

## An Evening At The Bing Bing

Mr. Johnson smiled: a wide, proud and satisfied smile. Beneath the two crystal chandeliers high above and surrounded by gold-rimmed Art Deco designs rippled a vast sea of gallant men and charming women, engulfed in the sweet and groovy jazz tunes played by the big band.

But it wasn't just the sheer number of people that gave the Bing Bing its sense of fullness. It was the atmosphere provided by the high-pitched laughter of the bare-shouldered flappers when they heard another flirtatious joke, the grumbles of men from historically wealthy families who argued with the ever-multiplying newly-rich, the courageous and sometimes tragic stories told by the survivors of the Great War, the energetic, downright incendiary dancing, the rushed footsteps of a small army of busy waiters and most of all the sound of clinking cocktail and champagne glasses. Prohibition was in full swing, and no one gave two whoops in Hades about it.

"Your regular table, Mr. Johnson?" asked a slender young waiter.

"Not today, McElroy," answered Mr. Johnson. His appearance momentarily distracted the waiter: fine, custom-tailored, white tweed suit, perfectly trimmed mustache, glistening, slicked-back undercut held in place by a cinnamon-scented pomade, chiseled jaw and imposing, constantly-alert blue-grey eyes.

"McElroy? Are you still there?"

"Pardon?" asked the waiter, stepping back from his trance.

“Table fifty-three seems to be in need of more refreshments,” said the boss, showing no contempt towards the dreaminess of youth. “No dosing off now, ok? Now, if you’ll excuse me.”

Turning away from the waiter, Mr. Johnson walked towards the stage. Heads turned along the way. The classiest women looked at him for a fraction of a second, smiled for even less, and turned their head away only to take quick peeks immediately afterwards. The flappers stared him down from head to foot, giggling and winking. The men bowed lightly and raised their glasses. Everyone knew Thomas Johnson.

The band broke for five, a perfect moment for the boss to personally congratulate every musician, like he always did. The players and the singer, all of them negroes, loved him. He was unlike most of the white folk they usually encountered. He never looked down on them. To him, they were just what they were: fellow human beings.

“Thank you, Mr. Johnson, thank you,” they said in unison.

“My pleasure, gentlemen. Keep playing like that and we’ll soon have to commission a whole new floor.”

“Raise ‘em up high and let all of New York City hear us,” said Travis, the clarinetist.

“Sounds like a plan,” said the boss, raising his fresh South Side Fizz up high, followed by the musicians who were always allowed to have a drink during their breaks. To lighten up their spirits, and smoothen out their grooves, of course.

Made merry by the good mood of his entertainers, Mr. Johnson strolled around his club for a bit. He needed no clear purpose. Sooner or later, someone would come. Someone with something to say.

“Thomas!” exclaimed a white-bearded man whose large belly strained his stain-speckled tuxedo. “A word, if I may.”

*Looks like I found out who’s to blame for all those missing appetizers,* thought Mr. Johnson, who said “My dear Maxwell! Such an imposing figure. Do leave some ladies for my poor old self, will you?”

Looking more than pleased, Maxwell said “Alas, Thomas, though I’m grateful for your accurate observations, I must say that something has been bothering me. Or, better said, something that should bother *you* bothers *me*, so I’m here to help the both of us.”

*Must be something about money,* thought Mr. Johnson, who knew of Maxwell Huntington’s thriving Wall Street interests.

“How very kind of you, Maxwell. I’m all ears.”

“Listen,” began Maxwell, suddenly pausing to snatch another little snack off a wandering waiter’s tray. “You’re losing money, you see. With these,” he pointed at the young man before him, “people.” The youth shot him a contemptuous glance after which he shuffled away towards other hungry guests.

“Do tell, Max. Have they been stealing? I know you finance types know a lot about thievery.”

“Another good observation, but no. This concerns their wages.”

“Their wages?” asked Mr. Johnson, surprised. “Quite a chunk, but a great investment if you want good service.”

“Be that as it may, you have a lot of maneuvering space there, Thomas. Just look around. They’re all... like you and me.”

Displeased with where this was going, Mr. Johnson managed to let out a single, strained “and?”.

“Think about it. Take the Cotton Club, for example. That gangster Madden makes a fortune off those nigger’s backs. Janitors, waiters, musicians. All darker than the depths of a tar pit. No need to pay them much. Whatever keeps them on their feet in those filthy slums they live in.”

Suddenly, Mr. Johnson heard a loud noise, as if a large boulder, falling from a great height, just smashed against the earth. Then another. And another.

“Did you hear that?” he asked, his eyes rolling madly.

“Hear what? The darkie band? Yes, quite terrible.”

“What? No, not the band. That sound...”

“I think this whole club-owning business has taken its toll on your nerves, old sport,” said Maxwell, showing no concern whatsoever. “Maybe you need to go on a vacation. Or work in finance. Pretty much the same to me.” Here he released a loud burst of laughter. “Anyway, remember our discussion, Thomas. More money never hurts, am I right?” Laughing even louder than before, Maxwell walked away, though not before telling another waiter that it is a mortal sin to let someone hunger. Needless to say, the waiter was soon hurrying towards the kitchen for a fresh plate of hors d’oeuvre.

Before he could give those mysterious noises another thought, Mr. Johnson was approached by a beautiful and petite lady in her mid-twenties. Her childish facial features were edged by her Dutch boy bob, and the beauty of her hazel eyes was only eclipsed by the many pearls adorning her ears, neck and wrists. A long and fabulous white fur covered her narrow shoulders.

“Monsieur Johnson,” she said with a sweet French accent, “is everything alright? You look a bit pale.”

“My apologies, Mademoiselle Davignon,” said Mr. Johnson, panting. “Something very odd just happened.”

“Well, this is America, after all,” she smiled, revealing even more pearls behind her rosy lips. “There are oddities at every corner.”

“Is that what made you come all the way here?” he asked, somewhat soothed by her presence. “I’ve always wondered, you know.”

“Oh, believe me, Monsieur Johnson, my *belle* France has its fair share of oddities, and most of them live in Paris where, thanks to your country’s influence, everyone dances the Charleston and hums jazz songs. You say “the roaring twenties”, we say “*années folles*”. But there is one big difference, and that is what made me undertake that long and tedious voyage across the Atlantic all those years ago. You see, back home, you can enjoy what your countrymen amusingly call “giggle water” without any law forbidding you to do so.” Here she grinned mischievously, and Mr. Johnson thought she was quite a choice bit of calico. “Don’t you find that boring? Don’t you find it infinitely more pleasing, more... *comment di ton? Exciting* to do something you are not allowed to do?”

“Well,” said Mr. Johnson, looking around at the controlled chaos around him, “the law can be quite forgiving over here.”

“That may be so, but if you look closely, you might just see its shadow wherever you look. And now that I’ve satisfied your curiosity, Monsieur Johnson, it is your turn to satisfy mine. Tell me, how does one come to own such a beautiful club?”

*How does one come to own such a beautiful club?* The question resonated within Mr. Johnson’s inner chambers, on and on and on, but still he struggled. *Such a simple, straightforward question*, he thought, but the answer eluded him. Everyone knew he was the owner, everyone greeted him as such, everyone congratulated him for it, everyone thanked him for inviting them to his fine establishment. Still... *how does one come to own such a beautiful club?*

“Mr. Johnson!” shouted a nearby voice. “Mr. Johnson!”

It was McElroy.

“Yes?” asked Mr. Johnson, pulled back from wherever he had just been.

“I am very sorry to interrupt,” spoke McElroy quickly, “but there’s a problem over at the poker table. Two gentlemen... you have to come immediately.”

“Right,” said Mr. Johnson, barely keeping himself on his feet. “Right. If you’ll excuse us, Mademoiselle. We’ll finish this discussion some other time.”

Two rushed bows and off they went in the direction of the gambling room, while Mademoiselle Davignon nodded her head in disbelief, shrugged and ordered herself another exciting drink.

“They’re shouting... infuriated... we must hurry... the bouncers don’t know what to do...”

Mr. Johnson couldn't understand a thing. Those boulders were back... those big, loud boulders kept falling and falling, raining down and shattering the earth beneath them. This time they were accompanied by a sound resembling that of constant hail crackling against rooftiles. He covered his ears and closed his eyes in an attempt to shut everything out, but soon felt his arm being grabbed. "Mr. Johnson! Mr. Johnson!" He opened his eyes and it was McElroy again. "Mr. Johnson, we're here!"

A large crowd was gathered around the poker table. The two elbowed their way through the curious bystanders and were soon standing at a small distance from a group of bouncers, a very worried-looking dealer and two seated, well-dressed gentlemen. Still disquieted, Mr. Johnson struggled to focus on what they were saying.

"You listen to me, Andrew, and you listen good," said the one smoking a thick cigar, pointing his even thicker finger at his adversary. He had a bottle of Templeton Rye in front of him, wore what looked like a very expensive suit and even more expensive rings and was accompanied by two breath-taking brunettes who seemed frightened and two large men wearing fedora hats who looked anything but scared. His most distinctive features were three long scars on his neck and left cheek. "If I hear the word "cheated" again," he continued, "these fine boys behind me might just drill a few extra holes in that smug face of yours, you hear?"

"And you listen to me, Alphonse," said the other, who wore a black suit and a white shirt which seemed less-worn than a freshly bought one. "You can threaten me with your goons all you want, but I'll get those chips I'm owed."

Alphonse laughed and puffed out more smoke. "How about this?" He put his hand in the inner pocket of his vest, pulled out a crumpled bill and threw it in Andrew's lap. "Now be a good boy and go buy yourself a rule-book."

"The only thing," said Andrew, his face red with rage and his greenish-grey veins bulging, "that would get me out of this chair would be a night trip to Chicago's South Side Park Manor," upon hearing this, Alphonse's confident and belittling grin faded completely, and the two goons behind him slowly aimed for the inner pockets of their long coats, "where I'd put a few stacks of dynamite beneath your slumbering mother and wife. Or better yet, I'd do it during the day. See how high those bitches can fly."

"Gentlemen, gentlemen!" intervened Mr. Johnson quickly, but the two goons were already aiming their 1911's at Andrew's head, before Alphonse said "Aim at his guts. I want him to bleed."

"Gentlemen!" shouted Mr. Johnson while most of the crowd dispersed in all possible directions, the two brunettes leading the way. "There will be no killing in my club!"

"Shut your yap, Johnson," said Alphonse. He turned back to Andrew, whose only reaction to the two ominous barrels pointed at him was a deep, horrible frown. "You think you're tough, wise guy? Well, guess what? I've made bigger men than you kneel and cry like sissies before painting the walls with their innards."

"Rot in..." began Andrew defiantly, but before he could finish, a waiter rushed in through the door, screaming "They're here! Everyone out!" before being pushed aside by a group of police officers armed with Model 870 Remingtons.



“This is a raid!” shouted the one in charge. Mid-fifties, white moustache, iron eyes and iron will. His men immediately pointed their guns at Alphonse’s goons. “Sorry to interrupt your little party, fellas. Now drop ‘em.”

The goons looked at Alphonse, who looked at Andrew with nothing but hatred in his eyes before his expression took an almost immediate, imperceptible turn and he smiled like the most well-bred man in the whole wide world. “Certainly, officer,” he said, signaling his men to lower their weapons. “Certainly.”

The officer stepped forward, and as he got a better look at Alphonse, said “I’ll be damned. This has got to be my lucky day. Take him for a trip, boys.”

“Not my first holiday, officer,” said Alphonse, smirking while being escorted out with his goons.

“And who might you be?” said the officer, turning towards Mr. Johnson.

“I...” he managed to say through what was now a thunderstorm of falling boulders and hail.

“I’m the owner ... I demand to know what’s going on, Mr...”

“Name’s Henderson. What’s going on? Well, I don’t know what planet you’re on, Mr. Club Owner, but down here on earth, especially in these here United States, there’s this little thing called the Volstead Act. And it looks to me like you’ve been violating it, son.”

“No, no,” said Mr. Johnson, mounds of earth cracking and disintegrating around him, rooftiles being battered by an endless hail. “I’m innocent. I...”

“Isn’t that what they all say?” laughed the officer, though not without a suspicious glimmer in his eyes. “You ok, fella?”

“You don’t understand,” said Mr. Johnson, grabbing the officer by his lapels. “Can’t you hear it? Can’t you hear those sounds? Tell me you hear them, officer! Tell me you hear those God damned sounds!”

“Get your filthy hands off me,” roared the officer, pulling himself away and reaching for his baton, which came down swiftly upon the club owner.

The sound of battered flesh, the sound of cracking bones, the sound of broken teeth and the sound of the rain of boulders and hail. A maddening orchestra singing inside Mr. Johnson’s head. Singing and singing without pauses, without interludes, without breaks for five. On and on it sang and tormented its only listener, until he finally opened his eyes and heard “Mr. Thompson! Mr. Thompson!”

It was McElroy again, but something was different.

“You’re waking up,” he said. “Slow and steady, Mr. Thompson. That bastard Henderson did quite a number on you.”

“Where... what happened? That damned cop...”

“You know he’s not a cop anymore, Mr. Thompson. That’s why he works here now. He’s actually supposed to keep you fellas safe until you get better, but he’s got quite a mean temper.”

“Works here? Wait, what did you just call me?”

“Mr. Thompson, sir,” said McElroy.

“My name is Johnson. What the hell, McElroy? What’s going on here?”

“Oh, right,” he said, turning a page on his paperclip. “My colleagues told me you do this thing with your name. Thomas Johnson, John Thompson. I’m sorry. I’ll call you Johnson if you prefer. I’ve only been here for a month now, and there’s a lot of things to remember.”

“I don’t know what kind of games you’re playing here, McElroy, but one thing’s for certain: you’re fired. Now tell me, where in God’s name are we? Are we still in New York City?”

Growing more concerned by the minute, McElroy said “We’re not in New York City, Mr. Johnson, but in New York State. Binghamton. The Binghamton Asylum for the Chronically Insane, to be more precise. You’ve been here for... let me check... almost three years now.” He paused, concentrated on some thought. “What happened yesterday was quite unfortunate. We had such a good time playing poker with your room-mates Al and Andrew, pretending to be in your club, that I actually thought your condition showed a very slight but observable improvement. But then you started screaming and shouting, “get down, take cover”, and then your fists started flying and Henderson tried to restrain you. It wasn’t a good idea to strike him, but I guess you know that now.”

*What is this man talking about? thought Mr. Johnson. Does he think I’m raving? Does he think I’m delusional? My name is Thomas Johnson, born in 1894 in Titusville, Pennsylvania. My mother was a dressmaker. My father invested the family’s money in a failing oil business. The last thing he saw was the bottom of a bottle. In 1901, we moved to New York City to live with my mother’s cousin in an Irish slum on the Lower East Side, with all the other piss-poor people. Everyone was hungry. Everyone cried. Everyone tried to get out. Rats and roaches, dirt and grime. My mother couldn’t take it. The first and last necklace she wore was a noose made out of bedsheets. This was in 1905. Her cousin didn’t like me. “You’re useless,” she would say. “I’m*

*little," I would cry. "You're eating too much," she would say. "Are you sure?" my stomach would growl. "You're lazy," she would say. "I'm tired," I would yawn. She kicked me out in 1908. "Won't ever get a husband with you around." I lived in boxes with other youths of the street. We begged. We stole. Sometimes, we laughed. In 1910, I got my first job. "You scrub them real nice, now," said my boss. "Yes, sir," I replied. Had more money than ever before. I scrubbed and scavenged and sweated and froze through summers and winters until 1914, when an Archduke was shot oh no somewhere in Europe. That's when I got a job as war a hotel doorman. "You look like an unpolished diamond," said the man on shot the street. "Why don't you blood come work for me?" The next three years were probably the worst of my life. I screams had to work, I had to survive, but the people there... Thinking they're all upstage, looking down on you, belittling get down you, calling you names. You're a puddle beneath take cover their boots. I quit, and in 1917 I don't do it enrolled. And I kill trained to be efficient. And I was good. For the first time die in my life, I was good. And in 1918 trench they shipped me trench over like a tool in a box. Flew a long way from America straight into hell on earth. And there we trained some more. And then the second battle of the Marne. Trenches, men and despair everywhere. "Nice to meet you," you would on the ground say one day. "He's dead," you would hear the next. Death falling from the skies. The boulders, the artillery, the boulders, the artillery. Drilling holes in men, earth and concrete alike. And the guns. Endless shots, endless hail. It was too much, way too much. I looked over my shoulder incoming too often incoming. "Mr. Thompson, we're sending you home," they said. Thompson? We won soon afterwards. But I kept losing back home. On and on and on for a few years, thrown back help into poverty help me and desolation. Some way or the other, I landed here. The God forsaken loony bin.*

“Mr. Johnson? Are you ok?”

There was no vitality left in the man. He closed his eyes and hoped the earth would do him a kindness and swallow him up. He heard McElroy get up and move away. Then he stopped and said, “I think we should let him rest now, Ms. Davignon. Let’s go check on the other patients.”

“Sure,” said Ms. Davignon in a bored tone. “Maybe something exciting will happen today.”

“I think we had enough excitement yesterday,” said McElroy.

The following day, Mr. Johnson woke up in less pain than the day before. His “room-mates”, as McElroy called them, were also awake.

“Look who’s up,” said the chubby one. “Hey, you handled yourself well with that prick Henderson. Why don’t you come work for me? I could use some extra muscle.”

“I’ve seen you before,” said Mr. Johnson, rubbing his eyes.

“Sure you have. Everybody knows *me*,” laughed the man. “Name’s Alphonse Gabriel Capone. But you can call me Al. Careful what you say, though.”

“Oh, shut it, Al!” said the man in the bed next to him. “Or I’ll stuff that fat mouth of yours with pyrotol.”

“And that’s Andrew,” said Al. “Andrew Kehoe. Or at least that’s who he *thinks* he is. What a loony. One of our newest arrivals ‘round here. The other one is this old guy who thinks he’s Howard Carter, but I think he looks more like Tutankhamun.”

Mr. Johnson couldn't believe his eyes, no matter how long he rubbed them for. It all seemed real. There was no club. There were no parties. He didn't own anything. On the contrary: this institution owned him. Or did it? It was all so confusing.

He stood up and got out of his room, and as he entered the hallway, he saw a negro gentleman mopping the floor.

"Travis!" said Mr. Johnson. "What are you doing here?"

The old man lifted his head up, frowned and said "playin' the clarinet, what do you think?" after which he scoffed and went back to work.

*I have to get out of here,* thought Mr. Johnson, walking faster.

"And where do you think you're going, John?" yelled a man from behind.

"Maxwell, old friend!" said Mr. Johnson, turning. "You have to help me! Something isn't right. You have to get me back to the club."

"I have told you many times, John. Call me "Dr. Huntington". And yes, obviously I have to help you, and that is what I am trying to do, even though what happened with Henderson seems to tell me and my whole staff that we're failing to do so. And no, I do not have to get you to that club of yours. There is no Bing Bing. It is just a delusion you've come up with, a defense mechanism to forget or at least place some distance between yourself and all those terrible events of your life, culminating in the..." He paused and took a very deep breath. "John, why don't you go outside and breathe some fresh air. Talk to someone. It might do you good, might keep you occupied. But not to that darkie janitor again! Don't ever forget that you and I, we are his superiors. Act as such. Now off you go."

*Still an old racist*, thought Mr. Johnson, who gave some thought to what the doctor had said, but forgot it all as he entered the yard.

Out there on the trimmed grass, grown men chased butterflies, sang songs in alien tongues, wailed and wobbled, hit themselves over the head and laughed for no reason. Some of them seemed more composed, smoking and reading, oblivious to those around them. Others talked to doctors and nurses. Many of them had missing limbs or were deformed in some way, and Mr. Johnson trembled and quickly looked away as they passed through his field of view.

What seemed most curious to him was that they all had something in common: he had seen each and every one of them at his parties, had greeted them cordially, had offered them drinks, had talked to them. Over there, at the Bing Bing, they were all... normal. Mr. Johnson thought it must all be a dream, some sort of illusion or mirage.

He must get back to the club. How did he get here, after all? It was that bastard, Henderson, knocking him out. *Maybe*, thought private Thompson, *maybe it could work the other way around. There he is, under that tree. Perhaps we should have a chat.*







