

THE LONELY ROAD

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"We fall in love, we drink hard, we run to and fro upon the earth like frightened sheep. And now you are to ask yourself if, when all is done you would not have been better to sit by the fire at home and be happy thinking..."

Walking Tours---Robert Louis Stevenson

Chapter I

6 P.M.

"Here you are. Sixty-five, seventy, five, six, seven dollars and thirty-five cents." Steve Varco, the bartender spread the bills and small change onto the mahogany bar like a handful of cards and slipped the paycheck inside the till. "More take-home pay now, eh chief?"

"Not much" said Joe Leather, the Indian. "Enough for a few more drinks but not what I expected with all the talk about the tax cut. Big talk and small hearts. Congress wanted to vote itself a nice fat pay raise but I think the elections coming up scared them out. Anyway, they don't have to worry about tax deductions."

"Well, every little helps. You having the usual?"

Joe Leather nodded.

Steve turned to draw the brew. Joe Leather glanced about the tavern, Shady Lane which stood nearly hidden by an un-tended grove of cotton-wood trees on the outskirts of Dusty.

The bartender held the trumpet-mouthed glass beneath the spigot, then slid it along the bar and began stacking freshly washed schooners and fish-bowls behind the bar. He jammed more bottles into the open-faced refrigerator in preparation for the Saturday night crowd.

Joe Leather raised his glass and looked at Steve, busy behind the groove-worn bar which silently and forever hid in the darkness of its deep stain of accumulated years the stories and happenings of each day.

Steve's bigness, ~~with~~ his rough, craggy face and chill gray eyes reminded Joe Leather of an Army sergeant he had ^{once} served under, ~~once~~. But Steve had a tolerance for the antics of his customers which the sergeant had lacked for his men. Only occasionally did Steve ball a capable fist and indicate the door. The sergeant had been a bully.

Joe Leather looked at Steve's big hand and unconsciously flexed his own fist, testing its lesser bulk and noting its greater roughness. He had always wondered about big men like Steve, who strode in a little physical world of their own. Steve's world was built on the simple assertion of muscle when it was needed and a persuasive way without brute force.

Joe Leather had wondered whether Steve was married or not. There was nothing to hint if Steve had a wife or ex-wife, and no one who asked ever got a satisfactory answer.

"Keep 'em guessing. Keep 'em interested, and they'll keep coming back, and I don't mean the men," Steve had replied to Joe Leather.

Women were interested in Steve. Sometimes genuinely and sometimes as a temporary front when some undesirable stranger became too ~~attentive~~ attentive. There was never a set pattern to women or the extent of their connections with Steve.

Shady Lane was filling with regulars and drop-ins.

Three stools to the left of Joe Leather, Peg was covertly scanning the bartender. She liked his fresh, white shirt and the way partially rolled sleeves exposed muscular arms. She openly admired the honest, wide-spaced eyes and the graceful way he maneuvered his 180 pounds behind the bar. She turned on the wobbly stool ^{which} ~~that~~ was covered with cracked imitation red leather and sighed. The man beside her disregarded the expression.

Old Louie, from whom she rented a cabin near the river, not far from the tavern, wasn't particular about his clothing.

Peg 's eyes flicked about the room.

It would be another discouragingly gray evening. She sighed again. It was increasingly difficult to have a good time---one had to work at it so deliberately. It just wasn't a good time world any more.

Old Louie saw a day-dream look on Peg's face.

"Bring Peg here some Dago" he said. "Gotta soften her up a little." He pressed Peg's arm and laughed hoarsely. "Have a cigarette," and he thrust forward a flatened pack.

Peg's face brightened slightly, then her jaw set determinedly. "No thanks, I laid off."

Joe Leather heard a spatter of rain whenever the door opened to admit another customer ~~and~~ The early-evening sound only heightened the loneliness which he had felt from the first time he realized he was an Indian. It had grown more acute because of a girl in another town. Her name was Judy. She had decided not to marry and come to a small town on a reservation far from her home in a larger city where the Army had located a training camp. Joe Leather had been stationed in the camp and had met Judy at a servicemen's dance.

His mind had become scarred by recollections of large and brown and smiling eyes. His memories were of a dark-haired candle-flame of a girl with a voice that sung, sounding like a stream passing through a meadow in the reservation back-country. After more hungering than had been good for him he had found no release from a dream. He had tried to convince himself that Judy had stopped writing because he had no career to return to after the Army, and not because he was an Indian with only an allotment of some land on a reservation of sagebrush and mountains.

He drank slowly, ^{thinking} ~~thought~~ long and deeply, ~~and ordered another.~~

Assets: Age thirty; a job in the lumber mill; good health and a tolerable appearance. Liabilities: A war record, a hungering for a soldier-crazy girl who couldn't see him in anything but a uniform; a reservation to come home to instead of a GI Bill of Rights.

Peg, seated there by Old Louie, was thinking now about big lovely green dollars. About women who had charge accounts in good stores, and a big satin Hollywood bed and dressing table lined with bottles of real French perfume.

The women had bank presidents or businessmen for husbands; maybe their old men were a little paunchy but it would still be something to sink down in a big soft davenport beside them, wearing a slinky black negligee, and know that all you had to do was put out a little. Know that tomorrow and every day after tomorrow would be just a case of putting out a little and using the old charge account.

She looked down with distaste at her cheap red rayon dress and the spike heels that came from Schlepperman's and cost \$4.85. Louie had his hand on her leg, but she didn't squirm to dislodge it. He was thinking about her over-due rent for that lousy cabin. He was thinking how he had offered her some packaged beans, oat meal and lard ~~that~~ one of his renters had left in a cabin when he had moved out.

"None of that surplus relief food for me," Peg had said disdainfully.

"Schaperelli" she now said distinctly, "and Chanel Number Five."

"What's 'at?" Louie peered at her. What's 'at you say?"

"Nothing." She glanced at him. "I was just hollering down a rain-barrel." Just an apple-packer, that's all she'd ever bee Charge accounts, and Hollywood beds and Chanel Number Five---Hah!

The girl on the stool next to Peg was Karen, a counter waitress in a small restaurant near the Speedway and the depot which was left stranded in a part of Dusty now ~~that~~ the Freeway had come through.

"Make mine a top sirloin" Karen said, "with sparkling Burgandy." She rolled her eyes at Steve. "I'll order the dessert later."

Steve's smile was dubious. He hoped he wasn't going to have trouble with Karen. Dressed in black stretch pants tapering to the ankles and holding her hips like eager hands, Karen looked like a college girl. Her beehive hairdo was a study in casualness. She was out by herself, intent on a good big evening.

Shady Lane was coming alive and starting to bounce. Migratory workers mingled with packing house crews, the lumber mill hands and technicians from the plane plant and factories who cashed their checks in the tavern.

Steve brought more wine. Old Louie fumbled for a bill and shifted his hand from Peg 's arm to her knee. She picked up the wine and sipped it, silently. Louie was beady-eyed, with glasses resting insecurely low on the bridge of his nose. Repentant tears, which he occasionally disposed of with the back of his hand dripped from rheumy eyes as he fought a ripy cough. He looked old but really wasn't .

Joe Leather, half listening to the no^osy chatter, let himself think briefly about Judy. No woman was worth p~~re~~eserving as a dragging memory. He made a decision he wished he had made a long time ago. It was time for Judy to quit obtruding into his life when she wasn't a part of it. She was a memory now--nothing more than~~a~~ a paper doll surviving as a graduation picture. It was time for him to quit acting like a high school boy. It was time for a personal inventory.

He smiled. He thought of that pert little girl he had seen in the Indian agency office the other day, home from boarding school and with a job. Sue had sure grown up in two years. He drank his beer slowly and ordered another.

"Turn on some lights," someone shouted. "What do you think this is, the White House?"

"I'm on an economy drive," Steve spoke ~~out~~ over the chatter.

Joe Leather looked ~~a~~ about the crowded frowsy tavern.

Some of these people had real problems. They came here to irrigate dry fields of memory with schooners of beer and shots of red wine. Most of them had unhappy faces and doubtless they all had memories they were afraid to be alone with.

That girl beside the old man; she looked like a pixie in Hell, freezing inside as she basked in the pleasant sulphur fumes of Hades. The one called Peg, smoking a newly broken-in pipe who had said something about Chanel Number Five. The one getting a feel by that disgusting Louie.

Joe Leather surveyed the room and found things no different from any of the hundreds of bars he had been in all the way to Viet Nam and back. Clinical cases, every one; and so was he. The world itself was a clinic and the people in it were only patients. That old man, Louie, playing with a girl's leg and dreaming of more robust times. All of these people trying to be happy on a crowded, lonely road. Karen picking up a quarter tip as she carried trays containing the residue of the satisfaction of belly hunger. Taking a slap on the rear and probably saying 'What the Hell' as she crawled into bed, member to member, with a customer from the cafe.

All of these people in Shady Lane, pulling levers, trying for the jackpot. A pitifully small jackpot that was saying: "Let us live, let us be happy. Let us satisfy our needs on the installment plan---and pay later. Let the world swim in beer, bounce with bosoms and beam with social security and unemployment compensations. Brighten up the lonely road for all we who walk it. The Hell with right now--we are just loving up the present to get a piece of the future.'

All the ingredients were right here in Shady Lane-ready to be stripped and exhibited in a riotous joy of living that would bring no joy.

The door banged on its rusty hinges as customers came from small places to the small bar. A thick-shouldered overalled man wearing a pullover sweater and blue denim cap. Swede was one of Steve's regular customers although he never brought his young wife.

*didn't expect their
hands dry on a
clean bar towel + Steve's
helping*

who had been washing glasses for Steve.

The college kids, Jeanine and Linda ~~got up from the bar and~~ went to the pool table. Louie half turned, the better to scan their legs.

One of those at the bar, Hound Dog Hoke, never drank beer or wine. He sat with a glass of soda water ~~all evening long~~ until the last customer had staggered to the door. Hound Dog lived in one of Louie's cabins, holing up in winter and puttering about, planting and watering flowers in little patches of ~~ground~~ *played out* about the cabins during the summer. He came to Shady Lane to see people--for want of something else to do at night now that he had no pack of dogs or wolfers and was no longer able to follow trail-bawling dogs whose belling had been his only music.

The door banged again. Mrs. Greta Kirschner came in and the habitues got ready for a well repeated story. Gretats once free running stream of life was now as small as a brook and clogged with silt, weeds and the brush of the years.

"I ~~expected~~ *expected* a letter from ~~my~~ *mine* daughter," she said uncertainly as she sat down ~~at the bar~~. "Maybe now they won't even let ~~letters~~ *led ders* come across The Wall." She had on an ancient pink sweater with a hole in it near one nipple. A tuft of white cloth showed through the hole. She had on a plaid skirt, such as a younger woman would wear, and a shapeless ridiculous hat with a red feather. She ordered a beer.

"T'aint ~~good~~ *good* news from behind The ~~Wall~~ *W*" she said softly. *in her old*

Count Ry way of speaking
Steve was busy with refills and setting out new bottles for other members of the club; Minnie May, a wisp of a faded blonde, celebrating her new divorce; Mrs. Cyr, fleeing for a few minutes from the care of four children and spending their relief allotments for beer; Leroy ~~Enslow~~ *BRONslow*, a seedy attorney, and a few strangers.

Minnie May wasn't wearing a brassier; she hung heavy and restless. Mrs. Cyr was brushing a wisp of graying hair from her thin

face.

"Since Hubert hurt his back" she said, "we can't no more than hardly live on the compensation, And Hubert's like a bear around the house, lays around moaning about his back and gripping because he's afraid to smoke cigarettes, but not me. I hate his chewing tobacco and spitting. It's nice to get out with some congenial people for a drink or two and a good smoke." She sighed. "What with all my size family, what's a woman to do?"

Minnie May nodded with sympathy. "I got children of my own. Lucky I ain't got no guy with a lame back layin' around. And there's a laundrymat right close now so I'm not stuck home all the time."

She pawed a straggling pony tail. Her blonde hair was streaked with dirt. She wore blue denims and a ragged tee shirt ^{which} ~~that~~ was too large. Bronslow, the attorney, scratched his elbow and said nothing. He had an ^{easily seen} ~~prominent~~ pot-gut and he wore a black string tie and a wide brimed black hat. With blue suit and frayed shirt he gave an appearance of gentility somewhat diluted by alcohol.

Those and many more belonged to the arms and legs and bodies, the ballet montage of faces confronting Steve on the busy Saturday night.

The patrons talked about women with realism and told jokes plainly and without lowering their voices. Most of them were caught up in undercurrents of tension and tedium and they were trying to forget their yesterdays while they worked up hangovers for tomorrow.

They didn't know too much, or care, about the history of Dusty or the bar where they sat, drinking beer. Until Steve had become manager of Shady Lane for the Old Man, it had the older name of Wagon Yard Bar. In days ~~that~~ now ~~were~~ nothing more than unwritten history the freight wagon teamsters had met there at the end of a long pull from the larger settlements.

The Wagon Yard Bar, in turn, had been the offspring of a long dismantled brewery which had stood in the shade of a cottonwood grove.

Outside the slackening rain was dripping in large cold drops. It was doubtful the truckers and box buckers could get into the orchards the next morning to haul the tag-end fruit to the warehouse. There was little chance of activity on the flight line at the plane testing field. But work or not, they would return to Shady Lane the next evening. Guessing who would return helped make the job more interesting for Steve. ^{Placing} ~~Strangers were~~ ^{was} like betting on a horse race. College students were ~~too~~ ^(and restlessness) ~~independable.~~

The college boys, filled with ~~the~~ ^(and restlessness) romantic yearnings ~~of their age,~~ had nothing to forget and much to anticipate. They were out on a double date and sat in a booth at the insistence of one of the girls. Their brief ~~sidetrip~~ ^{a revelation} to Shady Lane was ~~an expression~~ ^{Personal} of economic conditions ~~in a~~ ^{way.} The girls would have preferred the plush atmosphere of a down-town bar where mixed drinks were served with a flourish while live music played for dancing. Instead they sat there ~~in Shady Lane~~ where beer and cheap wine could accomplish a build-up.

It was becoming noisier with voices high pitched and ~~opinions~~ too positive. Steve stood warily by. Joe Leather sat silently, gazing out the window and listening to the rain which ~~walked~~ softly overhead from a sky pressing close against the damp ~~earth.~~ The bog black clouds were brushing the treetops with sopping feet.

"Yah, yah, yah," ^{hammered} ~~boomed~~ one of the college boys as he slapped a dime into the juke box and swirled across the rough floor with his partner.

"Hey, there" shouted Steve. ^{"Knock it off."} ~~"Take it easy."~~ You want me to lose my license. If you want to dance you can find a place down ~~on~~ the highway." He slipped two fishbowls of beer along the bar and followed with mopping up the wet tracks.