

Manufactured Luck

Nothing makes roadside attractions more appealing than a minivan full of screaming children. His wife raised an eyebrow at him when he gestured to the gaudy sign off the highway that read 'Luck Sold, Next Exit.' Under normal circumstances, he wouldn't have spared it a second thought, but his youngest had spilled juice all over his shirt 20 minutes ago and hadn't stopped complaining since, the twins were fighting over which movie to play next, and his oldest daughter had thrown him the finger when he asked her to settle them down. He needed out of the car soon or else he was liable to drive them right into the highway barrier.

His wife rolled her eyes, giving him the go-ahead to do as he wanted with her withered, bare feet propped up on the dashboard. She had been giving him that look a lot lately and had seemed to develop the same attitude toward their children ever since she'd found him holding their next-door neighbor in the tool shed.

He clenched his teeth and switched on his blinker. He'd said he was sorry, hadn't he? This trip was supposed to be about putting that unfortunate incident behind them. Instead, she was just lording it over him. The only thing this road trip had gotten him was a headache. Hopefully, this place sold some good, strong coffee.

His head gave another loud pound as he pulled into the gravel parking lot where the signs had led him. He grimaced. The wooden shack wasn't exactly promising. A single sneeze would be liable to blow it over. His wife leaned her seat back and closed her eyes when he threw the parking brake on, making it clear that his idea was his problem. He switched off the movie screen in the back, dug a new shirt out from his son's luggage, and confiscated his teenager's headphones, needing some sort of competent support. His youngest insisted on being carried in

even though he was too big for that now, and his daughter begrudgingly hauled the twins inside by the collars of their windbreakers.

She still refused to say a single word to him. She hadn't wanted to come at all, and he couldn't say he blamed her. Although, he suspected there was more to her resistance than the nasty attitude growing boobs and starting high school had inspired. Her glare was more venomous towards him than anyone else. They'd agreed that they wouldn't tell the kids about his little mistake, but he suspected that his wife had blabbed to their daughter anyway. God, what a bitch. Why promise something if you just planned to go back on it?

A string of bells jangled as he tugged open 'The Shamrock Shack's' door. Stupid name. It wasn't as small as he expected from the outside, but that wasn't saying much considering the exterior was a glorified outhouse. It looked like every other overpriced gift shop he had been dragged through in the past week, with its rows of cheap plastic toys and racks of postcards.

There was one feature though, the feature that was the basis for the strange name, that set this place apart. The entire back wall was *green*. Not painted green, no. The wall was the same splintering wood as the rest of the dank little building but crowded onto its shelves were *thousands* of four-leaf clovers.

Loose clovers in bags, bottles with clovers suspended in liquid, glass keychains with clover leaves pressed flat, and paper made with dried clovers encased in the fiber. It was impressive for half a second until his son began to tug at his collar and yell directly into his ear about it. He sighed and set him down so the kid could go get a closer look. He knew he wasn't getting out of here without buying each of them something. His daughter kept the twins in line with a series of stern looks any time they grew rowdy, but even she began to drift toward the wall of leaves, eyes slowly searching.

He left his children to cause chaos and approached the cash register, a deep earthy smell his only priority. He missed the shopkeep entirely at first, the drab state of his clothing blending in with the dismal state of his business. However, he must have heard him approach and like the air mattress he had been banished to back home the stranger slowly inflated, the pile of fragile bones rising up from the deep wrinkles to look at him.

“Hello there my good man,” he gave his best smile, the one that sealed contracts and made women fall into his arms. He slapped a palm against the counter. “Do I smell coffee?”

The man blinked at him slowly, tired eyes surveying him and then gazing at his children scampering around behind him.

“You do.” The voice was much deeper than he expected. There was a hint of some sort of accent he couldn’t place.

“How much would it take for you to part with a cup? Name your price. I’m dying for a little caffeine. Been driving for a long time and unfortunately still have a ways to go.”

The man didn’t say anything, his expression didn’t even shift (although that may be the work of his bushy mustache and the gray cap pulled low over his face), only stood and shuffled through the doorway behind him.

He was hoping that that was good news, and the clinking of dishes was promising. He turned to watch his gremlins. His youngest was clutching a small teddy bear with a string of resin-coated clovers dangling for its neck. The twins had moved on from the candy to argue over the same key chain from the back wall, even though there were at least five just like it hanging from a hook. His daughter had carefully angled her body to keep him from watching her. He frowned. He really wished she would stop doing that, treating him like a prison warden or the big bad villain. He didn’t like how she had changed. Back when he was young and his marriage was exciting she had been the light of his life, his precious baby girl. She used to follow him from

room to room or wait for him to get home from work in the window seat. He'd even gotten her a little plastic laptop so she could 'work like daddy.' She hadn't called him daddy in over a decade, and Dad had stopped a while ago too. Now if he was incredibly lucky he would get a withering 'father'.

He turned at the sound of ceramic being placed on wood.

The man had produced a yellowing mug full of deep black coffee. He was about to ask for a travel cup when the state of the store dawned on him and he realized this was probably all the old man had. Well, he'd take it. What were a few extra minutes outside of that suffocating mini van?

He nodded and began to drink the warm, if a little nasty, coffee.

"You have a beautiful family."

He jumped slightly, not expecting the shopkeep to make small talk. The old man wasn't looking at him anymore, just watching his kids as his daughter removed the controversial key chain from the twins and handed them each a different, identical one instead while his youngest tugged on her pant leg.

"You're welcome to keep a one or two of 'em" he joked, barking out a laugh, a laugh which quickly turned awkward and stilted as the man leveled him with another unreadable look. It was rare for comments like that not to get a smile at least.

"You are lucky to have them in your life." Was his only reply. He felt rather like a young boy being scolded for trampling his mother's flowers.

He glanced around at the store dripping in symbols of good fortune.

"I guess you'd know an awful lot about luck, working here, wouldn't you?"

He shook his head, tucking his thumbs into his suspenders as the children approached the register.

“Far less than most, actually.”

The twins smacked their prizes down, he helped his son set his teddy bear on the counter and ignored the pang of bitterness as his daughter slid two matching necklaces with long cords and clover pendants across the counter for the man to ring up.

“For mom.” She replied to his questioning look, daring him to challenge her. He didn’t.

He turned back to the man, still turning the strange reply over in his head.

“What exactly did you mean by that?” He asked.

The old man blinked, and although it wasn’t the sort of thing he usually bothered to notice, especially not in other men, he saw just how unnaturally blue his eyes were.

“Will that be cash or card?”

He waited for further extrapolation, not used to being denied. Surely if he just waited, the shopkeep would answer. Back in college, a communications professor told him that people were naturally uncomfortable with silence, and if you left them sitting long enough they would rush to fill it.

The old man just stared back.

“Card.”

The souvenirs found their way back into the hands of his children as he operated the chip reader.

“Nothing for you other than the coffee, then?” The man asked as he punched in his code.

He wanted to scoff. Now he was trying to be a salesman? Yeah, right. This crappy tourist trap had already gotten enough from his wallet.

“No thanks. I’m not really the superstitious type, you know?”

The man just stared him down.

“Yes, I do. Although, that may not be the truth for long.”

“Hm?” He asked, quirking an eyebrow.

“C’mon Dad, hurry up!” One of the twins yelled. He frowned again, but turned and left, not wanting to waste any more time on some cryptic old man who had a few screws loose.

He wouldn’t think about that exchange again until months later in his shitty new matchbox apartment filled with nothing but a bottle of cheap whisky and a metal folding chair. His wife had cleared him out and taken the kids in the divorce and he was dealing with the results.

Before he even bought a new mattress, he went online and searched up where he could buy a four-leaf clover nearby.

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Google Maps said it was a fruit stand. She sat in her car, staring flabbergasted at a strange roadside shop that was most definitely *not* a fruit stand. The ‘Shamrock Shack’ wasn’t what she had driven twenty minutes out of her way for. She groaned and dropped her head against the steering wheel.

The thought of meeting her girlfriend’s parents was already making her queasy and this wrench in her plans certainly didn’t help. She knew that they didn’t approve of them, but she thought she might be able to break the ice with a gift. Her girlfriend was always telling her that she smelled like cherries in summer rain or on fresh snow or whatever strange and beautiful metaphor met her fancy. As such, she thought that fresh cherries would make a good peace offering, but she doubted the tiny establishment in front of her was going to have any. She also didn’t have time to try to find somewhere that would.

She yanked her keys out of the ignition and unbuckled anyway. It was at least worth a shot, and even if they didn't sell fruit there still might be something else she could bring. Her heels made the gravel treacherous. She could feel the grime building up under her fingernails when she grabbed the handle and tugged, almost knocking off the string of bells as she did.

She was unsurprised, if not a little disappointed, that a once-over of the store confirmed that there was no fresh fruit to be found. She crossed her arms tight over her stomach and went inside anyway.

It was eerily silent in the place, and she was acutely aware of how every step made the floorboards creak and groan. She gave the rack of postcards a once over, passed over an endcap packed with regional key chains, and yelped as she rounded the corner into the next aisle.

The old man looked up at her from where he kneeled in front of the shelf he was restocking. He tilted his cap toward her in greeting. She pressed a hand to her collarbone, urging her thumping heart to calm down.

“Apologies, lass. Didn't mean to startle ya.”

He grabbed the cane that was leaning nearby as he struggled to his feet.

“Oh, let me help you,” She rushed forward, holding his forearm to steady him.

“Much obliged.” She thought he was offering her a smile, but it was really hard to tell with the prodigious mustache. He began to wobble away, his cane thumping and creaking with every other step. Not quite sure what else to do with herself, she followed, glancing around the store as they went.

There were novelty candies and plastic children's toys and strange little clay figurines, but the most bizarre of all was the back wall that he led her to. She gazed up at the strange assortment of items that crowded the shelves. She was delighted by what she saw. When she was young she had spent hours picking through the clover patch in her grandma's backyard,

desperately examining each plant in hopes of finding one with the special, extra leaf. Of course, she never had. She only found out much later just how rare four-leaf clovers were, the extra section only resulting from a genetic mutation. It was astounding to see so many in one place, and she couldn't help but wonder where they'd come from.

“You are in love.”

She looked at the man as he stared up at her with an unreadable expression. It wasn't a question.

She was slightly startled by the statement. She looked down at her fingers, running one thumb over another. She thought about her girlfriend, the way she smirked as she made a sarcastic comment. She remembered their first date, as they crowded into a diner booth for dinner and ended up talking well into the night. She thought about the way she made ramen and how her eyelids fluttered shut when she asked her to do her makeup, and the way her perfume still clung to her pillows long after she left. She'd met other partners' parents before, but she had never been quite this nervous. She'd attributed it to the fact that she *knew* that they weren't going to approve of her, no matter what she did, but she now realized that wasn't the whole story. It was because she'd never felt this strongly about anyone before.

“I am.” She'd begun smiling like an idiot. “How did you know?”

He hummed softly in his throat, leaning all his weight upon his cane.

“You have *the look* about you.” He reached forward his hand trembling as it went. “Only one cause for that look.”

He grabbed something from a hook on the wall and handed it to her.

Two heart-shaped charms dropped into her waiting palm. She grasped one between two fingers and held it up to the light. They were small and crystalline, and right in the middle of each was a pristine four-leaf clover. She marveled at the state of them. Upon seeing the multitude

of clovers, she'd considered the possibility that they were fake. However, upon close examination, there was no way that was true. These were the real thing.

“Not sure what it is that brought you here, but these are what I'd recommend. One for you, and one for whoever inspired that look upon you.”

She closed her fist around both of them. They weren't exactly fresh cherries, but they were still pretty damn good.

“I'll take them.”

She was right, her girlfriend's parents didn't like her. That first meeting was painful and stunted, with thinly veiled insults emerging every time one of them opened their mouth, but that didn't matter. It didn't matter because their distaste was vastly overshadowed by the soft hand in hers under the table, by the delight in those beautiful eyes when she presented the charm, and by the sweet kisses pressed upon her skin as she drove her back to her apartment.

They didn't come to the wedding, maybe thinking that their protest would be enough to stop it. She felt awful about it when her own loving family showed up in spades, but her beautiful girlfriend, no, her beautiful *fiance* said it didn't matter. She smiled and held her close as she slid a ring with tiny clovers engraved on the band onto her finger.

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It's tradition really didn't seem like a good enough reason to drive an hour and a half off campus during finals season. Here he was anyway, sandwiched between two strangers in the back of his roommate's tiny sedan. At this point in the drive, he had realized trying to shift to get

more comfortable was pointless and accepted the bony elbow in his ribs on the right and the manspreading on his left. He just hoped they'd get there soon.

His roommate was completely oblivious to his misery, happily chatting away to his current fling up front. Geez, how had he let himself get talked into this? Stupid question. It was because finals scared the shit out of him. Even if this impromptu road trip seemed ridiculous, his RA had sworn by it, promising that it might make all the difference in their exams. Even from his awkward position, he could still spy the bumper of said RA's car weaving along the curved road ahead of them.

It was a revelation when the car finally came to a stop 20 minutes later, gravel crunching under the worn-out tires. He unfolded his limbs and stretched out the moment he scrambled out of the back seat. The RA's car emptied out with the same haste, and so did the two other vehicles that pulled into the makeshift lot behind them.

"We made it man," his roommate yelled, clapping a hand on his shoulder.

"Made it where exactly?"

The place wasn't much to look at, with darkness beginning to fall on the tiny allotment. 'The Shamrock Shack' was not a total surprise given the cryptic responses his questions had been met with. The tiny building looked like the kind of place he would usually avoid, but tonight he fell into the pack of people as they drifted towards the tiny front door. As they went he acknowledged the few people he knew and avoided awkward eye contact with the people he didn't.

A string of dangling bells hit his hip as he passed through the door, making a cacophony of noise and providing enough of a distraction to keep him from noticing when everyone in front of him stopped. He unceremoniously smacked into the back of the girl in front of him, and an apology was on the tip of his tongue when he realized the unnatural hush that had fallen over the

group. The upperclassmen were placing hands on the shoulders of younger students, and pressing fingers to their lips to signal silence.

Before them stood an old man. He wore a faded pin-striped shirt buttoned tight around his throat and dark trousers that despite his short stature stopped short of his bare ankles. He had an old-fashioned, newsboy cap pulled low on his head, falling just shy of a prodigious brow. His skin was as dark as a nut, but the hem of his pants revealed that his tan resulted from long hours in the sun rather than genetic inclination. He had a thick, greying mustache that hid his upper lip entirely and made him suddenly self-conscious about his own lack of facial hair.

The man's hands rested on his knobby cane, swollen knuckles interrupting otherwise lithe fingers.

"Ah," he said to himself, surveying the group of college students that had crowded into the small shop. "That time already, eh?"

His voice was warm and deep with a soft lilt to his words that made him trust the man instantly. He released a breath he didn't know he'd been holding.

The man turned inwards, crooking a finger towards them.

"Come along then, form a line."

He was shoved and bumped and redirected until he found himself queuing up behind a line of other college students leading towards the counter. He didn't really know what was going on, but he followed the flow. He had no clue where his roommate or RA had ended up, and he was too aware of the strange order they had formed to start straining his neck to look for them.

The line moved slowly and steadily forward, his sneakers scraping against the rough wood beneath him every few minutes.

The place was fascinating. He had never really been in anything that could be considered a 'gift shop' before. His parents were always frugal and had considered any souvenir to be a

waste. Even at museums and aquariums, he'd been quickly hustled to the exit. Still, he had no doubt that that was what this place was. There was an actual rack of postcards and a turning display of name keychains wherein he knew he'd never be able to find himself. He watched as the people at the front of the line broke away from the cash register and began to look at the rest of the shop. He squinted at them, trying to figure out what exactly he was in line for. The only clue was the small, white, paper bag each of them now clutched. More than one of his peers drifted together towards the back wall of the shop, the place with perhaps the most unusual items in the store. He couldn't really make out what the theme was from where he stood, but he could see small specks of green on everything that sat on the shelves and dangled from hooks.

It was almost his turn now, just three more people in line ahead of him.

The old man tended to each of them, pulled something from a bowl on the counter with tongs, and quickly deposited it in one of those glassine bags. He then accepted payment from each person.

It was odd though, none of them placed an order and they seemed to get the same thing, but each of them paid very different amounts, all in cash. The first guy pulled out a crinkled dollar bill from his pocket and plopped it on the counter. The girl after pulled out a few various small bills and slid them to the old man, and finally the kid in front of him, who stunk of expensive cologne, pulled out a crisp hundred dollar bill from a metal money clip to pay for what he could now see was a single, four leaf clover.

He was a little dumbstruck as he was nudged forward for his turn, but the old man just looked amused.

The tongs were small, silver, and delicate. The bowl was carved from dark, rich wood and piled to the brim with pristine shamrocks.

The shopkeep looked him up and down for a moment, examining him, discerning unknown details about his form.

He used the tongs to dig deeper in the bowl, searching for a moment before withdrawing a clover with thin, white bands branding each leaf.

“This one ought to do you nicely,” he said, plucking it from the bowl, sliding it into the white bag, and creasing it tightly shut.

Realizing he now had to pay he jolted, digging his wallet from his pocket. He had a few one-dollar bills, he could just give one of those. He didn’t know how this worked and was really wishing someone had explained it to him. At the last moment, he hesitated and tugged a slightly creased but still perfectly good ten-dollar bill out instead. He handed it to the man.

“Thank you.” He said, accepting the strange clover because that seemed the correct thing to do.

The man nodded.

“You will do just fine, don’t you worry.”

He nodded back, not sure how to respond to that, and cleared the way for the person behind him.

He would grip the bag, just as confused, for the rest of the night, as laughter and ease uncharacteristic for the academic season slowly fell over the group. He’d pile into someone else’s car on the way back, this time with the window seat, and stare at its strange silhouette through the transparent paper bag. As they got closer to campus again the clover would be illuminated for a brief moment every time they whizzed past a street lamp.

He still kept the clover on his desk years later. It had dried out after only a week, but he had gotten it encased in a resin orb. After the first round of A’s on his exams, he went back to

that shop every semester. He still kept the other clovers in a box at home, but the first one was special. As he worked and created and evolved as a professional, he would always find himself reaching for it. A degree that seemed to come easier than it should've, a dream career, the love of his life, and a beautiful home all came to him in time. He still supposed he might have achieved all of this on his own, but still, a little luck never hurt. When it'd been his turn to wear the RA hat, he made sure all of his residents made the trip out to that little wooden shack whenever they could.

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He stood, hands buried in his coat pockets under the shade of the pine tree as the last of the group of students filed out of the familiar door. He waited longer still, ignoring the cold sting of wind as it brushed over his exposed skull until he was certain that the store was empty again.

He placed a palm on the string of bells to brace it, never caring for the loud jangle that it made. The person he had come to see would know someone was here without this formality. He'd probably been made the second he had stepped through the forest onto the gravel.

“Wondered when you were finally going to join me.”

Yep, he had already been noticed.

“You know I've never cared for an audience,” he answered, stepping around the floorboards that liked to creak with all the secrets they held.

The shopkeep stepped out from behind the counter, straightening up his form, age seeming to melt away from his bones as he leaned his cane against the counter, and began to move much more smoothly around the store. He darted quickly around, turning off display lights

and tucking the store in for the night. His mustache bristled as he looked out the single window that faced the forest.

“I’m closing for the evening.” The man announced to no one in particular.

He stood quietly, watching all of this happen with a sad smile on his lips. His friend had gotten good at this process, this normalcy, but they both knew this was never supposed to be his way.

He finally moved again as his friend shrugged on his own slightly dusty jacket, and led the way out of the store. As he waited for him to wrestle with his ring of keys, he spared one last glance back at the deserted cane leaning against the counter.

The old man didn’t invite him to follow but also didn’t tell him to leave. That was enough.

The last light was always the most beautiful in the forest. It scared away all that might do them harm but was still kind enough to hide them from prying eyes.

“You could be missing potential customers, closing this early,” he said idly, more to fill the silence than anything else.

“No, I won’t. No more tonight,” was grunted past that distinguished mustache.

He nodded and didn’t question it. After several stretches of steadily darkening terrain, he signaled for his friend to wait, retrieving the old lantern he had stowed behind a rock formation on his way here. He had to try twice before the wick caught, but as he handed it off to his companion his face was bathed with the soft glow of a flame, the lines on his face looking even more gaunt than usual.

“What is this for?” He asked, his accent thicker than usual.

He shrugged his shoulders, shoving his hands back into his pockets.

“Want to actually see ‘em tonight.”

He offered no reply, simply turned, and continued on, expression as unreadable as always.

It was nearly pitch black by the time the short form in front of him slowed to a stop.

The trees had given way to a field, and where before the ground had been bolstered by dirt and dry grass, something soft and gentle caved under the soles of his boots.

The lantern light revealed a soft bed of thick, dense clovers. It extended far beyond the pool of light, vibrantly green and unending. It was a calming, relaxing sight in and of itself. Anyone who trampled through this part of the woods by mistake would just pass by. It took an observant eye, or at least one that knew what it was looking for, to see what was so unusual about this part of the woods.

Every single clover here had four leaves.

But this was not why they were here, they had both seen this too many times to find it awe-inspiring anymore. Instead, they trekked together to the center of the clearing.

His friend's shoulders grew tense like they always did, jaw going rigid with the only sign of emotion he ever truly showed.

Every square inch of this clearing was crowded with clovers, except for the two patches right at the very center where nothing green would grow.

His old friend lowered the lantern on the first, long rectangular patch of dry dirt, and the shorter one beside it was still perfectly illuminated. One would accommodate an adult nicely, and the other was the perfect size for a child's body.

They stood together and stared in silence at the source of the miracle clovers. No, not the source.

The price.

He laid a hand, heavy on those delicate, bony shoulders in the only show of support he could muster.

Tonight marked 20 years since 'the Shamrock Shack's' opening. They both knew it. If he were a better conversationalist, he might have some word of comfort to offer, some revelation, or some brilliant speech.

Instead, all he could say was,

“Some people have all the luck, don't they old friend.”

“Yes, I suppose so.”