

The Paris of the West

by

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Setting

A bar across the street from the Ford Rouge Plant.

Time

The present - 2:30 a.m.

Cast

JIMMY - Autoworker in his 50s.

MEG - Bar owner in her 30s-50s.

(In the darkness we hear the sounds of machinery and hydraulics. The sounds slow down until with a long hiss, silence falls. Lights come up on Bronco's Lounge. The bar is upstage, with a table and two chairs downstage. MEG wipes down the table, then upends the chairs and puts them on top of the table. There is banging on a door, but she ignores it. The banging continues.)

MEG

Are you a moron? I'm closed!

JIMMY (O.S.)

Open the damned door!

MEG

It's 2:30! I been closed half an hour!

JIMMY (O.S.)

Open the damned door, Meg!

MEG

Who is that?

JIMMY

It's Jimmy. Jimmy Floyd.

MEG

Jimmy, you know better than this. Grab a couple of jumbos from the party store and go home, all right? Jesus!

(She listens. It's quiet. She returns to cleaning up...and the pounding on the door begins again.)

MEG

Goddammit.

(She opens the door and JIMMY comes in, carrying his lunch bucket.)

JIMMY

Thank you very much.
You're a princess among women.
Very kind of you.

MEG

I'm closed, Jimmy.
I been closed.
I want to clean up and go home.

(JIMMY takes a chair off the table and sits down.)

JIMMY

I'll take a shot and a beer.

MEG

Jimmy, it's past closing. I can't serve you.

JIMMY

All I want is a shot and a beer.

MEG

And all I want is for you to get the hell out of here.

JIMMY

Shot and a beer.

MEG

Jimmy...

JIMMY

Not as a customer. God knows I don't want to be in violation of the laws of this fine state. Just a shot and a beer between friends. I would like that.

(pulls out his wallet and
flips a bill on the table)

My buddy Mr. Franklin would like that too.

MEG

No, Jimmy--

JIMMY

And so would his friends, The Jackson Five.

(JIMMY fans out five twenties and slaps them on the table.)

MEG

For fuck's sake.

JIMMY

That's the spirit! Shot and a beer.

(MEG goes to the bar and gets a shot of Jim Beam and a bottle of beer.)

JIMMY

I like the place like this, Meg. Nice and quiet.

MEG

Yeah. It gets that way when I'm closed.

(MEG brings the drinks to the table.)

MEG

There. Drink up and go home.

(JIMMY downs the shot and opens the beer.)

JIMMY

Let me ask you something, Meg. How come you and me never hooked up?

MEG

Because we never really liked each other, Jimmy.

JIMMY

Oh yeah. Yeah, that makes sense. How long have I been coming in here?

MEG

Forever.

JIMMY

Exactly. And after all those years, all I am to you is just another shop rat with some bills in his pocket?

(holds up the shot glass)

I'll take another shot.

(MEG sighs, walks to the bar and grabs the bottle of Jim Beam.)

MEG

Rough day at the office?

JIMMY

Sure. Why not?

(She pours another shot and JIMMY drains it.)

JIMMY

That's the ticket.

MEG

What shift are you on these days?

JIMMY

Does it matter?

MEG

Aren't you supposed to be at the plant right now?

JIMMY

I'm on break. Permanent fucking break.

(JIMMY takes the bottle from MEG and pours himself another shot as she takes the other chair off the table and sits down.)

MEG

What's that supposed to mean?

JIMMY

What time is it?

MEG

There's a clock on the wall, Jimmy. Turn your neck three inches and you'll see it.

JIMMY

I can't do that. It's against my, what do you call 'em, principles...religion, whatever.

MEG

Looking at a clock is against your principles?
(off JIMMY's nod)
It's 2:37. A.M.

JIMMY

Then the Jimmy Floyd Era at the Rouge Plant will officially be over in one hour and twenty-three minutes.

(He downs the shot.)

MEG

Are you retiring or they laying you off?

JIMMY

Who gives a flying fuck? The Jimmy Floyd Era is coming to an end either way. That's why I'm here. I stopped by to say good-bye to you and your lovely establishment.

MEG

How long you been at the plant?

JIMMY

Thirty-five soul-sucking years.

MEG

Well, good for you. That's a good run.

JIMMY

A good run? My Dad worked at Pontiac Assembly from the time he was eighteen until he was sixty-six years old and dropped dead on the shop floor. Forty-eight years. And my grandfather worked up in Flint at Buick City his whole goddamned life. You know what thirty-five years at the Rouge makes me? A goddamned pussy, that's what!

MEG

So, what are you gonna do with yourself?

JIMMY

Do? I'm gonna die, that's what I'm gonna do. They got this thing down to a science.

MEG

What thing?

JIMMY

The retirement thing. The whole pension thing. Thirty-five and out they say. But by the time you get out you're so beat up by the damned factory that you drop dead while you're standing in line at the bank with your first pension check in your hand. That's the genius of the system. And you can bet your sweet ass that every time that happens, the boys in the glass house down the road give each other high fives because they just saved a bundle on another pension.

MEG

Planned obsolescence, huh? I always thought that was just the cars.

JIMMY

Nah. It's everything. And in this country there is nothing more obsolete than a factory rat like me. You're looking at a museum piece, Meg. A relic of a bygone age. I'm telling you, the moment I drop dead some guys from the Smithsonian are gonna scoop me up, stuff me, and put me on display. *Rodentus Factorius Americanus*. Thrived in the Midwestern United States during the twentieth century. Now extinct. I'll be in a glass case with the woolly mammoth and the fucking dodo bird.

MEG

Well, look at it this way. At least you won't drop dead in the factory like your Dad.

JIMMY

What makes you think he didn't want that?

MEG

You think he did?

(As JIMMY talks, MEG walks back to the bar to get another shot glass. She comes back, sits down, and pours herself and JIMMY a shot.)

JIMMY

Yeah. And why not? Go out with your steel-toed shitkickers on, that's what I say. It's a helluva lot better than sucking down strained peaches in some goddamned retirement home.

(MEG raises her shot glass.)

MEG

Then here's to your Dad.

(They clink glasses and drink.)

JIMMY

Peter Charles Floyd. Big Pete. The poor son of a bitch. He got up at four a.m. every day for the last thirty years of his life. He'd sit in the kitchen drinking black coffee and smoking Pall Malls, one after the other. You walked into our house and it was like walking into the Everglades at sunrise...just this permanent haze in the air. And he'd have the radio on to WJR, this old heavy-ass Bendix, and about once a month he'd hear something that really pissed him off and that radio would go spinning across the kitchen floor and gouge a chunk out of one of the cabinets. I still have the damned thing. Still works too. Anyway, he never made it past ninth grade in school. He kicked around the street for a little while, then got hooked into Pontiac Assembly through a buddy of his. By the end, he was doing five double shifts a week and pulling down a hundred grand a year. Can you imagine that? Some numb-nuts who couldn't make it past ninth grade knocking down that kind of change? Got himself a boat and a little cabin up north. He used to go up there to drink and pop off a few hundred rounds just to unwind.

MEG

He was a hunter?

JIMMY

Nah. He just liked shooting the shit out of things.

MEG

So, you started at the factory because your Dad worked there?

JIMMY

I guess. He took me into the plant one day when I was twelve or so. I can't remember why. But we're in the break room and I'm looking around and do you know what they had plastered all over the walls? Playboy centerfolds. Dozens of 'em. There must have been eight or nine Miss Julys hanging up in that room. And me, I'm looking around and thinking, "I want to work here."

MEG

I'll bet.

JIMMY

'Course, they got rid of that kind of thing by the time I was hired in.

MEG

Well yeah. That's sexual harassment.

JIMMY

Bullshit.

MEG

How is that bullshit? You think any woman wants to walk into a break room and see a couple hundred tits hanging on the walls? More importantly, tits that are bigger and better lit than hers?

JIMMY

It's the human form, all right? The beautiful human form. A centerfold is our version of a Greek fucking statue. You think guys walk into the break room hung-over from the weekend and they're getting hard-ons looking at centerfolds? No. It's a thing of beauty. Like a waterfall or sunset.

MEG

Uh-huh. Tell me the last time you fucked a waterfall, Jimmy.

JIMMY

You know, that's not a bad idea. I'll remember that next time I'm at Niagara Falls.

MEG

Send me a postcard.

(pouring two more shots)

So are you gonna try and pick up another job or something?

JIMMY

Oh yeah. Yeah, I've got my second career all planned out.

MEG

Bullshit. You're a shop rat, Jimmy. You've always been a shop rat. That's not exactly a desirable skill set these days.

JIMMY

No, I'm taking things in a new direction, totally new line of work.

MEG

And what's that?

JIMMY

Wal-Mart greeter.

(off her reaction)

What? You don't think I can do that?

MEG

No. The customers would run for the fucking hills at the sight of you. And you'd have to learn how to smile.

JIMMY

I've been practicing. Here, let me show you.

(they both get up)

You stand here...and now you walk into the store..."Good afternoon, Ma'am! How lovely to see you.

(MORE)

JIMMY (cont'd)

Thanks for shopping with us today. Our sugar-covered donuts are in aisle one, and our cheap-ass Chinese shit is in every other aisle. May I get you a motorized scooter to cart your fat ass around the store? Let me find a minimum-wage team member who lives on food stamps to assist you."

MEG

(laughing)

Jesus. "Team member." Who comes up with that shit, anyway?

(They both sit back down.)

JIMMY

The glass house boys. You know that. That's worth a two million dollar bonus right there. Let's call the factory rats "team members" and tell them how much we care. People have no fucking idea.

MEG

About what?

JIMMY

The factory. What it's like. What it does to you.

MEG

I'm listening.

(as JIMMY waves her off)

Come on, you were there thirty-five years. Let's hear some shop rat wisdom. That shouldn't take long. What's it like?

(JIMMY takes a long pull at his beer.)

JIMMY

It's like this. You come into the factory on your first day and you're like any other loser. You hate the spics, you hate the niggers, you hate whitey, you hate the faggots, and you hate all the bitches and assholes who have fucked you over for your entire life. And you get into that factory for a few months and all that just drops away and you realize you only have one enemy in this universe, one enemy that keeps coming for you day after day and week after week and that you hate more than you ever thought you could hate anything and it's the clock. That factory clock that hangs over your head and your station and your life, the second hand dragging its way around and around that dial and slowing down every time you look at it and so you train yourself to not look at it, to not stare into the eyes of God because that clock is your God and it's a God that wants to punish you for ever being born. So you're at your station four or five hours into your shift and your muscles are aching and your mind is screaming at the monotony of it all and so you do the only thing you can do and you start repeating your mantra, the chant of every line worker across the world, and it's like a heartbeat inside you and it's fuck them fucking fuckers.

(MORE)

JIMMY (cont'd)

Fuck them fucking fuckers. Fuck them fucking fuckers. And the guy next to you says fuck them fucking fuckers and down the line you hear fuck them fucking fuckers and now everyone is saying it or yelling it or pounding it out on their benches. Fuck them fucking fuckers. Fuck them fucking fuckers! Fuck them fucking fuckers!!! And it's not just you and the machine and it's not you against the machine, you are the machine, just another fuck them fucking fuckers cog in this huge fuck them fucking fuckers machine and you pound out your minutes and your days and your life in that machine and every second that you're pounding it, it's pounding you and then one day thirty-five years go by and you're done. The machine spits you out on the sidewalk and you lay there staring up at a sky you've never seen and it hits you, hits you like a poleaxed pig in a fucking slaughterhouse just how fucking done it is and how fucking done you are. And that's my shop rat wisdom wrapped up in a thank you for thirty-five fucking years certificate and a shiny new lapel pin.

(JIMMY pulls the lapel pin from his pocket and flicks it across the bar. He pours two more shots and they drink.)

MEG

Yeah, well, if it makes you feel any better, it's not just you, Jimmy. It's me too. It's everybody and everything around here. We're the walking dead in a trashed out ghost town that used to be the greatest city on earth.

JIMMY

Detroit? Fuck, that's just people talking, remembering things the way they want to remember them.

MEG

No. No, it isn't just people talking. A hundred years ago this was the Paris of the West. No shit. That's what people called Detroit. The Paris of the West. Six tree-lined spoked avenues running out into the wilderness and bringing anyone who wanted to be anybody right downtown. It was a city on the edge of a river and the edge of the future everybody dreamed of. And it was all here, the shops, the restaurants, Cadillacs with tail fins dropping off high-class women in furs in front of theatres. You see the old photographs and the faces of people walking down Woodward or meeting under the Kern's clock and they have no clue what's coming down the pipeline. And you, hell, at least you get some kind of pension. I'm like everyone else around here, hanging on by my fucking fingernails to a city that's never coming back. You wanna know what's gonna happen to Detroit? There's gonna be an earthquake, or nuclear war, or super volcano exploding somewhere and it's gonna bury us twenty feet deep in shit. And no one will dig us out because no one really give a rat's ass.

(MORE)

MEG (cont'd)

Give it a few centuries and Detroit will become a story, a myth that couldn't possibly be true. Like you said, some shop rat screwing on lugnuts with a house, two cars, and a cottage up north? That's a fairy tale. It never happened. It'll be up to some archeologist ten thousand years from now to dig up an axle or transmission to convince people we ever existed in the first place.

JIMMY

Yeah. That sounds about right.

(MEG pours two more shots. She raises her glass and JIMMY follows her lead.)

MEG

To the Paris of the West.

JIMMY

The Paris of the West. May it rest in peace.

MEG

Or rust in peace.

JIMMY

I like that even better. Well, you know what I say...

JIMMY AND MEG

Fuck them fucking fuckers.

(They clink their glasses and drink as lights fade.)

END OF PLAY.