

Back to Disney

Jeff Park

We drive in the dark of winter. The headlights of the Bronco illuminate a narrow path that we follow. Snow kicks up behind us.

“Don’t worry about it, Lindsay. Okay? Listen, they read the meter once, twice a year. Simple. Pay the bill and let it go.”

“What about spikes, Jerry?” I ask.

“You paranoid or what? You keep it constant, no major changes, therefore no surges. Simple. This used to be a dairy barn. High power usage. We didn’t change a thing, right?” Jerry looks over at Dave and shakes this head. “What can you do? The guy’s worse than my mother. Listen, Lindsay, I tracked all the bills for months. There are no surges, believe me. Those fucking cows drained a lot of power. Nothing will show up, trust me.”

Jerry turns the Bronco into a farm lane framed on both sides by trees. We drive into the farmyard past a small white house and stop beside the barn. The wind blows across an empty white field. The snow rises in ridges to the tops of the fence posts. A yellow floodlight on a steel pole forms a halo of light in the frosted air. We wait for a few minutes listening to the metallic clanking of the engine cooling. The wind whistles at my ear through a thin crack at the top of the side window.

Finally Jerry says, “Listen, let’s drop it. Don’t worry. I’ll look after everything. Okay?”

“Fine,” I say.

“Your uncle home?” asks Dave.

“No. Wednesday night he’s in town.”

“You ever worry about him?” I ask.

“Why should I? I give him a break on rent. He doesn’t ask questions.”

“You own this land?”

“You on the other hand seem to like questions.”

“Just curious,” I say.

“I know,” says Jerry.

Jerry opens the truck door, shifts his weight to get out and turns to Dave. “We won’t be long. Keep watch.”

Jerry and I get out of the Bronco. The large hinged front doors of the barn are sealed. We walk through the snow to the side door. Jerry leans over and puts his gloved hand on the shoulder of my parka. I feel the weight and pressure of his hand. "I just want you to know I'm impressed. You've done a great job. The design is perfect." He nods his head and opens the side door. "Welcome to Disneyland," he says.

We step through heavy green plastic curtains. The contrast is startling. Inside the building five hundred plants under long rows of grow lighting create a near jungle humidity. A steamy warmth rises to the wooden rafters of the sloped ceiling ten to fourteen feet above us. 400-watt halides with round, green reflectors are suspended from the rafters. Tiny sprinkler heads hang from black plastic water pipe. Thin sprays of water mist onto the tiny plants in eight-inch plastic pots. Plastic tubing leads to each pot. The plants are in two long metal troughs running the length of the building. Jerry leads me down the centre aisle of the plants. It feels a little like being in a church, walking between pews in silence. There is a green tinge to the light. The humidity is almost solid.

"It's beautiful," I say.

"You did fine work on the design. We've already moved most of the plants from the blooming room. Your system is incredible," Jerry says.

"I know I designed the set-up and everything, but to see it is another thing entirely. Amazing."

"A Wonderland. That's why I brought you out here," Jerry says.

"What now?"

"Just wait, my friend. We just wait. That's the beauty of your design set-up. I mean, I love the . . . what do you call it?" Jerry asks, pointing at some tubing running into one of the plastic pots.

"The gravity feed," I answer.

"Exactly! Let nature do all the fucking work . . . though we do help it somewhat. I love it. Timed lights, timed water . . . all hooked into the existing system. A combination 110-220 volt, some three-phase pumps. It's a fucking work of art. We should get three, four crops a year. Eighty thousand clear a rotation. Hell of a lot better than wheat. And we're just following government advice. Diversify, they said. Diversify. Free market enterprise as it was meant to be. Perfect."

We push our way back through the plastic curtains into the snow and wind. Exhaust clouds nearly obscure the Bronco. Snow has nearly covered the windshield. Jerry brushes away the snow on the driver's side and steps in while Dave slides into the centre. I make a few half-hearted swipes at the

passenger side window. I look back at the barn but the blowing snow forces my eyes shut. Inside, Dave is flapping his arms.

“Fucking heater cut out. I just got it going again. Fucking thing,” says Dave.

“Patience, my friend,” whispers Jerry as he turns the truck into the lane and onto the grid road back to the city. No one says a word until we pull to the curb in front of my apartment. Jerry turns to me. “You’ve created the Disneyland of hydroponics. I’m impressed. We’ll talk soon. Here.” Jerry hands me a thick wad of twenties. I put it in my jean pocket.

“Thanks.”

“Don’t spend it all in one place,” says Dave.

I watch them pull away. Frankly I am glad to be rid of them. Inside my suite, I pour myself a glass of white wine and put on some Howlin’ Wolf. Ever since Chicago I’ve been into the blues. I turn up the stereo. A year to go on the Ph.D. I moved back here thinking it would be easier. Now what? I couldn’t even bring Tanis back to the suite. I was living in a fucking gopher hole. Another dead-end relationship, another dead-end job. And then these two fucks run into my life. At least that’s over now. Another year and I’m out of this town.

A few weeks later I’m at the university working in the biology lab and Jerry shows up at the window of the door. I go to the door and we stand in the hallway.

“I told you not to come here.”

“Why not? ’Fraid I’ll steal the best looking babes?”

“Look, I’ve got to get back to work. Some of these people need to get this lab done by three.”

“Let them figure it out themselves. In the long run it will do them more good.”

“What brings you up here?” I ask.

“We might need your help again.”

“That wasn’t the deal. I only did the design. Nothing more. I was very up front about that.”

“Things change. We’ve decided it’s in all of our best interests to maintain a relationship.”

“A relationship? What the hell’s that mean?”

“It means we have some more work to do.”

“That wasn’t part of the deal.”

“It is now. It’s back to Disney. We’ve got a problem. I’ll pick you up just after three. Meet me on the street out front.”

Jerry and I drive to the farm without speaking. He plays AC/DC on the stereo. I look out the side window of the truck, trying to lose myself in the snowdrifts on the summer fallow. I look back at the city. Clouds of steam rise over the skyline as if the entire landscape is on fire.

There is a small drift of snow in front of the barn door. We kick through it into the building. I can’t help but be surprised again at the contrast. The plants have grown, and seem to vibrate in the green light. Ceiling fans circulate the heavy, humid air.

“So what’s the problem?” I ask. I am starting to lose my patience.

“The water flow on this drip pipe. It doesn’t seem right to me.”

He points at a spigot on one of the main water lines. A series of plastic tubes lead off the main line, constantly supplying nutrients to the plants on the metal trough.

“It looks fine to me.”

“Good.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? I don’t see any problem.”

“And that’s exactly what I want. No problems. I need you out here, say, once every two weeks. You know, general maintenance.”

“That wasn’t our arrangement. I told you, I’d design the set up. I didn’t even want anything to do with the actual construction of the grow operation. I was just providing the information, the concept.”

“The concept is real now, Lindsay. You can pretend all you want.”

“What if I say no?”

“Don’t push it, Lindsay. You’ve done some good work, and don’t think I don’t reward good work. But don’t fuck it up now.” Jerry zips up his leather jacket. “Time to go. I had some keys made up for you.” He throws me a ring of keys. They feel cold in my hand.

The Dog has fired his entire band, which I think is a mistake because he tries to carry the show with image, and the Dog can’t carry on image alone. The new group is competent. Don’t get me wrong. It’s just that they don’t have a presence. Flat. And the blues can never be flat. The crowd feels it too. You can hear fragments of conversations while they play, which is hard to do considering the volume.

I’m sitting at the bar of Counters, half watching the band, half watching the VLTs and all the losers giving the ghost in the machine all their money. The VLTs are indiscriminate: bikers stand beside old women standing beside

natives standing by guys in business suits. It's a democratic tax for the stupid. Soon I'd be playing.

I am supposed to meet Tanis at eight. It's now ten and safe to assume she is still on the computer or gone onto better things. I should check my phone messages, but the phone is by the entrance and I probably couldn't hear a thing anyway. I order another beer. The Dog is just finishing his second set.

Two girls in black tights, black T-shirts and short black leather jackets stand against the wall, each with a bottle of Heineken. Jerry leans into one of them and laughs. He looks up, sees me and waves me over. I turn back and find my reflection in the mirror. I see myself shaking my head. I get up, take my beer and walk over to the girls and Jerry.

"Good to see you," says Jerry, shaking my hand. His beer slops over our fingers as we shake hands. I wipe my hand on my jeans.

"Denise. Janelle. Lindsay." Jerry points at each of us in turn.

We all nod. The DJ kicks in with Albert King's "Born Under a Bad Sign."

"You need a toke?" asks Jerry.

"No, I'm fine."

"Yeah, you need a toot. Let's go, girls." Jerry takes my arm and weaves me through the crowd milling around the bar. We turn behind the bandstand, past the open doors of the washrooms to the back hallway. Jerry nods at the bouncer lurking there. The bouncer opens the door and waves us through.

The air feels clean on my face after the smoke haze inside. Jerry lets go of my arm. He shakes his shoulders. "Beautiful," he says. It's nearly thirty below and we're standing in ankle deep snow. Jerry leans against the dumpster, taking the joint out of the top pocket of his jean jacket. He double flicks his silver Zippo on his jeans and lights the joint. "Beautiful, man. Girls?"

He passes the joint, nodding his head at the sky. Tiny snowflakes float down, illuminated by the floodlight mounted on the top of the building. Janelle hands the joint back to Jerry.

"Lindsay?" Jerry extends the joint to me.

I take a short pull on the joint and hand it back to Jerry. He pushes my hand away. "Enjoy," he whispers.

I take another toke and hand the joint to Janelle who giggles and hands it to Denise. Jerry reaches into his jeans, takes out a twenty and hands it to Janelle. "Get a table and order a round."

"Sure. The usual?" She doesn't ask what I would like to drink. She and Denise both laugh and go back into the bar.

Jerry looks up into the light, the snow slowly falling on his face.

“We’re thinking of making some changes. I think there are some opportunities we should explore.”

“I’ve got enough opportunities right now,” I say. “I’d just like to finish my degree and move on.”

“Move on where, Lindsay? I’m talking large amounts here, Lindsay. Large amounts. For very little effort. Don’t be a blind man.”

“I don’t think so, Jerry.”

Jerry looks over at me, his eyes narrow slightly.

“We’ll talk later. Time is a wonderful convincer,” he says. He turns and goes back into the bar. I stay outside. Suddenly, I find the thought of the smoke nauseous. I turn into the back alley and start walking home. It’s only when I walk up the front stairs that I realize I left my leather jacket in the bar.

The first time I drove out to the ‘farm’ as Jerry calls it, I felt a rush of fear. By the second time the fear had transformed into a dull irritation. This time it’s about six o’clock, mid-winter, the sky already shifting to dark grey in the east. I park my ten-year-old Civic in the yard and reluctantly walk to the side door. The lock is frozen shut. I walk back to the car and find a plastic bottle of de-icer and spray the alcohol on the lock.

Inside, I spend a couple of minutes gulping in the air, feeling the warmth and humidity. The water flow is fine. I make some minor adjustments to the nutrient levels. The three-foot domed metal halides are fine. Not one is burnt out, which is amazing considering they’re on for over eighteen hours every day. I check the timers. Everything fine. I pass through the black plastic dividing curtain into the blooming room. The plants are pushing out of the eight inch pots. They’d need to be transplanted soon, but that isn’t my job. In here, the sodium vapours are on twelve hours a day creating a near daytime, jungle feel. If possible, the humidity is even higher.

I push through into the winter. A man in his fifties stands by my car. I hesitate in the doorway of the barn. He notices me and waves me over. I kick my way through the snow. I don’t know what to say, so I simply nod at him.

“I didn’t recognize the car. Thought I’d better take a look,” the man says.

“It’s mine. I guess you weren’t around the last few times I was by.”

“You know Jerry?”

“Your nephew?”

“That what he told you?”

I just nod and go to open the car door.

“Why don’t you stop by the house? I’ve got coffee on. Warm you up for the ride.”

I hesitate but say, “Sounds good to me.” I don’t ask his name.

At the back porch I stoop to take off my boots.

“Don’t bother,” he says.

Inside a trail of mud weaves through the kitchen into the living room. Another trail leads from the couch to the bathroom. The old farmhouse is basically one room with a bathroom as an add-on. It’s difficult to imagine a family living here. Boxes of newspapers and cans are piled in one corner of the kitchen section. Cartons of beer bottles are carefully stacked in another. Sheets of newspaper cover part of the floor. In the living room are an old couch and chair with a couple of TV tables.

A huge German shepherd comes around the corner and walks over to the man, nuzzling her head in his outstretched hands. The dog looks at me.

“I’ve never seen her before,” I say, “Never even heard a bark. Nothing.”

“This dog’s a genius. Recognizes everyone. She’s seen you with Jerry. To her, that means you’re okay. Bring a stranger out some time. She’ll go crazy.”

“Amazing.”

“More coffee?”

“Sure.”

The man walks to the kitchen to get the pot. He has a slight limp in his right leg.

“You stay here alone?” I ask.

The man waves his right arm around the room. “What do you think?”

The room is tight. All the windows are sealed. Cigarette smoke has stained the ceiling yellow. The single light fixture is nearly brown, acting as a magnet for the smoke.

“Why?” I ask.

“You ask a lot of questions,” the man says.

“I guess.”

“Jerry’s done some favours for me. I’ve done some for him. The house works for both of us. I keep an eye on things. I get a place to stay. He wanted a place for the dog. I think he moves around a lot.

“So, this wasn’t your place?”

“You kidding me? No. I move around a lot too,” the man says.

“I know what that’s like,” I say.

“Well, we’ll be moving soon enough. Jerry’s nearly finished here,” says the man.

“I thought this was more permanent.”

“If you’re counting on this, forget it,” the man says. The dogs lick his hand. I notice he is missing the first digit of his index finger. The dog is trained for motion and always keeps her eyes on me. I don’t move.

I didn’t go back to the farm for a few days. Nothing had ever been a problem and what was the point of worrying over nothing? I am sitting in Counters having a beer late on a Monday afternoon, trying to relax before going back to the apartment to mark the last set of lab reports, when Jerry walks in. At times he seems to know my every move.

“Hey, what’s up?” he says, sitting on the next stool. He raises his chin and the bartender starts pouring him a scotch.

“Nothing,” I answer. “I’m just getting ready for the next onslaught of papers.”

“You need a drink then,” Jerry says, raising his scotch which has already appeared. The bartender disappears, leaving us alone.

Counters is always dark and quiet in the afternoons. Without people the place smells of beer and urine. A couple of bikers, not wearing their colours, sit at a corner table. An old woman is playing the VLTs, greedily smoking cigarettes and balancing a draft beer on the edge of the machine. Jerry looks over at the woman.

“Think she’ll ever hit the big time?” Jerry says.

“Not very likely,” I answer.

“What about you? You done any thinking about your future?” Jerry says looking straight ahead into the mirror behind the bar.

“Always thinking, constantly thinking.”

“Good. Good. I haven’t seen much of you lately.”

“Busy, I guess.”

“Yeah, I suppose.” Jerry says, signalling the bartender. “You need anything?”

“No, thanks. I’ve got to get going.” I stand up to put on my coat and Jerry lays his hand on my forearm.

“What do you make a year?”

“Enough,” I answer.

“Enough for what? I figure ten, maybe twelve thousand?”

“So?”

“You want to be a loser. You want to be like her?” Jerry points at the woman at the VLTs. “That what you want out of life?”

I don’t look at him. I sip at my beer.

“You live in a hole, man. You drive shit. You drink shit.”

“So? What are you getting at?”

“We’ve got a couple of things to discuss.” Dave walks through the entrance and Jerry flags him over. “Good, a quick drink and then we’re off.”

Dave orders a beer. I sit down.

“We need to take a ride out to the farm this afternoon.” Jerry says.

“There a problem?” I ask.

“Not sure. Better safe than sorry.”

“You want me to meet you out there?” I ask

“No, we’ll all drive out together. Finished, Dave?”

Dave nods, and stands up with Jerry.

“Coming?” Jerry says.

The heater in the Bronco is still acting up. It’s more than thirty below and ice crystals hang in the air. I curl into myself, trying to stay warm. The horizon line is a grey smudge in front of us. Jerry turns into the yard. The house is dark, no sign of the dog. We step through the plastic into the barn. The room is completely bare. Nothing.

“What happened?” I ask.

“Time to move on,” says Jerry.

“So why bring me out here?”

“Unfinished business,” says Jerry. He nods at Dave who pushes his way out through the plastic screen, leaving Jerry and me alone in the room. Jerry leans against the bare wall, lighting a cigarette. Dave comes back into the room carrying a 12 gauge shotgun.

“What’s going on?” I ask.

“Ask no questions, I’ll tell you no lies,” says Jerry. He takes two shotgun shells from his parka, breaks the gun and inserts the shells. He snaps the barrel back together with a sudden crack.

“Come with me,” says Jerry.

Dave holds the door open. Jerry leads us behind the barn. I’ve never been behind the barn.

“Time to deal with the powers that be,” Jerry says, pointing at the back wall of the barn. There is an electric meter mounted on the wall with metal piping about five feet above the ground. Jerry hands me the shotgun.

“Blow it off,” he says.

“I thought you said you weren’t worried about spikes?”

“Now you know why.”

“Why me?”

“Ask no questions, I’ll tell you no lies. Hurry up, I’m getting cold.”

Jerry and Dave move back a couple of steps. Both are smoking cigarettes and the smoke seems to hang in the air surrounding them in the dull grey light. Jerry points at the meter. I turn around, and lift the gun. Even through my gloves my fingers feel numb holding the cold metal. I lift the gun and fire. In the still air, the roar is deafening. Glass and wood splinter in a cloud, settling on the snow. Jerry reaches out and takes the gun, cracking it open and stuffing two more shells in before snapping it shut.

“Now we talk about you.”

“What about me?”

“I’m worried. I offer you an opportunity, a golden opportunity, and you fuck it up. I don’t know. What is it? You think you’re better than anyone else? You think you can sit back and pass judgment on the world?”

“Look, I just don’t want to get too involved, okay?”

“Okay? You still think there are different degrees of being involved? You think you can watch the world, like you’re sitting on some fucking barstool, watching the rest of the room through the mirror? You don’t think I watch you. You don’t think you’re involved?”

“Okay, I’m involved. Is that what you want to hear? I’m involved, okay?”

“You’re learning.” Jerry lifts up the gun. He waves it past my eyes.

“Are you going to shoot me?”

Jerry starts laughing, waving the gun at the sky. Dave joins in, their laughter echoing in the yard. “Fuck no. What do you think this is? Alabama? We need to go for a ride.”

We walk around to the Bronco. I sit jammed in between Jerry and Dave who is driving this time. Jerry doesn’t put the gun in the back and instead sits with it between his legs, barrel pointed up and aimed towards the window. At the end of the lane Dave turns the truck away from the city. We drive on. Disneyland disappears. Jerry opens the glove compartment and retrieves a mickey of rye. He takes a pull on the bottle, and hands it to Dave who also takes a long swallow. Dave passes me the bottle.

“Have a shot, Lindsay,” says Jerry. I shake my head, but he pushes the bottle at me. I take a small sip and move to hand the bottle back. Jerry pushes my hand back. “Have another.”