

## Last Call at O'Reilly's

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Outside a dive bar, street lights flickered to life. The savage tint of a neon sign turned the window's bleached blinds crimson. Its glow issued a call to arms, a guarantee to satisfy the thirsty, the damaged, the troubled mind running circles within itself. This sign welcomed any and all to shelter, intervention: O'Reilly's.

Perched on a neighboring stoop, Ben pitied it, its only purpose to attract night owls or wandering drunks. Four piercing letters sliced through the darkness, letting passersby know that a pub named O'Reilly's was indeed OPEN. This beacon beckoned Ben, offering courage on the rocks after a stale day at the office. Today must have been the 20th time he'd been caught snoozing on the job by his boss; however, it's difficult for Ben to give a shit, as, no matter what, a paycheck showed up in his mailbox every Friday.

Ben, as usual, sported a navy blue t-shirt, Levi's, Converse, and a brand new Tom Ford suitcase. The suitcase was a gift from Ben's father, as if nudging his son toward being a "professional." Next would be an expensive suit, dress shoes, and, eventually, a ritzy Rolex. Ben knew that there were only two options: either quit his lackluster, secure job or submit to a lifetime of corporate brainwashing. It was a tough decision for a young man to make.

The stoop's apartment was numbered 49, yet was hardly differed from its neighbors, 48 and 50. Ben always had a tough time distinguishing one building from another, which he found to be both a disturbing and surreal feature of 9th street. His journeys up and down, to and from 9th began not too long after graduating from high school. Once caps were tossed, reality soon crept in. He picked up temporary employment: filling in as a sales associate at Davis Insurance while management sought out a replacement. The trial was only meant to last a few weeks; it turned out that Ben *was* the replacement. So, sunrise after sunset, he would trudge up 9th street at seven o'clock, down it at five. Up 9th at seven, down at five. Up seven, down five.

Ben became lost in the preconceived notion that the paydays would make selling insurance over the phone worth it; yet, scamming old ladies and foreigners ended up being repetitious, unrewarding. This line of work hardly measured up to his fantastical expectations: nice cars, lines of coke, and big-breasted women. It took this rest, upon the porch of apartment 49 or 50 or whatever, for him to finally discover O'Reilly's, the only building that clashed with the miles of seasoned orange, hand-laid brick apartments that lined the block.

"Oh, what the hell?" Ben said. On this day, he decided to try something different, to answer the call.

O'Reilly's aged oak door screeched, rust plaguing its hinges; a new world introduced itself with a waft of bodily fluids and stubbed out cigarettes. Ben seemed to be alone, which struck him as suspicious. He wondered if this bar may have been, at one time, condemned, now occupied by a squatter or two. Squatters that somehow scraped up enough cash to pay the electrical bill.

Past the assorted pails, mouse traps, and slick hardwood, eight stools were scattered. A counter lay, not of marble or pine, but of sturdy plastic. Once Ben's lungs acclimated his eyes dilated. A large figure darkened the room. The figure, a man, stepped forward, locking bloodshot eyes on the new customer. A name tag was pinned to the breast of his Notre Dame sweatshirt, labeled "Reilly." Ben stood as still as possible, imagining himself being torn apart, limb from limb. Maybe, if he backed away slowly, he might escape in one piece. It was worth a shot.

"What'll ya be havin'?" Reilly said.

Ben allowed his leg to hover above the ground for a moment, before exhaling. "Whatever's on tap," he said.

Reilly freshened a mug, as Ben took a seat on the stool closest to the exit. This became *his* stool; at first out of discomfort, but in time out of instinct.

It took a few years for Ben to get used to Reilly, but cheap drinks and an endless supply of honey roasted peanuts made the adjustment worthwhile. It turned out that Reilly was unhappily married, awaiting retirement. The two shared stories and vented frustrations, allowing them to bond over their shitty lives. Ben got a kick out of Reilly's dry humor. Almost nightly, the old man threatened to burn down the bar, using the insurance money to retire. The image was absolutely ludicrous: a 60-year-old slinging gasoline and muttering obscenities. If Reilly were actually serious, he surely would've left O'Reilly's in a smoldering heap years ago. He just didn't have it in him to harm such a storied business, which had been passed down through the generations, Ben came to believe. Reilly was much like Ben's father in that regard. They both respected tradition. That's also where the similarities ended, as Reilly, upon learning of ugly truths, wanted to slit the throat of "that woman beater."

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Ben was about eight years old when he began to hear his parents fight. The noises, to him, sounded much like those that the neighborhood kids made. Through his bedroom window, he sometimes watched the older boys screw around across the street. They would fake kick and punch, wearing outlandish outfits and home-made cardboard belts. It was like those WWF shows Ben had seen advertised in the newspaper. When his mother and father began thrashing around behind locked doors, he thought, "Wow, that WWF stuff must be pretty popular." Then, one night, Ben stumbled down the hallway for a glass of water to find his parents in the kitchen. His mother, black-eyed and sobbing, was laid out on the floor, his father standing

over her.

“Mommy? Daddy?” Ben said.

His father, nostrils flaring on his crimson face, froze. He tried to conceal his grisly, stained knuckles. Ben was too young to fully understand what he had just seen; however, he never did look at his father the same way again.

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“What’ll it be?” Reilly said.

“A draft,” Ben said.

“Martini. Dirty,” Joey said.

“Sure ya don’t want a wine cooler, sex on tha beach maybe?”

“Fuck you.”

Joey began visiting O’Reilly’s a little over a year ago, after moving into the apartment numbered 49. The kid practically covered the bar’s rent, spending a small fortune on “girly drinks,” as Reilly called them; the old man always took his money, and Joey handled the backlash quite well. Ben knew Joey was corner-cutting by buying the cheapest drinks in town, and found it a bit odd, as Joey happened to be rather well off. He worked alongside his girlfriend’s father, a real estate mogul up in New York that specialized in top dollar luxury apartments. The guy clocked in, clocked out, fucked, drank, lost consciousness, woke up. Wash, rinse, repeat. Ben was pretty jealous of Joey’s lifestyle, but he also could accept that he wasn’t a 20-something anymore.

Delilah, Joey’s girlfriend, kept her man grounded. For her, a simple yet weighted question laid hidden within a shoebox inside the master bedroom of apartment 49. Ben then understood Joey’s frugal nature: he was saving up for a nice place back in New York, a permanent home to start a family. Delilah was none the wiser that Joey had been planning to propose for months, awaiting the perfect opportunity. She visited the bar once, looking for a stiff drink on a Friday night. Ben once again grew jealous: big smile, big heart, big tits. Reilly even liked her.

“I’ll have whatever’s on tap,” Delilah said.

“Oh shit, Joey, even she makes ya look like a pussy,” Reilly drawled.

Ben respected that Joey was a shrewd kid that didn’t pull any punches. Especially when drunk. His youthful, ambitious perspective was welcome among the thick

cynicism that clouded the air of O'Reilly's.

"Ya want me to freshen ya glass, Joey?" Reilly said. "A few more girly drinks and ya'll be lettin' yar hair down in no time."

Joey slid his glass toward Reilly. Ben guesstimated this to be his seventh or eighth cocktail of the evening.

"Ya know, kid, I thought ya woulda grown a pair by now," Reilly said.

"Says the man that's too much of a *bitch* to retire, to burn this fucker down. Seriously, you're always saying that your gonna do it. Always bitchin', moanin', complainin' about this shithole. So, hey, here's an idea, why don't you just do it, huh? I dare ya," Joey said. He began to hiccup.

"Joey, maybe you should lay off the—" Ben said.

"And, you!" Joey said, whipping his body toward Ben, nearly falling off his stool. "You always bitch about your *job*. Wah, wah, wah. Then fuckin' quit already."

Joey swung his arm at Ben, losing his balance in the process. Ben and Reilly watched as he face-planted on the hardwood.

"Are ya okay, ya drunk bastard?" Reilly said, eventually.

The "drunk bastard" got comfortable; after a few minutes, he began to snore.

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Ben remembered a time before O'Reilly's, when he would walk down to where 9th and 2nd street met. This was his Monday evening routine, a way to start out the week. On the corner, a public library stood that appeared to be forgotten by city hall. Although its ceiling leaked and its shelves collapsed on occasion under their own weight, Ben found charm in the building's character. Rose, come rain or shine, could be found manning the front desk, with her floral long-form skirt and blouse. She always expected "Benjamin," promptly putting aside a work of Twain, Bradbury, or Salinger.

Next, a bit further down 2nd street, Ben made his way to Penelope's Coffee Shop for a few hours of peace. He became lost within the shop's tan walls and mocha furniture, immersed in whatever world the pages chose to present. This was his escape: cracking open a good book, drinking a good espresso. Then, one day, Penelope could no longer afford the bills, and lack of funding forced out Rose. Ben missed those days and, especially, those books.

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Quiet filled O'Reilly's. Ben took a swig of beer, surveyed the grounded pail, took a swig, followed the roach's path, took a swig, and locked eyes with his own reflection in the mirror. It was so quiet without Joey's slobber, Ben wondered where the guy might be. "What happened to Joey? He hasn't been around in a while."

"Delilah was rummagin' through tha closet, found that shoebox."

"What?"

"The ring, Ben. She found it." Reilly pulled out a postcard, tossing it at Ben. It was from Joey, mailed from some New York address.

"So, he's gone, huh?"

"Ya."

They both stared at it for a while, silent for the remainder of the evening.

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At age eight Ben begged his mother to visit her high school classroom, just to see what one was like. After years of pestering, she finally gave in. He didn't care that she stuck him in the back corner. In fact, it was preferred, as none of the others paid him much mind. The young boy felt like a chameleon, of sorts. Maybe, just maybe, he *was* a chameleon. Perhaps, his skin was now bleached white, having adapted to his new environment. This is why nobody noticed him, it *had* to be why. Camouflaged.

Ben's mother stood before the lot, brandishing chalk, with the assigned text in hand. It was *Nine Stories*, a collection by J.D. Salinger; she was a huge fan of Salinger. Today's class was dedicated to "A Perfect Day for Bananafish." Discussion focused on Seymour Glass, a former World War II soldier, who struggled with readjusting to civilian life. To captivate an inquisitive, three-year-old girl, he spun tales of bananafish: seemingly typical fish that, ironically, are allergic to bananas; yet this species frequents deep sea "banana holes," which they enter to eat, and eat, and eat as many bananas as they can. Too plump to swim back out, "banana fever" does them in.

One boy, Trevor, or Travis, felt that Glass compared to those fish, having "lost himself, his wits, his morals, and his innocence while overseas." All Ben knew was that only a poor, lost soul could abandon what made them *them*. You know, whatever

it is that makes them tick, function. Sure, Glass might've been loopy, but that's his excuse; what about all the other people, outwardly normal, that end up just the same: lying lifeless, beside their sweetheart, brains plastered upon the wall. Ben had seen such stories, quite often, on the evening news.

Next came Q&A. His mother would ask a question and hands would jut into the air. This pattern occurred over and over, sending Ben into a trance. Amid the discussion, he felt elsewhere, observing volleys back and forth. The pages of a tennis flip book came to life. Back, forth, back, forth. Serve, return, serve, return. Set, spike. The school bell snapped him back. Books shut, chairs screeched, and backpacks zipped, as the chairs were vacated. Ben wasn't used to such chaos. He found it to be a bit unsettling.

Only three people remained in the classroom: Ben, his mother, and one lone girl. The girl extended her arm, revealing a banana.

"For me? Thank you," his mother said.

The girl nodded, scurrying off into the hall to join the others.

"Mom?"

"Yes?"

"Could I, maybe, teach, too?"

She approached him. Apparently, he was visible, after all.

"Of course, Benjamin. One day."

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To accommodate Ben's intellect, his mother fought her husband to allow their son to attend a private high school. The boy eavesdropped on their exchanges, their hours-long bouts of contention. Ben would stand, stoic, with an ear pressed against his bedroom door. Sure, he could hardly decipher their back-and-forth mutters, but it's not as if sleep were an option. The tension was too palpable, the hollering too loud. His mother found herself, quite often, disadvantaged, as she argued through coughing fits. It was, unmistakably, at this time that her health issues arose. First came a nasty cough, which never went away, followed by bloody phlegm and spontaneous lumps. All of which left doctors scratching their heads. Ben, in his youth, believed that sympathy led his father to give in; the fight over private school she did win, unlike all the others.

At first, the transition was difficult for Ben, as he tended to keep his mouth shut and

hide away in the back row; he knew that, sooner or later, he'd need to surrender to acclimation. Ms. Nancy, a freshman English teacher and part-time librarian, pulled Ben aside, asking him to join the Book Club. She sort of adopted him, after noticing that Ben would sneak out of the cafeteria during lunch to the library. He took kindly to Ms. Nancy, finding comfort in her concern. Although daunted, Ben did sign up for the Book Club, for which he read the books and sat among his peers. But he didn't speak during the first meeting, or the second, or the third. Then one day Ms. Nancy, acting as the club supervisor, addressed him directly.

"Ben, who is your favorite author?"

His eyes shot to the floor, as he rocked back and forth. He muttered an answer under his breath.

"What was that, Ben?"

He closed his eyes and tilted his head toward the ceiling, leaning back in his chair. "J.J.D. Salinger," Ben said.

"Oh, I love him. Have you ever read *The Catching in the Rye*?"

The response did not come from Ms. Nancy. It was another member of the club, a female classmate, that had spoken up. Caught off guard, Ben opened his eyes, scanning the room. This voice belonged to another freshman, one hardly adept in Salinger's body of work. Her name was Diane, the cute girl that Ben swooned over in his American History class. He smirked, a faint blush staining his cheeks. Sure, Diane might be ditsy, but Ben paid no mind to her faults. She was, well, a *girl*, after all, an attractive, semi-popular one, at that. Such a specimen never paid much mind to Ben, let alone spoke to him.

"Ye-yes, I have," he answered, forgiving the book title mistake. "Have you read his *N-ni-Nine Stories*?"

"Nah."

"You must!"

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By year's end, Ben made a few new friends, ate lunch in the cafeteria, and even raised his hand during lectures. Ms. Nancy stood idly by, watching this timid, reclusive boy blossom into a self-assured, affable young man. A young man that went on to top his class and deliver a graduation speech before 223 of his peers. Ben's mother, despite being in and out of the hospital, was able to attend the ceremony. Seeing her son rise to the occasion, commanding that crowd, she felt hope again. She was so proud.

After graduation, Ben began weighing the pros and cons of sixth graders, or eighth graders, or elementary school kids. He wanted to be a teacher. An English teacher. Just like his mother, just like Ms. Nancy. But, when it came time to register for fall courses, that dream was put on hold. Without warning, Ben's father froze his son's bank account.

Ben never did ask questions, guessing that the money went toward his mother's medical expenses. Chemo wasn't cheap. In those days, he noticed a twinkle in his father's eye, a sense of joy at seeing his spouse fight something other than him. It was clear that his father wouldn't approve of him following in his mother's footsteps; so, Ben respected, begrudgingly, his father's wishes to stop pursuing a higher education.

And now, at this crosswalk, Ben reflected on everything that his mother once did for him: throw VHS movie marathons, play multi-day games of Monopoly, order Chinese takeout on Fridays; but, above all, he loved when she read bedtime stories. Before he could read, his mother must have spoken aloud every Dr. Seuss book at least 100 times. At the age of 10, he began ransacking libraries. Just like his imagination, each new binding contained limitless possibilities, and he just couldn't get enough. He would explore the depths of the ocean, the outer reaches of space, the vast deserts of Egypt, the skyscrapers of New York, the canyons of Colorado. Ben loved to read, yet he hadn't picked up a book in over five years.

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The clock struck seven a.m. as Ben meandered out front to check yesterday's mail. Among bills and assorted ads was something welcome: a sobriety pamphlet that he'd been expecting. He swept the contents into his suitcase and relatched it. Once again, he made his way up 9th street, savoring the sound of crumpling twigs and leaves beneath him. The fall breeze hid a little taste of comfort.

He stopped at a crosswalk and examined his beat-up Converse, so as not to make awkward eye contact with a passing bicyclist. A few crisp, burnt auburn leaves poked out from beneath his feet. Then he quickly crossed and entered the office of Davis Insurance.

Ben cut through the labyrinth of walls meshed with cubicles, cubicles meshed with table tops, table tops meshed with the fridge. He followed the jagged, tan carpet to a familiar stained oak door. No mind was paid to the secretary, as Ben passed through to the adjoining room. There, a golden placard that read Charles P. Davis capped a marble desk. Its owner stood in the corner, leaning upon a window's ledge.

"I wasn't expecting you, Benjamin."

Ben removed his name tag, tossing it upon the desk.

“I’m quitting.”

Mr. Davis adjusted his posture. “No, you’re not.”

“Yes, I am.” He unlatched his suitcase, sifting through the contents, removing the pamphlet.

“No. I won’t allow it.”

“This isn’t a discussion.”

Mr. Davis stepped behind the desk and placed his hands upon it. “Your future is here, Benjamin. This is where you belong.”

“No, it isn’t. It hasn’t been for years. It never will be.”

“Benjamin, you will one day stand where I’m standing right now.”

“I told you, years ago, that this wasn’t my dream. That no matter how hard you poke and prod, you and I are different people. I don’t know how many times I have to speak before you will listen.”

“What about the money, huh?”

“I have plenty.”

“What about the security?”

“I’ll be fine.”

“You *are* my replacement, Benjamin. Whether *you* like it or not.”

“How many times must I say no?”

Mr. Davis exhaled and took a seat. “You’re ungrateful, just like your mother.”

Ben emptied some corporate files from his suitcase, locking both clips on his way out the door.

“What would she have thought, Benjamin?”

Ben halted, peering over his shoulder.

“That it’s time for you to let go.”

Once more, Ben found himself upon the stoop of apartment 49. He was parallel to a smoldered heap that slowly disappeared beneath fresh snow.

“Well, shit. He really *was* serious,” Ben said. No use hanging around here, he thought, stretching out his legs, adjusting his scarf. It’s funny, really. Ben couldn’t speak for Joey or Reilly, but he’d kinda miss that dive. He’d even sorta miss that OPEN sign’s crimson glow, which pierced through even the darkest of nights. Its only purpose to attract night owls, wandering drunks, or, as it turns out, souls that’d lost their way. He would never regret answering the call, discovering shelter, intervention: O’Reilly’s.