

The Shiner

Joyce gives me a look. "That sounds like trouble, Jeff."

"It's just a couple beers with the guys," I say. Cousin Vyts had invited me for pizza and beer with some old high school buddies. "What kind of trouble can an old bald guy like me get into?"

Now all the way to the bar, the cooler was sliding around the back of the Jeep. So after I park, I open the back and fasten it down with a bungee cord. When I slam the hatch down, though, somehow I manage to get my head in the way. The liftgate conks me in the noggin right above my left eye. I see stars for a minute, but shake my head and stagger into the bar.

The guys see right away I'm oozing blood. For a few minutes I'm the center of attention, with the barmaid dabbing at me with a wet towel and Vyts passing me a beer. "Here, hold this against it," he says.

"You just grazed it," says Eddie.

"Barely nicked it," says Bruce.

"You sure Joyce didn't smack you one?" Joe kids.

Everybody agrees, "That's gonna be some nice shiner."

In a little while the bleeding stops and we get on with our pizza and beer, the laughs and the lies.

Next morning, though, my eye has swole up like a tennis ball. It looks like a globe of the earth sticking out of my face, black and blue with all the colors of the continents and the seven seas. You can trace the rivers of the world down the veins of my poor puffy eyeball.

"Nice shiner," says Joyce, usually a more sympathetic person. "We're supposed to meet Donny's girlfriend this week-end and have a civilized family dinner." Donny is her nephew who lives in the city. "And you look like you've been in a bar fight!"

"Well, excuuuse me," I say.

By Saturday afternoon, the eye actually looks worse, and with a pounding headache, I'm in no mood for a drive to the city. But it's a nice spring day and I don't want to be a trouble maker, so I gas up the car and we drive up to the North Side.

Donny's an okay kid, grew up in Orland and all, but I'm afraid he's turned into some kind of yuppie. Took his mom's death benefit money and started up a record shop in Andersonville. Yeah, you heard right. *Vinyl*. So apparently that's a *thing* now. We're supposed to meet him at his shop and all go to dinner at his girlfriend's place.

I'm pleased to find a parking place right in front of the shop on Clark St. The old brick building's in pretty good shape; Donny's got bright blue lettering on the window glass: Platters. Even as I back into the spot, I notice a tall, middle-aged guy in a brown leather jacket standing there. He's leaning stoop-shouldered against the blue door to the flat upstairs of the cleaners. He's got longish salt and pepper hair and a bushy moustache so black it must be dyed. As I turn the engine off, this guy squints at me through the passenger window, past Joyce, and I'm wondering now what?

He shakes his head and wags his finger at me. *No.*

I look up ahead and back behind the car for a "No Parking" sign or something. Meanwhile Joyce opens her door, puts a leg out to the sidewalk and looks back. "Go on in," I tell her. "I'll be there in a minute."

She scrambles out and, completely ignoring the guy, goes into the store.

Before the car door slams shut after her, this character steps up and catches it with his gnarly hand. Bending at the waist, he sticks his head in, but recoils a little at the sight of my face. "Huh," he says. "No parking here." Something makes me think he's a Greek.

"What?" I say. "There's no signs. Who says I can't park here?"

"I say," he tells me, and waggles his thumb. "Keep movin'."

"Who the hell are you?" I say, not really asking, you know. "This looks like a legal parking spot."

The guy shakes his head. "Is no parking."

"Why is it no parking?"

"Is a loading zone."

"What? There's no signs for a loading zone! Who says it's a loading zone?"

"I say." He slams the car door shut. He makes shooping motions with both hands and leans back in the doorway again.

Deep breaths. Deep breaths.

I glance out at the traffic on Clark St. and open my door to get out. I shoot my biggest badass look as I walk past him toward the shop door.

Arms across his chest and a sour expression on his face, he nods and says, "I have them tow you."

That stops me. Now I'm wondering is this guy connected, or is he just blowing smoke? I look at him. "Well, just do what you gotta do, all right?"

"Yeah, you sonofabitch," he says, his voice going up and his finger pointing. "I have them tow you!"

“Look,” I tell him, “if you’re getting a delivery or something, okay. If the truck comes while I’m here, I’ll move, okay? I’ll keep an eye out.”

He gives me an evil grin. “Oh, you keep an *eye out*?” He laughs, “Your eye already mostly out!”

I lunge at him. “Yeah, your eyes are gonna be looking out of your ass in a minute, you...”

He puffs up his chest. “Come on!” he shouts. “Take a punch at me! I sue you for everything you got, you sonofabitch!”

I shake my fist, drawing closer. “You’re not suing anybody if I pound you into a gyros!”

“I’m calling the cops!” he yawns and fumbles a phone from his pocket.

“Call a frickin’ ambulance!” I yell, “‘cause that’s what you’re gonna need!”

“Police!” he yells. “Help! Police!”

I look around, and, as it happens, a large, pear-shaped beat cop is actually strolling down the sidewalk across the street. He stops when he hears all the commotion. He sees two guys waving their arms about and yelling, and I’m sure it looks like a situation that could get out of hand any second. The copper does the sensible thing: He calls for back-up.

The Greek gloats, “Now you see! You will be busted! *And* they will tow your car!”

I turn toward the cop just as he starts to cross over. One look at me and he turns pale, slowing in the street. Before I can say a word, he pats me on the shoulder and steers me by an elbow to the curb behind the Jeep. “All right, sir, all right,” he says, “Settle down, now, and we’ll get you taken care of right away.”

“Tell him!” the Greek is shouting. “Tell him it’s no parking!”

The cop’s vest radio crackles and he reports to Dispatch. “I got a citizen down, injured with a head trauma...”

“Tow the sonofabitch!” the Greek howls, approaching.

“Hold it right there!” the cop bellows and pulls his service revolver.

I duck down behind the Jeep, covering my face. A squad car whoops up with lights flashing and screeches to a stop. As the cops leap out, first one, then the other looks at my face and does a double-take.

“Is no parking!” I hear the Greek shout, but his voice is drowned out by an ambulance wailing down Clark Street.

When Joyce and Donny walk out of the store, their jaws drop. Mars lights flash all over the neighborhood, reflecting off storefronts and strobing pedestrians. A considerable crowd has stumbled out of the local bars and restaurants. The jostling mob spills from the sidewalk into the street, and cops

mill about, yelling and threatening. They've got the Greek bent over the trunk of a squad car, his hands cuffed behind him.

I'm on the curb with a paramedic leaning over me. He's running me through concussion protocols as if I was a Bears cornerback, and honestly I'm eating it up.

Joyce walks over, shaking her head. "I was only gone for a few minutes!" she says.

"Wow! Uncle Jeff!" Donny says. "That's some shiner!"

END