

THE FALL - "THE STEAK PLACE" - An attempted explanation

If you look at it this way, this song actually tells a pretty funny, and subtle, story. I used to think of this song just as a description of a place, but once I started thinking of it as a narrative it becomes both funny and potentially even pretty creepy and Lovecraftian. Okay first:

1) Head down / Head down / Head, head, head down.

This sounds like a commercial, perhaps a jingle on local radio or a local public access TV station: "Head down! Head-head-head down, to the Steak Place!" It's like in Halloween 3, the "6 more days to Halloween" creepy repetitive commercial jingle chant.

2) Fool of the Commonwealth drove down there, / Down turnpike; / Desperate for food desperate for respite. The steak place. / The steak place.

The "Commonwealth" is New England, specifically Massachusetts, which is apparently officially a "commonwealth," according to Wikipedia. Our main character is a "fool." This is important to the whole narrative. Maybe he heard the jingle on the radio or TV and decided to go. In any case, a fool from New England drives down to New York. Note the touching detail of the "turnpike," which is Mark Smith's way of making clear this story takes place in America. There are no turnpikes in England; compare the specificity to the usual specific Fall references to "M1" or "M5" or "roundabouts" or "the North" which are all road signs on UK roads. This song is different from those. This is an American story, a New England story, we're in Lovecraft territory.

3) Cheap carpet lines the way / Aluminium tack door handles Candelabra lion's head / Via (?) butchers display too. / The steak place. / The steak place.

When the fool gets there, the place seems to be a bit unexpectedly creepy. Cheap and shoddy decor. With a cultish and gruesome element as well, with this "candelabra lion's head" thing, and the "butcher's display." The jingle element is back, a singing advertisement for "the Steak Place" but there's a creepy disconnect between the appealing restaurant promised by the jingle and the actual creepy, shoddy, cultish environment that the fool-protagonist finds when he arrives.

4) Via a carcass row/ Things are brought forward and eaten,

Again, rather creepy and gruesome. I picture plates of somewhat mysterious food, "things," being brought forth from the back, from the kitchen, "via a carcass row," perhaps a corridor lined with skinned meat animal (?) corpses hanging on hooks, something like that.

5) I see the corners filled with hitmen, / To (two?) young lawyers they are whispering, in / The steak place. / The steak place.

The fool is now noticing the other people who are in this place, perhaps as his eyes adjust to the dim candelabra-lit interior. Are they really "hitmen" and "young lawyers"? Maybe, or maybe that's just the fool's misinterpretation. In any case there are some kind of frightening thuggish characters ("hitmen"), along with clean-cut young professional characters, clean-cut dudes who are in some kind of cahoots with the thuggish dudes. Whether they are brawny or brainy, all seem sinister, engaged in secretive and sub-legal activities.

6) I wanna stay here, / I don't wanna go anywhere, / I could remain here. Head down / Head down / Head down / Head, head, head down / The steak place. / The steak place.

Our fool observes all of this creepiness and threat but keeps his foolish smile, like, "gee whiz, ain't this place just so charming?!" A classic horror situation, somebody not realizing how dangerously out of their depth they are. Or even a comedy situation, like, picture Chevy Chase showing up at what was advertised to be a fancy Italian villa, and upon discovering that it's actually a crumbling dump he puts on a brave smile and turns to his family like "it's so... rustic! I love it!" while the roof collapses in a cloud of dust. Etc. The jingle returns. Despite the evidence to the contrary, the fool is beguiled and charmed by his own stupid-tourist perception, based on the cozy imagined place the ad originally made him think he would find. With a stupid smile still on his face, he wants to stay here. He loves it so much he even "could remain here."

7) I'd stop the automation, / I'd sit behind dusty lace,

The fool is still romanticizing what he perceives as rustic simplicity in this obviously creepy place. This place is not part of the normal modern world, there's no modern "automation" here. It's a bit out of time. But still, why is the lace dusty? Even if a place has cheap carpeting and cheap door handles, and is old fashioned, they could still do some cleaning and dusting, right? Just an extra little creepy detail.

8) I have a word with hitmen, / I give off a beatific face. / The steak place. / The steak place.

Here's where the fool makes his fatal error - he actually tries to chat with the locals! He walks right up to them, trying to look cool, trying to be part of the local gang, putting on his best "beatific face," like, "Hey my main dudes, what's up! I'm just another cool dude like you, I'm down with you, right?" This reminds me of any number of horror movie scenes, where somebody might walk up to an obvious threat but tries to come on chummy, right before getting decapitated or something. Picture somebody chatting calmly to a giant werewolf "N...N... Nice doggy! I think I have a doggy treat in my pocket, w, w, would you like that? Maybe you could, uh, bring me my sli... sli... slippers or something?" Dramatic pause... Then all hell breaks loose!

9) From New York City run screaming, / Into New England states, Combined a man not should have to do this, / A man should not use his fist in / The steak place. / The steak place.

We're not told what happens, but something has gone terribly awry! The fool realizes this is a place not to be visited but rather to "run screaming" from, run back home where it's safe, I guess the "New England states combined" is just an oddly-worded way to say "run back up to ANYwhere away from here!" But he's in a fight, a scuffle, some kind of physical brawl, the nature of which we're not told, and he realizes the disconnect between the charming Steak Place promised by the jingle and the situation he's actually in. We don't know exactly what happened, or why, or exactly how it ends. Which is all sort of funny, as if the movie has just cut from the protagonist foolishly approaching the "hitmen" to a shot from outside the restaurant where we just see the building shaking and hear shattering glass, and chairs come flying out the windows, a sort of classic cartoonish jump-cut.

10) I wanna stay here, / I don't wanna go anywhere. / I shall remain here.

The fool still has his foolish smile on, perhaps dazed with tweeting birds spinning around his head. His tourist visit has become a journey of no return: no longer "could" he remain here, the wrap-up is that indeed he "shall" remain here. Forever. Probably on a plate, or as a skinned carcass in the "carcass row" outside the kitchen. The end (until the "head down! head-head-head down! To the Steak Place!" jingle ensnares another fool). I can imagine Mark on tour in the USA, hearing a cheery jingle on the radio for a steak place, and just slapping out this off-the-top-of-his-head little tale, probably recorded in one take and I guess never played live? Combines some classic Fall elements, the foolish tourism (Australians In Europe, I'm Going to Spain, etc etc etc), the macabre/magikal found in a mundane/working-class environment (City Hobgoblins, Jawbone & the Air Rifle, etc etc), mixed here with the New England/gothic/HP Lovecraft elements, all combined with a sort of inane repetitive radio-jingle, jazz-cafe snapping fingers, and "rustic" acoustic guitar, all of which might be part of Mark's idea of "American" culture.