

Harvey Tells Me About This Guy

Harvey runs a breakfast/lunch place downtown in a narrow slot of storefront near the Alabama Theater. A few months ago he tells me about this guy who comes in for breakfast every morning, already standing outside the diner in the dark when Harv gets there to open up, hanging in the doorway by the locked door looking through the window at him as he goes about his opening up chores. This takes at least an hour, but, as Harvey says, the dude never moves.

At 5:30am Harvey unlocks the door and the guy scuttles in. He's a short fellow but pretty broad. He's got a quick way of moving, changing direction and speed (velocity) unexpectedly, like a roach you're trying to hit with a rolled up newspaper. So Harvey calls him the Roach. I've only seen the guy once myself, but I'd have to say Harvey tagged him pretty good.

Anyway, Harvey tells me that he works at a car dealership a few blocks down the street. He thinks the Roach details cars or is what he calls a 'lot monkey' which seems to mean a go-for type who shuffles the cars around the lot, runs errands, keeps things neat and like that. Harvey draws his conclusions on his own as the Roach, who talks a lot, never says anything about his job. He talks about the government, and by that I mean the local city boys, not Washington or Montgomery, but Birmingham. And he knows his stuff, reeling off the names of the City Councilmen, the top bureaucrats, even the behind-the-scenes political guys.

The Roach comes in the diner talking, orders a bacon and egg biscuit and coffee every morning, and talks all the while Harvey's frying it up and then talks between bites while he's eating. Evidently he's a hell of a civic activist going to all the open meetings, sending letters every day with suggestions and 'constructive feedback' as he calls it. For a lot-monkey he seems to be a pretty well educated guy, or at least, as Harvey puts it, a guy who bought a dictionary once and actually read it.

This had been going on for about a year or a little longer, and Harvey, while he appreciates the \$4.49 he gets from the guy every morning, is getting pretty tired of the one way conversation. Particularly lately, as the guy seems fixed on the idea that the government is doing something sinister under the streets of downtown Birmingham, which are continuously being dug up, great gaping holes that the workmen climb down into and disappear. Harvey figures maybe the guy is on to something, because these city workers have been tearing things up for months, and not just one time but again and again. He figures they've ripped up the pavement in front of the diner five times in eight months, which seems about right to me.

So the Roach keeps on about this, and it's all he talks about for a week. Harvey says the early theory was that the city workers were deliberately working slowly and inefficiently to prolong the job and jack up the price of the project so the construction guys could milk the city for big bucks, with some juicy kickbacks to the city guys. Now this makes sense to Harvey and to me.

But the Roach gets tired of that and starts on about the workmen installing surveillance equipment under the pavement, devices that can track a moving vehicle, or even a human being if he's wearing enough metal. At this point he loses Harvey, but I'm still with him. I mean, what the hell, I can see it happening.

Finally he decides that they're building a series of underground tunnels and chambers. Harvey asks him why they're doing this and for another week he comes in with different and more fantastic speculations. They're going to move all the city employees underground to escape pollution and radiation. Or they're building an exact replica of the city down there, and they're going to force everyone who lives in the city to relocate to the underground equivalent of their business or apartment. Then they'd turn above-ground Birmingham into a giant sports arena. And so on and so on.

By this time Harvey's wishing he'd get his bacon and egg biscuit somewhere else, even though he's not bothering anyone but him. There's usually no one else in the diner at that time of the morning except his helper Sarah, who seems to like to listen to him and shake her head, muttering under her breath about crazy folks.

This goes on for a few weeks, the rants and the letters written to the newspaper and the mayor in protest and warning, and then one day the Roach is just gone. Harvey gets there to open up but no one is waiting. The next day the same thing.

At first, Harvey says, it was a relief not to listen to him, but then he started to think about it and when the Roach didn't show for a full week Harvey took off his apron and left Sarah to watch the store and walked the two blocks down to the dealership. He went on the lot and pretended he was looking at cars, going from one end to the other, but no Roach.

Finally he goes around by the service department and describes him to one of the guys washing a truck and asks if he's still working there. The guy, a scrawny kid, keeps on hosing the soap off the fenders and says Oh you mean Wendell, no he don't work here no more. Harvey says, What happened, did he quit? and the kid says, No he just didn't show up one day. Then he says, Hey if you see him tell him he's got a check waitin' for him.

So Harvey goes back to the diner and makes Sarah re-do the table cleanup she's supposed to have done and they get into it like they do at least three times a week and by the end of the day he's not thinking about the Roach.

But the next morning when he opens alone, still no Wendell, as he's started calling him, he thinks about it and by mid-morning when I get there for my coffee he sits on the stool next to me and says:

"You think anything bad happened to that boy?"

"You mean like someone from the city paying him a visit?" I ask him.

Harvey doesn't say anything for a minute, looking out at the torn up pavement, the workers standing around looking down into the hole.

"Naw," he says. "That's as crazy as Wendell was himself."

"Yeah, but think how easy it would be for them city workers to get him," I say, "being able to track him everywhere he went."

"Yeah okay, the hell with you," Harvey says and goes behind his counter. Then he calls out:

"Listen, he's just started gettin' his breakfast at MacDonalds, that's all." And begins scraping the grill with the spatula.