FAREWELL TO BAYTOWN

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My name is Luke, and I hustle trays of beer in the men's beverage room at Baytown's Coronet Hotel. I want to tell you about something that happened during the summer when the man who wrote the stories about Baytown died. I never read them, so I can't say if they were any good. But a famous magazine published them, so they must have had something going for them.

The *Banner* printed the author's obit and used a picture that showed a geezer with glasses, not much hair, and a sheepish grin on his face, like he knew the joke was on him. He was living in West Hollywood, California, when he died and was married for the second time. Cause of death was listed as a heart attack due to a burst aorta. He died instantly, which meant he had a free pass to Endsville, unlike many geezers who have to ride the slow train to the end of the line.

News of his passing split Baytown into two camps. His admirers thought he was an artist whose stories had made Baytown immortal and saw his death as a tragedy. "Nonsense," replied his detractors. "He was a hack who wrote for the money." They believed it was good riddance to bad rubbish, since he had often ridiculed our town in his fiction. Many of his characters, they said, were thinly disguised copies of local residents, who did not appreciate being portrayed as foolish or evil or both.

The only member of his family still living in town was his sister Lola, who got around in a motorized wheelchair and wrote poems she submitted to the *Banner*. The editor printed one now and then. Here's one she wrote as her brother's eulogy:

I never knew my brother.
That really is a shame.
He spent his life avoiding me,
As if it was a game.
But if you say he owes me,
There's nothing to collect.
He loved me in another way:
He gave me his respect.

The trouble began in the beverage room on the day the obituary ran in the paper. It was a warm July evening, the kind of night when the tables are crowded and there's a mist of condensation on the glasses of cold beer. The radio at the end of the bar was tuned to CBAY like always. Clement Foy was on the air with a special program devoted to the memory of the late author. I remember, more or less, what Foy was saying:

"Before he left for the USA, our late lamented friend worked here as a DJ. He was a lover of jazz, and there were times when I—as program director—had to scold him about his choice of records. I told him he was not supposed to play what *he* liked. He was supposed to play what our *listeners* like. Tonight, however, there will be no such restriction. For the next hour, I will play, without interruption, a selection of his favorites, beginning with Duke Ellington's rendition of that joyful Billy Strayhorn composition, 'Take the A Train.'"

Being an aficionado of the big bands, I was more than happy. But not everyone in the room shared my appreciation. A familiar voice raised in protest.

"Why do we have to listen to this garbage?"

That was my old friend Buddy Bristol. Middle aged now, Buddy had turned sour and had forgotten the Saturday-night orchestra concerts at the Park Pavilion we had long ago loved. I date the change in him to the day Anita left town….

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About half past one on a long-ago Sunday morning, Buddy and I were standing in the middle of Front Street after one such concert when a black sedan raced past us at speed, forcing us onto the sidewalk. The car ignored a red light at the Four Corners and smashed into a telephone pole, sending the passenger in the front seat flying through the windshield. We began running that way as the driver crawled out on all fours and staggered into the alleyway beside the Paragon Café.

The girl who landed on the pavement in front of the wrecked car was still breathing. Buddy performed CPR on her, which probably saved her life. They never found the driver of the car, which carried Quebec license plates and had been stolen the day before in Montreal. The girl was hitchhiking, had been with the driver less than two hours and knew nothing about him, not even his name.

Her name was Anita, and she became Buddy's girlfriend for almost a year. She took a job at Higgins' drugstore. Ten months later, she moved on, and Buddy never got over her. Having saved her life, he seemed to think he owned her. But she decided to go, and she went. Buddy was left with a heart in fragments and a mouth twisted into a mask of bitterness. He went down to Kingston and enlisted in the Ordnance Corps, served a few years and came back thin and tanned, his hair cut very short. His Army service had done nothing to restore him to the carefree guy I remembered from our childhood days, and our friendship was never the same.

"Let's have a little respect," Davey Blackburn called from behind the bar. "A good man has died."

"Yeah," I said, and decided to throw in some high-school Latin. "*De mortuis nil nisi bonum.*"

Somebody explained in a whisper, "He's talking about Cher's late husband."

But Buddy had gotten to his feet. "If I have to listen to this crap, I'll do my drinking somewhere else."

"Outstanding," Davey replied. "How about taking care of your tab before you go?"

The Coronet's patrons knew rage when they saw it. All eyes were on Buddy Bristol as he slammed through the swinging doors.

The next morning, I showed up at ten o'clock as usual to polish tables and ash trays. Davey was behind the bar, checking stock, and Big Harriet was putting away her mop and pail, having just finished the floors. Jack Danforth, the hotel owner, was standing by the front window in his sharkskin suit, a cold cigar clenched dead center between his teeth, peering out at the world. Chief Greb of the Baytown police was stationed at the end of the bar, where Davey's radio normally stood.

"Here's Luke," Davey said, as I came into the room.

"You were working last night," Greb said. "How did Buddy Bristol appear to you?"

"Off his nut. He made a big deal about the music on the radio. Then he stormed out."

Mr. Danforth said, “When Harriet was heading to the ladies’ room to mop up after closing, she glanced out the window and saw him returning this way. When she came back in here, she noticed the radio was gone.”

“It’s an open-and-shut case,” the chief said. “I’ll find Buddy, retrieve the radio, and put him in a cell for a few days.”

And that’s what happened. Finding Buddy was easy: he was sound asleep at his mother’s house. The radio, though, was missing. He said he’d given it to a friend he preferred not to name. When he got out of jail, he promised, he’d return it to the bar.

Which is exactly what he did, four days later, just before eleven, as the beverage room was about to open.

It was a blessing nobody but Davey was in the room when he turned the radio on. He touched the power switch, and the thing exploded—and that was all she wrote for Davey Blackburn. Two sticks of dynamite inside the cabinet and the expertise Buddy’d learned in the Ordnance Corps, and that was all it took to put my old friend in the penitentiary for the rest of his life on a charge of terrorism resulting in homicide.

I went to see Buddy in the Baytown jail before his trial. He was very subdued. He asked me about the funeral for the town’s famous author, which had happened the previous afternoon. A group of the author’s fans had raised the money to have the man’s body flown north from California, so he could be buried in his hometown.

Hundreds of locals lined both sides of Front Street as the hearse and a cortege of limos and private cars drove slowly from Baxter’s Funeral Parlor up West Hill to the cemetery overlooking the Bay. I was in one of the cars, and it impressed me to see Chief Greb in full dress uniform deliver a military salute as we rolled past him.

I told Buddy that Reverend Smith read a passage from one of the author's stories at the gravesite, a few lines that made Baytown seem like a place anyone would want to live. After the coffin was in the ground, a number of us accepted an invitation from Lola to gather at the family home for food and drink. Mostly drink.

"I'm glad he's dead," Buddy said, in response to my report. "He would have used what I did in one of his stories. I can just imagine how bad he would have made me look."

"And you would have deserved it," I said, thinking of poor Davey Blackburn, whose life had been snuffed out in one violent instant.

I chose not to tell him what I'd heard that morning from Terry Keenan, who lives in one of the bungalows up the hill across from the cemetery, though what Terry says he saw the night before has since become a part of Baytown lore.

He was walking his dog around midnight, the story goes, when he saw something moving in the darkness by the cemetery gates. A man, he says, coming through the gateway and down the hill, though Terry didn't get a good look at him. The man stomped some dirt from his shoes, then walked slowly down toward the Four Corners.

It was easy to rationalize Terry's story. What he had seen was probably some bereaved survivor, driven by grief to climb the hill and pay a late-night visit to a loved one's grave.

But then, a few days after my visit with Buddy, I happened to encounter Lola on Front Street. It was my day off, and I was doing a little shopping. She rolled toward me in her motorized wheelchair with a troubled look on her face.

"Something bothering you, Miz Lola?" I asked.

"There is," she said. "But I don't want to burden you, Luke."

"No burden," I told her. "What's on your mind?"

"Well," she said, "I was expecting to be miserable after my brother's funeral. But listen to this. That night, after the wake—"

"—which was a fine affair," I put in.

"After all of you had gone, the house was very quiet, and I decided to do some work on a poem I had been writing. I spent about an hour on it, and when I finished it, I went to bed."

"Yes?"

"In the morning," she continued, "after breakfast, I went to my desk to go over what I had written one more time before submitting it to the *Banner*—and someone had added a notation at the bottom of the page."

"That's strange," I said. "I thought you lived alone."

"I do, Luke, that's what worries me."

"Can I see it?"

"No. I was frightened, and I burned the page to ashes and flushed the ashes down the commode."

"Well, what did the notation say?"

She looked up at me from her wheelchair, and her eyes glittered in the sunshine. "It said, 'Have you ever considered writing a crime story? Seems to me, Lola, if I may, you should.'"

It was a warm day, but at that moment I felt a sudden chill of anticipation run up my spine. And, sure enough, Baytown's famous author's sister chewed nervously at her

lower lip and added, “And I swear to you, Luke, the message was in my brother’s handwriting.”