

What Are Friends For

by
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FADE IN

EXT. NORTHERN NEW ENGLAND WOODS - DAY

November trees are bare. Carrying rifles, two hunters tramp through the woods. They are the same age, fifty, but otherwise opposite. JERRY GLOVER is burly and jovial. NED HATCH is wiry, soft-spoken, and extremely shy.

They come to a pickup parked on a logging road. Jerry tosses his gun casually into the cab of the truck.

JERRY

Cripes, Ned, we just about tripped over that little spike-horn. Why didn't you shoot it?

Ned shrugs. He lays his gun carefully in the gun rack.

JERRY (CONT'D)

I'da taken him myself, if I hadn't already got one.

They get into the truck and Jerry starts the engine.

EXT. ROAD - DAY

The truck bounces down a dirt road and emerges onto a paved road near a lake. The lake is lined with an eclectic mix of farms, woodlands, and summer camps and cottages closed up for winter.

INT. TRUCK - DAY

Jerry still sputters his disbelief.

JERRY

It's nuts. Yesterday we see that twelve-pointer and you say he's too old, your ma can't chew the meat. Then today we see a sweet little spike-horn...

(shaking his head)

Y'aren't gonna tell me he's too tough.

Ned shrugs again, amiably.

EXT. ROAD NEAR SHADY REST MOTEL - DAY

The truck approaches the Shady Rest Motel, a cluster of tiny old-fashioned cottages at the edge of a small mill town. The lake-front grounds are immaculately landscaped.

DESMOND HEWES, fifty-five, clears dead leaves from a perennial border. His style is dapper, even when he is gardening.

As the truck passes, Jerry rolls down the window.

JERRY

Hey, Des, come have coffee!

Desmond turns with a start. His hand makes a tentative wave, but he looks like he has been crying.

INT. TRUCK - DAY

Not noticing Desmond's expression, Jerry chuckles.

JERRY

Guy sure likes things tidy...

NED

(murmurs, glancing back)
He didn't look so good...

JERRY

...guess the old ladies do, too.
They keep coming back...

EXT. MAIN STREET OF FLINT'S MILLS - DAY

The town is modest and old, but not seedy. The original mill is abandoned, but other businesses are going.

Approaching the Cloverleaf Diner, the truck slows down. Across the street are Ned's house and auto repair shop.

INT. TRUCK - DAY

Jerry gestures towards the diner.

JERRY

You comin' to eat?

NED

In a minute. I have to see about Ma.

EXT. STREET BETWEEN NED'S HOUSE AND DINER - DAY

Jerry pulls into Ned's driveway, stops beside the back door to let Ned out, then backs the truck across the street to park in front of the diner.

INT. HATCH LIVING ROOM - DAY

An old-lady room, tidy, dimly lit, filled with knickknacks. The curtains are drawn. The TV is very loud.

JUNE HATCH, eighty, sits in an easy chair with a walker close by. Her expression is vacant, brain-damaged from a stroke or accident.

Ned comes in and leans close to her ear.

NED

OK if I turn it down?

She makes a vague head movement. He turns the TV down.

NED (CONT'D)

Want to come along to Fran's?

She makes another vague movement.

He pulls the walker closer, smiles encouragement. She sets her jaw and shakes her head violently.

NED (CONT'D)

It's Saturday, Ma. Fran makes sweet rolls on Saturday.

INT. CLOVERLEAF DINER - DAY

The diner makes no attempt at ambiance. The decor is functional and well-worn, although some details signal changing times, such as the menu of espresso drinks on the wall behind the counter.

Jerry's wife FRAN, fifty-two, runs the grill. She's the boss cow in town, comfortably round, good-humored and outspoken.

Jerry sits at the counter across from her. His conversation includes anyone who wants to listen.

JERRY

...so Ned don't care about a trophy, that's fair enough, but a spike-horn's good eating...

PAUL SWEENEY, forty-nine, sits down beside him. Paul is rough-looking, with stubbled chin and well-used work clothes. His billed cap reads "Paul's Auto Salvage."

JERRY (CONT'D)

Hey, Paul. You wanna guess what Ned just did?

Paul shrugs. His mood is morose. Fran pours his coffee.

FRAN

Mornin' Paul.

He takes a swallow and doesn't answer.

JERRY

He passed up a spike-horn. Thing was so close, he coulda hit it with a rock.

Paul grunts, still without interest.

JERRY (CONT'D)

You comin' with us tomorrow?

PAUL

Nah, don't think so.

JERRY

Heck, just 'cause you got your buck don't mean you gotta stay home.

PAUL

I got things going on-

FRAN

He's moved out to the camp again.

JERRY

Oh, for the love of-- What now?

PAUL

I got sick of it, Des bein' on my case. Just 'cause I leave a few things lyin' around...

FRAN

He left a carburetor on the kitchen counter.

PAUL

I put a rag under it...

The door opens and Desmond comes in. Seeing Paul, he wheels around and leaves.

FRAN

Look, could you two work it out?
I'm losing business here.

PAUL

I was gonna move it.

The door opens and Ned helps his mother in. She moves at a creep, with the walker.

Jerry and Paul shift their coffee mugs from the counter to a table. Jerry pulls out a chair for Mrs. Hatch.

JERRY

June, you didn't raise this boy right. Yesterday we come on an twelve-pointer, nicest rack I've seen in years, he says the meat'll be tough. I nearly crapped.

He helps June sit.

JERRY (CONT'D)

Then today we see a little spike-horn and he won't shoot that either. I ask you, what's it take to please the guy?

Fran pours Ned's and June's coffee.

FRAN

I guess I know what was wrong with the spike-horn.
(to June)
I saved you a roll.

JERRY

(giving Fran a squeeze)
OK, you're the half with brains.
What was wrong with it?

FRAN

Paul got his buck opening day. You got one Monday. If Ned gets one, you've got no reason to go out in the woods again.

She glances at Ned for confirmation. He smiles.

Fran sets a sweet roll in front of June, who starts picking off small bits and eating them.

FRAN (CONT'D)

(to Ned)

You want me to look in at your house tonight? In case this wedding gig goes late?

NED

I don't want you goin' to no trouble. I mean, Ma would like it, but...

FRAN

It's no trouble. Those kids might wanna dance all night.

JERRY

They'll be dancin' without their piano player, if they do. This boy goes home by midnight.

He gives Fran another squeeze.

FRAN

(to Jerry, teasing)

They won't even miss you.

(winks at Ned)

Fiddler's the one that counts.

NED

That's not... I'm not any more...

FRAN

I know, the way you'd tell it is that the fiddle plays itself and you just come along to tune it.

Laughter, as Ned ducks in embarrassment.

FRAN (CONT'D)

By the way, you boys want a funeral gig? I hear Earl Coburn died.

Paul is surprised out of his funk.

PAUL

Earl died! Two days ago he was bitchin' about taxes. I figured he was gonna raise the rent on my yard.

JERRY

I figured he'd live forever just to save buying a casket. How'd he go?

FRAN

Dropped dead in his kitchen. He had some soup in the microwave.

JERRY

You think Opal's gonna be back to do the funeral?

At the mention of Opal's name, Ned becomes acutely attentive.

FRAN

Expect so. He's got no other family that I know about.

JERRY

I just thought... she hasn't been around here much. Not since she got married.

FRAN

(joking)

Maybe she was glad to be done with us.

PAUL

You know what I don't get is why a guy as rich as Earl would live in that rat's nest. Place is packed to the ceiling.

JERRY

He's got no wife to make him throw stuff out. What's it been, fifteen years since Bev passed?

FRAN

More than that or Aaron woulda had her for kindergarten.

JERRY

He didn't have her...?

She shakes her head.

JERRY (CONT'D)

How do you remember this stuff?

She shrugs, laughs.

FRAN

So, would you play if Opal asked?

JERRY

I hope she don't ask. I hate doin' funerals. They always want the fiddle weeping and wailing, makin' everybody cry. Torturing the catgut, I call it. Right, Ned?

Ned is startled out of a daydream.

NED

I don't mind so much, I guess.

JERRY

I'll take a wedding any day. Get people kickin' up their heels.

A grin briefly lights Ned's face.

NED

Yeah, it's pretty good sport, isn't it...

INT. WEDDING RECEPTION — NIGHT

The room is lively and warm. Ned, Jerry and two other musicians play folk music and the wedding guests dance. Even though his fiddle leads the music, Ned seems unobtrusive.

Now and then, the newly married couple whirls past the band. Ned watches their euphoria with a mix of pleasure and wistfulness.

INT. HALLWAY OF NED'S HOUSE — NIGHT

Carrying his fiddle case, Ned tiptoes down the hallway. He looks into his mother's room and sees that she's sleeping. He goes on to his own room.

INT. NED'S BEDROOM — NIGHT

Ned is awakened from a deep sleep by the PHONE RINGING.

NED

(into phone)

Hullo...? No, it's OK... A jump's all you need? Which road?

EXT. HAYFIELD - NIGHT

Ned drives his tow truck into the field and stops beside a tractor and a wagon loaded with plastic-wrapped round hay bales. The farmer, OTIS DENT, greets Ned with complaints. He is seventy years old, bent and bowed.

OTIS

Shouldn'ta shut the bastard down. I had to tighten a coupling. Good thing I had this fool phone.

He gestures with a cell phone, clutching it like a jewel.

OTIS (CONT'D)

Sure glad you were home. I got a new hired man and he gets ugly if I call after midnight.

Ned hooks jumper cables from his truck to the tractor.

NED

Mind a question?

OTIS

Not unless it costs somethin'.

NED

Why are you moving bales in the dark?

OTIS

'Cause if it's daylight and I'm done milkin', I wanna be huntin'.

Otis turns the key and the tractor starts with a roar. Ned unhooks the cables and gets in his truck.

OTIS (CONT'D)

(shouting after him)

Thanks, Ned. I'll drop somethin' by your place in the morning.

INT. NED'S BEDROOM - DAY

Early dawn. Ned is awakened by a LOUD THUMP from the front porch. He gets out of bed and goes to the window.

EXT. OUTSIDE NED'S HOUSE - DAY

Otis backs his truck out the driveway. He sees Ned in the window and waves.

INT. BEDROOM - DAY

As Ned stands at the window, his CLOCK ALARM sounds.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

Ned takes a last swallow of coffee and puts on a hunting jacket. June shuffles in with her walker and sits down.

Outside, a HORN HONKS.

NED

That's Jerry. I gotta go.

He sets a bowl of hot cereal on the table.

NED (CONT'D)

Cream of wheat today. I thought you'd like a change.

The HORN HONKS again. Distractedly, he heads for the door, stops, puts juice on the table, heads for the door again.

The storm door will open only a few inches. He peers out and sees that it's blocked by a crate of pumpkins.

He makes himself thin and slides through the gap.

EXT. OUTSIDE NED'S AUTO REPAIR SHOP - DAY

Ned stacks pumpkins into a neat pyramid outside his shop.

Jerry's truck backs away from the diner and pulls up beside the pumpkins. Jerry leans out to look at Ned's handmade sign: "Free Pumpkin with Every Job."

JERRY

That oughta start a stampede.

Ned smiles.

JERRY (CONT'D)

Fran said to tell you, Earl Coburn's service is tomorrow. Ten o'clock.

NED

Do you know if--?

He stops.

JERRY
Do I know what?

NED
Nothing.

EXT. OUTSIDE CHURCH - DAY

A plain, white New England church. Ned joins the trickle of people going in. The mood is quietly sociable, a civic function rather than mourning.

INT. CHURCH LOBBY - DAY

Ned pauses near the door and discreetly scans the people chatting in the lobby. He sees Earl's daughter OPAL standing with her husband TURNER BRONSON.

Lovely when she was young, Opal looks worn down. Her manner is diffident. Turner is handsome, sleek and self-assured.

Ned sneaks glances at Opal, but is too shy to approach. She is surrounded by well-wishers and does not see him. A neighbor smiles hello to Ned and he moves on into the main church.

Fran and Jerry come in and head directly to Opal.

FRAN
It's good to see you again, Opal.
You remember Jerry?

OPAL
(nodding)
Thank you for coming.

FRAN
I always thought Earl would hold on
to a hundred. He didn't much like
to let go of things.

OPAL
(smiling slightly)
No, he didn't. Always said you
were bound to regret it if you-

Her husband joins the conversation, cutting her off.

TURNER
Wasted opportunity is what it was.
Earl could have made a fortune if
he weren't so hidebound.

He holds out his hand for Fran to shake.

TURNER (CONT'D)
I'm Turner Bronson.

FRAN
Fran Glover. And my husband Jerry.

OPAL
Fran runs the Cloverleaf. We passed
it--

TURNER
Ah yes. The classic small-town
diner, buzzing with gossip. People
in a place like this must think
it's a godsend.

He adopts a tone of gallantry, addressing Fran.

TURNER (CONT'D)
And I'm sure your food is much
better than the typical diner hash.

Fran is taken aback, but recovers quickly.

FRAN
Oh, my food's a whole lot worse.
But you know folks around here. The
more we suffer, the better we like
it.

She and Jerry turn away and go into the main church.

INT. MAIN CHURCH - DAY

A white-haired lady is playing low-key BAROQUE MUSIC on a
small upright piano. Fran and Jerry join Ned and Paul in a
middle pew.

A moment later, Desmond arrives. With a conspicuous air of
injury, he sits in a pew on the opposite side of the aisle.

Opal and Turner come in and walk to the front pew. Ned's gaze
follows Opal.

The music finishes and REVEREND LANDERS steps to the pulpit.

REVEREND LANDERS
Friends, we are gathered here to
remember the life of Earl Coburn,
who has been our neighbor for more
than eighty years...

As the minister speaks, Paul and Desmond cast glances in one another's direction. When their eyes meet, they look away.

REVEREND LANDERS (O.S.) (CONT'D)

...we know that Earl was rich in earthly possessions, but we should not forget that he was richly blessed in other ways, too, most notably in his lovely daughter...

Ned's gaze slides sideways to rest on Opal. Fran watches him, speculatively.

INT. DINER - DAY

Several customers eat breakfast. Desmond sits gloomily in a window booth with his younger brother CHET, who wears a police uniform.

As Fran fills Desmond's coffee cup, she hears the ROAR OF A CAR with a bad muffler. Through the window, she sees a silver Lexus pull into the parking lot of Ned's repair shop.

FRAN

(to Chet)

You just missed your chance to arrest Dahlia Wardwell for disturbing the peace.

CHET

You'd think that car was new, as often as she gets it waxed.

FRAN

Wax doesn't do much for the muffler. You want more coffee?

CHET

Nah, I gotta get to work.

He stands up.

CHET (CONT'D)

(to Desmond)

So what's the deal here? You jumpin' off a bridge, or can I tell the kids Uncle Desmond's bringin' pies for Thanksgiving?

EXT. NED'S PARKING LOT - DAY

DAHLIA WARDWELL gets out of her Lexus and smooths her skirt, which is snug around her hips. She is thirty-six, stylish, shapely, and chronically stressed.

Seeing the pyramid of pumpkins, she rolls her eyes.

INT. WAITING ROOM OF NED'S SHOP - DAY

The waiting room has a few cheap vinyl chairs and one good easy chair, where Ned's mother sits watching a small TV.

Joke posters are tacked to the wall behind the counter: "The Hurrier I Go, The Behinder I Get," "I Got a Computer and Now I Can Make Mistakes Three Times as Fast."

Dahlia comes clicking into the shop. She dings the counter bell several times.

Ned comes in from the garage and she holds out her car keys.

DAHLIA

It's the Lexus, to be serviced.
Also, I forgot to mention it, but
the muffler is making a dreadful
noise.

NED

Sounded like it might have--

DAHLIA

I'll need it by noon. I assume
that's no problem.

NED

I don't know... New muffler won't
get here til one...
(he calculates)
You could have it by three if I--

DAHLIA

(sharply)
I'm meeting clients at one o'clock.
I have to have the car.

INT. DINER - DAY

Fran sits in the booth with Desmond, who pours out his woes.

DESMOND

Is it so much to ask? I just want a clean kitchen. Clean and orderly. And with natural light, of course. But Paul can be such a... Mack truck.

FRAN

He's been a Mack truck for twenty years, Des. He's not going to change.

DESMOND

He did get better about showering. So I keep hoping...

Fran glances out the window at Ned's parking lot and sees Opal Bronson getting out of an old blue Chevy.

INT. NED'S WAITING ROOM - DAY

Ned tries to help Dahlia.

NED

Tell you what, why don't you take my car? I don't need-

DAHLIA

I'm showing houses in Highbury. These clients are prepared to spend high six figures. I don't think your car is quite the thing.

NED

No, I expect not...

Opal comes in and waits near the door. As Dahlia talks, Ned's attention is mostly on Opal.

DAHLIA

This is a disaster. These people have come all the way from D.C. They don't have a lot of time.

Opal sits in the chair next to June, whose eyes turn briefly.

OPAL

(smiling shyly)
Cold out today, isn't it?

A faint flicker crosses June's face, then she turns back to the TV.

INT. DINER — DAY

Fran still sits with Desmond.

FRAN

Des, he doesn't drink too much, he doesn't run around. Can't you live with a little grease on the counter?

DESMOND

No, I can't! He's so thoughtless.

FRAN

Right, and is there some Mr. Sensitive hanging around this town that I don't know about? Who are you planning to hook up with if you dump Paul?

DESMOND

(almost crying)

I didn't dump him. He dumped me!

FRAN

By the tenth time around, I call that a technicality.

Through the window, she sees a new Mercedes pull into Ned's parking lot. Turner is at the wheel with a cell phone.

FRAN (CONT'D)

Took a few pennies to buy that car.

EXT. PARKING LOT — DAY

Turner fiddles with the phone and shakes his head in irritation. He gets out of the car to talk.

INT. WAITING ROOM — DAY

Ned's attention is still on Opal.

DAHLIA

(to Ned)

Do you have any other ideas?

He drags his mind back.

NED

Huh? Sorry. I wasn't...

DAHLIA

I said, do you have any other ideas?

NED

You could wait and fix it tomorrow. Won't hurt the car.

DAHLIA

I can't meet clients sounding like a motorcycle gang.

NED

Heck, everybody's had a hole in their muffler a time or two. They won't--

DAHLIA

These are not people who have ever had a hole in their muffler.

Ned wants to help, but he is baffled.

NED

You could try the dealer. If you don't mind driving--

DAHLIA

I don't have time to-
(looking at her watch)
Never mind. Forget it. I'll take your car. Do you have the keys?

NED

They're in it. The blue Chevy.

Dahlia rushes out the door.

EXT. PARKING LOT - DAY

Dahlia sees two old blue sedans parked near each other. She starts towards the cars, then sees Turner and stops.

He leans casually on his car, talking on the phone. He gives her an admiring glance.

Trying to act nonchalant, she veers away from the beat-up Chevies and strolls in the direction of her Lexus, which is parked beyond Turner's Mercedes.

As she passes Turner, he gives her another look. She smiles.