

The Shady Manor Motel

By Ivy Flesicher

His room was quiet at the Shady Manor Motel. As Henry Brookster looked at the small slit between window frame and window shade he could see sunlight seeping through to brighten the grey room. He'd been waiting for this sunshine. Henry turned over to look at his watch that sat upright on the night table next to the bed. 6:58 a.m. The red digits penetrated the darkness of the rest of the room. He could read it easily without his circular wire-framed glasses. He rolled back on his other side. He still wasn't ready to face the day. Putting his hand to his chin, he sat, looking toward the window, mesmerized by the paling neon light that was right above his window. Since the sun was coming up, the sporadic blink that was so characteristic of the motel sign was now just blending into the morning sunrise colors.

Henry had been to the Shady Manor Motel many times before. This was his "target sales region," as his boss had once cleverly termed. The company he worked for was based elsewhere . . . where his house was. But, THIS was his home. This was where he LIVED.

Henry liked the Shady Manor Motel. He always requested this room, too. Something about the blinking sign in the middle of the night made Henry feel that he was among action . . . that this was a motel with hustle and bustle. Of course, he knew if he said this to any of his traveling salesmen cronies they would probably just laugh . . . maybe even think he was stupid.

There were always a lot of truckers that stayed at the Shady Manor. The owner was a real pretty lady who was known to be quite friendly with more than a few of her guests. Some people said she'd been married and divorced five times, looking for a sixth husband who could make her REALLY happy this time. Whatever it was, truckers loved her, and the empty Days Inn across the street was proof enough of their favor for her more expensive establishment. What was a couple more dollars for a smile like Sadie's? The other traveling salesmen could answer that question. They weren't concerned with atmosphere.

Henry liked the truckers. They always seemed a lot more interesting to talk to than his business cohorts. Of course, Henry never actually talked to the truckers, but he could imagine what a conversation would be like. He would sit down at a stool next to one of them at Sadie's cafe, next door. And he'd hunch over his cup of coffee like all the truckers did who were lined up at the counter, just as if he were one of them. Then, he'd kind of tilt his head until he caught the attention of a neighboring trucker.

"God, I-27 is a real bitch out there. Last night I couldn't see the road for all the blowing snow, and there were cars stuck all over the place in the drifts of snow along the road. Jesus Christ, this must be one of the worst winters we've ever seen here."

And then, the trucker might say that this weather didn't bother him. Tomorrow he'd be in Florida. And they could talk about the weather or politics or . . . something important. And the trucker might even offer him a cigar and a light because they ARE a friendly breed. And they'd eat their bacon and eggs from the chipped blue plates in a comfortable silence like good friends should be able to do.

Of course, Henry never quite had enough courage to come out of his

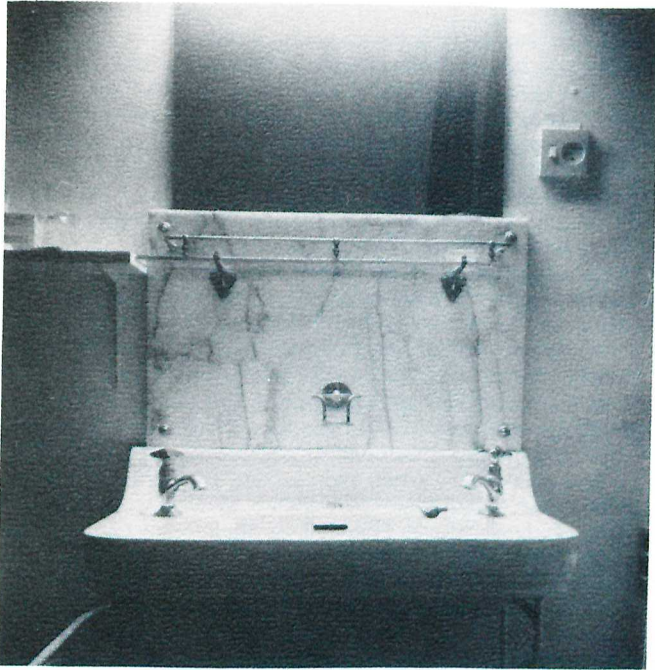


Photo by Rhet Lickliter

booth at the back of the restaurant. He always sat at the one with the green coverlet that disguised a hole the size of a fist so no one could see the aging yellow stuffing. Henry would sit in his booth most of the morning drinking his coffee slowly so Sadie wouldn't get mad and kick him out of the place. He would watch the truckers come in as early as four in the morning from his room window. Then he'd join them in the restaurant about an hour later. The truckers would be flirting with Sadie in that way that only truckers could do.

"Sadie, sugar! Why weren't ya payin' me a visit last night. I reckon you just don't care about your dear ol' Bud anymore."

"Mannnnn, you ARE crazy, boy. I've paid you plenty visits. You know I don't let my Bud go friendless. Remember, I have to keep ALL my truckin' friends happy, honey."

Sadie was a nice lady. Henry was sure of it.

At around nine o'clock or nine-thirty the salesmen might start to drift in, but they usually came in later. Not many showed up here. Henry figured they probably just skipped breakfast so they could hurry home and kiss the wife and hug the kids.

Henry wasn't married.

Today, however, was different for Henry. In fact, today Henry didn't even want to venture from his bed. He was sick of winter, and the sun was teasing him at the window. He'd heard the weather forecast last night, and he knew it was sub-zero cold. Henry could already feel the cold sneaking into the room through the crack under the door and through the thin pane of glass in the window. No, today was not a day to work. Today was a day to think. Today was his birthday.

A knock at the door interrupted Henry's thought. Henry jerked forward, but remained in bed.

Another knock. "C'mon honey. Open the door. It's cold out here, and you don't want sweet Mara Lou's buns to get cold, do ya?"

Confused, Henry put on his robe and glasses and walked to the door. He looked out the peephole at a woman who reminded him of a Woolworth's mannequin. "Mara Lou" stood there wearing no coat, a thin dress and costume jewelry that Henry thought must be weighing her down.

Another knock. "C'mon sugar—I ain't got all day. Ya just called me, so I know ya's here. Ya don't need to be shy."

Henry took a look at the women again. She had a kind expression on her face, like Sadie. Suddenly, he realized the opportunities at hand. He quickly opened the door. "I'm sorry. I didn't hear you at first. Umm . . . howdy Miss. Um . . . it's about time ya got here. Ya damn women are so slow anymore." Henry stood at the door, staring at the woman.

Mara Lou snickered and gently pushed him to her side with her left forefinger. She strutted into his room, looking back at Henry. Mara Lou wore a polyester/rayon blend dress with a big flower print that people were wearing a few years back. When she reached the center of the room, she turned around and finally spoke. "Sweetheart, give me a break. Why don't we just get down to business. It's been a long night." She moved forward and rubbed against Henry who leaned against the now-closed door. "Honey, let's just have some fun, now." She looked at him in the eye and winked.

"Um . . . don't you want to talk first Miss—I mean . . . Mara Lou?" He accented her name with concentrated precision. Henry wished to escape her aggressive hold. Grabbing the doorknob, he maneuvered himself around her, and immediately began fidgeting with his terrycloth robe to make sure no nakedness was visible. "I mean, how's work been?" Henry thought to himself that he wasn't sounding very truckerly.

"How's work been? Man, are you out of your mind? I thought this was just another trick with a lonely salesman. You're one of them shy guys aren't you?"

"No, I'm not shy. I just thought you'd want to be treated like a lady; that's all." Henry cleared his throat and deepened his voice. "Baby, you ain't seen what a man I am yet. Just you wait til we're in bed, and. . ."

"I know. I know. I ain't seen nothin' yet. I've heard it before, and I'm sure I've seen it before. Listen. Henry is it? You are Henry Brookster, aren't you?"

"Well. Yes, I am. Some of the women call me Henry "Hotlips" Brookster."

Mara Lou closed the door with a nudge of her hip and turned back around, facing Henry. "Why do I always get the shy ones? Sugar, I don't know why you're so embarrassed." She snickered. "I had one just like ya last night. He said he didn't call. He even told me that he thought I was working for his wife and was trying to frame him. I laughed. He broke down. He'd called from the pay phone at the end of the walkway. Either that or Sadie arranged it. She does that sometimes for lonely looking men."

"Listen to me. Sugar, let's cut the crap. Sadie said she thought it was your birthday and she thought you might be lonely being away from home and all. If you've changed your mind, tell me. I don't play games. So, why don't ya just act like yourself instead of Mack the trucker. So, ya wanna get to business?"

Henry looked at the floor and then lifted his head to stare at her neck. "Miss. . . I must say I'm a bit embarrassed. I don't think you understand me at

all. I'm trying to tell you that I'm not like these other salesmen you have met . . . you just don't understand me. I hang around with a different crowd; I hang around with the truckers in the cafe. They're my buddies . . ."

"Listen, Henry, is it? Do ya mind if I call ya Hank? I used to be married to a Hank. He was real nice.

"Hank, I have a problem here. Ya see, all you salesmen are alike. It's nothing to be ashamed of. Now, listen sweetie. I think you're kinda cute, and it's your birthday. So, let's just celebrate." Mara Lou put down her purse, and sat on the bed. She began to take her shoes off.

"Miss, I'm very sorry that you have been inconvenienced, but in this case, you really are wrong. Here's ten dollars, now. I really wish you would leave. You are just not my type." Henry fidgeted with his robe and pushed the oily hair that was falling in his face back in place.

She began to laugh. "Ten dollars?"

"Please just leave me alone. Here's five more. Ten. Just go." Henry appeared to be in a panic as a child feels before he is caught by his mother doing something wrong. Mara Lou toyed with the fake big pearls that hung around her neck. She flicked dirt off one pearl and then scrutinized the rest. She looked up.

"All right. All right. Just take it easy. I'll believe ya. Ya don't need to get upset. Shit. I swear you traveling salesmen are the weirdest and horniest breed of man I've ever met." Mara Lou walked to the door and let herself out.

Henry shut the door behind her, locking the knob, the dead-bolt and then attaching the chain. He returned to his bed, took off his robe, and adjusted the pillows. Arguing with the woman had exhausted Henry, so he fell to sleep quite quickly when he finally got into bed. Henry soon began to dream as he tossed and turned in his bed.

It was Henry's birthday and he was celebrating it with his numerous trucking friends (in the trucking company he now owned). He had a wife who was there too. A pretty lady with curves like Sadie's. She could drive the men crazy! She smiled at everyone, and everyone who walked by her just said hello to her naturally. Henry and his buddies were obviously always together. If it was a convoy, a strike or just a thought about another, they were together and they were a team.

Yeah, they were a happy crew and they livened the bar in which they celebrated Henry's birthday. The other men would slap Henry on the back, and he knew what it meant. He was an "all right guy." His friends thought he was the greatest. And no one was toasting this trucker. It just wasn't the thing to do. No, that kind of stuff was left to the salesmen.

The men just played their pool and drank beer while the women sipped ale and watched their husbands. Everyone was happy, even Henry. But then Henry noticed a man sitting in a rear corner. The sleeves of a business shirt were rolled up and a suit jacket lay over a chair. The man seemed to cuddle the drink he was staring into. Henry walked over to the man and asked him to join his party, to "meet the guys," and have "a beer on the house." The man in the corner soon joined the crowd so that Henry would have mistaken him for a trucker. His wife now leaned over to kiss Henry and she seemed to purr into his ear. "Happy Birthday, Henry. Happy Birthday to the greatest man in the world. Happy Birthday." And the crowd joined in like a chant until Henry woke up to the continuous drone of his alarm clock.