

THE TURN OF A FRIENDLY CARD

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Lyrics by The Alan Parsons Project

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Roy's coat collar was pulled up around his face and his hands were dug deep into his pockets, and he leaned his weight forward as he struggled to walk against the wind. The sidewalk was snow-covered, and more snow fell, hurled through the night with the strong north wind. The snow that stuck in his hair made him look older, as though his hair was even more grey. Roy was past forty but could pass for sixty.

At the end of the row of shops was the Restaurant. That was all it said on the Coca-Cola sign over the window and door: "Restaurant". The old metal door squeaked as Roy opened it and went in. He was warmed quickly, from the smells of home cooking and the throng of customers bunched on stools along the counter.

"Hello meester," she said as he closed the door. He walked to the first of the few counter stools left, and she spoke to him again. "Talk to me," was what she said.

"I dunno. What's special tonight?" Roy asked.

Her husband walked from the back carrying sandwiches, blindly dropping the plates in front of the customers who then swapped the sandwiches so that everyone had what they had ordered.

"Special? Everything special," he said. His accent was only slightly less prominent than his wife's, words reminiscent of their east European birth. He lifted lids off aluminum pans next to the grill. "Spaghetti and meatballs, Salisbury steak with sauce, fried chicken, mashed potatoes, vegetables ..." He looked to Roy for an answer.

Roy looked to the woman for advice. "Everything very good. Talk to me," she said.

"Make it the Salisbury steak. That looks good."

"Good, good. You choose good," he said, beaming with pleasure and dishing a large serving onto a plate. She brought a glass of milk to Roy without being asked. As she put it down she said, "I've seen you better meester."

"I have been." He tried but he couldn't return her smile.

The door opened and another regular came in. "Hello meester," she greeted him. "Talk to me."

The restaurant was a haven for many men in town. At the counter was a lawyer, a construction worker, two policemen, a garbageman, the town doctor, and five men who were unemployed, like so many others in this town. They were united by one situation: all had no wife to go home to. Most did at one time.

The lawyer, who was Roy's lawyer, Arnold Freeman, leaned forward on his stool three down from Roy's and made a small wave with his hand.

"Evening, Roy."

"Arnold," Roy waved back.

"Business any better Roy?"

"Not really. Can't seem to move much these days." The business was 'Roy's Fashions and Tailoring for Men and was at the other end of the block from the Restaurant. He had owned the store for over ten years now, and although he had never sold a great volume of merchandise, these last two years had been the worst. The jobs were drying up in this part of the state and no jobs meant fewer new clothes were being bought.

"Any word from Evelyn?" Arnold asked.

Roy was raising his fork to his mouth but paused. "Not for near six months now." The sauce from the Salisbury steak dripped on the counter, but for the moment Roy was preoccupied with his thoughts.

"That long? It takes a while to get over her, Roy. I know. My Doris left five years ago and still I can't forget. It'll work out."

Roy didn't answer. He chewed his meat.

"I thought those chain store executives from New York were looking into your business," Arnold said.

"They still are. I see the guy tonight."

Arnold pounded his fist on the counter. "That's good, Roy. You should be excited."

Roy looked at Arnold with no expression in his eyes. "The business is broke. It ain't worth nothing. They probably won't give much for it. Besides, it's *my* business."

"Better to get something than lose it all."

Roy waved his fork. "All I need is a break. Just have it go my way one time. Then maybe I wouldn't have to let someone buy me out." He paused and reflected. "Maybe you're right. Maybe tonight is my break."

"Is he coming here?"

"No, I have to catch the transit to the south side. I meet him at Fern's Tavern."

Several heads turned. "Not a good place, Roy. Been a lot of problems at Fern's over the years."

"Can't help it. That's where he said we gotta meet."

Arnold shrugged and went back to his soup and bread.

Roy had finished his meal and was beginning to feel nervous about the meeting. Would they want his business or not? As he was thinking, a piece of custard pie was put in front of him.

"I don't know if I can eat pie tonight," he said.

She turned around, eyes wide with surprise.

"Meester, you always have my pie."

Roy nodded. "To go, I'll take it to go."

The pie was wrapped up and Roy put on his coat. His bill was put under the cash register with the others that he still hadn't paid. At the door he passed the night watchman from the only factory in town that was still in operation.

Roy stepped into the winter again. "Hello meester," he heard her say to the night watchman. "Talk to me."

The doors to the bus opened to the cold night and the very large lady struggled up the steps to pay the fare. One hand searched for the exact change and the other gripped the passenger bar as the bus lurched ahead toward its downtown destination. When her change was dropped out of sight by the driver, the large lady threw an end of her mink stole over her shoulder (who wears mink anymore, especially someone riding the bus?), and she stepped unsteadily through the aisle looking for an empty seat. The driver was grinding the gears between first and second, then second and third, and each face of each passenger nodded forward and backward to the uneven movements of the bus.

She sat beside Roy just past hallway to the back. His seat was near the rear doors, over the wheel-well, and the only seat not fully occupied.

Roy had taken no notice of her boarding and had sat with his legs far apart across the raised wheel-well hub to discourage others from trying to sit beside him. It had worked until now. The lady was able to use her size to force in his right thigh enough to sit down, but Roy's right foot clung to the possession of the wheel-well hub. The heavy lady had to swivel her hips to sit comfortably. Her left foot rested against the base of the wheel-well hub under Roy's right foot, and her right leg fell into the aisle.

Roy stared at his feet. The snow on the sidewalk was now a build-up of slush on his old boots. It dripped steadily, a stream of water, sand and salt. But it didn't drip to the floor. It dripped on the white nylons of the large lady, on her ankle just above the crest of her shoes and rubber shoe coverings.

The bus stopped and started, creeping through the run-down centre of town, and Roy watched his dripping foot turn the lady's white stockings to dirty brown. When an area of her ankle had been completely dripped on, Roy would move his foot an inch or so and start to soil another part of the large lady's large white stocking.

He could tell she was well to do: the mink stole, a new leather purse and matching leather shoes, and a fashionable dress and coat that could not possibly have been bought in this town, not in that size at least. She must be from New York.

As the trip wore on Roy lost track of the time, and where the bus was. His head swayed to the bus's movements, and his eyes became blurry watching the lady's stockings block after block.

He almost missed his stop. A car honked its horn loudly and Roy looked out the window and there was Fern's Tavern.

"Stop the bus!" he cried.

The bus creaked as it tried to stop quickly. Roy was reaching for his gloves on the seat beside him and inadvertently hooked his arm on the large lady's purse. He jumped from the seat for the open door, knocking her off the seat and causing her to reach for the passenger bar to keep from falling.

Roy was down the steps and out the door before he saw the purse around his arm. He turned around.

She was up the steps from him, squatting in the aisle and leaning against the side of the seat. Roy had bumped her so roughly that she had not regained her balance. The heel on one shoe was broken and the front of her dress was up around her waist, showing all of the white stockings around her hefty thighs. She looked at Roy holding her purse, her mouth open, ready to scream.

How much cash would be there? What jewellery or bank notes might the large lady have stored in her purse? This could be the break he needed. He may look sixty but he could run like a man of forty if he had to.

The bus began to move. The doors began to swing shut. Roy still looked at the lady, her rich wardrobe and unflattering pose. He closed his eyes and threw the purse in just before the doors shut completely.

At the doors to Fern's Tavern the bouncer was standing with as tough a scowl and foreboding a pose as he could muster. His legs were wide apart and his arms were crossed over his wide chest. He stood outside the doors, subjected to the cold, but he wore only a black t-shirt and slacks. The t-shirt emphasized his muscles.

Roy didn't look at him as he walked past. But the bouncer spoke to him.

"Don't be a problem," he said.

Inside the air was warm and too smoky, even though there were not many patrons. Roy figured that every one of them must be smoking two cigarettes at a time. He walked past the groups of tables and chairs to the bar and sat on a stool.

The bartender did not belong in this setting. He was young, tall and good looking. He should have been old and beaten, like the furniture.

When the bartender noticed him, he walked over and stared at him, waiting for his order.

"Whiskey," Roy said.

"Here are you are Roy," the bartender said, putting the glass of whiskey down scarcely a blink of an eye after Roy had ordered.

Roy looked up surprised, but the bartender had turned away.

Twenty minutes later the bartender was walking past Roy's place at the bar and Roy opened his mouth to order another whiskey. The bartender was pouring his drink before Roy uttered a sound.

"How did you know my name?"

The bartender waved his hand nonchalantly. "You own a clothing sort, don't you?"

"Right. You've been there?"

"No," the bartender said, suddenly cracking an inappropriate smile. He walked away.

Roy sipped his drink and glanced at his watch repeatedly. The chain store fellow would be a little while yet.

He tried to guess what sort of offer he would make, and what tactics he could use to bump the offer up. Roy knew the store wasn't worth a fortune, but he had read in the New York paper that they were desperate to expand their number of outlets. And Roy was desperate too. It was a perfect match. Roy smiled at the thought of that, and when he thought of the money he would finally have.

"Private joke, Roy?" the bartender asked. He had moved next to Roy's position unnoticed.

Roy's smile disappeared and he looked at the bartender coldly, with suspicion.

"Come on Roy. Bartenders are the next best thing to a friend. You can tell us anything, except we don't analyze or give advice. We just listen."

The smile returned to Roy's face. "You're right. This is kind of a big night for me."

"The turn of a friendly card, Roy?"

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, it's just a line from a song."

Roy reflected for a second. He saluted his drink to the bartender. "You're right again. This is my break, my friendly card turning over. What are the rest of the words from that song?"

"Oh, I can only remember a few," the bartender said, waving his hand.

"What are they?"

"Let me see ... 'They think it will make their lives easier, God knows until now it's been hard. The game never ends when your whole life depends on the turn of a friendly card.'"

"Oh." Roy tapped his fingers on the ice in his drink.

"What are you going to do with the money?"

"How'd you know about the money?" Roy asked, looking up.

"No friendly card ever comes without money."

Roy pondered that statement for a second. "You're wrong. There are some friendly cards that aren't worth a cent."

"When did she leave you?"

"Five and a half months ago," Roy answered, though he looked startled once again at the bartender's ability to read his situation so well.

"And now you're about to get rich, about to get a cheque for a hundred grand or so (Roy looked up, he hadn't thought of a figure even half that size) but she has left you. Sort of bad timing wouldn't you say?" the bartender commented, shaking his head.

"'you picked a fine time to leave me Lucille'." He said.

"Another song."

"That's right."

"Her name is Evelyn," Roy corrected him.

"You should go easy on the whiskey, Roy. You don't want to be drunk at the big moment. You talk as though you may have to think quickly. May I make a suggestion?"

"Sure."

"I make a drink that looks like whiskey, sort of the Shirley Temple version. Looks like it, even tastes a bit like it. But he won't know the difference and you can keep your guts in while you negotiate."

Roy nodded. "Good idea. My nerves are steady enough now," he said as the bartender mixed one below the bar edge. "So, what do you put in it?"

"Sorry, a bartender never reveals the ingredients of his creation."

"What do you call it then?"

"Tonight," the bartender whispered as he set the drink on the bar in front of Roy, "I call it the 'friendly card'."

"If that's what you like ..." Roy shrugged.

"Shall I keep them coming until the other gentleman arrives?"

"Sure, that's fine," Roy said, feeling puzzled again.

"What's his name?"

"Barber, I think, something like that," Roy answered slowly.

"I'll watch for him. You stick with my 'friendly cards' and you'll be in good shape to negotiate."

"How do you know so much ..." Roy started to ask, but the bartender turned and walked away without letting him finish his question.

As time passed Roy finished his drink and turned to meet the eyes of a pretty woman at the other end of the bar. When he turned back a full drink had replaced his empty glass.

"That's Carla," the bartender said.

"She's pretty."

"She looks a lot like Evelyn, doesn't she?"

Roy spun around on the stool and sat up straighter. "How would you know?" he said angrily.

"I am the eye in the sky looking at you: I can read your mind'."

"You're big on quoting songs, aren't you?"

"In certain situations, the appropriate lyrics come to mind, yes. Now, Carla's a nice lady. Swallow your whole drink like it's real whiskey, that will impress her, and go over there and tell her all about the two hundred grand cheque coming through the door later tonight."

Roy was about to correct the amount but spoke another thought first. "Why wouldn't I tell her all about me?"

"Tell her about the money first. You can tell her about yourself later."

Lifting the glass to his lips and leaning his head back, Roy finished the drink. He walked over and sat beside Carla. As he did, the bartender put another drink in front of him.

"You look like quite the drinker," she observed.

"Oh, that," he said, acknowledging the drink in front of him. "No, I'm really not. You'd be surprised to know how tame these drinks are."

There was a moment's silence as Carla looked him up and down.

"You look like a nice guy."

"Thank you," Roy replied, hoping that he hadn't blushed. "You are very pretty."

"Thanks." She half extended a hand. "Carla."

"Roy."

Carla turned to face Roy more directly. She changed the way her legs had been crossed to the opposite side, and in doing so drew her skirt a little higher. Roy hadn't missed her legs from the start.

"Tell me Roy, why did you come over to sit beside me?"

"Do you want the truth, or do you want a line?"

"Oh, I love you, Roy," Carla exclaimed in laughter, touching him gently on the arm. "You're an honest man. That's so sweet, and it's so refreshing."

"I'm not always honest, but I can be tonight."

"Oh, please do," she said in mock seriousness. "And I promise to be truthful too."

"Tell me some truth then," Roy said, nervously finishing off his drink.

"Some real truth?"

"Real truth."

"Okay," Carla said, taking Roy's shaking hands in hers. "You're a nice man and I'm pretty. We could make a good couple for the evening. For a piece of the money you'll get tonight, we could go to my house and party."

"Party?"

"On the bed, under the sheets. We could party tonight. All night."

Roy abruptly took his hands away from hers. "What does that make you?"

"It makes me an honest woman is what it makes me. That's all."

"How did you know about the money?"

Carla smiled. "Why did you come over and sit beside me?"

Roy stood up and began to walk away. As he did a wave of dizziness came over him and he staggered the first few steps. He was about to walk past the bar stool he had first sat on when the bartender spoke.

"Where are you going Roy?"

"The bathroom. I suddenly feel sick."

"No, don't do that."

Roy stopped and looked at him. "Why?"

"Don't break the seal. Once you start, you'll have to go every ten minutes. 'Friendly cards' are bad that way. Try to control yourself longer."

"Okay," Roy said, fumbling to get on his stool. "But are you sure these drinks don't have alcohol in them? I feel so drunk I could throw up."

"Don't do that either. It's just a psychological feeling. They look like real whiskey so your subconscious mind tells you that you must be drunk. Just keep telling yourself that you're not."

"Okay, I'll have another then," Roy said, not certain why he wanted another.

"Here you are," the bartender said, ready with a drink and putting it in front of Roy. "What happened with Evelyn?"

Roy looked at him coldly. "That wasn't Evelyn. Not even close. Her name is Carla and she's a whore."

The bartender shrugged. "She sure seems nice enough. There are worse things than being a whore."

"Oh, there is?" Roy answered sarcastically.

"Being dead for instance," the bartender said with half a smile. After a pause he spoke again, more seriously. "You should relax Roy. It seems to me that this is a very crucial night in your existence. You may not know it, but you're dancing on a high-wire."

Roy just stared at the bartender. He waited for the rest of the line.

The bartender continued. "'You're dancing on a high-wire, you need to be so sure; there used to be a lifeline, there isn't anymore'."

"What do you mean?"

The bartender leaned closer. "You've got a lot at stake tonight. You have to keep your wits about you."

"I'm just sellin' my business. That's not so dangerous."

"You may be up against more than you think."

"What could I be up against?" Roy asked, spilling his drink on his shirt as he wavered on the stool.

The bartender held up his hands. "I'm only the bartender; I just listen."

Roy didn't say anything. The bartender's last statement didn't sound right to him.

The bartender went to serve Carla a drink and Roy watched. She patted the bartender on the hand, and they chatted for several minutes. Roy couldn't hear what they said. He watched expressionless, his head feeling lighter and lighter.

Carla suddenly began to cry and turned so that her back was to Roy. Roy felt pain in his chest and stomach and swallowed quickly as he felt the urge to throw up.

The whole tavern began to look different: the lights were brighter, the conversations indistinguishable, and even the walls were changing, shrinking and expanding like someone breathing into a paper bag.

"So, have you thought about the money?" the bartender asked, having moved unnoticed to his position across the counter, and interrupting Roy's vacant study of the walls.

"I sure have," Roy answered, smiling like a drunk man would smile.

"Wow," the bartender whistled. "Half a million dollars all to yourself. What are you going to do with it all?"

"I'm not sure," Roy's head swayed from side to side. He suddenly jumped and his eyes lit up. "I know! I'll buy Carla's house. I'll buy her house and we'll live there!"

"With Evelyn ..." the bartender added quietly.

Roy's face screwed up into a scolding look. He wagged his finger at the bartender for not paying attention. "That's what I said! I said I'll buy Evelyn's house and I'll live there. And I don't care if she's a whore because she said she loves me and I'm nice and she's pretty."

"Is that what you'll do?"

"I will!" Roy shouted, pounding his fist on the bar, and coughing from not taking a breath in his excitement. Little spots of blood appeared on the bar and Roy wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. It showed small traces of blood.

"You must be catching a cold, Roy," the bartender remarked.

"I really have to go to the bathroom now. Can you watch for Mr. Barber for me?"

"Yes, it's time for you to go," the bartender said as Roy stumbled to the tavern's bathroom.

Roy fell against the side of the bathroom door before going in. He managed to get the door open and went into the first stall. None of the stalls had doors and there was water on the floor. Roy leaned against the cubicle wall as he prepared to relieve himself. When he began, he screamed. His urine was bright red.

As he looked at the blood in the toilet, he felt sick and without warning he began throwing up on the floor. The vomit was red, it was thick with shreds of flesh.

Roy covered his mouth and forced himself to stop. His eyes were wide with fear. For the first time he realized that the pain in his stomach and chest was real. With all his strength he made his way back out of the washroom.

Stumbling into tables on the way, Roy could see the bartender standing at his position over the bar from Roy's stool. The bartender watched Roy but did not move. Others in the bar who saw Roy walk past them stared at the blood-soaked man stepping unevenly toward the bar. One woman shrieked.

A young man in an expensive suit stepped into the bar and wondered what all the commotion was about. The bouncer also came in, assuming there was a fight to break up.

Roy made it to the bar counter and stood unsteadily, looking at the bartender. His eyes did not reveal anger, they did not ask for pity. They showed resignation. They said, 'I give up'.

"You don't look well Roy," the bartender said.

"Got any lyrics for me before I fall?"

"There's one that comes to mind: 'You've got nothing left to lose, who'd want to be standing in your shoes'."

Roy fell, bouncing off two bar stools and rolling onto his back. The bouncer knelt beside him and held Roy's head up slightly and the well-dressed man who had just come in stood over him.

"What happened to that guy?" someone asked. Someone else called for an ambulance.

The bouncer was checking his pockets for identification and pulled out a squashed piece of custard pie.

The well-dressed man turned to the bartender. "Do you know who this man is?"

"His name is Roy. He owns the clothing store."

The well-dressed man bent over Roy, whose breathing was becoming more laboured and his eyes were only half open. "Roy ... Roy. I'm Sam Barker. I'm here to see you tonight. What happened Roy?"

Roy managed to tilt his head toward Barker and he spoke. "Evelyn?" he said with surprise. Then Roy smiled. "Evelyn ..." he said with relief.

His head fell back to the floor and blood ran from his mouth and nostrils. The bouncer took off his t-shirt and put it gently over Roy's face.

Barker rested against the nearest stool. He turned toward the bartender who had not moved, but just looked at Roy's body on the floor.

"You know what they say," the bartender said without expression.

"What?"

"The game never ends when your whole world depends on the turn of a friendly card."

"I didn't know that's what they said," Barker replied.

The bartender took Roy's glass from the bar counter and turned to walk away. As he did, he whispered, "it's what I say."