

ODD EVENING

AT THE

*House
of
Grease*

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BY JOHN MONTÉT

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Odd Evening at the House of Grease

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CHAPTER 1

THE WORLD TURNED SIDEWAYS as it came into focus. Hazy evergreen trees thrust from distant vertical hills into the cloudy left-hand sky. The ground stretched upward into the air, still holding tight to the dusty sand-colored gravel of the pot-holed parking lot outside Lucky's Bar. It was the gravel biting into his cheek that finally brought Michael Chord back to reality. It was either that or the size fourteen Caterpillar work boot firmly planted on the side of his face.

He hadn't been unconscious for long, he knew, though he wasn't sure what exactly had put him in such a prone position. It could be that he simply hadn't won the fight. It could be that someone blindsided him. He certainly wasn't feeling especially sharp after such a long ride. He decided to just not move for the moment. Waiting might give his head a chance to clear.

He took mental stock of himself. There was a deep pounding in his head, though not from the boot's attempt to make him one with the crushed rock. It was an insistent throbbing just above the back of his neck. It meant the blindsided theory was correct. It meant he was just stupid.

Even through the size-fourteen, Chord could hear

muffled laughter - nearby and obnoxious. That was instructive. It meant that there were several people in the parking lot. His blurry eyes could just make out the shapes of a few of them. Their silhouettes merged with the trees at the edge of the parking lot.

His head clearing, Michael Chord started to plan. The first order of business was to get out from under the boot. If he could get what's-his-name to let up for a moment, it would be enough. He tried a little fish-faced moan.

Bill Ullage, the owner of thoroughly worn and somewhat dusty Caterpillar work boots looked down in mock surprise.

"Easy Rider lives!" he announced to a round of approving laughter. He shifted his weight to lean just a little heavier on Chord's head. Bill looked up, guffawing with his fans.

Chord felt the pressure ebb just a bit as the laughter increased. It was exactly what he needed.

Sliding his face against the gravel, Chord spun himself sideways along the ground in a 180-degree arc, scraping his cheek painfully, but freeing his head. As he spun, he lifted his leg past Ullage, then drove back hard in a scissor kick, planting his own Red Wing motorcycle boot into Bill's sternum with the force of a wind-milling donkey. Ullage coughed a deep "oof" as the blow drove him to the ground, his head smacking the gravel hard.

Chord quickly spun to his feet, looking to drive a dark-heeled finishing blow into the body of his attacker, but there was no need. Bill was out cold, his head deep inside a pothole. His glazed eyes stared up under partially closed lids into the unmoving sky.

Chord turned to the spectators. There were only three men. Two of them wore the baseball caps, tee shirts, and

jeans that made up the general uniform of the younger Rhotic County residents. The third looked more Minnesotan in a plaid over shirt and brown pants. None of them moved. They simply looked first to their prone friend, then back to him.

"Well?" Chord said.

Still no one moved.

"Fine," he said. "You clean it up." Chord wiped at his scratched face as he started across the parking lot back toward Lucky's bar, trying not to stagger. Swirls and splotches of light still played behind his eyes, but the ringing was starting to fade. He hoped he looked better than he felt. Maybe the rest of his beer was still sitting on the bar. Maybe it was still cold.



Half an hour earlier, a road-weary Michael Chord had ridden down through the forested hills on the northern side of the Mismate River Valley. It had been a long, but enjoyable ride. He couldn't resist rolling back the throttle into the deep swoops and through the small valleys between the hills. He chose this route at the last minute specifically because of the curves. It was as if they were made for a biker's soul. It also helped that it was far from the normal interstate traffic routes. There were decidedly less highway patrolmen on this route.

At the bottom of the last hill sat the small town of Clements. Chord was following highway 324 as it slithered down the hill and through the town at steep angles to form the main street through Clements. The hills colluded with police to form very effective speed traps on each side of

town.

Fortunately, Chord was only doing forty as he passed the speed limit sign at the bottom of the hill. Officer Neil Clark, sitting in his cruiser, watched the Triumph Speedmaster pass, glanced at the radar readout, then went back to reading his book.

Chord had been riding the entire morning, having left The Cities not long after midnight. The case of swamp-ass he'd developed after crossing the state line was reaching a level verging on bayou. A break was sorely needed. He scanned the street, darting his eyes from one side of the street to the other until they locked onto the sign over Lucky's. Its rounded corners and burger-with-the-works-shaped relief was a welcoming site, even if the meat looked a little odd. It may have just been the fading paint. Regardless, it made a much more inviting picture than the line of newer pickups and SUV's parked across the street in front of Heaven's Kitchen Supper Club. Lucky's was more his kind of place.

Chord dropped the kickstand of the flat black motorcycle and swung off the bike in a single practiced motion. A glance at the sky told him that the clouds, while dreary, were not about to burst. There was no wind. There wouldn't be rain - at least not yet. The distant ozone smell of a storm ticked a note in the back of his biker brain, but for now, his pack and gear were safe. The same held true for the gems, his cargo, perfectly protected in the hidden compartment in the Triumph's frame. Chord gave the spot a quick glance, turned, and walked into Lucky's.



Ralph Doless captained the helm of Lucky's Bar for the past twelve years. The bar remained a staple in Clements for a little over a century, though under a string of different names. The first proprietor converted what was the newly defunct Clements City Bank into an eating-house. He named the establishment after his dog. Ten years later Sparky's Place nearly burned to the ground.

From then on, the bar's fate was inextricably tied to its name. The next owner reconstructed the bar, turning it into the River Café. This lasted for another ten years before a burst pipe in the ceiling driving the owner out of business. A similar thing happened to the Water's Edge when the sewer backed up a decade later. And so it was that Blazing Hearth, Danny's Sinkhole Saloon, Wild Bill's Buffett, Four Closures (few noticed the misspelling of "Clovers"), Gladys' Revenge, Not This Time Diner, and The Last Chance Pub all passed by without anyone noticing the correlation. Such was not the case with Ralph Doless. Irony being one of Ralph's strong suits, he was resolute in his decision to use the name Lucky's Bar. The strategy seemed to be working. He'd gone past the normal decade-long run. The bank was happy; the customers were happy. Still, Ralph couldn't escape the thought that fate was simply two years overdue.

Lucky's was a dark place, even at noon. The sweet smell of cigars clung to the wooden chairs and tables, though Ralph banned smoking well before the state law. Rich, worn wooden paneling soaked up the glow from the four neon signs. Lights inset in the ornate nautical carvings above the massive mirror behind the bar only deepened the shadows in the wood. The grill at the front of the joint gave the large front window above it a sepia tint.

Lucky's saving grace was the digital jukebox set on the

wall next to the electronic dartboard. The company that installed it hadn't been back since receiving a \$250 speeding ticket on their way into town. Ralph's nephew managed to hack the machine and install Ralph's extensive music collection. Patrons could be treated to Frank Sinatra, Joe Satriani, Hank Williams, Kenny Burrell, Motorhead, and John Lee Hooker all in the same evening. The machine remained stuck on random since the nephew went to college.

Ralph was wearing his ubiquitous, off-white cable knit sweater, polishing a glass, when Chord walked in wearing a leather jacket and severely windblown hair. He paused to look around for a moment, squinted out the window at the bike he parked out front then took a seat at the near end of the bar.

Ralph walked to stand across from the man and said nothing, the question being implicit.

The biker leaned his elbows on the bar and glanced up at Ralph.

"Beer?" Chord asked.

"You'll have to be more specific," Ralph said.

"Bud Light."

"Don't carry it."

"Really? It's the single most popular beer in the United States. Who doesn't carry Bud Light?"

"We don't. It tastes like crap. If I wouldn't drink it, I won't serve it."

Chord looked at Ralph a little closer; the hint of a smile crept across the biker's face.

"Well then, I'll have a glass of whatever beer you normally drink."

"I don't drink."

"What? But you do serve beer, right."

"Of course," Ralph said. "This is a bar. But, I don't drink. It leads to bad luck. I serve the beer I would drink if I were to drink beer."

"And that would be?" Chord's scarcely hidden smile was more pronounced and Ralph found himself starting to like this guy.

"How about a Samuel Smith's? They make a very nice oatmeal stout."

"Too strong," Chord said shaking his head slightly. "I'm on two wheels."

"A nut brown ale then," Ralph didn't phrase it as a question. He just headed to the large, antique, converted icebox he used as a refrigerator and pulled out a bottle. Neither man said a word while Ralph popped the cap and poured it into a glass. Ralph walked back to the front end of the bar and set the glass, along with the bottle, in front of his new patron.

"Expertly done," the biker said. "I appreciate a good pour." He reached for the glass and took a pull. "Very good."

"Ralph."

"Chord. Good to meet you."

"You know," Chord proffered, "they say that a beer is commonality. It is a drink as old as the ancients and as refined as the most cherished painting. What was it Thomas Jefferson said? 'Beer is proof that there is a god and he loves us very much.'"

"It was Ben Franklin, actually," Ralph said. He pointed to a sign on the opposite wall. "You almost got it right."

Chord turned, looked at the sign, and then turned back to Ralph. "An expert in beer and its culture, yet you don't drink."

"That's about the size of it." Ralph picked up empty

glass number two and started polishing it.

"Interesting," Chord said, going back to his beer.

Ralph did indeed like this guy. The same could not be said for the guy who just lost the pool game at the back of the bar. Ralph realized the oaf had been staring at Chord's back, whispering to his companions. Ralph moved toward the "Crowd Control Policy" he kept in a sling under the bar.

Bill Ullage could be such an asshole when he didn't win.

CHAPTER 2

JAIRUS DISHOME WOKE UP earlier than usual, though he wasn't sure why. It could be that nagging itch in his nose. When he'd lain down, he did so as discreetly as possible, taking care to not be noticed by the patrol cruiser parked in the lot of the old rail station across from the grain bin - his resting spot. He half expected the sheriff to burst in like a Hun and to provoke him awake with a Billy club. Instead, he was roused from his slumber by something brushing his nose.

"Rhapsode, get your tail out of my face," he said without opening his eyes. "I'm trying to sleep. That by-child sheriff hasn't even left yet."

"By-child?"

Jairus slowly lifted one eyelid. If his trusty hound had suddenly learned to talk, his life truly had changed for the worse.

Rhapsode sat staring at him, a canine smile on his face showing that he was really enjoying himself. Sheriff Neil Clark was standing next to the dog, scratching Rhapsode's ears. Jairus noticed a long strand of grass in the sheriff's hand.

"Blast you, you sombolist interruptus." Jairus pulled the torn canvas more tightly around him and tried to pretend to go back to sleep. "Et tu, Rhapsode?"

"Jairus-" the sheriff started.

"Dr. Dishome to you." Jairus kept his eyes closed.

"Dr. Dishome, then. You know you can't stay here. I'm sure I'm going to get a complaint from Mr. Harris once he finds out you're sleeping in his grain house."

"And just how, pray tell, is he going to find out?" Jairus opened an eye again. "Will you sing the pigeon's song?"

"No. I won't mention anything unless he asks. But I'm sure he is going to assume it wasn't the Melbostad boys who painted 'Dim Sparrow Sparrow' on the wall."

"Dum Spiro Spero, Sheriff."

"I see. And what does that mean exactly?" The sheriff squinted at the lettering above Jairus' head and sniffed. "Wait. What is that written in? It isn't..."

"Axel grease, yes." Jairus could see he wasn't going to get to sleep again. He slowly sat up. "It means 'while I breathe, I hope'. Perhaps I grew a bit maudlin last night."

"Perhaps with a little help from Stagger and Jags Liquors?" Rhapsode was sniffing at the lip of an empty bottle of Pappy Van Winkle's bourbon. The dog apparently figured if no one was going to scratch him, a light buzz would suffice.

Clark knew only rumors regarding Jairus' past. It was said that he was a disgraced professor of history at one of the three state universities; the stories placed him in each depending on the telling. As to the cause of the disgrace, the speculation ranged from running an underground methamphetamine lab ("obviously that much rat killer will get to anyone..."), to setting up wild orgies with the coeds. Others said he was an ex-military man whose mind was shattered in Viet Nam after a buddy threw himself on a grenade to save Jairus as he was squatting in the bush to

relieve himself. The trauma supposedly caused Jairus to take far too many laxatives in an effort to speed his necessities, which "does something to a man, you know." (Every version of this story includes that his buddy lived, but lost a testicle in the incident.)

The fact was that Clark never had cause to investigate which of these rumors may have been true. Jairus didn't cause any real trouble in town. Instead, he spent an inordinate amount of time in the town library - time, which Jairus said, he spent in an effort to get out of the rain, regardless of the weather. When Clark inquired if Jairus was a nuisance, he was told that Jairus was a key reason they were able to keep their circulation up. He also knew so much about the library that some of the more regular patrons would use Jairus as a verbal book index, though a rather acerbic one.

"Perhaps the local libation emporium played a part. But one can hardly lay blame upon their doorstep, can one?" Jairus said to the sheriff. For the lawman's part, he was trying hard not to 'loom'.

Jairus turned to address his dog. "Rhapsode, leave it! You know how you get when you are in the spirits."

"How does he get?"

"Contrite. It's insufferable."

Sheriff Clark looked down at the golden, longhaired dog. He was really in very good shape for the dog of a homeless man.

"What kind of dog is he, Jairus- I mean, Doctor?"

"He's the best specimen of a golden retriever you will ever likely see, my good man. Man's best friend, when there isn't another man around."

Rhapsode looked up at Jairus. One would have thought a man who claimed to have a Ph.D. would have

known a Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever when he saw one. Since you really can't tell a human anything, the dog went back to trying to lick the last dregs out of the bottle.

"You know you can't stay here, Professor. It's trespassing. Why don't you go over to June's Place? I'm sure-

"Out of the question. That pontifical wench does nothing but insult her patrons. You'd think she'd be more matriarchal as the mistress of a flophouse. She called me saturnine!"

"I know. You've said so before. But that was years ago. June's a very nice lady and the Nap 'N' Breakkers is a very nice bed and breakfast. It's not a flophouse. She won't be busy until the leaves turn and the leaf peepers arrive, so I'm sure she will make up a room for you again. It's only a mile and a half up the hill. I'll give you a ride."

Jairus looked up at the sheriff. He sighed and then held out a weathered glove for assistance. The officer obliged and helped him to his feet.

"I know she's a nice young woman. I'm just a bit put out after a night in the ergot. Harris really should rotate his stock." Jairus dusted himself off. It was a losing battle. "Anyway, I was there yesterday. I'm not going back until the rabble has cleared."

"Rabble?"

"Bikers. Not your normal Harley Davidson orthodontist crowd either. These two were of tougher stock. I don't think either one of them said two words to Dame Williams. I'm not going back until they leave."

"Hmmm. I may have to pay the Nap 'N' Breakkers a visit. Are they still there, do you think?"

"Don't know. Don't care," Jairus said picking up his pack. "I just know I'm going to see if I can make it to West

Watershed by 3:00. The Lion's Club is serving an all-day breakfast today."

With that, Dr. Jairus Dishome walked on. Rhapsode walked beside him trying not to look too contrite.



Scott Dobbs was a born drunk, or at least a born drinker. It wasn't that he was drunk all the time. In fact, it could be said that no one in all of Clements had actually seen Scott drunk at any of the backyard get-togethers, wedding dances, or keg parties Scott supposedly attended. Regardless of the occasion, Scott would materialize, beer in hand. Invited or not, he was always welcomed, if rarely noticed.

Scott had spent the last half-hour sitting at the far end of the bar at Lucky's, listening to the guys at the pool table talk. They bragged about girls, trucks, and past drinking binges - some of which Scott actually witnessed firsthand. He had his back to the players, part of his talent for not being seen, when he heard the group go quiet. Then he heard a ball drop.

"There," said Bill Ullage. "You owe me twenty bucks, and another beer."

There was just silence. To Scott, it was like the rattling of a snakes tail. There was no way he was turning around now.

"What?" Bill asked.

"Um, Bill," a quiet voice said. It was probably one of the Simon boys, but Scott wasn't sure. "You didn't call the shot."

"So?"

"Well, you have to call the eight ball. Otherwise the shot doesn't count."

" the fuck you mean?"

"It doesn't count," said another voice. "It means you sunk the eight ball out of turn. That means you lost."

The jukebox was now playing something off the Cowboy Junkies' 'Trinity' album. Margot Timmins wailed softly through the silence of the bar.

This was the point Scott hated. He knew something was going to happen. Had this been a graduation party he'd been "invited to", he would have quietly snuck out before things got worse. If he moved now, he'd likely become the target. So he sat and disappeared. David Copperfield would have been envious.

"Lost? You think I lost?" Bill wasn't yelling. He was just increasing the tension by pretending he was calm.

"Well..." started someone.

"Just where the fuck else did you think I was going to go with that shot? It went right where I aimed. Dead in. I didn't have to call it. Hell, Stevie Fuckin' Wonder wouldn't have had to call that shot."

"But it was a long bank shot," one of the Simon boys said. "It was across the table. I figured you were going to pocket it in the corner."

It is amazing how well you can hear deep nostril breathing over a quiet song. Scott contemplated just how he would vault the bar. He just wasn't sure he could keep his foot from getting tangled in the fishnet Ralph had tacked to the wall for decoration.

"Well, fuck," Bill eventually said.

There was the sound of a stick being dropped on the felt. Then it started. Scott wasn't moving. Not now. It felt as if there was a sniper in the woods, or a T-Rex. Moving

would have been counterproductive to his hiding abilities. He concentrated on becoming transparent.

"Hey you. Harley Boy. Where the hell you from?" Bill shouted to the guy at the far end of the bar. Scott ventured to turn around, just a bit, very slowly.

The stranger was taking a drink from his glass, but he rolled his eyes toward Bill. After a long swallow, he set down his glass. Scott heard the stranger breathe what he thought was the same sigh his father used to give when he was about to lay down a harsh punishment. Scott could see Ralph had moved down the bar, nearer to what Ralph liked to call his Crowd Control Policy. The stranger looked straight ahead at the bar mirror and spoke as if he was talking to his own reflection.

"It is said that people do not change. They cannot. Human nature is ingrained in most, imbedded in some, and imbibed in a sad few." At this last, he turned toward Bill,

"What?" Bill asked.

"Look," the biker said. "I know how these things go. You're pissed off because you lost your girlfriend, your boyfriend, or your pool game. Maybe you lost all three. Regardless of the reason, you are looking to beat the hell out of someone. Obviously, you aren't blaming your friends. They are probably the only friends you've got.

"This guy," Scott froze. The stranger was looking at him. It was a very bad development. "He'd probably melt and let you beat the hell out of him just for breathing. It wouldn't be a challenge."

Scott scanned for all available escape routes. He considered the merits of rolling over the bar and curling into a fetal position.

"So you decided to pick on a stranger," Chord stared

directly into Bill's eyes. "I'm the only stranger here, so naturally you want to fight me. How am I doing?"

Bill was starting to fume. Confusion did that to him. "Hey, fuckhead. I asked you where you are from."

"I'm from a place where we don't end our sentences in prepositions."

"What?"

The stranger sighed. "Never mind," he said getting off his barstool. "It's an old joke." He gestured toward the door. "Shall we dance?"

They left the bar together. Two other pool players followed them out.

The last notes of a Mary Osborne tune faded from the jukebox.

"Ralph," Scott said. "I think you are going to need a new pool cue."

Ralph moved his hand away from under the bar and picked up glass number one again. He started to give it its twelfth polish of the day.

"Why do you say that, Scott?"

"I just saw Cecil Simon walk out the back with one."



Ten minutes later, Chord walked back into the bar having put Bill in his place. No one followed him in. His face was scratched, dusty, and a little bit bloody on one side. The other side looked like someone had pressed a Russian branding iron to it. Scott saw what looked like the word "rallipr" on the side of his face. The 'r's were backward, so he assumed it was Russian.

Ralph handed Chord a wet washrag.

"Thanks," the biker said wiping his face and wincing a bit before pressing it to the back of his neck.

"So," Ralph said. "Am I going to have to clean up a mess outside?"

"No, I don't think so. The big guy should get up in a little while."

"You didn't kill him?"

"Nope. It's against my nature. I don't even kill spiders."

"You believe in karma, then?"

"Something like that." Chord sat down. "Hey! My beer's still cold."

The backdoor banged shut. Ralph and Chord both looked up. They were alone in the bar.

"Who just went out?" Chord asked.

"Someone going to get my pool cue I hope."

END OF SAMPLE

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