

HAPPY HOUR

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CREWS WERE CHANGED OUT EARLY on the oil rig, and the sun was barely over the rim of the Gulf of Mexico as we boarded the helicopter and headed toward the mainland. "It's gonna feel real good to be on land again," Whitey shouted over the roar of the whirring blades, and the rest of us nodded in agreement.

We flew in over southern Louisiana, looking down at a strip of marshy coastline that still hasn't made up its mind whether it wants to be land or sea.

As we walked away from the oil company helipad on the outskirts of the tiny town of Venice, Whitey said, "Y'all wanna stop by the house for a drink on your way outta town?" We all nodded again. It was barely seven a.m. but it was happy hour for workers coming off a two-week shift on a production platform out in the Gulf. 'No alcohol, drugs or women' was the rule on the rigs, and most of the men came ashore with a powerful thirst of one kind or another that just wouldn't wait until later in the day.

Whitey was the crew boss of a team of carpenters, and he lived in a trailer down a side street not far from the office. He opened the door then asked us to take off our boots before stepping inside. Merle said, "What, your Momma comin' by for inspection later?" But he took his boots off. We all did – me, Merle, Bobby, and the two brothers from Florida. We weren't out on the rig anymore and we knew it. Everything was different when you came ashore.

The trailer was surprisingly clean and even more surprisingly feminine. There were pale yellow curtains trimmed with white on the small windows, and the walls were a soft creamy color. There was a small sofa covered in a shiny red fabric with a pink cushion at each end

and white crocheted doilies on the arms. This didn't look like Whitey's lair at all. He saw us looking around and shrugged. "My girlfriend decorated it," he said. "And she'll be over soon so y'all hafta drink up and git pretty quick." He set up a round of beers and we downed them in seconds. "OK, one more, but then ya gotta go!"

After the second beer we trooped out of Whitey's trailer and sauntered



back up the road. The Florida brothers wanted another beer, but Merle had other plans. "I'm a lot older than you boys," he said. "I'm gonna go take a nap." One of the brothers grinned at him. "I guess you got a bunch of miles on you, old feller?" Merle grinned right back and said, "It ain't the miles, sonny, it's the stops I made along the way."

The Florida brothers retrieved their car from the company parking lot and the four of us drove off, me and Bobby in the back seat. Not far up the road we pulled over in front of a dilapidated-looking beer joint and went inside. The place was empty but the lights were on and there was a country western tune wailing on a juke box towards the back of the room. There was a pool table back there too. The brothers brightened up and high-fived each other excitedly. "Hey guys, let's play some pool!"

I noticed that someone had appeared behind the bar, so I left my companions to choose their cues and went over to order four cold beers. As I approached, the man behind the bar was looking over my shoulder towards the pool table. He was unshaven, and had long straggly hair sticking out from under a greasy, well-worn baseball cap. His eyes were smoldering and deep-set under bushy black eyebrows. His jaw was

clenched in an ugly scowl and his expression was anything but hospitable. I should mention that we were in Plaquemines Parish, a notoriously segregationist area of Louisiana, and Bobby was black.

The man glowered at me when I asked for the beers and I suddenly saw that he was not just in a bad mood. "Why doncha take your little buddy there," he nodded menacingly towards Bobby, "and just head on down the road." His tone of voice sent chills down my spine. I returned to the pool

table and repeated what the bartender had said. The brothers were outraged and wanted to go beat up the "racist SOB" with their pool cues. Bobby kept a much cooler head. He'd lived in this world his entire life. "It ain't worth it," he said.

"But there's just one of him an' four of us," whispered the brothers. Bobby shook his head. "If we start somethin' there'll be twenty of them here in a minute an' they'll kill us an' dump us in the bayou." He was calmly, quietly matter-of-fact about it, and once he'd said it we knew he was right. So we walked out of that dismal dive and drove off in the morning sunshine to look for a more agreeable place. Hell, even lowly roustabouts, regardless of race, color, class, or creed, are endowed with the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happy hour. ★