

See You On The Backlot

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Series Editor: Peter Lancett

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His hand on my arm was pretty friendly-like, but I could feel his strength behind it. And Jeff didn't have a tent stake in his hand, but he definitely seemed intent on keeping me from going my own way.

Look, greenie, I'm not saying I was afraid. I mean, you know me, I'm not afraid of anyone or anything. But these guys are carnies of the old school through and through – and I knew that if I gave them too much trouble, they might just take a poke at me just to show me who's boss. So I let myself be led off, with the two of them glancing over their shoulders several times, as we headed in the direction of the cook shack.

Did they have questions for me? Yeah, I suppose... I mean, they bought me some coffee and picked my brain about turning a tip, my escape stunts and... hmmm. I guess a little bit about this new guy Frank, who's on the payroll now. I guess, thinking about it, I don't know if they were trying to keep me from something in the back yard, or if they really wanted to know about this guy.

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So, while I was mad at having been pulled away from seeing Delilah, it led me to something else.

Remember how I told you Charlie hasn't been around much since Frank has been working the top? Well, you can imagine my surprise when I finally pulled myself away from the cook shack and headed back to our joint. As I was walking up, I could hear voices talking inside – not real loud, mind you – but raised up like they were trying to keep it quiet so no one could overhear, even though they were mad. So I snuck up to the laces, you know, around the edge where the sides of the top lace up together, and stuck my ear up to it to listen in.

It was Charlie and Frank having a beef. And, I mean, really getting into it. I don't know what started the whole thing, but by the time I got up to it, this is what I heard:

First thing I hear Charlie say is, 'Just who do you think you are? No one is going to go for that!'

Then Frank came back with, ‘Oh, I think they will. If you didn’t think so, then they’d all know, wouldn’t they?’

‘Doesn’t matter what they know,’ Charlie told him. ‘Or what someone thinks they know.’

Frank started to answer, ‘Yeah, you can say...’

But Charlie interrupted him, saying, ‘Things are a lot different now than they used to be. And don’t you think for a moment that I’m going to let you say a damn thing to Tony! You just stay away from him! He knows all he needs to know.’

And Frank, he said, ‘That boy don’t know much of anything, does he? Or you would’ve spoke up when you saw me on the lot that day. But you’d had a few, hadn’t you Charlie? Yeah, you had all right. I’ve seen it before and I know just what happens when you do that, don’t I?’

I couldn’t see the look on my pops’ face

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at that point; but I had a pretty good idea what his face looked like right then. Like a bad dog caught piddling on the rug or something. I've seen him with that look plenty of times. I closed my eyes, trying to picture the inside of the top, imagining the two of them facing off on the little stage.

Now Charlie ain't no slouch, mind you – but the years of *running* the show rather than setting it up have left him a little soft. My pops stood a good few inches taller than this guy, Frank. But Frank carries himself in that wiry kind of way that only a carny in his prime seems to have. Tight, corded muscles used to lifting rope, his arms ending in the big worn and beaten hands that come from heaving the big pipes, stakes and sledgehammers. A dark look on his permanently sunburned face makes his bright blue eyes burn with an empty flame. Broken nose. A few tattoos. Just looking at Frank made me think of what someone who spent his whole life with bar fights and hard living should look like. Next to him, Charlie looks kind of like a desk-jockeying marshmallow.

I was surprised then that I could hear Charlie muttering something to Frank under his breath then... something dark, mean and ugly. I don't know what he was saying, but the hair on the back of my neck stood up just to hear the sounds coming from him. Never, ever have I heard my pops talk to anyone like that. Not even at his angriest.

And I guess Frank wasn't used to being talked to like that either, because by the time I heard Frank answer, his voice wasn't filled with the bravado it had had before. There was something else in it. Fear? Maybe. Respect? Definitely. I heard him answer my pops, saying, 'I'll do what I promised you I would. You keep up your end of our bargain, and I'll keep up mine.'

They may have said more, but I snuck away then.

I don't know what they were talking about, either, greenie. It just made me think that maybe there's more to this guy Frank than I'd thought. Will you keep an eye on

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him, for me? I mean, I would do it, but I still have something I need to do.

Well, sure, I'm still going to go over to see Delilah! But I'll do it tonight, after the show. Didn't forget that we're doing the grind, did you? There are marks who are begging to be separated from their money, son! But I'll meet back up with you later.

Psst! Greenie!! Yeah, you. Over here!

Get down. Down! Look, just keep it quiet for a moment, all right? Staying behind this trailer may not be the most comfortable thing in the world, but it's what we're going to do for the moment.

What happened? How do you know anything happened?

OK, OK. Yes. Something happened. But keep your trap shut and I'll tell you about it. Quietly... OK?

I did what I told you I was going to do. I took a walk over to Delilah's trailer. This time, I thought I'd avoid getting stopped by anyone, by reading the midway while I walked along. You know, 'read the midway' – I walked with my head down, looking for change and anything else the chumps might have dropped on their way out of the carnival.

But when I got near the entrance to the back yard, what do you think I see? Mutt and Jeff, who were hanging around the gate. Almost like they were waiting for me. I kept an eye on them though, as soon as I saw them, because I had no desire to get distracted again. So I kept my head down and headed around through the back way.

So I figured, as I'm used to heights and climbing and things, that I'd scale over the fence using the Light Plant – that's the big truck with the generators on it – to get myself through. Now, it probably meant that I would have to walk back *out* of the gate past Mutt and Jeff, but I figured I'd be OK at that point.

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It was easy enough to get over to where I wanted to go – to Delilah’s trailer. But when I got there, gazoonie... Well, when I got there, not all of the lights were off. So I was listening outside quietly, beneath the lit-up window that used to be her window – just to make sure it was still hers right? I hear voices – not just her voice, right? But a couple of voices – and it sounds like her and her father talking really quickly and urgently. Then I feel the whole trailer shift – like someone threw themselves into the side of it. And then more noises from inside. It was like things were being thrown around. Like someone was getting slapped or hit. I could hear loud voices, but couldn’t tell what they were saying. And then it sounded like crying.

I froze. I completely froze. I didn’t know what to do. Should I get help? Or try to get in?

Just then, I heard a yell behind me. I turned around and saw what looked like Mutt or Jeff – one of the carnies, anyway, it wasn’t a townie – running towards me

and yelling. Well, a noise like that would wake up the whole lot, and... Well I just ran, greenie. I ran as quick as I could, not paying attention to where I was going.

Within a few moments I'd put some good distance between me and Delilah's trailer, and I started thinking I should turn around and tell whoever it was chasing me, who it was they were after. I mean, maybe they thought I was just some townie pervert sneaking around the trailers, being a peeping tom or something. I know I shouldn't have run – but I did.

When I turned around, though, there wasn't anybody there. I guess I'd lost them as I ran through the lot. I was hoping that whoever it was who'd chased me off had heard what was going on in Delilah's trailer, and maybe put a stop to it. But, if I went back to check, I'd have to answer why I was out there, right? That's what made me stop and think. That's what made me head back here instead of going back.

What would you have done?