



THE VANISHED TRADES ♦

The Knocker-Up: Waking a City for a Penny

An AI Wrangler illustrated story

MARTY

Welcome back to the fire, friends. Pull up close — there's a bite in the air tonight, which is just nature reminding us that a story and a warm flame are not optional. I'm glad you found your way here.

CAROL

We put an extra log on for you. I told Marty to start without me and he said absolutely not, which I'm choosing to read as romantic and not as a man who couldn't find the matches.



MARTY

Both things can be true. Now. Last time we sat here, we talked about the lost jobs of childhood — the paper routes, the Saturday errands, the things we outgrew before we noticed they were gone. Carol pointed out afterward that we'd missed the bigger version. Not what we outgrew. What the world outgrew, while the people doing the work were still right in the middle of it.

CAROL

Because a child loses a paper route and grows into something else. But a person who has spent forty years getting very good at a specific skill, and then the specific skill just stops being needed — that's not outgrowing anything. That's a

grief with a different shape.



MARTY

Let me start with one I find quietly remarkable. In the mill towns of England and Ireland, well into the nineteen-thirties, there were people called knocker-uppers. Their entire job — their livelihood, their daily purpose — was to walk the streets before dawn with a long bamboo pole, or sometimes a wire wand, and tap on the upper windows of workers who had to be at the factory by five. They were the alarm clock before the alarm clock existed. Some used a peashooter for the high floors. People paid them a few pennies a week and left the coins on the sill the night before.

CAROL

And I always have to ask this — who woke up the knocker-upper? Somebody had to go first. Was there an entire chain, all the way down?



MARTY

There was always someone at the bottom of the chain who just got up — pride, habit, some iron constitution. And when the cheap mechanical alarm clock made its way into every household, the chain broke. No letter. No last shift. People stopped leaving coins on the sill, and one morning the streets before dawn were quiet in a way they hadn't been in a hundred years. A whole profession, dissolved overnight into the ordinary ticking of a bedside table.

CAROL

No letter. No "thank you for forty years of getting up before everyone else so the rest of us didn't have to." Just a morning when the coins weren't there, and the streets went quiet, and that was that.



MARTY

Now here's one I think about more than is probably healthy for a man my age. In the cigar factories of Havana, and later in Tampa, Florida, there was a figure called the lector — the reader. The workers rolled cigars by hand, hour after hour, their hands moving without their eyes needing to follow. And they hired, out of their own wages — not the company's, their own — a man to sit on a raised platform in the center of the factory floor and read to them all day. Novels. Newspapers. Political speeches. History. Some of them read the complete works of Tolstoy aloud over months, while a thousand pairs of hands kept right on rolling.

CAROL

Marty. That's exactly what we do around this fire. Those workers didn't want the news. They wanted to be somewhere else for eight hours. They wanted someone to tell them a story.



MARTY

The lectores were celebrated. Workers had strong opinions about their voice, their timing, their taste in material. They took requests. They were, in a real sense, the stars of a small and vivid world. And then, around nineteen thirty-one, the factory owners in Tampa decided the readings were stirring up too much trouble. The lectores were choosing radical literature, and the owners banned them outright. And the workers went on strike. Not over wages. Over the right to be read to.

CAROL

A labor action. Over a story. Marty, I want to put that on a plaque somewhere.



MARTY

They lost the strike. The lectores stepped down from their platforms, and nobody who rolled cigars in Tampa in the years that followed quite worked the same way. Something had been in the room and then it wasn't. Not a machine. Not a benefit. Just a voice, rising over the sound of a thousand pairs of hands.

CAROL

What happened to the lectores themselves, though? I can't stop thinking about a man who has spent years perfecting the art of reading Anna Karenina aloud to a thousand people, and then it's a Tuesday and there's no platform — where does a skill like that go?



MARTY

Some found radio, which was young enough to still need voices. Some taught. Some just went home. And that's the thread that runs through all of these, friends — the work didn't end because people weren't good at it. These were craftspeople, artists in their way. The world reorganized itself around something new and didn't think to leave a door open. Which brings me, naturally, to one that Carol and I have a particular attachment to.

CAROL

You get a certain look, Marty, when you're about to talk about movies. I've known that look for decades.



MARTY

Every picture house in the world, before nineteen twenty-seven, had a musician. Sometimes a small orchestra. Most often a single pianist sitting alone below the screen, watching the same film week after week, twice a day some weeks, improvising every time. They built an entire private language of feeling — the tempo of a chase, the chord of a villain's arrival, the particular ache of two people in a doorway at the wrong moment. Some of these pianists were extraordinary. They gave the silent pictures their pulse, their breath. They made rooms full of strangers feel things together.

CAROL

And then — October of nineteen twenty-seven. Al Jolson looked right at the camera in *The Jazz Singer* and said, "Wait a minute, wait a minute, you ain't heard nothin' yet." First words of the sound era, and the last days of every one of those pianists.



MARTY

Within two years — not twenty, not ten, two years — every major studio had converted. Every picture house had stripped out the old arrangement for a new sound system. And every pianist who had given those theaters their heartbeat was handed a final envelope. Some stuck around a while longer, playing atmosphere, until even that wore out its welcome. But the profession was over. Overnight, more or less.

CAROL

I always think about sitting at that bench for the very last time and not knowing it. Just playing the end credits, closing the lid, going home. Not knowing you'd never open it there again.

MARTY

Most of them didn't know when the last night was the last night. The owner would call them in, explain the new equipment, and that would be that. A few found work in radio orchestras. Some went to vaudeville, which bought them maybe five more years before that folded too. And some just went home with an extraordinary skill — this ability to make a piano speak to a room full of strangers in the dark — and no place in the world that needed it anymore.

CAROL

There's that line from Sunset Boulevard — Norma Desmond, and I always want to get it right — "I am big. It's the pictures that got small." But those pianists couldn't say that, could they. The pictures got enormous. They just got left behind while the pictures grew up and grew loud around them.

MARTY

That's exactly it. And that's what sits with me on a night like this. We talk about progress like it's weightless — like every new thing lifts all the boats. But the knocker-upper walking home through the quiet streets for the last time, and the lector stepping down from his platform in Tampa in nineteen thirty-one, and the pianist closing the lid while the talkies rolled on without him — those were real people. With real names nobody kept. Real skills the world decided it was finished needing.

CAROL

And every one of those crafts — while it existed — was somebody's whole self. Not just what they did. Who they were. The thing they were good at. The reason the knocker-upper got up before everyone else without being asked. You don't just pivot from a life like that. You mourn it first, and maybe for a long time.

MARTY

Some things deserve a little mourning before we move on. That doesn't mean the world was wrong to change — just that something real was there, and someone ought to say so. The lector's voice rising over the sound of a thousand pairs of hands. The piano filling a dark room with something that felt like weather. The pole touching glass in the cold before anyone else was awake. Real things. Worth remembering. Worth sitting with, around a fire, on a quiet night. I'm Marty Shepard.

CAROL

And I'm Carol. Sleep warm, friends. And if your alarm goes off tomorrow morning — just take one second. For the person who used to do that job in the rain and the dark, before dawn, for a few pennies, so you wouldn't miss your shift. They deserved better hours.