

The Last Wilkie's

by Jon Steiner

By the time she got to Ocelot Springs, Erin's hands ached from clenching the steering wheel. The last hour of driving had been harrowing, all fog and sporadic downpours, the road getting worse and worse as it wound its way up into the gloomy hills. It was only just after midday, but it felt like dusk was already settling in. The air carried a wet chill. Even the trees looked hostile.

The town itself, Ocelot Springs, was a real backwater. Erin drove right through it from one end to the other, trying in vain to find a street name or building number. A couple of old toothless locals gawked at her as she cruised by, or maybe it was the shiny rental car that was drawing their attention. The few other cars Erin saw were older than hers by a couple of decades. Bits of trash drifted around in the street. None of the shops were open and Erin couldn't really tell what they'd be selling if they were. No chain stores or anything, not even a proper petrol station. At one point she had to brake hard when a pack of dogs swarmed across the road.

And then she was out the other end of town and back in the dark woods. Had she missed it? Must have done. She was looking for a safe place to turn around when she spotted the familiar blue and yellow sign up ahead: Wilkie's. But to her astonishment, the sign was *on*. Lit up. Aglow. Shining through the gloom like a beacon. As she got closer, she could see lights on inside the restaurant. There was a car parked out front. She could see people inside. Customers at a table, eating. Someone in a Wilkie's uniform was cleaning the windows.

The place was open for business.

Her heart pounding, Erin drove slowly past the place. A hundred metres down the road she pulled over and switched off the engine. She sat there, no idea what to do next. The place was *open*! How was that *possible*?



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Her first solo trip and already she was going to have to call Gary for help. This job was supposed to be a piece of cake, just a straight inventory and assessment of saleable assets and then back out of town before the sun went down. Back at her hotel with a bottle of wine and some takeaway in time for the seven o'clock news. She so badly wanted to prove herself just as capable as any of the others. But this—this was a situation unheard of. What would the others do?

Given that the Wilkie's Family Restaurant Corporation had ceased to be an entity in any way, shape or form some ten months previously, it was quite extraordinary to find this one still fully operational. But did she have any authority to shut it down? Even if she did, who was going to listen to her? Who did have the authority? Should she summon the police? Were there police in Ocelot Springs? She supposed she should speak to the people running the place. But what was she supposed to tell them? Erin had absolutely no idea, so she fished her phone out of the briefcase she'd bought specially for this trip and tried to ring the office. But there was no reception, which was not exactly a surprise.

She twisted around to look back at the restaurant, and spotted a payphone at its side. A *payphone!* Who has those anymore? She slipped out of the car and into the drizzle, then hurried back up the road like a commando, approaching from the flank to secure the phone. To her great relief, there was a dial tone. She followed the instructions to make a reverse charge call. Linda answered, accepted the charges, and put her through to Gary.

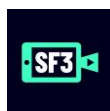
"Erin!" he guffawed. "You find the place okay? What's with the reverse charge call? You lose your phone again? So. Talk to me. What have we got? Anything worth a damn?"

She cupped her hand over the mouthpiece and spoke softly. "Gary, the place is still open."

"Oh, yeah, that happens sometimes. Don't worry about it. Franchisee's supposed to secure the door when they leave, but they forget, or don't care."

"No! I mean it's open for business. Lights on, people inside."

"Oh! Must be some locals using it as a community hangout or something. They're trespassing on private property. You're going to need to get a police constable. Just show them the papers."



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"No, Gary, it's operating as a *Wilkie's*. People are eating in there. Employees in blue and yellow uniforms are working. The sign is all lit up."

"What? But I don't—how could they—that's just not—I can't..."

Erin had never heard Gary flustered before. In a strange sort of way, it made her giddy with delight.

"So wait," he finally said, "where are you now?"

"I'm right outside! I'm on a payphone right in the fucking car park!"

"And you're sure you're at the right place?"

She clenched her fist around the receiver. "Of course it's the right place. What the fuck? Do you think I'm a complete idiot or something?"

"Well so have you gone inside and talked to anyone?"

"No! I don't know what the hell I'm supposed to say. That's why I'm calling you. What do I tell them?"

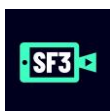
"Tell them they're not supposed to be there! They're going to have to shut down right away. They've got no liability insurance! What if someone gets injured? We could be in some serious shit!"

"But why would they listen to me? If I walk in and say you've got to get out of here, they're not just going to say oh, okay, and go, are they? I feel like I'm going to need some backup here. I'm not sure I'd trust the cops around here though. I don't even know if this town has any cops."

"Erin, listen to me. They don't own the place anymore, we do. Okay? The fridges, fryers, grill, the seats and tables, the ground it's on, whatever that's worth, it's all ours now. We're just doing our job here. Have confidence in your authority. You've got the files with you, right? Look up the franchise holder's name—"

"Yeah, I did already, it's Daniel Corby."

"Great, okay, so just go in there and find the guy, tell him the deal. *Wilkie's* is no more. I mean, does he not know that? We sent him letters! He must have gotten the letters! Ask him why he never responded. Tell him it was assumed that he'd abandoned the place,



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that's why we've left it so long. That and its remote location. Jesus. I don't even know how he's managed to keep it running, but he's got to close right away. And then do your inventory and report back. We need to close the books on Wilkie's before the end of the financial year. All right?"

She sighed and closed her eyes. "This is fucked up, Gary. This was supposed to be an easy one."

Gary put on his patronising voice. "Yes, Erin, I understand that this is an unexpected turn of events. But you have been assuring me for quite some time that you're ready to step into the role of field assessor, and that requires an ability to think laterally, to demonstrate initiative, and to adapt to changing situations on the ground."

Erin picked at the deteriorating rubber seal around the payphone's glass. "There's something really creepy about this place. I don't feel very comfortable with this whole scenario."

"Well I don't really know what alternatives we have at this point, Erin. I don't think it would make sense to just have you come back home and then book someone more senior to go out there and deal with the situation. I'd lose a lot of time and money that way. Can you at least just go talk to the guy? Don't make your trip a complete waste? They're not going to kill you and chop you up and turn you into burgers, for chrissake!"

"All right, fine. Fuck. Fine. I'll talk to them."

Erin hung up, took a deep breath, then walked around to the front and entered the restaurant.

Two old men sat at a table, eating burgers and fries. A young girl in uniform was going from table to table refilling napkin dispensers while a young man, also in uniform, was putting a fresh bin liner into a bin. The place was clean and well lit and the walls still bore the placards advertising the special limited-time-only offers from ten months earlier. Free *Captain Slamdunk cup* with the purchase of any value meal. That film had long since come and gone from theatres. It was like the place was frozen in time, preserved at the moment of the franchise's demise. Erin had visited dozens of Wilkie's around that time, and it was a surreal trip down memory lane to be back in an operational one now. She



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looked up at the menu and noticed that some alterations had been made: several items were covered over with electrical tape, and some new non-standard Wilkie's items had been added. Where new words and letters were needed they had been carefully crafted by hand to match the existing ones.

Upon Erin's entrance, the girl had set aside the napkin dispensers and gone around behind the counter. She beamed brightly. "Welcome to Wilkie's! May I take your order?"

Startled, Erin froze, and then stammered, "Um...yes. I'll have a Little Wilkie's meal." Her usual order. The words just came automatically.

"Certainly! And to drink?"

"Um...a Diet Coke, please."

"Would you like to upsize your meal for only an additional forty cents?"

"Thanks, no, that's fine."

"Can I interest you in an ice cream sundae this afternoon?"

"No, thank you."

The girl rang up the sale. "Your total today is six dollars and sixty cents."

Erin fished a ten out of her bag and handed it over. Through the burger chute behind the girl, she could see that the young man who'd been putting in the bin liner was back in the kitchen, watching for the order to come up on his video monitor. He now went into action, disappearing from view. The girl gave Erin her change and said, "Go on and take a seat, ma'am, I'll bring it out to your table."

Erin went and sat by the window. The two old men stared at her unabashedly, chewing their food. She pulled the Wilkie's file out of her briefcase and flipped through until she found the dossier on the franchise holder. Name: Daniel Corby. Age: 56. It didn't have much more to say about him, other than that in 1993 he had attended the requisite six-week training and induction required for all Wilkie's franchise holders worldwide. The Ocelot Springs Wilkie's had opened the following year. This was his only Wilkie's.



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She stared out the window into the gloomy wet afternoon. She didn't know how to tackle this situation. She was really more of a research and support person, spreadsheets and presentations. But fieldwork had seemed so glamorous. Flying Business Class, staying in hotels, driving rental cars, wearing a suit. Carrying a briefcase. She'd pestered Gary incessantly to let her tag along with other field assessors, and finally to go on her own. And now here she was, way out of her depth. Why had she ordered food? Why not just ask to speak to Daniel Corby? To buy some time, perhaps? What was that going to accomplish? The truth was, she'd panicked.

Several minutes had passed. She craned her neck towards the counter and noticed that the girl was cutting larger napkins down to size with scissors and stamping the trademark "W" on them with a rubber stamp. The girl glanced up and caught Erin watching her. "Shouldn't be much longer," she chirped. "Thanks for your patience!" A burger and a container of fries slid down the chute and a bell rang. The girl placed them on a tray that already had a Diet Coke on it, then brought the tray over to Erin's table and set it before her. "Here you are, ma'am. Can I get you anything else?"

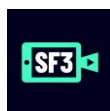
"Uh, no, thanks." Erin examined the items before her. Her Diet Coke was indeed in a Captain Slam dunk cup as advertised, but it was just a cheap plastic orange cup onto which the Captain Slam dunk character had been carefully drawn by hand with a Sharpie. Her burger was in a box that seemed to have been made from a manila folder, cut down and assembled with sticky tape, stamped with the same W logo. The fries appeared to be hand-cut potatoes, and were served in a sleeve constructed from a paper towel tube. Everything was served on a photocopied tray liner. *Help Wilkie save Lady Pickles from the Munchkins by connecting the dots.* Erin took a small, cautious bite of the burger. It tasted peculiar, kind of sour. She put it down, sighed heavily, then got up and approached the counter.

The girl looked concerned. "Is your meal all right, ma'am?"

"Is Daniel Corby around? Can I see him?"

The girl froze, her eyes wide. "I'm sorry, he's not here at the moment. Can I ask what it's in reference to?"

"Do you know how I can contact him?"



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Without taking her eyes off Erin, the girl shouted, "Victor!"

From the back came the young man's voice. "What?" When the girl didn't reply, he came up the passageway to the front, looking concerned. "What is it?"

"This lady wants to talk to Dan."

Victor shot the girl an angry look, then turned to Erin. "What do you want with Dan?"

His aggressive tone was unsettling. Her heart thundered in her chest. She tried to think how Gary would handle this situation. He would probably cock a cheeky eyebrow and keep a twinkle in his eye, but go for the throat. She tried to form her mouth into a confident smirk. "I have some business to discuss with him. Of a confidential nature."

"Well, he's not here. Don't know when he will be. He's not around much."

"Can you give me a number where I can reach him?"

"No. He's not interested in any business of yours. You should just leave." He took the girl's hand and led her down the passageway to the back. Erin could hear agitated whispering, then nothing. She waited a few minutes but they did not reappear. She peered through the food chute to the back but couldn't see anyone, so finally she just gathered up the Wilkie's dossier and her briefcase and went back to her car.

She sat with her hands on the steering wheel, staring at the back of the restaurant in the rear view mirror. How was she supposed to talk to Corby if she couldn't find him? Maybe he was even in there right now, holed up in an office in back somewhere. So what was she supposed to do next? She thought about calling Gary again but knew he would just make her feel stupid. He always had all the answers, he always knew just what to say and do. So what would he do if he were here? She tried to picture him in the restaurant. His fat gut, his loud tie, waving his meaty finger in that Victor kid's face. He would probably just push his way behind the counter like he owned the place, which technically he actually did, and go looking for Corby. Erin couldn't imagine herself doing that in a million years.

As she sat there, an old utility truck came rattling past her down the road and veered in to park at the back of the building. A man in a raincoat climbed out and opened



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the tailgate, then stood examining the contents. Victor erupted from the back door of the restaurant and spoke animatedly to the man, pointing at Erin's car. The girl came out as well, and stood anxiously wringing her hands. The raincoat man listened to Victor, throwing a couple of glances Erin's way. Must be Corby, thought Erin. She summoned all her courage and got out of the car.

As she crossed the road, Victor became frantic. "That's her! That's her!"

"Victor, calm yourself, please," said the man.

Erin stopped a few metres away from them. "Mr. Corby," she said. Her voice sounded high and fluty. She tried again, lower and more authoritative. "Mr. Corby. I'd like a word with you please."

Corby didn't acknowledge her. "Victor," he said, "I have obtained some meat. Would you please carry it inside and prep it for the dinner rush. Cathy, there are a couple of bags on the passenger seat containing cardboard. Take them inside and see what you can do with them. Also, I believe I found a coil we can use to fix the ice machine." His gaze briefly swept over Erin and then back to Victor. "Where is Nino?"

"Hasn't been in yet today," said Victor.

"All right, that's fine then. Now, both of you please do as I asked."

As Victor and Cathy retrieved their respective parcels from the truck, Corby took a small piece of wire out of his pocket and examined it.

Victor, a large canvas sack slung over his shoulder, paused on his way back into the restaurant and looked anxiously at Corby, who, with only the briefest of gestures, waved him along. Cathy followed quickly behind him.

Corby replaced the wire in his pocket and looked at his watch. "Hmm," he said to no one in particular, stroking his moustache and gazing off down the road. "Nino."

"Mr. Corby," said Erin again.

At last he brought his gaze around and fixed it upon her. He had strange blue eyes that made Erin jittery. She waited for him to speak, but after several seconds he only



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nodded politely, then walked quickly into the restaurant and pulled the door shut behind him.

“Hey!” Erin ran to the door but found it locked. She pounded on it. “Mr. Corby!” She felt like an idiot. Who was she kidding? She’d wanted so badly to be more than just an office worker, but it was obvious she was way out of her depth. She trudged over to the payphone and picked up the handset. What was she going to tell Gary this time? What was he going to say? She couldn’t face it. She briefly entertained the idea of just getting in the car and driving away. In two and a half hours she could be back in her hotel room, sinking into a blissful hot bath. Wine. Takeaway. Television. But then she thought of having to explain that to Gary. *You found the guy, and then you just left?!*

So she slammed the handset back down, walked around to the front of the building and went inside.

Corby was standing behind the counter. With his raincoat off, she could see that he was well-groomed, wearing a pale yellow polo shirt, and had a name tag that said “DAN” and beneath that, “Manager.” As she approached, a huge grin spread across his face. His strange eyes twinkled.

“Welcome to Wilkie’s, home of the quality family dining experience,” he said. “May I take your order?”

“I’m Erin MacMillan from Williamson and Farmer, Mr. Corby,” she said. “As you may be aware, we are an administration and insolvency firm. We have made numerous attempts to contact you regarding—”

“Yes, Wilkie’s is committed to providing quality food at a price that families can afford. Just look for the blue and yellow W, and you know you will get great food, great service and great value.” The smile remained in place.

“Sir, please, I need you to listen to me. I don’t know how you have managed to keep this place running without any support or supplies from corporate headquarters, but I’m sure you are aware that the Wilkie’s Foodservice Group has filed for bankruptcy and gone into liquidation. I mean...you know that, right?”



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“Can I interest you in a Wilkie’s Meal today, ma’am? It comes with a free *Captain Slamdunk* cup!”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Corby, but your restaurant is going to have to close down. Uh, effective immediately. This building and everything in it are now the property of Williamson and Farmer and our obligation to the creditors is to liquidate all assets and distribute the proceeds. There’s also the matter of operating without liability insurance.”

Corby blinked a few times. His eyes drifted to the windows at the front of the store, looking expectantly outside, then back to Erin again. His smile slowly ebbed. He sniffed and cleared his throat.

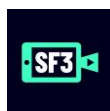
Erin tried again. “Mr. Corby?”

“Come this way,” he said finally. “Let’s talk in my office.”

Erin went around behind the counter and followed him down the passageway to the back. The walls were covered with motivational posters, reminding employees that our customers are the top priority and that service should always come with a smile. As they crossed the large prep room, she had a brief opportunity to look over what equipment there was. She saw things held together by duct tape and wire, odds and ends not standard to the Wilkie’s kitchen fit-out.

“This way, please,” said Corby and motioned her into a small office. He sat down at the desk and pushed some papers off a chair to make a place for her. The shelves were stacked with file folders and binders. There was a large poster mounted directly over the desk. It showed a lion in mid stride. The text read, *Every morning the gazelle knows it has to outrun the fastest lion in order to survive. Every morning the lion knows it has to outrun the slowest gazelle in order to survive. Whether you’re a lion or a gazelle—when you wake up, you’d better hit the ground running.*

Erin cleared her throat and placed her briefcase in her lap. She tried to think how Gary would handle himself in this situation. Very professional, but a bit intimidating. She took a stern tone. “Now, Mr. Corby,” she began. “Did you not receive any of the letters sent to you by my firm? Is your telephone no longer connected? Numerous attempts have been made to contact you. I have to wonder why you neglected to respond and continued



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to run your store when surely you must have been aware that the company had gone into receivership.” Her heart was beating rapidly and she was trembling a bit. What made it worse was that Corby obviously could see how nervous she was, and planned to exploit her weakness. His eyes narrowed and he smiled slyly.

“Ms. MacMillan,” he said, “Wilkie’s is more than just a corporation. It’s a mindset. It’s a way of life. It transcends matters of money and corporate law.”

“If you wanted to keep your restaurant open you could have purchased it at a very fair price, changed the name and run it independently. That was clearly outlined in our letters to you. Plenty of franchise owners did just that. But there are procedures to be followed. Cutting off communication and becoming essentially a renegade branch of Wilkie’s is not...it’s just...well...it’s not acceptable. And kind of crazy, actually.”

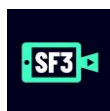
“Ah. So you think I’m crazy.”

“I don’t know you, Mr. Corby. It’s not my place to make that judgement. But it seems to me rather unprofessional to ignore business correspondence and flout the proper procedures.”

Corby drew himself up indignantly. “I have been nothing but exemplary in my professionalism since the day I opened this restaurant. My establishment has been a model for others to follow. We have consistently achieved very high customer approval ratings, and have received no fewer than fourteen commendations of merit from corporate headquarters. Ms. MacMillan, when I attended the Wilkie’s orientation program prior to opening this restaurant, I took the lessons I learned there to heart. I came to understand that Wilkie’s is more than just a business; it is a way of being that must transcend our work hours and apply to our entire existence. By being Wilkie’s people all the time, we make it a Wilkie’s world. I have applied the Wilkie’s principles I learned there to the best of my abilities every single day since. If others have now chosen to turn their backs on Wilkie’s, that is their choice. But not a choice I am prepared to make.”

“It’s not a question of choice! It’s over, Mr. Corby. Wilkie’s is gone.”

“It’s not gone, Ms. MacMillan. This is Wilkie’s right here. You are sitting in Wilkie’s right this very moment, are you not?”



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“You’ve lost touch with reality! Look around you. This place is barely operational. It’s held together by duct tape! You’re running a ten-month-old promotion! *Captain Slamdunk* isn’t playing in theatres anymore! It’s ancient history. *Captain Slamdunk 2* is about to come out.”

Corby looked over Erin’s shoulder and smiled. “Nino! It’s about time.”

Erin turned around. A large man was standing in the doorway. A very large man.

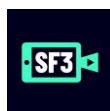
“Sorry I’m late, boss,” said Nino. “I got these.” He held up three dead rabbits. Blood dripped softly on the floor. Erin remembered the peculiar taste of the bite of burger she’d taken and her stomach heaved.

“Very good, Nino. Just leave them on the prep table, Victor will take care of them. I have something I need you to do.” He levelled his gaze at Erin. “Would you excuse me for a moment?”

Corby sidled past Erin out of the office and pulled Nino into a storage room where they began a hushed conversation.

Erin tried to calculate her chances of making it to the front of the restaurant and out the door before they could catch her. But even if she got out the door, she wouldn’t necessarily be home free. She’d need to get to her car. If she could get out the back door she’d have a better chance, but she wasn’t sure where it was. Would they even give chase? Was she actually in danger or was she being completely paranoid? Maybe she could just walk out. But then how would she explain to Gary that she’d been in the back of the store, talking to Corby in his office, and then had just left?

She stood up and took a few steps out of the office, into the prep room, and was finally able to have a good look around. They were using what looked like a gear box from an old car mounted on an engine lift as an industrial mixer. The grill was clearly not in use, as it was piled with cardboard boxes; a regular back yard barbecue stood in front of it, presumably where Victor had cooked her rabbit burger earlier. Mounted to the prep table was an old fashioned, hand cranked meat mincer. Definitely not standard issue Wilkie’s equipment—the franchisees had received burgers pre-formed and frozen, delivered weekly to all franchisees by big Wilkie’s trucks. There were boxes and boxes of canned



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goods on a large metal wire shelving unit. Not the big industrial-sized cans with the “W” logo that came in the deliveries, but regular-sized cans from the grocery store. Chopped tomatoes, pickles, sliced beetroot, sliced pineapple. On a tall shelf were stacks of empty burger boxes waiting to have burgers put in them. They were all slightly different—hand-made with sticky tape, and with the “W” stamped on them. The industrial fridge and freezer stood against the back wall, bits of duct tape evident in places. Erin had to admit some degree of respect for these people. It must have taken immense resourcefulness and ingenuity to keep the place running semi-normally all this time. It couldn’t have been easy.

A door slammed somewhere and Victor stomped into the prep room. He stopped abruptly when he saw Erin, then stared at her but said nothing as he put on a butcher’s apron and took a large cleaver off a hook. He began hacking at the rabbit carcasses, stripping off the skin and then pulling muscle off bone and stuffing the bits of flesh into the top of the meat mincer.

Erin began slowly moving towards the passageway that led up to the front of the restaurant. She wondered where Cathy was, and whether she would prove to be a friend or foe if it came down to it. She watched Victor carefully, but he was absorbed in his work. She made estimates of the number of steps down the short hallway, around the service counter, across the dining room and out the door. She inched closer to the corridor, every muscle tensed and ready to make a run for it.

Then Corby and Nino emerged abruptly from the storage room, prompting Erin to make a frantic dash. But her business shoes found no traction on the greasy floor and she skidded madly into a tall shelving unit, then landed hard on the floor. She wrenched her shoulder and felt a sharp pain on her shin. There was a clatter of metal mixing bowls as they cascaded off the shelves and onto her. She writhed madly in confusion, pain and panic on the slimy tiles. Then a pair of large meaty hands took hold of her and hoisted her to her feet.

Up close, Nino had an earthy smell, like a forest floor. Pain seared through her body—shoulder, knee, head, foot. She tried desperately to twist out of his grip, kicking at him,



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which only made him hold her more securely. “*Hold still*,” he said. After a while, she became exhausted, all the fight drained out of her. She hung limply in his hands, resigned.

“Bring her to the office,” said Corby.

Nino hustled her into the office and put her in the desk chair. He wrenched open a large desk drawer and pulled out a first aid kit. As she stared at the poster of the lion and gazelle, he dabbed at the cuts on her head and legs with cotton balls, then bandaged the gash on her shin. “Got to be careful in a foodservice environment,” he told her as he worked. “Walk, don’t run. Think before you act. Safety first. Accident prevention is your number one intention. Wash your hands before returning to work.”

Corby came in and handed her one of the hand-drawn *Captain Slam dunk* cups. “Thought you might be thirsty.” She took it and guzzled it down before even considering what it might be. She peered into the empty cup suspiciously as she pondered the taste. It was Diet Coke. It did make her feel better.

“I’m afraid we’re going to have to leave you on your own now,” said Corby. “The dinner rush is about to hit us and I’m going to need all hands on deck for a couple of hours.”

“Dinner rush,” said Erin vaguely.

“The sawmill lets out at five,” Corby explained.

And so Erin was left on her own in the office. She sat there for half an hour in a semi-stupor, staring at the lion and thinking, what would Gary do now? She became aware of an increasing din coming from the front of the store. It sounded busy. She wanted to see this. She got to her feet and limped out of the office. Victor was at the barbecue, furiously cooking burgers, while Nino sliced potatoes into fries and threw them in handfuls into the fryers, then prepared buns in boxes lined up on the table. Neither noticed her as she slipped past and hobbled up the corridor.

She peered around the corner and saw Corby at the counter, taking orders. There was a long line of rough-looking men, tired and grubby. Some women and children sat at tables. The place was packed. Corby radiated cheerful energy, grinning his bright grin as he took each order, greeting his customers by name. Cathy scurried around behind him, fetching



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drinks and putting food on trays as Victor slid burgers and fries down the chute from the back.

A man with a scraggly beard and a couple of teeth missing reached the head of the queue. "Things are a bit tight this week, Dan," he said sheepishly. "I was laid up sick for a couple of days. Can you float us tonight and I'll square it next week?"

Corby held up a hand. "Of course, Walter, that's no problem at all. Are Suzie and the boys dining with you today?" Corby looked out at the dining room, spotted a woman and young boy at a table and waved. They waved back. "So that'll be the Wilkie's Family Combo Deal?" Walter nodded. Corby punched the order into the register.

Next in line was a father and son. "Big Wilkie's Deluxe Meal for me," said the father, "and a Junior Wilkie's Meal for Tommy."

"Does it still come with a *Captain Slam dunk* cup?" asked the boy.

"Certainly does!" said Corby. He leaned in conspiratorially and lowered his voice. "Which character are you missing from your collection?"

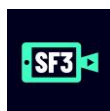
The boy thought for a moment, placing a finger on his lips. "Umm..." He held up the finger. "I still need Starla."

Corby nodded. He hunted through the cups under the counter for a moment, then called Cathy over and whispered something to her. Cathy nodded and hurried towards the back. She was startled to encounter Erin as she rushed past into the corridor. She froze for a moment, not sure what to do, but then continued to the back. Erin followed her, limping back down the corridor.

Cathy was hurriedly drawing a figure on a cup with a Sharpie. As Erin approached, she explained, "We ran out of Starlas." She held up the cup to show a shaky drawing of a woman with an hourglass figure spinning a basketball on her finger. "Not bad, right?"

"So many customers," said Erin. "Is this usual?"

"On weeknights, yeah," said Cathy. "Used to be even busier, when the copper mine was still open." She glanced towards the front briefly. "Can I show you something?" she asked.



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“Sure,” said Erin. “What?”

“Just a second!”

Cathy ran to the office. There was the sound of a drawer slamming and she ran back holding a framed photograph. It showed the Ocelot Springs Wilkie’s with a full complement of staff standing out front, all in brand new uniforms.

Erin took the photograph into her hands and stared at it. Corby stood proudly at the front of the group, looking much younger. Victor stood beside him, sticking out his tongue and making a peace sign. Cathy pointed to a wispy teenager at the back. “There’s me,” she said. “This was the day we opened. Dan was a minister before, you know. But his church had to close.”

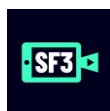
From out front, Corby shouted, “*Cathy! Need you up here!*”

“Got to get back,” said Cathy. She hurried back up the corridor with the cup.

Victor and Nino were hard at work. Victor was scooping minced meat out of a plastic tub, forming it into patties and throwing them on the barbecue as fast as he could, then flipping the ones he had on the go. A row of homemade burger boxes was lined up on the prep table, each with half a bun in it. Nino pulled peeled potatoes out of a tub of water and sliced them expertly into fries. As Erin watched, he pulled up a fryer, dumped out its contents and salted them, then began scooping them into homemade cartons and sending them through the food chute to the front.

Erin leaned heavily against the wall. All she wanted now was quiet. To lie down, to slip into the oblivion of sleep. Victor noticed her wobbling. “You okay?” he called over. She nodded. She hobbled into the office, put the photograph on the desk and picked up her briefcase. She found the back door and pushed her way out. It was pouring rain and only the faintest hint of light was left in the sky. She got to her car, got in, brushed the wet hair out of her eyes. Found the keys, started the engine, turned around and drove back in the direction of Ocelot Springs. The Wilkie’s car park was full. The place looked cheerful. Warm and well-lit amid the dark, foreboding trees.

As she drove back through Ocelot Springs, she saw no signs of life. No lights were on, nobody was out, she didn’t pass a single other car.

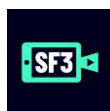


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An interminable two and a half hours later, she stumbled up to the door of her hotel room. There was a message from reception taped to it. *Anticipating update ASAP on status of Ocleot Springs*. She pulled her phone out of her briefcase and checked it. Ten missed calls. She could picture Gary drumming his fat fingers impatiently, the way he always did when the world failed to meet his expectations. She pulled the note down, opened the door, flung her briefcase and phone onto one bed and sprawled onto the other.

She lay there, savouring the quiet. The only sound was the distant growl every now and then of a semi-trailer roaring past out on the highway. She tried to make sense of the day, though her brain was too exhausted to think straight. There was something admirable about Corby and his gang, the way they managed to keep that Wilkie's running. She couldn't see how they could do it much longer though. It had to end eventually. But that town was nearly dead; the Wilkie's was the only thing it had going for it. But then was it her place to try to save some hillbilly mountain town? What was she supposed to do now? Could she live with being responsible for shutting down the only restaurant in Ocelot Springs? What would become of Corby? What would become of Victor, and Nino, and poor Cathy? She thought about flying home the next day, going in to the office and quitting. How satisfying it would be to see Gary's face! But then what would she do? She had mortgage payments to make. And that Wilkie's was going to get shut down anyway, whether she was part of the process or not. And surely Corby knew that it had to end sooner or later. But it just didn't sit right with her for loud, fat Gary to come out on top, as he always did, while Corby and the others lost the only thing they had going for them. Then again, a lot of rabbits would be spared. Was that a good thing or a bad thing?

She didn't feel like she'd slept, but she must have, as she suddenly became aware that the sky was light. The crash of dumpsters being emptied outside had brought her back to consciousness. There was a cacophony of birds chirping coming from the trees out in the car park. She rolled onto her side. The gash on her shin ached. She'd probably get some horrible raging infection.



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She got up and put the kettle on to make herself an instant coffee. The message from Gary was on the floor. She picked it up and threw it in the bin. Then she pulled it back out, tore it into four pieces, and threw the pieces in the bin.

She made the coffee and stood at the window, sipping it and gazing out across the car park at the highway and the industrial park on the other side.

Whether you're a lion or a gazelle—when you wake up, you'd better hit the ground running.

Like it or not, you're a lion. So be a fucking lion.

She picked up the phone and dialled reception. "Yeah, hi, can you get me the number for the sheriff's office, please."



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