morbid stories, but he was grimly pleased when Bill would corner Toby with his unsentimental bitterness. Bill could fill the store with frustration and broken dreams, heaping them on Toby, and then bursting into a Woodie Guthrie lyric, he'd stalk back to the warehouse, satisfied with the dark shadow he'd cast.

A Winnebago pulled up to the store and two couples from Michigan piled out. The wives tried on gob hats and laughed at each other in the little mirror while Toby and Stanley trailed them, eager to assist. Stanley corralled one of the husbands to ask him about the Winnebago. It was Stanley's dream to someday return to Ontario in such a camper, and maybe go west to Las Vegas. Just one last trip, nothing fancy. When the man from Michigan said he'd put out \$17,000 and was getting maybe seven miles to the gallon, Stanley longingly rubbed his thin wallet through his double knit slacks and felt where the sole of his right shoe was splitting. Stanley numbly nodded at the tourists, who bought some mink oil and told him how nice his store was. Stanley let it go at that.

When Bill returned from lunch he was in unusually good spirits. He had traded in his wife's Catalina for \$500 and a Fury with less mileage on it.

"Yup, got the best of old Roger on that one," Bill exulted as he washed his hands in the small sink under the gun case. When he'd gone to the warehouse, Stanley quickly edged up to the front door and nonchalantly took in the big, brown Plymouth. He noticed the glare off the new paint job and compared it to the rusty flanks of his battered little Datsun. Stanley didn't give a damn about cars.

"Only thirty seven thou on it.", Bill said proudly, returning with a can of diet soda.

"A real beauty." Stanley was noncommittal. "Got to get the vinyl patched up, it's got a few cracks in it. Got to get Roger to clean out the air conditioning too, but the V-8's got some jump to it. That baby really moves." "A real beauty.", Stanley repeated, losing interest.

"What a boat. You're going to be putting a lot of gas in that monster. Should have gotten a Volkswagen.", Toby said derisively from the knife case.

"Aw, you don't know what you're talking about." The color rose in Bill's tight skinned face. His glance was a carbon steel knife blade that pinned Toby's eyes to his newspaper, draining the fight from him. Toby and Bill had often had head butting sessions over American versus foreign cars, and Toby liked to tell Bill about the mileage he got in his father's Volvo wagon. Bill was grinding his teeth when he pushed through the front door to go look once more at the Plymouth's engine. Bill stayed outside for a half hour, tinkering with the gas line while his anger subsided. Toby tried to get Stanley to comment on the gas guzzling behemoth, but Stanley wasn't about to give him the satisfaction. There were no customers all afternoon, so while Bill inspected his engine, Stanley dozed on his display case and Toby read Newsweek. Just before closing time, Bill shuffled back into the store. He leaned against the wall behind Stanley and pulled the five hundred in cash out of his pocket. What the hell is he wavin that around for?, Stanley wondered. It was more than both of them took home in a week. Bill fingered the cash a little longer and then jammed it into his pocket. The Chessie System's 4:43 rumbled by, hauling brush out of Big Cypress to be used for landfill in a retirement development down the coast. The store rocked while the locomotives lumbered past. The ensuing silence was tired and heavy. "Lost Rene's mother last night, Stanley."

The words hung as if on a clothesline while Bill stared at his shoes. Stanley opened his eyes wide and straightened his creaking back. Toby's head popped up from behind the Old Timer's knife display. The temperature soared as the ceiling crammed down on Stanley, forcing him to say something. "Huh?" "Yup, the old girl just. We hadn't counted on it so soon. Had to trade the car to cover it. She didn't eat nothing but grease, ya know, dip her bread in the fryin' pan after we was done cooking sausages. Peein' all over herself in the middle of the night. Ohh me.", Bill sighed. "I'm gonna miss that damn girl."

Toby started to make like he was going to come over and say something. Stanley glared at him. If he says anything I'll break his face, Stanley fumed. Toby sensed the tension of the moment and kept his distance.

Bill was still leaning against the wall talking to himself when Stanley and Toby started turning off the lights and locked up the freight door. When the change and bills were stashed under the loose step, the three of them went out the front door, locking it and the grating behind them. A thunderstorm was building up, heavy and stifling. Toby got into his car and raced off without a word. Bill and Stanley stood silently, looking down the empty street at the thunderheads stacking up over the river. Stanley felt he should ask Bill and Rene to come over to his place for dinner, or maybe he and Noan should drop by Bill's later in the evening. Bill felt bad about subjecting Stanley to his problems. Both men felt they should talk, but throats were dry and words were elusive. Stanley suddenly patted Bill on the back and stuck out his hand. "I'm sorry, Bill." Stanley said with genuine feeling, as they shook. "Hey, we'll see ya in the mornon'." Bill's eyes cleared and sparkled as he looked into Stanley's. "Yeah, 'night Stan. See ya in the mornin'."