

## Wilderness House Literary Review 21/2

*Dale Scherfling*

### Short Story - A Block Away From Respectability

When I was ten I knew most of the bars in Lorain, Ohio, and they mostly knew me too.

I wasn't a young lush. My drink of choice was Grapette, and the bartenders kept it in stock just for me — the grape soda kid who came in out of the lake wind, climbed onto a stool, and watched the room like he was taking notes. Which, I suppose, he was.

The city divided itself the way cities do. Down at the coal docks there was a slab-board bar favored by the lake freighter sailors — men who worked the route from the Soo Locks to Painesville, hauling iron ore through the belly of the Great Lakes. It was a rough place and they were rough men, and the bar knew what they needed, which included whiskey and girls both. Kiddy corner sat the Broadway Building, Lorain's idea of commerce and respectability, and on the other corner the Lake Shore Bus Depot. I moved between these worlds without much trouble. Respectability didn't interest me. The bus depot was useful.

I lived south, in a new postwar allotment called Homewood — the kind of neighborhood that believed in lawns and Milton Berle and children indoors after dark. My father worked three to eleven at the steel plant. My mother thought I was at the library on Tenth Street. I was rarely at the library on Tenth Street.

Between 11th and 20th the city belonged to someone else entirely. International bars. Gypsy storefronts. The Elvira Movie Theater, where good people never went, and next door the gypsies in their street-level parlor, ready to tell your fortune or lift your jacket, depending on the afternoon. Rumor said they kept a whorehouse upstairs. I investigated this claim with some persistence and never managed to confirm it.

The gypsies had kids my age. They tried for the jacket twice. Both times I kept it.

Before I discovered downtown I had already begun ranging out on my bike to neighboring towns for coffee — with cream — stopping at old cemeteries along the way to find the oldest graves. I kept a log. I found a few from the War of 1812, men who'd earned land bounties in the Western Reserve, their names going soft in the stone. I wrote them down. I didn't know why then. I know now it was the same instinct that made me climb onto bar stools and watch sailors and listen to bus drivers and learn the names of cops. I was cataloguing a world. I wanted to know what had been there before I arrived and what was there now and what it all amounted to.

At ten I was setting pins at the local bowling alleys. That gave me a couple of dollars in my pocket at all times, which gave me standing. I wasn't a runaway or a stray. I was something the neighborhood didn't quite have a word for.

I hitchhiked, which my parents had strictly forbidden. Once a week, more or less, a queer would pick me up. I'd accept the ride, decline whatever else was on offer, and say nothing about it to anyone. Telling would

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have meant the end of the wandering, and the wandering was non-negotiable. I filed it under the cost of education and moved on.

The gambler found me somewhere between Lorain and Cleveland. He was a racetrack tout, a man whose entire occupation was knowing things other people didn't and selling that knowledge for a percentage. We understood each other immediately. He took me to Randall Park — not just for the races, but for the early mornings at the stables, where the horses breathed steam in the golden light and the grooms moved quietly and everything smelled of hay and manure and something older than the century. He bought me sausage sandwiches in Westlake bars. In return I was company, and discreet, and I never asked questions he didn't want answered.

The regulars, in whichever bar I'd settled into for the evening, tended to look out for me. They'd run interference if somebody came in wrong, send me on errands — fetch something from the bar down the block, carry a message, come back with change — and in this way I became part of the furniture, part of the ecosystem. I knew most of the cops and bus drivers by their first names. I rode the buses to work and home and downtown and back like a commuter, like a man with places to be.

I thought I was perfectly normal. I hardly watched television unless it was from a bar stool.

There were two negro twins — this is what we called them then, in that time and place — who taught me to shoplift. They were patient teachers. Then they rolled me, which was also educational, though in a different way. I ended up with a couple of bruises, somewhat less money, and somewhat more knowledge, which seemed a fair enough exchange.



Those times and places are mostly gone now.

I'm a writer. I still haunt dives — have all my life, all over the world. I've met mama-sans in Kowloon who ran their establishments with the same quiet authority as the best bartenders on 15th Street, who protected their regulars and let us sleep it off in the booths after closing, who knew everybody's name and kept track of who owed what to whom and made sure the right people got home. The geography changes. The economy of the low place — the way it works, the codes it runs on, the people it makes room for — stays remarkably constant.

I learned it young, between 11th and 20th, on the coal docks, at the Elvira, in the stables at Randall Park in the golden morning steam.

I was perfectly normal.

I was just paying attention to different things.