

A Middle, an End, and a Beginning

Whenever Wilson entered a new city, he tended to visit the bar that had been open for the longest amount of time. He liked to talk with the old-timers, hearing their inevitable and unique tales about where the famous mobster sat, which legendary squabbles were settled in the building, and what bets were grudgingly fulfilled when the local team won the championship. Each bar contained so much history, like an immersive photograph of earlier times, and stopping in was the perfect way to finish off a long day of work. Wilson had held many jobs before, odds and ends mostly, but an old high-school friend had recently hooked him up with a steady position selling medical equipment to hospitals. The hours were long, and he was paid on commission, but it was far better than pumping gas and selling marijuana on the side. In fact, at the rate he was going, after three more months he would be able to afford the ring he picked out. Wilson beamed at the thought of it, a sapphire stone surrounded by eight small diamonds and set on a white gold band. Every few days he checked the website to ensure it was still in stock and the price hadn't changed.

He had made three solid sales earlier, so as he wandered into Rosita's Tavern later that evening he felt relatively proud of himself. Upon entering, he quickly rolled up the sleeves of his dress shirt, loosened his tie, slapped his briefcase on the bar and ordered an Old Fashioned. While waiting for his drink, he naturally struck up a conversation with some of the older patrons and learned the local legend. According to the regulars, the bar was named after a beautiful woman with whom the original owner fell madly in love during his time fighting in the Mexican-American war. He asked for her hand in marriage three times, so the story goes, and three times she refused. Apparently, he had forgotten to take off the wedding ring already on his hand when he asked, and was shocked when this turned out to be a sticking point for Rosita. After the war, he settled in Kentucky, divorced his wife, and built the bar, which included a modest apartment on the second floor. He then went back to Mexico to find Rosita, making sure to bring proof of his divorce with him. Unfortunately, she had married during his absence, and could not be swayed to leave her new husband for a foreigner she had met only once before. Heartbroken, he returned to his bar and hung a rusty sign over the door. "Welcome are those who believe in things that cannot be real, who have fallen from places where no man can return, and who desire a treasure they cannot have." Though the bar had changed hands a three or four times in the last hundred years, with each successive owner bringing their own flavor and décor to the place, the sign never changed. It had become part of the lore, and it was deemed too disrespectful to remove.

Wilson was just getting ready to leave for the night, contentedly buzzed, when he caught the eye of a woman in a corner booth. It was hard to make out her features in the dim light, but he knew she was gorgeous by the way she motioned him over to her table. Only a woman who can have any man she wants could gesture like that, smooth, confident, without a hint of desperation. He felt a buzz in his mind, an attraction which centered on her, and it grew stronger as he walked over. A pang of guilt swept over him as his mind timely thought of the ring he was planning to buy, but he quickly soothed his conscious. This was just a conversation, no more, no less. A little drunk flirting never hurt anyone.

“Hey,” he said, trying to be smooth. “I haven’t seen you in here before.” It was obvious that she was at least 35 or 36 years old, which made her a good dozen years older than him. He knew older women liked men who were calm and self-possessed, and he hoped he was giving off that vibe.

She took a sip of her drink and smiled coyly. “Maybe you haven’t been looking hard enough.”

“Oh, no. No, no. That’s not it. I’m new here myself.” He admitted, laughing a bit too hard. Recovering, he looked down and truthfully added, “Besides, I would have remembered you.”

Her smile deepened maturely, as though she had heard these types of lines many times before. “Come,” she said, gesturing to the seat across from her, “Sit. Drink with me.”

“Okay!” he said excitedly, then cringed. “Okay.” he said again, forcing himself to be nonchalant.

He sat slowly and tried not to think about how lucky he was to be in the chair. She was even more stunning up close. Her flawless mahogany skin appeared as smooth as the surface of an undisturbed pool. An expensive gold septum ring pierced her nose and she had the telling wrinkles at the corners of her face which indicated her love of laughter. He noted, though, that the overall warmth of her face did not quite hide how treacherously piercing her eyes were. But that didn’t disturb him so much. Her lips were full and very, very red. *I want to kiss her*, Wilson thought. *Dammit, I will kiss her*. He briefly imagined what that might be like, to press his lips against hers, feel them give and envelop his own. Guilt again washed over him, stronger this time. He should leave. He knew he should. Why did he always walk the line like this?

“Who are you?” Her voice broke through his imagination. He realized, embarrassingly, that he had been sitting in silence for several seconds. She was still smiling though. Everything about her was inviting, everything except her eyes.

“Wilson. Wilson Barns. What’s your name?”

“Nancy,” she replied evenly, eyeing him curiously. He felt like he was being assessed. “But I didn’t ask you what your name was, Wilson, though it’s a very nice name. I asked you who you were.”

He chuckled nervously, fighting the alcohol. “Can...I have an example of what an acceptable answer would be?” That was a line from a movie he liked, and he felt clever for using it.

Nancy didn’t answer right away, and while her smile stayed the same, she seemed disappointed. She kept looking at him, but he could tell she was searching the bar for someone else, likely some older, more assertive man who knew what to do with questions like those. His chance was slipping away. If he was going to walk away from the table, now would be the time.

“What would you like to know?” He asked quickly.

She paused, reevaluating. “Tell me ... your story,” she said quietly. “Tell me the truth.”

He opened his mouth to start speaking. “My story? Well, I-”

“No, wait,” she interrupted, grabbing his wrist lightly, “you have to offer it to me.”

“Offer it?” he repeated, uneasy. His head spun a little bit now that she was touching him. The strong and sweet scent of her perfume was nearly overpowering. His vision blurred briefly, and he wondered if he had drunk too much. Shoving his guilt into a closet, he forced his nerves to be calm.

She nodded. “That’s how this works.”

“...What do you mean?”

“You just say the words, sweetie,” she explained patiently. “Say, ‘I offer this story to Nancy,’ or something like that, and keep going from there. It’s okay.”

Wilson paused, considering. Truthfully, he didn’t know what exactly he was considering, but something inside him sensed that this was a very weighty moment. Something about her eyes chilled him at his core, but she was so gorgeous. Her hand still pressed warmly against his wrist, and she made no attempt to move it, leaving the implications plain. If he focused hard enough, he could feel every one of her fingers and every crease in every finger. With sudden decisiveness, he thrust the guilt from his mind for good.

“I offer this story to you -- to Nancy,” he stated after a few moments had passed. She nodded with approval. He seemed to have redeemed himself from whatever test he had failed earlier.

“I accept your offering, and I thank you for it.” She replied. Wilson was surprised at how solemn the whole exchange felt. And then she looked at him, really looked at him.

He held her gaze in return. Second after second passed by, time slipping unnoticed, and he felt himself drawn inside her eyes, her brown, captivating, ravenous eyes. Before he offered his story, her presence merely lapped at his mind like gentle waves. Now it washed over him completely, the tide dragging him out to sea and closer to her. Wilson resisted, but only at first. She was so easy to trust; he swam out to meet her. She was so beautiful, how could he not. Her lips were so very red. Red like cherries. Red like corvettes. Red like blood.

Then, as their minds drew nearer he became more aware of *what* she really was. He knew, instantly, obviously, that she wasn’t human. Physically, he saw a radiant woman, but mentally, he saw something else entirely. Her true form, unshackled from the garment of humanity, stretched his mind to the breaking point. She seemed alien, even divine. He saw a voluptuous woman, glowing brightly from a source of energy beneath her skin. She was nude, but not in any way that suggested sexuality, she was above that somehow. Her face changed drastically from moment to moment—first she had the face of an old Korean man, then the face of a Hispanic child, then the face of a seemingly intelligent bull, then the face of a beast Wilson had

never even seen before. He shivered impulsively, sensing that his mind now beheld something that was not meant for humans to see. Yet through it all, she was purely regal. Her form changed once more, and it was plain that the majesty of her previous appearance was a lie, or at least, only half of the story. *This* was her true body, and his stomach retched violently. At first, he thought he was seeing things. Then he thought he was dreaming. Then he screamed. It was the insanity-laced, terrified cry of a man who realized that he was face-to-face with a demon. Yet the distance between the mental command and his physical lips was so great that the sound never had a chance—it drowned in the sea of her presence like everything else. Maybe “demon” wasn’t the right word, but whatever she was, she was unfiltered malevolence. Petrified, he urinated on himself, the stain flowing down his left leg. He mentally strained against the tide, fighting fiercely, hopelessly, to return to shore. But he had come too close, had trusted too much. In a moment, his resistance ended entirely, and he willingly lay his mind open to her, previous terror subdued.

Reaching across the table, she took hold of his wrist with her other hand as well. One of her hands held his wrist, palm up, against the table. The other slowly massaged the flesh just below his palm which now throbbed intensely under the pressure. *She’s priming me*, Wilson thought. But for what? She had eight eyes. How did he miss that before? Her face, now a spider’s face, had no nose and no eyebrows, just four sets of strange, abnormally large eyes. The biggest set were six times larger than human eyes. Above them lay a smaller set of eyes were spaced widely apart. Underneath the main set were two small sets of eyes in a horizontal row. All of the small eyes focused hungrily on his wrist, though main pair never dropped his gaze. They never blinked, never lost focus, they were devoid of sympathy and black as oil and Wilson couldn’t look away nor did he want to, yet he knew he should.

“Tell me your story. Tell me the truth.” Her voice was different now, deeper, multitoned, and scratchy.

And he did.

Wilson spoke of his father and how much he hated him. Of how he was beaten viciously for every interception he threw, for every pass he missed, and for every game he lost. His father said that he did it out of love, he said he just wanted Wilson to get a Division 1 scholarship. Wilson didn’t think he was lying, but he hated him anyway. And he hated himself for hating him. So he played to win, but he feared the punishment for losing more than he longed for throes of victory.

Wilson spoke of the cheerleader. Her name was Jazz. She had red hair, high cheek bones, orange freckles, and he smelled the mint from her shampoo when he held her. They made stumbling love in the back of his pickup truck after the championship game, and he had lasted less than a minute. When it was over, he mumbled something about stress. She nodded silently, allowing his excuse to pass without judgment, and he fell in love. Afterwards they went to a movie. He bought popcorn, she bought drinks, and they made out during the entire comedy. Neither of them wanted to go home, so they spent the night in the bed of his truck, using their backpacks as pillows. He told her that he loved her. She said he didn’t know what love was. He didn’t. But he didn’t argue with her, so maybe he did.

Nancy raised his wrist to her mouth and bit. Her fangs, easily six inches long, pierced his skin to the bone. Wilson shuddered with the pain, though he didn't cry out, and he didn't look away. He couldn't look away. The throbbing in his wrist eased, and he felt a slight tugging as she steadily sucked up the liquid that had been building. It wasn't blood she was after, but it was something else, something even more intimate. Words came quickly to him now, pulled along by the current. He felt pleasure as he talked, almost sexual, but not as fulfilling. It was like sipping soda on a hot, muggy day. Every sentence he uttered only partially quenched his thirst, leaving him dry and hoping the next sentence would be the one to satisfy him, or her, completely. It was getting harder to keep track of where he ended and where Nancy began. But he kept talking, faster now.

Wilson spoke of his mother, of how she often talked of happier times, and how she always made sure they went to church every Sunday, and how she tried to calm his father down when the alcohol went to his head, and how she carefully applied her makeup after those episodes became violent, and how she loved Jazz like a second daughter, and how she badly wanted them to get out of this "dusty, three-stoplight town," and how she taught them that music could stimulate the baby's mind while she was still in the womb, and how they should play more classical if they wanted Violet to be smart.

Wilson spoke of his father, of how he despised Jazz for distracting Wilson from football, and how he incessantly pushed them to get an abortion, and how his face turned colors when Wilson said that they were keeping her, and how he didn't speak for a week after Wilson sold his cleats for baby food, and how he once got so drunk that he tried to choke Jazz, and how his head flopped backward after Wilson hit him, and how he swore would quit drinking, and how hard he tried to quit, and how he never quit.

Wilson spoke of Jazz, of how her face turned so red during the labor that her freckles disappeared, and how she made him promise that he would never leave her, and how she made him promise that he would be a better father to Violet than his father was to him, and how she didn't cry at all when he told her he was leaving, and how she forgave him after he came back, and how she wept when he told her that he loved her, and how he wept when she said that she believed him.

The more he talked the more satisfied Nancy seemed. His stories flowed from him naturally, as if they had to be told. She gorged herself on them, on him, and her presence began to grow, swelling out her edges and filling in her crevices. She must have been famished when they started, perhaps near death. Her eyes, sharp and ruthless just a few minutes ago, or hours ago, were now round and content. They were still dangerous, still black, but more lethargic. After some time had passed the flow of liquid slowed to a trickle and then stopped completely. Wilson had told all of his stories. She slowly retracted her fangs from his wrist and sat back in her chair, flush and full. She was a woman again, beautiful, curvaceous, and he was no longer sure who he was.

"Mm," she purred, "Thank you, dear. That was... more satisfying... than I thought it would be." She picked up a napkin and dabbed the corner of her mouth. Her red lipstick left an impression

on the white tissue. She waited for Wilson to respond, but he didn't know what to say. He felt drained. He felt nothing at all. Even the memory of what just happened melted away with every passing second.

"You've..." Wilson hesitated, confused and searching for the right words. "You've... raped... me."

She looked at him without responding.

"Please," he asked, "Give them back."

She tilted her head slightly and pursed her lips, but said nothing. The dim light from the bar reflected off her golden septum ring.

"Please!" He begged, "Give them back!" No one even noticed his outburst, least of all her.

"You offered," she said with finality. "That's how this works. It's not really fair, I know. But you offered, and those are the rules. I have to eat too, you know." She got up from her chair and turned as if to leave.

"Wait."

She paused.

He was desperate. "You don't have to keep them all, you don't. You can give me half. You take the other half, but give me half. And I won't tell anyone. I promise. I won't tell. Just give me half. And that's that, see. Everyone wins."

She smiled as she shook her head, and it was that same, mature look of earlier, the one of someone who had heard these lines many times before.

"You can't just leave me like this," he panted. "Do I have a family? A wife? GIVE ME SOMETHING!"

Silence. The vilest, damnable silence.

"What is your name? At least...at least tell me that."

"I've told you sweetie, my name is Nancy."

"No," He said, shaking his head. "Your real name."

She weighed it and then grinned proudly. "My name is long, for I am old. I've had many daughters, and they have had many of their own. But you won't remember it, even if I told you."

"I know, but, please. Please."

And then, over the next four minutes, she slowly said her name. It was appalling, frightful, and magnificent. In her name were many other names, thousands of names, spanning across cultures and times. She went deliberately, salivating over each set of syllables. Some names she spat out like sour milk, while others she crooned over, licking her lips as the sound passed through them. Inside her name were the names of kings and prostitutes, heroes and villains, explorers and priestesses, rice farmers, devils, athletes, bankers, writers, mothers, grandfathers, lovers, goddesses, slaves, and, at the very end, she paused before adding “-wilsonbarns.”

“Thank you.” He said sincerely, trying very hard to remember what he had heard.

“You’re welcome.”

Wilson wanted to hate her, but he no longer had it in him. “What do I do now? I don’t even know who I am.” He asked, beaten and tired.

“Sweetie,” she said kindly, “you never did. Do whatever you like. You’re free.”

“Am I?” He thought for a second, a plan forming. “I’d like to kiss you then.”

She looked at him sharply, lethargy gone in an instant. “...I’d like that.”

He kissed her, long and hard. But this was no ordinary kiss, this was a rescue mission. In her mouth he tasted the last bits of himself, the fragments still lingering on her breath and the flakes caught in between her teeth. He searched, frantically, for any trace of who he was, who he used to be. He tasted the flavors of moments, the smell of mint, the anguish of a father, the cry of a child, but that’s all. Only the out-of-context shadows remained, and even these evaporated like cotton candy, blissfully flavorful for one second, whispery mist the next. As she kissed back, he felt her tongue transform in his mouth. It grew hairy, wrinkly, and thick. Suddenly, it split into three separately moving organs, one forced itself down his throat, choking him, and another curved upward into his nasal cavity. She was also searching, looking for any part of him that was still unexplored, any story he might have hidden from her. This was the ultimate contest, and Wilson was no match. When the kiss ended, he had gained nothing. Worse, he wasn’t sure what else he had lost in the effort.

She looked at him sympathetically. It seemed like she wanted to say something, but then thought better of it. She winked at him, spun around, and walked towards the door, heels *clacking* rhythmically against the hardwood floor. The door closed behind her, and she never looked back.

Wilson would have followed her out, but he had nowhere to go. He waved at nearly everyone in Rosita’s, hoping someone would light up with recognition when they saw him, but no one did. One person, however, kindly pointed out the stain on his leg. Perplexed and grateful, Wilson hurried to the bathroom to clean up, muttering to himself about how he needed to be more careful. Eventually, he took a seat at the bar and ordered another round. The liquid sloshed and burned as it hit his throat, filling parts of him that he didn’t know were missing, and soothing

parts of him that he didn't know where disturbed. Miles Davis played from the juke box, and he swayed empty to the music.