

Shoes on a Streetlamp

By: Hamilton J Reed

The sun is setting, and the wind howls out of the east. I've passed by this town many times before on my way to Utah, but today's late start means I'm stopping here. It's some cowtown that outgrew its britches long ago, a place by the name of Ault, out in the ass-end of eastern Colorado. I'm sitting at the counter in some diner just off I-75, sipping coffee and waiting for my burger to arrive.

The wind howls and tears and tries to force its way into the building. The ancient boards creak and groan under the attack. Every so often a draft gets in, pushing the door open slowly, before the door forces it back out with a bang. There's a window facing west and the sun sets fire to the sky behind the mountains, illuminating a storm cloud making its way towards us. I'm glad I decided to stop here for the night.

I don't like going over the mountains in the dark anyway, too many forgotten things in the forests. The fact that there's a storm rolling in just reinforces my decision. I suppose I could have just gone on to Denver, but here there's less traffic and more character.

There's no one in the diner but me and the waitress. She swings by to fill up my coffee and let me know my burger will be out in a few minutes. I ask her if there's any decent places to stay around here. She stands up straight and thinks about it for a second or two. "Well, there's a place just up the road. They just got rid of their bedbugs too." I grimace. She laughs. "Oh I'm just kidding ya. I know the family that owns the place. It's fine, it's fine. There's no bedbugs there. Just you tell 'em Liz at the diner sent ya, they'll give you a good rate" and she winks then wanders off to go work on a crossword puzzle.

Finally my meal arrives. The veggies are fresh, the burger is cooked perfectly. The bun is a little dry and the fries are soggy, but I haven't eaten since yesterday, so the whole plate is gone in a matter of minutes. The waitress smiles at me when she brings the check. "Hungry, huh?" As the food coma sets in all I can do is smile and nod. The place is cash only (of course) and I make sure to give her a little extra for the hotel advice.

The wind is still blowing. In fact it seems like it's gotten stronger, even though the sun has gone down. It's a quick drive up the road to the hotel. Only a minute really. I could have walked if I didn't have a whole load of stuff to bring into my room. The lights are still on in the lobby, and a bored looking kid sits playing with his phone behind the front desk. He looks up as I approach. "Hi there sir, need a room?" I nod, and mention Liz sent me here. He smiles at that. "Yeah, she sends a lot of business our way, we do the same in kind." It's only \$30 for a night, but when I reach for my wallet, all I find is lint and linen. Must have left it back at the diner. "No worries man, I don't think we'll get full while you go grab it." He laughs at his own joke, then goes back to playing with his phone.

When I go back outside, the wind has died down. Without the noise and chill, it's actually quite a pleasant night. I decide to walk. A car passes here and there, but mostly the night is quiet. All the sounds of the town seem to come from far away. I look up at the night sky and can almost see the Milky Way amidst the stars. You don't get views like that in Denver.

The hotel and the diner are on the same side of a small street, only an empty lot and a gas station separate them. The other side of the street is all houses. Postwar construction illuminated by the soft orange of sodium lights.

It almost looks idyllic, like something out of a postcard. A light or two illuminates the houses from within. A pair of shoes tied together are hung over one lamp post. They look expensive, a light tanned leather, and sway even without the wind.

"Couldn't get enough of our coffee, eh?" The waitress looks up from her crossword puzzle, smiling. I laugh and point at the counter where I was sitting, explaining my wallet situation. "Oh that, I was hoping you wouldn't come back for that. Although I suppose you can't get a room without it" and she laughs at herself. Lot of comedians here for such a small town.

As she heads into the back office to get my wallet, my mind drifts back to the shoes in front of the house. I holler after her, asking if all the hooligans in this town use nice shoes to hang on streetlamps and laugh a little. The town must be wearing off on me. When she comes back out, all the mirth has left her face. "I wouldn't worry about that if I were you. Just try and get a good night's sleep." She thrusts the wallet into my hand as if it were a dead rat.

She follows me to the door and as I step outside, I hear the lock thud into place behind me. I check my watch. I could have sworn the sign said they weren't closing for another hour. Must have been a slow night. I turn to make my way back towards the hotel. I notice all of the other side of the street has gone pitch black. No streetlamps illuminated. No houses glowing.

Well, almost none. The streetlamp with the shoes is still on, but they no longer sway. In fact, they almost seem frozen in mid air. My eyes follow the point of the toes towards a house. All the lights in the house are on and there

are shapes moving. I feel the blood drain from my face and my breath stops in my throat. The reptilian part of my brain screams at me. Those aren't people it says. The shadows are too tall and thin. They twitch and blur and twitch again. The top nub, I hesitate to call it a head, seems to drift from side to side, like it's searching for something. It stops, and my asshole clenches.

I run the rest of the way to the hotel. The kid asks if I found my wallet, but I can't even make eye contact as I fish out the thirty bucks and throw them on the counter before snatching the keys. I leave my stuff in the car. I can get it in the morning. "I'm really tired" I lie to myself.

I strip down and crawl under the sheets. The blanket is rough, but at least the sheets are comfortable. I turn off the lights and roll over. I hear sounds outside the room. "Must be some newlyweds" I murmur to myself. My eyes refuse to close. The wind is howling again. Shrieking.