

You Can't Play to Win

The tall sign outside the gas station reads, from top to bottom:

REGULAR: \$3.02

PLUS \$-.-

SUPREME: \$-.-

DIESEL \$3.22

Miss Emma, a timeless old woman, hangs the nozzle on a gas pump that has never and will never accept debit cards. She steps into her in pickup truck.

Billy Joe hollers from inside the convenience store.

“Twenty-seven dollars eighty-four cents, Miss Emma.”

“Tell your mother I said ‘Hello’ and I want some of those peaches the moment they get ripe and not a day sooner.”

“Yes, ma'am. You have a good day, Miss Emma.”

She cranks the chainsaw of an engine, backs up the truck, and swivels towards the exit.

“I want ‘em ripe, now.”

Billy Joe waves.

Miss Emma brakes to allow a man to cross the sidewalk intersecting the pavement. He holds out his hand politely, without smiling.

Before Miss Emma pulls away, the man swivels back toward the truck, knocking on her passenger side window. Miss Emma leans over, the window rolls down. The man places both hands on the truck, and speaks into the open window. He listens, gestures toward the gas station. He nods, pats the truck once before it lurches forward and away.

You Can't Play to Win

The man walks slowly toward the gas station convenience store, his boots clacking in the small town silence created by the departing truck.

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The glass doors of the convenience store open causing a makeshift doorbell to chime. The man, Abner, a working man, pauses inside the door. He sees cushionless dining booths, tight aisles, homemade fried chicken under heaters. He turns and approaches Billy Joe standing behind the counter.

"Pack of reds, please."

Billy Joe turns to grab the cigarettes, the waddle of one long unaccustomed to torso movement. Abner turns around, scanning the surrounding store, looking. He faces Billy Joe as he returns with the cigarettes, pats his dusty suit jacket.

"Can I get a lighter, too?"

Billy Joe pivots again. Abner looks around again.

"He doesn't mind if you smoke in here." Another voice.

Abner cranes his neck to see Patrick, a man out of work, staring at the screen video poker machine behind a stand of beef jerky. Abner sees Patrick's face, spins too quickly turns again toward Billy Joe. He speaks to Billy Joe.

"Is that true?"

Billy Joe shrugs. Abner grabs a lighter, unwraps the pack, plants a cigarette in his mouth, reaches for his wallet.

"Don't worry about that." Patrick says

You Can't Play to Win

"Don't worry about what?" says Abner.

"No one pays for anything here, not right away. You can wait awhile."

Abner talks to Billy Joe. "That true, too?"

Billy Joe shrugs. Abner digs a wad of bills from his pocket.

"Well. Payday some day," says Abner. "Might as well be today."

Billy Joe is silent, shrugs.

"What do I owe you?"

Billy Joe shuffles to the register, punches a few buttons. A total appears on the digital readout. Billy Joe steps back and looks blankly at Abner, who places a single twenty-dollar bill on the counter.

"Want your change right away?" says Billy Joe.

"No, I guess not." Abner lights the cigarette, leans against the counter, takes a puff, watches Patrick tap the video poker screen.

"Shit," Patrick says to the screen. He feeds a crinkled bill into the machine. He glances at Abner. "Where you from?"

Abner starts walking to Patrick.

"Next state over. In on some business. You ever win at that thing?"

"Ha. You can't play to win— Shit." Patrick puts another bill in the machine.

"You from around here, then?" says Abner.

"Born and bred. Lost my cherry in the restroom over there."

"Men's room or the ladies room?"

Patrick looks up.

"It was certainly a unisex restroom at the time."

You Can't Play to Win

"Yes sir, I believe it was."

The ice is broken. Abner extends his hand.

"Name's Abner."

They shake hands. Patrick returns to the game. A moment.

"Never played this kind of game," says Abner. "Always preferred the real thing myself."

"Shit." Patrick's hands drop from the game. He puts his head in his hands.

"Goddammit".

"So, you're from around here then, Patrick?"

"Yes sir, and you ain't. I believe we covered that."

"Whereabouts exactly?"

Patrick looks up.

"Who needs to know, Abner?"

Abner puts his hands up.

"Hey, sorry. I got nowhere to be till tomorrow morning, and I'm just talking."

"I see," says Patrick. "Well, Abner, I need money, and I'm gonna sit here and try to get this machine to give me some. In a couple of hours I'll need a drink, so you wanna take one of those twenties I seen a minute ago and buy me a drink down the road in a bit, I'll talk about whatever you want."

"Sounds fair. Where do I meet you?"

"Over at the Dark Horse."

"Where's that?"

Patrick feeds another bill into the machine.

You Can't Play to Win

"Down the road."

■ ■ ■

Parties of one, men gathering the courage to go home, dot the barstools and tables of The Dark Horse. Abner sits at the bar with a glass of water. The bartender leans against the back wall across.

"You know, there are other places in town that serve water."

"Just waiting on someone. Don't worry."

"Someone from around here?"

"Yeah. Patrick."

The Bartender nods. "Any idea what's keeping him?"

"He needs to run out of money."

"Well, you shouldn't have to wait long, then."

The bell over the door clanks. Patrick walks in slick with rain and defeat. He sits next to Abner.

"Whatever he's having," says Patrick

The Bartender turns to Abner. "You ready now?"

Abner nods. Holding his hand over the bar, he indicates a small drink in front of himself and a taller one in front of Patrick.

"Keep it that way till we leave."

The bartender moves away. A jukebox twangs distantly.

"Any luck, then?"

You Can't Play to Win

"I just can't...is there no...I'm sorry, friend, what was your name again?"

"Abner."

"Abner, do you mind if we wait till the drinks get here?"

"No, I don't."

A moment. The Bartender returns with two different sized glasses as ordered, places them on the bar, pours whiskey in. Patrick drains his quickly, plants the glass back onto the bar.

"Jesus," says Patrick. Abner nods to Bartender, who pours Patrick another.

"You got any family around here?" says Abner.

"Less than I used to. Less than I'd like."

"I hear you. Hard to keep everyone in one place in America."

"The thing is, I had 'em for a while. " Patrick takes another drink, all the way down.

"Suzanne, really pretty little wife. Oldest daughter Becky looked just like her. Younger one didn't but just pretty in her own kind of way. But, you know, you can't hold on to 'em."

Abner nods, takes a sip from his drink.

"What about you?" Patrick says. "Anyone waiting for you back at the house?"

"Yes. Yes, they are. I have a wife, pretty as wives tend to be. Recently came by a little one as well. Kind of dropped on our doorstep.

"Well, congratulations. Ain't nothing in life better."

"You, you lost yours then?"

"I truly did. I truly did lose them. All but the youngest." Patrick says. "Suzanne, she passed, you know. And I can't blame her for that, what with living with me and all, but I

You Can't Play to Win

had the girls. Becky, she looks like her mama, but a while back she said I didn't love her right and she just run off. Just little Grace now.

"The younger one?"

Patrick nods. "Real cute."

Abner looks around the bar. Everyone is absorbed in their drinks. He stands up from the barstool.

"Need a lift home?"

"Eventually, but come on, stay a while." Patrick motions to the Bartender.

"It's getting late."

"I thought you was wanting to talk!" Patrick is loud. A few lone patrons lift their heads. Abner slides back onto the barstool.

"Sure. I sure did."

The Bartender offers another drink, Abner lifts his hand slightly from the bar: no more. The Bartender surreptitiously points towards Patrick. Abner nods.

"What's your business here?" Patrick says.

"Excuse me?"

"You're in town on business; what is it?"

"Oh, it's just, kind of a presentation I have to give."

"Huh. Didn't know they gave presentations in this town."

"Yeah..."

Patrick takes another drink. "With a computer and whatnot?"

"Nope. Just talking. Point and shoot."

Patrick nods. "Mm-hm."

You Can't Play to Win

Abner shifts in his seat, not settled. Patrick notices.

"How old's your little girl?" says Patrick.

"Ha. Not old enough."

"Seems like it was kind of a surprise then? Why'd you wait so long?"

Abner doesn't answer. He drains his drink.

"Listen, no offense but a man your age—" Patrick says. "I mean, I guess that's something to be proud of, right there. Life is long, right?"

"I guess I just never thought it was the right time." Abner takes another drink.

"And your old lady, she didn't have the mother thing? Or she couldn't. She couldn't, right?"

"No, no, she could. She...she certainly wanted to have kids, but—"

"But you were busy."

"Very busy, I—"

"Too busy. Too busy for family."

"I was out building something."

"Out there in the world, like you are now. Making presentations."

"I wasn't home a lot."

"But you are now. Now is the time."

"That's right."

"Now *you* want one."

Abner takes a deep breath.

"Now that I have a child, I want one," says Abner.

It's quiet for a moment.

You Can't Play to Win

"Ain't that something," says Patrick.

Another long pause. Abner is lost in thought.

"Well, Abner, congratulations. I believe we have talked. I'll take that lift home."

■ ■ ■

In the parking of The Dark Horse, Abner pulls out his car keys and walks to a pickup truck with an unsteady Patrick in tow. Abner opens the passenger door then walks around to the driver's side. He watches Patrick shuffle into the truck. When the passenger doors closes, Abner climbs in. He sits for a moment, then locks the doors and twists the ignition.

The old truck roars to life.

■ ■ ■

Patrick sways while Abner drives.

"You know where we're headed?" says Patrick.

"Your place, right?" says Abner. Patrick looks at Abner, then at the road ahead.

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You Can't Play to Win

Dense woods surround Patrick's doublewide trailer. Civilization is distant. Abner's truck rumbles up the long dirt driveway, stops uncomfortably far from the front door.

Neither man moves. Patrick looks at Abner.

"Don't want to wake up your little girl," says Abner. "What'd you say her name was?"

"Grace," says Patrick. "She's probably asleep."

"Right. And the other one's Becky."

"Right."

Patrick opens the door, steps out.

"I got kind of a drive back to the hotel," says Abner. "Mind if I get a glass of water from you?"

"Uh. Sure."

"Thanks."

Patrick stands there a moment, truck door open.

"I'll be right behind you," says Abner.

Patrick closes the door, starts shambling towards the trailer. Abner reaches towards the glove compartment and grabs what he needs. Patrick continues towards the house. Abner steps out of the truck, closes the door, walks a few paces behind Patrick.

The blue light of a television pulses through a window.

Patrick walks up simple wood steps to the front door. He produces a key ring, looks back at Abner. Still a few feet away, Abner is looking around. He turns back to Patrick, smiles weakly.

You Can't Play to Win

Patrick turns back to the door, his breath quickening. He opens the door and steps into a messy living room. On a dark thrift store couch lays Grace, 9 years old, unwashed. She's asleep, lit by the glow of the TV.

Patrick stumbles quickly across the room, fumbling with his keys. He rushes towards an end table with a locked drawer.

"Wait."

Patrick freezes. He turns to see Abner standing just inside the doorway, a gun pointed at Patrick.

Patrick holds his free hand out, a silencing gesture. He motions to Grace. He keeps his voice low.

"Is she okay?"

"She's asleep."

Abner motions for Patrick to walk back towards the door.

"Is this about Becky?" Patrick says.

"Yes."

"Is she pregnant?"

"No, she's dead. But she was."

"Was it mine?"

Abner doesn't answer.

"Oh God. Oh Jesus."

"Let's go," Abner says. He takes a step backwards down the steps. Patrick takes a few steps, starts to reach towards Grace.

"Don't," says Abner. "Come on."

You Can't Play to Win

Patrick stands for a moment, taking a last look at his daughter. Then he walks.

■ ■ ■

Abner backs down the stairs, gun drawn. Patrick emerges from the front door, leaving the door open. Abner beckons and Patrick walks down the steps. Abner moves Patrick away from the trailer, then pivots around him, quickly ascends the steps, and closes the door softly.

“What about Grace?” says Patrick.

Abner steps down, a safe distance between him and Patrick. He points towards the woods beside the house, shakes the gun: move. Patrick walks, fighting his drunkenness.

“Oh God. Oh God, no. God, I can't think.”

Abner follows. They approach the tree line.

“I can't think. Mister,” Patrick stops at the tree line, rocking on his feet. “Mister, I am lonely. I was so lonely. When, when my daughter, listen—“

“Patrick, we can't wake up Grace.”

“No, no, no,” Patrick starts to cry softly. “God, no, no.”

They start to walk again, into the trees.

■ ■ ■

They are deep into the woods, the porch light barely visible through the dark of the trees behind Abner. Patrick walks, blubbering. Abner follows at a distance.

You Can't Play to Win

"Oh God. Listen," Patrick says. "Abner, I need you to listen."

Abner glances towards to house. He is nervous.

"Keep going," he says.

"I need to talk to you. About Becky. About how I was."

Abner moves closer, goads him forward.

"God, I need to talk to you! I need to talk to you, Mister. I want to you listen to me!" Patrick wheels around and lurches back towards Abner, eyes towards the house, arms outstretched. "My daughter! My daughters!"

Abner is too close. He pulls the gun back but it goes off, firing into Patrick's hand. Both men lose their footing. Patrick falls forward onto his stomach, Abner a foot away onto his back.

Patrick rolls to side, clutching his hand, weeping.

"Listen, listen, I can't remember, listen..."

Abner scrambles to his feet, breathing heavily. He quickly locates the gun in the leaves nearby and points it at Patrick.

"Stand up," Abner says.

"I was drunk. God, I can't remember."

"Stand up!"

Patrick supports himself on his good hand and wobbles to his feet. He faces Abner but doesn't look at him.

"I was drunk."

"Turn around."

You Can't Play to Win

Patrick pivots, facing away from Abner. Abner backs a step, gun pointed. He cocks the gun. Patrick raises his hands. Blood drips from one of them.

"I was drunk, I was lonely, and I don't remember. I was drunk, I was lonely, and I don't remember." Patrick drops his hands. "That's all."

Patrick's breathing slows. He lowers his head.

"Okay," says Patrick.

■ ■ ■

Morning streams through the window above the couch. The television is off. Grace stirs on the couch. She sits up.

"Daddy?"

Abner enters.

"Hi," says Grace.

"Hey there."

They look at each other.

"What's your name?"

"I'm Grace."

Abner crouches to her eye level.

"Are you hungry?"

Grace nods.

"Let's see what we have to eat." Abner walks to the kitchen. Grace stands, sleepily walks to the modest, cluttered table.

You Can't Play to Win

"What do you like to eat?"

"Cereal."

Abner grabs a box of cereal from the top of the refrigerator, then opens the refrigerator door.

"I can't have any milk. I'm lati-kose intolerant."

Abner pours the cereal into a bowl.

"But you can have just cereal, right?"

"Where's daddy?"

Abner sits down at the table and sets down the bowl.

"Do you believe your daddy loves you?"

Grace nods.

"And," Abner pours some cereal, "that he'd do anything to keep you safe?"

Grace grabs a handful of the dry cereal and throws it into her mouth.

"Uh-huh."

"Would you like to have a baby sister?"

Grace grabs a book and crayons from the table and starts coloring.

"I guess so." Grace is absorbed in her work. Abner walks to the couch, sits, and watches her.

■ ■ ■

Patrick stands besides the road in the early-morning mist. His bandaged hand is tucked into his armpit. He lights a cigarette with the other. The dawn sky is in full bloom.

You Can't Play to Win

He turns, exhales a large plume of smoke, and sticks out his thumb as an eighteen-wheeler goes by. Patrick looks back at the truck and then turns to the road and continues to walk.