



The Good Guy

Dean Koontz

DEAN
KOONTZ



*The
Good Guy*

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THE GOOD GUY

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I shall tell you a great secret, my friend. Do not wait for the last judgment, it takes place every day.

—*Albert Camus*

The Right Place
at the Wrong Time

Sometimes a mayfly skates across a pond, leaving a brief wake as thin as spider silk, and by staying low avoids those birds and bats that feed in flight.

At six feet three, weighing two hundred ten pounds, with big hands and bigger feet, Timothy Carri could not maintain a profile as low as that of a skating mayfly, but he tried.

Shod in heavy work boots, with a John Wayne walk that came naturally to him and that he could not change, he nevertheless entered the Lamplighter Tavern and proceeded to the farther end of the room without drawing attention to himself. None of the three men near the door, at the short length of the “L”-shaped bar, glanced at him. Neither did the couples in two of the booths.

When he sat on the end stool, in shadows beyond the last of the downlights that polished the molasses-colored mahogany bar, he sighed with contentment. From the perspective of the front door he was the smallest man in the room.

If the forward end of the Lamplighter was the driver’s deck of the locomotive, this was the caboose. Those who chose to sit here on a slow Monday evening would most likely be quiet company.

Liam Rooney—who was the owner and, tonight, the only barkeep—drew a draft beer from the tap and put it in front of Tim.

“Some night you’ll walk in here with a date,” Rooney said, “and the shock will kill me.”

“Why would I bring a date to this dump?”

“What else do you know but this dump?”

“I’ve also got a favorite doughnut shop.”

“Yeah. After the two of you scarf down a dozen glazed, you could take her to a big expensive restaurant in Newport Beach, sit on the curb, and watch the valets park all the fancy cars.”

Tim sipped his beer, and Rooney wiped the bar though it was clean, and Tim said, “You got lucky finding Michelle. They don’t make them like her anymore.”

“Michelle’s thirty, same age as us. If they don’t make ’em like her anymore, where’d she come from?”

“It’s a mystery.”

“To be a winner, you gotta be in the game,” Rooney said.

“I’m in the game.”

“Shooting hoops alone isn’t a game.”

“Don’t worry about me. I’ve got women beating on my door.”

“Yeah,” Rooney said, “but they come in pairs and they want to tell you about Jesus.”

“Nothing wrong with that. They care about my soul. Anybody ever tell you, you’re a sarcastic sonofabitch?”

“You did. Like a thousand times. I never get tired of hearing it. This guy was in here earlier, he’s forty, never been married, and now they cut off his testicles.”

“Who cut off his testicles?”

“Some doctors.”

“You get me the names of those doctors,” Tim said. “I don’t want to go to one by accident.”

“The guy had cancer. Point is, now he can never have kids.”

“What’s so great about having kids, the way the world is?”

Rooney looked like a black-belt wannabe who, though never having taken a karate lesson, had tried to break a lot of concrete blocks with his face. His eyes, however, were blue windows full of war light, and his heart was good.

“That’s what it’s all about,” Rooney said. “A wife, kids, a place you can hold fast to while the rest of the world spins apart.”

“Methuselah lived to be nine hundred, and he was begetting kids right to the end.”

“Begetting?”

“That’s what they did in those days. They begot.”

“So you’re going to—what?—wait to start a family till you’re six hundred?”

“You and Michelle don’t have kids.”

“We’re workin’ on it.” Rooney bent over, folded his arms on the bar, and put himself face-to-face with Tim. “What’d you do today, Doorman?”

Tim frowned. “Don’t call me that.”

“So what’d you do today?”

“The usual. Built some wall.”

“What’ll you do tomorrow?”

“Build some more wall.”

“Who for?”

“For whoever pays me.”

“I work this place seventy hours a week, sometimes longer, but not for the customers.”

“Your customers are aware of that,” Tim assured him.

“Who’s the sarcastic sonofabitch now?”

“You still have the crown, but I’m a contender.”

“I work for Michelle and for the kids we’re gonna have. You need somebody to work for beside who pays you, somebody special to build something with, to share a future with.”

“Liam, you sure do have beautiful eyes.”

“Me and Michelle—we worry about you, bro.”

Tim puckered his lips.

Rooney said, “Alone doesn’t work for anybody.”

Tim made kissing noises.

Leaning closer, until their faces were mere inches apart, Rooney said, “You want to kiss me?”

“Well, you seem to care about me so much.”

“I’ll park my ass on the bar. You can kiss that.”

“No thanks. I don’t want to have to cut off my lips.”

“You know what your problem is, Doorman?”

“There you go again.”

“Autophobia.”

“Wrong. I’m not afraid of cars.”

“You’re afraid of yourself. No, that isn’t right, either. You’re afraid of your potential.”

“You’d make a great high-school guidance counselor,” Tim said. “I thought this place served free pretzels. Where’re my pretzels?”

“Some drunk threw up on them. I’ve almost finished wiping them off.”

“Okay. But I don’t want them if they’re soggy.”

Rooney fetched a bowl of pretzels from the backbar and put them beside Tim’s beer. “Michelle has this cousin, Shaydra, she’s sweet.”

“What kind of name is Shaydra? Isn’t anyone named Mary anymore?”

“I’m gonna set you up with Shaydra for a date.”

“No point to it. Tomorrow, I’m having my testicles cut off.”

“Put them in a jar, bring them on the date. It’ll be a great ice-breaker,” said Rooney, and returned to the other end of the bar, where the three lively customers were busy paying the college tuition for the as-yet-unborn Rooney children.

For a few minutes, Tim worked at convincing himself that beer and pretzels were all he needed. Conviction was assisted by picturing Shaydra as a bovine person with one eyebrow and foot-long braided nose hairs.

As usual, the tavern soothed him. He didn’t even need the beer to take the sharp edges off his day; the room itself did the job, though he did not fully understand the reason for its calming effect.

The air smelled of stale beer and fresh beer, of spilled brine from the big sausage jar, of bar waxes and shuffleboard powder. From the small kitchen came the aroma of hamburgers frying on a griddle and onion rings crispening in hot oil.

The warm bath of agreeable scents, the illuminated Budweiser clock and the soft shadows in which he sat, the murmurs of the couples in the booths behind him and the immortal voice of Patsy Cline on the jukebox were so familiar that by comparison his own home would seem to be foreign territory.

Maybe the tavern comforted him because it represented, if not permanence, at least continuance. In a world rapidly and ceaselessly transforming, the Lamplighter resisted the slightest change.

Tim expected no surprises here, and wanted none. New experiences were overrated. Being run down by a bus would be a new experience.

He preferred the familiar, the routine. He would never be at risk of falling off a mountain because he would never climb one.

Some said he lacked a sense of adventure. Tim saw no point in suggesting to them that intrepid expeditions through exotic lands and across strange seas were the quests of crawling children.

compared to the adventures waiting in the eight inches between the left ear and the right.

If he made that observation, they would think him a fool. He was just a mason, after all, bricklayer. He was expected not to think too much.

These days, most people avoided thinking, especially about the future. They preferred the comfort of blind convictions to clear-eyed thought.

Others accused him of being old-fashioned. Guilty as charged.

The past was rich with known beauty and fully rewarded a look backward. He was a hopeful man but not presumptuous enough to assume that beauty lay, as well, in the unknown future.

An interesting guy came into the tavern. He was tall, although not as tall as Tim, solid but not formidable.

His manner, rather than his appearance, made him interesting. He entered like an animal with a predator on its trail, peering back through the door until it swung shut, and then warily surveying the premises, as though distrusting the promise of refuge.

When the newcomer approached and sat at the bar, Tim stared at his Pilsner glass as if it were a sacred chalice, as though he were brooding on the profound meaning of its contents. By assuming a devotional demeanor, rather than a pose of sullen solitude, he allowed strangers the option of conversation without encouraging it.

If the first words out of the newcomer's mouth were those of a bigot or a political nut, or the wrong kind of fool, Tim could morph from a pose of spiritual or nostalgic reverie to one of bitter silence and barely repressed violence. Few people would try more than twice to break the ice when the only response was a glacial chill.

Tim preferred quiet contemplation at this altar, but he enjoyed the right kind of conversation, too. The right kind was uncommon.

When you initiated a conversation, you could have a hard time putting an end to it. When the other guy spoke first, however, and revealed his nature, you could shut him down by shutting him out.

Diligent in the support of his yet-to-be-conceived children, Rooney arrived. "What'll it be?"

The stranger put a thick manila envelope on the bar and kept his left hand on it. "Maybe...a beer."

Rooney waited, eyebrows raised.

"Yes. All right. A beer," said the newcomer.

"On tap, I have Budweiser, Miller Lite, and Heineken."

"Okay. Well...then...I guess...Heineken."

His voice was as thin and taut as a telephone wire, his words like birds perched at discreet intervals, resonant with a plucked note that might have been dismay.

By the time Rooney brought the beer, the stranger had money on the bar. “Keep the change.”

Evidently a second round was out of the question.

When Rooney went away, the stranger wrapped his right hand around the beer glass. He did not take a sip.

Tim was a wet nurse. That was the mocking title Rooney had given him because of his ability to nurse two beers through a long evening. Sometimes he asked for ice to enliven a warm brew.

Even if you weren't a heavy drinker, however, you wanted the first swallow of beer when it was at its coldest, fresh from the tap.

Like a sniper intent on a target, Tim focused on his Budweiser, but like a good sniper, he also had keen peripheral vision. He could see that the stranger had still not lifted the glass of Heineken.

The guy did not appear to be a habitu  of taverns, and evidently he didn't want to be in this one, on this night, at this hour.

At last he said, “I'm early.”

Tim wasn't sure if this was a conversation he wanted.

“I guess,” said the stranger, “everyone wants to be early, size things up.”

Tim was getting a bad vibe. Not a look-out-he's-a-werewolf kind of vibe, just a feeling that the guy might be tedious.

The stranger said, “I jumped out of an airplane with my dog.”

On the other hand, the best hope of a memorable barroom conversation is to have the good luck encounter an eccentric.

Tim's spirits lifted. Turning to the skydiver, he said, “What was his name?”

“Whose name?”

“The dog's.”

“Larry.”

“Funny name for a dog.”

“I named him after my brother.”

“What did your brother think of that?”

“My brother is dead.”

Tim said, “I’m sorry to hear it.”

“That was a long time ago.”

“Did Larry like sky-diving?”

“He never went. He died when he was sixteen.”

“I mean Larry the dog.”

“Yeah. He seemed to like it. I bring it up only because my stomach is in knots like it was when w jumped.”

“This has been a bad day, huh?”

The stranger frowned. “What do you think?”

Tim nodded. “Bad day.”

Continuing to frown, the skydiver said, “You *are* him, aren’t you?”

The art of barroom banter is not like playing Mozart on the piano. It’s freestyle, a jam session. Th rhythms are instinctual.

“Are you him?” the stranger asked again.

Tim said, “Who else would I be?”

“You look so...ordinary.”

“I work at it,” Tim assured him.

The skydiver stared intently at him for a moment, but then lowered his eyes. “I can’t imagine being you.”

“It’s no piece of cake,” Tim said less playfully, and frowned to hear a note of sincerity in his voice.

The stranger finally picked up his drink. Getting it to his lips, he slopped beer on the bar, the chugged half the contents of the glass.

“Anyway, I’m just in a phase,” Tim said more to himself than to his companion.

Eventually, this guy would realize his mistake, whereupon Tim would pretend that he, too, had been confused. Meanwhile, there was a little fun to be had.

Sliding the manila envelope across the bar, the guy said, “Half of it’s there. Ten thousand. The rest when she’s gone.”

As he finished speaking, the stranger turned on his stool, got to his feet, and headed toward the door.

As Tim was about to call the man back, the terrible meaning of those eleven words clarified for him: *Half of it’s there. Ten thousand. The rest when she’s gone.*

First astonishment—and then an uncharacteristic clutch of fear—choked off his voice.

The skydiver was intent on bailing out of the bar. He quickly crossed the room, went through the door, fell away into the night.

“Hey, wait a minute,” Tim said, too softly and too late. “Wait.”

When you skate across the days, leaving a wake as thin as spider silk, you’re not accustomed to shouting or to chasing after strangers with murder on their minds.

By the time Tim realized pursuit was obligatory and got up from his stool, a successful chase could not have been mounted. The quarry had covered too much ground.

He sat again and finished his beer in one long swallow.

Foam clung to the sides of the glass. Those ephemeral patterns had never before seemed mysterious to him. Now he studied them as if they embodied great meaning.

Feeling disoriented, he glanced at the manila envelope, which looked as portentous as a pipe bomb.

Carrying two plates of cheeseburgers and fries, Liam Rooney served a young couple in one of the booths. No waitress worked on a slow Monday.

Tim raised a hand to signal Rooney. The tavern keeper didn’t notice; he returned to the bar gate the farther end of the room.

The envelope still had an ominous significance, but already Tim had begun to doubt that he had correctly understood what had happened between him and the stranger. A guy with a sky-diving do named Larry wouldn’t pay to have someone killed. All this was a misunderstanding.

The rest when she’s gone. That could mean a lot of things. It didn’t necessarily mean when she was dead.

Determined that the world would quickly be put right, Tim pried up the prongs of the brass clasp, opened the flap of the envelope, and reached inside. He withdrew a thick wad of hundred-dollar bills bound together with a rubber band.

Maybe the money wasn’t greasy, but that was how it felt. He returned it at once to the envelope.

In addition to the cash, he found a five-by-seven photograph that might have been taken for driver's license or passport. She appeared to be in her late twenties. Attractive.

A name had been typed on the back of the photo: LINDA PAQUETTE. Under the name was an address in Laguna Beach.

Although he had just finished a beer, Tim's mouth was salt-dry and lemon-sour. His heart beat slowly but unusually hard, booming in his ears.

Irrationally, he felt guilty looking at the photo, as though he had somehow participated in the planning of this woman's death. He put away the picture. He slid the envelope aside.

Another man entered the bar. He was nearly Tim's size, with brown hair cropped short like Tim's.

Rooney arrived with a fresh beer and said to Tim, "You keep chugging them at that pace, you won't qualify as furniture anymore. You'll be a real customer."

A persistent feeling of being caught in a dream slowed Tim's thinking. He meant to tell Rooney what had just happened, but his tongue felt thick.

The newcomer approached, sat where the skydiver had sat, with an empty stool between him and Tim. He said to Rooney, "Budweiser."

As Rooney went to draw the beer, the stranger stared at the manila envelope, and then met Tim's gaze. He had brown eyes, just as Tim did.

"You're early," said the killer.

A man's life can pivot on the smallest hinge of time. No minute is without potential for momentous change, and each tick of the clock might be the voice of Fate whispering a promise or a warning.

When the killer said, "You're early," Tim Carrier noticed that the Budweiser clock showed five minutes shy of the hour, and he made an educated guess: "So are you."

The hinge had turned. The door stood open, and it could never be closed again.

"I'm no longer sure I want to hire you," Tim said.

Rooney brought the killer's beer, and then answered a call to the farther end of the bar.

A trick of light, reflecting off the mahogany, gave the contents of the glass a rubescent cast.

The stranger licked his chapped lips, and drank. He had a deep thirst.

When he put down the glass, he said amicably, "You can't hire me. I'm no one's employee."

Tim considered excusing himself to the men's room. He could call the police on his cell phone.

He worried that the stranger would interpret his departure as an invitation to take the manila envelope and leave.

Carrying the envelope to the lavatory would be a bad idea. Under the assumption that Tim wanted privacy for the transaction, the guy might follow him.

"I can't be hired, and I'm not peddling anything, either," said the killer. "You sell to me, not the other way around."

"Yeah? What am I selling?"

"A concept. The concept of your world profoundly changed by one...alteration."

In Tim's mind rose the face of the woman in the photo.

His options weren't clear. He needed time to think, so he said, "The seller sets the price. *You* set the price—twenty thousand."

"That's not the price. It's a contribution."

This conversation made no less sense than typical bar talk, and Tim found its rhythm. “But for my *contribution* I get your...service.”

“No. I have no service to sell. You receive my grace.”

“Your grace.”

“Yes. Once I accept the concept you’re selling, your world will be profoundly changed by my grace.”

Considering their ordinary color, the killer’s brown eyes were more compelling than they should have been.

When he had sat down at the bar, his face had appeared hard, but that had been a mistaken first impression. A dimple adorned his round chin. Smooth pink cheeks. No laugh lines. No furrows in the brow.

The whimsical quality of his half-smile suggested that he might be remembering a favorite childhood story about fairies. It appeared to be his default expression, as if he were not entirely connected to the moment, perpetually bemused.

“This is not a business transaction,” said the smiling man. “You petitioned me, and I’m the answer to your prayers.”

The vocabulary with which he discussed his work might have been an indication of caution, a technique to avoid incriminating himself. When delivered with a persistent smile, however, his genteel euphemisms were disquieting if not in fact creepy.

As Tim opened the manila envelope, the killer warned, “Not here.”

“Just chill.” Tim removed the photo from the envelope, folded it, and put it in his shirt pocket. “I’ve had a change of heart.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. I was counting on you.”

Sliding the envelope in front of the empty stool that stood between them, Tim said, “Half of what we agreed. For doing nothing. Call it a no-kill fee.”

“You’d never be tied to it,” the killer said.

“I know. You’re good. I’m sure you’re good at this. The best. I just don’t want it anymore.”

Smiling, shaking his head, the killer said, “You want it, all right.”

“Not anymore.”

“You wanted it once. You don’t go as far as wanting it and then not want it anymore. A man’s mind doesn’t work that way.”

“Second thoughts,” said Tim.

“In a thing like this, the second thoughts always come *after* a man gets what he wants. He allows himself some remorse, so he feels better about himself. He got what he wanted and he feels good about himself, and a year from now it’s just a sad thing that happened.”

The brown-eyed stare disturbed, but Tim dared not look away. A lack of directness might inspire in the killer a sudden suspicion.

One reason those eyes were compelling became clear. The pupils were radically dilated. The black pool at the center of each iris appeared to equal the area of surrounding color.

The light at this end of the bar was reduced but not dim. The pupils were as dilated as they might have been in perfect darkness.

The hunger in his eyes, the greed for light, had the gravity of a black hole in space, of a collapsing star.

A blind man’s eyes might be perpetually dilated like this. But the killer was not blind, not blind to light, although perhaps to something else.

“Take the money,” Tim said.

That smile. “It’s *half* the money.”

“For doing nothing.”

“Oh, I’ve done some work.”

Tim frowned. “What have you done?”

“I’ve shown you what you are.”

“Yeah? What am I?”

“A man with the soul of a murderer but with the heart of a coward.”

The killer picked up the envelope, rose from the stool, and walked away.

Having successfully passed himself off as the man with a dog named Larry, having for the moment spared the life of the woman in the photograph, having avoided the violent confrontation that could have ensued if the killer had realized what had gone wrong, Tim ought to have been relieved. Instead his throat tightened, and his heart swelled until it seemed to crowd his lungs and crimp his breath.

A brief dizziness made him feel as if he were spinning slowly on the bar stool. Vertigo threatened to revolve into nausea.

He realized that relief eluded him because this incident was not at an end. He didn’t need tea leaves

to read his future. He clearly foresaw the prospects for tragedy.

With only a glance at any stone courtyard or driveway, he could name the pattern of the pavement: running bond, offset bond, coursed ashlar, basket weave, Flemish bond.... The pattern of the road before him was chaos. He could not know where it would lead.

The killer walked with a light step that could be achieved only by someone not weighed down with a conscience, and went out into the night's embrace.

Tim hurried across the tavern, cautiously cracked the door, and peered outside.

Behind the steering wheel of a white sedan parked at an angle to the curb, half veiled by the windshield that reflected the tavern's blue-neon sign, sat the smiling man. He riffled the packet of hundred-dollar bills.

Tim withdrew his slim cell phone from his shirt pocket.

In the car, the killer rolled down a window. He hung an object on the glass and cranked up the window to hold it in place.

Blindly feeling his way across the cell-phone keypad without looking at it, Tim began to dial 911.

The object pinched between the window frame and the glass was a detachable emergency beacon which began to flash as the car reversed away from the curb.

"*Cop,*" Tim whispered, and hesitated to dial the second 1.

He risked stepping outside as the sedan pulled away from the tavern, and he read the license-plate number on the back of the dwindling vehicle.

The concrete underfoot seemed to have no more surface tension than the skin of water on a pond. Sometimes a skating mayfly, eluding birds and bats, is taken by a hungry bass rising from below.

In the downfall of golden light from the dragon lamp, a simple iron railing guarded the rising concrete steps. The concrete had been worked with a screed when it was bleeding, and as consequence, some edges had scaled badly; some treads were as crazed as crackle-glazed pottery.

Like a lot of things in life, concrete is unforgiving.

Through four framed panels, the copper dragon, still bright but greening at the edges, serpentine against a luminous backdrop of lacquered mica lenses.

In the wash of ruddy light, the aluminum screen door appeared to be copper, too. Behind it, the inner door stood open to a kitchen rich with the aromas of cinnamon and strong coffee.

Sitting at the table, Michelle Rooney looked up as Tim arrived. “You’re so quiet that I *felt* you coming.”

He eased the screen door shut behind him. “I almost know what that means.”

“The night outside quieted around you, the way a jungle does when a man passes through.”

“Didn’t see any crocodiles,” he said, but then thought of the man to whom he had given the ten thousand dollars.

He sat across from her at the pale-blue Formica-topped table and studied the drawing on which she worked. It was upside-down from his point of view.

Out of the jukebox in the tavern downstairs rose the muffled but lovely voice of Martina McBride.

When Tim recognized the drawing as a panorama of silhouetted trees, he said, “What’s it going to be?”

“A table lamp. Bronze and stained glass.”

“You’ll be famous someday, Michelle.”

“I’d stop right now if I thought so.”

He looked at her left hand, which lay palm-up on the counter near the refrigerator.

“Want a cup?” she asked, indicating the coffeemaker near the cooktop. “It’s fresh.”

“Looks like something you wrung out of a squid.”

“Who in his right mind wants to sleep?”

He poured a mugful and returned with it to the table.

As was true of many other chairs, this one seemed like toy furniture to him. Michelle was petite and the same kind of chair appeared large under her, yet Tim was the one who felt as if he were a child playing at coffee klatch.

This perception had less to do with chairs than with Michelle. Sometimes, all unaware, she made him feel like an awkward boy.

She finessed the pencil with her right hand, holding the drawing tablet steady with the stump of her left forearm.

“ETA on the coffeecake,” she said, nodding toward the oven, “is ten minutes.”

“Smells good, but I can’t stay.”

“Don’t pretend you’ve gotten a life.”

A shadow danced across the table. Tim looked up. A yellow butterfly fluttered at the silvered hooves of the leaping bronze gazelles in a small chandelier by Michelle.

“It slipped in this afternoon,” she said. “For a while I left the door open, tried to chase it out, but it seems at home here.”

“Why wouldn’t it be?”

A tree branch whispered into existence between the pencil point and the paper.

“How did you make it up the stairs, carrying all that?” Michelle asked.

“All what?”

“Whatever it is that has you so weighed down.”

The table was the blue of a pale sky, and the shadow seemed to glide behind it, a graceful mystery.

“I won’t be coming around for a while,” he said.

“What do you mean?”

“A few weeks, maybe a month.”

“I don’t understand.”

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