
**ELMORE
LEONARD**

**BE
COOL**

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T o T h e S t o n e C o y o t e s

Barbara Keith Tibbles, Doug Tibbles,
and John Tibbles. Thanks for letting
Linda Moon use your music.

A c k n o w l e d g m e n t s

The following songs were composed by Barbara Keith for The Stone Coyotes and are used by permission of The Stone Coyotes (www.stonecoyotes.com): “The Church of the Falling Rain,” “Hammer on the Nail,” “My Little Runaway,” “The Changing of the Guard,” and “Odessa.” Copyright 1998 Mohawk Trail Music. Registered with ASCAP.

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BE

COOL

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THEY SAT AT ONE of the sidewalk tables at Swingers, on the side of the coffee shop along Beverly Boulevard: Chili Palmer with the Cobb salad and iced tea, Tommy Athens the grilled pesto chicken and a bottle of Evian.

Every now and then people from the neighborhood would stroll past the table—or they might come out of the Beverly Laurel, the motel nextdoor—and if it was a girl who came by, Tommy Athens would look up and take time to check her out. It reminded Chili of when they were young guys in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, and Tommy never passed a girl on the street, ever, without asking how she was doing. Chili mentioned it to him. “You still look, but you don’t say anything.”

“Back then,” Tommy said, “I went by the principle, you never know if it’s there you don’t break the fuckin ice. It didn’t matter

what they looked like, the idea was to get laid, man. Our young bodies required it. Now we're mature we're more selective. Also there's more quiff in this town per capita, you take into account all the broads hoping to get discovered. They act or they sing, mostly bad, either one. Turn around and take a look—walking her dog, the skirt barely covers her ass. Look. Now she's posing. The dog stops to take a leak on the palm tree it gives her a chance to stand there, cock her neat little tail. She ain't bad, either."

"Yeah, she's nice."

Chili turned to his salad. Then looked up again as Tommy said, "You doing okay?"

"You want to know if I'm making out?"

"I mean in your business. How's it going? I know you did okay with *Get Leo*, a terrific picture, terrific. And you know what else? It was good. But the sequel—what was it called?"

"*Get Lost*."

"Yeah, well that's what happened before I got a chance to see it, it disappeared."

"It didn't open big so the studio walked away. I was against doing a sequel to begin with. But the guy running production at Tower says they're making the picture, with me or without me. I thought, well, if I come up with a good story, and if I can get somebody else to play the shylock . . . If you saw *Get Leo* you must've noticed Michael Weir wasn't right for the part. He's too fuckin short."

"Yeah, but it worked," Tommy said, "because the picture was funny. I know what you're saying, though, a little guy like that into street action isn't believable. Still, it was a very funny picture."

"Also," Chili said, "I didn't want to have to deal with Michael

Weir again. He's a pain in the ass. He's always coming up with ideas for a shot where you have to re-light the set. So I said okay to doing a sequel, but let's get somebody else. The studio asshole says, in this tone of voice, 'If you don't use the same actor in the part, Ernest, it's not really a sequel, is it?' He's the only person in L.A. calls me Ernest. I said, 'Oh, all those different guys playing James Bond aren't in sequels?' It didn't matter. They'd already signed Michael and had a script written without telling me."

"This is *Get Lost* you're talking about?"

"*Get Lost*. The guy's in a car wreck and wakes up in the hospital with a head injury. He doesn't remember anything about his past life, his name, anything. Has no idea he's a shylock with mob connections or the car wreck wasn't an accident. I said to the studio guy after I read the script, 'You serious? You want to make an amnesia movie? It's what you do when you don't have an idea, you give the main character amnesia and watch him fuck up.' The studio guy says, 'Ernest,' like he's the most patient fuckin' guy in the world, 'if you don't want to produce the picture tell me, we'll get somebody else.'"

"So you made it and it stiffed," Tommy said. "So? Make another one."

"I suggested that. I said to the studio guy, 'While we have our momentum up why don't we try it again? Call it *Get Stupid*.'"

"It sounds like," Tommy said, "you aren't as tight over there as you were."

"What, at the studio? I've got a three-picture deal at Tower, one to go, and I got a good friend. They fired the nitwit was running production and hired Elaine Levin back. She's the one okayed *Get Leo*, then quit for different reasons, like doing sequels; they ironed out the problems and she's back. The other day I ran

into her having lunch. She asked if I had anything worth putting into development. I said, 'How about a girl works for a dating service fixing up lonely guys?' Elaine goes, 'And this lonely shylock who happens to be short comes in?' I told her no shylocks of any size, and that's all I told her."

"Why? That's all you had?"

"You don't want to tell something you're thinking about, hear it out loud yourself for the first time, unless you know what it's gonna sound like. It has to have an edge, an attitude. So you have to know your characters, I mean intimately, what they have for breakfast, what kind of shoes they wear. . . . Once you know who they are they let you know what the story is."

He could tell Tommy didn't know what he was talking about.

"What I'm saying, I don't think of a plot and then put characters in it. I start with different characters and see where they take me." He watched Tommy nod his head a few times. "Anyway, getting back to the dating service . . . I got a flyer in the mail, the kind of letter it's addressed to the occupant?"

"You look at all that shit?"

"I like to open mail. This one invites you to come in, tell 'em who you are, what you're looking for in the opposite sex, or give 'em a call. That's what I did."

"An escort service. Yeah, I ran one for Momo."

"Tommy, this isn't hookers, it's legit. They bring couples together, match 'em up."

"I thought you were seeing that broad from the studio, Sharon something?"

"Karen Flores. She married a writer."

"You're kidding me."

“Fuckin screenwriter. Those guys, most of ’em don’t even know where the commas go. You have to rewrite half their stuff.”

“Karen dumped you so you try a dating service?”

“Tommy, I’m looking for a character, for a movie. I want to hear what a girl from a dating service sounds like. This one I talked to, soon as I heard her voice and the beginning of the pitch? I thought, This could give me an idea. So I put her on tape.”

Tommy was nodding again. “Okay, but what if you work up this idea, you go to Tower with it and your friend Elaine doesn’t like it?”

“I go to another studio. Tower has first look, that’s all. They turn it down I can take it anywhere I want.”

“Okay, say you do and you keep getting turned down.”

“What’s your point?”

“You always wear a tie?”

It stopped Chili for a moment. He said, “When I feel like it,” and pressed his chin down to look at the tie he was wearing with his navy-blue summer suit: tiny red polkadots on a deep-blue field, his shirt a pale blue. “What’s wrong with it?”

Tommy Athens was wearing a T-shirt with words on it under a chambray workshirt that hadn’t been ironed, wornout prewashed Levis and pumpup Nikes, Chili noticing the shoes when Tommy arrived, twenty minutes late for their lunch date. He held his arms out now to display himself, presenting his midlife girth.

“This is how you dress in this town you’re in arts and entertainment.”

“Or you do yard work,” Chili said.

“Same difference, on the surface. You don’t dress to impress. You don’t give a shit how you look, your talent speaks for itself.

But in case there's any doubt"—Tommy nodded toward his car, parked on the street behind a Ford pickup—"you pull up in your fuckin Rolls and it says who you are, nails it. What're you driving these days?"

"Mercedes. I'm around the corner."

"New one?"

"Seventy-eight, a convertible."

"You can get away with that. Where you live?"

"On Rosewood."

"Never heard of it."

"Kind of a Spanish-looking house. Only you can't see it, there's a giant hedge in front."

"Beverly Hills?"

"Los Angeles."

"What's the zip?"

"Nine oh oh four eight. Couple of blocks from Chasen's."

"That's Los Angeles County where you are, but you're all right, you're practically in Beverly Hills. What I'm talking about is image. I wore a suit and tie. . . ." Tommy paused. "We're both in the same business, right? Basically? Entertainment?"

Chili wasn't sure about Tommy but nodded anyway.

"So this is true of both of us. I *know* that if I wore a suit and tie, unless I'm going to a funeral or it's a black-tie function . . . I take that back. Even when it's black tie you don't wear a tie anymore."

Chili said, "You wear one of those shirts you look like a priest."

Tommy seemed to agree, shrugging his big shoulders. "You might. Or, the kind of people I associate with in business, you wear black, yeah, but it might only be a tux coat or tails with a

pair of jeans and cowboy boots. Though your shitkickers are big, too, with steel toes. You go, my man, with the prevailing style. If I was to wear a suit and tie let's say to a recording session? They'd look at me like I was from Fort Wayne, Indiana, or some fuckin place. Say I got an idea for the recording, I want to lay in some more tracks, beef it up. If they don't feel good about me, bro, where I'm coming from, they're not gonna listen. The producer, the engineer, the band, shit, the *band*, the friends of the band, they're all into casual to farout attire, whatever they feel like wearing. I'm standing there in a suit and tie? At best I look like a fuckin agent, and who listens to agents."

He was serious.

Chili nodded to show Tommy he was giving it some thought. He said, "So where should I get my clothes, the Salvation Army?"

"See?" Tommy said. "You got an attitude problem. You know better—all you have to do is look around at the people here, the way they're dressed, but you have to be different."

"I've never been here before."

"Swingers, people in music and people that wanna be come here to hang out. Listen to what they're talking about. Recording sessions, who had to go back to rerecord, who's doing heroin, who kicked it, who left what band and went somewhere else. You hear how the record companies are fuckin 'em over. How they can't get this or that label to listen to their demos . . . You look around, though, you can't tell the ones that've made it from the wannabes."

Chili said, "That's why we're here, for the fashion show?"

Tommy pushed his plate away and laid his arms on the table, getting closer to Chili.

"I called you 'cause I got an idea for a movie."

Chili had to go to the men's but paused. Maybe this wouldn't take long. "What's it about? Can you pitch it in twenty-five words or less?"

"I can tell it in one word," Tommy said. "Me."

"Your life story?"

"Not all of it, no. You have to be careful where the statute of limitations might not've run out. See, I think you're the guy to do it, Chil, 'cause you and I have shared some of the same experiences, you might say. I tell you something, you know what I'm talking about. But I want to be sure you're connected at a major studio and not pissing everybody off with your attitude."

"You mean the way I dress?"

"The way you antagonize people, the ones putting up the dough, for Christ sake. If they're signing the check I think they got every right to get what they want."

"A studio exec reads a script," Chili said, bringing a Cohiba panatela from his inside coat pocket. "He puts the script down, calls the agent who sent it to him and says, 'Man, it's a terrific read, but not what we're looking for at this point in time.'"

Tommy waited. "Yeah? . . ."

Waited as Chili snipped off the end of the Cohiba with a cigar cutter and lit it with a kitchen match he struck with his thumbnail, Chili saying, "The studio exec has no fuckin idea in the world what they're looking for. If he did he'd have somebody write it."

Tommy was pointing a finger at him now. "The one thing you've always had going for you, Chil, you're the most confident guy I know. You have a cool way of making it sound like you know what you're talking about."

"You saying I'm a bullshit artist?"

“One of the best. It’s the main reason I think, in spite of your attitude, you can get this movie made.”

“Based on your life as what, a record promoter? Get into all that payola business?”

“Based on how I worked my ass off to become one of the highest paid indie promoters in the industry, and to where I am now, with my own label, NTL Records, Inc. That payola, they work it different now. You remember a guy named Carcaterra?”

“Nicky Car, Nicky Cadillac,” Chili said, “a punk, yeah.”

“He’s a big indie promoter now, Car-O-Sell Entertainment. Gets the juice from the label and dazzles the program directors with it, guys at the radio stations who make up the playlist. Takes ’em to Vegas for the fights, to the Super Bowl. . . . He’s Mr. Nick Car now. You call him Nicky he’ll have one of his goons bust all the windows in your car. This’s some fuckin business, I’m telling you.”

“What’s NTL stand for?”

“Nothing to Lose. My wife Edie’s a partner. You met her at some Lakers games and a couple of functions. The redhead.”

Edie Athens, you bet. Several times, sitting next to her at the Forum, Chili had felt her hand on his thigh, turned his head to see her staring at him, letting him know here it was if he wanted it.

“I told her,” Tommy said, “I was gonna see you today. Edie goes, ‘Absolutely, Chili’s the guy to do it.’ Anyway, I got offices and a recording studio out’n Silver Lake. I got some up and comers in the world of punk rock, and I got an artist I just signed and I’m ready to break, Derek Stones, with Roadkill. It use to be a hair band, now they do post-metal funk with a ska kick. You have any idea what I’m talking about?”