

Eastern Discipline

Just two traffic lights between the apartment and work. At each, I sit muttering, *Come on you fucker*. It seems like I've been holding my foot on the brake for ten minutes. I wonder how long I could hold it there before the muscles would freeze and fail.

I pull in, park behind the store, and enter through the bakery department's delivery door. The date on the time clock makes me pause as I punch in. It's the date I've been looking out for. 30 days clean and sober. 30 days sticking to the workout. A solid month of studying the Gita, Ouspensky, the Rig Veda and Gurdjieff. Finally a month of real discipline.

Back behind the cutting room the new dairy guy, a skater punk weighing in at no more than 125 pounds, has blocked off the ice machine with the pallets he's trying to move into the freezer. I watch the kid maneuver the pallet jack awkwardly. His name tag says Aaron. *Come on, you fucker*, I think to myself.

As I'm finishing loading the fish case with ice, Wendall comes out of the cutting room. He speaks fondly of last month's Indians post-season baseball games. I've lost track of them, and a few other things, since Jerry died in August.

"Well hippie," he says to me, "The highlights tape decided me. I'm going through with it."

"Through with what?"

"I'm getting a Chief Wahoo Logo tattoo. After work tonight. At the place by the Pro Football Hall of Fame where the players go. You coming?"

I think of the date on the time clock. Seems like an ideal way to mark the occasion.

"Absolutely," I say.

"I got a Wahoo picture right here," he says, pulling paper out from behind his apron, adding, "Cob is coming, but he won't get tattooed."

"I probably won't get a Wahoo."

“Why the hell not?”

“I’m moving back to the Southwest eventually. Don’t want to piss off the real Indians.”

“Indians don’t give a shit. Just white hippie liberal fucks like you.”

“Still, I’m not looking to get a mascot tattooed on me. What if they move away like the Browns some day?”

“Fuck off. Next year is already sold out. Tribe ain’t going anywhere. What’re you gonna get then?”

“I’ll figure that out later. Yoda maybe, from *The Empire Strikes Back*.”

“Fuck a Yoda, man. Get the Wahoo.”

“I’ll figure it out later.”

“Long as you’re coming along, man.”

“Oh, I’m coming.”

I get elected to drive to Canton. The party is up to five people now. Wendall, Aaron from Dairy/Frozen, Corn Cob, and Wendall’s cousin Matt. We get stuck behind a truck passing another truck on Route 62. *Come on, you fuckers*, I think to myself.

At Rockin’ Rick’s Sports Tattoo we end up waiting for hours, but it’s a lot of fun. Girls keep coming in to get navel piercings. Soon we’re all reciting the care instructions along with the guy after each one. At \$45 a piece it seems like a great gig. The piercing takes maybe 3 minutes and then going over the instructions takes another 2. One of the girls is spectacularly drunk, and doesn’t look a day over 14. She comes into the waiting area with her new piercing and puts her abdomen in my face to ask me how it looks. I take the ball at the end of the little gold hoop with my teeth and give it a tug, pressing my nose against the slick sweat on her stomach. She shouts and calls me “Fucker,” then wanders back into the clean room where her friend is getting pierced. A minute later she is back out, sitting on the arm of the leather couch beside me and running her fingers through my hair. I’m a bit worried she’s going to throw up, but still interested. Wendall and Cob are laughing hysterically.

“Whatcha got there hippie?”

“Don’t rightly know Wendall,” I reply.

“Gonna fuck it, you think?”

I look up at the girl, who stares blankly at the checkered tile floor.

“Not sure she’s going to be awake much longer. Also not sure I can buy the ID she showed the guy there. Hate to go to jail.”

The piercing guy pipes up from the other room.

“Girls didn’t have IDs, just notes from Mom. Jail is a distinct possibility . . . for you. I still got the notes.”

The girl stumbles out of the room indignantly, grabs her coat and heads down the stairs toward the street. After a brief chorus of the care instructions, her friend follows.

Wendall and his cousin are getting tattooed simultaneously. Aaron decided he was more of a piercing guy. I picked a piece from the flash on the wall to celebrate my month of Eastern discipline; a Buddah meditating surrounded by fire. Neither of the apprentice guys wanted to do it so I have to wait for Rockin' Rick himself. He's finishing up a gigantic orchid in the small of a woman's back. As he works, he's talking on a cordless phone to the guys at Z Rock Radio. One of the other tattoo parlors in town called them on air to say Rick was giving people AIDS. Now he's trying to get air time to defend himself. Ash from his cigarette falls on the woman's ass and he casually brushes it away. She giggles. *Come on, you fucker*, I think. I realize that I'll be holding everyone else up by the time I get worked on.

We came in before 6 and now it's almost 11. It doesn't seem like that long. This place reminds me of the places I hung out before I found Jerry Garcia. I miss those great anarchist punk clubs of my youth. There was always something funny-but-wrong going on. I wish I could work in a place like this instead of a fucking grocery store. I used to be really good at drawing and painting, actually, back when I was just doing the drugs instead of fighting with them.

Rick works on my leg for nearly an hour, fielding calls from other Tattoo shops and various worried customers who heard him on the radio. He uses a new needle for each color, and pours the paint into little disposable cups. I can't see how he could be giving me anything.

The burn of the needle is good. The intensity makes me grin from time to time, just from feeling alive with pain. Wendall sees the grins and tells me I'm a fucking psycho. I think about it and realize something about me really is off. The tattoo on my leg is about six inches tall and seven inches wide. If I work out tonight it will bleed like a bastard.

"Damn proud of that piece, I am," Rick says as he puts a temporary dressing over it. "Come back in 10 days and let me get a picture. I'll also brighten up anything that heals blurry—had to go real fuckin' deep to get that color."

Rick grabs a bag from the table behind him. It's a half ounce of rock star bud the girl with the orchid gave him in payment. Big sticky nuggets. Red to purple crystal hairs. He begins stuffing some in a big pipe.

"You guys wanna stick around for the end of day procedures?"

Everyone looks at me. *30 days*, I think. *And look how happy its made you*, a different voice from the back of my head adds, *so . . . Come on, you fucker*. I think about that phrase and realize I need a new mantra.

I'm not in any hurry, I decide. I repeat it out loud and let it echo in my mind, taking the pipe and the lighter from his outstretched hand.