

Night in the City Looks Pretty to Me

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Allison was trying to come up with a version of that old joke. A kangaroo or whatever walks into a bar and the bartender says, “Say, we don’t get many kangaroos in here.” But the only version of the joke Allison could think of for the stranger sitting at her bar, eating a steak and reading a book was, “Say, we don’t get many literates in here.” But that was maybe harsher than the town of Slick Rock deserved and even in the glittering cities Allison knew she over-idealized, most bars probably weren’t reading hotspots.

Anyway, if she tried that joke it would probably make the guy at the bar more self-conscious than he already was. He was shy, not saying much, smiling nice, not from around here for sure. Shane she decided to name him, after the mysterious stranger in that old western. Girl bartender’s instinct—for flirtation, trouble, both—she could tell Shane was watching her when he figured she wasn’t looking. Unlike Alan Ladd in the movie, this Shane wasn’t wearing a fancy fringed buckskin shirt. But his neat white shirt, with actual buttons on it, stood out in Slick Rock. Shane was what she thought of as city slender, cute in a quiet way. Not as beautiful as Alan Ladd, but then who is? If the stranger was going to be Shane, Allison was changing her name to Marian for the night, after the character Jean Arthur played in the movie.

Shane was very polite when he finished eating, arranged his silverware like a gentleman, piled the used paper napkins and curly foil butter packet tops neatly on the plate. He was probably more of a tipper than the usual in Slick Rock. The highest percentage tip Allison had ever gotten was from an Australian guy on his way to climb in the Mogollon mountains. He’d said in that jokey accent they have, “In Australia you don’t tip unless ya wanna sleep with the waitress,” then put down a 15-dollar tip on a 19-dollar

tab and looked winningly at her. She'd ignored him. She was pretty free and easy, but preferred a little more romantic chit-chat than that.

Shane got another Wild Turkey, asked Allison for change and went to look at the jukebox. The first song he played was that Jimmie Dale Gilmore song that starts Did you ever see Dallas from a DC-9 at night? / Well Dallas is a jewel, oh yeah, Dallas is a beautiful sight. Then he went to the 75-cent pool table, looked around to make sure no one else was looking to use it and settled in to play eight ball against himself.

Shane had left his book propped open on the bar. A novel called *Refracted City*. Allison had never heard of the title or author, but that was hardly a surprise. It's not like she got the *New York Times Book Review* and this wasn't the kind of thing the doublewide Slick Rock library was likely to spend budget and shelf space on. She leaned to read the excerpt on the back cover. It was that headlong young guy writing, made you wonder how they could even keep up with themselves. But it was edgy and city feeling and she liked that. Shane glanced over, saw her looking at the book and made a kind of be my guest motion. So she opened the book and read at it some more, between getting drinks.

Shane kept playing pool and feeding the jukebox. Songs like that Lucinda Williams one about the small town waitress who sells everything to move to the city and the Tompall Glaser version of "Streets of Baltimore". Glen, her boss, had gotten this new internet jukebox service. Instead of just the usual Nashville crap, you could find just about any song ever and Allison wondered if the Blue Dog Bar regulars had gotten so sick of hearing her moon on about moving to the city that they'd sent Shane in here to play every city lights song there was, just to rag her.

Around 9:00, when the last other patron had left, Shane asked, still shy, if she wanted him to go so she could close up. Allison told him Glen didn't like it if she closed early. Sometimes, even on a Tuesday night in Slick Rock, New Mexico, people showed up late, up to God knows what. About 9:30 Blue Dog wandered in, to mooch some food. Allison got him a couple of burgers and some fries, hold the trimmings, because what does a dog care about pickles and lettuce?

When Blue Dog was done eating he ambled over and put his paws up on the edge of the pool table, to watch the balls rolling around. Allison liked that Shane scratched Blue

Dog's head and didn't try to move him, even when he was in the way of a shot. She walked over with a couple glasses of that expensive Bookers bourbon Glen had gotten in for some rich hunter. Shane was leaning on the cue stick, looking down at the balls on the table like they were a long way off. She touched his arm to get his attention, handed him a glass of Bookers. "On the house," she said. "Better than that Wild Turkey you've been drinking, so as not to seem too stuck up for us hicks." She smiled and touched her glass to his, to make sure he didn't think she was being catty with that remark. She hoped Shane might be able to appreciate irony more than a lot of people around here.

He smiled back, looked her right in the eye for the first time, said, "Thanks."

She pulled three quarters out of her jeans pocket and with conscious drama slammed them down on the edge of the pool table. Shane didn't seem to know what that meant for a moment, but she could see him working it out, looking from the quarters, to the table coin-slot, to her.

"I'm not very good," he said and he wasn't. She beat him every game, but he didn't seem to mind and she appreciated that.

"What are you doing out here in the middle of nowhere?" she asked as she leaned to line up a shot, while Shane pretended he wasn't looking at the curve of her body. "Not even hunting season."

"Just seeing country," he said. He seemed bashful that he didn't have some more practical, less poetic answer.

"Seeing country?" she said. "Sounds like a line from a western. So you're just the mysterious stranger traveling around?"

"Not sure how mysterious I am. I don't mean to be."

"When you're Shane you don't have to try to be mysterious. It's just the way it is."

"Shane? That's a lot to live up to. My gunfighting skills are a little rusty. And I don't have a fringy leather shirt."

"I noticed about the shirt. But it's more about the coming into town and being something new for the homesteader's wives than it is the gunfighting. My name's Marian."

“Just like Jean Arthur in *Shane*.”

“Just like. Don’t go falling in love with me now.”

“If I recall the movie right, *Shane* falls pretty much in love with everybody in Marian’s family and everybody in the family falls in love with him.” He looked around at nobody but him, Allison and Blue Dog in the dim barroom. “Is Van Heflin going to come in and brood menacingly at me for chatting with his wife?”

“Afraid he never showed up in the first place to marry me. A few have tried. One of them keeps at it and I guess it’ll probably be him in the end.”

After Allison shooed Blue Dog outside and locked up, she and Shane walked down the empty highway through what there was of town, across the bridge, creek running loud with spring thaw, feeling their way toward the Wrangler Motel where Shane was staying. The moon wasn’t up and there were no lights on in town. The canyon was pretty narrow here, so the stars were just a bright band across the top of the sky. She took Shane’s arm, to make sure he didn’t fall off the road into the creek or something.

“Must be a change from the big city,” she said.

“How’d you know I’m from the city?”

“Seemed like a good guess. I’ve got this thing for city lights.”

“The movie, the bookstore or just the lights?”

She thought about dropping his arm, turning around and walking back to her car at the bar. But she guessed she’d started this whole allusion thing with the *Shane* stuff, so maybe she should give him a break, not assume he was mocking the dumb country girl for what she didn’t know. Maybe he thought she was better at this than she was. That would be kind of a compliment. “Remember,” she said, “I’m just the girl who’ll likely end up some homesteader’s wife. I wish there was more to me than that, but I’ve never heard of a movie called *City Lights*, never been in an actual bookstore and never seen any city lights for real.”

Shane must have felt her tenseness, because he dropped her arm, turned and put both hands soft on her shoulders. She could barely see his shape in the dark. He said, “Most people I know in New York wouldn’t know what I was talking about either. I do kind of chatter on.”

“You don’t seem that chatty to me so far.” She touched his invisible cheek. “So enlighten me.” She could feel his face crease as he smiled and she realized her pun. Maybe he was right and she was better at this than she thought.

“*City Lights* is a Charlie Chaplin movie,” he said. “And the name of a famous bookstore in San Francisco. I’ve never been in that store either. And honestly, much as I like New York, the lights can be a pain in the ass sometimes. You’re just trying to look out the window, see the night sky and there’s glare everywhere and red lights from a cop or ambulance flashing in your face.”

Allison felt his cheek slide against her palm as he tilted his head to look up at the stars above the canyon. “This is a pretty little place,” he said.

“It is,” she said. “You want it?”

“I don’t know what I’d do with it.”

As they came into his room he reached to turn on the lights. “No. Leave them,” she said, not wanting to see any more than she already had of the insides of Wrangler Motel rooms. She kissed him, moved them towards the bed.

The lovemaking was nice. Better than it probably should be for a Wrangler Motel shack-up. She’d thought Shane might be a little diffident, but he wasn’t. Wasn’t bossy either. He went down on her, something most of the cowboys around here didn’t seem to be able to imagine happening outside of a porn video. She liked the way he touched her, not just trying to get her revved up, but as if he actually liked exploring the whole body of her.

Later on when they were dozy, Shane reached his arm around and scooted her over so her head rested on his shoulder. His collarbone was sharp against her cheek. A coyote or something ran through the parking lot, triggering the motion sensor, so the pole light outside went on, shone through the thin brown curtains, turning the acoustical tile on the ceiling an even dingier yellow than it was.

When Shane’s breathing got even, she eased away and stood up. Hunting for her clothes on the dark floor, she kicked something, bent to feel the book he’d been reading at the bar, picked it up. He stirred and there was the shine of his eyes as he looked at her in the dim light.

“Well,” she said softly, weighing the book in her hand, “I’ve got cattle that need feeding.”

“No one’s ever said that to me before,” Shane said. He motioned at the book. “Keep it.”

“Thanks. I will. Don’t get much new out here.” She moved to where he lay, kissed him briefly.

He said, “There’s a card in there I was using for a bookmark. Has my email and phone number and non-Shane name and everything. Look me up if you’re ever in New York.”

“I will,” she said. “If I’m ever in New York. My non-Shane name is Allison.”

“Pleasure to meet you Allison. It’s a prettier name than Marian.”

“It’s the one I’ve got,” she said. As she opened the door, she reached over and turned off the poisonous old gas flame wall heater. “You’ve got to be careful sleeping with these,” she said, speaking toward the dim shape of him in the bed. “They suck all the air out of a room.”

She walked back to the bar parking lot, the town utterly still around her. By the weak dome light of her little Ford, she read the excerpt on the back of Shane’s book again.

Fucked up like this I can’t go back to Rachel’s, so not knowing what else to do I stay on the subway, standing at the front, watching the lights rush at me in the tunnel. When the train comes out of the ground, onto the Manhattan bridge, the whole skyline is blazing over the black river and it’s like I can see the light from every window spearing at me through the night, like the whole city is glowing and alive, just for me.

Allison cranked the Ford’s engine until it finally started, with a clatter of noisy valves. She locked it into second, keeping the revs up so the headlights wouldn’t dim, headed up the canyon. The road twisted with the creek, new buds on the aspens glinting red in the car light. She cranked down the window to feel the air, hear the sound of the creek over the rattle of engine. At the dirt road turn off toward her place she stayed on the county highway. There were no cattle left to feed, no particular reason to go home.

Where the road came out on the ridgetop, she pulled to the side, sat on the warm hood, listening to the engine ticking as it cooled, wrapped her arms around her chest for warmth.

East, below the ridge, flat desert and starry sky stretched to the horizon, not a light to be seen. She sat for a while, then went to the trunk, got the fifth of over-proof Jim Beam and a plastic thermos cup. She sat back on the hood, poured a slug of bourbon in the cup, sipped and watched the empty desert.

She thought about driving fast and wild down the switch back road to the bottom of the ridge, then going faster and faster on the straight desert highway, car rattling around her, until the glow of some city began to show in the distance. She remembered an old Chevron roadmap of California she'd found in her father's stuff after he died. There was a drawing on the cover of the map. Nighttime, high on a ridge, a long white convertible pulled to the side of the road, a man in a sport jacket leaning on the car, arms around a woman in a tight waisted dress, both of them gazing down at the beautiful lights of a city spread out below.

The gas gauge in the Ford was broken. But it was Tuesday and unless something different had happened, which it hadn't, the twenty-five dollars she put in every Monday to go from work to home and back would mean enough gas in the tank now to go 100, maybe 150 miles into the desert. Nowhere. She guessed everything in her cabin was worth something like six or seven hundred dollars, but who would buy it? She'd let the grazing lease go back to the Forest Service while her father sat on the porch and died, cattle sold off to pay doctor bills. No one was going to take the place off her hands for any reason she could see. There were the mineral rights, but there was nothing around here except granite. She'd seen pictures in magazines of granite counter tops, but she didn't think someone was going to pay money to dig rocks out of her meadow. She had 217 dollars in the bank account, maybe enough to get somewhere, but not enough to stay alive there until she got a waitressing job or something.

Two winters ago, she'd spent all she had to get down to Hobbs, by the Texas border, see if she could put together enough money to leave Slick Rock for good. A wildcat oil driller who'd known her father gave her a job, doing clerical stuff in the office. She'd earned a little and tried to save, but just getting by in an oil town had eaten up the money about as fast as it came in. In the end, too many wells had come up dry and the driller had shut down, owing everybody money, including her.

She'd never been much of anywhere, but even Allison had known that Hobbs had to be one of the ugliest places on earth. She remembered spending New Year's Eve in her room in the Scotsman Inn, bathroom sink full of ice and cheap beer, watching some movie about well-off kids trying to make it in Chicago. The glow out the motel room window had been the sulfur gleam of venting gas burning off refinery stacks, not any pretty city lights.

She leaned back against the windshield of the Ford and stared up at the same endless stars fading with dawn. There was a rose glint showing over the desert to the east, but that wasn't any city lights out there either, just another day coming. If she didn't have the gas or money to get anywhere, maybe she ought to just drive down the road toward the desert, then keep going straight at one of the switchbacks, fly out into all that open. She imagined the small puff of orange as her car exploded way down on the flat.

She hopped off the hood and got Shane's book off the front seat, found the card he'd told her was in there. She didn't look at the name or anything, just poured over-proof bourbon on it. She couldn't be bothered to buy cigarettes anymore, but there was still a lighter in her jacket pocket and she used it to ignite the whiskey-soaked card. It didn't burn as fiercely as she'd hoped. She dropped it when the flame was about to reach her fingers. It's pretty clear she's not going to be looking anybody up in New York City or anywhere like that.

Then she poured bourbon over the hood of the car and tried to light that, but beyond a couple of fizzling blue sparks, nothing happened. Bourbon hadn't done the paint job any good, but it wasn't much good already. Bottle in one hand, book in the other, walking on the double yellow in the middle of the road, she headed down toward the desert and the rising sun, taking occasional contemplative sips from the bottle.

After she'd walked about half a mile from her car, there was a dazzle of red and blue lights on the pavement in front of her. She looked over her shoulder to see the cop car coming slowly towards her, light bar flashing. Rick. She couldn't remember if she'd told Shane Rick's name last night, when she'd said she would probably end up with this one guy who kept on trying to get her to marry him. Rick had a good job with the state police and maybe if they got married, he would take Allison on vacation to LA or somewhere.

If they made it to San Francisco, she could look for that City Lights bookstore Shane had told her about. But likely once they were married, the babies would start coming and she and Rick would never get farther than Vegas. From what Allison had heard that was just the lights, no real city to go with them.

She stopped walking and turned around to face Rick's cop car. He killed the light bar so as not to blind her. He pulled alongside, said through the open passenger side window, "Saw your car back there. Figured if you're going to walk all the way down to the desert, I'd follow along behind, keep you from getting run over."

"Not a lot of traffic through here to worry about," Allison said. She put the bourbon and Shane's book on the cop car hood, leaned her arms on the windowsill to look in at Rick. "Still," she said, "that's awful considerate of you."

"Well mam, 'A Safer New Mexico' it says right there on that door you're leaning on."

"Does it? I never noticed." She considered standing back to look, see if she could make out the words in the rising light, but decided she was too tired for that.

"Rough night?" Rick asked.

Allison thought about that question. Rick probably didn't know about Shane last night, because he didn't spy on her, but for sure he knew guys like Shane happened. Rick didn't seem to mind the Shanes, not that it was his place to mind. She'd hooked up with Rick from time to time too, but he knew what that meant and what it didn't mean. It seemed kind of foolish for Rick to care so much about her when she kept telling him she didn't want to marry him. But he was for sure not a fool, so maybe it was just the way it was. She guessed Rick's love was imperturbable. No, that wasn't quite the word, but her powers of recall weren't at their best just now.

"Rough night?" she said. "Not really. I did try to burn my car."

"How come?"

"Thought it might make a pretty light for bit."

Rick thought about that. "Well," he said, "I've seen a few burning cars on this job. They can look pretty from way off. Not so much up close. And there's a nasty smell from all that burning plastic and tires and such."

“Yeah,” Allison said. “Where’s the romance in that? Anyway, it didn’t light. I think I might have gotten ripped off with this bottle of over-proof bourbon. It doesn’t seem to work as an accelerant.”

She turned to look at the half ball of red sun coming over the eastern horizon. One time on an internet map program she’d drawn a line straight east from Slick Rock. If you kept on going, didn’t deviate at all north or south, no matter what mountain or river or whatever you ran into, the first good sized town you’d hit would be Lubbock, which hardly seemed worth stopping for. Next real place would be Birmingham Alabama, then Atlanta. Atlanta at least was pretty big, but from what Allison could find online it didn’t seem to have much of a real city downtown to it. Maybe they’d never rebuilt after Sherman burned the place. West wasn’t much better. Besides Phoenix which didn’t appeal to her for more or less the same reasons as Atlanta, it was empty desert until the California suburbs and the Pacific Ocean. North and South? Forget it. Empty US then empty Canada or Mexico, until you hit the Arctic Ocean or the Gulf of California. So that was it for finding city lights along the cardinal directions from Slick Rock.

She got the bourbon bottle off the hood, took a sip, offered the bottle to Rick, who shook his head politely no. She tossed the bottle into the brush by the road, last of the whiskey arcing out in a brown glint. The bottle didn’t break, so she walked over and picked it up, came back to the car and handed it to Rick, who put it in a black garbage bag.

“The State of New Mexico appreciates your assistance in keeping our highways litter free,” Rick said. He looked at her with his quiet smile. He wasn’t wearing his hat and had a cute little tousle going on with his hair. It appeared he would be content to sit here for as long as she felt like leaning on his car.

“Implacable,” she said. “That’s the word I was looking for. You’re implacable.”

Rick thought about that. “I’ve probably been called worse,” he said.

It was driving her a little nuts, the way she felt like it was inevitable that someday she would give up and come around to saying alright to Rick. When she did, there would be no more Shanes, because when you’re married that just means you’re trashy and there would be no more mooning after city lights, because that would just be mean to Rick. The

way it felt like this was all just going to happen to her, no matter what she did, made her want to grab the cop car shotgun out of its clip on the dash, blow out the tires on Rick's car, blow a lot of little holes in the Safer New Mexico decal on his door. Not put any holes in Rick of course, just see his eyes get wide and shocked. Something different.

Instead she said, "Nothing wrong with being implacable. Just sometimes, it's so, I don't know, implacable. You know?"

"I believe I do," Rick said, smiling kind of sad. "Just don't know what I can do about it." He got out of the car, leaned against the hood and looked out at the new day's colors on the desert. "I imagine," he said, "I can be something of a burden. If you want me to never do anything again, except nod politely at you across the barroom, I'll do that." He turned to look at her. "No more cow eyes."

Allison laughed and God damn it if he hadn't done it to her again, reminded her why she liked him as much as she did and how stupid she probably was not to like him back as much as he liked her, instead of having her dreams all off in some imagined city of lights and people who read books on the subway.

"Cow eyes?" she said almost giggling. "If that's what you call making cow eyes, no wonder nobody wants to marry you. Those eyes are like twenty miles of hard shale road." She got serious and said, "I wouldn't like you to do that. To just treat me polite, as if you don't care. I'd understand if you did. I imagine I can be something of a burden too."

"Ah, hell," Rick said and for a moment there he almost did have cow eyes. "We've all got our foolish dreams."

But that's where he was wrong. Most people around here didn't bother to have foolish dreams, beyond maybe winning the Mega Millions. But it wasn't so easy being someone's dream. Maybe New York and Paris and cities like that found it hard being so many peoples' dreams too.

It was a wonder Rick had turned out to be so decent. Allison had known his father from in the bar and he'd been pretty thoroughly an asshole. One of those guys who's jolly one minute, then suddenly his eyes go mean and there's a broken beer bottle in his hand. Allison had no way of knowing and she'd never asked Rick, but she imagined his

father had been an even meaner bastard at home. Certainly Rick's mother looked a lot more chipper since her husband had rolled a tractor on himself four years ago. Rick's little brother ran the ranch now, but Rick felt like he had to be around for his mom and brother and even if he did agree to move to some city with Allison, it was hard to imagine him being who he was anywhere away from southwest New Mexico.

"It is a conundrum," Allison said.

"Yeah, it is." Rick looked at his watch. "But even out here in the back of the beyond we've got to at least pretend we're contributing to the economic life of this great nation. Much as I'd like to stay and chat forever, I've got to get working." He smiled, just a big goofy smile. "I suspect your skills at the moment are more attuned to vocabulary than driving slightly scorched old Fords. So maybe you'll let me drive you home. I can stop by later and run you back up here for your car before you need to get to work."

Allison nodded and touched Rick's arm, got in the passenger side of the cop car. She spent the day on the cabin porch, reading Shane's book and napping, until Rick came to take her to her car, then she drove down to another night at the Blue Dog bar. □