

**THE  
WAYS  
WE  
GET  
BY**

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# The Continuing Controversy of the Snuggle Shack

Lonnie calls and tells me my first session isn't until noon, which is great because it means the protestors will be on their lunch break and not there to remind me that I'm a Hell-bound gigolo. And a murderer. Of course, when I get to work there is a woman who has apparently brown-bagged it. She is perched on the curb with her protest sign across her lap, slowly destroying what appears to be an egg salad sandwich. She must spot my Snuggle Shack employee T-shirt, which advertises me as a "Certified Cuddler," because she bolts to attention, holding her sign high and proud. In bold, red letters, it reads: SNUGGLE SLUTS GO HOME! I want to ask this woman if she really thinks this is where I want to be. If she truly believes this is the life I always imagined for myself. But I don't. I just smile weakly and compliment her use of alliteration.

Across the street, I see a giant hulk of a man, like an armoire with limbs. He's balding on the sides, and all the way bald up top, and the midday sun glints off of his huge, smooth dome. At first, I think he's just another protestor, but he isn't holding a sign or telling me what a terrible person I am. He just stares. He stares right at me. Then the woman beside me starts screaming something about how I'm unraveling the fabric of this great and noble country, but it's hard to make out because her mouth is full of egg salad. I ignore them both and go inside.

Upstairs, I find Lonnie in his office meditating beneath his eight watercolors of the Dalai Lama, and the photo of himself and Stanley Geegland. Stanley is Lonnie's friend from rehab who bears an uncanny resemblance to Bono. He even wears the little rose-colored glasses. Mindy and Allison, our two female snugglers, are in awe of the photo, and while Lonnie never outright says it's Bono, he doesn't correct them either. If Lonnie is aware of my presence, he doesn't acknowledge it. I knock on the door jamb, interrupting what I'm sure is his inevitable Transcendence Into Enlightenment. Lonnie opens his eyes. He asks if my time away was mentally and spiritually recuperative. He asks if I am prepared to continue doing the healing work of Touch Therapy.

I say sure to both.

"I certainly hope so," Lonnie says. "The file is on the desk." Then he closes his eyes and continues his pursuit of Zen.

My first client of the day is one Sara Mews. According to her Snuggle Scenario, we'll spend an hour in the Etruscan Room, on the bed, but above the covers. She has opted out of the Ambient Aural Therapy, which is great because that includes the Maui Waterfalls Fountain. That thing always makes me have to pee. Her file tells me that Sara suffers from social anxiety and mild depression. Her intake photo shows a thin, middle-aged woman who looks like she's never smiled in her life. I've seen mug shots with more glee. Even so, she's my first client since the incident, and I can't afford another suspension. Under her Preferred Therapy Postures, Sara has said that she'd like to start as the Little Spoon but is open to some possible Face-to-Face. So that's how we begin.

Though Lonnie officially runs The Snuggle Shack, his dad is bank-rolling it. Mr. Johnson made his fortune inventing that white foam tray beef is sold on. I guess before then meat was just wrapped in butcher

paper, and the blood and other juices would leak out. Johnson's Meat Trays absorb those carnivorous reminders, and now they're in every deli and supermarket in the country. Mindy, Allison, and I call him the Meat Diaper Man, though never in front of Lonnie.

The story is that a few years ago, Lonnie was living with a vet tech and, at some point, became addicted to Canine Oxycodone. He did a few failed stints in rehab, but the last one had more of a holistic, mind-body type of approach. Lots of touch therapy and elephant gods. Whatever it was, it worked, and Lonnie's been gulping the Energy Exchange Kool-Aid ever since. He promised Dad he'd stay clean if, in return, he'd help turn his new interests into a business. Lonnie used the money to convert the offices of a defunct law firm into three Snuggle Suites, each with a couch, pillow-top bed, adjustable lighting, and those ambient nature CDs. Though we've only been open a few months, and some people are coming around to the idea of Contact Medicine, most of the town thinks we're running some kind of new-age brothel.

My session with Sara does not go well. During Big/Little Spoon, my arm keeps falling asleep, and strands of her hair drift into my mouth. I sneeze an unacceptable number of times. Though she remains stoically silent, I can tell Sara would be more relaxed if she were being buried alive. I suggest we try some Face-to-Face. This is a mistake. Snuggle Protocol requires that Face-to-Face include prolonged periods of therapeutic stroking along the shoulders and back area. Normally this is fine, but Sara has a number of pronounced moles on her back, like God, or Jesus, or whoever, super-glued a handful of Raisinets back there before forcing her into this world. Every time I begin one of my stroking maneuvers, I run up against one of Sara's moles and stop short. I'm afraid of accidentally lopping one off. Instead, I resort to a series of tentative, gentle pats that probably have little therapeutic value. It's like

frisking a baby. Sara's disappointment is profound. Her mouth curls down, deepening already prominent frown lines. Her eyes stare at me with the lidless disinterest of a reptile. It doesn't help that our faces are about six inches apart. My Snuggle Summary Evaluation does not look promising.

It doesn't take long. I'm sanitizing the slippers with disinfectant spray when Allison tells me Lonnie wants to see me in his office.

He's still in the lotus position when I arrive.

"Take a seat please," he says.

There are no chairs in Lonnie's office, just a bunch of meditation pillows and a few yoga mats. I move to sit on a purple and gold cushion, but Lonnie says no. He means I should sit on the floor. So I sit on the floor.

"I, we, all of us here are in the business of healing," he says. "And while of course the healing is our main objective, we depend on the business component to provide this service. The lights don't run on love, do they? I can't pay the rent on this place with smiles, can I?"

I admit that he cannot.

"So, until we all live in some kind of utopia where love and smiles are the primary means of commerce, we need the business. And that means clients. But you, you are driving those clients away from here, and in one case, right out of existence. At least, on this plane anyway."

Lonnie's talking about the woman I killed. Mrs. Dorothy Simone. Technically, she died of "natural causes," but that's a detail a number of people seem to be ignoring. Like the protestors. Like Lonnie.

"Each of us," he continues, "is striving for spiritual completeness. To find that harmonious balance between ourselves and our surroundings. We do this even though we know the journey will never end. Even though we know we will never be completely whole. Perhaps I've overestimated your position on this journey. Maybe, given your current

level of wholeness, being a healing influence on others is asking too much. Does this make sense?”

I nod. I nod and try to ignore that fact that I’m having my “wholeness” judged by a guy who was once addicted to puppy smack.

“However,” Lonnie says, “despite the unfortunate scene with Mrs. Simone, she did like you. As do the rest of our advanced clientele.”

He means old people.

“So, until further notice, they will make up your client list. I will handle everyone else, as well as any walk-ins. Mindy and Allison, per usual, will take care of our male clientele.”

“And when I’m not embracing the elderly,” I say, “then what? What about the rest of my shift?”

“Equally divided between Maintenance and Housekeeping.”

“C’mon, Lonnie, you know I can’t afford to change sheets all day. I need the tips.”

“Then allow me to give you the most valuable tip of all,” he says. “Unburden yourself from this negativity that is blocking your spiritual growth. Develop a calming, peaceful center, and allow it to expand and radiate out to others. Because, if you can’t, you’ll never know true serenity. Plus, I’ll fire you.”

Then Lonnie dismisses me, but not before giving me a copy of my Written Warning, which highlights the changes to my shifts. Lonnie’s signed the bottom, and I notice he’s dotted the *i* with a tiny yin and yang symbol.

A little piece inside of me dies.

I go back to work.

Mrs. Dorothy Simone was my regular nine-thirty Thursdays. She was a sweet old lady, though a bit eccentric. Always showed up for our session with her face completely made up, wearing full jewelry and

some sequined ball gown like she was off to celebrate the repeal of Prohibition. I'd remind Mrs. Simone that we couldn't snuggle with her dressed like that, and she'd bring a manicured hand to an overly rouged cheek and feign embarrassment. *You know*, she'd say, *if you want me to slip into something more comfortable, all you have to do is ask*. Then she'd call me "troublesome" and I'd give her a pair of the pajamas we keep on hand for the lawyers and businesspeople who come in on their lunch breaks and don't want to wrinkle their suits.

We went through this routine every Thursday.

The day it happened, Mrs. Simone and I were snuggling on the couch in the Stillwater Room as usual, and after some time, she put her head in my lap and I ran a brush through her sparse, pewter-colored hair. She fell asleep, leaving a drool stain on my pants that looked like an upside-down South America. I didn't mind. When our session ended, I tried to gently shake Mrs. Simone awake. Then I used a little more force. Still, I got no response. Of course Lonnie freaked, though, to me, slipping away in a painless, peaceful slumber seems like the utmost degree of relaxation, and something of a testament to my abilities as a Snuggler. Few saw it that way. Mindy wrote "The Cuddling Kevorkian" on my locker in red lipstick. Lonnie had to call for a shutdown and bribe the EMTs to take Mrs. Simone's body out the back. Even so, the protestors got wind of it, and now they have a whole other reason to hate us. We all got sent home early, which meant lost revenue, and more than a few unpleasant looks in my direction. Did anyone ask if I was okay? If I suffered any residual trauma from having a woman die in my lap? They did not. Was I praised for not mentioning the fact I wouldn't be receiving my usual twenty percent tip? I was not. What I did get was three days Reflective Suspension. I thought about quitting. Then I thought about the shameful six months of trying to shop around my degree in Television History

and the realization that I am unqualified for just about every job out there.

I'm in Laundry, trying to wrestle the duvets back into the duvet covers, when Lonnie sticks his head in and says phone. It's Gloria, the live-in I hired for Gramps. She says we have a problem. She says I need to come home right away. In the background, I hear Gramps screaming that he's going to be late. Something made of glass breaks. I tell Gloria I'll be right there.

"I have an emergency at home," I say to Lonnie, "but I'll be back as soon as I can." He reminds me to breathe and focus on my bliss.

Outside, the protestors have returned from lunch en masse. When they spot me, their faces screw up in identical grimaces of judgment. They shout and shake their signs—DOWN WITH COMPANIONSHIP, A-LONE IS BETTER THAN A-JOHN—in my face, as if hoping to fling some of their righteous wisdom on me.

Across the street is the balding armoire man from earlier. His body goes rigid when he sees me, and his face mottles like ground beef. He moves to cross the street, ignoring or oblivious to the cars that have to stop short to keep from slamming into him. Just as he's about to reach me, a man steps between us. He says that I, and the work I do, are affronts to the Lord. His tongue darts in and out of his mouth when he speaks, and flecks of spittle land on my shirt. He holds a sign with a Bible verse written on it, and though I don't know it specifically, I imagine it refers to my wayward soul and the eternal Hell-fires that will eventually consume it. The man says that I need to atone for my sinful ways, and accept Christ into my life, just as he has. Then he bops me on the head with the cardboard end of his sign.

I rush home.

When I arrive, I find Gloria chasing Gramps around the loveseat. Gramps is wearing his navy-blue pinstripe suit. Gloria looks more flustered than usual.

“I’m going to be late,” Gramps says when he sees me. “This... woman here is making me very late.”

On the floor, shattered into a dozen pieces, is one of Mom’s Adorable Occasions figurines. It is, was, a calf and a tiger cub on a teeter-totter. I never liked that one. It never made sense to me, biologically speaking. Sure, maybe their friendship works for a while because they’re young and don’t know any better. But once that tiger cub grows up and realizes where he fits in this world, and what’s expected of him, he’s going to pounce off that teeter-totter and turn that calf into veal and wallets.

“What are you going to be late for?” I ask Gramps.

“Work of course. I have to be at the office by nine.”

“No,” I say. “You don’t. You don’t have to work anymore. You’re retired.”

Gramps looks around the room, and then at Gloria and me as if we’ve invaded his dreams. “I am?” he says.

“Yeah,” I say. I take Gramps by the arm and lead him to his bedroom. His hands are trembling, and I help him remove his suit jacket and loosen his tie. It’s amazing. Most of the time the poor guy has no idea where he is, or what’s going on, but he can still tie the cleanest Half-Windsor I’ve ever seen. I’m grateful for these lightning flashes of lucidity, even as they remind me of Gramps’s daily darkness.

“This is not working,” Gloria says as she sweeps up porcelain animal pieces.

“I know,” I say, “and I’m sorry. I know he’s been challenging lately, but there’s a new medication, and maybe...”

“No, not just the Señor,” Gloria says. “You and I. I have not been

paid in three weeks. I cannot afford.”

“Please. Just give me a few more days. Here,” I say as I pull out my wallet, immediately and painfully aware of the futility of this gesture. I open it, hoping I guess that the pair of dollar bills inside have mated and reproduced. No such luck.

“Take this,” I tell her. “I’ll have some more for you soon.”

But Gloria just stares at my meager offering and smiles. She spends more on bus fare coming out here.

“I’m sorry,” she says. “I cannot.” Then she hands me the broom, grabs her purse, and walks out.

I stand at the window, hoping Gloria will change her mind or at least glance back at us one more time. She does neither. Gloria becomes, along with Sara Mews, the second woman today to walk out on me filled with disappointment.

I’m on a roll.

I microwave some hot dogs for dinner, and Gramps and I settle in to watch his favorite show, *Pre-K MMA*. We’re just in time for the main event. The announcer says today’s bout features the toughest tots this side of the Mississippi: “Tiger” Timmy Witherspoon versus Preston “The Blade” Dempsey. The Tiger looks big for his age. Gramps suspects him of doping. The fight is less mixed martial arts and more of an arms flailing, windmill type of exchange. The Blade has some good moves, but his head is too big for his body, and it keeps throwing him off balance. A couple of times the Tiger wanders off in the wrong direction and the ref has to reset.

“Your mother came to visit me last night,” Gramps says in between bites of hot dog.

This is an impressive bit of news as Mom’s been dead almost a year now.

“Really,” I say. “How’s she look?”

“She’s worried about you. She thinks you spend too much time alone. She wants you to meet a nice girl.”

“Well,” I say, “if you two somehow talk again, tell her I’m fine. Tell her I’m not lonely. I meet nice girls every day.”

We watch the rest of the fight. In the third round, The Blade trips on his own feet and bites his tongue. He cries on the mat until the ref counts him down, and the Tiger wins by Technical Knockout, and that’s that.

I’m back at work on Tuesday, which is when the van arrives from Renaissance Gardens. The RG is a top-tier assisted living facility. I’d love to move Gramps there, but that place takes some serious bucks. I can’t even afford the warped linoleum and wet bacon smells of Wavering Meadows. The protestors are pretty well behaved on Tuesdays, as most people are usually reluctant to yell at the elderly. Sure, some people still shake their signs and chant how “Hugs Beget Whoredom,” but most find it tough to sling their condemnation at someone’s Bubby while she hobbles past in her pink housecoat.

I’ve brought Gramps to The Shack with me. It seemed like the best way to keep him out of trouble. Allison says she’ll help keep an eye on him and maybe work in a free Snuggle Session if there’s time. Allison is great. She’s my girl, or she would be if she only realized how much we had in common. Her dad left, too, walking out on her and her mother and brother when Allison was just a teenager. I guess her mother couldn’t cope because, at the end of October that same year, she hung herself from the oak tree in their front yard. Allison’s little brother was the first to find her. He was too small to get her down, and none of the neighbors intervened because they thought she was an elaborate Halloween decoration. By the time Allison got home, her brother was sitting in the grass with his knees to his chest, rocking back and forth in the shadow of his mother.

He's been in and out of the nut-hut ever since.

I want to take Allison out, maybe down to Cooler's Pub. We'd talk about our respective situations. How, because of her brother, and me with Gramps, we both know what it's like to sacrifice for a loved one. How we'd do anything for them, but sometimes, usually late at night, the thought of that responsibility sits like a weight on our chest, and it's hard to breathe. And even though helping them likely amounts to the one decent thing in our lives, it also fills us with a paralyzing sense of remorse, not to mention crippling debt.

Then, maybe after all of that, we'd share a plate of potato skins.

But I don't. I don't ask Allison out. I'm too shy I guess, or afraid she'll say no. Plus, I think she likes Lonnie.

The ladies from Renaissance Gardens keep me busy all morning. One client talks about her late husband, a tugboat captain, as she rests her head on my chest. She says her hands and fingers have become so thin she's had to move her wedding ring to her thumb, and since then, nothing has felt the same. Another talks about how some of the women at the home cheat at bridge. She insists on being the Big Spoon, and every time she recounts a lost hand, she gives me an angry little squeeze. Someone's grandma, who smells like buttered toast, spends the hour telling me about the time she was propositioned by Spiro Agnew in the elevator of a Baltimore Howard Johnson's.

Things slow down in the afternoon, and Lonnie decides I should use the free time to repaint one of the Snuggle Suites. Lonnie is always finding these weird paint colors that are supposed to have healing properties and evoke some kind of therapeutic something or other. The color he's picked for Suite 3 is called Shantung. Lonnie says it's the shade of the sun just as it rises. He says it's the color of new possibilities, of seeing things in a fresh light. I say it looks yellow to me, and Lonnie

says that's exactly my problem. Then he presses some money into my palm and says two gallons ought to cover it.

I decide to take Gramps with me. I find him in the Stillwater Room, on the loveseat with Allison. His head is on her shoulder, and she is holding one of his hands in both of hers. They've got "Rain on a Tin Roof" playing as their Ambient Aural Therapy. I've always liked that one.

Allison must hear me come in, because she looks up and smiles at me. A strand of her chestnut-colored hair falls across her face.

Oh, Allison. When will our time come? When will we—free from having to sweep up the little tumbleweeds of lint and hair that collect under the beds, or having to constantly restock the scented candles because they burn down so quickly, because Lonnie is too cheap to buy the good ones—have our moment? Some time where we can talk, and not just idle chitchat, but about grander, deeper topics. And maybe, during this conversation, one of us, say me, makes a comment that while witty on the surface also speaks to a more profound, emotional understanding of things. And perhaps, in response to this witty/emotional comment, one of us, say you, laughs and gently touches my arm, letting your hand linger for just a second. When will that happen?

Allison catches me staring at her, and her eyes seem to brighten, as if lit from within.

Maybe now, I think. Maybe now is our moment. Then Gramps catches me staring.

"Who the hell is this guy?" he asks.

Maybe not.

"Hi Gramps," I say. "You having a nice time?"

He turns to Allison. "Do you know this young man?" he asks.

Gramps always refers to me as a "young man" when he doesn't recognize me.

“Sure,” Allison says. “He’s your grandson.”

Gramps stares at her, and then me, giving us the same blank look. Prerecorded rain continues to fall.

“I’ve got some errands to run,” I say. “I think you should come with me.”

Gramps starts making this low, humming noise and slowly shaking his head.

“I’ll take you to lunch,” I say.

The humming stops and his posture straightens. “Schotblatt’s?” he asks.

That is just great. Gramps doesn’t remember me, who he has known my entire life, but he can recall, with immediate clarity, the Reuben from Schotblatt’s Deli.

“Sure. Schotblatt’s it is,” I say, and off we go.

As Gramps and I exit The Shack, the protestors quiet down and step aside, creating a little path. I think, finally, I’m catching a break.

But no. The protestors aren’t stepping aside for me. They’re making room for the Bald Armoire. He stops a few feet in front of me. He’s got a look of concentration on his face that makes the skin around his eyes crinkle.

“Was it you or the other guy that done it?” he says.

“Done what?” I say.

“Killed my mama.”

Growing up, mom always said that I had a smart mouth. That I didn’t think before I spoke. But, really, it was more like thoughts came out of my mouth the same time they came into my head, and sometimes they bypassed my head entirely. Mom said that one day my smart mouth would get me in trouble.

And she was right. Because instead of apologizing, or explaining what really happened, or offering any measure of sympathy, I say this:

“Holy crap! Mrs. Simone was your mom? I never knew she had a son. In all the time we spent together, she never once mentioned you.”

I know, as the words leave my mouth, that this is probably an ill-advised response. The Armoire winces. Then he does this ragged-type breathing through his nose that makes his massive chest rise and fall. Then, as if to confirm my suspicions, he pulls a gun from the waistband of his jean shorts and shoots me.

The Bald Armoire shoots me right in the stomach. I can't believe it. The impact knocks me right on my rear, which, oddly, hurts more than the bullet and fresh hole in my gut.

The gunshot creates a panic. The protestors flee in every direction, their abandoned signs littering the sidewalk. Even The Armoire seems to have disappeared. The peace and quiet is a welcomed change, even if it, I suppose, comes at a hefty price.

I lie back and stare at the sky. There are no clouds.

After some time, I feel my shoulders and head rise, and I think this is it, my body is ascending to that vast and mysterious beyond just like movies and TV always promised. Then I'm disappointed that even death has become a cliché. Then I feel the scratch of polyester against my cheek and realize it's Gramps pulling me into his lap.

“There, there, young man,” he says as he gently pats me on the head. “Help will be along soon. Try to lie still.”

And even though it hurts my neck, I tilt my head back to look at my grandfather. He looks down at me, and smiles, and continues to stroke my hair.

“You know,” he says, “my grandson is taking me to lunch today.”

I look away. I close my eyes.

You would think that after so many times of Gramps forgetting who I am, that it wouldn't hurt anymore. But it still does.

It hurts every time.