

Awesome Eats

In a justifiably forgotten corner of rural Wisconsin stagnated a little town known as Mal Glen. Though the actual social proximity of its inhabitants was never officially investigated, it was safe to assume that any adult resident of Mal Glen was certain to have a solid degree of familiarity with any of the other 471. It was the kind of town where everybody knew everybody, and if they didn't know you, that could be a problem.

Not a major problem, mind you, but more a localized inconvenience in the eyes of the indigenous folk. In all honesty, Mal Glen treated outsiders much like how a store clerk regards that last customer still vacantly browsing several minutes past closing time. Politeness was a reluctant courtesy, but warm smiles came at a premium, and sincerity was simply not for sale. It was a 'conduct your business, get the hell out, and never come back' kind of town. Less in deed and more in thought, of course. They just didn't want any trouble.

Indeed, everybody in Mal Glen knew everybody in Mal Glen in some fashion or another. But nobody in Mal Glen knew the owner of Awesome Eats.

In spite of their peripheral glares and festering suspicions, the people of Mal Glen did have one redeeming quality to say the least. Through highs and lows, good times and bad, they supported each other with a dedication seldom seen anywhere else in the country. Food was grown and purchased locally, as were common goods and services necessary for sustainment. Unknowingly laughing in the face of the overt fiscal woes facing the nation at that time, their external mistrusts had created a simple, effective, and very much self-sustaining internal economy. Mal Glen residents bought Mal Glen food, wore Mal Glen clothes, resided in Mal Glen-built homes, and ate at Mal Glen restaurants.

Except for Awesome Eats. Nobody ate at Awesome Eats.

Nestled on a remote corner near the edge of town was an empty restaurant joined to an equally empty parking lot. It's sharp angles, uniquely perfect symmetry and excellent craftsmanship contrasted heavily with the thrifty yet lovingly-built homes and businesses in the

area, supporting the logical assumption that this was the only building in town that was not constructed by local talent, and was erected on a budget considerably out of financial reach of the town's humble residents. It was simple in its design, yet incredibly sturdy to harsh weather as well as time. The paint never dulled, the planks never chipped, and the darkened, nearly opaque windows were always spotlessly clean.

The only obvious flaw in the restaurant's design was the slightly crooked positioning of a large, bright billboard that nearly paralleled the entire length of its flat roof. Written on it in an almost fluorescent red was two words: 'Awesome Eats'. Its final and most inviting touch was a smaller, well-lit sign hung from one of its dark windows where it faced the road, indicating to all that Awesome Eats was always open for business.

Awesome Eats was a familiar site, and its unique presence yet nonexistent occupancy remained unchanged for as long as even the oldest residents could remember. There was no town record to indicate when it had been built, who built it, or even who had been maintaining it over the years. Nevertheless, there it was.

The people had their theories, of course, and they were mostly negative. Strange gossip and stranger stories aside, most assumed it was an unwelcome chain restaurant from out of town, and its management and employees traveled in from outside their borders. A large corporation could cut losses on an individual restaurant for decades without notice, laughing in the masked faces of untold years of societal quarantine. Most towns would give in eventually, but they underestimated Mal Glen's xenophobic tenacity.

Despite an age-old, silent boycott of the establishment, Awesome Eats refused to yield its claim. No matter how many years of empty disdain, the lights were always on outside, and Awesome Eats was always open for business, unsupported yet unmarred by suspicious locals and bored, legend-tripping teenagers alike. No petty vandalism nor crimes of adolescence dared to touch Awesome Eats or its immaculate frame.

The empty restaurant's presence had fallen into the realms of mystery, and conflicting stories would sometimes be told about its strange existence. Stories about how no employees nor their vehicles were ever seen in its lot. How shining a flashlight through its

impossibly dark windows could only reveal just a sliver of chairs and tables before becoming lost in the unearthly shadows within. Awesome Eats felt as intimidating as it did foreign, and the people of Mal Glen had no genuine interest in dispelling either notion.

It was a sunny afternoon in a very late Spring when Eddie McAllister rolled into town. Nobody could remember when he had arrived as they paid him very little heed in his passing. Later questioning revealed that he had only knowingly been seen in town a single day, and had upset many with his antics. Aside from that, there was no other information to go on regarding his whereabouts. His disappearance was only noticed when his child support payments lapsed even later than was typical. There was only one thing about it that *was* certain: it was right before all the strangeness that had occurred that following summer, and, as reports later revealed, the last known location of his car indicated a connection with that unsolved mess. There will be more on that later.

Eddie was a salesman and a gambler. He would often call himself a salesman first, but anybody that knew Eddie also knew that was a lie. Devoid of any sense of caution, he lived for high risks and high rewards, in business as well as in pleasure. There was nothing he loved more than the thrill of the sale, except for maybe horse races, blackjack, and his 3rd wife (The one he didn't pay alimony to, but only because of her death four years prior). But the sale itself was paramount. He didn't care what he was selling or whom he was selling it to, just so long as there was some sort of asset transaction in the process.

Eddie coddled the sale like it was his only child, though in actuality, he had 4 of those. They were in the custody of 3 different women whose names he could barely recall. He was pretty sure the second was named Charlotte. Or was it Charlene? No, that was his mother's name. Cheryl? As for the other three, he only know that if his handwriting was messy enough on his alimony checks, nobody asked any questions. Not up to that point, at least.

Heading to Mal Glen was just another gamble for him. He'd never heard of the town, but he just knew those secluded little backwaters were always in need of a few bits and pieces they couldn't get nearby. Not only that, but the mind of a redneck was an easy one to

manipulate. He was sure he could get maximum resale because of Noah or Jesus or something about tractors. It didn't matter. He was ready to say whatever he needed to say. The sale was his catharsis for any guilt incurred.

On that day, Eddie was selling tools. More specifically, he was re-selling an assortment of tools he had purchased wholesale at a Minneapolis expo. He was on his way to Chicago to visit his second mistress (Or was it his third?), but he had some time to kill in the interim. Since there were no casinos available to otherwise indulge him, there was no reason not to try to turn a quick buck during his slog through the less interesting parts of his journey. The return on investment was likely to be pretty low, but that was okay. It would probably equate to some gas money and a few lunches, really, but it was a sale nonetheless.

Unfortunately for Eddie, he had made light of Mal Glen's distaste for outsider goods, not to mention their distaste for outsiders themselves. The local market wasn't interested in his wares, and the manager nearly grew hostile after Eddie's third over-rehearsed sales pitch. An attempt at selling door-to-door was nearly as unsuccessful as it was degrading when neighbors began to warn one another of a strange man in town knocking on doors and testing peoples' patience. Wisely, he ceased his desperation before the local sheds were emptied of their torches and pitchforks. He knew he had worn out his welcome.

Eddie began to spiritually regroup as he returned to his car. He'd gambled and lost many times before, and this wasn't a particularly jarring circumstance. As was typical of his narcissism, he sweated none of his overabundant self-confidence. After all, there were plenty of towns between Mal Glen and Chicago that hadn't yet been honored with his tired sales pitches, and there was bound to be a sucker or two somewhere.

As Eddie reached the eastern limits of town, he noticed a small restaurant away from what little bustle Mal Glen had to offer its less-than-frequent guests. It was a nice-looking building, too, and appeared fairly new in design compared to its drab surroundings. On its flat roof was a large, colorful billboard displaying only two words, 'Awesome Eats.' Below that, hanging from a darkened window, was a small, bright-colored sign that indicated it was always open for business.

He instinctively stowed his car in its empty parking lot upon

realizing just how hungry he'd become from his wasted business efforts. He took a fleeting note of the lack of other vehicles around him, but paid it no mind. He was sure there was a good chance the townsfolk who ran the place made their way to and fro by foot, and being on the outskirts probably made it an inconvenient choice for locals looking for a mid-day bite to eat. But for a traveler like himself, it was perfect, and his stomach was already lost in dreams of diner food as greasy as his own conscience.

Almost as greasy. He had just remembered his senior prom.

Eddie crossed the lot to the front door, admiring how perfectly symmetrical the restaurant's features were, all the while hoping to find a menu tacked to a window near the entrance. There was no such luck. Oddly enough, he couldn't really see anything through the dark-tinted windows before him. He gave a small shrug, and with thoughts of a juicy, flame-grilled cheeseburger with extra bacon stuck in his mind, he opened the door and stepped inside.

But what he saw when he opened that inconspicuous wooden door did not meet his restaurant expectations. In fact, it didn't meet any expectations one would have of any kind of building whatsoever. First, he saw only darkness. Then, there was a dull flash of red whipping outward, long and forked like a serpent's tongue. Then he was gone. Eddie McAllister had gambled on that strange restaurant at the edge of a strange town, and his gambling career ended unexpectedly with that one final loss.

Early the next morning, Alan and Alyssa Eddings were driving down a lonely, seldom-used Wisconsin highway with two young daughters in tow. Even further in tow was a large rental trailer. They were heading to a little town named Mal Glen, and, if arrangements were right, they had a new home waiting for them.

Just recently, Alan had been promoted into a remote position in the software company he worked for, and all it required was a time zone relocation he was more than willing to comply with. Anything to get away from New York City, he thought. He had always disliked the bustle, as did his wife. With the combined prejudices of similar rural upbringings, he and Alyssa both agreed that, for the sake of little Amber and Annie, they should return to the sparsity they knew, loved, and grew within.

Alan Blinked hard as he struggled to maintain focus on the road. His eyes hurt and his head pounded. Though he and Alyssa decided previously to sleep that night in a motel, he insisted they keep driving. As a result, he'd been doing just that for the entire night. The sun had only begun to recently rise in his rear-view mirror, and its first rays of greeting felt irritating.

A misplaced front tire through a pothole jostled Alyssa awake, and she smiled at her husband sleepily as she drifted off as fast as she had risen. Had Alan not made the decision himself soldier on, he would have been annoyed. Instead, he managed to force out feelings of frustration with those of wonder regarding where this new leg in his life would take him. He was hurting, but he would get them there. And then it would be better.

It was nearly 6AM when he finally saw what he was looking for. Beyond row upon row of blooming plains and grazing livestock was a small road sign that read, 'Welcome to Mal Glen. Population: 590'. They were finally home.

Alan nudged his wife and shouted for his children to wake up, but it seemed the whole car was already on high alert. Annie was glued to her window and Amber the same. Alyssa kept her eyes forward, smiling all the while. What very few regrets she had of leaving the city dissipated in the fresh country air and spacious surroundings. It was a familiar sight that invoked happy nostalgia. In that moment, she was sure she could do without the the shopping, the dining, and the spectacle. This was what she had always wanted.

Alan's car was awash with positive feelings and curious yearnings. Amber and Annie had never in their lives seen such open spaces, and they both wanted to go out and explore. Alyssa reminded them all how little they knew of their new home, and it would be best to introduce themselves to their new neighbors right away. As for Alan, he just wanted a little sleep before they did too much unpacking. Though their minds were all full-speed on perpendicular vectors, they agreed on a single and important next course of action: breakfast.

Alyssa was familiar with the rustic nature of towns like Mal Glen, and knew the odds of finding a good place open for breakfast that early would be slim. But much to her surprise, something crossed her eyes the same moment hunger had crossed her stomach. There, on an unassuming corner at the edge of town was a pleasant-looking and

well-maintained restaurant boasting an eerily perfect symmetrical construction. A large sign sprawled across its flat roof read 'Awesome Eats', and a second, brighter sign in a darkened front window indicated it was always open for business. Alyssa was so pleased with the sudden find. It almost felt like *it* had found *them*. She gestured for Alan to stop for a visit, and he did so without hesitation.

Alan pulled his miniature convoy into the far side of the dusty dirt lot, not too far from the lone black BMW already present. He gave it a passing glance as he led his family to the restaurant's front door. Such a nice vehicle likely belonged to the owner, and it welcomed mental images of a home-grown, family business, where the proprietor was also the head chef and server. He hoped the grill was be warm by then, because he was in the mood for the least modest stack of pancakes the menu could accommodate.

The Eddings family opened the door eagerly, smiles all around. However, the expressions on their faces all changed unanimously. After an ominous and foul-smelling breeze, their eager optimism changed to outright confusion, and then rapidly into terror the moment before they were never seen again.

Bill Dwyer scratched his side as he pressed his back hard into his beaded seat cover. It was aching again, which happened a little too often for his liking. Probably a sign of rain, he thought. Definitely a sign that he should see a damn doctor.

He wiped two hours of sweat from his bald head, promising himself for the last time that he would finally get the air conditioning in his truck fixed. She was his lifeblood, after all, and he knew he should treat her a little bit better. Maybe right after he got his back fixed. Or at least had it looked at.

108 miles had passed on Bill's GPS as he crossed the border into Mal Glen. He'd been dispatched to that little backwater to retrieve an abandoned trailer. That was his assumption, at least, as it hadn't moved in four days, nor had the renting company been able to reach the man who rented it. These things happened all the time, and modern technology made his job exponentially easier than it had been when he started his retrieval service 22 years prior. Tracking was hardly a problem anymore, except for maybe the long distances. And his back.

Tracking was indeed easier these days, but it was the acquisition

was always the trickiest part. It's why he carried a concealed handgun on every call, though he was grateful to have never needed it. He sometimes likened his work to a police officer approaching a vehicle they just pulled over, cautious of the multitudes of unpleasant situations it could lead to. There was always a bit of an adrenaline spike, and he'd be lying if he said he didn't enjoy it at least a little bit.

Sure, he'd seen a strange thing or two during his decades of work, but never a situation that he would honestly call dangerous. He sometimes reached his target vehicle to find it vandalized. Or stripped of tires, electronics, and other easy parts to remove. Or that it had become a home to wild animals or even desperate folks down on their luck.

Of course, the latter was usually the most complicated, but it was never anything he couldn't solve with his 6'7" frame and cartoonishly large chest and arms. In his field of business, looks mattered. Though he wasn't a violent man by any reasonable stretch of the imagination, appearing to have that capacity was beneficial for more than just dealing with unwanted salespeople.

Bill found his target in an unpaved parking lot on the edge of Mal Glen, and it's circumstance was one he'd rarely seen. The trailer was there and in perfect condition. Even rarer of a sight and much to his surprise, it was still attached to the vehicle of the man who initially rented it. A light dusting of seasonal pollen complimented the days it sat unmoving, but it didn't appear to be abandoned at all.

He exited his truck to take a quick look. The car was empty, and it seemed pretty clear that neither had moved for days. It was strange to see the leading vehicle abandoned with the trailer, but it wasn't entirely unbelievable. He'd seen it before, but it had certainly been a while.

Upon finding the trailer itself still padlocked shut, his curiosity began to grow. After breaking said lock with a pair of bolt cutters he retrieved from his truck, his curiosity bridged into concern. The trailer was filled to the brim with furniture, boxes, and a wide assortment of tools and equipment. There was no doubt it was the untouched possessions of an entire family. Not only was the car abandoned with the trailer, but everything being carried had been left as well. In Bill's 22 years of retrieving lost, stolen, and derelict vehicles, this actually *was* a first.

He carefully drew the gate back down and latched it shut. He

scratched his head, unsure of how to proceed. Perhaps it wasn't abandoned after all? It had definitely been held for longer than was paid for, and the renter himself could not be reached despite constant cellular harassment. In light of the bizarre evidence before him, he couldn't bring himself to take back the trailer as it was. The guilt would probably crush him should it all be a giant misunderstanding, or even if it wasn't.

As he returned to his truck, toying with the idea of calling the police, the nearby restaurant caught his eye, and along with it the small, bright sign in the window that indicated it was always open for business. It looked like a nice little mom-and-pop diner, too, and it stood welcoming in the hot summer air.

There was no doubt the employees had noticed this trailer in their lot. As funny as it sounded, perhaps the renter of this lost vehicle was inside at the moment to grab some food. Outside a nice little diner was just as good a place as any to make a long-term pit stop. Perhaps he could just talk with Mr. Eddings and see what was going on before he made any rash decisions about carting away an entire family's livelihood? Bill was a nice man at heart despite his hard candy shell, and he chose to go with his conscience. Also, he was starting to get a bit hungry.

Bill approached the entrance to Awesome Eats and threw the door open with unknowingly undue force, causing it to rattle on its hinges. He took a step inside, assuming his eyes would adjust to the darkness quickly as he fled the bright afternoon sky. He closed his eyes and stretched, yawning massively as his back cracked in relief. Then, he opened his eyes just in time to catch a glimpse of another first in his 22 years of life on the road.

2AM. Wednesday night. Thursday morning, actually. A little too much Thursday morning for most people.

Officer Greer was working the graveyard shift again, not that he really minded. He was a night owl, and always had been. While his fellow officers filled their veins with caffeine to maintain alertness at such an hour, Greer's nocturnal energy was always natural. After all, everything was more interesting at night, and there was nobody at home waiting for his safe return anyway. A win-win, he felt.

He was responding to a call that began from several degrees of

precinct separation. It seemed that a trucker by the name of Bill Dwyer had gone missing during a routine vehicle retrieval and all efforts to contact him had failed. It was first reported by his wife, and then by the company who contracted him an hour later. There wasn't any suspicion of foul play at the time, just a handful of worried friends, family, and coworkers who were hoping he hadn't gotten into any trouble. They were very much aware of his line of business.

To make his night even more interesting, Greer was also advised to keep a lookout for a black BMW with an Illinois license plate that may have been traveling through the area. It belonged to a man named Eddie McAllister, and he had an outstanding warrant for failure to pay child support.

Officer Greer was genuinely excited. It actually had the potential to be an interesting night. Suspicious activity was a rare commodity in Mal Glen, and he was happy to be working his most exciting shift in quite some time.

As he made his way along the outskirts of town, an unexpected reflection caught his eye. He stopped his squad car a small distance from Awesome Eats, turned on his spotlight, and scanned its parking lot with mounting interest. There appeared to be customers.

Being one of Mal Glen's own, he was aware of the little restaurant on the edge of town with its odd symmetry and bright-colored sign indicating it was always open for business. Just like the rest, however, he'd never been inside, nor had he known anyone else who had. But Greer wasn't as suspicious of outsiders as his neighbors. Besides, during his time in the Academy, he had made plenty of friends out of strangers. There was really nothing to fear.

He slowly pulled his car into the lot, carefully inspecting each vehicle as he passed by. There was a red sedan with a trailer in tow: most likely an outsider passing through given the New York license plate. Parked alongside the sedan was a large tow-truck, and its description matched that of the truck belonging to the missing driver. Had this not absorbed Greer's attention, he would have also been interested to know that the black BMW in the lot belonged to yet another person he was looking for.

He exited his vehicle and drew a large flashlight from his belt. He'd never been more interested in that little restaurant until that very day. Approaching with a deliberate and confident pace, he wondered

what he would find within. It seemed that Mr. Dwyer had stopped here at some point, and was perhaps staying in town a bit longer than expected. With no immediate suspicion of foul play, he figured there was no reason to call for backup, but he was ready just in case.

Greer reached the front door and gave it a loud, firm rap. There was no response, and nothing could be heard beyond the echo of his own knocking. He approached the nearest window to have a quick look, but it didn't seem like his flashlight could penetrate the remarkably dark tint of the glass windows. It looked like at least one of the legends around this place was true, and it did make him feel a bit uneasy.

He opted to give the door one more good knocking before entering of his own accord. He was on police business and therefore not a customer, so it only seemed polite. Maybe it was a side-effect of his upbringing in Mal Glen, and despite his more socially-liberal leanings compared to his kin, the thought of entering this mysterious restaurant still made him feel the slightest bit uneasy. But again, the only response to his knock was silence and night echoes. There was only one thing left to do.

Officer Greer carefully reached for the front door handle, and listened keenly as it clicked out of place. Still wondering about the eerie silence, he opened it with caution, taking note that the interior of Awesome Eats was just as dark as its windows implied. Flashlight or no, he couldn't see anything.

Then, in an instant, he *did* see something. He scrambled for his gun, but it was already too late.

It was one day later when attitudes began to change about Awesome Eats. Though the paranoid townsfolk still stayed back as the lot began to fill, they were watching curiously from a distance. Now, from more than a stone's throw away, one could see a modest number of customers at the eerie restaurant, and though many were likely strangers to the town, the local squad car was unmistakable.

Communal fear began to collapse and curiosity was built upon the edifice of its antiquity. There was a local there, and a man of the law no less! Perhaps they had the wrong idea all along? Almost right away, one family after another broke the taboo. That old dusty lot, empty for decades, began to fill up with cars and trucks. And as the

crowd grew, so did public interest.

But it wasn't long before novel fascination diverted course toward something more primal. In no short order, residents realized there was something funny going, and missing persons cases began to sprout faster than they could be investigated. It went without saying that there was one obvious link to all of them, and old legends became new again. As the remains of Mal Glen's tiny police force did their best to resolve the situation, they too began to disappear one by one.

In the strangest evening of that entire summer, there was an unpleasant gathering at the town hall. With torches lit and arms raised, they addressed the mayor. Somehow, Awesome Eats was the source of these disappearances, and it had to be stopped. As wild accusations and wilder theories spewed from the crowd, the mayor gave in to their frenzy. He led them himself as they rioted their way to that evil restaurant at the edge of town, with its fearful symmetry, its terrifying craftsmanship, and its brightly-colored sign as welcoming as the sweet nectar of a pitcher plant.

But when they got there, it was gone. It wasn't demolished, burnt down, or otherwise destroyed. It was just gone.

Nobody could believe their eyes. Aside from an aging lot filled with empty vehicles, there was nothing. No restaurant. No cellar. No foundation. Not even an imprint in the blasphemously-unmarred earth. There would never be another time in Mal Glen history when so many prayers and curses were spoken in unison.

In total, 27 went missing that summer, residents and outsiders alike. None were ever found. The people took action and sparked a nation-wide investigation, but the mystery was left unsolved. The tales the locals spun were simply unbelievable to investigators. After years of no leads beyond strange hearsay, it was dismissed as mass hysteria, and the disappearances an undocumented natural disaster. Interest faded. Anger drifted aimlessly into hopelessness.

The people of Mal Glen mourned, but they eventually moved on. Men and women went back to work, children went back to school, and the perceived mockery by federal authorities only amplified their mistrust of outsiders. Nobody could help them, so they continued to help themselves, justifying their shallow dislike of out-of-towners through their historic crisis. Now their only visitors were 'explorers' and 'paranormal investigators', and the invasive recklessness of these

unsanctioned thrill-seekers was salt in a gaping wound.

In time, the story Awesome Eats faded into legend. Though there were still a few elders who could remember that strangest of summer evenings, it became nothing more than a folk tale to scare the little ones. But the times were changing, and children are often braver than their elders, and their children even braver than them. Nobody thought of Awesome Eats anymore, and less could even remember that mysterious summer of disappearances.

Gary Archer was one of those even braver children of especially brave kin. Highly intelligent, too. In fact, he was about to do something that no Mal Glen resident had done in decades: he was on his way to college.

It wasn't just any college, either. It was Rivers Cross University in Somerton, Connecticut, and a certifiable bastion of science and history. His interest and talent in agricultural science sparked their enthusiasm for his residence, and he was offered a full scholarship. A rigorous and fascinating curriculum awaited him, but he had to get there first.

It had to have been several hours since Gary left Mal Glen behind, and he had passed more rest stops than he probably should have. His eyes were sinking and his consciousness was drifting dangerously toward the median. It was time to take a break.

A small building with a large, slightly crooked billboard caught his eye.

Awesome Eats? Why did that name sound familiar? He tried to think, but his mind drew a blank. He shot awake again with another jerk of the wheel.

That's when it hit him. Like a cinder block to the face.

He had just passed an Awesome Eats about 30 miles down the road! And another perhaps 50 miles before that! It had to have been some kind of restaurant chain. The first two had evaded his scrutiny with little consequence, but he was much hungrier this time, and he needed a break.

As he pulled over to the curb alongside the restaurant with its sturdy construction and strange symmetry, something caught his eye as he exited his car. There, in the front window, was a brightly-colored, welcoming sign that indicated it was always open for business. With

nothing more than an itch in the back of his mind and a rumbling gut,
he stepped in for some lunch.