

## Conversation at a Truck Stop Diner

by Zachary Kellian

“I’m on the trail of the man who murdered my wife.” It was a hell of a conversation starter. I decided to open with it in this small cafe somewhere near the border of Kansas and Nebraska.

The waitress behind the counter smirks as she waits for the punchline to follow. When it doesn’t, she just shrugs and refills my coffee. “Don’t matter if you don’t want to tell me what you’re here for, but at least you’re willing to keep things interesting.” She was tired, clearly, and likely could not see how serious I was through the blur in her eyes. “You just let me know if you need anything else, okay hun?”

I nod to her and begin to tear at the pink sugar packets. Next to me, a man who had been at the end of the counter when I came in slinks over two seats. There was now only one stool separating us. He has the hunched shoulders of a long-haul truck driver. His features are as weathered as his faded olive cap and his threadbare flannel. “Beg your pardon, but what was that you were just telling Millie?” His voice sounds strained as if he was pushing it through a vice.

The waitress’s name escapes me at the moment, but it was most certainly *not* Millie. Still, I play along. “I was just stating my business, that’s all. What’s yours, friend?”

He slides his own cup of coffee over to join him at his new stool and takes a sip before answering. “Got a shipment I take fairly regular from Denver to St. Louis.”

“That your rig out front?”

He nods.

I continue, “You enjoy the work?”

“I enjoy the freedom.” He takes another long sip. “But back to you. What was you saying about murder?”

“Just what I said. A man murdered my wife, and I aim to track him down.”

He tips his hat back. His fat fingers run through thinning hair and he lets out a low whistle. “That’s one for the books, surely. You bull-shitting?”

Surprisingly, it feels like a relief to finally talk about it. “You’ve heard this story enough to think so, maybe?” I shoot him a wry smile that he does not return.

“So you are being serious?”

“I am.”

“Don’t suppose you want to tell me how you plan to do that?”

“Nope.” I take a gulp of the terrible coffee. “I don’t suppose I do.”

We drink in silence for a moment. Down the counter the waitress, whose name is not Millie, keeps a wary eye on us as she busies herself refilling ketchup bottles.

My companion decides that he’s given himself enough time to think things over. He shifts uncomfortably in his seat. “You ain’t trusting the police to do that?”

“Do what?”

“Find this killer you’re looking for.”

I size him up with a sharp glance. “I won’t let them rob me of the satisfaction.” He knows I am serious.

“How’s that now?”

“Prison is too good for the man who took my wife from me. He deserves to die, and I deserve to look him in the eye when he does.”

The trucker leans in, his breath hot and sour. “That’s pretty serious shit. You want to watch him die, huh?”

“It want him to see in my eyes just how much he took from me, before I take everything from him.”

At this, he chuckles to himself. “How you plan on doing it?”

“I’m going to find him and sit him down. I’m going to show him a photo of my wife. And then I’m going to do it.”

“But like, how? How you plan on killing a man in cold blood?”

“I’m going to pull out the Micro Desert Eagle I always carry. The one I keep chambered with two rounds. And then I’m going to put one bullet between his eyes.”

“That so?”

“That’s so.”

And where are you going to put the other one? Up his ass?” He laughs at his own joke.

“No. The second one is for me.”

“You’d kill yourself?”

“Killing him is the last thing I have to live for. With that done I can finally rest. I can finally see my wife again.”

“That’s what you believe?”

“That’s what I know.”

“Jesus.” The trucker exclaims. “That’s some real sick shit. Ain’t no way that would work.”

“We’ll see.”

“No, I mean killing someone? That’s real serious business and you seem too nice. You don’t have it in you, friend.”

He is right. The waitress is named Millie. I can see her nametag clearly now as she comes by with my bill. She can tell I do not want to be interrupted again and she moves back into the kitchen.

My friend seems to be turning something over in his head and after another bout of silence, apparently arrives at a conclusion. "No, I'm sure of it now, you are full of crap. You're just one of those salesmen who likes to liven things up while he's on the road. I've met your type before, always inventing stories, always messing with people."

"What makes you say that?" I ask.

"That suit of yours for one. Dressed nice like that, you've probably got a meeting somewhere between here and St. Louis."

"No meeting." I say. "Just a special day."

"How's that?" He has moved over to the stool right next to mine. I can smell the grime of the road on him. My nostrils sting and my eyes begin to water. "If you're telling the truth then you must keep your wife's picture on you."

"How do you figure?"

"You said you keep the gun on you always, to be prepared. I can assume it's on you right now?"

"It is."

"Means you'd keep the photo handy too."

"You're very perceptive."

"What's say you show me that photo of her then?"

I oblige, drawing it out from my jacket pocket and placing it on the counter.

He glances at it. "I'll be damned, you aren't lying are you?" He looks again. I wait for the recognition to show in his eyes.