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about 2220 words

THE MODERNS

By Paul Lambrecht

("I like knowing the same walls/ the same people." -
Bukowski, *Yes*, 1977)

People in Globe, Arizona, didn't know Bob "Weevil" Modern that well. He tended to keep to himself, bent over his breakfast of eggs and hash-browns at The Breakfast Barn, or sitting behind the reception desk at the Angel Hacienda Hotel. Decker out in his overalls, with his large simple ham-hock face, you'd expect to get nothing out of him but a dull stutter. Usually he was only too happy to oblige, but on a good day, when his bangs were parted behind either ear, and his eyes were clear, he might come out with an interesting and tickling bit of wisdom.

Once he'd been seen arguing with a tourist who had stopped to ask for directions. The tourist was not shy about showing his contempt for Weevil who was unsure and becoming increasingly angry.

"Well, now see here, you stopped me to ask a question, now let me think."

Despair was written on the features of this tourist.

"Go down to the end of this fence, and you hit county road 114. Go about 8 miles due east, and you'll see a maroon truck with rust on the back wheel well..."

Steam was starting to hiss from the tourist's ear canals. He couldn't take anymore of this so he hopped back in his Ford Ranger and squealed off.

"Say," said Weevil, shaken by this turn of events and shouting after the man walled in by his automobile, "it looks like your front tire's a little low..."

"Go go go, that's all they do," said Weevil to himself, chuckling and soon back to his chipper self.

The Angel Hacienda Hotel was in the corner of the plaza of the old mining town. Weevil ran the desk at night and cleaned the bathrooms in the morning. Most nights he sat in a ratty easy chair with a sign around his neck which read, "Please Wake for Service." Alternatively, he would sit up all night drinking warm Pabst and listening to AM talk radio.

These were generally the nights when there were storm-fronts rolling through the Modern household.

His wife Vera and his daughter Cassie Marie were constantly at each others' throats. Weevil did his best to stay out of it, chalking it up to the mysterious syndrome which attaches itself to that second "X" chromosome.

Weevil had been a farmer not so long ago outside of a town called New Ulm, Minnesota. But then crop prices had gone too low and he'd been forced to sell to Consolidated Foodstuffs, and then prices mysteriously went up again. He struggled to think of any of his friends or family who was still self-sufficient. Though minimally schooled in

economics, he rightly perceived that no one produced anything of value anymore. Everyone was in the business of servicing everyone else's meager whims. He had started to feel like a man using a pail to keep the tide out of his little hole in the sand. This symbol floated in front of him as he lulled in and out of sleep on the easy chair.

You couldn't count on a sympathetic ear at home, he knew. His wife, Vera, his childhood sweetheart, hated Arizona, and his daughter, Cassie Marie, was acting out in school. She was a good girl, solid through the trunk and haunches, with prominent healthy white teeth and a penchant for wearing overalls like her dad. She wore pigtails but she had taken to dying the tips purple or black and her mother said she was beginning to experiment with drugs. Vera feared few things more than drugs, which probably supplied much of the allure for Cassie Marie. Weevil had taken her aside a few times on their American Idol night, and bent over in whispers, asked her how she was doing, if she needed anything, needed to talk, and that she could count on him. This seemed to help and after these talks Weevil tended not to worry about her. But he would never let on any of this to Vera. Lord, no. Hell, if kids need to take a little pill or potion to feel a little relaxed in this world, then let them. This was an awfully magnanimous

point of view, but then again, Weevil saw life as a horse of a different color.

When Weevil was young, growing up on the farm outside of Ortonville, people had been forced to work very hard. When he was 14 and had just asked why he had to slop the hogs which was his brother's chore, his dad had rose up from the table knocking the chair behind him and grabbed him by the face. "Son," he said in his thick Moravian accent, "if you are old enough to sass me, then you're old enough to be a man." The next week he was sent with one suitcase via train to New Ulm to work on their distant cousin Novak's fields. He stayed with two other boys in the loft of a barn.

By comparison, Cassie Marie had it very good. Her mother, Vera, had spoiled the girl, had honored her whims to be independent and chic. Had cried when that meant getting a tattoo on her ankle, and piercing holes through all the protuberances on her face and hanging jewelry from them. They loved watching old Audrey Hepburn movies together, and Vera had told Cassie she had the same features as this classical beauty. This just wasn't true and Cassie knew it, perhaps fueling her rebellion and her enmity towards her mother. If Cassie Marie resembled anyone, it was her father Weevil, with their big broad

simple faces, trusting, eager, and winning smiles, and soft droopy lips.

Bob Modern, as he begrudgingly assented to being called at parent-teacher conferences, knew one thing. Not every one was fit for school. Sure, he had to listen to these well-meaning coifed and manicured ladies wax on about potential and stifled creativity. School had never appealed to him much but after these conferences, Vera always left as stirred up as a Valkyrie. When they got home, Cassie Marie would endure a two-hour harangue with many not-so-nice or subtle references to the alternative should she not improve in her school work.

"Look at your father, cleaning toilets. Do you want to end up like him?"

This jibe only ever had the effect of embarrassing Vera. Someone had to clean toilets. At least he did a good job.

The truth was Cassie Marie did love her mom. She would have been more than happy to clean toilets with her dad, but it would have broken the old lady's heart. So she kept on trying to do well at school, but it seemed by about 4th period every day, she started lusting after a cigarette so she walked down to the alley behind the bowling alley, and it seemed the hours flew by. Soon it was 2 in the

morning, and she was just trying to extricate herself from a marijuana smoke and pharmaceutical haze.

Vera would be pacing the entryway in her nightie, grumbling and repeating a phrase under her breath over and over again.

"We should never have moved down here."

Once when Cassie had walked in, stumbled more like it, Vera had rung her across the face with the butt of her hand so hard she had seen stars. That night they had both been so scared they stayed up for several more hours eating ice cream and chatting like sisters while Cassie held an icepack to her face. Vera hadn't done that again but sometimes was nostalgic for the reunion which it had produced. Now when Cassie stumbled in bleary-eyed, Vera would wordlessly flip off the light switch and grumble off on her way to bed, her brain toasted by constant worry. Her daughter's brain toasted by the glowing hot coils of youthful oblivion.

Vera wanted the family to move back to Minnesota. All her family lived in and around Mankato.

"It's the best thing for Cassie Marie. She can talk to her cousins and her aunts and uncles about the troubles she's having. They'll be able to help her."

But Weevil put his foot down. He liked this old Wild West mining town. And the hotel did great. They were making pretty good money. The weather was better, too - especially the winters.

"Honey," he said, "That's the past. Cassie's gonna pull through this and be just fine. A lot of family's just gonna push her away right now. And that'll just give her excuses."

He didn't know quite what he meant by that, but it served as the final word. At least Vera wasn't saying anything, but how she glared at him, like a heartless lout who enjoyed tossing puppies at old ladies.

They lived in a trailer in a large rusty dusty dirt-yard. They had actually re-opened the Globe mine after a quarter century, the price of copper was so high. So their neighbors were thick ruddy dirty miners and opportunists of every variety. This also made Vera nervous.

"I saw one of those brutes staring at Cassie for a solid minute while she was hanging up the wet clothes today."

What could Weevil say to this?

He had to drive to Flagstaff one Saturday to pick up a unique pipe-fitting for an antique toilet. He was in a pretty good mood because the hotel would be reimbursing him

for mileage and a lunch once he got there. He asked Cassie to come along so it might be a father-daughter bonding experience.

He had thought he might have to plead with her but she jumped at the chance with alacrity.

As they drove up I-17 with the semis blaring by, Weevil asked her if she had met anyone special.

Cassie blushed. "Well there is this one boy, Jesse, who I kind of have a crush on."

Weevil smiled and settled into his seat, but kept his eyes on the road. "Yeah," he said, "now does he know this?"

"I should think so, Dad, we practically made out for an hour last Saturday night."

"Okay, okay."

This was a lie, but Cassie's particular skill was bravado - and making her mother squirm. Weevil fancied himself a little more worldly-wise.

"Well you just be careful and don't tell your mother that. If you have any questions about anything, you just let me know, and I can take you down to the clinic or something."

"How do you know if you're in love, dad?"

Weevil hadn't considered this topic in many years.

"Well, I guess I'd have to say, the day where you think to yourself, I'd be so lost without this person in my life I couldn't get out of bed in the morning. When you think God put me on this earth to find this person, and that's all you truly know deep in your heart. I think that's when you can say you're truly IN LOVE."

"That's how I feel about Jesse."

They both were smiling now as they looked forward down the road.

It took Weevil 15 minutes to find the pipe fitting in the Plumber's World Warehouse, and then they were free to get some lunch.

They went to a hamburger place and sat down and after Weevil had made sure to ask the waiter for a receipt, he looked at his daughter square in the eyes over the table.

"You know," he said, "I think you're causing your mother a lot of heart-ache. Now I love you both more than anything else in the world, and I know you're my daughter but that's the love of my life who you're putting through so much pain. And you're putting me through pain, too."

It had taken him longer to force out this last sentence. Cassie looked away.

"I'm not hungry anymore," she said.

Weevil heaved a sigh. "Cassie Marie Modern, I'm just telling you this because I love you. This is coming from me. Your mother didn't tell me to say anything."

She met his glance and considered her words for a long time before speaking. She wanted to choose the words that he would understand but which wouldn't make her cry.

"Dad, you just don't understand the stuff I'm going through."

Weevil looked at her. This seemed like the naked truth.

"We all went through it, dear. Granted, it was a different time. And there's a lot more going on nowadays. But it's always been tough, growing up. Cassie, you have your whole life ahead of you and there's gonna be good times and bad times..."

The waiter brought out both their burgers and set them down but neither of them touched them.

"... and there's gonna be times when you wished it was just all over. And those are the times when we got to pull together as a family."

They looked at each other simply, two round honest faces, one with a mostly bald pate and some heavy lines in the face, and the other with violet frosty-tipped pigtails and an eyebrow ring.

Weevil Modern had the feeling he had just been completely abandoned.

THE END