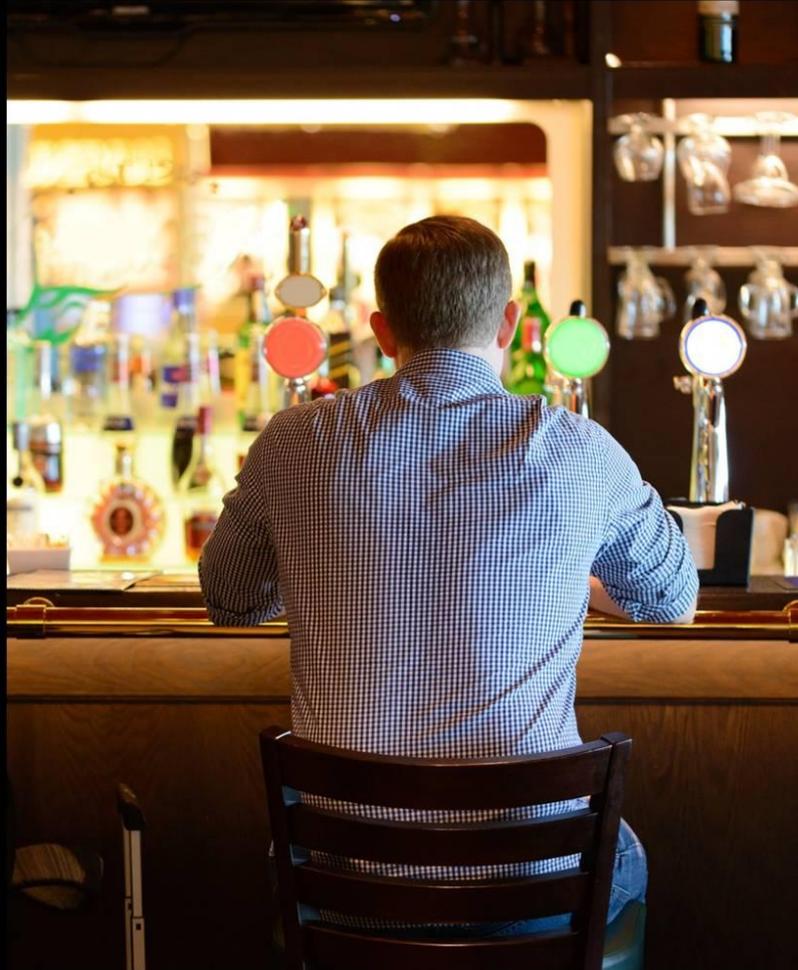


Lonesome Loser



a short story
by Brian McAleer

Poor, pathetic, Harry. When someone spends the better part of their life in pubs, telling tall tales that aren't really true for the sake of others, the truth will eventually catch up with them. But Harry was a little different, because he usually told the truth about his life, pouring it all out over an endless series of drinks to the one person who cared to listen. Harry started driving trucks at the age of 19 and for nearly twenty years he was still doing the only thing he could do well. Along one of his popular routes, Harry regularly stopped off at a little place in the La Trobe Valley, where he drank heavily and tried his best to fit in with the crowd of other truckers that frequented it. About once a week he visited the pub and in his early twenties, it was there he met two different people there that would play an important part in his life.

Harry first met Simon, a fellow truck driver who was just a little bit smarter and better at life than he was, and the two of them became mates straight away. Over a few beers they would swap stories from the road and share tips on how to make the most amount of money with the least amount of effort. Then Harry met Jane, a young, beautiful and exciting woman who called the same pub her home away from home. She dated the coolest, most handsome guys in that pub and when she was there was usually surrounded by a large group of people. Harry secretly liked Jane, and secretly wanted her. But he could never muster up the courage to tell her. That was fifteen years ago, and now Harry and Jane were good friends, and as for Simon, well, he was dead.

The new pub was visible now, and in a few moments they'd be in there, ready to drown their sorrows and talk about what had just been lost forever. Harry Furlong eagerly waited hitting the bar, to drink hard and fast and be in the right state of mind and ego to talk to Jane. He'd had so many conversations with this woman over the past fifteen years, and he liked it when it was just the two of them, and he especially like it when they were enclosed within the safe, comforting walls of a pub. Back down the quiet road they'd walked along was the cemetery Simon had just been buried at. Harry and Jane watched in despair as the former trucker was lowered into a deep, dirty hole, his body concealed in a long, wooden box. At this moment there was a gathering at Simon's parent's house for all who wished to attend, but Harry just couldn't face it. He just wanted to drink somewhere else, somewhere different and unknown to him; with Jane there by his side to do what she did best.

"I'll buy the first round" Jane said "One for me, one for you and one for Simon. And you can have his drink!"

This got a small smile out of Harry, the first in a week. Jane pushed open the front door entrance to the pub, revealing its insides. The two of them walked in, became silent and were immediately disappointed at what they saw. The Duke of Ronald Pub was a dusty and dimly lit place, even though it was a bright and sunny afternoon outside. The only natural light that seemed to make it inside was the taste of it that came in with them. Its bar stretched long ways from side to side, serviced by three sets of beers taps. Behind the bar was a mirror-wall, with glass shelves, displaying what looked like to Harry, probably every type of bottled beer in the country. The barman behind the bar and the only one on duty was a tall, stocky and serious looking guy. His square face and muscular body were as stiff as plank of wood. As Jane and Harry still stood at the entrance surveying the pub, giving it their own personal review, the barman stiffened up even more and continued his list of small, menial

jobs, offering them no greeting or acknowledgement. With unsatisfied looks on their faces, Harry and Jane stepped forward, each of them sitting on one of the wooden, circular stools at the bar.

The barman waited a few seconds then slowly walked over to the two customers, mumbling “What’ll it be?” His eyes were firmly fixed on Harry, their gaze narrow and full of suspicion. Harry didn’t notice.

“Glass of red wine for me” said Jane.

“Two pints of heavy” Harry said “one for me and one for my mate”.

Harry gave the barman a wry smile after that remark. Jane chuckled, but the barman showed no response. As he prepared the drinks, Harry and Jane observed the rest of the pub. It was surprisingly quiet for a large place, and a Saturday afternoon. At the far end of the long, wooden bar and to the right of Harry, sat a conservative looking man, wearing a t-shirt, jeans and reading a newspaper. He had a small glass of beer that he’d hardly touched; Harry saw that there were drops of moisture on the outside of the glass indicating it wasn’t fresh. To the left of Jane, at the other far end of the bar sat two middle-aged men, each with pints of beer and engaged in a quiet conversation. They were large and burly, with untamed hair and beards. *Maybe truckers?* Harry thought. Besides the main bar, there were several, empty booths situated along the walls of the pub. They had black-top tables, with soft seats covered in torn and faded material of green and red patches. In one of these booths sat an old man, staring into space vacantly, and nursing a glass of whiskey. Occasionally he would move his dreary eyes into his glass, staring into the brown liquid and ice. Harry guessed he was looking for his past.

“Dinghy little place isn’t?” Jane said to Harry, whispering it as the barman returned with the drinks.

“Yeah but It’ll do. Let’s drink” said Harry. He picked up his first pint and skulled the whole beer in one go. Jane watched in amusement for the eight or so seconds it took for the beer to gurgle down Harry’s throat, and then he slammed the empty pint glass down on the bar, causing his eyes to go watery and turn his face red.

“That one was for Simon! And this one” said Harry, picking up the second pint “is for me”. He gestures Jane for a ‘*Cheers*’ and she raises her wine glass.

“Cheers” they say together and the glasses gently collide. As they take their first sips, their eyes lock for a few seconds. While Harry takes just a small mouthful this time, he reminds himself again of how fortunate he is to be in the company of this woman. She slowly sips her wine, letting it rest in her mouth for a moment, and then swallows it. Harry notices a little dark red liquid left on her lips, and she quickly licks it off. Jane then remembers that fifteen years ago, she didn’t know Harry existed. It was only until Jane had left the relationship she was in at the time that Harry discovered her.

Jane would never be single for very long. In her younger years she would go out with the best looking, coolest and most exciting guys there were and have more fun than she could handle. But in the end they’d usually turn out to be hopeless cases that would disappoint her, or they would be severe alcoholics, who after a few drinks, would turn into abusive and violent maniacs. This cycle of dating started in Jane’s teenage years and continued into her early thirties. She spent a lot of that time in an

assortment of pubs and one she stopped by at about once a week or fortnight was the same place Harry visited along his common truck route. He saw Jane there for the first time after he had been going to the pub for a few months. She was young and beautiful and lively, always laughing or making others laugh just as easily. She constantly had a guy by her side and a lot of drinking was the order of every visit. She seemed untouchable and Harry could never get himself to approach her.

Harry's life had been one of missed opportunities, an inability to make confrontations and chances that always seemed to pass him by. He'd continuously come up with excuses for why he could never get what he wanted. The people who knew him well knew that Harry was a weakling at heart, and they hoped for his sake, that one day he would realise that fact and do something about it. Harry on the other hand had always been disillusioned and complained of all sorts of circumstances that held him back.

But as luck would have it he was at the pub one night at the right time to see Jane there by herself, which was something he had never seen before. On this particular evening Jane came in, ordered a drink and sat quietly by herself. Disappointment was all over her face, as well as the traces of a black eye, covered heavily in makeup and some of her long, black hair. It was noticeable to Harry because he knew her face so well. When he spotted it he knew something was up with this woman. After drinking his fifth beer, he ordered a shot of whisky, and downed it fast, believing he had just the right amount of alcohol and cockiness in him, combined with a little hope, to walk over to Jane and talk to her. The song playing on the jukebox at the time was 'The Fire Inside' by Bob Segar, and Harry would continue to connect that song and this moment with meeting Jane for the rest of his life.

They began a conversation and Jane saw that Harry was generally interested in her and wanted to hear what was on her mind. She explained the whole damn mess of how her latest boyfriend had been fired from work, and then headed home to drink and drink. When he realised how screwed he was, Jane got home from work at that exact moment and he took it out on her with his meaty fists. His usual form of abuse to her before this was name calling and aggressive language which Jane just put up with. But when he punched her twice in the stomach and once in the left eye, she ran out the door. Jane didn't call the police or report it as she'd been down that road before and didn't want to go through all the hassle again. In the past she'd spent many nights in police stations, answering dozens of questions and deciding whether or not to press charges. However being hit or abused or threatened was such a common thing, she had virtually become accustomed to it and instead of letting things escalate she would just run off on the guy and start over with another one who she hoped wouldn't do the same.

On and on this went, and after each failed romance, Jane would come into the bar by herself, order a drink and wonder what went wrong. And almost every time she did this, there would be Harry, sitting by himself or occasionally with another trucker friend of his, called Simon. Harry would see her alone, go over to her and didn't have to ask what was wrong. He would open up with something like, "What did he do this time?" and Jane would explain. After she was done venting her anger and frustration, she would change the subject and get Harry to talk about his day. They were never too eventful. He would often ramble on about life on the road as a trucker; the things he saw and the challenges he faced, like trying to stay awake on long drives and

struggling to meet the deadline on time. Not very stimulating conversation but Jane preferred it to things like “*You stupid bitch*” or “*Don’t make me punish you again*”. She felt safe around Harry; comfortable and warm. He was her sponge and she was his rock. An adequate pairing.

And now, they were together again but not in the bar they had socialized in for the past fifteen years. Instead some crappy little dive down the road from a graveyard where Harry’s best mate, and probably his only true friend, had been laid to rest.

“I just can’t believe he’s gone. He was a good truck driver, and he fell asleep behind the wheel? It’s just not right” cried Harry. His pint was almost empty, and Jane was just finishing off her second glass of red. She ordered another round.

“And a shot of whisky too please” said Harry to the barman.

“When was the last time you saw him?” Jane asked, thinking it would just sadden Harry even more, but still an important and common question to ask.

“Oh... about three months ago it was. We ran into each other at one of the truck compounds” Harry said looking at his new pint of beer. His face grew concerned, almost worried.

“What happened there?” Jane asked

“We were both delivering a special shipment, something kind of confidential.

Anyway, how’s your love life?” Harry asked.

This was the question Jane had hoped to avoid, even though this was mainly what she had talked about with Harry in the past. This time there was no relationship to speak about as she’d managed to cut herself off from the bastards that put her through hell. In fact, she had pushed men away all together. Recently, Jane had come to a realization. There was one last hope for her in the world of men.

“Well I’m not seeing anyone at the moment Harry, and I haven’t been for about six months honestly. I was young and foolish much longer than I should have been, and now I wouldn’t go near guys like that with a ten foot pole.”

“Good for you. You deserve better, I’ve always said that to you haven’t I?” asked Harry, his speech getting slurry now. He picked up his hot shot of whisky, held it under his nose, sniffing in that fine Kentuckian smell, and then let it slide down his tongue. The burning sensation it left in his mouth and throat felt good; a real rush. Suddenly, his frame of mind changed. He was in the right state for talking, or more so, the right state for confessing.

“Thanks Harry” Jane said, then sat up in her chair.

“I mean you’ve spent way too long going out with guys that just disappointed you, and now you’ve finally gotten away from it. Welcome to your life sister; things will only get better now”

“Yeah hopefully” Jane said, with her realization coming back to her. A few days after her last relationship ended, she was lying in bed wondering which way to go. She woke up in the morning, and seemed to have had an epiphany. She asked herself, *who is the one guy who has always been there and would never hurt you or make your life miserable?* And she answered to herself out loud – Harry. *Could this lonely truck driver, who was pretty pathetic in life, be the guy for me?* She thought about it for a good week and then decided that soon, she would tell Harry that she had discovered her feelings for him, and wanted to be with him. She had a deep gut feeling that he

had always been into her. Why else would he be at the same bar every week, coming up to her when she was alone and listening to her talk about her bad relationships? Maybe he really cared? Maybe he was trying to tell her that he wanted to be with her, and he was proving himself by always asking how she was and listening, really listening, when she spoke? It all seemed to come together.

“The guys in the trucking business think I’m a joke” said Harry, interrupting Jane from her daze. “I’m always the last to know about things, and I always seem to get screwed around with shipments and routes. Why is that?”

Jane didn’t answer, instead remained quiet as she knew that this was just Harry’s usual talk after his slew of alcohol. He was complaining about his life again.

“And it doesn’t pay as well as you’d think you know. Everyone expects truck drivers are pretty wealthy...” said Harry lifting his pint up and waving it around, a small splash landing on the bar top. “But we’re not. We work bloody hard, and get no respect. And no one respected Simon. He was one of the good ones. Me and him were like brothers, and we always looked out for each other” he cried, slamming his pint down on the bar.

Everyone in the pub turned and looked. Harry’s eyes were watery with the beginning of what could be streams of tears, reflected in the dim light. Jane edged herself closer to him.

“Come on Harry, keep it together” Jane said, placing her hand on his shoulder. She had never seen Harry this emotional before. Fair enough he had just lost a mate, but maybe it was time to put Harry in his place once and for all. Not in a bad way, but by making him realise that the woman he was sitting next to would now take care of him and he would have nothing to complain about. She didn’t want to try and change the guy. She was just going to settle for him because he was her only choice. Her road had led to Harry, and she believed that maybe his road had led to her, and he just didn’t realise it.

She was going to make him realise it right now. While Harry’s head was in his chest, hiding the tears that were probably running down his face by now, Jane took in a deep breath, pointed her eyes to the ceiling for a little guidance, and took the plunge she had been preparing herself for.

“You know Harry, there’s something I’ve been thinking about lately and it’s really hard for me to say but it involves you... and me” she said, amazed that she’d gotten all that out so well. She’d only had two wines and figured she was still in control, unlike Harry who was beginning to slip. But he was still with it enough to turn his attention away from himself for a moment and listen to what Jane was saying. He lifted his head up, but there were no tears. His face was blank and expressionless.

“I feel really privileged that you asked me to come to the funeral with you today. I know how important Simon was to you, and I’m glad I could be there for you” she said, but she knew she was trailing off instead of saying what was in her heart.

“And I’m glad you came, because without you there, I wouldn’t have been able to be as strong and able to keep it together. Because the truth is…” Harry said, taking a long gulp of his pint, downing half of it “I was feeling a real sense of guilt today Jane”.

“Why?”

“Because of what had happened between me and Simon recently” Harry said.

Jane’s focus completely shifted. In whatever way she was just going to tell Harry she wanted to be with him didn’t matter now, because that moment was gone. Harry had seemed to pull himself up out of his usual miserable state, and was speaking in a firm and serious manner, unlike any way Jane had heard before. She also saw his hands slightly trembling.

“What do you mean? What happened between you guys? I thought you hadn’t seen him in months Harry?” she asked, confused.

“Well I lied about that. I just saw him last week” said Harry. Before he proceeded he ordered two more drinks from the bar, a beer for him and a wine for Jane. The man reading the paper at the other end of the pub made the first movement he had made since they arrived, by slowly standing up and walking over to one of the empty booths. He took his paper and beer with him, and once seated continued what he was doing before, keeping to himself. The old man with the glass of whisky was still staring into it, his face looked angry.

“We had an argument. A big argument.” said Harry as the barman placed the drinks down before him.

“What about?” asked Jane. She was compelled. Harry had never been so straight forward before. Her opportunity to say what she wanted had gone out the window, so she would hear Harry out and see where this was going.

“About a truck job. It’s funny you know, because when we first met and for all those years in the pub, we would talk about how to make the most amount of money from this job. We discussed different ways for making it to our destinations earlier, and making double, or three times, our weekly salary with one job. There were always sneaky ways around it.”

“What’s that got to do with what you’re saying Harry?” asked Jane

“A couple of weeks ago, we were catching up with each other at the compound, after just finishing a long haul. This truck driver neither of us had met before came up to us, talking about a special delivery from Melbourne to Sydney. The deal was, there was a load that had to be driven from one city to the next, and the driver would get paid…” Harry leaned closer to her and whispered, “…\$20,000, cash!”

Jane’s eyes widened and she fell silent. Harry looked at her anxiously.

“Go on” she urged him. She slurped down half her glass of wine, and didn’t even flinch.

“This sounded too good to be true to me and Simon so we asked this guy what the catch was. The requirements were that the delivery had to be made in half the time it usually took and the driver had to avoid all weigh stations and check points” he explained.

“Isn’t that impossible?” Jane asked assumingly

“Not impossible, just illegal, which meant that whatever was in that truck couldn’t be seen or stopped. But for \$20,000 neither Simon nor I really cared. This was the kind of thing we had dreamed about when sharing our ideas to make more money. Then, the problem came along, which was that only one driver was needed to make the delivery.”

“So you two had a fight over that. Who ended up taking it?”

“Simon did, even though I tried my hardest to stand up to him. It’s not easy standing up to your best friend Jane. You probably know that from all those assholes you went out with. Did you ever stand up to them?” Harry’s tone shifted to a negative one.

“Whatever, tell me what happened. Why did you let Simon take the job from you?” Jane asked firmly.

“Because I’ve always let people take things from me Jane. I gave in and Simon got greedy. He took the job and was going to keep all the money for himself. Once again, a good chance passed me by” Harry was amazed with himself, of how assertive he was being and truly acknowledging for the first time in his life, that he had been defeated, and by his best mate of all people, which was the last thing he ever expected, and what hurt him more than anything else.

“But he had a little trouble along the way. He crashed his truck” said Harry.

“Oh right. I can understand why you feel so guilty now. By letting him take the job you kind of feel like maybe you led him to that accident. You can’t believe that Harry. Simon just fell asleep behind the wheel, probably because he was trying to make that impossible deadline. It was the money that pushed him to keep going. That’s what made him sleepy, and that’s why he crashed.” Jane said, feeling like she was an attorney presenting her statement.

“When Simon stole that job from me Jane, something inside me just snapped. I said to myself *‘That is enough!’* I had come to a boiling point. I had watched opportunities go by before and never took them, but when my best friend denied me of the very thing that would have turned my life around, I couldn’t take it anymore.”

“What do you mean Harry?” Jane asked.

“The night Simon left the compound I watched him get in the truck and drive off. I supposed by that point I just had to accept it. As a kind gesture I lent him my coffee flask which was full of fresh, hot coffee. He took it and thanked me. As he drove away, I got in my car and started to follow him. I didn’t know why I was following him. I thought maybe when he pulled over for a rest or something to eat I could have one last go at talking to him. I’d try and persuade him to think about splitting the driving and sharing the money. So I drove behind him, keeping my distance but watching his every move.”

“You saw him crash didn’t you?”

“Yes Jane. Simon was a great truck driver and he always delivered his loads. I knew he would get there and receive all that money and that made me angry. So for the first time in my life I acted out of sheer desperation. I gave him my coffee flask, as a kind gesture but before that I... slipped some sleeping pills in there. That’s why he fell asleep.”

Jane felt her stomach rise into her throat and she suddenly went cold.

“You killed him?” she asked, her voice trembling.

“Afraid so” said Harry, letting out a huge sign of relief, and slumping down on his stool.

Right at that moment, the man in the t-shirt and jeans leapt out of the booth, pulling something from his back pocket. It looked like a wallet. Then, the bar filled with bright, scorching light and three dark figures came barging in the main entrance. When the door closed behind them and the light disappeared, Harry could see three police officers.

“Harry Furlong, you are under arrest for the murder of Simon King” the man in the jeans said and his wallet flipped open to reveal a shiny silver badge. He pulled a set of handcuffs out from his other back pocket and in an instant slapped them onto Harry’s wrist’s.

“What? How’d... Jane, don’t let... I’m sorry” he said looking into her eyes, which had begun to swell up with tears. Both his hands were in cuffs now and the three uniformed police men each pulled him away in the direction of the door. Jane watched in total confusion and despair as the man she was about to commit herself to after a life of failed relationships was being taken away because he’d murdered his best mate.

And Harry, who was even more confused and terribly afraid of what would happen to him now, felt his body being pulled and controlled by a force of cops. He had to wiggle to turn his head around and get one last look at Jane as he was being pulled through the exit.

“Wait, stop!” he yelled “Please officers, just a moment. In my left pants pocket, a piece of paper. Could you take it out please?” he asked desperately. The three police men looked at the detective.

“Do it” ordered the detective. The police men stopped and two of them held Harry very tightly, while the other slowly slipped his hand into Harry’s pocket. And as he said, there was the piece of paper, which the cop pulled out. It was folded neatly and small in size.

“That’s for you” Harry said to Jane, who was still looking at him in shock. However, she composed herself and walked towards Harry, but the cop with the piece of paper stood in her way, and gave it to her. They immediately continued pulling Harry away. Jane held the paper tight in her hands.

As Harry was taken out of the pub, the door seemed to shut in slow motion, and just before it did his eyes locked with Jane’s for the last time. He was consumed with only deep, deep regret. He had gone and acted out of fear and desperation whilst trying to stand up for himself for the first time in his life; and everything completely misfired. The only woman who cared about him, listened to him and maybe liked him would be left alone and disappointed once more, just like all the other losers who had hurt her before. Harry thought he was different from them, because he would never hurt Jane. But he knew that he had hurt her in a way that was worse than a black eye or a bad name yelled into her face. He had completely let her down. He was placed into the police car, with the door shut and locked.

Back in the pub, Jane somehow pulled herself out of her shock, but still continued staring at the door hoping that maybe Harry would just walk back in saying ‘Surprise’, and it was all a joke. But it was no joke.

‘Miss, my name is Detective Larson, with the Homicide Division’ he said, in a monotone voice. He spoke like he was reading a legal document fifty pages thick and he was on the last page. There was no passion or expression in his voice. No feeling in him at all.

“Homicide?”

“Yes miss, your friend Mr. Furlong was involved in the delivery of an illegal shipment, although he didn’t know it. After Mr. King died in the crash, the coroners report indicated that a heavy dosage of sleeping pills was in his system. We expected that murder may have been at work here”.

“How did you bust Harry like that? How did you know we were here?” she asked
“We were monitoring your conversation via hidden microphone” said the detective. He tilted his head to the left, and pulled something out of his left ear. It was a little white, round thing with tiny holes in it. An earpiece, Jane guessed. He then leant towards the bar and pulled a tiny black microphone with a wire attached to a little black box from underneath the bar.

“We were monitoring the two of you at the cemetery and concluded that you would either come here or to the wake for Simon King at his parent’s house. I guess we got lucky here. And we weren’t invading your privacy, I hope you realise. This is just routine police work” he said and handed Jane a white business card.

“Here is my number at the station. We may need you to come down and answer some questions. Would you be okay with that Miss?” he asked. Jane sat down on the stool, and it all came flooding back. The hours she spent in police stations, telling the same story to five people, deciding whether or not to press charges. She had been through that before and thought it was all over. *Guess not sister.*

“Thank you for your time” the detective said and he walked out of the bar. Through the entrance, Jane could see a police car pull away and got her last glimpse of Harry. All she saw was the side of his head, and it was slumped down, buried in his chest, in that sulking, miserable, lonesome way she had seen so many times before. She suddenly remembered about the piece of paper in her hand. She put the detective’s card in her pocket, and slowly unfolded the paper. The writing on it was blue and faded, and the creases from the folding job indicated it was old. The writing was upside down, so Jane flipped it over and read it.

*The Love Sick Truck Driver
a poem by Harry Furlong*

*Oh lonely road, I’m your only guest
Driving along, in this vast emptiness*

*It’s nice out here, my mind is clear
I think about my Jane; my girl, my dear*

*I forget where I’ve been, but know where I’m going
She’s waiting for me, I can’t think of slowing*

*I miss her immensely, it’s been too long
The radio pains me, when they play our song*

*But I’ll be home soon, just one more day
I’m at the bridge now, I’m crossing the bay*

*When it comes to great women, I've had some luck
Even though my job is to drive a truck*

*And each time I come home, I can make a fresh start
Because forever and always Jane'll have my heart*

Jane looked up from the paper, folding it quickly and slipping it into her pocket. Her eyes started to swell back up again. What she thought she knew about Harry was right; he loved her. And he never got to tell her in person. She guessed he had probably written this poem years ago, but never had the guts to give it to her. He finally did when he knew he had lost her for good.

Jane stood there, in the dim light of the bar for a couple more minutes before finally noticing that everyone in the bar was staring at her, like tourists at a zoo. She didn't know what to say or what to think. So she did the only thing she could do without having to think, and which would make her forget what had just happened. She pulled her stool up to the bar and ordered another drink.

written by Brian McAleer