

Ernest Hemmingway on the Shiawassee

From “Snot Lake” A Collection of short stories

Tall Tales of Michigan and Beyond

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Abstract: The only police officer in America without a car finds a memorial cross and a bottle of Ale. Ernest Hemmingway discovers adventure and his “Achilles heel” on the Shiawassee River while motoring a 1917 Scripps-Booth topedo roadster.

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Signed: Len Kirschner

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Officer Lee never knew what it was. He has been passing by it on foot five days a week before and after his shift at the local precinct. He always thought of it as a yard complete with weeds and traces of grass but after asking around he found that reverse corner lot was the more correct term. He learned this when filing a report on the death of one Bartholomew Dawdle.

Dawdle had been driving an old Ford pick-up when he came to meet a tree outside of town at the blinking red light. This was on the walk home for Ryan Lee. He was walking because he was yet to acquire the use of a car although he had been promised help from a number of sources including his sister. Frankly he thought he was the only police officer in America who had to get home via shank's pony. Captain Danville at the precinct could have easily let him take the third squad car home but he preferred to keep the car in with the impounded cars overnight.

What was striking about the report was that Dawdle appeared to have been eating Shrimp and Grits coupled with Truffle Parmesan fries. These were found all over the cab once the paramedics arrived on the scene. Lee loved Shrimp and Grits as well as Parmesan Fries and he found it troubling that he had no idea where Dawdle would have bought the food in the area. He wasn't given much office work so he was delighted to be filling out the report.

Dawdle had been quite popular in high school up to the Friday night when his football career came to an abrupt end. He fumbled the ball in the biggest rivalry game of the year with the Snot Lake Black Flies and the result was a 3-0 loss. The best the coach could say after was that "The defense played well." His lingering popularity was the reason that a memorial cross was put in the yard at the place where the Ford truck met the Tulip Poplar

tree. It was also the reason that a bottle of Two Hearted Ale was placed under the little wooden white cross.

Lee frowned when he first saw the bottle. First of all it was one of those fancy craft beers that people were paying too much for and it was, in his opinion liter. He picked it up and put it in his parka pocket. He always wore a parka even when it was as hot as two rats in a wool sock. He couldn't let anyone see his police uniform underneath on the walk home. The bottle also had a deposit so it was a no brainer. He had to make sure it was in the pocket that didn't have his Mountain Dew. He always carried a liter bottle of the soda and drank it like a runner would drink water while running a marathon.

This went on for a while. On the way home he would pick one up and the next night there would be a new full unopened bottle of Ale to take its place. On his days off he was hoping that a new bottle would appear on a time schedule but that wasn't the case. Only when he pocketed the bottle was there a new one the next night. This routine was only broken up one night when he went to the wooden cross, picked up the Two Hearted Ale and saw something new on the reverse corner lot...a sign announcing "Coming Soon: Future home of Burger Girl Restaurant." He took a picture with his cell phone and made his way back to his RV stopping now and then to refuel with Mountain Dew.

Around this time he made the decision that this stretch of M-52 needed a sidewalk. It was one thing walking 8 ½ miles and another to be footing through grass rocks and mud. He stuck out his thumb as he went walking forward with his thumb in that direction as well. Within five minutes a car stopped. "Ryan, you wouldn't be soliciting a ride would you?" It was Sergeant Johnson smiling at Lee's discomfort.

"Look here Jones you are an officer of the law and that badge does not give you the right to saw you are the law. I know my rights and how to enforce them. I am not stopping or impeding traffic. I am not in the process of committing a crime. I'll bet you must have something better to do than harass me off hours.

You do enough of that on hours. If Danville let me use that damn squad car that is collecting dust I wouldn't have to be walking. I need a damn car or moped or scooter. What I don't need is you harassing me off hours. You should transfer to Flint if you have run out of things to do here."

Johnson quickly wrote out a citation. "Get in the car I'll buy you a drink." "I'm walking out of my shoes here. I don't want a drink. I just want to get home. Drinking is what ruined Ernest Hemmingway's life." "Whatever do you have to do with Ernest Hemmingway? Lee paused and then shot back "Ernest Hemmingway went fishing on the Shiawassee. In fact the Shiawassee is where he took his first drink." The Sergeant handed him the citation as Officer Lee slid into the passenger's seat. "Do you want me to turn on the lights?" Lee used all of his self-control not to respond

When he finally spoke he said "It had to do with a 1914 Scripps-Booth. Hemmingway was in Petosky cleaning out Waloon Lake of fish. He received a letter from his Uncle Tyler. Now Uncle Tyler worked at the Kansas City Star on a newspaper but he had a new Scripps-Booth that he had just bought right off the factory floor in Detroit. Uncle Tyler had to get back to the newspaper and he needed a place to keep the car until he could drive it back to Kansas City. He suggested that young Ernest, then 18, take the train from Cheboygan down to Detroit and drive the three year old Torpedo Roadster back up to Waloon Lake." Lee took a breath and a gulp of Mountain Dew and then another breath and then continued.

"You know I'm walking out of my shoes just trying to get home. I hope you get a kick out of this," Lee said and he opened the citation again and refolded it and placed it in his shirt pocket. Johnson's squad car pulled into the Avenue Bar and Grill. "I told you I didn't want a drink. I got to walk home." "I'll give you a lift. You know we are just work buddies out to put down a couple of cold ones," Johnson argued in his defense. The car pulled into the

gravel parking lot. Lee gave a loud sigh as he stepped out slamming the car door behind him.

They both ordered the Hangover a popular Ham Bacon Fried Egg combination. Lee settled for a glass of Bud Lite although he had an unopened bottled of Two-Hearted Ale in his parka pocket and his liter of Mountain Dew in the other. Johnson went directly for Absolut Vodka selecting various combinations of mix. Lee sighed a few times and then continued. "It all started around Bryon. Hemmingway had told Uncle Tyler that he would treat the car as a luxury car, which it was and that he could count on it being in brand new condition when he picked it up. Things were going well until he tried the new push button door locks. They worked. He pressed them again and they didn't. He reached inside to pull the handle and it was locked in place.

Now for an 18 year old to get himself in something like this was something he hadn't bargained for. Finding someone in Bryon to talk to in a conversation that led mysteriously to talking about a buried pirate ship he was directed to Durand to an Iron Horse Pub that had a mechanic there who doubled as a bar tender. Hemmingway climbed in the open window and fell into the front seat shoulder first. Starting the car he drove closer and closer to his first drink.

Hemmingway walked in the Iron Horse slowly, having never been in a bar, pub, or tavern. He was amazed at how many glass bottles were lined up on shelves on the wall. It was dark as well. He nearly tripped until his eyes adjusted."

"I'll have another with Orange Juice," the Sergeant blurted out. He was told you want to see Lyle from Lansing," Ryan Lee continued. "This needs some explaining because Lyle was actually from Virginia and he just went by Lyle from Lansing to avoid something that Hemmingway never learned about. He did ask once and Lyle from Lansing replied "you will never learn what you don't want to know." "

Officer Lee hadn't touched his Bud Lite and Sergeant Johnson was already on his fifth glass of Vodka. "You are listening aren't you," Ryan asked. Sergeant Jones Johnson just nodded with a sedated smile. Officer Lee looked the place over and reached in his parka for the liter of Mountain Dew while putting it and his head under the cover of parka he took a ten second swig.

Screwing the cap back on, he continued, "Now Lyle said that he thought it was a spring come loose or something. Mentioning how stupid it was to have locks on cars in a place like Michigan where no one steals anything. Hemmingway waited for Lyle to get the chance to come outside and check out the predicament. Lyle offered a drink and Hemmingway held his hand up saying he was only 18 in which time Lyle told those at the cheerless bar "I'll be back," and went outside.

"This must be that 18 horsepower valve-in-head that I read about in the news. 18 horses for a snotty nose kid of 18. Where did you come upon this son?" Hemmingway explained about Uncle Tyler and Kansas City and his driving task up to Waloon Lake. Lyle remarked at his displeasure at thinking having 18 horses would be easier than having something that quits working. "Son, if you had 18 horses and one of them wasn't working you could just shoot the animal and get another. This could take me a while. Have you ever been fishing?"

Hemmingway explained that he had been fishing as long as he had been brushing his teeth which reminded him of the fact that he hadn't brought a toothbrush. Lyle said "I've got a fly rod but anything will work. The river down there has small and large mouth bass, just like people, Pike, Catfish, Suckers, we got them all. "I've never fished for suckers before," Hemmingway replied.

Within two minutes young Hemmingway was heading right to the banks of the Shiawassee carrying his borrowed fishing supplies and some flies. He opened the angler's Creel and saw that Lyle from Lansing had a bottle of grain alcohol on the bottom. It must be for cleaning something Hemmingway thought. Walking straight to the middle of the river the boy was amazed that it wasn't any more than two feet deep.

“Hey, are you listening?” Sergeant Johnson held up one finger and the bar tender filled his glass. Officer Lee shook his head and took another large sip of Mountain Dew and continued.

“Now it comes to be that Hemingway is on that river for four hours. He will not come back and show Lyle from Lansing who is from Virginia that he can’t fish a river as calm as the Shiawassee.

Just about that time he goes to sit on the bank. He’s cold and exhausted, like I am when I’m walking home from the precinct, when he looks in the Creel again. There it is a bottle of alcohol. He would have started drinking right then and there when he saw something glittering down the river. It was five young girls in white dresses. They were fishing. He got back in the water and started walking downstream towards them.

It was getting cold for September and he couldn’t feel his legs from the knee down and his feet could have dropped off somewhere...he wouldn’t have known it. It’s then that he saw Tarpon. The five girls had a bag of crabs on their shoulders and were tossing the live bait in the river and the big fish were practically jumping up to take it out of their hands. Why Lyle hadn’t mentioned this was beyond the boy’s imagination.

Hemingway had read about Tarpon and he knew that they belonged in Key West not on the Shiawassee. Then he noticed the girls all had canes as they felt their way back to the riverbank. They were blind. Young Hemingway walked even faster to the spot of his fishing vision and when he arrived he was standing in two feet of water. Exhausted from walking on the murky river bottom he went to the bank and sat down opening the Creel and took out the fateful bottle that changed his life.

When he got back to the Iron Horse Lyle from Lansing did not ask about his fishing at all. “Hell, I don’t know,” he said. “Let the owner figure it out.” So the young intoxicated boy fell through the open window onto the driver’s seat and headed north to Petoskey.”

“You don’t say,” was all that the Sergeant could muster. “If you wanna drive so bad drive me home,” Johnson said as he fumbled for his keys and

dropped them on the bar in front of Officer Ryan Lee. “Just pick me up for work in the morning or I’ll kill you.” Johnson was helped to the door of his mobile home and must have fallen when he was inside because Officer Lee heard the noise as he eagerly went to the squad car. He turned on the lights for a brief second and smiled with great satisfaction.

Before calling it a night Lee drove down Main Street and made it up to Juddville Road where he checked the out of the hole acceleration. He then went to the Bartholomew Dawdle Memorial Cross and stood there looking at “Coming Soon: Future home of Burger Girl Restaurantj.” He took some sips of Mountain Dew, reached in his parka and a bottle of Two Hearted Ale was placed under the little wooden white cross.

I haven’t checked but I believe that bottle of ale is still there, Burger Girl never did come to Shiawassee County and Officer Ryan Lee is still walking to and from work.