

1. LOVE WILL KEEP US TOGETHER

Do you suppose customers thought that wanted posters looked quaintly romantic back when a marshal used to get off his horse to post them at the general store? The modern ones are all business – tacky little printouts that seem like afterthoughts. Missing kids, too, at least had the iconic milk carton. Now they get some notice at the front of the discount store, a card slipped in with the pizza coupons and ignored.

I probably saw Nelly Jones on one of those, because I used a lot of pizza coupons. Didn't pay much attention, though. It's the human touch that stands out in this type of thing, and the human touch in this case turned out to be a fat man with a funny hat. That's definitely hard to ignore.

It was early summer – June. It had been hot and humid, of course, just bad enough that everyone seemed to be on edge. I considered myself lucky that Aileen's idea of 'vintage' didn't translate to 'no fucking air conditioning'. Apparently record albums were people too, so it was a real joy to come to work all summer. In fact, it seemed like I was there a lot even when I wasn't on shift.

"Terry, tell me about that thing," Aileen said to her girlfriend as they pattered around the stock, straightening stacks of vinyl out and generally wasting time. "That one thing."

“With the dogs biting the robot?” She didn’t even look up from the pile of hard bop titles that were perpetually out of order. No one ever looked at that crap, but they were always askew.

“That’s the one. Tell Eric.” I was behind the square counter in the center of the shop, listening to my headphones at a reasonable level. I gave Aileen a look – who knows why she wanted me to hear this story. Probably to embarrass me with some sort of girl-on-girl stuff. I kept listening to my music and threw some barely polite attention to Terry’s story, while keeping a glance every now and then at the door in case some customers decided to make an appearance. That actually seemed doubtful. It was still early in the day, but already sweltering, and overcast. Nobody was going to roll in until lunchtime, and Aileen and Terry would get antsy by then, ready to go eat their vegan tacos or whatever.

I was surprised by a pretty savage pinch on the arm. “Dammit, Aileen!” I tried to swat at her hand but she was too quick and already out of reach as usual.

“Daydreaming again, man. We’re out of here. It’s Tuesday – fifty cent vegan taco day down at the Polar Bear.” She grinned at Terry, who was laughing and apparently unconcerned that her story had fallen on deaf ears. Perhaps the whole thing was just a setup for the pinch. I’d buy that.

“You guys have fun. It’s gonna be a slow day.” I threw a hand up to wave as they headed out the door, and rubbed my arm only half for show. “Try to not to pinch too many people.”

“Big baby.”

“One of these days you’ll come back and I’ll have sold all the rare vinyl and moved to Amsterdam.”

“Not a bad idea, Eric,” Terry said, and then they were gone.

The day passed pretty much as I predicted and I listened to a lot of music and read as much of my book as I could stand. I’d been trying to get through

some French writers – Sartre and Camus. It was rough. The Camus guy was better; he at least seemed to just be writing a slow medical thriller. The other one though, was a book of plays, and I quit after the first. It was about three people trapped in a room, and I had been stuck at work once in a snowstorm with Aileen and Terry, so I didn't exactly feel like reading about the French version of people doing the same thing.

Maybe it was a little pointless, reading. I had been on a date, my first in a long time. Awkward, though, because I'm sure I came off as a big creep. One-sided. It seemed almost stereotypical, that when the topic of reading came up, she mentioned Existentialism and wanted to have an interesting conversation about that. Big fail there. I figured I would bone up for the next date, but so far it had been two weeks and there didn't seem to be any sign of that.

It was towards the end of the day. There had been some decent business, but nothing to write home about. Aileen had called after lunch, and with one earphone out I had listened to her playfully make up some bullshit reason that she and Terry weren't going to be back in that day. And could I open up tomorrow? No problem there. Despite her flightiness, she was a great boss. As far as I was concerned, I was overpaid and under worked. I didn't really consider hanging around in a music store all day to be any sort of burden. Besides, she kept my mp3 player filled with music. I didn't do computers.

I was starting to think that I could shave a few minutes off closing time when someone walked in who obviously wasn't a customer. Our patrons are all hipster kids in various ridiculous getups and gaunt elderly record collectors. This guy was stout, red-faced, in a peach polo shirt, and most amazingly, a captain's hat. He was an 80's rum ad writ large and not looking so good. In my mind I immediately nicknamed him Captain Darryl Dragon.

“Can I help you, sir?” He approached the counter tentatively, a conflicted look on his face. There was a sheaf of papers in his hand.

He held them up to me, and opened his mouth but didn’t manage to say anything yet. MISSING was the most prominent word, and then the picture. There was Nelly Jones, according to the poster, age 19. Missing. I had never seen her before, but there was something about all those missing pictures that looks familiar and pulls at your heartstrings.

“Please,” he said, and pointed at the front door. There were a number of flyers for concerts up. “Can I post one of these here? I’ve been going around the neighborhood. I’m her uncle.”

“Here, let me do it.” I took one of the posters from his unresisting hand. “I might have to take down one of the older flyers. It’s no problem.”

“Thank you... thank you.”

“I’m so sorry. How long has she been missing?”

“A week. Her parents are a wreck. We’re trying everything.”

“A week... they say -” Well, I’m sure the authorities had probably already told him what being missing a week meant. I mean, if I knew what being missing a week meant just from watching cop shows, then there was no point in saying it. “Look, you can go ahead and post it up. Maybe you’ll feel better doing it with your own hands.” I shrugged and handed it back to him.

He walked back to the door and taped the poster up in an available spot, smoothing each piece out as if it were load bearing on his soul. When he was done, he looked back at me and nodded.

“Thank you.” Then he was gone.

There were no more customers, and it was closing time. I turned off all the lights, and locked up. On my way out the front I looked at Nelly Jones’ face in the poster. Her eyes seemed darker, more piercing. Then it hit me, in a profound way that was alien to

my shallow life. Nelly Jones was dead. Nelly Jones was dead, and putting up posters was not going to bring her back. The futility of it pissed me off. I reached out and tore the poster from the doorway, feeling an almost electrical contact as I did so. I crumpled the paper in my fist and tossed it on the ground.

Eric no

But Nelly Jones was dead. If she didn't want me to tear her posters up, she had better tell me face to face. She had missed her chance. Then I thought of her uncle, plastering the neighborhood with the things.

"Okay, Nelly, you'll have your shot at me. Let's try the pizza place, shall we?"

2. LOVE WILL TEAR US APART

Pizzazza had a Hawaiian with extra pineapple that no one had come to pick up and let me have it for cheap. I could pick the pineapple off. They also had a poster. When the kid at the front wasn't looking I grabbed it and crumpled it into the dumpster outside with the excess dough and outdated ranch dressing.

No no no

"You're going to have to do better than that."

There was a jewelry store and a coffee shop in the strip mall with Pizzazza. Both were closed and both had posters. I pulled the posters down and held them together as I stood next to the dumpster again. This time I ripped them to shreds. I threw the shreds on the ground.

"Eric, what are you doing?" I could actually hear her voice now, not in my head, but echoing off the side of the building. It sounded like her heart was breaking. I thought you were supposed to be beyond pain or something when you were dead.

"Look, you're dead. You were murdered, right? Maybe you can tell me who your killer is. I'll have to pretend to be psychic so they believe me... but then you can go into the light, or..." I was floundering. And there was no answer. I had no idea what I was doing. Maybe I really had lost it. I grabbed my pizza box and headed home. There had to be more of these on the way that I could try to make contact with.

It was a long walk, and ordinarily I didn't mind, but on top of it being muggy, I was kind of creeped

out. I stuck to the bus route, hoping to get there a little quicker. There was a lady waiting at the first stop. "49?"

"Just passed," she said. That meant another twenty minutes. I might as well walk, so I headed back into the neighborhood. The post office was nearby – sure enough, on the outside was a poster. Forgetting that just a moment ago I was starting to freak out, I ran over and tore it off; actually tearing it in half as it came off the glass. Nelly Jones didn't say anything this time but instead flickered into view for a moment, the shade of a young girl as she saw herself in death – all harsh lighting and features blurred where she felt ashamed. The eyes held me for an instant like they had for the first time in the poster, then she was gone.

"Come on, Nelly!" I found myself wondering stupidly what ghosts ate.

Walking again, I realized my hands were shaking. I didn't see any more posters around – it was all residential for a couple of blocks. Maybe that was for the best. This was just an episode of weirdness, like one of those weeks when every time you look at a clock it's 7:11 or something.

"You son of a bitch." It was a real voice and not Nelly's.

I turned and the fist connected solidly with my cheek. I ended up on my ass, the pizza box on the ground, my earphones coming loose and dangling wildly. Captain Dragon loomed over me, his right fist still poised in the air after having done its damage, the sheaf of poster rolled up in his left. His face was redder than before. "Is this your idea of a joke? Is this what you're going to joke about with your buddies? A girl is missing!" I tried to scoot backwards away from him, still reeling, but he shuffled forward and kicked me solidly in the ribs. I groaned, and got a glimpse of his face. He wasn't enjoying this. I wasn't being bullied here, and that scared me.

“Why the hell would you pull down these posters? Why?” He kicked me again, and I coughed, almost puking.

“Trying... to... find out... where she... is...” It took him a second to process that.

“That doesn’t make any fucking sense!” I suppose it didn’t. I tried to sit up, but didn’t have the strength. “I think maybe you already know where she is. Covering your tracks, you sick fuck? Taking souvenirs?” He dropped down on one knee next to me and punched me in the face again, over the eye. My whole world flared into white and there was a crunching pain. Something broken. “Where is Nelly?” He backhanded me, other side of the face, thankfully not so hard this time, but whatever was broken still hurt like hell. “Where is she?”

God protects fools and people getting the hell beat out of them. I started having a fit or something, my body deciding it didn’t want to die as he began choking the life out of me with his free right hand. At this point Dragon was so mad he didn’t seem to care about answers, just brutalizing the guy who might have killed his niece. A wild grab got lucky, though. I got hold of the sheaf of posters in his left hand, and between his death grip on them and my desperation, I manage to tear them all raggedly up.

I could feel it – the electric shock I had felt the first time was almost like the feeling before a thunderstorm this time – but he didn’t notice until Nelly Jones laid her hand on his shoulder. That got his attention.

His hand went limp, and I could breathe again. His face was pallid except for some spots of high color, and I could feel how cold it was where her hand had touched him. Dragon looked up at his niece, and when he locked eyes with her he gasped and rolled off me. Fallen over on his side, he was at a loss for words, but she bent down and whispered something in his ear. He was crying now.

Nelly Jones - her ghost - rose and turned to me as I lay on the ground next to her weeping uncle. I was in bad shape, but pretty sure that something important had happened. I looked into her dark, dead eyes and couldn't see myself reflected there. Maybe I was not important in the grand scheme of things. Maybe a douchebag in a nautical hat getting closure is more important than me living or dying. At that moment I was fine with it. Nelly Jones smiled. She leaned down and kissed me on the mouth, which was wonderful even though it was icy cold and I was sure I would lose my lips like an Everest climber afterwards. She stood and looked at us, then abruptly disappeared.

That was good. I let myself drift off.