

A Shallow River of Mercy

by

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“I shall tell you a great secret, my friend. Do not wait for the last judgment. It takes place every day.”

—Albert Camus, *La Chute*

To Earl and Margaret and precious memories

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THE MAN SWUNG down from the high cab, on the passenger side, careful to keep a tight grip on the paper bag he carried in his right hand. His legs were stiff from the long ride and sharp pain shot through his bad knee as he dropped onto the hard surface of the potholed gravel parking lot. He waved goodbye with his free hand and shouted his thanks to the driver, hoping to make himself heard over the noisy clatter of the idling diesel engine, then covered his mouth and nose to protect against the swirl of choking dust and exhaust fumes left by the truck as it lumbered back onto the highway interchange.

The bone-chilling cold of an early Michigan winter cut through the man's light jacket and stung the exposed skin of his face and hands. The man, whose name was Ernst Kohl, was tall and thin and walked with a slight limp. His breath left little clouds of vapor in the frigid night air. He hurried toward the truck stop's restaurant, identified in large red neon lettering as the Purple Onion Grill. A smaller, flashing blue sign in a front window said "Breakfast any time." Breakfast was of no particular interest just now, but the grill would be warm. He pushed open the front door and went in, unsure what to expect.

The dining room was dimly lit. An Italian movie with subtitles played on a wide-screen television set mounted on one wall, its sound muted. Kohl paused and looked about the room, then made his way somewhat hesitantly to the back and took a seat on a round, padded stool and stowed the paper bag on the floor between his feet. He rubbed his hands together to combat the cold and leaned forward with his elbows on the worn Formica counter.

A lone fry-cook seared hamburger patties on the griddle and didn't look at him at first, and then when he did he said, "They let you out, Kohl? It's been a few years, ain't it?"

"Yeah," Kohl said, "they let me out and it's been a few years. You goin' to get me something or not?"

The fry-cook waved off his question with a blackened metal spatula. "Hold your horses," he grumbled. "I ain't got but two hands. Anyway, whadaya want?"

Kohl shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know," he said. "Anything that's hot."

"Coffee's hot. Want some?"

"Yeah, sure. Give me a cup of coffee."

"You want something to eat?"

"That meat smells good."

The fry-cook laughed. He was a fat man and his laugh rumbled up from his big belly, rolled across the griddle against the stainless steel splash panel, and bounced back toward the seated customer. "Bet anything I make for you's better than what you been used to," he said. "Or maybe they put a little prime rib on the menu up there and I never heard about it."

Kohl ignored the sarcastic remark. He didn't say anything until the fat man set a cup and saucer in front of him and filled the cup with coffee. "Thanks," he mumbled then, and went about adding sugar and an artificial creamer to the dark brew and stirring vigorously with a

spoon. The coffee was hot and it tasted good. He drank the whole cupful and looked back at the fry-cook and pushed his cup and saucer forward.

“Want some more?” the fry-cook asked.

“Yeah, I could use another cup. Do I know you?”

“You used to. I’m Danny Connor.”

“It’s been twenty years, Danny.”

“If you say so.” Danny Connor poured more coffee. “I’ll fix you a hamburger, on the house. Soon as I take care of them truckers.” He motioned with a nod of his head toward two men at a table near the front door. “One of ’em’s my buddy, Tay.”

Danny Connor carried hamburgers to the two truckers and poured more coffee for them. Kohl turned and watched. One of the truckers, a husky black man with a merry expression on his face and a wide smile, shook the fry-cook’s hand and commenced an animated conversation. Danny Connor quaked with laughter, but motioned toward the back as if saying he had to get back to work. He was still laughing when he paused beside a tired-looking old man who sat alone at a table alongside the wall and studied a bowl of chili as if uncertain it was fit to eat. The old man looked up and shook his head no, and Danny hurried back to his station at the griddle. He finished cooking Kohl’s hamburger and brought it on a wide white china platter with stacks of French fries and onion rings and stood in front of Kohl to see if he wanted anything else.

“This looks real good,” Kohl said. “Sorry I didn’t recognize you.”

“Forget it. I’m twenty years older and a hundred pounds or so bigger than I was the last time you saw me. Anybody know you’re coming?”

“Nobody left to tell,” Kohl said. “Leastwise nobody who’d care.”

“You goin’ back to the old home place out on Old Church Road?”

“I’ll go check it out and see what happens.”

Kohl had never known Danny Connor well. He remembered when they both went to the same high school and Danny played football and Kohl wanted to play but wasn’t good enough. Kohl’s mother was still alive then. He was disappointed when he didn’t make the team and needed her sympathy, but she said it was just as well because if he played football he’d probably go around the rest of his life on gimpy knees. Too high a price to pay for a few years of sport, in her opinion. She wanted him to work on his studies and someday go to college and maybe be a businessman. He could be in insurance, she said, or run a hardware store. Something respectable.

In one of the more painful ironies of his life, he ended up with a gimpy knee suffered in a far less honorable activity than football. His mother never knew.

Kohl was two years out of high school when he got in trouble and broke his mother’s heart. Since then he’d been in prison, his life one of misery and guilt and self-recriminations and perpetual mental visions of something dark and evil, and now he felt like an old man.

“How ’bout you?” he inquired of Danny Connor. “You got a family?”

“Wife and five kids.”

Kohl made a clicking sound with his tongue but said nothing. He was in no mood to hear about Danny Connor's children, or complaints about his wife. He had no interest in problems that were not his own.

He drizzled a thin swath of catsup over the fries on his platter and ate in silence. He devoured the hamburger and onion rings and dredged the last smear of catsup from his plate with the final spike of fried potato. The food was good. Or maybe it just tasted better because this was his first meal as a free man in a very long time.

Danny Connor turned to face him, his back to the griddle.

"I suppose you know about Angie?" Danny Connor said.

"No, and I don't care to know. Whatever it is, it's nothing to me."

"Sorry. I just thought—"

"Look, if you've got something to say, spit it out and be done with it."

Danny Connor raised a hand, palm toward Kohl. "Okay. No big deal. I was going to tell you she moved out East somewhere, is all."

"Like I said, it's nothing to me."

"Well, just forget I brought it up, then."

More truckers came and went, keeping Danny Connor busy. Kohl picked up the paper bag and went to the men's room. When he'd finished there, he took a seat in a booth near the front of the dining room next to a window and opened the shade so he could see out. Ghostly white lights on tall aluminum poles lit up the parking lot.

Beyond the lighted area, a steady parade of traffic slid by on the interstate highway. He was awed by the sheer number of trucks, which formed an endless parade, one close behind the other. What would it be like to drive one of those powerful machines and haul goods from coast to coast or maybe down to Mexico? The freedom to travel hundreds or even thousands of miles over the open road should make anyone happy.

He wondered about the truck driver who had given him a ride and wished he'd learned more about the man. The truck driver didn't talk much, though, and Kohl wasn't one to ask a lot of questions.

There were cars on the highway, too, and in his mind's eye he pictured families on their way to Detroit or maybe the Upper Peninsula. It felt good to see people on the move—a gratifying view of ordinary people doing ordinary things that had been denied him for half his life.

And he wondered about Angie. For twenty years he had wanted to put her out of his mind forever and had hoped that passing time would let him forget. He had hoped in vain. Searing memories still pushed their way into his consciousness much too often, and the instant Danny Connor brought up her name his senses had come alive with the same raw images, the same sounds, the same smells, the same terror and confusion he had experienced that balmy evening two decades past.

The sky finally began to brighten on the eastern horizon. Kohl welcomed the sight. The depressing darkness soon would give way to sunshine.

Danny Connor's reflection in the windowpane warned that the fry-cook was coming toward him. Kohl was grateful for that; people slipping up from behind made him nervous. He never liked to be taken by surprise. He turned his back to the window to face the man who, so far, was his only new connection to the once-familiar world he had come back to.

"I'll be leaving in a minute," Danny Connor said. "Anything more I can do for you before the new guy and the girls come on at six o'clock?"

"I don't need anything else."

"Look, Kohl, I don't hold grudges, and as far as I'm concerned you're just as good now as anybody else that sets foot in here. You paid your price. But don't expect everybody to welcome you back with open arms. Not after what you done."

Kohl looked him in the eyes. "Yeah, well," he said, "they can take me or leave me. I'm not going to lose any sleep over it."

Danny Connor stood waiting, as if he expected Kohl to say more. After a moment of awkward silence, he turned and went back behind the counter and began scraping grease from the griddle. Kohl kept on looking out front, toward the highway. He didn't see Danny Connor leave and he didn't notice the new cook who replaced him and the two waitresses beginning their shift because they all came and went through the back door.

He had lied to Danny Connor. He hoped desperately to be accepted by the people here, the only home he'd ever known. He was not an evil person. He had not intended to do what he did. People would understand, if only he could tell the full story. All he asked was a chance to prove himself, to find a way to make a living and live out his life without being judged on his past. He did not see this as an unreasonable thing to ask.

Kohl was trying to picture Angie as she might look today when one of the waitresses approached, pad in hand and a stub of a pencil poised to write down his order. She was plain-looking and no longer young, but it felt good to have a woman close and he didn't notice her appearance. He felt guilty sitting at one of her tables with nothing in hand and, even though he really didn't want anything more, asked for coffee and a donut.

"I'll be right back with that," the waitress promised, and offered a quick smile. Maybe the smile was forced, an obligatory expression that was part of her routine to make customers feel welcome, but he didn't care. It was a sweet smile and he felt lucky she had come to take his order. Momentarily, at least, he had stopped thinking about Angie.

The waitress returned promptly and put a cup of steaming coffee on the table and then a donut, all alone on a large plate, along with silverware rolled in a paper napkin. The coffee smelled good and so did she. Her scent carried a subtle hint of something out of his past but he didn't remember what it was. Flowers his mother used to grow? Or maybe just the scent of a woman. It had been a very long time since he had experienced either. He wished he could keep this woman close.

She took his money and hurried toward the back of the room. He watched her as she walked away. Their encounter had been brief, but he felt an inexplicable sensation that here was a kindred spirit. If there was a single person in the whole world who cared to listen to his story,

who possibly could understand, this waitress might be the one. He wanted her to sit across from him and talk about things she felt were important and listen as he told her how he wanted to make the most of his life now and give people reason to forget his past.

Kohl never had considered himself an optimist. But unless all the fates were working against him, he believed this would happen. Not today, maybe not anytime soon, but it would happen. He would tell this woman and she would understand. The mere fact that this was possible was in itself remarkable to him.

He took a bite of the donut and was about to sip from the cup of hot coffee when he saw the plain black Dodge sedan with a star on the door turn off the highway and charge into the parking lot. The low morning sun glinted off its windshield as it crunched to a stop in a no-parking space beside the front door. The man who got out of the car was young and overweight, dressed in a uniform that was too tight, and wore a wide leather belt around his middle that anchored a holstered handgun. He stuffed a nightstick into a loop on the belt as he walked.

The man pulled his hat on tightly as he entered the grill, looking about warily. He saw Kohl, glanced down at something in the palm of his hand, then walked directly to the booth where Kohl was seated.

“Somebody told me you were here,” he said curtly. “You got business in this town, Kohl?”

“I live here.”

“Not for the last twenty years, you haven’t. We don’t like riffraff around here. Why don’t you just get on down south a ways while you’re on the move and let the Indiana authorities keep track of you?”

“I’m paroled in the state of Michigan. But you know that.”

The young cop slid into the booth opposite Kohl. He turned his palm upright so that Kohl could see the photograph he held, shoving it forward as if it needed to be seen up close. “Pretty good likeness,” he said. “See, the fellows up at the pen send us a heads-up when scumbags like you are turned out. Complete with their latest picture. Given how good they treat you up there, I’m surprised it’s not in color. This one doesn’t do justice to your baby-blue eyes.”

Kohl sat stoically. “You got a complaint on me or something?” he asked flatly.

“We don’t need a complaint, Kohl. Look at this badge and check my nametag real close. I’m Deputy Scott Sobeski from the county sheriff’s department and you’re going to get to know my face good because I’ll be on your ass as long as you insist on staying around here. You as much as jaywalk or spit on the sidewalk and I’ll have you back behind bars in the blink of an eye. Have I made myself clear?”

“Yeah. You talk real good—for a cop.”

“How long do you think you’ll make it on the outside, Kohl? That smart mouth will get you in trouble real fast. People around here have long memories. You’re going to catch a lot of flak, and sooner or later you’ll fight back. That’ll land you right back in prison. You’d come out way ahead by hanging your hat somewhere else.”

“You got any more news for me, Deputy Scott Sobeski?”

“Just this bit of advice: I wouldn’t be caught in the dark all by myself if I was you. Some nights it’s just not safe out there.”

The deputy slid from his seat and stood over Kohl, contempt in his eyes. “And one other thing,” he said in a low voice, “if I was you I’d stay away from that gypsy waitress. She’s got plenty of trouble of her own.”

The deputy stalked out of the building and, back in his patrol car, roared out of the parking lot in a shower of dust and flying gravel. Kohl watched until the car disappeared around a corner, never changing expression. Twenty years in the state penitentiary had taught him not to show emotion. On the inside, though, he seethed with anger. He’d paid the price for what he did and no man could be more sorry nor carry a stronger sense of guilt. He remembered this town as a place with decent people who could forgive even if they couldn’t forget. Had it changed that much? Or maybe he had been wrong all along.