

No Return
Tony Romano

This is a tribute to longtime Chicago columnist Mike Royko, a voice of sanity sorely missed.

I climb poles for ComEd. Routine maintenance mainly. But you remember the nasty storm that swept through here last week? The sky was crackling, just waiting to split open. Nothing routine that night. But climbing had to get done and none of the old timers wanted to go up and I'm new, looking to prove myself, so I climbed. One rubber-soled boot at a time, like it was June instead of October. I could see sparks shooting from the tracks of the Ravenswood. The second I braced myself at the top, a shiver of electricity ran up the length of my leg, through my chest, and out my head. I wouldn't have given this another thought if it hadn't been for the power outage sometime later. Total blackness. Not just the street lights and the apartment lamps, but the cars too. The one behind me smashed into my truck and sent me flying into my airbag.

We got out to inspect the damage but couldn't see a thing. He lit a cigar, and I could see he was an old guy with wide, black-rimmed glasses on a beak nose. Not a scratch on him. No concern lining his face. He told me his name and asked me where I was headed.

"A sports bar on Fullerton."

"A what?"

"You know...beer, flat screen TVs."

"I've been away a while. Where's the nearest tavern, Slats?"

He kept calling me that. Slats Grobnik.

I took a step away from him. The red end of his cigar lit up the creases in his eyes. "My name is not Slats."

"Don't mind me," he grumbled to himself. "Slats is my alter ego, you could say."

"Uh-huh."

"Let me ask you some questions. I've been thinking of coming back, but I want to make sure it's worth my trouble."

"Back from where?"

"Never mind that. If I can find someone to...to host me." He glared at me, like he was sizing me up.

"I don't think my girlfriend wants boarders right now. Our relationship is a little rocky to tell you the truth."

"Relationship! People still using that weightless word?"

I pulled out my dead cell. "I can call someone for you."

He spit when he saw the phone. I swear I saw the spit splatter. But I couldn't have.

"Damn technology."

I thought about walking away, but his cigar provided the only light and I felt myself pulled toward it.

"If...you came *back*, what would you do?"

“Give me a typewriter. I used to write four columns a week.”

“Columns?”

“Newspaper columns. You read the newspaper, don’t you?”

“I get my news online.”

“Online.” He twisted his mouth in disgust, then turned into himself, as if he was thinking of a column to write. “Who’s the mayor?”

“Daley.”

“Hrrmmm.”

“Cubs make it to the World Series yet?”

“A few years back, they were up three games to one—”

“Spare me the rest.”

“There’s always next summer,” I told him.

“Boys on schoolyards still playing 16-inch softball?”

“Not so much.”

His shoulders sagged.

“Ketchup?”

“Huh?”

“People still putting ketchup on hot dogs?”

I nodded and looked away in shame. I thought he might cry, but I knew he wouldn’t. I could see he’d never cried in his life.

He touched my arm, and I swear, a charge spiked through me. He gripped hard, like someone unused to human contact, which was a thought I’d never had before.

“Go,” he said, as if doing me a favor. “Take off. Before I change my mind. Good luck with your relationship and your online news and rooting for the Cubbies and pouring your ketchup. I’ve had enough of that for one lifetime. I could be enticed by a good corner tavern, though, with a bartender...”

He released my arm and another charge flashed through me, starting from my head and creeping downward. Sparks flew from the el, apartment lights flickered on. From my perch atop the pole, I felt a rush of chilled air fill my lungs. The city had never looked so bright to me. I climbed down, lightheaded, but one sure step at a time, a strange craving for a cigar burning my tongue.

