

David Salner

The Frozen River

One Friday night, when I lived in Sioux City, Big Al knocked on the door. He stood on the second-floor landing of a rickety outdoor staircase, the only way up to my apartment. He towered there in the wind, which came off the frozen river. As I remember it, Big Al—I never heard him called Al—had tears in his eyes. The wind, I reasoned.

Long after the bars had closed, in the loneliness of the night, he was asking me for money. I was skeptical, especially with the way he hulked in the doorway with his Give-me-or-else swagger. It did surprise me that he knew my address, also that he knew my name. As the bouncer at the club I went to, he'd never done more than grunt when I walked up to the door. I had heard him address others, for example the kids waiting in line with fake id's: "You should leave before somebody drops a house on you." Or the old standby: "Get lost, F**k Face!" Not all were that clever, but they seemed to get the job done. These were not empty edicts, but edicts with north of 250 pounds to back them up.

On that night, however, he'd come to me begging \$5 for gas. "I ran the tank empty looking for my wife . . . Dave, she's in some kind of trouble!" An earnest and worried man? Like I said, I was skeptical.

"Hang on," I said, because \$5 was a lot back then. Plus, I wanted to keep him standing outside. Big Al coming into my apartment made me nervous. It was a one-room affair. I hardly remember it now, but I'm very clear that I didn't want him watching me fumble around, seeing me pull more than \$5 from my wallet—which hardly seemed possible given the state of my finances—and him demanding I hand it over, all of it. And in those days \$5 was a lot, like I said.

Besides, I hardly knew him, so what business did he have banging on my door in the middle of the night? Let him stand out in the wind and shiver, snuffle and shiver. Which was what he was doing when I came back with the five. That's when I noticed he wasn't wearing a coat. Or maybe he was, but it was open in the front, and his shirt was unbuttoned. Anyway, what struck me is that his chest was bare to the wind, a gold chain around the neck, tiny hairs, pink skin.

"Thanks, Dave, I'll remember this—" and more, he was profuse in his thanks until I cut him off. Not that it would hurt to have Big Al remember me. As long as he didn't make a practice of hitting me up.

Financially, and in other ways, I was just getting by, working in a carpentry shop assembling draft beer coolers for minimum wage.

I don't often encounter people with that exact job on their resume and, truth be told, I never included it on mine either. But if you went into a bar and ordered a draft and watched the bartender pull on the tap handle, the spurt of beer and foam emptying into the glass originated in a keg that was kept cool in an insulated box. Like the kind I'd been assembling that winter. Cold beer is more popular than warm, even in winter.

Back then I thought such jobs were dumb, and that poor attitude meant I was a poor worker, not well liked by the boss. Not that admiration from a boss is something we should strive for. The point is, a bad case of job insecurity had made me tight with five spots. My buddy had gotten a job in a grain elevator, which I figured I'd have to do as soon as they fired me from the beer cooler shop. One of the perks of working in a grain elevator is that I'd be able take home all the grain dust I could stash in my lungs. Not considered pilfering. A benefit, free and clear. As it turned out, I never had to work in a grain elevator, but if I had, I would have been fired from there as well. Or I could have gone to work in one of Sioux City's many slaughterhouses, where I'd probably be the first one slaughtered.

At a certain point in my life it dawned on me that no jobs were dumb if they kept you from starving. But at that time, on the bitter cold night that I'm writing about, I hadn't yet learned all of life's many great lessons. I was still making excuses for being a bum. And I was listening to the pre-dawn clatter of Big Al's boots clumping down the steps. It bugged me, the triumphant sounds of someone making off with my hard-earned money.

When I closed the door on the night, air whooshed in over the floorboards and chilled my bare feet. I went to bed and tried to dismiss the feeling that I'd just been mugged. I tossed for a while, wondering if I'd done the right thing by not standing up to him. But wasn't that a no-brainer? When I finally calmed down about the money, his face floated back into my mind, that big square face in the wind, the watery eyes.

The club I frequented was called the Payday Lounge. In addition to a fierce bouncer, the Payday featured a great band. Back then, I'd heard all the bands, on record or radio, and I can tell you that Steve Monroe and the Sioux City Ramblers were the best blues band for many miles around. But who cares now? Who cares today what a bum like me felt when Steve closed for the night with a ten-minute rendition of "My Girl"? He built it up, chanting "*talking 'bout, talking 'bout . . .*" followed by moans and keyboard exclamations and guitar riffs with plenty of feedback. That may not sound very musical, but music is hard to write about. Even people with advanced degrees, who get paid good money to write about it, end up saying something about

as informative as: “That dude Schubert . . . that cat knew how to lay down some notes.”

It was the kind of music that my generation took to heart, that we argued about, that made us weep. The fact that I didn’t have a girl at the time may have contributed to the weeping I did over the Rambler’s rendition of “My Girl.” Well, Schubert didn’t have a steady girl either, which was not exactly an excuse for why the poor guy had VD his whole adult life, which I never did. Maybe it also explains the teardrops he injected into the “Ave Maria” tune that I can never get out of my mind. It stays with me, a tuning fork in a deserted concert hall.

But the Ramblers’ version of “My Girl” has long since disappeared without a trace, sound waves into thin air, dispersed just like all those nights in Sioux City, the dead-end job, the lonely walks, the solitary drunks. The smoke that used to hang in the Payday dispersed into thin air years ago. The atmosphere in that lounge, if the Payday exists anymore, is now pristine. Healthier to breathe, but somehow lacking.

That’s what I remember about those days, a few great songs and the smoke, which seemed to surround all our wants and longings, the smoke and smoking. I’m not meaning to defy medical opinion, which I agree with—and I’m sure the distinguished doctors of the CDC are pleased to hear my opinion on the subject—I’m just stating a fact, a historical fact. If we were stressed, we smoked; when we relaxed, we smoked; working hard or hardly working, we smoked; if we wanted a chat, we said, let’s burn one; but most of all, if we were having a bad time, we struck a match and fired one up. The fact that I could always light up a Lucky or a Camel meant I had a way to deal with troubles, large and small, with anything life had thrown at me. That’s who we were. It’s a matter of history, and you can’t just dismiss it with an admonishing index finger and a nonny-nonny-boo, it’s so bad for you.

In fact, the day after Big Al hit me up, over lunch at the Cooler Plant, after I’d wolfed my sandwich, I poured coffee from a steel thermos and relaxed over, guess what, a smoke. The sandwich was nothing, the coffee not bad, but the smoke was everything. It certainly helped me focus, which I needed to do, because I was teetering on the edge, and one of my coworkers was trying to push me over. “I spoke up for you when the boss asked why you only got three frames done yesterday.” Spoke up for me, my ass. You threw me under the bus is what you did!

I still remember that guy: the short, bristly hair, turned-up nose, and the way he always spoke out of the corner of his mouth. The type of guy who might give you good information that you’d discount because of all the bad information he’d been feeding you. Then, when you’d get in hot water, he’d turn around and—it’s your own fault, you

should've listened to me!

After my shift, I took a shower in my icy apartment, and grabbed a few winks. I often met my buddy for dinner before going to the Payday, but he wasn't around. Not sure why, since he was also a fan of the Ramblers. Maybe he was working afternoons at the grain elevator. Or he'd hitchhiked back east on the spur of the moment. My memory's damn good, just not for everything. And I shouldn't have to explain that. You can make a lot of mistakes, but if you commit one little memory lapse people look at you like you're coming down with a medical condition I don't even like to name. Ballplayers make bonehead errors, surgeons remove the wrong kidneys, companies put the wrong software in jumbo jets—mistakes get made all the time. But one memory lapse and people give you that look.

What I remember best about those days is that except for my buddy, who'd apparently left town, and the people at the Payday, I was pretty much alone. I was friends with the Ramblers, and my chats with them were proof that I wasn't completely alone on the planet. Being alone on the planet is still my worst nightmare.

Steve Monroe even invited me, along with a few others, to an after-hours jam session at his house. Steve was my version of a success. Not only did he have a pretty wife and baby but he'd cut his teeth in Chicago, used to sit in with Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf.

I regarded Steve as a cut above me, but the band's manager, Kenny, was a friend. He and his wife, Darlene. Kenny, Darlene, and I often had lunch on Saturdays. Sometimes she'd pack a basket and we'd get stoned by the banks of the Sioux River, if it was a nice day with no wind, as seldom as that was. All I can remember is that the sandwiches had sliced sweet pickles on them and there were shoals in the river and a bridge over it. And I didn't have to assemble coolers the next day. At the Lounge, Darlene would ask me to dance from time to time. She was a very cute and nice woman, but I never saw Kenny dance with her. Between sets I'd BS with the rest of the band, too, and still remember a couple of names, like Rudy, the lead guitar, and the drummer, Squirrel.

As I drove into the gravel parking lot, I wondered what Big Al would say at the door. He'd probably treat me like his long-lost buddy, fawning all over me. I wanted that even less than his previous disdain. Maybe he'd toss me out, try to discredit me in case I made a claim on that five. But I didn't have to worry because Big Al wasn't there, no girth blocking the door. A relief, but suspicious, to say the least. He was always the first one at the Lounge. What could you count on in life if not the presence of Big Al, ready to lord it over teenagers? But it

Kestrel

was still early, a good hour before he was needed at the door, so he had plenty of time to make whatever terrifying entrance he planned.

I ducked inside and felt the air shift from subzero to hot and damp and hurried to take off my coat. As soon as I'd wiped fog from my glasses, I saw Kenny and Squirrel sitting at a table, deep in talk. Then I noticed Rudy leaning against the bar, talking with Ron, the bartender. When you look back at scenes you see things that you didn't notice at the time. Remembering the scene today, I can definitely see there was some tension in the air. Squirrel and Kenny—and Rudy and Ron—were having simultaneous discussions about the same thing, something disturbing.

Squirrel had a shot in front of him, which he was staring at, through the droopy blond hair that was always in his eyes. He had pointy features, which may or may not have fit with the nickname. I know what a squirrel looks like but never could draw a clear bead on how to describe one. The bangs and the bowl haircut didn't fit. The overhead light glinted off an earring. He was bold to wear it back then when the only guys to wear earrings were tough guys in motorcycle gangs. He was either deep in thought or trying not to think at all. Kenny may have had a beer in front of him, or not. Alcohol was no big thing to him.

"So'd you get a visit last night?" Kenny asked, even before I sat down. I held up my finger to hold that thought while I got Ron to pour a draft. I knew what was coming and wanted to think of some version of what happened last night that wouldn't make me look like an easy touch and a gullible fool.

"Big Al, right?" Kenny said when I came back with my beer. He narrowed his eyes. There was no line of bull he couldn't see through. Then he said, a little anger creeping into his voice, "From what I hear, he skipped town, a few pissed off people on his tail."

I hoisted my beer, not even noticing how good it tasted. Too bad, because the first beer after work is always the best. The more you tip them in, the less taste. In the silence that followed I realized I had to answer Kenny. But I had one option before showing my hand, and that option was to answer his question with a question of my own. "Why? Did he stop by your place?"

Squirrel looked up through his bangs, not too happy.

"Hit me up for \$25," Kenny finally admitted. That really surprised me about Kenny, the clever one, until I thought about it. He was the band manager, and the band needs a bouncer. He almost had to hand something over.

"He told me he was trying to find his wife, who was in bad trouble, so I gave him \$5."

"Dave, you shouldn't have fallen for that line about Big Al's

wife. I doubt that lug is even married.” Kenny leaned back in his chair, that know-it-all grin coming back on his face but only for a second. I never asked him what line Big Al used on him.

“Hell, what’s it matter,” he laughed, as if he could read my mind. “That’s the last we’ll see of Big Al.”

Squirrel got up and crossed the dance floor. He stepped up on the bandstand, walked over to his drums, and tapped on the snares. It was a nervous gesture, no music to it. Just a rattle in the air.

Then Kenny and I looked at each other, our eyes meeting at the same instant. We laughed and shook our heads, two dumb guys enjoying a joke on each other. I went back to the bar for two beers. I figured Kenny might need one, and if he didn’t want it, it wouldn’t go to waste. It would be just the right temperature, from the cooler below.

The Lounge was quiet now, not a sound, even from outside. As I stood there, leaning on the bar, I had the feeling that my whole young life was there, in that one silent room. I watched Ron scoop the mugs up from the draining board and knew something was about to happen. That’s the way I remember it, anyway. The way the world is, anything can happen. But it can’t. Only one thing can happen.

I glanced toward the door as it suddenly opened. The wind blew in off the frozen river. It was Big Al. Tears streamed down his face.

