

Home	<h2 style="text-align: center;">It Keeps Going Down</h2> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>by Michael Cocchiarale</i></p> <p>The one thing Donnie loved was a fancy hotel, and when the young blonde in the silver buttoned uniform handed him his key with a coy, "Here you are Mr. Cunningham. Enjoy your stay!" he was on the verge of thinking that all his dreams stood a good chance of coming true.</p> <p>In the room, Donnie hung his white shirt and sports coat in the closet. He angled the bottle of champagne inside the compact fridge. He turned down the king-sized bed Laura would warm up later on that night. Downstairs, with time to kill before his son arrived, he took a seat in the lobby, enjoying the Christmas tree winking by the front entrance, a family in holiday sweaters drawing complimentary beverages from brass urns, the swift rush of the waterfall behind him. On his left was the bar, dark and lovely even at this time of day. All the years he'd lived in Corning, and he'd never stepped foot in this magnificent—this restful—place. For a moment, Donnie pretended he'd been invited back, the small town guy made good.</p> <p>Paul was right on time. Donnie hardly recognized his son at first, the shaggy, beard-burdened head swiveling this way and that, a long black coat flapping like a wounded bird. But there was that unmistakable stride, every step an attempt to span a stretch of standing water. As he rose to hail him, Donnie noticed that Paul was not alone. There was a wife or something—a pale little woman in thick frames, stretch pants, and a black beret. Attached to her hand was maybe a three year old boy, his eyes brown triangles of fear.</p> <p>"You're shitting me," Donnie said, looking down at the boy who shrunk against the leg of the mother.</p> <p>"Don't swear in front of the child," Paul said.</p> <p>Donnie couldn't even find his son's mouth amid all that swirling, angry hair.</p> <p>"Would you, I don't know, like a drink? Celebrate the . . . the new arrival?" Donnie opened his arms, offering the place as his own. "Do You Hear What I Hear" tinkled through a speaker overhead.</p> <p>"We have quite a bit of shopping to do."</p> <p>The wife added: "All the best deals are today."</p> <p>Donnie watched the revolving door spin the three back into the snow, which was falling now as quickly and finely as sand. He had expected some kind of punishment from his son, but not such blunt and final cruelty. After all, he'd been a good father for years—a faithful husband too, unlike any number of his friends. When the money was there, he bought his wife necessary things, took her and Paul on trips up to Seneca Lake and even to the City that one time for the Phantom everyone had to see. When the boy wanted to play the viola instead of second base, he said "you do what you gotta do."</p> <p>It had been a good life—Donnie would argue "ideal," almost—until one day, out of the blue, his wife began forgetting things she'd just said and done. He</p>
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took her to see a series of specialists, the last of whom talked not about cures but about slowing things down, seeing a counselor, preparing for the inevitable. He also said, "never underestimate the power of prayer," and Donnie almost punched him in the face.

At home, fresh from the diagnosis, his wife put the kettle on for coffee. She dropped two spoons of sugar into his mug, proud to have remembered that was just what he liked. Then, clearing her throat, she asked quietly for a divorce.

"Are you?—" he stammered. "Do you think I could?—"

Donnie's wife stopped him with a hand. There was no way on earth she was going to put her loved ones through something like this.

"Send Paul money," she said. "When the time comes, Cynthia will know what to do." That was the extent of her plan.

The kettle breathed over blue fire. It ticked and knocked and came to boil. His wife folded her hands. Her eyes were tearless and calm, and Donnie wondered if she'd already forgotten what she'd said. The kettle whistled, and he put fingers to his mouth—bars that certain words would soon begin to bend.

Days later, after the shock wore off, he began to consider the plan. A few years earlier, Cynthia—the born again sister, the happy-go-lucky martyr—had taken their mother home to die. When the time came, she'd gladly take in Paul, make sure he finished high school. Donnie could have done this, he supposed, but women were, as a rule, much better with children. And besides, hadn't he been in Paul's life long enough to make his mark? Yes, sure—the more he thought about it, the more there seemed to be a sense to it all. But for the long winter weeks that followed, the plan remained a wild fantasy, preposterous as science fiction.

One Friday afternoon, his shift at the glass factory done, Donnie found himself creeping past the bar where he'd meet his buddies for a beer or two. He turned onto Route 17 and drove the speed limit all the way to Binghamton. In a fast food restaurant, he blew on coffee. He sipped on it, some more and some more, and when it was gone the empty cup was like a confirmation. He drove out of the lot and, veering into the fast lane, plunged down, down, down to the Jersey shore, where an old acquaintance from his construction days had more work than he could handle. Once settled, he only called his wife to say the necessary papers were on the way. He never wrote, other than to send checks to Paul for the undergraduate degree he'd never even finish. Some of the checks were cashed, others were not. Donnie, a new life unfolding, decided not to think about what that might mean.

So why start doing so now? Shaking off the nonsense with his son, Donnie headed to the bar for a gin and tonic. When the drink was placed in front of him, he was sad for a moment to see how clear it was, how simple and ineffectual. He tested it with a long, steady drink. Not bad; in time, it might do the job. A newspaper was in pieces at his left, and he picked up each section for awhile: Foreclosure and gang fighting throughout the dreary front pages; East over Watkins Glen in the Tip-Off Tourney; venison recipes just in time for deer season, which made him think of the annual outing with Al Lawton, who was probably gutting a buck as Donnie sat here with his gin. Half-heartedly, he paged through the Classifieds long enough to know there were no jobs

here either.

Donnie ordered another and checked his watch. Laura wouldn't finish her shift for another hour. And then, of course, she'd have to shower and slip on that nice dress he'd sent the previous week. As fastidious as she was, she might not arrive for another two hours or more. Donnie hadn't come to see his son, but the shorter-than-expected interview left him with a giant hole in the itinerary.

"Another?" the barmaid asked.

"Please," he said cheerily. He was going to make a real effort to enjoy the luxury for which he paid.

A college football game was ending on the plasma screen above. A coach stood over a petite woman with a microphone.

"The kids out there . . . I can't say enough . . ." The coach rubbed his forehead with a palm. "We just ran out of time."

The barmaid laughed. "What were they going to do with more time? Toss another pick?"

Donnie shrugged.

"They lost, am I right? I don't know much about this dumb game, but 28 beats 23 every single time."

"That's that Avery creep," an old man at the end of the bar explained. A white, sloppily applied patch on his cheek made him look like a pirate who missed the point.

"Brainless asshole ruined the program at Illinois—they're on probation now. It won't be long—"

Donnie shifted on the bar stool. It was true he had not made all the possible sacrifices his wife's illness had called for, but he did give up an excellent job at the glass works. He'd been at the Glassworks since 73, had four weeks of vacation, health insurance, and a benefits package second to none. He'd given up status. For years, when he strode down Market for the Fourth of July parade, people—total strangers—would slip off the curb with eager, flag waving kids to thank him for his service. He'd given up his only child, the smart, awkward kid who turned into a beast with terrible hair. And his grandson too, the fearful boy who would remember him (if at all) as some shell-shocked fool in a fancy hotel lobby. Donnie ground his teeth against a chunk of ice. If he'd gotten away with anything, it certainly hadn't been much.

"Charge it to your room?" the barmaid asked.

"No, no," he said. "I've got cash." He fumbled in his wallet, tossed two bills onto the bar and added a third just to hear the barmaid cry "oh!"

Donnie left, buoyed by his beneficence. At the elevator, though, all his enthusiasm leaked away. Eyes closed, he leaned against a wall of the box that lifted him to the second floor. The corridor was silent, filled with identical doors. The door to the room next to his was open, a vacuum like a sentry

standing out front. He peeked in just as the housekeeper was drawing the blinds, an act that made him remember his wife on their honeymoon at Niagara Falls. He'd ordered room service, expensive as hell, and was somewhere between elation and regret when she awakened from a nap.

They sat out on the balcony to watch water plunge and foam like champagne from a bottle. "It keeps going down," Donnie observed. She said, "No kidding," hair blowing across her smiling lips, her child-sleepy eyes. It was the moment she should have been lovely, but something about her had just missed the mark. Suddenly, he wondered: What was he doing with this woman? What was he doing in this kind of life? He smiled bravely, a white fib of the lips.

The memory tactfully refrained from following him into his room. He sat down on the bed, spreading his hands across the comforter. He checked his watch. The phone was stoic in its cradle. Donnie took a deep breath and figured it like this: Laura would arrive and there would be drinks and Filet Mignon at the hotel restaurant; dark, furious lovemaking followed by her appeals to him to move back home already; tears and pillow punching and all the rest; fitful sleep; a breakfast of French toast and forced smiles. Then Laura, the on-and-off love of his life, would be gone for another six months or more. In fifteen hours or so, Donnie would be right back at the front desk, bag over shoulder, surrendering his key to another bright blonde so she could zap it for the next customer waiting in line. In a moment, he'd be out the door—tired, cold, snow hounded, trying not to dwell on the lives he had left.

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