

Jukebox at Buck's Diner

By Sam Clevesy

It all happened back when I was a kid; my first job ever. I was eager to begin making an income of my own. Independence was finally right at my fingertips. Remembering it now is sort of like trying to remember a dream; it was so long ago. From the outside, the diner was one of those old school truck stop diners from the fifty's.

A flag waved outside that read "open". I raced inside. On the inside, one word can simply describe the diner; nostalgic. Old vinyl record sleeves lined the shelves. There were autographed posters of celebrities and athletes. I couldn't help but be awestruck at the signed picture of Bobby Orr's seventy-two Bruins team. There was one thing that really stood out among the rest, a vintage jukebox. Its pristine condition grabbed my attention. The moment I noticed it, I was practically levitating towards it while reaching for change in my pocket.

I could feel the quarters in my fingertips when I heard a voice call out. "Hey, you Mike?"

Turning around, I saw that it was Buck himself. I gave a quick "yes" in response.

Buck gave a slight grin and gestured towards the back of the restaurant. "If you want to learn the ropes, you're going to want to follow me." He walked through the swinging doors to the kitchen. Of course I followed. On my way back to the kitchen, I flicked my quarter up in the air and snatched it at its peak. Confidence was filling me to the brim.

I think there is no mistaking this, so I will skip to the part of the story where the help wanted sign comes out of the window. I now stood in the back of the diner with a couple of the other cooks. The job did not pay much, but it was a start for my early working career.

The end of the week had finally come. My first pay day also came with the responsibility of locking up. For the time, it was an exciting moment.

"Hey, Mike," Buck grabbed my attention as I was cleaning off the grill. He tossed the keys as soon as my eyes met his. "I need to head out early, so why don't you lock up tonight?"

I caught the keys out of the air. "Of course", I eagerly replied.

"Okay kid, I'll see you bright and early in the morning," Buck made this clear as he headed back out to the front of the diner.

An extra shift was not something I was expecting, but I guess it comes along with closing up shop the night before. Besides, I could have taken all the extra cash this guy was willing to hand over. There would be no complaints coming from me.

I will never forget my first night alone in that diner. It is strange how your surroundings seamlessly change at night. Being alone in an unfamiliar place during that time of day can really mess with the head like that. To calm my nerves, I went back out to the front of the diner. The coin was already in my hand.

There was a grand selection on the jukebox. Each one of them seemed to be a classic. There were plenty of big band songs, bands like The Ink Spots, Dean Martin and so on. I was not sure what to choose, so I picked at random. The song starts playing; "Butcher Pete" by Roy Brown. My nerves calmed. Cleaning up the rest of the diner would be much easier. I took an extra second to admire the neon lights shining from the jukebox. Sight and sound were both magnificent.

I finally spun around, and what I saw damn near made me shit my pants. The diner was full of patrons. They were all dressed to the nines, oddly enough. Actually, that wasn't the odd part. The odd part was the era of the style; roaring twenties maybe? I wasn't sure where all of these people came from. I was still filled with shock, so when I opened my mouth to start asking questions, nothing came out. I was frozen to the spot.

The tables were pushed to the side. They were all dancing perfectly in time to the song. What the hell was I seeing? Was I hallucinating? There was no way in hell that all of these people came in here without me noticing. No god damn way. A group of people this large was not that quiet, plus there was a bell right over the door which rang every time someone came in. Something just was not right about any of this. Finally, I was able to start moving through the crowd. It was strange how they didn't notice me walking past them.

Are these people ghosts? Am I a ghost to these people? Was it time travel? There was no way the jukebox was a secret time machine. Or was it? I had too many questions. My mind was on overload.

The music stopped, and at the same moment, the dancing came to a halt. Their heads turned and their eyes became fixed on me. They had finally noticed my existence. I had felt much safer when I felt like a ghost in the middle of the makeshift ballroom.

One of the people, a woman, started walking up to me. Once again, I was frozen. I wasn't sure what was about to happen. She stopped right in front of me. When she spoke, her voice was soft and concerned. "You don't belong here," her arm extended outwards towards me with a finger pointing directly at me.

What the hell did she mean by that? I was confused. I wanted to say something, but the only thing I was able to get out was broken garbles of air. She continued to repeat the saying which started turning into a chant. The rest of the crowd began chanting along with the woman. On the inside, I was freaking the fuck out. I was drowning in the noise and it seemed like there was no escaping it.

Suddenly, the people began to fade. They had started turning into clouds of smoke; disappearing right before my eyes. The chant too was fading as each person turned into a cloud of smoke. The last to fade was the woman with her finger still extended outwards in my direction. The

smoke continued to dance through the diner until it finally surrounded me. I was engulfed by the blackness and unable to breathe.

The next thing I remember was my alarm going off at six in the morning. My body lunged straight up in a cold sweat as I gasped for air. I shut the alarm off and began struggling to remember what happened. Did I actually finish cleaning up the diner? Did I remember to lock up? More questions. It wasn't really what I wanted to focus on. I tried to put the night behind me and chalked it up to a strange dream. I needed to get ready to meet Buck at the diner for opening.

Buck was already waiting for me as I pulled up to the diner. Checking the clock in my car, I knew I wasn't late. Actually, if I remember correctly, I was a little early. I hoped he was not waiting too long for my arrival. The car was parked, I stepped out, and I began walking towards Buck with the keys in my hand.

He welcomed me by gesturing towards the door and saying, "I'll let you do the honors, Mike."

I cracked a smile as I slid the diner key into the lock. The door swung open and the bell above the door rang out as we entered. There was the jukebox staring me down as we stepped inside.

"That jukebox is pretty amazing, Buck," I started saying. "I played one of the songs on it last night. The sound is incredible for its age."

I turned around to see Buck's confused look. "You get high off of some cleaning chemicals last night or something, kid?"

"What do you mean?" I was not sure what to make of a comment like that.

"That old thing hasn't worked in years," Buck continued. "The only reason I keep thing damn thing around is for looks," my heart was in my throat as he spoke. "People are literally drawn to it specifically for the nostalgia of it."

No way, there was just no way. Then again, the night was a blur, and I either had a very peculiar dream or very vivid hallucination. He really must have thought I had gotten high on something. At that point, I really could not blame him. Carefully, I turned back to the jukebox, slowly walking towards it. It was as if the jukebox was watching me; studying my movements. Once I got to the jukebox, I looked through the little window. Right on top of the stack of records was exactly what I was expecting to see; "Butcher Pete" by Roy Brown.

There was an overwhelming feeling of nausea coming over me. I took a few steps back and fell backwards into a booth. My head fell in between my hands. There was no way for me to comprehend what was happening to me. There were no words to describe what I was feeling.

I stood up from the booth and walk back over to the jukebox. There was not a lot of time before I got a quarter into the jukebox. I pressed the button to try and get the song to play. Nothing happened.

The only sound to be heard was the continuous clicking and jamming of the button with my thumb. The jukebox was not working. I really felt as if I was going crazy.

The sound of plates being set on the table took my focus away from the jukebox. Buck was kind enough to make some breakfast for the both of us before we actually opened up shop.

"It's okay, kid," Buck was taking his place at the table. "You probably dreamed about the jukebox."

I walked back to the booth and sat in front of my plate. "I see you made the classics."

"Eggs and sausage with a side of toast," Buck said with a grin. "You can't go wrong with that."

As we began eating, I grabbed one of the menus and briefly looked it over. On the back of the menu, there was a paragraph that gave the brief history of the diner. Under the paragraph, there was a list of people who had once owned the restaurant.

"I never knew there were so many owners of this place," I used this as a conversation starter to try and get the jukebox off my mind.

"Did you know that people thought the original owner was a Satan worshiper?" He asked out of the blue. It was not at all the topic change I was expecting. "All the classic pop and rock music inside the jukebox, you know what people called it, right?" His eyes were gazing down upon me.

"The devil's music," I replied jokingly.

"That's right. There are more stories than just that, like him building this place on a Native American burial site, satanic rituals, things like that," Buck shovels down another bite of food before speaking again. "This is an old place with a lot of character," He uses his fork to point. "That jukebox you're so obsessed with is probably just as old."

I also use my fork to point back at him. "Obsessed is an overstatement." I tried to force out of my head what he had just said about the rituals and the burial ground. None of it could be true. It was just too far out there.

"Regardless," Buck started up again, "that old thing is the heart and soul of this place. It breathes life into this place. It might be a hunk of junk, but it keeps this diner going. It keeps bringing people in."

I looked back at the jukebox then back at Buck. "You talk about this place like it's a living thing."

Buck swiveled his head to look around the diner as he spoke. "I love this place. I've owned it for a long time. There's nothing I wouldn't do to make sure this place keeps running."

I could not help but notice the sinister tone as he said that last statement. The way Buck talked about the diner was as if he was talking about a child. He cared deeply for it. I understood what he meant, but I was still concerned with the tone in his voice. It sent shivers down my spine.

We finished up our meals, quickly cleaned the table and dishes and got ready for the day to begin. Slowly, all the other employees began to show up. The work day officially began. Just as soon as it began, it was also over. The whole day became a blur as I was fixed on what Buck had said during our brief breakfast.

I needed to know what the hell he meant by that. It was just so strange. I needed the opportunity to find out what he was hiding. There was just no way for me to shake the feeling that something was indeed wrong. I would need to lock up the diner again. I wanted to use the jukebox again. Something was off about everything. My curiosity was peaked, and I needed to get to the bottom of this mystery.

It felt out of place just asking to close up the diner again. I had to though. There was no other way. If I did not ask, I would never get to the bottom of it. As we began the cleanup and the other cooks and waitresses left, I gathered the courage to ask Buck, "Want me to lock up the diner again, Buck?"

Judging by the look on his face, he had to have been surprised. "You sure, kid?"

"I understand if you don't want me to," I replied.

He thought about it for a minute. "Of course, you can lock up again," He tossed the keys at me. "No getting high off of the cleaning chemicals, again."

We shared a laugh before he exited through the front of the diner. I clutched the keys in my grip as I shoved them deep into my pockets. It was time to figure out what the hell was going on in this diner.

I stormed out to the front of the diner. My heart was pounding in my chest, which I thought was about to explode. The headlights of Buck's car disappeared into the night. Coin in hand, I marched over to the jukebox once again. I let go of the coin and let it slide into the machine. I pick the song; the same song, "Butcher Pete".

As the song began to play, I quickly spun around. Nothing was there waiting for me this time. The room was empty, and the diner was still the diner, not a ballroom. I waited for several moments that felt like forever, before the frustration within me boiled over the edge. I spun back around to face the jukebox and kicked it. The jukebox slid slowly over to the side. There is a set of stairs behind the old machine. Confusion and fear set in, but I knew my answers were beyond this point.

I began my decent; the stairs creaked under my feet with each step that I took. The darkness was blinding. My fingers were searching for a light switch against the wall. I reached the bottom of the stairs before I could discover the light switch. Something was wrong with the floor, but I could not tell what.

My fingers found and flipped the switch on the wall. The light burned my eyes for a few moments. Once my eyes adjusted, I was greeted by the feeling of nausea. I had woken up right into a nightmare. The room I was in was layered with bones; human remains. Skulls were looking up at me. I began hearing the chant of dozens of voices in my head.

“You don’t belong here,” it rang over and over again in my head. Eventually I had to pin my hands over my ears, but it did no good.

Suddenly the voices were silenced. I heard the bell upstairs. Someone had just entered the diner. The footsteps were marching around above my head. The anxiety was continuing to building within me. My ears pinpointed the sound of creaking stairs. Whoever entered the diner was coming down. I stumbled over the bones and lean back into the rock wall. It was so cold. I was scared this dungeon was going to become my final resting place.

The figure reached the bottom of the stairs, but was still in the dark. He finally stepped into the light; Buck.

“I wish it didn’t have to be you, kid,” he started. “I was really getting to like you.”

“What the fuck is going on down here?” I tried to interrogate Buck, but my fear was causing me to choke on the words.

“The diner chose you, Mike,” he was trying to explain something I was not going to comprehend. “I told you, I’d do anything to keep this place running.”

“So you just kill people?” Another question fired past my teeth. “Trying to feed the diner like some kind of psycho?”

“The diner needs to feed.” Buck pulled a bone saw from behind his back. “How else do you think this place has gone on for so long? It wouldn’t survive if it were starved to death. You do realize all those stories I told you were true, right?”

He took heavy steps as he walked closer to me. I tried to go over my options as quick as I could. It was too late; Buck began to reach out. I dropped to the ground to avoid his quick movement, and his hand slammed into the wall. Buck cried out in pain as I moved away from him. I heard the bone saw fall to the ground. Buck was gripping his hand trying to cover up his bloody knuckles.

“You,” He shouted. “You broke my fucking hand,” he cried out.

I grabbed one of the skulls on the ground as I got to my feet. I moved as quickly as I could and struck Buck over the head. The skull shattered into pieces as Buck fell to his knees letting out another groan.

I reach for the bone saw, knowing what I have to do. I heard another groan being let out, but it was not from Buck. The noise was coming from all around me; coming from the walls.

Buck looked upwards at me. “We’re already in the belly of the beast, boy.” Blood was dripping down his brow.

There is a glow coming from one of the corners of the room. It was another opening that I had not noticed before. I began to examine it and walked towards it, like a moth towards the light.

“Mike,” Buck grabbed my attention, and I spun back to face him. “Don’t go over there. Stay away from it. I, I think it’s time for me to retire anyway.”

I noticed Buck struggling to breathe as the blood began covering his face. He struggled to get to his feet. He looked at me as tears began filling his eyes. There was nothing I could do as he walked to the chamber. My feet were frozen to the spot; something that was becoming a common occurrence that I had no control over. As he walked by me, he spoke softly, “I know you’re young, but this place is yours now. That’s why it chose you. I wasn’t prepared to accept that. Just remember to feed it. You’re its caretaker now.”

The groans continued to stream in from the glowing chamber; the real belly of the beast. Buck continued to walk towards the chamber. Suddenly he became nothing more than a silhouette, and then he was gone. One final loud groan, that sent shivers down my spine, filled the room. My hands once again clamped down over my ears. It did not do much to keep the sound from filling my head. Once the groans stop, I look back at where the chamber was, but it was gone; sealed off.

The voices begin to come back into my head. The voices chanting that I don’t belong here. The diner chose me, but the spirits of those that the diner devoured didn’t want me there. Deep down, I knew what had to be done.

My feet swiftly guided me up the stairs. In the back of the diner, there was a fire axe on the wall. I grabbed it, and marched back out of the front of the diner. I began hacking away at the jukebox, destroying it.

“I don’t want it!” I began screaming it over and over. “I don’t want it! I don’t want it!” The diner chose me, and I was declining the offer. I hacked away at the jukebox until it was nothing more than spare parts and firewood.

Soon after I found some flammable chemicals and doused the place. I found a lighter and took one last look as I stood in the back doorway. I sparked the lighter and tossed it inside. The flames roared to life, as if the spirits came back to dance once last time before justice was served. I left the diner behind me. A feeling of relief came over and engulfed me. The spirits that were once trapped within the diner were now free.

I stayed and watched as the diner burned with chimney red and Halloween orange. When the fire fighters and police finally arrived I already had a story prepared for when they question me.

I would tell them that I was still cleaning when I smelled gas. Soon after the diner caught fire, and I just ran out. It was simple enough. I’m still thankful to this day that they believed the story. I was not around when they discovered the graveyard that was below the old diner. It did not matter at that point anyway.

No more would this place be devouring innocent people to satisfy its hunger. No longer would souls become trapped within the walls of that dungeon. They were finally set free. I was not going to be

a link in this rusty chain. I refused to feed souls to the hellish demon within the diner. That was the fate I had just escaped.