

J.D. Smith

Selected Innovations

I am talking about Pong
along the back wall of a bowling alley.

I am talking about Asteroids in an arcade
and Galaxian and its spawn Galaga
and all the killing pixels can do.

I am talking about the games
that took over TVs,
from Frogger to Resident Evil.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

I am talking, too, about
the walkie-talkie phones
the size of bricks with long antennas
that grew up-slash-down into candy bar, flip
and tablets that were also phones
and cameras with more computing power
than the cluster of metal and cathode ray tubes
that once browned out Philadelphia.

I am talking about a coffee pot
at a university in England
that could be watched all over the world,
and a hamster dance, and a dancing baby
and everything that acquired
the name "meme," the tag "viral,"
and maybe more about the Jules Verne
dream come true of two-way videotelephony,
now with dog fights or nude strangers,
and Orwell's dread of a spy
installed in every home.

Which is to say I am talking about
how a life little more than halfway done
holds all of these, with more to be rolled out

and none of them will stop
for my convenience or slow learning.
They won't pause for a moment of silence on my passing
but keep going until they run out of rare earth minerals
and maybe not then, as I won't be around to see.

J. D. Smith

On a Photograph of Two Bluesmen

Because it is a well-worn cliché
and under certain conditions obligatory
for a white boy with some college
to take as his heroes less-lettered Delta men,
a picture hangs in the mind.

In the foreground sits Otis Spann,
who is not alone, holding up
a three-foot long and very live alligator
the way most people would handle a cat,
and he looks calm, having no doubt
faced far greater dangers
in a time of, to put it mildly,
backs of buses and sundown towns.

To the left of Mister Otis
sits a man who can damn nearly be
referred to as Him with a capital H,
one McKinley Morganfield, aka Muddy Waters,
wearing a bandanna like nobody's business
and eating breakfast like a mere mortal
at an early-generation TV tray
because even a legend well along in the making
needs his strength to buzz around a hive,
let alone drink TNT and smoke dynamite
as he sang about, Mister Waters—

Mud, if I may be so bold to say,
and just this once there's a good reason.
Born in Jug's Corner, Mississippi, he spent his last years
in Westmont, Illinois on the Burlington Northern line
between Chicago and the home town,
in part peopled by migrants from Holly Springs,
of this aging white boy who left money on the table
and never stirred himself to see Muddy Waters live,
just like he once showed a good woman the back of his hand
and all the times he called whiskey
a better friend than the morning light.

These are, I know, about some pale-ass blues

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that no one will pick up a harp to play,
but maybe, just maybe if I confess as much and beg
Otis Spann and Muddy Waters will let me
slip into that picture for five minutes' time.
There's no third chair, but I'll gladly sit on the hallowed floor
if I can join them in their long-past meal.
May I then across time and space
call on the help of an old friend, a mojo hand
or the almighty and hell-hounded mercy of Robert Johnson
to keep the gator off my plate.

Payable on Delivery

It was 10:40 p.m., ten minutes after the time we'd agreed on, so I could check on things without feeling like some kind of high-maintenance dick.

I stood outside the taqueria's front window and pretended to look at the menu over the counter. Though by now I could have recited it backward at the end of a long night of drinking—pretty much the way I'd first stumbled into the place.

What I really wanted to see was if the contractors had made it.

They had, and they fit the description I'd gotten. As a white guy I'm usually not too put off by my own kind, but these were far and away the scariest white dudes I'd ever seen in person. The shorter one, about five-eight, was a fireplug with Popeye forearms who looked like he hadn't been out of prison long enough to get out of shape. He had on a cap like Sluggo in the cartoon, and jagged tats covered his skin from elbow to knuckle, with probably full sleeves and more under his shirt. Other patches crawled out from under his collar like some kind of art cancer.

The other dude, a tall lanky thing in a cowboy shirt and a bolo, had black hair slicked back in a pompadour and huge gnarled hands that could have belonged to an eighty-year old and cheekbones that could cut through sea ice. Seems like he'd taken the prison-to-rockabilly route that some guys did in Chicago. I didn't know what that was all about, and after tonight I planned to live a happy life without ever finding out, as long as they did their jobs.

They looked a little flashier than I would have wanted, but that wouldn't matter if nobody was left to ID them. I liked the odds. Different as they were, they both had dead eyes, with nothing behind them. It reminded me of a lizard I'd seen at a pet shop when I was a little kid. Later on in school I read about how a lot of animals were equipped mostly to take care of the four Fs: fighting, fleeing, feeding. And reproducing. I didn't want to think much about that last one, but the way they hit their burritos reminded me of that lizard and its meal of live crickets—a quick bite, then a swallow without any chewing to speak of.

I exhaled into my hands so nobody would notice my breath in this weather, and I walked away before drawing any attention to myself. The two were working for me by way of a one-percenter MC contact and half up front, half payable on de-

livery, but they didn't know I was their customer. If I caught their eyes, coming out and kicking my ass would just feel like a warm-up before the main event.

So I just might end up getting my money's worth.

I got lucky with the EI and didn't have to wait long out in the cold in January. Back at the apartment, I checked for messages. I'd left the cell at home to cut down on distractions. All I heard, and the only emails I had, were from strangers trying to sell me things—for once, the way I wanted it.

I put some Beam in a rocks glass, no ice this time of year, and I started to count down.

Then again, I'd been counting down since the first time I walked into that place and saw Catalina. She wasn't even the one who took my order or called it out when it was ready, but I got a look at her when I counted my change, and our eyes met. It wasn't some meet-cute thing like in the shitty movies my ex dragged me to or some flirting where I got busted for checking her out. It sure as hell wasn't the thunderbolt that leads to a quick hook-up, then second-guessing and maybe a trip to the free clinic. Been there, done those.

It was just two people thinking, "Oh, it's you. Let's get this started."

I must have been pretty obvious, because as soon as we sat down with our trays and plastic baskets my boy John said, "That's not on the menu, dude." Once we left, and after I'd gotten distracted enough to end up wearing more of my tacos than usual—and that's saying a lot—John's brother Mike caught me looking back and said, "Nothin' special there, amigo. Nobody's gonna mistake her for the girl on the mudflaps."

This was the sort of thing he would say. His last couple of girlfriends had worked part-time as auto show models. They looked like they'd been customized in a couple of places themselves, though, and they both made shithouse rats look sane. Because Mike was driving I didn't rip his fucking head off.

Sure, Catalina wasn't going to be some pin-up, and different from some of the other Mexican girls I'd dated. She wasn't one of those back-and-a-rack types.

She had something different going on, more angles than curves, and you could have called her delicate. I'm not sure she topped five feet. Catalina said it was on account of her Zapotec ancestors, and the pictures of her family in Oaxaca showed me what she was talking about.

And in that tiny body she had a big heart. You could tell right away she'd seen things and suffered, and it took me a while to learn how.

I haven't seen it all, but so far I've seen that people who've had a lot to deal with can break one of two ways. The first one seems a lot more common. People say, "I've got my problems, you've got yours. Get tough or die." Another way's out there, too, though you can't always count on finding it. Somebody says, or acts like they're thinking, "Yeah, things are hard. Let's not make them any harder. Hell, we could even make things a little better here and there."

Catalina didn't make any noise about it, but you could tell she'd picked door number two. Once I started dropping in on the regular, I'd see her reach in her own pocket, and not the shared tip jar, and pull out bills to top off the check of somebody who couldn't pay his whole tab. Before the first time we went out, if you could call it that—pie and coffee at an all-night place across the street after her shift—she threw together a plate of burros from scraps that would have ended up feeding roaches in the dumpster, and she took it to a broken-down dude who'd been poking through trash cans outside.

"Why'd you do that?" I asked her for the first time. And the last.

"Why wouldn't I?"

She did that sort of thing time after time, but she did everything else by the book. I always paid full freight before we headed out across the street, and eventually farther, on the nights when her Uncle Ramiro wasn't working or he was out of town. And only on those nights.

I finally learned why. The first time we were going to be together, together that way, I asked her what she was doing with me, anyway, a guy who'd just squeaked through high school and lived on odd jobs. If she'd just wanted a white guy, or any man, she could have done a lot better.

"You treat me good," she said. "You respect me."

Seemed like she was setting the bar kind of low. I had her go on, and she told me about how other men been bad to her—a couple had even raised a hand—until she decided she couldn't live like that anymore. I was ready to go out and administer some beat-downs, but she wouldn't give me any names.

The talk moved on. "So why can I only see you when your uncle's not there?"

“Because he didn’t like the others, and he doesn’t like you.”

“Why not?”

“Because you’re not him.”

I didn’t know what to say, and it was quiet for a minute before she said anything else.

“He touches me.” Her eyes filled with tears and I didn’t have to guess how she meant it. It had started in Mexico, and she was too ashamed to tell anybody. When he moved to the North and set up his business—nobody knew how he’d gotten the money so fast—she had a break for a year or so. Then he sent for Catalina. She didn’t want to go, but her own padre told her she had to go so she could have a better life. She went, and the touching started again. A sister and a brother and a couple of cousins came up later so they could get a better life too, just like her.

“But you’re a grown woman now. Why can’t you make him stop?”

“You don’t understand,” she said, and I didn’t. It turned out he kept her green card and other papers in a safe nobody else could open, and if she was done with him there were others in the house, and more where they came from.

“How do you know he hasn’t already—“

“I don’t. But I don’t know what else to do.”

Calling the police was out. Tio Ramiro had an F.O.P. sticker in the window, and maybe he slid some cash their way. They returned the favor by staying out of his business, whatever all of it was.

An hour more of tears came. We would not be together that night, or for several more weeks.

I knew what to do, though, and there was no point in worrying Catalina by letting on too much.

As I topped off the rocks glass I figured that, if everything went the way I’d planned, she would never know.

If some insurance came our way too that would be great, but it didn’t matter much. She’d be free, and she could go home if she wanted to, maybe take me with her. I didn’t like the winters here any more than she did. I’d already learned some Spanish at jobs, and I could probably learn some more.

But I was getting ahead of myself. First, things had to fall into place. At eleven fifty-two, I topped off the glass again and went over the list. Again. Had I told her to stay away from the restaurant tonight? Check. Had I told her I wouldn’t be calling for

a couple of days before tonight? Check. And that she shouldn't call me during that time? Check.

If she called me later tonight, after it was done, nothing would look suspicious; she'd need a shoulder to cry on, or just be in shock. Somebody smarter could have come up with a better game plan, or a more complicated one anyway, but I was stuck being myself, a guy who'd tried chess for about a week once and decided anything that hard should come with a paycheck. Somebody with more patience could have gutted things out until Tio had a grabber or a stroke, being as fat as he was, or got on the bad side of whoever had helped him set up the business so fast. They probably hadn't done it out of the goodness of their heart. My folks had been pretty good at saving up some money for retirement, to go on a cruise someday, until they hit an ice patch and drifted head-on into the path of a semi. I'd had my own fill of waiting, and of getting filled, hard, in my six months at Audy House after acting out and boosting stuff when I was still getting used to being an orphan. I hadn't gotten around to telling Catalina about that. She already had enough to deal with.

She'd decided to reduce the amount of suffering out there, but I'd learned to bounce it back and spread it around. So if Sluggo and Tex did their jobs right, after the last customer had gone and once nobody was standing at the counter, one would go out and bar the back door to the alley. The other would bust into the kitchen, cut the gas line and set a fire on his way out. The rest would take care of itself.

Twelve-thirty. Time flies when you're having booze, especially compared to waiting things out sober. Catalina could be calling any time. The blast would set off any alarm for a block around. The police would find out, and they'd have to tell the next of kin, who'd tell the family. And she would call. She'd have to call.

She'd be crazy with grief because it was family, as fucked up as it was, and because he was a human being, if she wanted to call him that. He wouldn't be much of anything by the time I called it a night. If one or two of his socios went down with him, I might even sleep better.

Even whiskey can do only so much to speed up time. I looked into the bottom of an empty glass and put it in the sink to slow my roll. I needed to start drying out for whatever came up next.

She wasn't calling. Nothing on the landline or the cell.

What if nothing had happened?

I turned on the TV and surfed the channels for news, but there were only reruns from ten o'clock. AM radio news didn't mention anything, and neither did the stations' websites. Maybe I shouldn't have been surprised. There were a lot of buildings in Chicago—hell, for that matter even a lot of taquerias—and if one blew up now and then it wasn't big news. Did she forget to call? Not likely. She knew my birthstone off the top of her head, and the ones for the other months too.

Maybe she just fell asleep, or fainted from the news. I'd never seen a woman do that except in a movie, but maybe it could happen. Anything was possible.

Like it was possible I was driving myself crazy wondering what was going on.

The hell with it. I picked up the phone and called the landline at the house. If it woke somebody up, too bad. If I wasn't sleeping nobody was sleeping.

On the third ring somebody picked up and coughed.

"Pendejo! Do you know what time it is? I'm sick as a fucking dog here."

The voice was Tio's

There was no turning back now.

I apologized and asked for Catalina.

"She's at work. Don't call no more."

The click at the other end sounded like a hammer driving a nail into my skull.

She's at work. And what had just happened at work? And who had made that happen? A scream built up in my head and broke out until it filled the room and spilled over onto the street. I picked up the rocks glass and smashed it against the countertop, and a big jagged piece added my blood to the rest.

And I still owed the MC the other half. Payable on delivery.