

Midnight at the Diner

by

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It was torture! Unbearable! Inhuman torture!

What had I done to deserve this?

How had I gotten myself into this infernal predicament?

Why, oh why, had I agreed to go on a cross-country, all-night drive with a pair of belching, racist louts like Eddie and Clark? Sure it was cheaper sharing gas expenses with them than flying home for the holidays, but twelve hours in a car with the two of them was more than I could take.

At least occasional drunk driving seems to be practically a required course at our university, but Eddie and Clark majored in it. I was relieved to find that, despite all the beer he had put away, Eddie drove pretty well, though faster than I would have liked. I suppose that with all his practice at driving drunk he couldn't help but get pretty good at it.

We were all three crowded together on the lumpy front seat of Eddie's ancient Chevy, because Clark had filled the back seat with his luggage and an ice chest full of beer. The trunk being full of Eddie's baggage, my single backpack rested on the floorboards between my feet. Worse than the cramped seating was the way the car bounced every time it ran over anything thicker than a paint stripe on the pavement. Then there was the atmosphere inside the car, befouled as it was by Eddie and Clark's competition to see who could fart loudest and longest, Eddie's chain smoking and the smell of exhaust and scorching oil that drifted in through the multiple holes in the floorboards.

But worst by far was the constant bickering that went on between my two fellow travelers. They argued about the best route for us to take. About sports. About who could drink the most. About who had made the wittiest obscene remark to some pretty young thing on campus. About who snored the most. About whose feet smelled the worst. But most of all, they argued about when and how often to stop.

Eddie insisted that we needed to keep to a schedule and that we had already fallen behind due to the time it took to load all of Clark's bags, compounded by the several stops Clark had successfully insisted on. Clark, on the other hand, seemed to have the weakest kidneys and the biggest appetite of anyone I have ever traveled with.

"No, damn it," Eddie was saying, "we need to make up some time! We're more than an hour behind schedule as it is! I told my folks we'd be in by ten o'clock in the morning."

"What difference does it make," I asked? "If it looks like we'll be very late, we can always call ahead so no one will be worried about us. It doesn't matter just when we get in."

"I told my folks we'd be there by ten and I'm not going to look bad just because you two weinies can't hold your water."

"But I'm starving," whined Clark.

"How can you be hungry after that supper you ate," wailed Eddie.

"Supper! You call eating a couple of convenience store sandwiches here in the car a supper! I want to sit down to a real meal."

"A couple of sandwiches," exclaimed Eddie! "You ate three sandwiches and half of Dave's sandwich and all those chips and candy and stuff!"

"A man's got to eat. And I gotta eat now."

"You should have gotten something to eat when we stopped for gas," said Eddie. "In fact, you did get something -- I know you did! How can you be hungry again so soon?"

"Aw, that was just a bag of pork rinds. And that was hours ago. I'm hungry and besides I need to take a leak."

"Again You've got to go to the restroom again! If you can't hold your beer, lay off it for a while and leave some for Dave and me."

"As if you haven't been drinking your share," sneered Clark as he popped the top on another brew. "My stomach's growling and I say we stop the next place we can get a meal on this Godforsaken shortcut of yours."

"If you didn't cry for us to stop every five minutes, we wouldn't need any shortcuts! I planned our schedule with reasonable time for stops for gas and to pick up some food but you've got to keep coming up with all these delays. We're an hour behind as it is."

"You and your schedule! What difference does it make if we get in an hour later? Or a couple of hours later? Nobody but you is expecting us to be their right at ten o'clock."

"Maybe your folks don't worry if you're late but my folks care about me and I bet Dave's do about him."

I didn't want to hear what Clark was going to say in reply to that, so I said, "I'm getting kind of hungry myself."

"Two against one," crowed Clark, "that means we eat."

"Alright," said Eddie, "we'll be back on the Interstate in a half hour or so and maybe we can find someplace decent to eat then."

"No way, we're stopping the first place we can get a meal."

"And it looks like we won't have much of a wait," I said pointing to a sign by the edge of the road that said simply, "EAT" in letters about two feet high, with the words "24 hours" and "just two miles" in smaller letters beneath.

A mile ahead, another sign invited us to "EAT" and told us it was "just one mile." The next "EAT" sign declared that our destination was "just one half mile" and the last said "just 100 yards ahead."

Those one-hundred yards carried us around a great curve in the highway and into the midst of a stand of trees. There, all by itself, stood an old-fashioned diner -- the kind you see in an *that famous* Edward Hopper painting. There was no mistaking the fact that it was a diner. A plate glass window each side of the center door gave a clear view of the counter and stools inside and in each window hung a pink neon sign reading "EAT." An enormous neon "EAT" sign stood on the roof of the diner.

Pulling into the empty parking lot in front of the diner, Eddie asked, "Are you sure you want to eat at this dump?"

"I could eat a horse, raw," replied Clark.

"I'm not sure you'll eat a horse or anything else here," I said. "I don't see anyone around, maybe the place is closed."

"With all these lights on," laughed Clark. "Don't be silly. Besides, the sign said twenty-four hours. C'mon, lets chow down."

Eddie and Clark piled out of the Chevy, kicking beer cans out of their way. I followed with a strange sense of reluctance.

Walking into the diner, Clark sat down at the counter, while Eddie wandered over to the old-fashioned jukebox. I seated myself next to Clark on a rather squeaky stool.

"Look at these prices," yelled Clark, reading an assortment of signs posted on the wall behind the counter. "Coffee is only a dime here. And they've got burgers for a quarter."

"This place is probably run by some gook and your burger'll be a dogburger or catburger," said Eddie.

"Naw, slants don't live out in the woods like this. It's just these hicks don't know what things cost nowadays, living out here in the middle of nowhere. Maybe they'll be possumburgers, though, I think that's the kind of thing hicks eat, that and hog jowls. How about it, Dave, are you ready for a plate of hog jowls or a possumburger."

"I don't know about that," I replied, "but I might just try the fried chicken dinner for a dollar."

"Who the hell is Glen Miller," asked Eddie? "I don't recognize a single tune on this jukebox."

"Well I'm not gonna dance with you anyway. You might as well come on over here and eat with Dave and me."

"Yeah! Well, who's going to serve us this food. I don't see anyone around here," said Eddie, sitting down on the other side of Clark.

Clark began to bang on the counter, yelling, "Service! How about some service out here!"

But no one responded. While Clark kept on yelling, I looked through the door into the kitchen which proved as lifeless as the dining area. There was something uncanny about this empty diner. It made me think of those old science fiction movies where some guy wakes up and finds he's the only person left in the world, until he meets Beverly Garland, ^{Eventually} then you find out he's named Adam and she's named Eve. But in this case, neither Clark nor Eddie was my idea of an Eve.

"Something's wrong," I told them. "Let's get out of here. We can stop somewhere else for a meal. I don't like this place!"

"Don't have a cow, Dave! If there aint no one here, the chow's on the house. How's about grilling us up a couple'a steaks Clark, while I get some change for the jukebox out of this cash register."

"I'm gonna check out back," I said. "Maybe the manager or owner lives out back or something."

"Right," said Clark, "that's it, the cook must just be out back. I bet there's an outhouse behind this place, cause there sure ain't any restroom here -- just the dining area and kitchen. And, Eddie, you better keep your mitts out of that cash register until were sure there ain't nobody here."

Outside it seemed colder than ever. Once I got around the back of the diner it was pitch dark. I could barely see but there wasn't anything to see anyway. Just trees growing right up to the back of the building. No owner's house. No outhouse. No garbage cans next to the back door. In fact, no back door or back windows either. Nothing you'd expect behind a diner.

When I got back around front there was still nobody in the diner. But now that included Clark and Eddie.

"Hey, where are you? Where'd you go?"

I looked in the kitchen. No one there again.

"This isn't funny! Where are you?"

I couldn't see any place anyone could hide in the diner so I went back outside. They must have followed me around the back or gone out to the car.

But once I was outside I could see that the only tracks in the snow were mine looping around the building and those the three of us made going in.

I ran back in, yelling, "Where the hell are you?"

I knew they had to be hiding somewhere, laughing at me. I'd never live this down -- getting all freaked out just because they hid behind a counter or something. But they weren't behind the counter. They weren't any place I could find.

Alright, I figured there was one way to bring them out of hiding. Back out the door I headed, calling out as I went. "Bye, I'm leaving now. Have a nice walk. See you next year."

I climbed into the drivers seat and found the keys right where they always were, in the ignition. Starting the car, I gunned the engine then let out the clutch a little in reverse. I was sure that would bring them running. But nothing happened.

That was when I noticed the neon signs. All three of them. Now they said, "ATE. ATE. ATE."