

# goodnight irene

by sam deleo

Me and the old woman walk into the restaurant and take a booth by the window, same as we always do. She insists on sitting there so she can watch the people walking by on the sidewalk. Don't ask me why that's necessary to digesting your food. Anyway, we've sat in this section of this restaurant for what seems like a hundred times — how am I supposed to know there's unstable elements sitting in the booth next door?

I'm at a stage in life now where I just want to be left alone. I'd just worked about 10 hours putting on a shake shingle roof, that's what I'm doing now, I'm a roofer. Before that I was carpenter, before that a short order cook. I don't even remember all the other jobs I've had since high school, which, believe me, seems a lot longer than six years ago. I've even hitch-hiked from town to town working different jobs for a while. Anyway, now I'm a roofer.

By the time I get off work and drive to the old lady's place, she is already agitated that I'm late to take her to the store and to dinner, and I haven't even had a chance yet to change out of my dirty work clothes. Sometimes she remembers the time I'm supposed to be there, sometimes she doesn't. It's my luck that on this night she does. "Where you been, honey?" she says, "I was worried sick about you." But a minute or so later and she's forgotten where we were going, anyway.

"I'm a good woman, honey."

"I know," I say.

"These other women today are no good," she says. "But you like them, don't you?"

"They're not as good as you," I say to keep her calm, but as blandly as you might say anything you've had to say hundreds of times before.

"That's right. I could have had all kinds of men when—"

"We have to go, Irene."

"Okay honey, help me with my coat. They're all chippies, these women," she says as I'm sticking her brittle arms in the coat and handing her the paper sack she uses as a purse. Until we get off the elevator and walk out the door of her building, she holds the bag one-handed, by her side, like you hold any wrinkled paper sack. The minute we get out the door she has to lift it up and carry it under her chest like a purse, for everyone to see.

I work for Irene part-time — or, I guess it's more correct to say I work for Social Services part-time. I get paid to take her shopping and on errands. I just drive around and try not to listen to her. But she always insists I take her to dinner, as well, and she will not shut up about it if you try to reason with her. Social Services doesn't pay for that, and I try to make them aware of that, that it takes longer than the eight hours a week they're paying me to deal with Irene, but so far no luck. I work for her Tuesday and Thursday nights, and there's never a week that goes by when I'm able to finish in eight hour's time. Christ, the woman's pushing 83, she doesn't move around so fast, I've tried to tell them.

The good thing about Irene is that she doesn't mind me getting a few errands done occasionally on her time. She's just

happy to be out of the seniors' home. I guess she used to live in Wyoming with her husband, but he died quite a few years ago. She has a son somewhere in town but she doesn't seem to know his exact street address. He visits her every Christmas Day.

You can tell the other seniors in the home admire Irene for still having the guts to stir things up, and they'll say hi to her at the mailboxes or in the hallways, but none of them are interested in visiting with her. At that age it must seem easier to conserve your energy. They sit in the lobby with their canes and purses, hardly ever going outside, and wave hello by lifting a hand up at you and dropping it, as if they're really saying get lost.

Usually when I pick up Irene I'm bushed, thoroughly drained, not only from the work, but from the people I work with. We're only a three-man crew: Andy, who's the owner and the boss, me and Jorge. Forty or 50 hours a week is a lot of damn time to spend with the same people — I'm sure they say the same thing about me, I got no argument there.

Andy basically keeps a Pall Mall 100 lit in his mouth all day, whether you're in the car or not. He takes it out to yell, and then only because he's burned himself too often trying to do both. Andy's the type of guy who took a branch in the eye once, went to the hospital, had his eye froze and then came back to work. Jorge is always eating something when we pick him up in the morning, even with Andy's Pall Malls full blast. He's eating something mid-morning and at lunchtime, and he's eating mid-afternoon and late in the afternoon when we go home. He swallowed a nail once when we were hammering tile and he was chewing beef jerky while holding nails in his mouth. And whatever he's eating usually is 90 percent onions or peppers or some weird damn cheese, so you always smell what his wife has packed him for the whole day and into the next when the same smell activates the old one like a scratch-and-sniff patch.

We try to make a quick stop at the grocery before going to the restaurant, even though I insist I'm starving and the grocery is open all night long and we can go after we eat. But the grocery store is never quick. If we're shopping for a can of chicken soup, Irene will have me lift almost every can on the shelf to find the heaviest and fullest one. The can cannot have even a small dent or the slightest impression in it, either. You'd think I could just swipe it off the shelf randomly, but she checks it herself if she thinks I'm cheating. I had to beg her to let me grab the groceries off the shelves for her in the first place because of all the things she would drop and break. The one blessing is that she's partial to certain brand names, which actually works to save a little time. If they're out of Welch's Grape Juice, we don't buy grape juice that day.

The cashiers know Irene but she rarely remembers them.

"Hi Irene, get all your shopping done today, sweetie?" a heavy-set cashier named Graciela asks at the check-out.

"Oh! He-he-he, you hear that honey, they know my name here," Irene says.

"Well, you shop here every week, baby," the cashier points out. Irene knows this, she just wants everyone else to know it, too.

"What's your name, honey?"

"Graciela."

“Gracie?”

“Graciela.”

“Ella.”

“No. Graciela!”

“Hee-hee! You got me all confused honey. You know, I been a good woman all my life. I never did all those dirty things with men you see women doing today.”

“Well you look like a good woman.”

“With their big boobs and sticking their hands down mens’-”

“Ahh, here’s your change honey, now you have a good day, alright.” But there’s never a time when we exit that simply — ever. Irene has me count the money twice while she keeps talking and the cashier is looking at me wondering what the hell I’m doing. Then I order all the bills in the little pocket purse she keeps in her bag according to denomination, largest to smallest from the outside in. And why do I bother? Because the alternative — arguing over whether this method actually saves her money or not — takes much longer and is much more painful. After the first sorting out of the bills, I also order them according to crispness and newness, all the old bills on the outside of the fold so they get used first. And, if there’s a slight tear or a some light showing through Lincoln’s forehead, it’s “Honey, can you get me another bill, this one’s dirty.”

As I walk her to the booth in the restaurant, she talks loudly so everyone will notice her. She holds her paper bag closer to her torso, like one of those aristocratic women from Victorian England who’s caught amid company beneath her and is afraid of brushing against someone or something dirty. She finally gets her cheap glass of red wine and a menu and calms down as the alcohol settles in, but only for a minute. There’s a small window between the full glass and the middle of the glass where she’s calm, almost sedate, and then during the second half of the drink she gets more excitable.

“I’m not like the others, honey.”

“I know,” I say.

“Youuuu don’t care about me,” she says lowly, like James Cagney in those old prison movies, while lowering her hairy chin to her hands on the table.

“I respect you Irene,” I say without even hearing what she said. I have a whole bank of lines like this that I can use when I don’t feel like talking much, even though I know Irene is probably the only person I’ll get to talk to until work the next day.

“Well honey, you won’t find any woman better to respect. Why don’t you let me give you a massage tonight?”

“It’ll be just fine.”



“Sure it will, honey. Should we go now?”

“What?”

“We’ll go now and I’ll give you a nice rub down with baby oil.”

“Wha- let’s not talk about that any more, Irene. Why don’t you order already?”

“Let’s not talk,’ he says,” and she starts cackling, loud enough for the kitchen to hear. “Let’s not talk about that again,” he says. “Ohh heeheehee. There you go again, you got some chippie, don’t you?”

“No Irene. I’m trying to order, I’m hungry.”

“You got some chippie. Well let me tell you what will happen with you and your chippie. She’ll-”

“Irene, what do you want to eat tonight.”

“I’ll tell you what will happen, Arthur-” Arthur is her son who never comes to visit her. “I’ll tell you what’ll happen, this chippie of yours will take your money and find another man. That’s how these women are.”

The waitress comes by for the third time, and, after what seems like 10 minutes Irene orders what she has always ordered on every single visit, spaghetti and meatballs. I take the tuna casserole with a side of meatballs and garlic bread — like I said, I’m starving.

But this is when the trouble starts. I excuse myself to the bathroom and douse my face with cold water, pee and douse myself again. I feel better, full of the energy I ran out of at work. I guess it’s adrenaline, I’m working on a good second wind.

But when I come out, Irene is turned around in her seat, talking to the two guys in the booth behind us. They’re part of the cigarette-and-coffee-drinkers bunch. Hell, I’ve done it before. You come in with a dollar or two and some smokes and drink re-fills of coffee all day while reading the newspaper and taking smoke breaks outside. It’s safe shelter. You can even laugh about the lousy jobs in the help wanted section if you want, just so long as you’re not completely broke. You ride the customer waves like a waiter, you feed off the hangover buzz of the brunchers, liven up a bit with the business lunchers, get lazy with the late feeders, and, if they haven’t asked you to leave yet, you feel weirdly ahead of the game with the early diners, usually folks Irene’s age who are most of them frantic to get to bed before the sun does. But one or two days of this is about all I could take. I never figured out how guys like these two do it on a routine. I saw them when we came in, but you can’t do much about it because the place is full of them.

Anyway, I come back to the table and sit down, happy she’s got some other distraction. I get up, grab a newspaper from the stand and sit down again, not even listening to what they’re jabbering about. Then I hear the one in the white tank-top say, “So, this guy taking care of you okay, darling?” He doesn’t even look at me while he’s saying it, as if I don’t exist. I look up from my paper and he’s got his newspaper tucked under his arm, and he keeps re-tucking it there as if it’s a badge or license to patrol any table in the restaurant. He’s probably read it 10 times already. His friend in the dark T-shirt has got that friendly afternoon drunk

smile, which says, "This is nothing, I'm not drunk," even though everyone and his mother can tell he is.

Of course, Irene is giving them her St. Theresa line and they're running with it. "I fed the orphans in Wyoming when we lived with the miners," she says. "I was a good woman. And chaste." Irene is not as crazy as people think when she doesn't want to be. She can be very charming and even sensible. Sometimes she'll pretend she is a great martyr with people because I think she feels they don't see how charming and sensible she is. But that's her problem, not mine. And I can't help it if guys like these two don't understand this.

White T-shirt says once more, "Are you sure he's taking good care of you, honey?" Now, I'm giving him the benefit of the doubt: Irene has won him over; and I do look like hell in my ratty work clothes. I don't even look up from the paper this time. But when he gets the idea to stand up from his seat, walk over in front of my seat and say, again, loudly this time, "Are you sure he's taking care of you?" I've had about all I can take of keeping quiet.

"You got a problem," I say.

"Yeah," he says, "This sweet young lady here says she could use a good man to do right by her. And you don't exactly look like you fit that bill."

"Well, maybe you'd like to prove you're a better man," I say.

"Maybe I would," he says.

"Let's give you an audition," I say, "out back."

"Yeah, out back, right now."

"Right now," I say.

"Right now!" he yells for our audience of cheap diners crouched above their plates and menus, and then tucks his paper even further up in his stink. As clearly as possible I explain to Irene that I need to leave the restaurant for a moment and then I'll be right back, but she won't have it. She's going with me, she says. "I'll need to go, too. The wine takes my appetite sometimes. You know, honey." I throw some money on the table for the wine, but now I've got to walk Irene out to the parking lot through the back door. Mr. White T sees us get up and looks a little taken with it all but begins following us. Of course, an 80-year-old woman does not move at a speed fast enough to keep fighting words burning very long. All the same, we do our best to keep it going while Irene and I are waddling out one step at a time, her arm in mine.

"Let's see how you do against someone who's not an old woman," he says.

"Yeah, let's see how I do against a young woman," I shoot back, as we move a couple of more feet. The pace is so slow we look away from each other.

"You're nothing but a poser!" he barks and I look back at him again.

“And you’re in for more work than you done this whole year,” I say, as we make a couple of more tiny steps. But we are only a couple of tables away from where we started.

“Outside now, asshole!”

“Right this way, you little coffee-drinking bitch.” I don’t know how I came up with this last insult, but instead of making us more creative with our insults, the extra time seems to be sapping us of anything really good and cutting. At this rate, we’ll have to start insulting distant relatives before we make the kitchen.

Then, a strange thing happens. I think he begins to see I might be legitimate. And, more than that, serious.

“Hey, listen buddy,” he whispers as we maintain our tiptoeing still several feet from the back door, “I didn’t realize you and her-”

“No!” I yell, not able to turn my head all the way around to him and away from Irene. “Outside! Now!” We have made it as far as the kitchen. Now it’s just a few steps past the bathrooms to the back door. Probably because no one can think of anything more to say, we all kind of look down at Irene’s scuffed black old shoes, including Irene, and listen to their heels brush against the carpet and then click on the black-and-white linoleum.

Well, the short of it is, we make it to the parking lot, I put Irene in my Duster with the splintered windshield, lock her in, and me and this guy give it a whirl. He’s actually a pretty strong guy for a restaurant flake, but after a few glancing punches and broken clenches, I get him in a headlock where I know he can’t breathe. Nothing serious happened, other than the guy couldn’t speak for a while after the big black cook busted out of the back door and kicked us off of each other. But right after I maneuver the headlock, in a flash, I happen to catch a glimpse of Irene in the car. It was as if the time slowing down from the fighting allowed me to see her, and I’ll never forget the look I saw in her face. She’s sitting there watching through the passenger window, her eyes wide and a small smile on her parted lips, the kind of look a baby has when it’s amused by something, and I can tell in what must be a millisecond that she’s probably not all interested about who’s winning the fight she’s watching, it’s enough that this battle is being fought over her. In fact, there’s a chance she doesn’t even completely recognize me, with all the rolling around going on, that she just sees two men wrestling like kids in the dirt of an unpaved alley parking lot. But her expression is like she’s watching some famous ballet.

Anyway, I see that look and I feel like quitting right then and there, just giving up, getting in my car and driving away. But I don’t, at least not before the cook separates us.

I check myself as I get up and find only a few elbow scrapes, but my shirt is ripped all the way up one side. I look at the guy one last time as I dust myself off and get in the driver’s side. We’re both still gasping for air, just standing there, looking. I try to tuck in and think, what a goddamn waste of a good flannel shirt.

I am not sorry at all, I just feel stupid as I'm driving off, especially if I think of Irene's reaction to it all. Of course, to top everything off, she's got herself in a state of extreme excitement the whole ride home. "You want a massage," she says every five minutes. "You want a massage now, honey?" I make a wrong turn from not paying attention and we get detoured way over to the west side of town. None of the roads I try seem to get us back. But Irene doesn't care we're lost, and, after a while, neither do I.