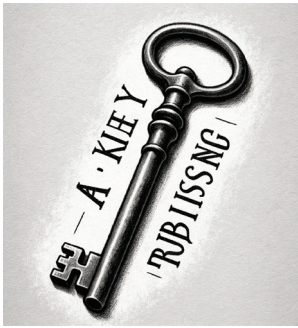


HOMER'S
LAST LINE
AND OTHER SHORT STORIES

LEX E SANTÍ



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A Key Therapy Publications

For Shona and Gordon Ahrae,
Shanti Strong

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Salvation



I'm just pulling in, and it's 7:50 on the dot, and trailer trash Tammy and her kid are already at the Salvation Army door, looking ready to go. I'm not about to hit the door in the cold, waiting; I don't want her to know it is me again. Anyshits, I'd much rather keep the car idling, staying warm, before I look for Dad's boots. They're not any boots, mind you; they're a pair of limited edition Houseton SideWinders he had shipped up here from (wait for it) deep-in-the-heart-of-Texas! It does not stop there—ostrich and rawhide with hand embroidery of roses and pistols on the inside. If I don't get at those boots first, they'll be gone in an instant, and for the past three weeks, this has been my regular

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look-see, waiting for them to be sorted in the back to get to the front.

Tammy is huffing on a Kool 100. I know her brand. Her kid is throwing snowballs at the door. Lil' Tracy's hands are red from what I figure is 1) The slush. 2) The wind. 3) And not the least bit from standing outside for the past 15 minutes with no gloves.

I'm just figuring. I know I gotta get those boots back, and I won't let Tammy get in my way. Last week, she was a regular chatty Cathy; I'd say chatty Tammy, but it doesn't sound as good; words are weird that way. She and I have known one another since the first-grade school. She dropped out of John Junior when she got knocked up by Jamie, who used to bounce at the Chanticleer. Folks say he forced himself on her, but it's brutal telling.

I see her flipping her hair, and she waves at what I figure must be one of those dweebs with their blue smocks and Salvation Army ribbons. Then she looks away, says something to her kid, and picks at her chin again.

The bottom line is it isn't time yet.

She knows it isn't time yet. Not yet.

I know it isn't time yet. Not yet. It will be soon.

While Tammy is busy freezing her ass off, I'm keeping the heat on high in my G-ride 1997 Steel gray

Chevy Cavalier; word 'em up. While she's flicking the ashes and kicking rocks, trying to balance on hooker platforms, my boots are tied tight while I'm listening to Krazee Kenny bump on the bass and 12 inchers kick in the dynamat trunk. Boom. While she plays with her bleached blonde hair, twirling it like she thinks she can make a perm out of dead-end splits, I'm thinking about the last thing my dad forced me to do before he kicked the bucket.

I ain't nearly slept in the past three weeks since mamma dropped his shit off. And when I think about that last time, I dunno; it's like something took over on me. I grip the steering wheel hard. I usually ram down the gas and try to see how fast I can take a turn.

So that's when my mind gets all goofy. I'm floating off then, like. Spacing out, feel me? I get like that, and I'm pushing down the pedal while I'm just sitting there and shit. Car is revving up on high, and I see his giant fucking snake in the hospital bed and the doctors walking by outside of us. *That's it*, he said, *that's my good boy, a little secret*. Then fucking stupid me, incognito is over. I see the tapping on the glass. Tap.Tap.Tap.

"Frank, is that you? What the fuck you doing?" and wouldn't you know, Tammy is up in my business again. "I can see you through this window tint, you know, it ain't no five percent, damn," she said.

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I'm all red in the face when I realize that I'm not on the highway heading to Buffalo and the titty bars or anything with my boys; I'm not in the hospital bed either. I'm at the Salvation Army doing my regular. I roll it down, just pretending to ease off the gas.

"Tammy Dipload to the truckload, what the fuck up?" I say, rolling down the window a lil' bit.

"What the fuck is up, Fran-sis. And do not try to act all smooth on me, mister," she says, leaning over onto the window, "Fucking let me and my baby girl in; my ass is freezing here." I nod and figure it's my lot and shit.

The next thing I knew, they were opening the doors and getting all comfy.

"Tracy, you get in the back seat, there you go," she says, then slides around to sit shotty.

"I know what you're looking for."

"Oh, you do, don't you?"

"You looking for them boots again, huh?"

"Yeah," I say, clicking the little down arrow on my deface Pioneer.

"Mind if I smoke?" She says, taking out her pack.

"Yeah, I do mind."

"Why were you revving your car and shit going nowhere?"

Homer's Last Line and Other Short Stories

"No reason, just testing the engine, making sure the cylinders are all firing at the same time and shit."

"Oh," she goes.

"Yeah, I may just do it again one time, feel me?" I pressed it down well, the whole Cav just shaking around. "You like that, Tracy?"

"Do it again, do it again!" her girl screams.

"Ahhrite," I said, looking back and smiling at the kid. I push the gas in, and the car goes left and right, and I get lost.

"Shit, that's enough, Frankie, come on, cut the shit."

"Shut up, Tammy, kid needs some fun." I let up on the gas and sort of gave her my gangster stare, "It's just a game, damn."

"How's your mom's doing?"

"About the same as the last time you asked on Tuesday and shit."

"Uh, huh, keep working that attitude, boy," she goes, "I might stop being nice to you," she says.

"That right?"

"That's right," she says.

"Don't you think I'm being real nice to you, sharing my heat and shit," I go. There's just silence on her end of the line. "I thought so," I say.

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"Inside there, this one guy," she says, "I think he has a crush on me."

"That right? Someone wants to hit that loose cooch, huh?"

"Damn right," she goes, and just laughs low and smiles at me. She brings down the painting-on-lipstick mirror, and the light goes off in the dark car. I see a white baggy of something fall in the dark on her lap.

"Mommy?" her kid goes, "Is this man going to be my daddy?" And I am the first to respond.

"Nah, I don't think so," I say, shaking my head at her turning around. Her little brat laughs and then bounces in the back seat.

"These what you looking for?" Tammy says.

"These what?" I say, getting into having a kid in the back car, making a face and shit.

"This," she goes hitting me in the shoulder, "The boots and shit." I see from the light coming up over the Texaco station, across the street, that she's got my Polaroid that I took two years ago, the proof that he did laugh at. "Damn, nice boots. Them is fly. If I find them, I'm going keep them." The blood in me goes cold. I turn to her, and I do not ever want to hit a woman, and I wasn't going to start then.

"You will not fucking do no such thing, Trailer Tammy. And I look down at the picture. I need those

fucking boots." I grabbed the Polaroid from her. "Don't fuck with me, Tammy; I need those fucking boots."

"Shit, why do you need those boots anyway?"

"I want boots, Mommy; I need them bad!"

"Shut up, Tracy, don't make me go back there and hit you," she said, and then I remembered why I didn't want Tammy in my car.

"You shouldn't hit your kid," I say.

"Damn, shut up, man, don't tell me what to say about my child."

"I need them, my feet howtt!" She goes, and she's screaming in the back seat.

"I told you—" and the sound of skin, slapping skin popped in the back seat. "To shut the fuck up," I looked in the rearview and watched Tracy flinch at first, and then her face began to crunch up. I thought about the way he made me look in the mirror by my bed, how if I didn't, he'd punch me in the side. Tracy started to cry slowly and quite like. I tried to think of anything else besides her tears. Not the boots. Not when I got beat. Not all the time.

"Yo, you shouldn't be hitting your kid!" Tammy was reaching down, pulling up her platforms.

"And why the fuck not? You social services or something?"

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"I'm just saying, fucks them up. Makes you a fuckup.»

"Yeah, you say. We all knew you got beat. Hell, most of us did," she said.

I paused a long time, just let it be silent, glad for the heat. Not wanting to say shit. Then my dumb ass did.

"That's the reason shit is all fucked up," I said. "Anyway, can I have my picture back?"

She returned it, and I reached for it; I held the bottom of the white crinkly paper. I pulled, but Tammy wasn't letting go.

"What you mean, 'the reason shit is all fucked up'? Are you trying to tell me I ain't such a good mother? That I'm going fuck up my child," she said. I looked down at the picture in her hands.

"Nah. It ain't about that."

After he saw the flash of my camera, he hauled me right out; my chin ran up against the wood floors and tore the skin right off. *Now, you get off me now; I got proof, pappy.* That's what I said, shaking that picture with the camera around my neck. It happened three years ago. Makes me 14 at the time.

And you know what he did? He just laughed; his big, round, red face just chucked it up.

Homer's Last Line and Other Short Stories

Proof, your mom doesn't need no proof, his hands were rough on the back of my neck and he pushed me over the bed. You think you're some badass rapper tough guy, huh? You white, boy, white. Ain't no damn Jigga."

And I just kept saying, *Dad, I got evidence now, you come in at night. They're going to listen.* He straight punched me in the bread basket, and I couldn't breathe. I was glad to feel the pain again, delighted to know. I spun around, hugging my stomach, which felt like it would fall out. The picture of my Kiwanis league fell off the ledge when I heard his button-fly's pop, and the buckle hit the floor. His hands were peeling my pants off. When my boxers hit the floor, I heard him spit in his hand. *That's my son. You're not so tough, are you?* He said *That's my son*, he whispered as he pushed in. He held my hands tight, and his breathing told me he'd be done soon enough.

"Anyway," I say, after we just sat there, looking in different directions. "I figure Rudy will be out in a minute, and then we know it's time to go in," I tell her. Rudy is the guy who runs the door in the morning shifts. He slow like.

"Yeah, whatever," she says. "You think you're the only one that got beat on?"