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ad he been the sort to decorate his duffel with gaudy stick-on

travel decals, it might have been clear at first glance that Nick had been around, that he possessed what amounted to a long distance trucker's familiarity with the American landscape. on this foggy September morning, however, Longview was entirely new to him, as Sacramento had once been, and Nashville and Chicago and Mobile before that. He had journeyed to those locations as he came now to us. each locale had once been a pushpin on the map of his next best chance.

"Anything can happen" had been his operative outlook upon arrival in all those spots, yet when all was said and done, when the job had run its course and nothing else could keep him there, it was his departure that proved to be the signature feature of his stay. "Move on" is what he'd always told himself when things hadn't turned out. Move on and try your luck anew. Move on, be clear, stay strong. Anything can happen. Like the catchy refrain of a lilting jukebox tune, such phrases had become the background music of his days, propping him up, at times moving him to song. He was in the habit of muttering pep talks to himself, a closet motivational speaker with a private audience of one.

Crossing the railroad overpass, Nick was soon in the center of our business district, gazing down Bluff Street towards High. It was a scene framed like a postcard, although not precisely the postcard that the Chamber of Commerce in their zeal to portray us as a thriving hub of enterprise might print up and distribute. The scruffy tan dog with protruding rib cage sniffing the gutter, no owner in sight, as if Longview was some forlorn Mexican pueblo. The solid stone Cheshire Building on High Street with its windows dust-smudged, even on the ground floor. The retail storefronts with hand-lettered placards advertising "Angela's Classic Cuts" and "Checks Cashed Here." The Riverview Tavern, smelling of varnished wood and last night's bourbon, open for business at 10 a.m. every day except Sunday.

Coming to Longview, Nick was entering a world tethered as much to the intractable past as to the jet stream of the future. of course, he would not have immediately recognized this, and why should he? Few enough of us did, and we had an excuse: we lived here and had no better perspective on our fragile circumstance than a polar bear on a melting ice flow. What Nick saw – and this said more about the depth of his floundering than it did our actual resources – was nothing less

than a land of opportunity. He had no choice.

There were, admittedly, some features about Longview that encouraged romanticizing. The view, particularly from the depot, was reminiscent of those meticulous model train setups with their cute compact houses along sloping hills carefully arranged to depict the countryside at its innocent and bucolic best. Our setting was one that a diligent Lionel hobbyist might have assembled: the depot, with “Longview” inscribed in gold lettering on a board bolted to the lamp post; the ticket office with its window half-open and the shape of a man inside; the sturdy iron bridge with “Class of 94” crudely painted on a buttress; the hillside dotted with miniature frame homes half hidden by the arching branches of tall shamrock-green trees; the length of track vanishing in the distance as it rounds the bend.

Situated on a thumb-shaped protrusion of fertile high ground overlooking the Ohio River, we were in a sense isolated by the river and protected by it. We were nearer to Pittsburgh than Cincinnati, but pretty far from any place you’d call cosmopolitan. We were not incontestably rural like the Dakotas, or antiquated and quaint like New England hamlets, or obstinately rugged like western logging towns. At the periphery of several minor media markets, we enjoyed divided loyalties when it came to pro sports teams, having no preordained affiliation. We could be, as viewers and consumers and fans, whoever we wanted to be. Or we could abstain entirely.

We certainly felt ourselves to be fully contemporary. Cable TV in most homes with a full complement of channels, strip mall out County 12 with a Wendy’s and Pizza Hut, a local Savings Bank taken over and renamed by Wachovia, kids taking drugs named for chemical compounds the police had never heard of, a shortage of qualified nurses at the Oak Cliff senior care facility. Yet with the exception of enhanced home entertainment opportunities and a few technological conveniences like ATM cards, we were largely unchanged, or so we liked to tell ourselves.

The Ohio Hotel was Nick’s first stop. He’d made a reservation before departing California, although there probably hadn’t been more than a day or two in the past twenty years when a reservation was necessary. His appointment at Made Right was not until 1 p.m. He had a few hours to rest up, even to prepare.

The hotel’s frosted glass double doors were open to the street. Like much of Longview, the Ohio had seen better days. The original hotel, built in 1889, had featured 46 rooms with a carved walnut staircase ascending from the airy, high-ceilinged lobby. It had been renowned throughout the region as a showplace for the radiance of the gaslight era. Swing bands from Cleveland and Louisville had performed on weekends. In the 1940’s, the central staircase had

been eliminated and the dining room with its colorful William Morris wallpaper patterns was now mainly a place to watch TV. In recent decades, the Ohio's clientele has been mostly a day-to-day bunch, salesmen and the not-yet-destitute. guests who weren't at the Riverview Tavern drinking to excess often congregated here late at night to glumly watch the Jay Leno show. We preferred the affable Leno, wringing his hands like a befuddled buddy, to his more caustic and urbane rival, David Letterman.

Nick plopped his duffel on the beige industrial carpeting. The lobby was silent except for the incessant rasping chatter from the tiny Panasonic that Gus Hoover kept behind the reservation desk. Gus rarely turned the TV off. He was watching Good Morning, America. President Clinton was concerned about the Balkans.

"How much for a room?"

Gus waited for the TV correspondent to conclude his summary of the President's dilemma, which had no easy way out. "By yourself?" he asked.

Nick tried a little joke. "Damn," he cursed, swiveling around in exaggerated surprise. "Where the heck did that woman disappear to now?"

Gus was not amused. "How many nights?"

"With a little luck, who knows?"

Gus plunked down a registration form on the Formica countertop. "Sure, mister. With a little luck you could be here forever. Like me."

Gus watched as Nick filled out the form.

"Don't get many Californians," Gus commented.

Nick smiled. "Can't imagine why."

Gus handed over the room key, affixed to a clunky plastic disk the size of a bar coaster. "Any, ah, help with your luggage?"

Nick gave a yank on the duffel strap and flipped it cavalierly atop his shoulder. Then he walked briskly, as briskly as he could, across the worn lobby carpeting and up the carpeted stairs.