

Warm Body

My stop. I shuffle out of the train with a group of passengers. No one looks at each other. It's all silence and the sound of scraping feet. The night air has that Novocain sting so I flip the collar of my jacket and make my way to the street and into a vacant phone booth. The space inside the booth illuminates when the door clicks and I look out from this glass display onto the crowded sidewalk, longing for its anonymity. I pull a small pad from my pocket and dial the last number in it. As the phone rings I notice a poster for a missing teenage girl.

“Hello?”

“Hey Phil, it's Stan,” I say.

“Oh hey, been a while, how are you?”

“Fine.”

“Still with Tiffany?”

Which one was Tiffany? “No.”

“Eh, she was a dumb cooze anyway,” he says. Now I remember Tiffany. I hear a dull female voice from the other line. *Who is it?* “Stan,” says Phil, his voice further from the receiver, “Where's my notepad? You put it somewhere?” *I didn't touch it. You'd lose your own dick if it wasn't attached.*

“How is Nancy?” I ask.

“Fine,” he says, distracted. I hear slamming drawers and shuffling papers. “Why the fuck is this in here?” he yells at Nancy, “I sure as hell didn't put it here!”

“When did you move? Larry gave me the new number,” I say.

“Last month. Needed a bigger place with the new baby and all. Nancy’s been meaning to throw some house warming bullshit, but we hardly have time to sleep. I’m starting to think this kid is just fucking with us. 3AM and he’ll let out this evil howl and when we go to his crib, nothing, just looks up at us with that cute fucking face.”

“Regular ball breaker!” I chuckle.

“You can say that again,” he says laughing.

“Anyway, Larry said you got something for me.”

“Yea, I got an address. Got something to write with?” he asks.

“Yea go ahead,” I say, pulling out a pen.

“56 Howard, Apartment 15. I think it’s around the corner from that dive bar we used to go to. What was it called? *Luke’s*, that’s it.”

“Alright, thanks. Give Nancy and the baby a kiss from me.”

“Will do.” Then click. I gaze at the picture on the missing person poster, her eyes lively and bright despite being grainy and colorless on the paper.

I got a girl pregnant once. We were on the rocks, but I thought fatherhood was something I could do. Turned out I was selfish. And she was just a junky.

I hail a cab. Inside, it smells like cigarettes and I tell him 56 Howard. For a moment we make eye contact through the rearview mirror. He returns his gaze to the road and I stare from

the dirty window at the strange tapestry of the night. An entire city in motion. Below the streets are cast iron furnaces belching fire, powering giant slow moving cogs, purring gears and pounding pistons. I do not recognize this city in the daytime. Everything is hidden in the light. At night I can rely on her for the secrets. I know the folds and dark crevices that go unnoticed in the daylight, but beneath the moon grow tentacles and grasp at the ankles of clicking footfalls. No one is ever surprised about what happens in the night.

The cab pulls over at 56 Howard. I pay the driver and step onto the sidewalk. Across the street is a liquor store. I buy a bottle of Jameson and a scratch off. On the corner I scrape at the paper and watch the door of the aging apartment building. A young lady walks up the steps and turns the key. As she's stepping in I mount the stoop and hold the door. She minds her own and continues up the stairs. Inside the building is deep warmth. I unbutton my coat and make my way up the stairs. In the hallway I can smell burnt garlic and hear faint curses as I approach Apartment 15 and knock on the door. I hear hard footsteps and see a shadow at the gap beneath the door. I present the bottle to the peephole and smile.

Gerry seems happy to see me. I'm not sure he is. I am happy to see him despite the circumstances and we give each other a hug. Gerry is burly fellow with a smooth face and a receding hairline. He has a square jaw and a skull you can hammer nails with. He's a soft spoken guy, but when he does say something, his words can weigh on you for days.

"You always were a shitty cook," I say.

"I hoped I would never see you again," he says as I walk in.

"I hoped the same thing. Why didn't you just leave town?"

“What can I say, I love its stink,” he says. As I admire his apartment, I feel something hard against my back.

“Give me your piece Stan.”

I reach into my jacket and pull out my snub nose from the holster tucked in my pants. He snatches it from my hand extended to the side. He pushes the muzzle deeper into my back. Getting the hint I lift the back of my jacket and he removes a glock tucked in the back of my pants. The pressure of the muzzle lets off. Taking a seat on the couch I place the bottle on the table and he goes to the kitchen to retrieve some glasses. He takes a seat on an arm chair across from me. He crosses his legs and perches his weapon across his lap elegantly. It’s a 12 gauge, sawed off, a modern day blunderbuss, with a nice, wide spray. From this close, I’d be cut in half. He places the two glasses in front of me and I pour liberally into both.

“Salud,” he says raising his glass ceremoniously. I do the same and let it all run down my throat. Slamming our glasses down, we both smack our lips violently and let out a deep sigh. His hands look softer than they used to be.

“I saw your mother at church the other day,” I tell him, pouring more into our glasses.

“Yea, I know, she told me over the phone.”

“She doing alright these days?” I ask, “She’s always sayin she’s fine, but I can tell it’s bullshit.”

“Eh, it’s mostly her arthritis. I buy her pain meds and she says she doesn’t want to be taking no drugs. Stubborn broad. She needs to be crying before she takes the stuff. I used to crush ‘em up and slip ‘em in her drinks.”

“Ha! Remember when we got caught smoking grass and she got real fired up? Managed to punch the both of us with one swing!”

“I never felt a worse punch than that.”

“I got home that night, and had to tell my parents Timmy Donovan punched my lights out. I got whacked upside the head for being a pussy and my dad got drunk and challenged old man Donovan to a fight.”

“Who won that one?”

“Think my old man won that one. Then Donovan went back home and beat the shit out of Timmy for being a mean little cunt to his friends!”

“Ha! Poor bastard,” says Gerry downing the rest of his drink. I lift up the bottle to signal to let me pour him more. He extends his right arm for the pour. Swiftly I clutch his wrist, drop the bottle and bring the blade from my boot to his forearm. The skin just gives beneath the blade. He swings the gun from his lap to shoot but I intercept it, grabbing it by the barrel, tear it from his grasp and break his nose with the stock. He falls back into his chair and can’t get back up. Sitting back down I look on apologetically as blood cascades from his arm and his eyes slowly dim. He gives me a look. I can’t tell if it means “I’m glad it was you” or “What the fuck?”

I carry the blade and my drinking glass to the sink. Soap and water do the trick on them, but the red seems to get stuck in the deep creases of my calloused skin. Good enough. I let the glass dry on the rack and slip the blade back in my boot. With a handkerchief I wipe down the bottle and shotgun. I collect my guns and gripping the doorknob with the handkerchief, look

back. Gerry looks nice leaning casually in his faded green chair. I need to remember to send his mother flowers.

The night air is refreshing. I get into a phone booth and dial a number from memory.

“Hello?”

“Hey Larry, it’s Stan.”

“How’d it go?”

“It’s done.”

“Good,” he says. There is an obvious relief in his voice, “I’m glad you’re free. I got another job.”

“Alright, lay it on me.”

“High profile. The bulk of the cleanup is done. Been a long shift though, so I need you to finish the job.”

“Sure. Where?”

“Meet Terrence at Junior’s Diner on Avenue K.”

“Alright.” Then click.

Terrence seems somber as he sips his coffee. I order one, black with sugar. He’s handsome like Gerry and I used to be, with a doughy boyish face. He reaches in his pocket and places car keys on the table beside me. There is a smear of blood on his sleeve. His hands are still soft, but I can see the knuckles of his index and middle fingers beginning to show wear.

“I think Gerry would have liked a shootout,” says Terrence out of the blue.

“Yea. He had that beautiful blunderbuss under his arm.”

“Damn shame,” says Lawrence, “Never thought I’d see the day. Can you blame him though?”

“You choose what you are and live with it,” I tell him.

“There has to be a way to go back.”

“Listen kid, you’re young, so maybe you have a chance,” I tell him, drawing his eyes to mine, “But nothing Gerry could have ever done would’ve redeemed him.”

Getting up, Terrence drops his money on the table. He is out the door like an apparition. The waitress brings me my coffee and I drink it slowly.

Outside in the parking lot I find the car, a dented green Malibu. The key fits so I turn it and the engine roars. Full tank. I open the center console and find a plump envelope laying there. It has a smooth ride. I feel stationary as the world to the right and left of me shoots past.

Guiding Light Funeral Home at this time of night looks like a haunted plantation. I follow the path as it curves into the rear of the home and lights ignite and a garage clambers open. A stout man comes to my window and says, “You must be Stan.”

“You must be Jeremiah,” I say. He nods and motions me into the garage. “Where are these services you render?” I ask stepping out of the car.

“Next room.”

I nod and open the trunk. “I’m gonna need help here Jeremiah,” I say looking down at an enormous mass rolled in a blue tarp, a bit sleek with blood.

“Thought I saw the back sag as you drove in. I’ll grab the legs.”

We each reach in grabbing an end and heave. We manage to get it out but Jeremiah slips and the mass hits the ground. The tarp unfurls and we look down at a bloodied woman. She’s wearing a nightgown whose strap has fallen from the shoulders and her left tit hangs exposed, nearly severed from her stabbing. I hear Jeremiah vomit.

“Some fucking help you are,” I say, covering her up with the loose tarp.

“Sorry,” he gasps, wiping his mouth, “never gotten one so fresh.”

She is fresh. I can smell the life on her still. Underneath the blood and excrement is the scent of lavender bubble bath. It reminds me of my mother. “Get your shit together and grab her fucking legs,” I bark. Shuffling into the next room, we carefully place her onto a rolling platform. The hum of the furnaces is intense.

“You have my money?”

“Upon services rendered,” I tell him. I head back into the garage stepping over the fluids.

Tucked in the side of the trunk is a black canvas bag, with a knife and bloody clothes in it. I see something jammed in the rear of the trunk I didn’t notice earlier. I tug at it and a slender arm falls from the wrapping. My insides churn. My head throbs and my ears buzz. For a moment, I can only grasp its frail wrist. I want to break it and hear a scream, but there is no mild throbbing from the coursing blood so all I can do is pull it toward me and hoist the small lump from the reeking trunk.

“What the fuck is that?” asks Jeremiah as I cross into the crematorium.

“Go mop up your mess.”

“Is that a kid Stan?”

I put the lump down gently and unwrap it. Why'd I do that? Little girl, about eight, but what do I know? She is untouched with dried blood in her ears. She was smothered in her sleep, wrapped in her favorite comforter. Her face is warm.

Holding her is like when I held my daughter still damp from the womb. I could not comprehend how she was possible. I had hesitated cutting the umbilical cord, standing there, feeling her mother's eyes which so longed for the relief this severance would mean on her body. I read somewhere that in a water birth, so long as the baby was still connected, it could just float there in the water like nothing changed. But she let out a cry so I knew her lungs were flapping and she was now one of us, so I cut her away.

“What do we do?” asks Jeremiah stupidly.

“We finish the job.”

In the garage I cut out the bloody lining of the trunk and he hoses down the concrete and we move about each other in silence. I stuff the lining into the canvas bag and place it on the fat lady's chest. I can feel the heat of the belching fire as we push her body into the furnace. We pull out the moving platform and the mechanical hatch slowly shuts behind the engulfed body. The girl gets her own furnace. The fire appears to embrace her. We wait. Their bodies in the furnace let off a soft squeal.

We play war on an embalming table, throwing down and picking up cards in silence.

“You know what my job is?” Jeremiah asks.

“Yea.”

“My job is to make the dead look less dead. I used to say that it was my job to make the dead look like the living.”

“Your parents must have been proud.”

“I was good too, but it would fuck with people.”

“How?”

“Well, I thought they wanted to see them as they were, but people don’t want that. They want to know for sure the person is dead.”

“No shit,” I say gravely.

“So I start laying down that make-up like they’re the fucking prom queen and the family complains, but I can tell, I can tell that they’re relieved.”

He throws his cards down and steps away from the table, pacing. He looks at me with glazed eyes. “When I saw that broad out there, all bloody and fat, all I could think about was how I could wash her up, sew that tit up good as new and make her ‘coffin ready.’ Shit, I could even trim a few inches off her waste. It was the smell that got to me. I fixed worse messes than that though.”

“You obviously have something on your mind.”

“That fucking kid Stan! I have never seen anything like that before.”

“You never get a dead kid in here?”

“Oh sure, but meat on a tray, cold as ice!”

“What’s your point?”

“Oh fuck you Stan! Even you were shook up. An old pro!” he spits. “You know exactly what I’m talking about. You felt her. I could see it from where I was standing.”

“Her warmth?”

“Yea her warmth, her fucking life!”

“Just say it.”

“I’ve never seen anything look so dead and alive at the same time,” he lets out like a sigh.

We sit together in a desperate silence. The squealing from the furnaces seems to have subsided. I want to lay myself onto a table and understand the other side. I want Jeremiah to push me into one of those meat lockers and let me steep. Everything looks sterile but feels grimy under my fingers. Or maybe it’s me who’s grimy. I still can’t seem to get that red out from the creases in my hand. I feel like it’s always been there, for as long as I can remember at least. I’ve been carrying around all this blood and it never bothered me.

Jeremiah places two taped-up shoe boxes before me and says, “Services rendered.” One is heavier than the other and their contents sift around softly. I go to the car and retrieve the envelope. I pull out half the money and hand it to him. He hesitates.

“This is how it works,” I tell him, thrusting the money into his hands. “Goodbye,” I say, extending my hand.

“Bye,” he says placing his hand in mine and squeezing.

I leave the radio off as I drive through the deep, dark stillness of the hour. I can't stop glancing at the shoeboxes, sitting on the passenger seat. I park the car in a tow away zone and grab one of the boxes. I gently unwrap the tape and lift the top, slipping my hand in. I sift my fingers through the soft, warm ashes, afraid of touching something human like a tooth or a ring. This was a person. A person now reduced to nothing but brittle bone ground to a fine dust. It is not even bone anymore, but calcium. The rest is suctioned away as gas. Hot air. Back to the basics. I believe Jeremiah used the term “vaporized.”

Tomorrow or the next day I will turn on the TV and see their faces, mother and daughter plastered on the news. I know they are vaporized, but to the world they will just be missing. Missing is open ended. If something is missing, you can find it. I wonder when people will accept that they are vanished. Sometimes I see fliers for children gone missing decades ago with a new picture of what they could look like now. The flier says “missing” but these are the vanished. Vanished is also open ended. They will not be found but they may not be dead. They may be living among us, unaware that they are among the vanished. I wonder how many were actually vaporized. My daughter keeps company with the vanished.

She is only vanished to me. There was no hubbub, no fliers. Somewhere in an office there is a file that says exactly where she is. Shortly after her birth I got pinched. Assault and battery. I remember the guy's face when I got through with him. Like a tire rolled over it. I remember that better than I can remember my daughter's infant face. It is vague but always smiling. In my dreams, she's always older and has a face, but I don't know where that face came from. At least it is always smiling.

They put me away and it wasn't long before her mother stopped visiting. She only sent me one letter calling me a "good for nothing." Tucked behind the letter was a picture of Gerry holding my little girl in his arms. I wish I still had that picture.

I knew the broad liked to get stoned, I just didn't know how much. I had told Gerry to keep an eye on her but she was slick, sly to the streets and smarter than any of us. Gerry told me that the baby sitter found her with foamy puke running down the side of her mouth. He didn't find out till some time after and by that time my daughter was lost in the system. Her mother had no one but me and I was hardly anyone, a violent criminal with a good chunk of change left to his sentence.

I knew a baby like that would get adopted real quick. When I got out I knew she had a family. I think maybe it was better that things turned out that way, but more than anyone else I know the world for what it is. And in a world where it is so easy to vanish, I can't help but wonder if my girl is a face on a missing person's flier or powder in a box.