

DEEP TOO

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Michael comes back to the table where I'm waiting with my cue. He's chuckling & shaking his head. "There was this guy at one of the other urinals in there," he says. "'Sure is cold,' the guy said, & I said 'What's cold?' & he said, 'No, no, you're supposed to say & deep too. I know that,' he said, 'because I run the place.'"

The place is The Brass Rack, on Water Street. Michael & I have been playing some pool & enjoying the twelve buck bucket of beer on ice.

"What did you say?"

"I didn't say anything. I just laughed."

I laughed too. For one thing, I was putting myself in Michael's place, baffled but amused.

The other thing was – ☺ what are the chances of this? – I happened to know what the guy was going for. I'd heard it told as a joke in *Sling Blade*, a movie written ☺ directed by Billy Bob Thornton. Billy Bob also plays Karl Childers, the main character, who other people in the movie call retarded. He certainly is slow. Hasn't got much to say to anyone. Keeps mostly to himself after being released from what he calls "the Nervous Hospital," his home for seventeen years after he knifed the man who was raping his mother. Karl was only twelve then, ☺ that's how he read the situation. But then he had to defend himself with the knife when his mother got up ☺ attacked him. She had actually been enjoying herself.

Back in his Arkansas hometown, Karl is offered a job fixing small engines. He hears his new boss tell the joke during lunch at the shop. His co-worker, Scooter, snickers his head off. Karl doesn't seem to be paying attention, but he is.

Now Karl had only just got back home when he was befriended by a young boy, Frank. Frank's easy-going mother, Linda, has this shit of a boyfriend who is making life hell for her, & even worse for the inconvenient son. The evil of it eats at Karl. One night he's in the house when the boyfriend throws a harrowing tantrum, & that gnaws at Karl's vitals. So next morning he comes into the kitchen where Linda is nursing a cup of coffee & says, right out of the blue, "There's these two fellers standing on the bridge, going to the bathroom. One feller says that water is a-cold. The other feller says the water's deep. I believe one feller come from Arkansas. Get it?" Never having heard Karl speak except when spoken to, Linda is amazed. She has no more clue about what he just said than Michael did in the can at The Brass Rack, though she does know he was trying to comfort her. Finally she says, "Well, I be dog!"

There are spots in plenty of conversations when it's your turn to speak & there's really nothing to say, so you just pick up one of those ready-made fillers & drop it into the conversational hole. "Well, I'll be damned!" "You don't say!" "Isn't that a caution!" "You just said a mouthful!" "You ain't just a-whistlin Dixie!" It moves things along. My Newfoundland friends have a compact multi-use expression for that. "Now 'den," they say, with emphasis on the first syllable, meaning "How 'bout that!" or "All righty now, what's next?" That kind of thing.

Now 'den, here is what Karl was going for, he & the owner of The Brass Rack: "Scooter, did I tell you the one about the two old boys pisin' off the bridge? These two old boys hung their peckers off the bridge, one old boy from California, one from Arkansas. Old boy from California says 'Boy, this water's cold.' Old boy from Arkansas says, 'Yeah, and deep too.' Get it?"

My mother had no sense of timing. She murdered every joke she ever told, & she liked to tell jokes. She was no fool, but you need more than smarts to tell a good joke. You need timing. Karl isn't lacking only the timing, though. He's forgetting his boss's "did I tell you the one about." When he got that far, Scooter was already snickering. Linda could have used the intro. Karl is offering only the bones of the joke, then, & he's also too considerate & too delicate to use words like "peckers" & "pissin'" in the company of a woman. Notwithstanding his violent past, he is arguably the moral centre of the story, & it's a filthy shame that goodness fails to prevent his return to "the Nervous Hospital."

& – location, location, location – it should now be clear that there is no scope whatever for any "cold" & "deep" exchange between two fellers pissing side by side at urinals in the St. John's Brass Rack Men's. I guess there'd be

COLOPHON

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