

Dead Eye's Cure

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"Okay, if you're sure, here it goes," an old man said to his waiter as he sat at the far end of the diner's counter, "Now, tell me how long a man will live if he is blind, deaf, and too stubborn to know he is blind and deaf?"

"About as long as it takes to beat him to death," the waiter responded with a small chuckle.

"Nope – forever," the old man said.

The waiter squinted his eyes so hard a wrinkle appeared on his forehead.

"Think about it." The old man sipped his coffee and put his menu down as the waiter went to hand the ticket to the cook, who was standing behind him in front of the grill.

"I don't get it, do you?" the waiter asked.

"Sure, I do. Too blind to see the damage you cause. Then, stress will never kill you," the cook said as he cracked two eggs in succession. Each had egg shells in them. He scrapped them off the flat grill and into the grease trap and tried again. "Too deaf to hear nagging. Then, the man is spared other opinions." Two more eggs. This time, only one needed to be scrapped. "Too stubborn to give a shit means he can live his life in bliss."

As the old man was finishing his riddle, two men walked into the diner. Their arms were interlocked. Commander kept his hand on Chris's shoulder as he took the left side of the Caution Wet Floor sign, and Chris passed by on the right. They sat at the opposite end of the counter and hid behind two menus.

"Good evening, coffee?"

Both men nodded to the waiter without saying a thing. They both turned their cups right side up, and Commander slid his to the edge of the counter. Behind it, the waiter walked toward the coffee pot and slipped on the floor. The floor was littered with grease, food, paper products, and tickets.

"Damn it, cook. This is your area. Get it cleaned up before I break my neck." The waiter poured the coffee into their mugs. "Have you decided what you'd like?"

"Waffles."

“No waffles at Harvey's. You're about two years too late. Our pancakes and bacon are excellent, though.” Mel, the owner of Harvey's, had converted an old Waffle House to make his diner. This wasn't the first time that the waiter had heard this joke.

"No, I want some waffles," Chris said with a laugh.

"Stop it," Commander demanded. Commander turned his head to stare at him and rubbed his red, puffy eyes.

"Stop what? I want some waffles, and this looks like a waffle place, so go back there and bring me a plate. I want a two-inch thick carbohydrate that is toasted and drenched in warm syrup."

The waiter looked away from the grayed skinned, unshaven, red eyed customer to his friend sitting next to him at the counter. Commander put the menu down and opened his mouth to speak, but Chris cut in again. "Hey tell me something. Why did Mel name this place Harvey's?"

"No one knows," the waiter replied, "Everyone asks him, and he just breaks into hysterical laughter."

Commander broke in and said, “So, we'll both have the number one: sunny side up, bacon, and white toast.”

"I don't want that shit. My wife makes that; I could just eat at home instead of spending seven dollars,” Chris stopped laughing and his voice switched from a good natured tone to annoyance. When the waiter left, he immediately began beaming until his face met Commander's, and then his smile vanished, his body got shorter, and his shoulders hunched forward.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?"

“I just wanted waffles.”

“Well, looks like neither of us are getting what we want tonight.”

"I've had a rough night, abused by the boys in blue-" Chris said, but then he shouted, to the almost empty room. Besides the waiter and the cook, there was only one other diner who was at the far end of the counter. "UN-LAW-FULLY!" He bellowed even louder even after he had scanned the whole place and saw that the booths and tables were empty and that the area had a closed sign around it.

"I hate sitting at the counter," he said, "Why the hell can't we seat at the booths? At least, my back wouldn't be to the door."

If he was talking to Commander, then he was talking to himself. His friend, and former Army Major, didn't appear to hear his raised words but was more concerned with the volume in which Chris spoke them. Commander just raised his left hand to his temple and used his right hand to indicate the volume needed to be turned down.

Chris repeated in a quiet tone, "unlawfully detained, by corrupt deputies, who tried to take a shot at me." His voice rose again. "So, is it too much to get some god damn waffles?"

"Yes because we're not in a Waffle House. Besides, I don't know that a night in the drunk tank is the worst thing that happened tonight. I was in the middle of a sex dream with Marilyn Monroe, and I was Joe DiMaggio. Right before I showed her what makes me a legend, I get a fucking call from your wife telling me to bail your ass out of jail at two in the morning."

Chris put his chin towards the coffee cup but kept his eyes on Commander.

Commander jerked his eyes away and said. "Don't act like you are some wounded puppy." He said as he slammed back into his chair. Then, he leaned toward Chris, who was on his left side, and said, "You're an old man with an everyone owes me attitude. That's what your problem is. It's not the war."

Commander took a sip of his coffee cup and spat it out again. He stood up and went to the waiter, who was sitting behind the register with his head buried in his book. They had a quick exchange, and then the waiter shouted, "This time with the black bag, not the green one."

The cook slammed the coffee pot on the floor and jerked the filter back. Chris snapped to his feet and away from his chair. His coffee was inadvertently knocked onto the counter, but the cup didn't break. Commander quickly walked back to him and handed him his napkin. At first, Chris didn't take the napkin, so his friend wadded the napkins into Chris' hands and turned around within seconds to ask for a rag. He took the rag from the waiter and passed it on to his battle buddy.

"It's your mess. You clean it up."

Chris wiped the counter and chair down and wrapped that coffee cup into the rag before handing both to the waiter. Commander took his hand to help him sit down. Chris wasn't slouching anymore; now, he was straight up in his seat staring at the cook plating the old man's food.

“Hey. Chris. Fucking look at me, not at them.”

Chris didn't budge. His eyes remained toward the grill. The cook began to put the toast down but kept looking back at Chris staring at him.

The cook was a known junkie in town, who happened to be the owner's best friend. He was skinny, like an anorexic, with scabs down his arm. Four days ago, he had finished rehab and started working at the diner. He was promoted from dishwasher when the normal cook quit unexpectedly at 11:07 that evening.

"Hey, so you want to tell me why the hell you were out at midnight?"

“Bingo had to shit.”

The waiter returned with two new cups of coffee, and he grinned as Chris stated his case. Without a word, he went back to his book, but this time, he stayed at the back of the counter and slid the book a few inches toward Commander and Chris.

“Bingo had to shit. You want to finish the story?”

"Nope that's it - a four-word story. Bingo had to shit."

“Your Weimaraner having to shit does not get a man arrested.”

"Exactly."

Commander pounded his fist on the counter and then shook his head. After a deep breath, he addressed his friend, "So, I met a man once who had been arrested for no cause-" He stopped because Chris was staring down at the counter. "Hey, listen here."

Chris shifted his gaze to the window behind him. Chris's head moved in time with the lights of the trucks. Only two vehicles passed by, but Chris followed them. His whole body turned around until they passed out of sight.

When the two trucks left sight and Chris had turned around in his chair, Commander continued, "So, he spent four weeks in jail, became friendly with the cops and their fists, and you know the bitch of it?"

Chris continued to stare at the window and didn't respond.

Commander moved closer to his friend and shifted his head to break Chris's gaze. "Chris do you know what the bitch of it all was?"

Chris shrugged his shoulders.

"They had the wrong guy, right name but the wrong fucking guy. Got his ass handed to him on a regular basis for four weeks, and his only crime was that he was named Salty Pepper."

As Commander went on, the waiter inched a bit closer to the two men. The cook was moving about and staring at Chris, who altered his gaze between the window to the cook. The longer Chris held his gaze, the more jittery the cook got, and he burnt the meat on the grill. The waiter turned around and moved his head back and forth between Chris and his prey. Finally, he went to the grill and took the cook by his chin and whispered something to him. He took the charred bacon off the grill and opened a new package. He retrieved six strips and placed them on the grill himself.

The cook threw his spatula onto the grill and said, "Fuck this." He stormed out of the restaurant through the storage room entrance. The waiter went through the door and out of the restaurant with him.

Chris and Commander both just sat there looking at each other and sipping their coffees, pretending not to notice the cook's meltdown. Another car came speeding passed the window. Chris turned to look but had to cover his eyes because the high beams were directed straight at him. He laid his head down on the counter until the car passed.

After a few seconds, he sat up and took another drink of his coffee. He then began massaging his arm, and his knee was vibrating against the underside of the table. He took several breaths and said, "Why are you asking? You know what happened. That little fucking dog abuser called in his cop buddies to harass me, and a man can't stand for that."

"Nope, that's not why you got arrested. Your dumb ass tried to hit a sheriff's deputy. I heard he only come out of his home to find out what was going on because someone was letting off two rounds from his gun," Commander stated.

"Stop preaching. Damn, you've been doing that since the Army. We're out, and you're still making people call you Commander. Your name is fucking Bob, or Bill, or Tom. Hey, what the fuck is your name?" Chris shouted.

"You done?" Commander asked as he sat back in his seat. He didn't raise his voice to match Chris's aggression. He just calmly said. "I might be some college asshole who got to tell people what to do back then. A young buck to your old man. But if age is the determination, then the years have made you stupider. The sergeant I deployed with would have known not to fist fight a cop."

"Smartass."

The waiter was back in front of them with more coffee. He told them that it would be a minute on their order as the cook was on break.

"Can you believe someone tied a puppy to a brick? What kind of person does that?" Chris asked.

"A shit head does that. A shit head also starts shooting his Glock in his neighborhood because a puppy is tied to a brick. Did it ever occur to your Coors soaked brain to untie the puppy and take him home with you?" Commander paused, but his friend gave no response. "No, you're such a shit head you took a swing at a sheriff's deputy."

"Yea, it's the extra ten years I have on you. I get to make decisions like that."

"Is that what it is? Ten more years I get to be a special kind of stupid. It takes a real special kind of stupid to take a gun and point it at the deputy. "

"Hey, I have every right to carry that gun," Chris retorted to a statement or question he thought he heard, but in fact, Commander never asked. "Open carry shit head. It's called the First Amendment."

Chris jerked his head away from Commander. He focused his eyes on the cook, who came back into the restaurant. The cook wasn't standing as tall as he was before. His gait was no longer elongated and quick but slow and jerky. The waiter didn't return to his spot but slid his book just a few inches closer to Chris and Commander. Now, he was only one spot away from them.

"Huh – funny, I don't remember the first saying anything about open carry, lunatics owning guns, gun ownership, or fucktards who are trying to escape the conversation. Especially since the first is about free speech dip shit."

The waiter began laughing. Chris stood up, but Commander forcefully shoved him back into his seat. "What's so fucking funny?" Chris looked at the laughing waiter and then to his Commander, but neither could look back. The waiter veered his eyes towards the floor, and Commander put his right arm up on the back of Chris's chair in a lounging position.

The waiter laughed again, and said, "It's the Fourth."

Commander rolled his eyes.

The cook turned from his grill and stared at the men. "Second Amendment - you idiots."

Commander raised his left eyebrow and sipped his coffee.

"I know why I am here, and I know what you want to say. I ain't got time for this. I've got shit to do."

"Why does Bingo need another walk?" Commander asked.

"Fuck you."

"So, your wife tells me you skipped another appointment because of work last week."

"You're not my Commander anymore?"

"No. Then, quit acting like you need a mommy. OK, let's focus on the positive: that you have a job. But you don't have that job anymore. You were fired... again. What does that make? Fourteen jobs in the last three years?"

"I didn't skip the appointment. You can't skip what you didn't make," Chris said staring at the empty counter in front of him.

"You might consider getting some help. If not for your mental health, then for your work prospects. This town doesn't have enough businesses for you to keep getting fired from."

"I told you I ain't doing it. I have my pride." Chris continued, "Besides I didn't get fired, I quit."

"Is this that nonsense about your manhood?"

"Don't brush it aside like it's no big deal. I'm married. I got a wife to satisfy. You don't."

"Nope, mine left me," Commander said.

"At least, it wasn't because you couldn't get it up. You know that is what that *cocktail* does to you," Chris said dramatically using his hands as air quotes for emphasis.

"It can, but there are magic blue pills that correct that situation," Commander said in a monotone voice.

"So, I have to take pills for my PTSD and then take pills for the pills' side effects? Does that make any sense? Maybe, it's because I didn't go to college, but that seems fucked up."

"It might seem fucked up to you, but to me, it seems a step in the right direction. What seems fucked up is a good man who can't ask for help."

"How did asking for help work out for you?" Chris moved away from Commander and began speaking louder, "A thirty-eight-year-old single father, whose wife took off on him and his kid."

The waiter went to get the coffee pot and poured Chris a new cup. "More?"

"No. We're full up here," Commander responded.

"Hey, fuck face. Stop ease dropping. It's none of your business," Chris said. "You know who is sitting in front of you?" he asked with a louder voice. His face and chest jolted toward waiter. He grabbed the boy's apron and yanked him towards the counter. "This man lead the 160th in Kandahar, and personally saved -"

"Hey." Commander grabbed Chris's hand. Chris let go of the apron and sat back down.

The waiter's right leg was trembling. The Commander and waiter talked privately leaning away from Chris. Chris was fixated on the empty diner. The waiter shook his hand as Commander passed him a hundred-dollar bill. Commander then looked toward the cook and said, "He's not wrong you know. It does look like a trash dump back there."

Commander took back his seat next to Chris. Another headlight passed by the windows and Chris followed them with his body again. "Why did you give him money?" he asked without changing his focus on the street outside.

"Cheaper than bailing you out again."

The waiter sat back down at his stool behind the counter with the Benjamin safely tucked into his back pocket. The cook took the old man's breakfast to him.

"Hey, look at me, don't stare at your coffee, or the cars, or those two. Look at me." Chris sat back in his chair and stared right at him. "Why won't you go in and get help? You can't go on like this? Damn, Molly's right; you are a full-time job."

"Molly? What did she say?"

"Focus on what's going on. You are about to lose everything," Commander said.

"I'm fine. I'm handling it."

"Is getting arrested over a fucking dog handling it?"

"Got to stand for something?" Chris said as he took another sip of his coffee. "Hey, you like it so much. I've seen your stack of appointment cards lined up, your whole life wasted at the VA."

"I go because one day I want to tell a story that doesn't involve the words: war, troops, soldiers, dumb asses, Kandahar, or ISIS."

"And that desire justified taking fourteen pills a day, so doped up out of your mind that you have forgotten what your actual personality is, and your dick is like raw cookie dough? I know what the *cocktail's* side effects are, and it just ain't worth it."

“No, but you’re just fine with being a paranoid, alcoholic, rage filled, insomniac, who stands up for the plight of little animals. You probably convinced yourself the puppy was a metaphor for your suffering.”

"I'm doing fine without the VA. Fuck them. I'm not some science experiment."

Commander scooted in closer. "I'm tired of talking about your dick." He put his arm around Chris and whispered, "Guess you got plenty of time to satisfy Molly now that you are home all the time."

"Fuck you," he said pushing his arm off of him.

"No. Come on - you said you are a man. A man gives it to his wife whenever he can. You're not taking the drugs, so you two must go at it all the time." Chris sat quietly. "Oh, that's right - there's two in this relationship. What she not as excited to bop a psychopath?"

"Fuck off."

"What? Is she stressed about money?" By this time, their voices had risen to such a level that they were shouting, and the old man at the end of the counter could hear them. "No, no, she must be stressed about Bingo and his shitting."

"I'm not stressed. She's not stressed. I told you I got this?"

"Really, everything is just fine. Tell me Mr. Loverboy; where's Molly?"

"Home with the kids and Bingo," Chris said. Then, the conversation stopped. The room fell silent.

A loud semi braked in front of the diner. Chris fell onto the floor and under the counter. He was crouched with his knees to his chin, and his hands wrapped around his ears. The old man at the end of the counter began to stand up, but Chris's commander stopped him with a halt sign.

The entire place was void of noise except for the crackling of the greasy eggs on the grill. Everyone was frozen in their place until the front door dinged. A trucker walked in, and went up to the counter, sitting on the third stool from the cash register. Without looking at the menu he ordered toast and coffee as soon as the waiter came up to him.

"Times up, man," Commander said as he patted his friend's hand.

"What am I supposed to do?" Chris asked as he came out from his hiding place. Commander reached into his pocket and pulled out one of those appointment cards.

Chris knocked the card away from himself and sent it flying behind the counter. "I mean she can't just leave the kids at night. They could get hurt in their beds. Come on, sir. You have a daughter. What would happen if she needed a drink of water and no one was there?"

"My daughter is two years old; yours are fifteen and seventeen." He took another business card out of his right breast pocket of his black t-shirt. Again, Chris tossed the card on the floor.

The two men leaned towards each other. The loud whispers hid nothing of their conversation. Commander jolted back in his chair and sat straight up. He took a deep breath and threw his hands in the air. Then, he began another story.

"So, you know I have this stud named Dead Eye. Know how he got his name?"

"I don't give a shit. I don't want another one of your dumbass stories."

"Too bad. It's four in the morning, and I'm up because of you. That means I get to tell a story or two."

"So, my shit ass father was showing off one day. Dead Eye was just a colt then. My old man was lunging him. He kept cracking that whip at the colt over and over, till the bullwhip caught him right in the eye. Blinded him instantly, which sucked for Pops because he wanted to keep him as a stud. I wanted to breed those blue-papered colts, so I bought the horse off him for five hundred bucks and gave him the name Dead Eye."

"What's your point?"

"Well, the great thing was that his injury was man-made and not hereditary, and other than the blind eye, he was a specimen of equine perfection. So, I went ahead and pimped him out."

"You're a horse pimp?"

The waiter slammed his book closed at this point and stared straight at Commander. The cook took the trucker's toast out of the toaster, plated it, and dropped it off to him before he went to stand right behind the waiter.

"Yep, that horse got laid more than – Well, more than any of us." Commander took a long pause. "He's a great horse. The only problem was I never took to the scientific test tube breeding. Thought it just seemed wrong that Dead Eye didn't get any satisfaction in the process, not to mention the mare. Having to carry a foal without the joy of a ride seems cruel. The mare

freaks out too much. Can't really blame her, tied to the stall and then some strange stud comes strutting up. She gets beat up too bad."

Just then, cooked had finally finished their breakfast order, and waiter delivered their meal. The waiter stood in front of them, listening.

Chris took a piece of bacon and crumbled it, and Commander took the side of his fork and plunged it into the yoke. The cook left the open grill area and went back into the storage room. He came back into the galley with a broom and a mop and a bucket of warm suds. The Brillo pad floated on top of the steaming water.

"Damn, this is good. Where was I? Right, I was at artificial insemination," he said as he took a bite of his bacon. "So, I always liked to free run them, but you can't put a hopped up, horny stud and a strange mare in a pasture together without them killing each other. So, I decided little medicinal cannabis was needed. I shotgun Dead Eye right before I move a new one in." Commander took a big bite of his eggs, and the yolk dripped down the fork back on to the plate. "Wanna know more?"

Chris began banging his head on the counter.

"So, I take my weed and roll the fattest joint ever. When he sees me walking to his pasture smoking a joint, he meets me at the gate. He knows what this means. Then, without touching his halter, I share the remedy. It takes a while as you can imagine. Horses are a lot harder to get stoned than humans. Finally, after the glossy film fills his right eye and ooze begins to pour out of his left, I leave him in perfect bliss. Only then, do I release the mare."

The cook turned around and stared at the two men.

"Hmm. My first thought is: I think you need to ease up on the medical pot," Chris stuttered, "Your brain is stoned if you're getting a horse stoned."

"What's your second thought?"

"Damn, you are one fucked up kid," Chris retorted. A few minutes passed with the five men in the restaurant staring at Chris. After taking a bite of his eggs, he became aware of the cook, the waiter, the old man, the trucker, and Commander's stare. "Why tell me this?"

None of them responded. Several minutes passed as Chris moved his eyes from one man to the next. Finally, it was the cook who broke the silence. "Because a house is only peaceful when the wounded animal is medicated."

"Uhm- how's your food?" the waiter asked.

"I don't understand." Chris stood up from his plate. His head moved between the men's stares.

Commander shifted his body from facing the counter to pointing directly to Chris. "I think you do. You never were stupid."

"Why are we here? It's almost four thirty. Why haven't we left yet?" Chris asked. "Where is Molly?"

"Just eat your breakfast," his friend said. Chris pushed his plate over the counter, and it crashed on cook's side.

"Why are we eating at this shitty diner?" he screamed.

"She needed time to pack the kids' things."

Chris moved fast towards the door.

"Come on. It's not too late," he said as he opened the diner door and let in another headlight. He went out and tried to open the car's door. Several times, his hand grasped the handle and pulled out, but the door didn't open. His Commander didn't move. The trucker and the old man turned to watch. The trucker put on his ball cap and began to stand but sat back down when Commander cleared his throat and shook his head no.

It was almost four minutes. Everyone in the diner watched that grown man crouched on the pavement outside in between a blue truck and a red Honda. He walked back into the diner and passed the counter. He headed straight for the closed area, and then ran right into the, Section Closed sign. He landed on his butt with his right leg turned out.

The waiter went towards him. "No," Commander said, "He can do it himself." Then, he turned toward Chris. "Now get up, soldier." Chris pulled himself off the floor and walked back to his seat. "Wait, go back, and put the sign up. You don't want anyone else to fall." Chris turned around and picked up the sign that was laying on the ground and placed it on both its legs.

Commander's voice rang out, "Can we get some more coffee here?"

"What can I do?" Chris asked while hyperventilating and crying.

The waiter brought over a fresh cup of coffee and took the old cups away. Chris thanked him in a kind, meek voice. It was the first nice word he said to the man all night. Then, the waiter picked up his book and shoved it in a shelf under the register. As he walked away, three farmers walked through the door. One of their trucks was running, and a horn blared from the street. This time, the noise didn't get a physical response out of Chris.

The old man at the counter had finished his plate about five minutes before. He didn't move to leave, nor did he pay. He just sat at the counter with the trucker, both watching. Chris and his friend leaned into each other, and Chris laid his face on top of his breakfast plate. His friend put his head on top of his friends. His right hand had another card in it, which Chris put into his pocket.

The waiter asked the other two diners, "Should I go get their plates?"

"No, let them be. His commanders got this," the trucker said. Then he stood up, reached into his wallet and left fifty dollars on the table. "Theirs is on me. The rest is for you." He tipped the bill of his Vietnam hat and then left.

Commander walked up and asked for a clean wet rag. Waiter handed him one and then told him his tab was covered.

"Come on. Take this into the bathroom and clean yourself up." Commander handed Chris the rag.

Chris got up from the counter and walked toward the register. He took the rag and wiped down his checkered, buttoned up shirt while he walked straight toward the restroom. When he wiped his breast pocket, he stopped. He took out the yolk-covered business card and asked, "Do you have another one?" Then, he disappeared into the bathroom.