Backstory of the Album of

The Ballad of the story of Mr. Pokey McSlow

*Written, transcribed, and archived by John T. Wurzer*

**Pokey McSlow - Westin Hotel, San Francisco – Thursday Night**

Trevor, clad in a crimson vest over a white dress shirt with puffy sleeves had obviously never tended bar before. Pokey wondered how an upscale hotel chain like the Westin could sink so low as to put a moron behind the bar in their classy lobby bar. Trevor was looking up recipes for drinks on his phone whenever anyone ordered anything other than beer. Someone asked him, “What kind of wine do you have?” Trevor responded, “Red and White, I think.”

“I mean what kind of Red and White?” came the response.

Trevor bent down and pulled five bottles out of the cooler setting them up on the bar. The customer shook his head in disgust and pointed at a 2010 Cabernet Sauvignon Puente Alto Don Melchor saying, “That one.” Pokey finally caught Trevor’s eye and raised his hand to wave at him. When Trevor came over Pokey asked for a Michelob Ultra, and Trevor looked confused.

“In a bottle?”

“Yes, in a bottle.”

“Amstel Light or Heineken, those are the only bottles,” said Trevor.

“Amstel,” muttered Pokey.

“Light?” asked Trevor.

“Yes, light,” said Pokey, rolling his eyes. Then he returned to his poetry book where he’d started scribbling some notes.

A perfume-drenched woman who was probably 10 years younger than Pokey strode up and stood at the bar next to him waiting for service. She had been sitting at a table about ten feet away with five guys in suits that were patting themselves on the back about some medical supply contract they’d just landed. After waiting for a few minutes without being served, she turned to Pokey and said, “What does a girl need to do to get a drink around here?” Pokey, somewhat annoyed by this time, hollered “Trevor! A little help?” Trevor who had been reading drink recipes on his phone came over to take her order. She ordered tropical drinks, shots with strange names, and asked for the bartender for some menus. Trevor looked terrified, and Pokey realized this was not going to be a brief interaction so he tried to slide his phone and laptop closer to him in order to make room for the woman at the bar.

She hopped up onto the barstool next to him and asked, “So, what are you doing in San Francisco?”

“We have a major client here, and I’m pitching a new sales and distribution deal. They’re holding their annual author’s exposition this week.”

“What do you sell and distribute?” she asked.

“Satire,” he answered.

“Satire? Novels, columns, short stories, what kind of satire?” she persisted.

“Comic Books,” said Pokey.

“Cartoons!?” She gasped, “I didn’t even know that people still printed cartoons. Aren’t they all online now?”

“*Comic Books*,” Pokey emphasized. “Not *cartoons*.”

“What’s the difference?” she asked. “Pictures, words in balloons, whatever. Do they really still print them?”

“Yes, they really still print them,” he said. “Millions and millions of them every year.”

“Really?” She paused and watched as he started scribbling in his notebook again. Then she quizzed him “Wouldn’t it be faster just to type your notes on your laptop or record them on your phone? Seems like a lot of work writing everything down in that notebook.”

“Oh this isn’t work,” he said in an exaggerated Texas drawl. “I’m just writin’ to relax.”

“Writin’ what?” she said, making fun of his accent.

“Mostly poems, songs, and stuff.”

“Still, it would be much faster on the laptop. But maybe you get a better feel this way. That must be it, you get a better feel don’t you?”

“A feel?” he asked.

“Yeah, ya know—a feel for the words. A feel for whatever you’re writing about.” She paused again and then continued. “Anyway, I’m Angela but you can call me Angel. Everybody calls me Angel. Don’t get me wrong though, I’m no Angel. What’s your name?”

“Richard,” he said. “Richard McSlow.”

She started to giggle. “McSlow? That must be because you write instead of typing. They should call you Slow Poke McSlow. Do you have a nick name?”

“Yeah, I have a nick name,” he said.

Just then her drinks showed up, and three guys came over from the table to help her carry everything back to where they were all seated. Pokey thought he’d been spared until a few minutes later she walked back up to order appetizers.

After placing her order she turned to him and said, “Your nick name, what is it?”

“Pokey”, he responded. She broke out into raucous laughter as she turned to walk away slapping her thigh and squealing.

“Pokey? Pokey McSlow! Now that’s rich.”

She returned to her table all the guys started cracking up as well. Pokey turned back to his notebook, pursing his lips, and continued to write. About five minutes later he noticed it had become noticeably less noisy in the bar, and he glanced back at the table behind him where everyone had pulled out their smart phones and begun texting and posting, checking voice mail, making calls, and had consequently stopped talking to one another.

Pokey paid his tab and quickly made his way back to his room.

**Parker Joe Sling – Ray’s Cantina, Texas – Friday afternoon**

*Be a big man in a small world.*

That’s what Joseph used to say to Parker years ago when Parker was growing up; driving home from the little league game; waiting on the tee of a par 3; or sitting in traffic at a red light.

*Be a big man in a small world.*

Joseph died of Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma when Parker was 22 years old.

Parker had always been a party boy. Through his high school years and even after attaining his undergraduate degree in Accounting, he hung with the late night crowd, taking unnecessary chances, driving under the influence of a variety of substances, and womanizing whenever and wherever there was womanizing to be done.

*Be a big man in a small world.*

This phrase took on a new meaning when Joseph got sick. Although his father’s death changed his life’s path, Parker would not realize it until many years later. The “Big man theory” became more about money, position, power, and respect in business, financial, and political circles than about being the “big man on campus”. And Parker Joseph Sling became a master of the schmooze, a dissector of the deal, a networking natural. He plied his trade smoothly but with an energetic urgency that was captivating and debilitating all at once. He married a “showroom wife” who wowed influential men and could melt them with a smile. She bore him two beautiful children, Trevor and Hanna, and he reveled in their innocence throughout their younger years. He knew all the right people in all the right places on all the right levels, and he worked hard. He worked every task, every project, every social interaction as if it were a three-point shot at the buzzer, a putt on the 18th green, the last at bat in the bottom of the 9th; a win or lose event. He worked harder than his peers, and he passed them on the road to success, unconcerned about where that road might eventually lead.

Years later, after Hanna had moved to Tel Aviv with her boyfriend Seth and after Parker’s wife was recovering in the Betty Ford clinic in Sedona, Arizona, Parker strode into Ray’s Cantina in west Texas where he had been told Trevor was working as a bus boy.

Trevor had left town and headed for Corpus Christi 10 days earlier. Sometimes surprises don’t work out as planned; if they did they wouldn’t be called surprises. Other surprises, however, were on the way.

**Ray – Junior’s Restaurant, Midtown Manhattan**

The restaurant was no more than a glorified diner. However, being strategically located between the Marriott hotel and two Broadway theatres, and its being the coldest evening in February with snow falling and the wind blowing twenty-five miles an hour, the place somehow transformed itself into an upper class retro experience—Juniors.

There was actually nothing at all classic about this place; with its orange and white motif, *Happy Days* memorabilia, and bright incandescent lights. It was hard to fathom why 27 people were lined up waiting to be seated. Ray, however, spied an open seat at the bar and slipped into the restroom bypassing the hostess station altogether. When he arrived at the men’s room door he did a 180, briskly walked over to the bar and planted himself on the available barstool. “Any port in a storm,” he thought as the tattooed bartender slapped a plastic laminated menu in front of him. The pace in the diner was frenetic at the very least. It was as if someone had snapped their fingers, tapped on the face of their watch, stared everyone down and said, “Okay, you’ve got two minutes to place your order, it will arrive in ten minutes after which you will have seven minutes to ingest it.” It was a far cry from Ray’s Cantina.

Ray, having never been to New York City before and having spent the last two days at a restaurant and bar supply convention being courted by salesmen who took him to asinine upscale eateries hoping to land his business, ordered a hot dog. He realized he had forgotten his cell phone, but knew he wasn’t going to give up his seat at the bar to walk back to the hotel and get it, so he took out his pen and started scribbling a poem in his notebook. It had been years since Ray had written any poems, but somehow this trip to the Big Apple had rekindled the urge. He had written a poem for his wife the previous night in the hotel before drifting off to sleep. He often had wondered to himself if he could still write anything worth reading. He decided that the real question was whether or not anything was worth writing, and if it was, would anyone read it? Regardless, he forged ahead pressing his pen to the page.

Roast beef, pickles, incandescent lights, people scurrying everywhere; these were the things that he noticed peripherally while spilling a few thoughts onto the page—thoughts that he couldn’t help but notice were lightyears from being anything profound. Ten minutes later he had finally filled up most of a page and paused to consider how very much he missed his wife. His hot dog still hadn’t arrived. He closed his notebook, pulled out his laptop, connected to the Wi-Fi network, and started reviewing the previous year’s financial statements and the coming year’s cash flow projections for all 27 Ray’s Cantinas. Just then, his hot dog showed up and he asked the tattooed bartender for another beer.

**Dominque, Melina, and Parker Joe**

“Last call for happy hour drinks!” shouted Ray’s wife Dominique while afternoon sunlight still slithered through the blinds covering the front windows of the cantina. The afternoon drunks would soon make their way out the door into the glare of the pre-sunset light on the dusty street and stumble home to their unhappy children, unhappy wives, unhappy lives, and the despondent desolation of a moonlit late June evening. For now however, just one more round.

Then in walks Melina Maldaynis. She is wearing her usual Friday frills and finery—dress cut halfway up her thigh and blouse showing just enough cleavage to draw the eye but little enough to keep the men wondering. Melina was the perfect accent to the clean yet rustic atmosphere inside of Ray’s, and as long as no money changed hands on the premises Dominique and Ray were happy to let her flirt with the regulars, hustle drinks from strangers, and occasionally walk out the door arm-in-arm with her latest conquest. Melina was a fixture rather than a nuisance.

On a normal Friday evening Pokey McSlow would have already been sitting at the bar with a paycheck’s worth of cash in his wallet, waiting for Melina to arrive. Pokey was essentially her “Friday night guy”, but he was in San Francisco on business, making a sales and distribution proposal presentation to an egomaniacal satire aficionado and wouldn’t be back until early Saturday evening. Melina was, therefore, a bit more flirtatious than usual on this Friday late afternoon hoping to cultivate additional clientele. She made her way to the jukebox where she was surrounded by three roofers whose company had just finished repairing the courthouse roof which had been struck by lightning the week before. They offered to pour her a beer from their pitcher but Melina flashed them an almost motherly smile saying, “Beer? No beer. I need a champagne cocktail.” The young men knew that any drink with champagne in it was beyond their means so they muttered, “Suit yerself” and trudged off to the back room to shoot some eight-ball. Melina gracefully sashayed back to her usual place at the bar, purposely brushing her bare arm against a stranger’s elbow as she lifted herself up onto the barstool next to his. He was a clean shaven man, quite overdressed for Ray’s. He shot her a quick glance, took a deep breath and stared off lazily into space.

Dominique came over to the two of them and said to Melina, “Last call for happy hour, girl. You buying?”

Melina rolled her eyes and shook her head sighing, “Not right now, Dom, I’m still waiting for the Champagne cocktail of my dreams to come walking through that door. Until then a glass of water would be nice, thanks.”

Dominique started to scoop some ice into a glass when the well-dressed man next to Melina reached out with a fifty dollar bill in his hand and interrupted saying, “I’ll pick up that Champagne cocktail for her. Bring us two shots of tequila as well.”

Melina grabbed his bare wrist with her soft hand, forcefully pulling it down to the surface of the bar, looked deep into his eyes, and spoke to Dominique without turning her head, “No Tequila for me. Make mine an apple schnapps.” And then she addressed the stranger, letting her stern look curl up into a smile, “Well, aren’t you the fancy gentleman? Are you sure you’re in the right bar?”

Dominique put the drinks in front of them and took the money from the man’s sweaty hand. Melina raised the shot of schnapps stating, “Here’s to you Mr. …?” looking at him quizzically.

“Sling. Parker Joe Sling,” he said.

She continued, “Here’s to your health, Mr. Parker Joe Sling. May you stay very healthy, at least through the weekend.”

“Joe,” he said. “Just call me Joe.”

“Okay, Joe. To the weekend!” And the first pair of what was to be many more pairs of shots were drained.

Seven hours later Melina and Parker Joe slipped out the side door and stumbled down the street towards the Diplomat Hotel. Dominique wiped her hands on a bar rag and killed the house lights. She had worked a double shift because Ray was in New York City attending a Hotel and Restaurant trade show. She missed Ray when he was away and was glad he’d be back tomorrow. Sherriff Bob was hanging around just to be sure that Dominque got home safe, and he looked at her saying, “There goes trouble.”

“No doubt,” said Dominique. “No doubt.”

**Sheriff Bob - Historian’s notes, Monday morning**

Small town, no one around, dust all over the hot dry ground

Seemed like a mighty fine place to retire, to shut off the freezer and build a new fire

Warm until midnight, cold after that

Walk to work in the morning in a cowboy hat

With a spring in one’s step and a smile on one’s face

No better retirement in the whole human race

Policing a town where there is no one to rob

It was paradise found for old Sheriff Bob

Still one never quite knows when one follows a light

What’s inside of the apple until they’ve taken a bite

And the sweetest of treats and the moistest of fruits

Can get sometimes grow bitter once they’ve planted their roots

Until one’s carefree existence becomes another dull grind

With no challenge, no prospects; just calm peace of mind

But inevitably, somehow a new wind will blow

This time it was Sling and Pokey McSlow

That ought to keep Sheriff Bob around for a few more years.

*Lots of love,*

*Hope and/or pray for peace on earth.*

*John*