

You Pour Vodka In Your Coffee

by W. Scott Bowlin

CHAPTER MOTHER

It's Saturday and I'm supposed to go see my mom. I don't want to but I don't feel like suffering through the guilt of not seeing her so I grab a pint of vodka and drive to the Shores. She lives in an apartment building near the boardwalk and I think maybe I'll go see her and then leave early and go to the pier and rent a fishing pole and spend the day fishing so coming all the way over here won't be a waste. She's wearing a bathrobe with holes in it and blue slippers, and there are dark circles under her eyes and I think that her eyes and mine look a lot alike these days and I wonder if her eyes are like that from staying out all night drinking and doping like mine are. She has a cigarette clamped in her fist when she opens the door and she says come in Robert and she goes back to the living room and sits down on the couch and stares at the television. One of those daytime talk shows is doing yet another paternity test, and for some reason mom seems to be enthralled by it and I say how are you and she says there's coffee in the kitchen without looking away from the television. I find a cup in the sink that doesn't look too old and I wipe the lipstick off with a potholder that's laying on the counter and I put some water in the bottom to soften up the coffee ring that's already there and then I dump it out and pull the vodka bottle out of my pocket and fill the cup half way and then top it off with coffee. I ask her where she keeps her creamer and she doesn't say anything and I look around but all I find is some packets of sugar substitute mixed in with little packets of ketchup and jelly and I go sit down on the couch as far away from her as I can get. The lady on the television show is being overdramatic about finding out that neither of the two guys on stage are her baby's father, and the host of the

show is standing there in dramatic pause before he turns to the camera and says so who is the father of Sherry's baby- find out what we uncovered right after this and it goes to commercial. Mom crushes her cigarette out and says how have you been and I say fine and she says that's good and I wonder if she is my real mother, if I could get one of those paternity tests and find out if she's my real mother and if the guy she told me was my father was really my father. I can't remember him very well, just a lot of him screaming and hollering and hitting me and her when I was still too small to go to school even, and I don't really care about it because that's the way it was and we are here now.

Finally, the show goes off and mom gets up and goes into the bathroom and I hear the water running when I go into the kitchen to add more vodka and coffee to my cup. Her purse is on the counter, and I can see all the crumpled money she has stuffed in there from work. I used to rob her when I came to see her, lift a ten spot or sometimes twenty if she had enough. I poke around in her purse a little, wondering what she does when she's not sitting around the apartment or working. The water in the bathroom shuts off and I close her purse, then stare at it guiltily trying to decide if it was more open when I first came in the kitchen. I suddenly think it is very important that she not think I was trying to rob her like I used to, and I rearrange the strap and open it up a little more then go back to the living room. I'm sitting on the floor when she comes out of the bathroom. She goes in the kitchen, and I can hear her moving her purse and I feel guilty for touching it and think she's going to be able to tell I was digging around in there and I just want to leave. She comes back in the living room and stands there, near the door, staring at me. I drink the rest of the coffee vodka and get up to put the cup in the kitchen, but she holds out her hand for it as I approach and I give it to her. Rick will be home soon she says, simply, and I say yeah, I'm leaving anyway, and she gives me a quick hug and I can feel her pushing money into my hand. I look down at it and start to hand it back to her but her eyes are moist and she looks

at me and then turns back into the kitchen and I walk out the front door.

After I leave her house I stop at a liquor store and buy another pint of vodka then drive over to the parking garage near the strip. I park the car and tuck the bottle into my jacket and walk across the street to a convenience store where I buy a bottle of cranberry juice and a soda. I'm almost out of cigarettes but I only have enough money for the pier, so I leave and walk out onto the boardwalk. The guy working at the counter has a shaved head and a tattoo of a dragon on his neck blowing flames onto his ear. He has a crystal earring which I suppose is meant to go with the tattoo but I don't really see it and he says going out on the pier and I say yeah I need a pole and some bait. And a bucket. He gives me a pole and some frozen squid and I walk out to the pier thinking he is the same guy I saw Jamie buying ecstasy from at the Coliseum a month ago. There are several other people out on the pier already, and most of them are fishing up close to the building where the surf crashes against the pilings. I walk past them and on out toward the end. The chairlift clanks overhead and I look up to see a woman and two girls, probably her daughters, riding overhead. The woman looks down at me and then quickly at her daughters who stare at me for a moment then look away, embarrassed to be seen with mom. I wave at them all, but they don't see me since they are pretending not to look at me, except for the dark haired one, and I sit the bucket down next to a guy in a jean jacket with a sweatshirt underneath it. He sees me baiting my hook and comes over and says that's not how you do it let me give you a hand and I want to tell him to fuck off but he seems so sincere that instead I let him take one of the shrimp and rip the head and tail off and throw the shell away and put it on the hook. A seagull comes down and catches the tail before it hits the water below, and I stare at the foamy patch of surf where the water curled and rolled past. The man stands there holding my pole out to me for a minute or two before he says here you go and I look up at him and say thank you. He's old, I see when I look up, probably in his forties, and he has some sort of accent like French or Canadian. He smiles

and says any time and goes back to his own corner of the pier. I cast out into the surf and set the pole into one of the holders attached to the pier and move my bucket down so that when I recast I can get away from him and bait my own hook. I sit down on the bench and light a cigarette then take out the bottle of vodka and drink it straight from the bottle. I look down the pier and see the woman and her two girls from the chairlift walking on the boardwalk. They walk out onto the beach and away from the pier toward the better hotels and I watch them to see if the dark-haired girl turns around and looks at me but they get smaller and smaller until I can't see them anymore and she never looks back.

