

Class Warfare at the Convenience Store

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The convenience store had stood for years in the middle of nowhere, at the intersection of two streets which, though they were major thoroughfares in the city, petered out here to two-lane roads, with one curving around and intersecting the other to avoid plowing headlong into a man-made WPA fake-lake that itself had been built one notch beyond the scope of interest of anything or anyone. But it held water and was connected to the city by old, old pipes that burst like clockwork every winter, and in any case, both it and the convenience store happened to simply be a place between places, happily bypassed for a more direct route by everyone but people up to no good or wanting to be left alone - well, and fishermen.

It was during a horribly mismanaged state highway "improvement" project that the city folk managed to rediscover this stretch of rural road because they found themselves redirected onto it as a detour for eight painful miles, and over the course of 18 months during which the highway was improved, fixed, tore up, pondered, and improved again, and finally passed muster (that is, the last federal dollar was spent), it became frequently trafficked by uptight alpha types and financially thrived, though the exasperated patrons were less than polite. The small shop suddenly became crowded by agitated men and women in business suits who talked too loudly into their cell phones, shaved and applied make-up while grinding their teeth and bumping into each other, growled when asked to show their ID, and generally ran down the place:

"You call this coffee?"

"You don't stock panty hose?"

"What do you mean you can't make change for \$100?"

"You ought to call yourself the "Made in China" store!"

Dan and Denise, who ran the place, had to hire extra help from amongst the non-ambitious college students whose dwindling academic careers led them to the semi-proximate community college, for between the hours of 6:00 AM to 9:00 AM, and again between 4:00 PM and 7:00 PM, the place was hopping. But even the extra staffing was not enough to ameliorate the self-loathing bitter business types, and despite the extra money the traffic had supplied, Dan and Denise were glad when the highway improvement project was completed several million dollars over budget and one county commissioner indictment later, and the irritable drivers returned to

their more direct route, now with slightly smoother lanes and misspelled signs congratulating every politician vaguely affiliated with the falderal.

But the forbidden apple of the semi-rural languor and "rustic charm" had been tasted, and one or another real estate developer had looked over the sparse land populated by tiny shacks with huge "NO TRESSPASSING!" warnings and seen dollar signs rise up before their eyes, and the lonely convenience store at the intersection of nothing and nowhere, standing beneath the green-blue glow of a single street-light on the pole that trailed a single electrical line to the place, would never be the same, nor would its vicinity.

Within weeks of the highway's completion a monied developer with connections at city hall and a Manhattan-minted ideal of 'rural charm' had greased the right palms and rubbed the right elbows to get the matter of annexation formally underway.

It was at the meeting of the local business owners in that rural to semi-rural wasteland that Dan and Denise first learned the news. In addition to themselves the local business community consisted of: Walter, owner of the Reservoir Lake Bait Shop; Lilly of the Trailer Park Salon; Janice and Jerry of the Tie-Dyed Smoke Shack; and Earl, owner and proprietor of the 'car graveyard.' It was at this meeting that Lilly announced that Mr. and Mrs. Edna Merle had sold their nearby farm to a group of city real estate developers for a princely sum and that the developers' buddies in city hall were already trying to blindside everyone with annexation, a dead-of-night rezoning for multi-family housing, and lots of nice new rules and taxes to pay for the roads and sewers and services that their new paternal municipal entity would theoretically provide.

"What will we do?" they fretted, sitting around Walter's shop, smoking cigarettes, drinking pops, each getting up nervously now and then, pacing, glancing over the odd assortment of fishing and porn magazines and looking down through the glass counter into the bait wells.

"They biting on white crickets?" Earl, proprietor of the car graveyard, asked.

Walt shrugged. "If it's rainy."

Lilly, who was tough and wiry as a yard chicken and painted more glamorous than a 30's movie star, interrupted: "Boys, we got to stay on topic. My son says that a lawyer who comes to a place he bartends says them developers got big guns and city hall in their pocket and that we're screwed!"

Janice and Jerry sat off to one side in their self-designed multicolored shirts, and Jerry thoughtfully stroked his bushy moustache. "Bringing in the man and all his rules is gonna be a bad trip."

"What if we don't want to be annexed?" Earl asked.

Daniel cleared his throat, pushed up his glasses, and faintly spoke up. "Uhm, Denise and I have been doing a little research, and things just don't look good."

"That means I'll have to get rid of my amateur zoo," Earl said.

Earl's car graveyard contained several old and rare specimens that appealed to an equally eclectic caste of monied eccentrics who came by their wealth through nefarious means and had

little use for the law, and he had occasionally been accepting exotic animals in exchange for car parts and now he presided over a small but impressive menagerie on his back acres.

"It'd be best if nobody ever learned about that zoo," Denise said.

"Well then we have to fight the annexation and all the malarkey that comes with it," Earl replied.

"That's going to be difficult," Daniel said, "because by state law we meet most of the criteria to be annexed: we share a contiguous border with the city, we're unincorporated, and officially we lack some basic services."

"We don't need them!"

"In the state's eyes that doesn't matter."

"Don't they have to let us vote?"

"I'm afraid not. All they have to do is hold a couple of 'community meetings' for us and be able to prove to a state panel that they can provide police and fire protection and water and sewer service at least as good as we have now."

"That's no good to us - we don't even have sewers - we have septic tanks."

"Wait a minute though - what about police and fire? There's no way they could respond faster than our volunteer fire department. And their police force is already stretched thin."

"Yes, maybe we do have an angle there."

"Course they'll insist on proving to us that they *can* respond quickly. They'll just station a few patrol cars near here until their survey 'proves' they can do the job, then they'll pull'em back again."

"Nothing a few burning logs rolled across the road couldn't fix," Earl said.

Denise gave him a soft chastening glance. "No burning logs, Earl."

"You say that now but you'll change your tune. I'll keep my old telephone poles and paraffin handy."

And so before they knew it the trial period before annexation was underway. The Rural Charm Realtors had already broken ground in anticipation of annexation and re-zoning approval. In fact, they had even bought space on the one and only billboard in the area and posted a garish ad that read "Country Charm - City Pride - Support Annexation for a Better Tomorrow!" and it showed a picture of a modern urban lady nonetheless putting a pie to cool on a windowsill while out beyond on the street a friendly cop waved hello to some children on bikes as a shiny red fire truck just happened to be passing by.

The community meetings were no more subtle. It was not a good start when their upbeat multimedia presentation accidentally included a slide showing a lavish golf course labelled "Sun Pine Valley Meadows Country Club: Phase Two" that was marked at a spot on the map where Earl's car graveyard currently resided.

"They're scheming against me already!" Earl hissed to Dan and Denise across the meeting's back rows. They're going to use my private zoo to get me kicked off my own land."

"Dude, we have got to do something about those animals so you'll stop fretting," Janice said.

"This sucks!" Lilly said. Daniel agreed. He whispered back. "Did the burning logs slow down the city's 'rapid response team' any last night?"

"Nope - my boys lit the log *then* tried to roll it. They were still hopping around slapping the fire out on their hands when the cops sailed right on by."

Denise, who was meek and bookish by nature, shot her husband a disappointed glance.

"I told you the logs were a bad idea. And I thought you said you were off stargazing."

He pushed up his glasses and blushed. "I know Denise, I'm sorry - but we had to try something. Things look bad."

She sat back in the rickety metal chair and sighed. "You're right. I know they do."

She folded herself up miserably and imagined the day when the quiet little convenience store would no longer be theirs, and she looked across the aisle at Lilly's two big but stupid sons, who hands were swathed in bandages.

"...and so," the assistant city deputy vice manager of the neighboring metropolis said after the multimedia presentation was finished, along with all its misspellings and oddly-placed clipart graphics (some upside down), "Any questions?"

The lights came up and the handful of faces in the room looked at her and then at one another.

Earl cleared his throat. "I noticed that at the end of your presentation you used a recording of Ethyl Merman singing the Star-Spangled Banner. Did you, in fact, have permission from her estate to do so?"

The trim, efficient woman was taken aback for just a moment, but smiled and quickly composed herself. "Excellent question! I am so glad you are interested in the annexation effort. That was, in fact, a recording of Kate Smith singing the Star-Spangled Banner, and yes, we did."

"Oh."

"Anything else?"

A fresh-scrubbed eager-beaver looking man in the front row raised his hand and then stood up and turned around so everyone in the room could see his face beaming pleasantly. "I have just one question - this all sounds so great! When can we begin? I can hardly wait to start 'growing places' with your fine city services!"

The woman smiled. "I am so glad to hear that. We at the municipal league share your enthusiasm for a better tomorrow! I assure you we can begin very soon." They smiled so pleasantly at each other that one almost felt assured that some time in the not too distant future a little league baseball game would be played near that very spot, to the wafting smell of apples

pies, and not a single parent would dispute a single call in all nine innings, and afterwards everyone would have a picnic and watch a small but inspiring city-approved fireworks display.

"Excuse me, but if you and the shill are finished, I have a *real* question," Lilly said.

"How do we know that you and all your convoluted city rules and ordinances aint gonna bring in more bullshit than your fancy sewers can pipe out?"

Earl was impressed.

"I mean," Lilly continued, "we folks out here don't need your grandstanding and reams of minute laws about lawn height and how far you can park from the curb and how far the beer has to be from the soda pop aisle and whether you can have two cats and three dogs or three cats and two dogs, and we sure as heck don't need to fall under the umbrella of your cronyism, with all the services we'll be forced to pay for going to your contractor buddies downtown and having to filter down through 100 layers of kickbacks every time we want a sidewalk put down or a flagpole put up. Hell, have you seen downtown? Concrete cracks before it's finished. And you all just built a new fire station that is gonna have to be torn down and restarted from scratch because your buddies shorted you on building materials."

"Well, like all cities on the path to a better tomorrow, we do have our share of growing pains now and then. And of course, there will be a few new rules. But we'll all share in the benefits as well."

"How do we know there'll be anyone looking out for us? Right now we can look out for ourselves just fine. But how are we going to fare when we have to jockey with 500,000 other people to make our voices heard?"

"Give up yer freedom and take a number," Earl said. Some in the back clapped and hooted.

"Look," Miss Pert-and-Trim said, a bit of color coming to her cheeks, "the city is growing and you cannot stay isolated forever. Big money is coming to our up-and-coming city, big money that wants rural charms. Sun Pine Valley Meadows will increase your property values 500%, as will our city services. I think," she ended curtly, "that our presentation and our statistics will more than satisfy the court that our case for annexation is well-planned, compelling, and perfectly clear."

She had blown her top a little and so there hung over the room a sudden silence. She tried to regain some semblance of civility by flashing a quick white smile, though all this did was make her seem predatory. The shill who sat in the front row turned around and looked at everybody and tried to affect a rural twang. "Well, I for one like the way the little lady puts the cards on the table. Count me in fellas - I can't wait for progress!"

But no one responded to him (though this did not seem to cow him a bit), and the meeting just sort of silently, spontaneously and unofficially broke up.

A few hours after the meeting they all met again at Walt's Bait Shop that night.

"It don't look good," Jerry said.

"I can always open a new hair salon the next trailer over," Lilly said to herself. "Maybe I better make it two trailer parks over."

Even Earl seemed to have given up. "Nothing left to do but sneak out the zoo animals," he said.

"Look," Daniel said. "I know everything seems inevitable, but I hear that the hillbilly down the road who runs the ostrich farm drank himself into a blind fury and hired some fancy lawyer to file a suit. And in any case, no matter how overheated they are, in the end the machinery of politics moves slowly. So yes, we should all be prepared to move on, but don't be too down just yet. For now, let's sit and wait."

And in truth for all the gush of fancy talk the legal machinery did find itself reduced to a crawl, thanks in small part to the hillbilly's lawsuit, and thank more to the squabbling amongst the city's power brokers as to who would have the right to what. But the folks who bought Mr. and Mrs. Edna Merle's farm weren't waiting, and within days of the sale big noisy earth-moving equipment had been scraping the site clean and flat and wide, and they poured a big flat block of concrete with 1001 pipes sticking up for all the apartments that would go there, and they even dug and poured the big round oval of a pool. And so the days passed by in an odd mix of activity and waiting, noise and dust clouds but no real news on anything. Then one day Lilly said that her son who bartends said that he had heard from two lawyers at his place that the district court was set to settle the ostrich farmer's suit the next day, to the farmer's disadvantage, and that the power brokers at city hall had finally carved up a map of the region they could all agree on.

"Okay, so now this is it," Daniel said.

"Yep," said Earl. "The animals deserve better than what Animal Control will have waiting for them. Who's willing to help me?"

They all said they were, and they met that night at the back acres of Earl's place. He unlocked the gate of his razor-wired chain link fence and Lilly's boys backed up a truck and Daniel brought his hatchback and Jerry and Janice their microbus, and a few other helpful souls came by as well.

Each was a little astounded to lay eyes once more on the small menagerie Earl had assembled, even though they all understood that barter was its own valid economic system in these parts and that through his collection of rare and vintage car parts Earl rubbed shoulders with some high rollers who liked other exotic things in addition to autos and who preferred to keep their transactions off the books. In sum, the collection consisted of a jaguar, a snow leopard, a baby elephant, two black swans, a tapir, an alligator, and a polar bear. All were lovingly cared for, mostly by a long-haired lady friend whom Earl never let them near but who, upon this evening's meeting, seemed warm and friendly and more like a whole-grained granola bar than Janice and Jerry put together. She wore clothes like she was on a safari, and her hair was blond and her face a little leathery but her eyes a deep, deep calm pale blue.

"It's so wonderful of you all to come out," she said. "Earl loves the animals so much - it's so nice of you to see that they all get good homes."

"I told you not to let them know that I am capable of love," Earl said.

But they ignored him and embraced her, and one by one they received their assignments. The tapir was going to a farm two counties over; the jaguar and the polar bear were being transferred to a wealthy Russian capitalist at a rural airstrip that very evening; the leopard would be driven

by Janice and Jerry to a rich oil man who knew a guy in Dubai who owned his own world-class zoo and wanted one; the elephant - Lilly's boys were driving him to a charity ranch for orphaned circus animals in West Texas; Dan and Denise would deliver the swans to a fancy hotel that promised to cherish the prestige animals in their lavish pond out front. But that left the alligator.

"The alligator can fend for himself," Earl said.

And so they all departed into the darkness to carry out their assignments, one step ahead of Johnny Law, one day or so before the city and its rules would descend upon their quiet lives forever. Earl himself drove the gator into town in the back of his pickup truck, made his way to a quiet intersection, lifted a manhole cover, and slid the beast inside. He heard a splash and considered his job done.

Their little no-man's land was quiet after that. They kept waiting for news of the annexation announcement, but a day passed then the next day and then a week, but the announcement did not come. Then Lilly said that her boy said that even though the ostrich rancher's suit had failed, the city's own internal horse-trading had gotten gummed up again, and one or two of the big parties involved had turned out not to have the money in the bank they said they did. In fact, the next day the newspaper headlines announced the unexpected failure of a major bank in town, and it was turning out that a lot of people in real estate and otherwise were suddenly discovering they did not have the money they thought they did.

Then a city manager was fired. Then someone from the FDIC was suddenly in town from Washington pretending he was Elliot Ness, and city officials who were used to having their faces in the paper and their names in the society columns were stumbling over each other to protect their own cover stories. And then all the machinery at the Sun Pine Valley Meadows development suddenly fell silent. And stayed silent.

After another three weeks some small cadre of the city's annexation panel tried to rally themselves and revive the effort, but before they could even convene the first meeting of their new new initiative, another story chased them from the headlines:

"Monsters Lurking Beneath the City?"

Growing numbers of citizens are reporting the sighting of a creature or creatures lurking within the city's sewer system. Residents report a growing number of dogs and cats are missing. Maintenance workers are refusing to go down into the tunnels under the streets, and more than one sighting of an enormous alligator or crocodile has been reported. Residents are left asking: is this the best our city can provide? Why aren't they doing more to safeguard their citizens?"

Soon reports of sightings were flooding city offices from all four corners of the metroplex, most improbably far from where Earl had deposited his pet, but all 100% earnest and panicked and full of fear, sobriety, conviction. Dan and Denise immediately called the local news and managed to get some intrepid eager beaver reporter to hold the head of the annexation committee's feet to the fire until it dispatched some spokesperson to announce: "Until we can

ascertain the extend and scope of this alligator infestation, we cannot in good conscience extend city services to our neighboring communities at this time."

And so the annexation effort died. In truth, it would have died without the alligators anyway. The real estate market had abruptly imploded, banks had begun to falter, and city revenues had begun to dry up. Suddenly the thought of annexing every adjacent acre and turning it into landed gentry estates just did not carry much cache anymore. Folks were mostly focused on paying next this month's bills, on justifying city payrolls, on surviving.

And so Dan and Denise and Earl and Lilly and all the rest celebrated. Their lives quieted down again. Their place in the middle of nowhere went back to the way it ever was, a place for people who wanted to leave the city behind them, a place for folks who wanted to hide or just did not want to be bothered; a place between places for people wanting to be left alone.

The grass grows tall there. You can park however far from the curb you like - there's no one else coming down the road anyhow. Well, except maybe to the dinner theater Dan and Denise opened up. Or to the petting zoo Earl's girlfriend managed to open, legitimately, by making friends with people in and out of government who had the same warm spot in their hearts for animal welfare that she did. And so now there are one or two new things out in the sticks to lure folks from the city to come and see them, even amidst the hard times, but only if they are sick of the city and want some chance to escape from it, if only to be closer to Nature for one day or to forget themselves in a bit of bad amateur theater served up by drop-outs from the local community college with good food and stiff drinks and many unintentional laughs mixed in with the dramatic moments. Because, in the end, each person in that no-man's land ended up discovering a little more about what they really wanted out of life, and in any case Earl was able to buy the site of the abandoned Sun Pine Valley Meadows development for a song, and its abandoned pool sealed the deal that got him the permit to add to his girlfriend's zoo a lovely pair of pygmy hippos, and they flourish unlike any other pair in captivity. The experts say the quiet does them good.

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