

Rations

By

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Cast of Characters

Mr. Lowenstein: The Proprietor; 60s-70s
Billy: A Young Customer; 16-18
Jack: A Sailor; 20s
Eddie: Another Sailor; 20s

Scene

Interior of a small gas station; Small Town USA

Time

May, 1944

RATIONS

At rise, we are right in the middle of an exchange with an irate customer. BILLY is at the counter, in MR. LOWENSTEIN's face...

MR. LOWENSTEIN

I can't do that.

BILLY

You're not listening to me!

MR. LOWENSTEIN

No, Billy you're not listening to me.

BILLY

When my old man finds out-

MR. LOWENSTEIN

Don't bring him into this...

BILLY

I'm just saying...

MR. LOWENSTEIN

Don't threaten me.

BILLY

I'm not, I'm only telling you-

MR. LOWENSTEIN

Billy, let's just-

BILLY

Turn on the pump.

MR. LOWENSTEIN

I can't do that, Billy.

BILLY

The hell you can't!

MR. LOWENSTEIN

No, Billy, I can't. You know how much we all get to use every week.

BILLY

Oh, don't give me that crap!

MR. LOWENSTEIN

Billy, if there isn't something else I can help you with-

(CONTINUED)

BILLY

You know damn well what you can help me with!

MR. LOWENSTEIN

I don't make the rules.

BILLY

Then follow them! I've got the coupons right here.

MR. LOWENSTEIN

I can't accept those.

BILLY

You mean you won't accept them.

MR. LOWENSTEIN

No, I mean that the OPA requires-

BILLY

And I've got their damn coupons!

MR. LOWENSTEIN

I know where you got those, Billy. And even if I didn't, that's why they require that I be the one to tear those out of the book so they can-

BILLY

(exploding)

Turn on the goddamn pump!!!

MR. LOWENSTEIN

Billy!

BILLY

I'm not messing around with you anymore, Big Nose!

MR. LOWENSTEIN

Alright, that's enough, I'm going to have to ask you to-

BILLY

I'm not leaving until I get what I came here for!

MR. LOWENSTEIN

Billy, you need to calm down or leave my store... don't make me call the police.

(BILLY pauses for a moment, takes a deep breath, then gets out his wallet)

BILLY

Alright, look. How much is it gonna take?

MR. LOWENSTEIN

That's not how it works, either...

BILLY

Hey, what the hell do you know about how the system works? If you ever worked with my old man-

MR. LOWENSTEIN

(overlapping)

I've already asked you not to bring him into this.

BILLY

(continuous, overlapping)

- you'd know that he's one of the few who are footing most of the bill for this whole sham of a war that-

MR. LOWENSTEIN

Billy!!

BILLY

Look, just hear me out! Thirty seconds!

MR. LOWENSTEIN

(resigned, but amused)

Go on...

BILLY

Good! Now, let me ask you. Do you have any idea how long ago the Reds would have been licked if they weren't still being propped up by a bunch of radicals in Washington?

MR. LOWENSTEIN

No, Billy, I wouldn't have any idea.

BILLY

That's right, you wouldn't! And considering how we're the ones whose dough they're confiscating to pay for it all, you're not exactly in any position to judge.

MR. LOWENSTEIN

I'd say your thirty seconds are up now, Billy.

BILLY

Look! All I'm saying... You don't rise to that level without knowing a thing or two about "how the system works"... now everything has got a price, you people should know that.

MR. LOWENSTEIN

(sighs and turns to go)

I think I'll go and finish that crossword puzzle now...

BILLY

What was it, thirty pieces of silver?

MR. LOWENSTEIN

Don't forget the other little item you came in here for.

(He goes into the office. BILLY picks the bag of what he purchased up off the counter and, in a rage, throws it at the office door and storms out, bumping into a sailor, JACK, on his way out the door)

JACK

Excuse me.

BILLY

Yeah.

JACK

Say, you wouldn't happen to-

BILLY

(exiting)

Screw you!

(JACK looks around the shop for a moment and then another sailor, EDDIE emerges from the bathroom)

JACK

Hey.

EDDIE

Hey. Did you...?

JACK

No, I was out talking to the other folks. Couldn't get anybody to-

(sees that his friend has placed a finger to his lips, shushing him)

What?

EDDIE

The old man...

JACK

Yeah, what about him?

EDDIE

Oh, just when I came in here to use the john, there was this kid trying to... you know.

(CONTINUED)

JACK

What, you mean that jackass that just left?

EDDIE

Look, he... he was just being a real hard-ass about those coupons.

JACK

Oh... well, I think he was trying to-

EDDIE

Well just... I don't think he needs to know too much about what we're doing.

MR. LOWENSTEIN

(coming out of the office)

Hello, sailors!

JACK

Good afternoon, sir.

MR. LOWENSTEIN

Can I help you?

JACK

Yeah.

(takes out two rationing coupons and set them on the counter)

Pump number two...

MR. LOWENSTEIN

Alrighty, then...

JACK

Something wrong?

MR. LOWENSTEIN

You boys do know the law requires that I be the one that tears these out of the book?

JACK

Umm...

EDDIE

Well yeah, see-

MR. LOWENSTEIN

Black market out there for some folks that are selling these to others who want to use more than their allotted amount. OPA is cracking down on that now.

(CONTINUED)

JACK
Yeah, well...

EDDIE
Look, here's the thing-

MR. LOWENSTEIN
Of course, those books are pretty flimsy, and the coupons have been known to just fall out if you're not careful... I'm sure that's what must have happened.

JACK
Uh...

EDDIE
Yeah. Yeah, that's what happened.

MR. LOWENSTEIN
Number two?

EDDIE
Two.

MR. LOWENSTEIN
Alright, you're all set.

JACK
Thank you.
(to Eddie)
Hey, why don't you-

EDDIE
Yeah, I'll go fill up, you get the other stuff.

JACK
Okay... anything special you think she might like?

EDDIE
What?

JACK
For Ida.

EDDIE
Look, forget it.

JACK
Eddie, all we've got to do is-

(Eddie turns back, gives him a hard "shut up" look, and a subtle gesture to the stranger who shouldn't be hearing this)

(CONTINUED)

EDDIE
Don't forget the smokes.

JACK
I won't.

EDDIE
(exiting)
Alright.

(Jack goes around the store, getting the
cigarettes, and selecting some other
items)

MR. LOWENSTEIN
So... how much longer you boys got?

JACK
What's that?

MR. LOWENSTEIN
Gotta be back to your ship by when?

JACK
Oh yeah... yeah, we ship out of Norfolk at the end of the
week.

MR. LOWENSTEIN
Norfolk? What's that, only like a two day drive from here?

JACK
Something like that... you'd have to ask Eddie, he's
calculated everything.

MR. LOWENSTEIN
I'd say that's about right... I don't see why he shouldn't
be able to see that girl of his!

JACK
What? No, we-

MR. LOWENSTEIN
(chuckles)
Oh, these ears hear it all...
(Jack has approached the counter)
That be all for you?

JACK
Yeah.

MR. LOWENSTEIN

Sure your friend doesn't need anything else?

(he has picked up the bag Billy threw
and presents it to him)

Here... no charge, already paid for. Courtesy of the young man that just left.

JACK

What are you...?

(looks in the bag, and then gets
embarrassed)

Hey, this is his wife we're talking about here!

MR. LOWENSTEIN

Alright, just trying to help. After all, ole' what's his name won't be needing them...

JACK

You mean that kid who came storming out of here?

MR. LOWENSTEIN

Oh, yes... she's a good ten miles up the road, and he's not gonna make it under the OPA's limits.

JACK

His girl?

MR. LOWENSTEIN

(shrugs)

One of them, I suppose. Gotta be hard to keep them straight.

JACK

Sounds like him and Eddie are in the same boat.

MR. LOWENSTEIN

Somehow, I find that rather hard to believe.

JACK

No, I just meant...

MR. LOWENSTEIN

Yes, I know... I just find it a little hard to believe that, with your status, they didn't give you enough.

JACK

Well, we had other family to see. It's been one heck of a trip across country.

MR. LOWENSTEIN

Oh... well, that's a darn shame.

(CONTINUED)

JACK
Of course, me I did get a chance to see my wife, Pearl.

MR. LOWENSTEIN
Married?

JACK
Yeah.

MR. LOWENSTEIN
She wasn't so far out of your way, huh?

JACK
Well, actually her too. We kinda flipped for it... and I must say I'm feeling pretty lousy about winning right about now.

MR. LOWENSTEIN
Aw, son look, you shouldn't-

JACK
I mean I should have insisted, but then I kept telling myself, I mean I figured...

MR. LOWENSTEIN
What?

JACK
Nothing, never mind.

MR. LOWENSTEIN
(smiles)
Figured you could always buy a few more of those coupons on the black market?

JACK
Uh, look sir... you see, this is something that-

MR. LOWENSTEIN
Son, I ain't the Office of War Management.

JACK
(pauses, then returns the smile)
Thank you.

(Sound of the horn honking offstage)

EDDIE
(offstage)
Come on, let's go!

JACK

Alright, I'll be there in a minute! How much for the gas and everything?

MR. LOWENSTEIN

Four thirty five

(Jack starts emptying out his pockets on the counter, and Mr. Lowenstein sees a postcard he's taken out)

MR. LOWENSTEIN

Say, is that...?

JACK

What?

MR. LOWENSTEIN

That postcard... I've seen it before.

JACK

It's from France.

MR. LOWENSTEIN

Yes, yes I know. From the time of the Great War.

JACK

Yes.

MR. LOWENSTEIN

My son, when he first arrived in France, one of the first things he did...

(he goes to the bulletin board on the wall behind the counter, and takes down another postcard)

JACK

That's not the same one.

MR. LOWENSTEIN

Yes, yes I know. It's the closest thing we could find when we went there afterwards trying to put the pieces back together.

JACK

You've been to France?

MR. LOWENSTEIN

Oh, yes. Twice. Then it was just to...
(chuckles)

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

MR. LOWENSTEIN (cont'd)

But trust me, it had been a lot prettier twenty years earlier.

JACK

You were looking for a duplicate?

MR. LOWENSTEIN

I don't know how my wife could have lost the first one. The postmark indicated he must have sent it within a couple days of his arrival, but the mail moved pretty slowly across the Atlantic. It arrived here two days after he went missing.

JACK

That must have been so difficult.

MR. LOWENSTEIN

Sometimes I think maybe it was deliberate. I knew, of course, I could never ask her, but somehow I just... couldn't get it out of my head, the image of her just... burning it.

JACK

You don't really think she...?

MR. LOWENSTEIN

No, I'm not saying that it was right, I just... I think at first she didn't want to hold on to it. Not until it was for sure. Didn't want to accept that it really would be the last thing we'd ever...

JACK

I'm so sorry.

MR. LOWENSTEIN

Don't be. Just... one thing I was going to ask you. How much would you sell me that for?

JACK

Oh, no you see-

MR. LOWENSTEIN

Twenty dollars?

JACK

Oh, sir, I just couldn't do that. You see, my wife Pearl gave me this. It's something her father sent to her mother.

MR. LOWENSTEIN

May I...?

JACK
(shows him the postcard)

Oh, sure

MR. LOWENSTEIN
(reading the back of the card)
He got to meet General Pershing in person?

JACK
Somehow I doubt it... if you knew my father in law, you'd understand.

MR. LOWENSTEIN
Oh, I think I do.

JACK
Sure.

MR. LOWENSTEIN
Fifty dollars?

JACK
Look, I know how you must feel about this, but Pearl gave me this. The whole General Pershing lie... it had been a family joke with them for years. But then with me? Well, since he came back unharmed, she just figured... told me to keep it on me at all times. Said it would bring me good luck.

MR. LOWENSTEIN
I know what you mean. It's just...
(pause)
A hundred dollars! I'm sure that could really help you and your friend to find some way to-

JACK
No!
(pause)
I'm sorry, I just can't. I hope you can understand.

MR. LOWENSTEIN
Of course.

(He goes to put his own postcard back on the bulletin board while Jack counts out the exact change. As he finishes, Eddie bursts in)

EDDIE
Are you coming, or did you wanna walk the rest of the way?

JACK

Almost done. Gonna go use the head before we get back on the road.

EDDIE

Well, hurry up, okay?

JACK

Fine.

EDDIE

And you're driving the next shift!

JACK

What?

EDDIE

You're driving... It's been me since the diner.

JACK

Oh, come on, that was only two hours ago!

EDDIE

So?

JACK

So I was gonna sleep a couple more hours...

EDDIE

Yeah, well I'm tired too.

(takes out a coin)

And I call heads!

(flips it)

There, like I said, you're driving.

JACK

(as he goes off into the bathroom)

Asshole.

MR. LOWENSTEIN

You two decide a lot with a coin toss, now don't you?

EDDIE

No, not really. But when you do, it's kinda nice when...

(he shows off both sides of the two-headed coin and smiles)

Wait, what did he tell you about...?

MR. LOWENSTEIN

Relax, he just told me about your wives and how-

(CONTINUED)

EDDIE

Look, whatever he might have said-

MR. LOWENSTEIN

Hey!

(pause)

That's all I know.

EDDIE

Thank you.

MR. LOWENSTEIN

Hey, wait a minute... I thought your friend said you lost that last toss...

EDDIE

What?

MR. LOWENSTEIN

I thought you were the one that wasn't gonna get a chance to see your wife.

EDDIE

Yeah, so...?

MR. LOWENSTEIN

So then how do you lose a coin toss when you've got one of those?

EDDIE

Who says I lost?

(long pause)

Look, I've known Jack all my life. We both know this might very well be the last time the wives get to... you know? I'd been telling him how I felt about Julie growing up not knowing her father. Said if there was one thing me and Ida should use this time for, it was to try to give her a brother or sister.

MR. LOWENSTEIN

I see.

EDDIE

So he knew how important it was to me. But I knew how important it was to him. So I put my foot down... and I called heads!

MR. LOWENSTEIN

(smiles)

That really is one heck of a story.

(CONTINUED)

EDDIE

Just don't tell Jack.

MR. LOWENSTEIN

Your secret's safe with me.

EDDIE

Thank you.

JACK

(emerging from the bathroom)

Ready?

EDDIE

I think you know, I've been ready.

(to Mr. Lowenstein)

You take care of yourself now, you hear?

(to Jack, indicating the stuff on the counter)

You gonna help me with this?

JACK

Yeah, sure.

(gathering up the stuff with Eddie)

So long, sir.

(Mr. Lowenstein just nods, and doesn't say anything until they've turned to walk away, and then:)

MR. LOWENSTEIN

Well, boys I'm gonna go on back into my office now. I'll just leave those coupons there on the counter... I sure hope the wind doesn't blow 'em away.

(They just stand there, frozen, as he goes into the office, then exchange a furtive glance at each other, then a smile)

JACK

I'll meet you outside in a minute.

(Eddie nods, then takes the stuff that Jack had been carrying and goes out ahead of him. Jack walks over to the counter, takes a quick look around, then picks up the coupons. He turns to go, and then stops, he stares off into space, deep in thought. He takes the

(CONTINUED)

postcard out of his pocket and stares at it for a minute, until the horn is heard honking again offstage)

EDDIE

(offstage)

Come on, let's go for crying out loud!

(Jack walks over to the bulletin board and pins the postcard onto it, next to the other one, then starts to go. He walks halfway out, then turns to take one last look, considering, then smiles and turns to finally leave as the lights fade...)

END OF PLAY