

What a World

In Pigwell, time is not measured in days or weeks but by the number of eighteen wheelers that drive past my house. Although it's home to me, most kids would never admit it. I live in a seedy motel on the main route between Akron and Cleveland. A motel with a parking lot full of giant trucks and rooms filled with sleazy women.

I did live in a house once, back in Cincinnati. It was a nice house, on a tree lined street with sidewalks and neighborhood kids, I played with most every day. Dad was a local trucker working for the Cincinnati Food Depot. He delivered goods to their local stores and got home every night for our family dinner. Mom was a part-time office worker for Samson and Dewitt, one of the Depot's many food brokers. We weren't rich by any means, but from my perspective, our little family lived pretty well. All until it came to an end on that terrible night when two state troopers rang our door bell. I figured they were here because of something one of my stupid buddies had done, so I stayed in the kitchen where I could easily hear everything that was said when dad answered:

"Mr. Johnston?"

"Yes"

"Is Cheryl Johnston your wife?"

"Yes", he responded hesitantly.

"Sir, I'm so sorry to have to tell you this. Your wife has been in a terrible accident."

"Is she okay?"

"No sir, I'm afraid not. She was hit by someone going the wrong way on the turnpike tonight. The EMT's took her to the University Medical Center, where despite their best efforts, she didn't make it."

I ran to the door to make sure I heard everything correctly. The troopers ask to come in to help us any way they could, and thank God they did. We were both devastated and at a loss as to what to do next. After they left, we went to the hospital to see mom and say our last goodbyes.

Dad's boss gave him the week off, to settle everything and try to control his grief. I was still on summer vacation, and tried to help him struggle through, but Labor Day was right around the corner and I'd be going back to school soon. The funeral was beautiful, but as a kid, I never realized how expensive a funeral could be, until I saw dad, at the kitchen table, holding his head, hopelessly going over the bills. Of course, the jerk that killed her, had no insurance, no money and most likely received a free burial from us county taxpayers. Mom, being a part-time employee, had no health or life insurance, so the cost of everything landed all on dad.

Thanksgiving came fast that year. Poor dad tried to make a turkey for the two of us, but it was a disaster. We ended up assembling the half-raw and half-burned turkey scraps into sandwiches and dragging out the old family album to reminisce about what a good life we once had. We tried to be thankful for what we had, but it certainly didn't work very well. I had never seen dad cry, even at the funeral, but tonight we were both in tears and gave up trying to hide it from each other. Neither one of us wanted to leave the other and we both fell asleep right there in the family room to the glow of the TV, that remained on all night.

Thanksgiving was bad enough, but Christmas hit us even worse. Dad explained that because of mom's medical costs and the funeral expenses, things would be too tight for much of a Christmas, especially with the loss of her income. We couldn't even get a tree, but at least we still had that little manger scene dad bought for mom a few years ago. We plugged it in and put it on the fireplace mantle as our only little token of what most everyone else was celebrating. I wished I could help dad through these tough times and offered to take a job at a department store over the holidays, but I soon discovered, that couldn't work. I had to be at least 16 to work and I was only a little past my 15th birthday.

Just as things couldn't get worse, they did. Apparently, dad hadn't paid rent for our flat since mom died and the landlord told us we had to be out by the first of the year. Making matters even worse, dad's trucking company was sold to another bigger trucking company, up north, and layoffs were sure to come in January. As soon as he got the news he headed directly to my school to pick me up early enough to head off to the new trucking company's regional headquarters before they closed. Dad told me to wait in the car while he went in and insisted on a new job. He got it! However, it meant he had to start January 2nd and we had to move to a little town north of here named: Pigwell. Poor dad, his voice cracked as he explained to me how we

both had to give up the home that still had mom's touches in it, and I would need to leave my buddies in Cincinnati. His new driving job required many overnight runs, meaning I'd most likely be spending many nights alone. Hugging him, I told him not to worry. I know he is doing the right thing, and after all, I am a grown man now. I can handle being alone. Hey, in a few months I'll be 16, and I can get a job of my own to help us get back on our feet.

So that's how I got here, in this lonely little town of Pigwell. A town where they say time is measured by the number of eighteen wheelers that drive past your house. That's not completely true. In my case, I have an additional way to measure time. I measure it by the nightly rhythmic moans and metronome-like headboard thumpings that come through my motel-room wall. It drives me crazy. I try to take my mind off it by sitting on the edge of my bed and peering out the room's only window to watch the truck-stop across the street. There's not much to see. All I see are four big fuel pumps in front of an old concrete block building covered in white chipped paint. There is a red neon "OPEN 24 - 7" sign flickering in its central front window. Plastic self-stick letters are attached to the glass entry door saying, "Fresh Sandwiches and Cold Drinks." It's been that way since we moved in and most likely before. Apparently, some trucker peeled off the "w" and "C", just to put a little humor into his boring life on the road. The trucks come and go all day and all night. Like I said, nothing much to see. Although, the one thing I did notice, is just how long it takes a trucker to fill his two 125 gallon saddle tanks. I bet, I can pick up a few bucks doing that for them. It would give them a chance to grab a sandwich or go to the john and it would give me a chance to get out of that depressing motel room and make a few bucks.

So, I give it a try. I make it almost one full night, until the station manager sees what I'm doing and chases me away. Occasionally, I sneak back when he's not around. Then, when the weather gets worse, some of the drivers start asking, "Where's that kid who runs the pumps?" Soon the manager realizes it is crazy to keep chasing me away. I don't cost him anything, the trucker's tip me, and my service generates food counter business for him, so he allows me back. I am now a regular at the pumps and have regular customers of my own. Everyone one of them is a character with a list of stories a mile long about their adventures on the road. I love it and love talking to them.

I don't recognize the new truck that just pulled up to one of my pumps, but I'm pleased to hear one of the other truckers yell over to him, "Hey, Snowman, you don't need to do that. The boy will do it for you."

I can't help but chuckle to myself, "*Snowman, that's his name? He's as black as I am.*" Snowman gives me a raised-eyebrow look, activates the pump with his credit card and says, "Okay kid, fill'er up." So, I do just that, as he and his buddy, walk into the building together. When he returns, he hands me a couple of bucks and jumps into his cab. He starts the engine and pulls away. I think to myself, *Looks like I have a new customer.* As I head to the next pump, I notice Snowman's truck sputtering and spitting black smoke from its stacks, as it struggles to make it onto the highway. It runs just long enough for him to put it in reverse and back up to the pumps again.

"Hey, asshole, what'd you put in my truck!"

"250 gallons of Diesel, sir. Just as you said."

"It's a gas truck, you idiot! Get that shit out of my tanks right now and fill it back up with gasoline."

How was I to know that. Every tractor-trailer that ever came in here took Diesel. I've never once put gas in one of those giant trucks before.

In a panic, I apologize and ask him for a lug wrench or something to pry off the underground Diesel tank's cover, so I will have someplace to empty the fuel. But, how do I get the fuel out of the truck? Fortunately, there is a short garden hose, attached to a faucet emerging through the concrete of the raised pump island. It is normally used to fill the courtesy windshield washing tanks mounted along-side of the pumps. I remove the hose from its faucet and lay it next to the truck while I twist off the left fuel tank's cap, I insert the garden hose into the tank and start sucking. After a couple of mouths-full of Diesel, I stick the mouth-end of the hose into the underground tank's opening. It continues siphoning until the tank is nearly dry. It takes a few more mouths-full to finish the job. I do the same to the right tank, all the while listening to him swear a blue streak at me from his cab. After more than an hour, the tanks are finally empty and my nightmare is over. I apologize once again and start to walk away when he yells out to me,

"Where the hell do you think you're going? Fill this thing with gasoline."

I stop dead in my tracks realizing, I can't. I sheepishly turn back and say, "I can't, not without money. The pump needs a credit card or you need to go in and pay the cashier before she'll start the pump."

When I tell him that, he's even more furious. Instantly he jumps down from the cab pointing a terrorizing pistol at me, "Look it, shithead, I'm not going to pay for this! You're going to pay for it! One way or another!" He pauses for a second and looks around.

"Where do you live? Go get the money from your parents."

In a panic, I stupidly, tell him, "I live right across the street," pointing toward the motel, "But, my father isn't home and besides that, we don't have that kind of money just laying around the house."

"Well, then guess what, you're mine until you pay this off! Where do you go to school?"

In a trembling voice, I respond, "Pigwell High."

"They let you go to that yuppie school? Don't the Cleveland Cav's kids go there? You're not one of them, are you?"

"I wish. Do you think I'd be working here if I was? What difference does it make, where I go to school? So what if my school has a bunch of rich kids? None of them are about to give me any money. I'm a new kid, they hardly even know who I am."

"Don't worry, they will get to know you and be more than happy to give you money. You see, we are about to go in business together."

Lowering the gun, he reaches into his pocket and pulls out a zip-lock bag containing a few dozen triangular shaped pills. "You recognize these, don't you?"

"No."

"They're Ecstasy, and I guarantee, that if you take them to school, every one of those stuck-up rich bastards will know exactly what they are and what to do with them."

Snowman slides the pistol between his skinny gut and his belt, while walking over to the pump to register his credit card. When the pump starts, he turns and says,

"There's not enough in this bag for you to pay what you owe me, but it's a start. I come through here every Tuesday. So you now have a week to get me some of my money." He hands me the bag and says, "I'll be back next Tuesday and every Tuesday after that, so you can buy more drugs and pay me what you owe me. Believe me this is going to go on for quite some time."

Snowman heads back to the truck while removing the gun from his belt. As he walks by, he sticks the nuzzle in my belly and looks me straight in the eyes, not saying a word. At the truck, he opens the driver's door and sticks the gun under his seat. He hits the door lock and leaves me to refill the tanks, while he turns to go into the building for a bite. When he passes me again, this time, he says,

"Don't get caught or do anything stupid. I have friends everywhere, even in prison, and believe me they will do whatever is necessary to help me collect. You don't want it to come to that, now do you!"

I see him walk to the building, all the while watching the pump clicking away dollars. Dollars I don't have. I think to myself, *"Oh my God, he just threatened my life into becoming a drug dealer! I can't do that, I just can't. Especially now. After that crack-head driver killed mom, all I remember is standing alongside her grave, promising her I would do whatever I could to right this wrong. Sure it was an impossible promise, but I owe it to her. I can't be involved in the crime that killed her. The pump numbers become a blur as I look skyward and think out-loud, Please help me mom. I don't know what to do!"*

Tuesday comes pretty fast. Snowman pulls his truck to the side of the building and spots me by the pumps helping a guy with an overheated engine. He walks toward me, shaking his head from side to side, slapping a rolled-up newspaper into the cupped palm of his other hand.

The first words out of his mouth are, "What the hell have you done?"

I know exactly what he's getting at. He's talking about the article in Sunday's paper. It's about a kid, from Pigwell, that nearly died from an overdose, while at a house party, last Friday night. Everyone at the party was under age, so no names were mentioned. At the end of the article it said: "The community is stunned and police are scouring the school looking for the source."

He drags me away from the guy I was helping, and toward the side of the building.

"Who the hell did you sell those pills to?"

"I sold a few to some jock on the football team. He hardly knows who I am. He is the only one who knows where the pills came from and I'm sure he's not talking. The story around school is that the OD kid is a real nerd and some of the cool kids wanted to see if the pills, they 'found', would do anything, so they slipped one into the nerd's Pepsi, just for fun."

Snowman glares at me in disbelief and growls, "So, where's my money?"

I show him the bag containing the rest of the pills and two ten dollar bills.

"I only sold a couple pills. The jock didn't believe they were real and wanted to try one or two first. I think now that he knows they work I can sell many more next week. Don't you?"

"You really are stupid, aren't you! No way in hell can you go back into that school. The cops are everywhere. You're going to get caught and you're too stupid to keep your mouth shut about where you got them."

Soon, the guy I was helping starts wandering over to make sure I'm okay. Snowman's eyes dart around, nervously trying to come up with Plan B before the guy gets here. In less than a minute he says to me,

"Tell that guy you'll get back to him in few a minutes and let me ask you something. How well do you know those hookers at your motel?"

Where the hell did that come from?, I wonder, while yelling out to the stranded motorist,

"SIR, GO IN AND A BUY A GALLON OF ANTIFREEZE AND I'LL BE WITH YOU IN A MINUTE."

Turning back to Snowman, "I know them pretty well. They think I'm cute and often jokingly flirt with me."

"You know, I should just stuff you in the truck and dump your dead body someplace along the highway. Tell you what, I'll give you one more chance, but only if you get one or more of those girls to meet me and agree to take your place as my dealer. I'm sure they'll realize that by selling pills, they can get more money from their clients on their feet, than they can on their backs. Can you do that without screwing it up?"

I remain as calm and confident as possible and reply, "Sure. You're going to be here next Tuesday, right? Meet me over there," pointing across the highway, "I know just who to connect you with."

Snowman snatches the pill bag from me with one hand while grabbing my throat with the other, pressing me hard against the wall,

"Screw this up, and the next time you won't be so lucky. Understand?"

"Yes sir."

I make all the arrangements. Crystal agrees to meet Snowman tonight. I anxiously pace back and forth in front of my room waiting for his big white Peterbilt to pull into our parking lot. It's getting dark and I don't know if I should be worried or happy, if he doesn't show. There it is. The big truck lumbers into the parking lot, almost blinding me with its huge bank of headlights over and under its bumper. He climbs out of the cab and I notice him pause just long enough to reach under his seat. Then, before shutting the door, he readjusts his pants and zips his jacket half shut.

"Where is she?"

"Room 108", I reply, pointing in its direction.

He demands, "Go knock on the door and tell her to get out here."

I do, and Crystal answers the door in her "work clothes." It never surprised me to see any of these woman in teddies or skimpy negligees, but it sure got Snowman's attention.

"Get out here!" he says to her.

"Are you crazy? It must be 20 degrees out there. You have something to say, come in here and say it."

It's a stand-off and the tension increases while Snowman stands next to his truck, with his hand inside his half zipped jacket and Crystal stands in her doorway with the pale light of her room gently back-lighting her body. Snowman is being attracted to her like a moth to a flame. Eventually he caves.

"Did the kid tell you what this is all about?"

"Yeah, he said you want me to sell drugs to my Johns. Look, honey, I'm doing just fine as it is. I don't need your shit. Besides that, I can go to jail for what you've got. Right now I'm sitting pretty. Even the cops love me."

"So you think you have it all figured out? Don't you?"

"Guess so, unless you've get something I'm missing."

"I do. Let me explain."

"Well, get in here, if you've some kinda sales pitch I'm missing, or I'm closing the door and getting out of the cold."

Snowman hesitantly leaves his truck and walks toward her room, but not before unzipping his jacket all the way and placing his hand firmly on his silver pistol.

"Honey, if you think that's the gun you're going to convince me with, forget it."

Snowman enters her room with me following behind.

"Get out of here kid!", he shouts. "We've got business to transact."

I leave and go next door to my room and wait to see how this goes down.

It's incredible. Crystal should have been a Hollywood actress rather than a lieutenant on the Ohio State Police Force. I watch the entire transaction unfold on the large screen set up by the cops, earlier today in my room. She gets him to explain everything, including how he picks up the drugs from some longshoremen in New York, to the stops he makes along the way, as he brings them to Ohio. He even explains how much money she can make. It was so cool, but nothing as cool as when she gives him a little kiss and tells him it looks like they are about to become real soul mates and suggests he turn down the bed and give her a chance to freshen up in the john. The idiot does just as she says. He puts his gun on the night stand, strips and climbs into bed. And he calls me an idiot. The cop watching all this with me, slowly picks up his walkie-talkie and quietly says one word into it, "Go." Within milliseconds three SWAT uniformed officers blast out of her bathroom waving automatic weapons at him. We didn't need a microphone to hear what happens next.

"Show me your hands! Show me your hands! Get on the floor!"

It was over in a matter of minutes. As they drive him away, I look to the heavens and mumble under my breath, "I told you I'd kept my promise. I love you mom."

I also kept my promise to officer Jerome Cook. He was one of the troopers that came to the house that night. He really helped me and dad through some tough times. I told him if there ever was anything I could do to help him rid the world of these bad guys, I would do it. I never lost his card and called him when all of this Snowman stuff started. I told him Snowman wanted me to sell drugs in school and I didn't know where to turn. He said, "Don't worry, I do." As my guardian angel, he was the one with the "overheated" car next to the pumps that night when Snowman came to collect. He was also the one that put the phony story in the paper about the overdosed kid. There never was any party or any kid that got drugged. He even gave me the twenty bucks to put in the bag I gave back to Snowman. All that in the hope it would get Snowman off my back for awhile, until we could come up with a better plan. Neither of us ever expected Snowman would be so stupid as to develop the hooker plan by himself and get himself arrested by doing it, but he did.

So now I'm back to counting the eighteen wheelers going by my "house" and hearing my real next door neighbors bang out a living. I guess it's all part of growing up and being true to your word.

What a world!

Author: Ronald Brooks Bio:

Mr. Brooks spent many of his teenage years in a small town much like Pigwell and draws upon that experience to write this vignette. His stories are always designed to lead readers to their own logical conclusions, until at the end, they look around and discover they are in a place they never expected to be.