



Routes 1&9

Ivan Robertson

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Teresa and Stan

Stan sat where he usually sat and stared up at the TV. He had a bottle of beer in one hand and a tangle of keys in the other. Between the two was an ashtray and a small pile of money.

Buffalo was losing to Philadelphia fourteen to three in the first quarter. It was raining down on the field and on the players. A big clot of muddy turf got caught in the quarterback's face-guard and another player was helping him get it out. Their jerseys hung off them like rags. Stan looked past the TV, through the windows outside, and watched the same rain come down on Old Hook Road.

"Change the channel, Nick," an old man called down from the end of the bar. "Turn this crap off."

Nick stood behind the bar, looking down at an open newspaper and drinking a bar mug full of coffee.

"Calm down, Freddy."

Stan had seen the paper already. There was a picture of his boss in there somewhere, standing in the parking lot of the Kool-Range plant with a grim and determined look on his face. He was standing in the rear lot, where Stan used to park every morning. It was the middle of the afternoon and there wasn't a car in sight.

He took a drink from his bottle. It wasn't much after three, but the cars hissing past the bar already had their lights on.

He could see his own car rusting away out there in the bar's gravel lot. He'd only bought it off his uncle nine months ago and it was falling apart on him already. The suspension was shot, the transmission was starting to slip. He was praying it would make it through winter but he was beginning to think maybe it wouldn't, and if it didn't he wasn't sure what he'd do.

The TV was showing the Bills halfback fumble the ball in slow motion and from different angles. Philadelphia had recovered it and ran it to the twenty-yard line.

"Goddamn butterfingers," Freddy sat by himself at the far end of the bar, hunched over his Seagrams and his ashtray. Nobody wanted to sit next to him. "Goddamn knuckleheads."

Stan drained what was left in his bottle and set it down.

"Hey, Nick..."

Nick looked over and pulled another beer from the cooler. He set the full bottle down next to the empty one and took two dollars from Stan's shrinking pile of cash.

"Thanks, Stan."

He counted what was left. Seven dollars on the bar, plus two tens in his wallet, plus whatever might be left in the bank. This Kool-Range deal had come at a bad time. Any time would've been a bad time.

"Thanks, Nick."

Stan took a drink from his bottle and looked back up at the TV.

“Annette?”

“Yeah?”

“Hey, it’s Stan.”

“Oh. Hey, Stan.”

“Hey, how’s it going?”

“Fine. It’s going good. How’s it going with you?”

“Good. Great. Listen, is...uh, is Theresa there?”

“Yeah, I think so. Hold on.”

He could hear Annette cover up the receiver with the palm of her hand and call out her sister’s name. He looked down at his boots and closed his eyes.

“Stan?” It was Annette again.

“Yeah?”

“Listen, could she call you back? Are you at home?”

“No, it’s OK. I’ll try her later. Thanks, Annette.”

“Take care, Stan.”

“Yeah, you too.”

Stan checked out his wallet on the way back to his stool and pulled out one of the tens.

The place was beginning to fill up a little and the sky was getting darker. The high orange streetlights had switched on over Old Hook Road and on the diner across it. Stan looked out at his car again. Fat raindrops were running down his windshield and bouncing off the hood. He’d left the driver’s side window open a crack and his seat was probably soaked.

“Hey, Nick,” He called over. “You want to buy a car?”

From the other end of the bar Nick laughed and shook his head no. What looked like a college couple was playing pool in the back and a couple of older guys in suits and ties sat a few stools down. They were both drinking vodka with limes, and they were both looking up at the TV in a distracted way.

“I mean, Jesus Christ!”

“I know, I...”

“Phil. Of all the people in...”

“I know, Buddy.”

“Fucking Phil.”

The game was in the third quarter by now and the Bills were pulling up a little. The players on both sides were covered in mud.

“Come on, let’s move!” Freddy was yelling. “Let’s move it!”

The girl was scanning the records on the jukebox, looking for something to play. The boy was leaning over the pool table with the cue stick in his hands.

“Nick, what time is it, do you know?”

“Quarter to five.”

Stan finished his beer and set it down on the bar. A song came on the jukebox, something from the seventies, and the boy in the back laughed. The girl danced the few steps from the jukebox to the pool table, wiggling her ass in the boy’s direction.

“Nine months. Nine fucking months he’s been with Mason and Finch.” One of the older guys was jabbing at the bar with his index finger. “Now I ask you...”

“Len, I agree with you. I...”

“...Is that right? Does that in any way seem just?”

“No, of course not. Of course not. But...”

“Bullshit. There’s no argument. It’s wrong.”

“I’m just saying...”

“Could we get another round, please?”

At the end of the game it was thirty-five to nine Philadelphia and the stadium was near empty. The players on both teams looked miserable and cold. The coach for Buffalo came on the screen.

“Asshole,” Freddy threw a pretzel up at the TV screen and missed.

“Freddy, I’m warning you.”

“Could I get another one?” Stan asked.

Theresa lived with her sister in a house along Mapler Avenue that looked just like every other house along Mapler Avenue. It was the house they grew up in. When their Dad died and their Mom moved down to Florida, Annette took it over. Then Theresa moved back, too.

Before that she shared a four-room apartment with Stan, and they lived there together for almost two years. They were both taking night classes at BCC, that’s how they met. She was finishing up her nursing degree and he was taking some computer class. She got her degree and Stan just stopped going. He held on to the job at Kool-Range.

Three weeks ago she moved out, saying she thought it might be the best thing for them both. She needed some time away from him, she said. She needed some space. Stan just sat there on the couch, too dumb to move. She said she was sorry but she’d thought a lot about this and she couldn’t help the way she felt. She still loved him but she felt they were going nowhere and she hoped he understood.

He said he’d try. He didn’t know what to say.

The next morning he helped load her stuff into her Honda and stood there on the sidewalk, waving while she pulled away.

“Nine off the twelve.”

“Good luck.”

The nine hit the twelve, which sank into the corner pocket with a thud.

“Damn.”

“Eleven,” Dave pointed with his cue. “Side pocket.”

Stan stood there and watched. Dave hit the cue ball too hard and watched it follow the eleven into the side pocket.

“Shit.” He took a cigarette from his shirt pocket and lit it. He exhaled with a spitting sound. “Still, it went in.”

Dave used to work across the line from Stan at Kool-Range, mounting rotary compressors. They’d eat lunch together and talk about bands they both liked. Eventually he wanted to teach High School math, that was the plan. He was working on his certificate and hoped to start next fall. He’d

married a girl named Emily that Stan had met once or twice. He remembered her as being tall and awkward. The two of them were expecting a kid in March.

Stan lined up the cue ball behind the three.

“Corner pocket.”

“It’s too close.”

Stan shot and missed. When he played with Dave he usually lost. Dave put his cigarette down on the edge of the table.

“How’s Emily?”

“She’s good. She’s doing real well, all things considered.”

“Yeah.”

“Big as a barn. Four in that corner there.” He hit it and it sank.

“She’s big?”

“She’s huge,” He looked down at the table. “Thirteen. Her Mom’s driving me nuts, though. Which I guess is part of the script.”

“Uh-huh.”

Dave missed the pocket by a few inches.

“She’s trying to convince us to move in with her out on Long Island. Syosset. Says we’ve gotten ourselves in a corner, what with the job and everything...”

“Uh-huh,” Stan lined up the three and shot. The ball spun around weakly and stayed on the table.

“Yeah, no shit. Anyway, Emily can’t work much longer. She shouldn’t be working now.”

“Sure.”

“Number thirteen again. So I imagine we’ll do it.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Move, I mean. Yeah. She’s got this house out there and it’s just her and John - Emily’s dad.” Dave sunk the thirteen. The table was cleared except for Stan’s three and the eight. “Still pisses me off, though.”

“Yeah.”

“So, how’s Theresa?” Dave lined up the eight and sank it. He looked up at Stan.

“Huh?”

“Theresa, how’s she doing?”

“She’s fine. You know, working all the time. I guess you won.”

“Guess I did. She still over at Holy Name?”

“Yeah.”

“Good. Good for her. Tell her hello.”

“Will do. How’s your beer? You about ready?”

“Annette, it’s me again.”

“Stan...”

“Is she there? ‘Cause I’d really like to talk to her, Annette. If she’s there.”

“She’s, uh...”

“Hey, Annette...”

“Hold on.”

Dave left over an hour before, the football game was long over, and the bar was filling up even more. The college couple had been joined by a bunch of their fiends and Stan watched them clown around by the jukebox.

“Let her call you back, Stan.”

“I’m not even at home, Annette.”

“Yeah, well...”

“Would you tell her it’s important? Could you do that?”

“She’s not...”

“Hey, Annette, come on.”

“Let her call you back, Stan. OK? Let her call you.”

By seven the day crowd was turning into the night crowd and Stan was drinking shots. Nick was winding down his shift and counting out the register with his back to the bar. Freddy sat over at his spot and watched Jeopardy. He’d shout out the answers and slap his hands down on the bar when he got them wrong.

“Freddy, I mean it! Shut up!”

Stan looked down at the beer in his hand. Nick had bought it for him. Stan knew he didn’t need it, he was drunk enough already, but he was glad to have it all the same.

“Spain!” Freddy yelled up at the TV. “What is Spain?”

The answer was Portugal and Freddy barked in disgust.

Stan turned and looked down, past the phone, at the college kids again. There were a lot more of them than before, drinking pitchers of beer, wearing Rutgers sweatshirts and

baggy pants. One of the girls, the girl Stan remembered dancing around earlier, was talking to the others without looking at any of them. She’d sort of nod and look straight ahead in front of her. Stan hadn’t really looked at her before. She turned and looked towards the front of the bar, in Stan’s direction, but not at him. Then her boyfriend said something and she turned to him, laughing.

“What is Oklahoma?”

“Theresa?”

He could hear her breathing over the line.

“Theresa?”

“Hi, Stan.”

“How are you, Theresa? I tried to call you earlier.”

“Where are you, Stan?”

“I’m, uh...”

“You should go home.”

Stan held his free hand up to his ear. The college kids were singing along with the jukebox, George Thorogood, “Bad to the bone.”

“I miss you, Theresa. I really miss you.”

“Stan...”

“No, just let me talk. I love you and I know I’m fucking up but I... I feel really stupid here, Theresa. I feel like a fucking idiot. And this sucks. I mean, what am I supposed to do? I don’t know what to do here, Theresa. I miss you and I don’t know what you want.”

“Oh, Stan. Come on...”

“I...”

“Go home. This isn’t the time, Stan. Go home and call me tomorrow.”

“Do you still love me, Theresa? Maybe it’s not going to change anything, but I need to know...”

He listened to her breathe.

“I do. Yes, I do. But that’s not enough, Stan.”

“But it’s something though, right? It’s something.”

He hung up before she could say anything.

Stan swung at the kid and missed. The kid shoved him back.

“Hey...”

Stan charged him and hit him in the arm. The kid punched him back, hard, and Stan caught it in the eye. He tripped back over somebody’s chair.

“Easy there, big guy.”

“Fucking asshole,” the college kid shouted.

When Stan tried to stand he slipped and landed with his forearms on the wet floor. He could hear Nick’s voice somewhere about him.

“That’s enough.”

“The fucking guy jumped me.”

“OK, enough.” Stan saw a hand appear in front of his face.

“Get up, Stan.”

Stan took the hand and Nick pulled him up. The college kid stepped closer to him, squaring off, but Nick stood between them.

“I think you’re beat, Stan. Let’s go.”

“Asshole,” Stan heard the college kid mutter.

“Come on, my shift’s over. I’ll buy you a cheeseburger.”

“How’s the eye?”

Nick and Stan stood on the broken white lines that divided Old Hook Road, waiting for a diesel truck to roll past. The rain was picking up.

“It hurts.”

“It’ll hurt worse in the morning. Hurt like a son of a bitch.”

“Yeah, well...”

“Drink some water, that’ll help.”

“Yeah.”

“And some aspirin when you get home.”

“You know, Nick, I’ve been drunk before. This isn’t exactly a new thing.”

The truck had rolled past and they started to cross. Nick didn’t say anything.

“I mean, I appreciate the concern and all, but I’ll be fine.”

“Fair enough.”

The two reached the shoulder of the road.

“Besides, you’re the one who got me drunk in the first place.”

“Now this goes back thirty years or so. Nineteen sixty-five, sixty-six. Before you were born, I bet. My last year of high school up to boot camp. Graduation. It was hotter than hell that summer, as I recall. People kept teasing me, ‘You want hot, wait’ll Vietnam.’ And they were right about that.”

Nick sat across the booth from Stan, drinking a cup of tea. The diner was nearly empty except for a few old VFW-type guys sitting at the counter, drinking coffee and flirting with one of the waitresses.

“It was hot, huh?”

“Hot as hell. But I didn’t care. Shit, I was so keyed up, I couldn’t wait to go, to tell you the truth. The papers were signed and all...you want some coffee?”

“I’m fine, Nick. Thanks.”

“Anyway, I had this friend back then, this guy Bobby Pastori, and for a couple of years there we were pretty tight. He’d moved into town sophomore year and we hit it off, you know? Bobby and Nick. His dad was a salesman or something...”

“Right.”

“But the main thing was that Bobby had a car. This beat-up blue Impala, ugly as shit. He’d gotten this job at a movie theater two towns over to pay for the thing. Tearing tickets. Saving his dimes. The first time I saw it parked in his yard I remember I was holding my head in my hands going ‘Oh, Bobby. What did you do?’ He was just standing there with this big goofy grin on his face, proud as all hell. It was a heap.

The upholstery was all ripped up, the dashboard was cracked. It was all rusted out...”

“I know the type.”

“Yeah, but it could hustle. Bobby had rebuilt the engine and this thing could fly, he had a gift.” The waitress arrived with their food. Two cheeseburger deluxes. Stan had ordered whatever Nick had, he didn’t care. He wasn’t hungry.

“Thanks, Barbara.”

“You bet.”

“Fastest I’d ever gone was in that car. One-twenty or something with Bobby behind the wheel. I was so scared. I was sure that was it. I wasn’t even going to make it to Vietnam, I was going to die right there thirty miles from home. And Bobby was just laughing his ass off.”

“Uh-huh.” Stan watched the old guys lean in to hear some joke one of them was telling.

“And by that time, last part of senior year, the two of us were riding around all the time. We’d pretty much given up on the idea of going to school altogether, just cut out at lunch and drive. Once or twice we’d still be out driving around when school started up again the next morning. The morning news would come on the radio and we’d be hopelessly lost out there a hundred miles from homeroom. But we didn’t care...”

“Uh-huh.”

“It was a done deal, they had to pass us through. Like I said, I was going into the Marines and schools were fighting

over Bobby. The kid was some sort of engineering genius. So we graduated the end of May and I was at Parris Island the third week of July. And we kept driving...”

The old guy finished his joke and slapped the counter with his hand. His friends all laughed and the waitress was pretending to be embarrassed.

“Oh Frank...” she said.

“Anyway, about a week before I left we were driving around upstate, somewhere. Lost up around Newburgh. Middle of the night, pitch black. We had no idea where we were, driving around some little road, coming down from the hills. I was playing with the radio when Bobby goes ‘Oh, shit’ and throws on the brakes. I thought we hit something.”

“What was it?”

“There was this old Chevy van in front of us, and its brake lights were on or else we never would’ve seen it. You know those old Chevy vans? Used to see them everywhere. Anyway, this one must’ve been flying. The road turned and the van went straight, and it must’ve flown twenty feet. From where we were it looked like it was just floating there.”

“Yeah.”

“It had landed on some sort of a farm gate, and the ass end of the thing was about five feet up in the air.”

Nick finished his tea.

“Bobby pulled up onto the shoulder of the road and switched on the safety lights. It really must’ve been flying. The front end was all mangled up and the gate had pushed

the engine block right up into the front seat, right into the driver’s lap. There was no room up there at all.”

Nick bit deep into his cheeseburger and chewed.

“We ran right up to the van. There was a man in there, and he was a mess. He’d hit the gate dead on and it just nailed him there in his seat, you know? The radiator and everything was sitting on top of him. His forehead was up against the glass, and there was blood everywhere. His face was black with blood.”

“Was he dead?”

“No, he wasn’t dead. Not then. He was sort of opening and closing his eyes, kind of moaning. He was alive, certainly. And so... Well, Bobby was the shit-hot driver and so he hightailed it to the next phone or the next town or whatever he could find, and I stayed with the man. I remember standing there on the shoulder of the road, watching the Impala’s taillights get smaller and smaller and thinking to myself ‘Now what? God damn. Now what do I do?’ I went back to the guy and I didn’t know what to do. He kept blinking and I couldn’t tell if he could see anything or not. There was all this paint splattered all over the place, cans of it laying around everywhere. It was all just a mess, and I didn’t have a fucking clue as to what to do for him. I kept asking him if he could hear me and maybe he could, I don’t know. I told him we were getting help. I told him what a great driver Bobby was and how there’d be help in no time flat. I was telling him ‘Hang on.’ I was telling him all sorts of things.

Finally I just started saying 'It's okay.' You know? 'Everything's okay.' I couldn't think of what else to say. 'It's okay.' I just kept saying it over and over."

"So what happened?"

"Well, he died is what happened. He was crushed by the engine. He was all fucked up."

They sat there for a minute. Nick was mopping up ketchup with a french fry. Stan looked down at his own plate and played with a piece of lettuce. The gang at the counter had left.

"Bobby came tearing back up the road, with these police cars behind him. I could see their lights flashing and all, following him."

"Yeah," Stan looked out the window and could see the lights of the bar flashing across the road. He could just about make out his own car parked out there by the door.

"But I remember...before that. I remember just talking to the guy. He knew he was dying, he must've. And I was just some scared kid lying to him, telling him everything's gonna work out fine. But I think he heard me. Anyway, I like to think so."

"I bet he did."

"Well... maybe he did, who knows? Anyway, eight weeks later I was in Vietnam, but that's another story."

The rain had turned to snow while Stan was driving home. He drove slowly, looking out for ice on the road. He had the

window open a little and he had the radio on. The cold air felt good on his face.

The man on the radio said that the snow was expected to last for a while. It was the first snow of the season and the earliest in years. It was some kind of a record.

When Stan saw the sign for Mapler he turned without planning to. He surprised himself, he'd just done it. He slowed down and looked at the houses all lined up. They were identical, house after house. He counted down the addresses until he came to Theresa's. He pulled out and let the engine idle. The man on the radio was talking about coastal flooding when Stan shut it off.

The house was dark. He looked up to where Theresa's bedroom was, the same bedroom she grew up in, and it was dark in there too. Her car was pulled into the driveway, behind her sister's.

He didn't know what he was going to do next. He didn't have a plan in his head. He watched the snow cut through the beams of his headlights, big fat soggy flakes. He looked back towards Theresa's window and this time the light was on. He felt his chest tighten.

Theresa came to the window and looked down at Stan's car. She couldn't see him in it but she knew he was there. She could see the green glow of the dashboard lights. She could see the smoke pouring out of the exhaust and all the snow coming down. That's all she could see.

He sat in his car, just staring up at her, for ages.

Teresa and Stan from ***Routes 1&9*** collection of short stories

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