



Hoppersville #1 - Nighthawks

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What is Hoppersville?

Hoppersville is a set of ten connected and inter-linked stories based upon ten of Edward Hopper's paintings in the order chosen by members of Mobileread.com

Nighthawks is #1 of 10 and is based upon the Edward Hopper painting "Nighthawks."

Nighthawks

"Earth shattering, yeah that's what I said, Johnny. How am I supposed to explain it over the phone? You don't shatter the earth over the... "

Peggy's words rang out in my head as I took the Hack off-meter and drove cross-town to a little diner they called the Hoppersville Rocket.

The Rocket sat on the corner of Mercy and Divine. An empty fish-tank of a place suited for late night insomniacs, the lonely and anybody trying hard to live a dream, or was that escape bad dreams, I could never be sure?

Peggy sat in the corner nursing a small cup of Joe. Her blonde hair tied back hard against her head. She wore no makeup and had the look of a woman about to be involved in serious business.

My gut twisted a little as though I'd hit the down slope of a hill too fast. Was it *my* Earth that would be shattered tonight? Was I the one

in for the chop with all this after midnight secrecy?

I wouldn't find out by sitting around watching the place from the driver's seat of the Hack.

Inside, the coffee jerk, Pete, wearing the same white crumpled paper hat with as many wrinkles as his crumpled white face, caught my eye as I entered.

"What'll be, Johnny?" he said.

I played it cool, kept my eyes on Pete and the only other patron in the Rocket that night.

That other patron sat with his back to the window, a sour look on his face and an untouched cup of Joe before him.

"What you reckon, friend?" I said to him.

"Reckon?" he said, catching my eyes for a moment then focusing again on his untouched drink. "Reckon about what?"

"You got a recommendation on what I should order?"

He took his time, lifted his head slowly like the second hand of a watched clock moving toward quitting time.

"I recommend you stay a bachelor as long as you can, that's what I recommend," he said.

I looked at Pete.

Pete shrugged at me

I held up my hand and backed away from the sour patron.

"No harm, fella, just being polite is all. I'll ask someone else next time," I said.

He grunted something I couldn't hear and returned to his sourness.

I turned to Johnny.

"You know what I like, Pete, make me one and make it big," I said.

Pete smiled, his milky old eyes drifting toward Peggy in the corner.

"Should I make that two?" he said.

Nervous, I licked at my lips. What was this madness all about, why had she called me in the

middle of the day when she knew I'd be sleeping? Did I even want to know the answer to that question?

"Just one, I don't know how long I'll be in here tonight."

Pete tapped the corner of his hat.

"Bring it over or... ?" he planned out what might happen as his eyes travelled toward the door of the diner and there saw a future with me gone from the place.

I sucked in a calming breath, nodded and said; "Bring it over."

Peggy didn't move, even when I was within reaching distance. She focused on the empty cup of Joe in front of her. Wherever she was, she wasn't in the diner that night.

"Look like someone pulled out the rug when you were standing on it," I said, and let my hand fall gently on her shoulder.

Peggy flinched under my touch, her back rippling as if I'd run a cold hand along her spine.

"Damn, Johnny, what are you tryna do, give me a heart attack?" she said, patting at her chest between every word.

I had a smile, but I lost it as I sat down next to her at the counter.

"I figured it was the other way round," I said, "what with that call this afternoon and all."

"Did I wake you?" she said, her voice real and honest sounding.

"Are you kidding me? You know I drive the Hack nights and sleep in the day, that's why you said you liked me, wasn't it? Why we hooked up because we were both, what did you call it... you made up a name... Nighthawks?"

As I spoke, I turned, and as I turned I saw her face.

There was too much worry in that face, too much fear and the reason why was unspoken.

I hit the other side of that unseen bridge and my stomach lurched.

"What is it?" I said.

She closed her eyes. Without makeup she looked like a little girl lost searching for her mom in a crowded store. Too young, and yet she had the dark circles beneath her eyes that marked everyone used to after-midnight living. You could never be young and have those after-midnight markings.

"I didn't want it to come to this," Peggy said, her eyelids fluttering like a sleeping net attacked by moths in the summer months.

I got in closer, grabbed her by the sides of the arms. "Come to what? Tell me? Are we through, is that what you're—"

"It's not you, it's—"

Disbelieving what I heard, I let go of Peggy.

"You're not going to give me that runaround are you?"

"What?"

"The *it's not you, it's me* runaround. Listen, sister, I've lived long enough to have heard that one before and I'll be damned if I sit here and listen to it again."

"It's true this time," she said.

"True? Sure. Come on, Peg, what's *his* name?"

"His?"

"Gotta be some other guy, right? Meet me here after midnight with earth-shattering news, that's what you said on the phone, *earth shattering*. There's only one thing that can shatter the earth when a man is in love with a woman."

"In love? You're in love with me?" she held onto her chest as though her heart might jump out.

"And you're asking me that question, what else did you think I was doing with you, playing footsie the last six months just for the hell of it?"

I wasn't angry, I was surprised. I thought Peggy was something more. Not the usual dame who liked to drag a man around by his wallet and then drop him when that wallet was empty.

She'd said we were *Nighthawks*. The same kinds of lonely creatures who caught the sun in glimpses and opened our eyes to the forever winter that was the Hoppersville night.

Now I was beginning to wonder what I'd seen in her, and why I'd seen it for so long.

Just about then I saw something more.

Peggy grabbed me and pulled me close.

"I love you too, but you gotta know something, Johnny, you gotta know who I am... what I am, what we both are... can be... I mean what... ' she said.

I tried to pull away, but she was strong. The wrong kind of strong for her height and the slender wisp of her body.

"Peg, what the Hell—"

Her eyes closed.

They opened.

They weren't the kind of eyes that belonged to any woman I'd known before.

My heart was somewhere up in my throat and trying to find its way into my ears. I heard a

music that could only exist on the inside, a nauseating, thumping tune that played out of time. This wasn't real, I'd overslept and in that oversleep I was dreaming a bad dream that couldn't be real. Shouldn't be real.

Was real.

Peg held me tight, she wouldn't let go.

"Now you know, it *is* me, Johnny."

I tried not to look into her eyes, but wherever I turned they seemed to be there.

A blackness thicker than the night existed beneath Peggy's lids. They weren't eyes any more, but a deep and never ending well that I felt myself falling towards.

"Jesus, Peg," I said, still struggling.

She leaned into my ear, her voice a hot whisper.

"I said we were *Nighthawks*, but that was a lie. I *am*, Johnny. You *can* be too... if you want to..."

Her voice had changed. This was the voice of something that existed in a bad dream you tried to wake from but couldn't.

Fear grabbed me tighter than Peggy. I was a statue, solid rock.

What was a Nighthawk anyway? What was Peggy? And why would I want to be one of these black-eyed creatures as she'd suggested?

At that moment all I wanted was out of the Rocket Diner and home to my bed. I wanted the night over, and the sound of the day in my ears when all this wouldn't be real and I could blame an empty bottle of rye for my troubles.

"If you hadn't said you'd loved me, Johnny, the story would have been over, ended without any fuss. I would have walked away. But *I* love you too, and I can't let you go now."

I shivered like I'd been pushed out of a warm house into a snowstorm.

Her voice was deep now and seemed to reach inside me. The voice touched parts of me that it had never touched before. That touch was cold.

"Leave me be you... "

I pulled back far enough to see that the world had changed.

The Rocket Diner was gone and with it Pete and the sour stranger. I was behind the wheel of the Hack, Peggy beside me on the seat.

"How... ?" I said, my words as numb as my face as I turned to take in the shift of location.

"What I am, what you can be, Johnny."

"I don't want—"

Peggy reached out to me and touched my lips with her finger.

"Hush," she said.

I didn't want to hush. I wanted to turn the key, hit the gas and roar away from the Rocket Diner, from her.

I hushed.

A sound wouldn't pass my lips even though I tried. I was mute, but not deaf and certainly not dumb.

Peggy slid back into the shadows that hit her side of the Hack and took her dark eyes with her. From the new darkness that hid her, she said:

"Drive, Johnny, drive."

I moved without wanting to move. I turned the key, hit the gas, and roared away from the Rocket Diner like the whole of Hoppersville was on my tail.

The night was a series of smoking yellow, red and green blurs at the edge of my fear. Hoppersville was a smear of a city, and I was a wreck of a man.

I glanced to the darkness and saw nothing in that darkness of what I'd known only a night before.

Peggy was gone.

Something new had taken her place, something that belonged to this night in a way I hadn't dared to imagine before. A darkness that was not a woman, and a woman that was the shifting darkness.

Nighthawk?

Nighthawks?

Were there more like her? How many more in Hoppersville and how had I'd never seen the likes of them before. Most confusing of all; why

would she think I'd want to be one of them? Why would anybody want to—

"Here, I'll show you," Peggy said.

She wasn't answering my question, she couldn't read minds, least I thought she couldn't. At that moment I would have believed she could turn off the sun with a nod of her head.

I turned the wheel of the Hack and hit a winding road that led away from the smeared light of the city and into a new darkness.

My mouth opened to speak, but there was still nothing inside there but cotton wool and lost intention.

"Stop," Peggy said.

My foot hit the brake.

The Hack jerked forward then dropped dead into silence.

The bass drum of my heart filled the quiet soon enough and my thoughts only added to the noise.

Soon as I get the chance, I thought, I'm out of here. I'll take it on the hoof if I have to. Leave the damn hack behind.

Soon as...

Sure, leave the Hack out in the middle of nowhere when I still owed Llewellyn fifteen payments back at the depot. Oh yeah, good plan, Johnny. You lose this Hack, you lose your job, you lose your lousy one room fourth floor walk-up with a view of a brick wall. Go for it. Let's see how far you get anyways with this crazy... creature by your side. Let's just see how you fare, friend, running in the darkness with...

.

"There's something you've got to see," Peggy said from the dark.

The door opened on my side. Outside the darkness stretched out forever, and somewhere in that darkness I heard Peggy's breath, then her voice.

"All I'm asking is you look, Johnny, just look and then we see what happens from there," she said.

Look? Sure, that's what I was going to do, that's what I wanted to do at God-knew-what-time in the morning with a woman who was, what? Was Peggy even a woman to begin with? Didn't matter, 'cause my feet were itching to run and hang the consequences, hang the money I owed to Llewellyn and losing everything. I just wanted away from her, away from this crazy dark night in Hoppersville.

"Will you look?" the darkness asked me.

I nodded.

I swung my legs out the side of the Hack and let my body follow.

Then I bolted.

The dark was thick and cold and smelled of freshly dug earth. There was no wind. No breeze and no light. I could have been running in place, but I didn't care. I was running and that was enough. As long as it was away from *her, it, Peggy.*

A wind picked up, but not the wind.

A voice.

"You don't need to run, Johnny."

Peggy's voice came from in front of me. Another sound resonated just beneath her words. A rhythmic *fut-fut-fut*.

I pumped my legs harder. Sweat broke out across my forehead. I ground my teeth.

"Don't you love me, Johnny?"

Fut-fut-fut.

Love? Love? I wondered if it was ever love with Peggy or had she put some spell on me? What else could she do that I hadn't seen yet? What other secrets were contained in the darkness of her eyes?

And what was that sound?

Fut-fut-fut?

Fut-fut-fut

"Leave me be, "I shouted into the night, "just leave me alone."

Fut-fut-fut

"But you gotta know what I am. I gotta know if you'll love me, Johnny, once you see."

Fut-fut-fut

"Leave.."

Fut-fut-

"..me.."

Fut

"..be!"

I hunkered down, pushed forward, hoping to break through.

A solid wall of darkness met me.

I bounced back, falling, falling... .

...

.rising... .rising...

Weightless.

I rose up. Two hands wrapped in underneath my legs. A hot voice burned the inside of my ear like a flame.

"You gotta see what *we* see, Johnny. Gotta know what the night is before you make up your mind."

The darkness fell away beneath me, and Hoppersville appeared. The smeared lights of the

city seen from above. Seen from way, way above the ground.

Impossible.

Incredible.

I craned my neck to see what had hold of me, what could be causing this miracle to happen, but I already knew before my eyes had witnessed the sight. There was no other explanation.

I saw her eyes. Two black holes pulling in the pale galaxy of light that was her face. The city was trapped too, but somehow reflected in that darkness. I saw myself.

Peggy.

Fut-fut-fut

And behind her, two dark shadows cut through the night. Up. Down. Up. Down.

Wings.

Wings?

"Peggy?" I asked, my voice found but feeling lost.

"Hush," she said, "we're nearly there."

"Where?" I wanted to say, but my voice was gone again, but the answer was quick in coming.

As I looked away from her face, from the deep dark beating of those wings, I saw a new light below. The reflected light off a thousand and more broken stones below.

No, not stones exactly.

Headstones.

We were heading to the Hoppersville Graveyard.

Not heading.

Falling.

Falling.

The world rushed up to meet us, a mixture of twisted light and hard stone.

I wanted to scream, but the cotton in my mouth absorbed any sound I could make.

Then...

I closed my eyes tight, gripped that thing, that beautiful thing that I'd once loved and now couldn't find a name for, closer. I prayed to any God that might be watching that night over Hoppersville. Any God that might in a curious moment dare to look down on the smoky, smeared lights of the city and find me in amongst all that quiet confusion. Find me and find some pity for me.

Oh Gods, whoever you are wherever you are, don't let me die here where the dead already sleep. Don't let me welcome the dawn, my body twisted over somebody else's stone memory. Don't let me—

The flapping of wings stopped.

The rush of air ceased.

I dared to open one eye.

And found myself alone and standing in amongst the headstones. The lights of

Hoppersville in the distance found me and the dead stone markers around me. The light danced around me as Hoppersville was reflected back upon itself.

But where was Peggy?

Had that thing, that creature I'd dared to love, found the darkness again, upset with all my fear, running from my surprise?

No, she couldn't have. She wouldn't just leave. She'd brought me here for a reason. To tell me something, to show me something, I wasn't sure, but with both my eyes open I saw my opportunity. The lights of Hoppersville called. From there I could find my way home, if not the way back to the Hack. But home and my bed sounded better than anything else in the whole god-damn world about then.

Then what, I wondered?

When I'd slept away the day, if I managed to find the Hack again, then what?

Peggy would still be around, she wouldn't magically disappear into the thick air.

And the air was thick.

I stumbled through that soup toward the lights of Hoppersville, chasing my North Stars, hoping that in that light I would find answers to my questions.

With each step the darkness got tighter, closer, thicker around me, pushing in from every side.

My eyes strained to see her in that thickness, hidden, watching or was she gone?

I pushed on.

The lights beckoned me, promised comfort and the stripping of confusion. Away from the questions and back to that life where I could sleep away the rising sun and wake in the cool quiet of the evening.

But the questions remained. They tumbled through my head like clothes from a broken suitcase dropped open at the very worst time.

What was it I needed to see out here, what was she that would bring me to a graveyard to reveal... what... ? And what would come

afterward? What would become of a night where I knew was filled with winged creatures that...

Fut-fut-fut

Fut-fut-fut

I dropped into a cold stance, like a junkyard dog sensing the presence of a cat nearby. A prickle of coldness sent the hairs on my neck into a shiver. I searched, but found nothing in the darkness but that noise and that noise was growing louder, louder...

Fut-fut-fut

Fut-fut-fut

FUTFUTFUTFUTFUT

Peggy?

No.

No... .

Not just one pair of wings, no.

It couldn't be possible but there were others out there in the dark.

The darkness took shape.

Many shapes.

They came to me, finding the scant light to make themselves real. They were young and old, tall and thin, fat and skinny and all of them, all of them were panda-marked as after-mid-night people.

"What do you want from me? Please, don't," I said turning a dizzying circle. "I just want... I want... "

They stopped. A circle of dark eyes at the edge of darkness looking at me, looking but not daring to touch. As children near an untended candy counter where the latest and stickiest sweets waited, so were the Nighthawks that found me there, begging for my life.

And one, one of them spoke.

Peggy's voice from the rear of the group.

"Join us, Johnny," she said.

I searched for her, wanting to see something of what I'd known, what under the lights of the

Rocket Diner I'd seen only a night before. A girl with love in her eyes, with the light not darkness.

"No," I said, my voice lost.

"Join us Johnny or... "

I didn't need the end of the sentence to know what would follow could not be good, would never be good.

"Show yourself, show yourself. Stop hiding!" I screamed into the darkness.

The darkness lessened for a moment and then there she was, in front of me, that thing that beautiful thing made of night and the beating of wings. That creature that terrified me yet still, somewhere inside, made my heart beat faster for a different reason.

"Join us, Johnny, it's the only way you'll make it out of here alive," she said.

"Why are you doing this to me? Why can't you let me be?"

"Because you love me, Johnny, because you love me and I had to take a chance, you

understand, I had to show you what I am, what you are. If you didn't love me Johnny then... "

My fists tightened into cold hard lumps. I wanted to swing out, my muscles ached to punch and lash out at the darkness, but that darkness sensed my intention. Before I could take a step and warm my hands with violence, the darkness pulsed and pushed in toward me.

I stepped back. My fists unfolded, along with my tongue.

"Why can't you just leave me alone, huh? I won't tell anybody, I swear, you just leave me be and—"

Peggy wagged her head "no". She smiled and it was the night and the twilight and the time before dawn came and feeling that dawn might never arrive.

"You know us, Johnny. You've seen us before and you'll see us again. *We* can't have that, but we can have you."

My gut turned to a Popsicle.

"I ain't never seen none of you before, I swear." Like some honest Boy Scout I put a hand over where my heart beat its irregular rhythm.

She put her cold hand upon my burning face and rubbed the skin like a mother comforting a child.

"You've seen us, Johnny, plenty of times. We've been in the back of the Hack, we're in the diners and the all night cafés. We're on the corners slinging rhymes, in the clubs singing out our pains and our joys. We're in apartments trapped in amber midnight light, pounding on keys, filling up white pages with words. We're everywhere Johnny, we're everywhere and there's one thing you gotta know about us. One thing before you become one of us."

She leaned in close to my ear.

I gulped and I was sure that every dreaming citizen of Hoppersville would hear that gulp as a gunshot near their ear.

"We're Nighthawks, Johnny, we're the ones that make this town what it is. Without us there

would never be a dawn, never be a sunrise, or a sunset. Without us there'd be no Hoppersville."

I found a confused word lodged in the back of my throat and spat it out.

"What?" I said.

She took a step back, she unfolded her arms to introduce a piece of darkness that stepped forward, and then another and then another, each in turn she described.

"One here paints the world, another writes it, another still makes this world in song, and yet another plays that song for everyone to hear. We are the Nighthawks Johnny and while the city sleeps we create the city, and while the city wakes, we sleep only to wake again and create the city anew. "

I shook my disbelieving head and it felt like I wouldn't be able to keep it on my shoulders for much longer.

"It's a lie," I said.

"No lies needed. I created you, Johnny. You're love and you're the hope of the lonely. I wrote

you, Johnny, I wrote you to life and you came to me and you fell in love with me. You came off my page and into the night, but now you're here, now you know, you have to be one of us, there's no going back, you get me? You get me, Johnny?"

I got nothing, except the bursting feeling inside that I wanted to run and never stop running. More than all that, I wanted the light and the day. I wanted them as a man lost in the desert wanted water and the cool shade of a palm tree.

"It's a lie," I said again, searching the faces, for the faces in the darkness.

"No lie, Johnny. You're real now but you won't be real much longer. Once the day day comes around, once you sleep then... "

"Then what, then what?" I said.

She took her time, and in that time the darkness got a little less dark, the people vanished without any flutter or fut-fut-fut, and then all that was left was her voice, that voice as she told me the future and what that future held.

"No more Johnny," she said.

"It's a lie," I said.

"No lie," she said, her voice fading.

"It's a god-damn lie!"

"I love you, Johnny."

"Then why did you bring me here, why bring me here and—"

"I'm sorry it had to end like this."

I felt her hand in mine guiding me toward somewhere that I didn't want to go.

"Where am I?" I said.

It was an apartment, amber lit, small enough to worry a cat without being swung.

Peggy sat before a typewriter, pounding at the keys. The white paper stained with new words in the roller. If she'd had wings, they were gone, if she'd had midnight eyes, they weren't there when she turned to me.

"Peg? Peg what's going on? How did I get here, how did I—"

She turned, pulled the sheet out from the roller and handed it to me. I read the words.

Johnny never was real. Once he read the words on the paper he was... gone.

The Hack meter ticked out a midnight heart-beat. The Hack engine rumbled, and then the man, who'd patiently read my manuscript by the scant overhead light, finally spoke.

"You wanted me to be honest, miss?"

I nodded, hoping that he wouldn't be.

"Well," he shrugged and he tossed my story aside, "it's not much of a story. Reads more like some kind of strange nightmare to me. Where did you pull all that from?"

I pulled the Hack up to the brownstone on Divinity and knocked it off-meter.

"Just made it up, saw some of it in real life, the rest just came to me. You think it sucks, huh? Didn't like the dark wings or the graveyard parts, was that what put you off?"

The fare looked up to the brownstone and back to me.

"Take my advice, you stick to something simple when telling a story," he said reaching for the door.

"Like what, you reckon?"

The fare steadied his hand.

"Good versus evil, you know. Give us somebody to route for. A bad guy versus a good guy, or gal, whatever your preference, but graveyards and lovelorn creatures with wings, that's a no-go. Besides, *that* ending was a real stinker." He wrinkled his face over the whole idea.

"Good versus evil, you reckon, that's what makes a story?"

The fare, his face losing the wrinkle of concern, leaned forward.

"Listen, Miss, you look like the kind of gal who can hold her own and take a few punches, am I right?"

I nodded.

"Well let me tell you this straight, you need to come up with something punchier than this if you want the pulps to take it on. And it was *you* who was the woman, right?"

It was my turn to wrinkle my face at him.

"How did you know?" I said.

"Two things," he said, "your license is there on the dash. It says Peggy on there and you named the woman character Peggy in your story."

"And the second?" I asked.

"You been driving me home from the Diner for two weeks. I'm the guy with the sour face, right? the guy talking about how he wishes he'd stayed a bachelor?"

I blushed.

"Maybe."

He smiled, there was no sourness anywhere near his face. "Thought as much. Maybe you

should write a story about me, huh? You could call it the "The Sour Faced Killer."

"Why would I do that?"

My fare opened up his side door and stepped out.

"Who knows," he said, a smile that told a story all by itself forming on his face.

The door slammed.

I watched him walk to the front of the building. He reached up to a buzzer and pressed it, hard. A sound filtered out into the night that at first I didn't recognize, but soon enough was clear.

I pulled away from the building, the words in my mind, that title rolling about and clashing with everything else.

Good versus evil.

Give the audience someone to route for.

The Sour Faced Killer.

Maybe when my shift was over and all the Nighthawks had gone to ground for another day, I would spend a little time reshaping my

story, making everyone good or bad. Maybe I'd start a new story. A story about a sour-face man returning home and the plan that had formed in his mind after too many late nights and too many coffees in a lonely little fish-tank of a diner on the corner of an empty after-midnight street in Hoppersville.

I had an opening paragraph in mind.

A paragraph that I couldn't get out of my head all the way through that night, just like that haunting sound I'd heard coming from that building.

As the sour-faced man entered the darkened apartment, the sound of a piano met him. A sound he'd never wanted to hear again. A sound he'd thought was gone from his life for good.

END

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