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Telling an Old Joke is All in the Punch Line

There are these four guys sitting in a bar. Actually Chet and Kyle are playing eight ball on a six-foot, quarter-operated table. Ray, Raymond; Robert, Bobby; Chester, Chet; and Kyle play the game in a perpetual rotation that has been going on for over a year now. They clean up after work in their own way and wander down to this neighborhood tavern. They do this a couple nights a week, coming home from their respective jobs to small places they've established as warehouses for their personal property. Bobby keeps a bedroom at his parent's house. Kyle and Chet have small one-bedroom uppers after getting booted from a girlfriend's place and a three-bedroom starter home of a now ex-wife. Ray is buying an eighty-foot singlewide. It's used, but he got a deal. Only thing he doesn't like is that now he has to drive in from the north towns.

Bobby is sitting with his back against the bar watching his two buddies play. He's clutching a bottle of beer and a cigarette in his right hand, holding on to the neck with the third finger and pinkie, using his thumb as a sort of cantilever, the cigarette squeezed between his index and second finger. He takes a drink then a drag in almost one movement, in a practiced way that he thinks some girls think is cool. He's already called next, having placed his money in the slot.

The tavern stands in mid Buffalo off Delaware on Richmond Street, old and stained with the life of generations of working-class customers trying to find a few hours away from the perpetual worry of eking out a living, of putting one socially accepted foot in front of another. It's wedged into a building that is wedged onto an old city block. The establishment is long and narrow, with the bar toward the back along the side and tables up front near the window so the few customers can look out on the street where, if the seasons aren't changing, the walkers-by are. Shadows of privacy or loneliness, whatever the pleasure, accumulate like cobwebs. And with the old heating and the two rainy seasons, spring and fall, the very fiber of the place exudes that old tavern musty odor. It's been open for decades despite the fact it's got no reason to stay open but low rent and no help to pay to wait on the sporadic flow of customers willing to do without amenities in exchange for cheap drinks.

Two TV's sitting on high shelves are tuned to ESPN with the sound off. Ray is telling the guys this joke he heard, but actually thinking about the fact he's getting hungry and about getting something to eat, but he's not crazy about eating at a bar. He drives an eight-year old pickup truck and lives in a small cramped two-bedroom upstairs apartment until he closes on the singlewide, works as a line inspector checking the same parts day in and day out. He insists on a couple of things in his life, just to know he hasn't sunk quite as low as his buddies. One is eating food you need a knife and fork for and doesn't come on paper plates or in Styrofoam containers. The other is never lowering his standard in women even if it means most of his life he's alone.

"So where was I," Ray says. Before anyone can tell him, he says, "Yeah. This girl walks into a bar." They're really not paying much attention to him, but that's just because he's told them this part before. "She says to the bartender, 'set me up with ten bottles of Miller.'"

Ray waits a second to see if he's gotten their attention back, thinking how he'd love to go to a restaurant he knows where they serve decent steaks with a huge baked potato and more sour cream than a guy can stand, but he figures his chances of getting his buddies to go sit at a table are almost nil, seeing how they like to play pool and have a lot of bills, which keeps them in the hamburger and cheap beer category.

Bobby and Chet turn their heads in his direction. Kyle, who is shooting, just glances toward him for a second.

"The bartender looks at the girl and asks, 'you want ten bottles of Miller beer?'" Ray reaches for his bottle but just holds it in anticipation of drinking it right after the punch line. "She says, 'yep, line them right up here on the bar.'"

It's times like these that Ray really wishes he had a woman. Not that he wants to tell a joke to her. He's pretty tired of jokes as entertainment on a Friday night. He wants someone to take to a nice place and have a decent conversation, one that doesn't involve some sort of masculine verbal jostling. There are other times he'd like a woman, too, but he tries not to think of those. A steady woman would solve a lot of his problems. She'd create just as many, he tells himself.

"Where's what's-her-face?" Kyle asks Bobby, as if he's reading Ray's mind. For a second Ray's surprised, but then he realizes they're all thinking about women. Chet turns around, Ray figures, just to see if Bobby's got a good answer rather than what it might actually be.

"Who?" Bobby says back, not moving other than gesturing with his full hand. He kisses his bottle like a lover, taking a slow swig, and then with a twist of his wrist he presses the filter of his cigarette against his lips. Without speaking he holds everything over the ashtray for a second, knocking the ash off with a flick of his thumb against the filter. He does it nonchalantly like there's no way he could miss.

“Yeah, where’s what-her puss?” Chet says, leaning lightly on his pool stick. He’s back lit by a lighted sign, one half clock, one half beer advertisement. A half-dozen clocks advertising beer hang on the walls of the bar. Ray sees a certain irony in this, how people are constantly reminded that they’re wasting their lives in here.

Kyle comes up out of his shooting crouch. He blinks several times from the change of light now being outside the bright luminescent cone cast onto the table by the cheap florescent light hung from the acoustic tiled ceiling by two anorexic chains. “The good-looking little one,” he says. He accidentally taps the lamp with his stick. Blue dust accumulated from years of single men blowing away the extra chalk for the tips of the cue stick, comes floating slowly down like the plastic snow in one of those little Christmas scenes inside a plastic bubble filled with water and plastic flakes.

Ray is close enough to see Bobby’s eyes twitch minutely before he gets himself together. Ray knows what is going to get said is probably a lie.

“Gone,” Bobby says, waving his beer and cigarette. “Dumped the bitch.”

“Dumped you, most likely,” Ray says. He takes a quick drink from his bottle, wanting to get back to his joke.

Bobby flicks him off and everybody laughs. Ray laughs too but he’s not sure if Chet and Kyle are laughing at him because he just got flicked off, or Bobby, because the gesture is tantamount to an admission that he’s just lost another one.

Kyle sets back down in his crouch and shoots, missing the side pocket with the nine ball. Chet walks around the table to see his best shot while Kyle chalks up. Chet lays his stick against the rail and goes to sight down it, but comes up gazing across the long room. Ray turns to see the new barkeep, Meagan,

bending over to wipe a table. She's rubbing hard on something, which has got her butt moving forward and backward. The four men stare for a minute until she straightens up and then they look in different directions while she scoots behind the bar, disappearing into the kitchen.

Bobby has already called dibs on her and Ray thinks that he's getting damn tired of Bobby calling dibs on all the good-looking ones, except Bobby calls dibs on all the girls good looking or not. What really pisses him off is that most of them fall for Bobby's bullshit for a while and then they skedaddle. Ray has watched all three of his buddies hit on Meagan more than once and each time she shut them down. Behind her back they call her a stuck-up bitch, but that doesn't keep them from coming up with some new line. Only now they try to do it when nobody is looking. She's getting to be a challenge, or more so, Ray thinks, a trophy. Ray hit on her once, almost thinking he had to, never once thinking she'd take him up on his offer. He'd been correct. He knows that whoever succeeds in getting Meagan to go out with him will be hot shit around the others. Of course that guy will imply he got her in the sack. Ray knows he'd treat her right. He'll never get the chance, but most times he never gets the chance to treat any woman right.

Meagan rushes out of the kitchen and bounces to a stop across the bar from Ray and Bobby. "You guys okay," she asks.

Bobby leans back against the bar and peers over his right shoulder. "Better than okay," he says. Kyle and Chet pretend to attempt to smother up a couple of guffaws with the back of their wrists.

Ray notices that the corners of Meagan's smile droop a little.

She steps to her right so she's directly across from him. "How about you?" she asks.

Bobby giggles a little.

Ray's supposed to say something witty and slightly off-color, but he can't think of anything when he's staring at her little-girl angel face with blue eyes he's seen some nights just before sleep. So he shakes his bottle and contemplates tying one on, but that's getting old. "Naw, thanks," he says.

Meagan is staring at something behind him, up and to his left and he figures it's one of the clocks.

It takes her a couple of seconds to snap back to attention and a few more to remember what he said. She says, "Tony will be here in fifteen. Kitchen will be open." She pats the bar twice in front of Ray. "If you want something just yell." She smiles at Ray.

He smiles back thinking that maybe she's taken a liking to him.

Bobby says, "Honey, I've been yelling."

Meagan's still smiling as she turns back to the kitchen, but Ray knows the smile is already gone. The four men stare silently at the space where Meagan had been as if trying to conjure her back up.

"Anyhow," Ray says. "The girl drinks the ten Millers and passes out." He holds his arm straight up at the elbow and slowly flops it over like a falling tree or girl.

High-pitched giggles and silk-smooth voices of more females entering the bar fill the empty space between the walls, ceiling and floor like a flash flood. The sound goes through Ray like a low-voltage shock. It's unusual for girls to be coming in at this time of day, actually for any time of day in this bar. Ray figures it's one of the reasons the guys chose the place, a sort of respite from the romance wars. He swings his barstool around one hundred eighty degrees to get a good look at them. The girls seem to have come in three sizes; a short one; a tall, skinny one; and a fairly stocky one who lets the door slam shut behind her.

The women snake around the tables. They all wear the same color pullover shirt, a burnt orange with something printed on the left side above their breasts,. The short one touches the top of a table with

one finger and gazes at the other two for affirmation. The stocky girl nods while the tallest girl pulls out a chair. The all have long hair in varying degrees of brown. Ray has already surmised that they work together and they're trying out a new bar probably someplace in the neighborhood of their jobs or at least on the way home for one or two of them.

"Well, well, well," Bobby says, sliding up on his barstool. Bobby says it in some weird accent that Ray figures is a poor attempt at imitating a movie vampire or a Snidely Whiplash sort of villain. It just reassures him that his assessment of Bobby's intelligence isn't far off.

Kyle and Chet seem to have lost track of the game, or interest in it anyhow. Ray takes a drink from his longneck while still gazing at the girls. It splits his vision like one of those old stereoscopes. The short one sits with her back toward the men. The tall one and the stocky girl glare quickly toward them while Ray is still trying to focus past his bottle. He suddenly gets a vision of what he looks like. He puts the bottle down and glances away. "Anyhow," Ray says, "where was I?"

Bobby says, "Telling some stupid joke."

"What do you mean, stupid," Ray says.

Kyle suddenly starts chalking up, rubbing the little blue square against the end of the stick, attempting to concentrate on the tip. "We already know the ending."

"No you don't," Ray says back, still a bit embarrassed at looking like a fool to the girls, already.

Bobby leans forward and glances down at the girls. "We can figure it out." He smiles at them but they don't seem to notice.

Ray looks down to the three ladies. The distance between him and the girls is only about twenty feet but he realizes he has no ability to traverse it and that it's too late for the joke. Once the girls walked into the

bar, everything changed, but he thinks, maybe for the better. There's always a chance. Can't get shut down forever. He knows his only hope, though, is to send Bobby as point man, which he thinks shouldn't be that hard seeing how Bobby never has a clue when he's out-classed and he's definitely out-classed. They all are. Bobby's built up the reputation of being a ladies' man, mostly through his own bullshit, bragging and the like. Ray knows that if he sets him up, there's no way Bobby can get out of it.

Ray turns to Bobby and says, "Fine, you're up, smart ass."

Kyle looks right at Bobby and says, "Ray's right, I think we need to get to know them." The way he says it Ray knows it's a challenge for Bobby to put it on the line and he's not surprised at all that they're all thinking the same thing. Ray is already figuring that there's a problem, three girls, four guys.

"Ok," Bobby says. "Give me a minute."

"What the hell you need a minute for?" Ray says. "Just go get 'em."

Bobby takes another drink as if he's not worried about it at all, but Ray is close enough to see the way he gulps his beer. He knows the guy is nervous. "Need a plan," Bobby says.

Chet is back in his shooting crouch and he leans his forehead against the rail as if the stupidity of what Bobby just said has blown his concentration.

"Fine," Bobby says. "You guys go out there and do it." He points with his beer/cigarette hand toward the women who Ray has noticed have glanced at them several times. "See how you make out. At least I get something once in a while," Bobby says.

And that's what puzzles Ray. Bobby's decent looking. He's got that lead-singer-from-a-rock-band, boyish look where he could be a skateboarder or college student or any of those cool types. He's the shortest of the four of them, but that seems to work in his favor too. He doesn't seem to have much trouble getting

women and some of them seem pretty nice, but he never keeps them. It isn't like they catch him screwing around on them, although Bobby does or will if given half a chance. It's just that he sort of ignores his woman once he's got her. The longest Ray remembers one sticking around was a year.

Chet fires off a shot and Ray hears the miss-cue and the ball goes spinning across the table like a tiny white planet whirling out of control in some green, felt-covered solar system.

Kyle goes down to line up the next shot. He's smiling and Ray sees he's got only one ball left on the table, an easy shot with draw to line up the eight ball. But Chet is smiling too and Ray's starting to think he's playing a bigger game. Kyle drops in the eight and Bobby slides off his stool.

Chet says, "Let Ray take your spot. You've got some cattin' to do."

Bobby stares at Chet for a few seconds then glances at the three girls who are now getting drink orders from Meagan, all smiling and laughing like they've known each other for years.

Ray can't understand how women do it, just settle in to each other like that. He walks over and takes the stick from Chet and nods in the direction of the girls. "They didn't ask for menus which might mean they aren't planning to stick around long." It's a warning for Bobby to get a move on or Kyle or Chet to kick his butt. Ray knows he's the smartest of the bunch, not just because he almost finished a four-year degree and only Bobby even attempted to go to the community college, mostly for the girls and parties, but by observation and how the other three seem always to be screwing up their lives. He also knows, through painful observation, that he's the least good-looking of the bunch, or he's got something that doesn't appeal to most women. It's why they hang together. In some ways they're all screw-ups even if the others won't admit it. Everyone else, though, seems to be a leader except him. That is, if someone says something the rest take it for gospel truth. He says something, they think it's all bullshit, so he usually has to put it in some way

the rest of them can swallow, like a suggestion, which they always turn down but come up with later on as if it had been their idea in the first place. Of course his failure to find a woman, any woman, is legendary among the four.

Bobby glances down the bar to the girls again. The short one moves her chair back and starts to stand. Bobby sets his bottle on the bar. He drags hard on his cigarette and snuffs it out in the ashtray. He blows the smoke out his nostrils in one of those long sighs like a gunfighter at high noon. He walks away but seems to be heading for the bathroom when he accidentally bumps into the girl who seems to have been heading there also. They talk for a few seconds. Bobby is giving her one of his smiles where the girl can't help but smile back, and then they go do their business. She is back sitting in her chair with the other two friends by the time Bobby is done. He walks straight to their table and takes the fourth chair as if he's known them all his life.

"Son of a bitch's gone and done it," Kyle says. "Can you believe that?"

Ray can, but for some reason the girls being so easy disappoints him. "So," he says, "which one loses." He nods towards the table as he jams in the coin receiver on the side of the pool table. The sound of pool balls falling echoes through the bar and somehow they sound like the antithesis of the girls' laughter.

"Huh?" Chet says, and then seems to catch Ray's drift. "You do."

"No way," Ray says. "You two already had your turn." He's speaking about the fact that Kyle has two kids and an ex-wife while Chet has one kid with an ex-girlfriend.

Kyle smirks at him. "You mean the ex?" Kyle says. "Tell you what Ray, give you her phone number. You can go over there right now and take her and those kids off of my hands."

“Sorry, man, but she’s used and abused,” Ray says, but he’s already tried it a couple of times after he heard she was going for a divorce. He’d heard divorcees were desperate. He found out she wasn’t that hard up. And Chet’s woman was already replacing him before she threw him out. Ray had seen Bobby and Kyle’s cars over there on different nights while Chet worked the late shift.

“Besides,” Chet says, “you’d only fuck it up.”

Kyle is racking up the balls, matching them up in the wooden triangle, high—low, high—low. “That’s right. You couldn’t get laid if you had a tranquilizer gun.”

“Hey, man,” Ray says, but he doesn’t finish it. He knows they speak the truth, but that’s not going to keep him from trying. He bends over the rail and lines up the cue ball. Kyle lifts the rack. Ray hits it hard sending in the eleven and three. He calls choice. It’d be real easy to tell Chet about Bobby and Kyle, or Kyle about his ex saying she was glad to be done with him and his drinking because most times he was too screwed up to be any good in or out of bed, which was her reason not to give Ray a chance, figuring he’d be just about the same, but what good would it do? Just make them lonelier than they already were. The thought comes to Ray, while trying to figure out whether he wants lows or highs, and how he is going to work his way down to the table, that maybe Kyle’s ex is desperate enough now to give him a chance, at least let him on the porch.

Chet picks up his beer and walks down toward the table. The tall one, who is sitting facing toward the back of the bar where the pool table is, stops laughing at whatever Bobby is saying and stares at Chet advancing on them. He’s a kind of burly man with a lot of rough edges. Of the three, Ray figures Chet’s better off with the big one, not the one he’s staring down. That’s the problem with most people, he thinks; they never seem to pick the right one.

Before he sits down, Chet pulls Meagan over and says something in her ear. Ray figures he's ordering more drinks. Chet taps her on the behind when he's done. She smiles but Ray sees the flash of anger once she's behind Chet.

Ray bends over to take a shot, having decided the lows are lined up the best. He's thinking about saying something to Kyle about Chet's technique, thinking he'll stick around to finish up the game, but Kyle is heading down to the girl's table, cue stick and all.

"Fuck," Ray says to himself. He shoots the six, misses, lines it up again and makes it in the corner pocket. He shoots at the three and drops the cue ball in the side pocket, all the time trying to stay calm as if he doesn't care. "Hey," he shouts down the bar. "Your shot."

Kyle glances up from where he's just pulled up a chair, and they stare at each other for almost a minute. Ray's not sure what he looks like standing there with his stick in his hand, but Kyle has a look on his face that'd stop a rhinoceros. For a second Ray is wondering if he can take Kyle. He thinks he can. Kyle's a big boy but he's a wild swinger, mostly arms, and no real power.

Kyle says, "Hey, why don't you finish it up yourself. That way you can win." He glances at the girl to the left of him, then the one on the right and laughs. Chet and Bobby laugh too.

"Fuck it," Ray says under his breath, disgusted with all three of them and goes to cleaning the table getting angrier at every click of ball hitting ball, at every thud of a ball dropping into a pocket. When he's done he tosses the stick onto the table, slides up to the bar and takes a couple of swigs of his beer, watching Meagan deliver the drinks to the three couples.

Tony, the night bartender, strolls in glaring at the gaggle of girls and guys for a second as if wondering what's going on. Ray knows it's just Tony's way of letting everyone know he's in charge. He nods to Meagan then walks behind the bar and into the kitchen.

Meagan follows Tony, passing Ray. She's untying her apron and turns to him as if just remembering something she's forgotten. "You set?"

Ray glances at his bottle. It's three-quarters gone. "Yeah," he says, thinking he might just go home.

"You want something to eat?" She says it as if really concerned about his welfare, folding her apron up and holding it in her hand. He thinks she might be done for the night.

Ray almost says, yeah, not wanting to disappoint her and liking the attention, but he glances down to the table where the six of them are drinking and laughing and thinks that he must look pretty sad sitting there alone and would look even worse eating alone. "No thanks," he says, then adds, "I kind of want to go out. Not that you don't have good food or nothing, but it's just, you know, I wanted to do the baked potato-salad-bottle-of-wine thing."

She smiles and he knows it's not at him. He figures she's got a good memory or two of a dinner like that. He almost asks her what time she gets off, but thinks better of it.

"So, you're going out," she says. She leans against the wall with her hands behind her and Ray notices her deep blue eyes again for maybe the thousandth time.

"No." He draws the word out like it should be obvious to her that he's not and why he's not.

She's bouncing against the wall, a little movement back and forth and Ray can almost feel the tiredness in her legs from working all day. "Where's your favorite place?" she asks. She mentions hers.

“Been there a couple of times,” he says. He doesn’t mention how he showed up alone and was stared at most of the time as if being single was some kind of affliction. “They’ve got a decent rib-eye.”

“I like their T-bone,” she says.

Probably got a bunch of nice boyfriends Ray thinks. Except he’s here a lot and no one comes in looking for her or picks her up. Bobby, Kyle, and Chet all noticed it, too. That’s the main reason they keep hitting on her. They think that someday she’ll be horny enough to take one of them up on it. Damn hard up is what Ray interprets it as meaning. “Really? I sort of had you figured for a vegetarian type.” He finishes his beer, pushing the bottle toward the back edge of the bar.

“Naw, not me,” she says, picking up the empty bottle and setting it underneath the bar.

Ray picks up his money, leaves three dollars tip and feels the metal-heavy finality of the moment. All he can do now is get down from his barstool and walk by his three buddies with the three girls, head out the door, get in his car and drive home to his TV, a TV dinner and his two cats. Then he just blurts it out not even thinking of it or maybe thinking he can’t be any worse off. “What time you get off?”

Meagan smiles but doesn’t answer and now Ray can feel himself start to sweat like he does when he thinks he’s about to get shut down and he knows, she knows, he knows she is getting off now or very soon. He shrugs. “I just thought you’d like to go.” He glances down to the table full of happy people and her gaze follows.

She shrugs back as if to say she doesn’t know how to say no without hurting his feelings and she knows he’s been hurt enough already today.

“Ok,” he says, feeling himself giving up, having no idea how to get a woman to like him. He’s tried every line, every trick in the book. He’s had three different haircuts in the last year, tried several different,

“looks.” “I’m desperate here,” he says, not giving a damn how he looks or sounds anymore. “All I want is for someone to go out to dinner with me so I can eat in a decent restaurant without being stared at for Christ’s sake. Drive your own damn car. Meet me there.” Now he’s gesticulating, but forcing himself to speak quietly. “Order anything you want. I’ll pay for it and you can leave right after dessert, before the check comes, so you can make a clean get away in case you’re worried about me getting any ideas.”

Meagan stares at him for a moment. They both turn at the staccato sound of three chairs being pushed back. The girls have gotten up to leave. “Supper? That’s all?” Ray nods. She seems to think about it for a few seconds watching Bobby, Kyle, and Chet watch the three girls file out the door and onto the street. “I’m pretty hungry.” No funny stuff? Just friends?” Ray nods. “I guess you’ve got a deal,” she says. She walks into the kitchen and comes out carrying a light jacket and a small black purse.

Ray follows her around the table toward the door. She’s made it clear it’s only dinner and there’s no way a girl like her would ever hook up with a guy like him, but he also knows Bobby, Kyle, and Chet don’t know that. Ray and Meagan walk past the three men sitting in the bar. Ray winks as he goes by.