

A Greyhound Pass

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SHE HAS WORKED as a waitress for as long as she can remember. It is all she knows how to be. Coffee flows through her veins, ketchup drives her heart, the smell of fried onions fires her brain.

Betty-Jo was just sixteen when Mr Simms built The Coyote Diner on the edge of town, where Main Street seamlessly transforms into Route 58. The town was small and perpetually covered with a thin layer of pale desert dust, as if it had been kept in storage for a long, long time. There was one bar on the outskirts, frequented by drunks and farm-hands, and no place for kids or women. The excitement amongst the bored backyard teenagers grew with the building site, as out-of-town workmen levelled the one-pump gas station and erected eatery Eden. The kids watched its progress from porches and push-bikes, standing in huddles to gawp at the passing trucks and rising walls and to speculate on how the place would look when it was finished. It was 1962, and those workmen left behind more than just a building; they left the tiny dirt-track town the much needed hope of rock 'n' roll glamour and more than one illegitimate child.

Betty-Jo went to see Mr Simms before the work was completed, the main shell having been constructed but the inside not yet beautified. She peered through the glass door, still with its protective plastic sheen, and watched him scan the local paper and slurp back coffee. He was a big, grey-haired Texan,

complete with the requisite Stetson and spurs, even though his Chevrolet Impala was parked outside.

Men were a mystery to Betty-Jo. Her Daddy had left when she was nine – preferring hard liquor and gambling to providing for a family – and then it was just her and her Momma, who spent her life sitting silently on the porch in her rocking-chair mending the town’s clothes for a meagre living. From this spot Betty-Jo’s Momma squinted at the desert, which stretched out between the peaks that punctuated the town, as if she were waiting for somebody to ride over the horizon. Somebody she knew deep down would never come. Money was tight. Sometimes Betty-Jo dreamt of going to Vegas and winning big on the gaming tables she’d seen in the movies so that she and her Momma wouldn’t want for anything. Whenever she mentioned this, her Momma would reply that money was better when it was earned and that Betty-Jo should concentrate on her studies instead of spending her time day-dreaming about things she’d never have. Betty-Jo never was one for schooling. Her Momma was right; she did spend most of her time in the classroom gazing out of the window, the teacher’s words lost in the mist of her daydreams. She wouldn’t ever be college material, but she had the savvy to walk up to The Coyote’s door, before any of the other girls in town, and ask for a job. She stood a good while at that door before Mr Simms got the feeling he was being watched and spilled his coffee on himself as he started up and beckoned her in. As soon as she stepped over the threshold she knew she belonged.

In 1962 The Coyote seated a hundred and fifty. It had the smooth chrome lines of an express train complemented by deep, red, leather booths and bar stools. Each table had a mini jukebox, ensuring that the music was always on. When Betty-Jo arrived for her first day, in her short pink uniform and regulation lipstick, The Tornados blasted through the outdoor speakers and grease monkeys in newly pressed overalls tuned up cars on the parking lot. They stopped and whistled as she passed and she felt more like she was in an Elvis movie than starting work in her hometown.

In the back room, under a fog of competing perfume, the

girls fixed their make-up and hair for the grand opening. Betty-Jo knew a few of them – Cherry, Marlene – but mostly they were from out-of-town, and Betty-Jo blushed with pride when they complimented her on her legs as she tied the laces of her roller skates. They became the sisters she never had and Chet, the grill cook with movie-star looks, became her first husband, though none of them knew what they would mean to each other on that first day. Back then, they shared an unconscious immortality, certain only that the next day would be better than the last.

The Coyote's fame spread. The last stop before the desert, it drew customers from far and wide on their way to the natural wonders of the valley. It was also the place to hang out if you were young and looking for love. Betty-Jo was its star, a whizz on roller-skates, Mr Simms' favourite girl, popular with customers and co-workers alike. It was no wonder; she was very striking, tall and thin with the friendliest of ice-cream smiles. Her hair flowed in unruly auburn curls that kept coming loose from the bobby pins she used to keep them up. She considered it her best feature, even if it did smell of burger grease.

All that was nearly fifty years ago; and on almost every day of the intervening years – barring the few taken for funerals, childbirth and holidays – Betty-Jo has looked out across the parking lot to the desert at sunset. There is a particular moment she likes best, when dusk begins to dissolve into night and the sun tucks itself beneath the covers of the horizon. She always takes a minute to stand and watch its progress, awestruck as the orange light casts lengthening cactus shadows across the plain. The Coyote's vast windows give her the full Panavision experience. In these moments, she feels at one with the world. Today is the last day she will witness this spectacle as a waitress and she has a lump in her throat as she watches a lone car move slowly away toward the infinite.

From her first day at The Coyote, Betty-Jo remembered everybody's name. It came naturally to her, as if the brainpower needed to retain all the arithmetic and fancy words in school was just waiting for a purpose. She added up cheques in her head and

remembered the favourite dishes of her customers, even if they had only visited once or twice. If folks were new to town she greeted them warmly as they settled into a booth and made sure to ask how they were doing. Sometimes it was hard. Sometimes her heart felt like it would break. In her time at The Coyote, she has gone through two husbands and her fair share of lovers. Chet ran off with another waitress after ten years together. Her second husband, a refined older man named Mitch, died of lung cancer a few years after they wed. Both left her a son apiece, Eddie and little Malcolm. Even when they were babies she managed to work full time, night shifts and afternoons, leaving them with their grandma until they were old enough for school. Later, they came to the diner after class and Mr Simms always gave them a jawbreaker while they picked something from the menu for supper and did their homework in the back room. Mr Simms was a sympathetic boss, more like a granddaddy to her boys. He said they were as cute as pie with their mother's red hair and Opie freckles and he taught them their first magic tricks, and then poker, over the counter as Betty-Jo worked.

Malcolm was killed in Iraq. He was twenty-nine. They flew him home in a coffin wrapped in the stars and stripes. The army presented her with the flag at the funeral. A young man with a straight back and a square jaw placed it on her upturned hands and then saluted her. She had no tears left to cry. She keeps Malcolm's flag folded in her dresser drawer, out of sight but never quite out of mind.

Eddie didn't cope too well. He got deep into drugs, and the crimes that go with them, and ended up with a fifteen year prison sentence for armed robbery. Neither son had married. There are no grand-kiddies to dote on, not yet, and not without considerable luck. Eddie isn't young anymore; his red hair was shaved to the skin last time she visited and his face was puffy and grey. Betty-Jo wishes she could visit him more often but he's in a cross-state penitentiary and the bus fare is more than she can afford. That's her business though. The customers don't need to know about her personal dramas. For them, she has only a smile and a few words of encouragement when it looks like they might be suffering.

In the 1970s the music changed. Approaching thirty, Betty-Jo adapted her roller-skating technique, swishing in time to heavy disco beats with a tray poised preternaturally on one hand. The diner still buzzed and Betty-Jo still wore her smile. Most of the original Coyote girls had left, married or gone South to seek fame and fortune. Betty-Jo was older than the new girls and more like a mother than a sister. She gave them advice when they had man-trouble – God knows she'd had enough herself – and provided a shoulder to cry on when they needed it. Mr Simms looked after her, made sure she was eating right and had enough shifts to pay the rent. She thought of him as the father she never had, a bond unspoken but acknowledged in the cheery '*mornin, how are you?*' they exchanged each day. When Betty-Jo's momma passed he paid for the funeral and afterwards sat with her until dawn sharing bourbon and memories.

Another decade passed under the unforgiving desert sun and Betty-Jo's skin began to wrinkle. She had good genes but the laughter lines ran deep turning her mouth down at the edges so, unless she was fully smiling, she carried an air of sadness about her. She still loved her job, though it wasn't the same after Mr Simms had his heart attack. Right there in the spot she'd first seen him, almost thirty years to the day. He slumped to the floor and his coffee spilled on the table, seeping into his newspaper and blurring all the stories into one. The Coyote passed to a nephew, who never came near, and the management of the place was taken over by a young man called Gregory, who had a sour face and a silent manner. A Starbucks opened on Main Street and a drive-thru McDonald's across the road. People wanted their food fast. Custom dwindled quickly and within a year of Mr Simms death half of the booth space in The Coyote was given over to slot machines. The music was turned way down.

Today, Betty-Jo shows her replacement the ropes. Carmine is her name; it doesn't suit her. She is a tiny, mousy thing with glasses and acne, just out of school. She has to be shown how the staff lockers work several times; God knows how she'll cope

out front, but that's not Betty-Jo's problem anymore. At least the roller-skates have long been replaced by sensible sneakers, rubber-soled so as not to mark the floor. As Carmine stows her outdoor shoes in her locker, Betty-Jo looks at herself in the back room mirror. She smooths her hands over her belly, noting how her uniform stretches across her bulging middle, and then touches the tight grey perm peeking from under her hat. The auburn curls are gone. For some time now she has been squinting at her order pad through bi-focal lenses. Her smile is the same though, a little puckered around the edges maybe, but still as radiant as a desert morning.

Betty-Jo's last order is a rush. At six-thirty the door is opened by a stranger wearing blue jeans and a pressed white shirt. She saw his pick up drive in from the valley, sunlight reflecting off the wing mirrors like fallen stars. It's unusual to see an unfamiliar face at The Coyote these days. He carries a Stetson and, though he bears no physical resemblance to Mr Simms (he's too short and dark), he reminds Betty-Jo a great deal of her former boss; perhaps it's his soft Texan accent and twinkling eyes. He orders coffee and blueberry pancakes with canned cream and as she pours Betty-Jo asks on the off chance if he is related to Mr Simms. *Wouldn't that be something on my last day?* She says. But the stranger smiles and tells her he's just passing through and there's no connection at all. Betty-Jo is as attentive as ever but her co-workers spring a Happy Retirement cake on her so she doesn't have as much time to talk to him as she would like. Gregory – now middle-aged but no more communicative – makes a short embarrassed speech about her being their longest serving employee. There is applause and tears and they present her with their gift – a china model of a cowgirl riding bare-back. It's pretty, hand-painted, with fine detail on the long red curls sticking out under the cowgirl's hat. Perhaps they thought it looked like she did in the old photographs that now adorn The Coyote's walls. It's a lovely gift, planned, thoughtful and completely useless. Betty-Jo hides her disappointment under her usual enormous smile. A Greyhound pass was what she wanted, so she could visit Eddie more often. She was sure she had dropped enough hints.

After the party, she places her cowgirl safely under the counter and insists on clearing her last table. The Texan is long gone. He smiled and tipped his hat to her during the celebrations. She watched him walk to his car as the waitresses set off party poppers and sang 'For She's A Jolly Good Fellow'. Betty-Jo pockets his tip without looking at it, assuming from his smile that it is a more than generous note. She goes out for a farewell beer with her colleagues, knowing she will see them rarely. She doesn't think she could bear to come back as a customer. The Coyote is as much her diner as it is anyone's; it wouldn't be right to be waited on. It is only when she is home, sitting alone in front of the TV rubbing her stockinged feet, that she remembers the tip. She sits up and fishes into her coverall pocket. She is surprised to find that the folded paper in her palm isn't the twenty dollar bill she was expecting but a lottery ticket for that night's county draw. She thinks about her momma, sitting on the porch mending clothes, telling her that money is better when it's earned. Betty-Jo remembers her teenage dream of winning big in Vegas, a city her momma never got to visit. A smile crosses her lips as she reaches for the TV remote and changes the channel just in time to catch the jackpot draw.