

LIFE IS LIKE THIS SOMETIMES

Barry Gifford

TWENTY-SEVEN YEARS ago I rode the train from Oakland, California, to Ogden, Utah, where I arrived at Sunday night. From there I had to catch a bus to Logan, to meet a friend. The next one was not scheduled to depart until six A.M., so I had several hours to kill in Ogden, a town I did not know.

It was late November, very cold, snow and ice on the ground. I walked into a bar full of Indians. The name of the place was Dot's Hot Spot. I took a stool and ordered a beer from the bartender, who resembled a retired Irish cop from Chicago I used to talk to at the racetrack named Eddie Dooley. Dooley had been forced to retire after the horse he'd been riding down State Street during a Saint Patrick's Day parade had collapsed from a heart attack, fallen on Eddie and crushed his right leg. One day at Sportsman's he told me he was now "taken' it out on the ponies." The last I heard of Eddie he was repairing refrigerators.

Dot's Hot Spot stayed open all night and was full of Indians who were either already drunk or about to be. During the course of the night several men slid off their stools and collapsed to the floor, where they remained undisturbed until they recovered or woke up and again took a place at the bar. The popular belief among white men was that Indians could not hold their liquor particularly well. From what I had observed by that time—I was twenty-six—neither could most white men.

I sipped my beer, listened to Charlie Rich and Freddie Fender on the Rock-ola, and kept an eye out for trouble that might be headed my way. I didn't want trouble, I just wanted to get to Logan. A white man with red hair cut short who looked to be about forty-five years old came in and sat down on the stool to my left. He ordered a shot of bar whiskey and a beer. He nodded at me.

"Look like we're in the minority," he said.

"Oh, I don't know," I said. "I think most of these boys are drinking about the same as us."

"You got a point, hotshot," he said.

We talked for a while. His name was Rigney. I never asked if it was his first, last, or only. He told me he had

been up to Draper to visit his sister, who was doing a dime for armed robbery.

"She knocked down a couple or three laundromats," Rigney said, "along with her boyfriend, Walter Topper. He put Rita up to it. Hotshot jumped bail, but he can't stay disappeared forever. I'd hunt Walter Topper down and take him out of the count, Rita wanted me to."

We drank more. Rigney switched from whiskey to Tequila somewhere along in there while I nursed a few beers. I wasn't much of a drinker and I did not want to risk being kept from boarding the bus because I was drunk. I had promised to meet my friend in Logan by nine-thirty.

Rigney rolled up his shirtsleeves. Tattooed in large gothic letters on his left forearm was the name RUTH. A few Indians got into a tussle at the other end of the bar but it didn't travel. To my relief, it was a pretty quiet night in Dot's Hot Spot. Toward morning it occurred to me to ask Rigney who Ruth was.

"I don't know anybody named Ruth," he said.

We didn't talk after that except to say goodbye and good luck. At five-thirty I left the bar and went to catch my bus. Two of the Indians who had been in Dot's Hot Spot staggered into the Trailways stations. The taller of the two wore a calico half-Stetson and had a braid halfway down his back. He was one of the men that had been involved in the brief scuffle. A cop stopped them and ordered them to go outside and come back later when they were sober. The shorter Indian, who was hatless, passed out and slumped to the ground. His partner went out the door in a hurry. The cop picked up the Indian who had collapsed under his arms and dragged him outside.

From the window of the bus as it pulled out of Ogden I saw Rigney walking on the side of the road. It was snowing and he didn't have a coat.