

Outside Elko

A STORY

BY PORTER FOX



Porter Fox's fiction and nonfiction have been published in several commercial magazines and literary reviews. His story "Caribou" was nominated for a 2008 Pushcart Prize. Fox recently completed his first collection of short stories, "Which Is More Powerful," and is writing a travel narrative about sailing the coast of Maine, where he was raised. He teaches fiction and lives in Brooklyn.

THE TWO MEN sat across from each other. A pair of car keys rested on the table between them. One of the men held a glass mug, the other his head in his hands. A waitress stood by, waiting for their order. She coughed and scuffed her sneaker across the floor.

Get to it, Bill finally said.

What?

Order something.

Order for me.

I don't know what you want.

Neither do I.

Bill looked at the waitress, tapped his mug. Two Buds.

Draft or bottles? she asked.

Either.

Which?

Bottles.

Bill watched her walk away. He whistled and winked at Ted. Then he went to the jukebox and punched in three songs.

How bad was it? he asked when he sat down.

Bad, said Ted.

What'd he do?

Nothing. Yet.

He hit you?

He won't do that.

He might, Bill said.

Not now.

The waitress brought two mugs back from the bar. Bill shook his head.

She leaned against the table.

I said bottles, Bill said.

You were drinking a draft.

Doesn't mean I have to stick with it.

You stick with what you get.

How long you worked here?

Long enough, said the waitress.

What's this place turned into?

The place I work.

I like you.

Don't get your hopes up.

The waitress went back to the bar and spoke with the bartender. Bill followed her with his eyes while Ted sipped his beer.

He steal anything? Bill asked, still watching.

Not yet.

You'd know.

He bought a car yesterday.

How long's he been here?

Little sedan.

He sleeping on your couch?

Couldn't fit half a suitcase in the trunk, Ted said.

He'll leave town soon.

Not without her.

He going to the racetrack? Bill asked.

When she's working.

Jason know?

Soon enough.

The waitress turned around, and Bill hoisted his mug. She rolled her eyes. He took a swig and winked.

You remember when we were in high school? Bill asked.

I remember we treated people fairly, Ted said.

Hardly.

We didn't go around threatening each other.

We sure did.

Not like this.

The waitress returned and sat next to Bill. He looked at her and smiled. One of his songs came on the jukebox, and he sang along with it. He only knew half the words, then the waitress joined in and they finished it together. When it was over she collected their empty mugs and went back to the bar.

She new? Ted asked.

Yeah.

You thinking about that?

I think so.

Any word from May?

She got there, if that's what you mean.

The waitress delivered two more beers, and the men drank them down. Two couples wandered in. A woman keyed a few more songs into the jukebox.

He'll be at the track tonight, you know, Ted said.

Will Jason be there?

Doubt it.

Maybe we should go, talk it out.

You go ahead. I'll have an ambulance standing by.

Can't be that bad.

Bad as I've ever seen it. He's mad about her. He'll chew you up.

He drinking?

What do you think?

He can't take out the whole county.

He'll kill anyone gets in his way.

That's not our problem.

It is if that person's you.

THE TWO FINISHED their beers and walked outside. The sun was down. A green streetlight flickered on. They stood in the parking lot and watched a pair of eighteen-wheelers rush east toward Elko. A car pulled into the lot, and two middle-aged ladies got out. Bill shuffled over and held the door for them.

He lit a cigarette and offered one to Ted. A station wagon drove past in the other direction. The sky changed from light to deep blue. A pickup rattled into the lot, raising a cloud of dust. Two men got out and went into the bar.

Does she call? Ted asked.

I got a note last week.

How is she?

Hard to say.

What'd she write?

Bill pulled a postcard from his breast pocket. The picture on the front was of a totem pole. Next to it was a T-shirt shop. The corners of the card were worn and faded. Bill read:

Dear Bill,

Made it to Asheville. Kids are OK. I'm not too good. We went to Pop's. He's smarter than ever. I don't know. I won't write again.

May

Bill gazed at the card for a second before putting it back in his pocket. Then he tossed his cigarette on the ground.

You send money? Ted asked.

Every week.

Must be hard on the kids.

She needs them.

You miss them?

In the mornings, Bill said.

It's all trouble.

Sure is.

Bill kicked a bottle cap across the parking lot and started toward the car. Ted took another drag and tossed the butt on the ground.

I'm happy to see you changing things, Ted said.

I didn't know I was.

The waitress did.

You think?

Why don't you ask her out?

I will.

Go ahead.

In time.

Someone's going to snatch her up.

Nothing I can do about that.

Ted nodded and laughed, and the two got in. Bill started the engine, paused for a second, and tapped his fingers on the steering wheel. Then he put the car in reverse and turned around.

To the track? he asked.

Why not.

BILL ROLLED HIS window down. The Ruby Mountains bordered the desert to the south. Straight ahead was nothing. Jerry Lee Lewis came on the radio.

Ted lit another cigarette. A hitchhiker walked along the soft shoulder with his thumb out. Bill watched him in the rearview as they drove past.

I saw a truck out by Sarah Spring yesterday, Bill said.

They drilling?

Had a rig up.

You think there's anything?

Hard to say.

They don't miss much.

Not these days.

What kind of rig was it?

Looked like a Jensen.

That's Joe Mitchell.

I figured.

You know how much he pumped last year?

I don't want to.

Bill looked up and saw a blue sedan careening around the corner. He swerved to the right to avoid it. The sedan leaned to the outside of the turn and fishtailed. Ted put his hands on the dash. Bill let out a little laugh and tried correcting the opposite way. The sedan clipped their front bumper and pitched Bill's car into a slide. He tried to straighten it out but the car slid off the embankment. It flipped several times before landing on its roof.

WHEN BILL OPENED his eyes he was hanging from his seat belt. The passenger seat was empty. His shirt was soaked, and he felt pressure building in his chest.

He unclipped the belt and fell to the roof of the car. A burning feeling spread up his leg. He pulled himself out the window and stood on his good leg.

He couldn't see Ted. He tried to call out, but his voice was thin and hoarse. He hopped to the rear of the car. A truck pulled over on the highway. A man stepped out and waved. Bill waved back, then hopped to the passenger door. Ted lay crumpled under the hood. There was a deep gash across the back of his neck, and his head was bent to his chest.

Bill turned around, and his leg collapsed under him. He rested his head against the door. His breath came in short wheezes. Another truck stopped.

Two people got out and waved. Bill waved back.

A few stars twinkled in the half light. A grasshopper chimed under a sage bush. Pressure built in Bill's chest. He noticed a red crescent at the edge of his vision.

He took the postcard from his pocket and wiped it on his leg. It was hard to make out May's loopy handwriting. He tilted it up toward the dim twilight and read it. Then he put it back in his pocket.

THE HITCHHIKER COVERED his mouth and nose with a handkerchief as he approached the scene. The fire had gone out in the sedan. Three people stood around a truck listening to the CB. Paramedics loaded a body into an ambulance. Several more carried two corpses from the overturned car in the field.

The hitchhiker continued down the highway. He was making good time. He lit a cigarette and felt a lightness in his chest. It was amazing how many miles you could cover on foot, he thought. If you kept a good pace.

The highway made a sweeping turn to the right. The hitchhiker finished his cigarette and flicked it into the ditch. A station wagon drove by. He rounded the curve and saw a long, straight stretch ahead. Noises clicked and hummed in the desert. He'd make Elko by dawn, he thought. Noon at the latest. Had to. There was someone there he needed to see. **N**