

Navarre Maldonado

In the Hand of the Inevitable

Metamorphosis

I've never been one for words. Talking never came naturally to me. I can make small talk fine enough, but an actual conversation? Nah, too much trouble, people lie too much. Mind you, they're not great liars, you can always find the truth some way or another, just have to look hard enough. Why am I telling you this? Why should you care? Who the hell am I? Name's Isaac, I own this establishment. When you walked in you asked, "Why a jazz bar, who the hell listens to jazz?" Let me get there. See, I've loved it for quite a while now. Not that structured bullshit that they'd teach you in school. Nah, I love acid jazz. That mix of funk and hip hop, the horns, it just speaks to the soul, you know? I found it back in the nineties, back then I worked at a record store in Queens. It was called Empire Records; it probably isn't there anymore. Anyway, so this girl came in and asked if we had any James Taylor Quartet and I had no clue what she was talking about. She was hot though, so I told her to check back next time, and we'll have some by then. I start asking around and finally, I found it, In the Hand of the Inevitable, the album that changed my life. I had heard these genres individually, but there was a certain magic in hearing slammed together, you know? She never came back, but the damage was done, I was in love with the music. Shortly after that my pops kicked it, heart attack in the middle of the day, help got there too late. It was always just me and my pops, no brothers, no sisters, hell, my mom just left me at his door and bailed. So, when he died, his money went to me. He was a poor bastard, but he been setting some aside for me, I guess. It was a pretty hefty load, don't know where the hell it came from, but he left a note with, "Do whatever the fuck you want." That stuck with me.

The man barely spoke to me, just left me with cash, and told me it didn't matter. I sat on it for a while, just pretended nothing happened, but late one night it hit. I love jazz, I love drinking, why not combine the two? So, I took the amount he left, the little bit I saved up myself, and opened up this bar here in Brooklyn. I try to promote to the jazz groups around here, give them a steady place to play. Sometimes we'll get some math rock or some ska bands in here. They're alright, they just don't hit the same. You're probably wondering why the name though, right? Why Metamorphosis? You see, it was acid jazz that got me here. It changed my life, brought me here, right? I want to do the same. I want the music to touch and change anyone that walks in. Anyway, sorry for the life story, you didn't ask. You wanted to tend here, right?

We Belonged in Bed

Why the hell am I here? Sure, I need the money, but if I have to listen to this asshole ramble on and on like this on a daily basis, I'm out of here. You see, here's the thing, I need the money, desperately. Like I could lose my place in a couple of weeks desperately, but I don't have time to listen to this guy's life story. He says his name's Isaac and gives me the whole history of the bar, but I'm not here for this shit. I've been in this neighborhood for about five years and my friend said this place showed up about three years before I did. I've seen it, but I usually never have enough to drink, so I've never gone in. About a week ago I saw an ad on the door saying they needed a bartender. Now, I've never mixed a drink before, but how hard can it be? I'm a quick study, besides, I just need the cash. I got fired from my last job. Some stuff about me reached my boss's ear and shortly after that I was told to pack my shit and go. Rent's coming up, so I just need the cash. Finally, after an eternity, Isaac brings up the position. "Yeah, if it's still open, I'd love to take the job." "It's yours, kid, what's your name?" After an hour, you really want to know my name? "Jonathan" "Well Jonathan, welcome to the family"

For someone who supposedly hates people, he's pretty quick to bring me in. I mean come on, this guy doesn't know me, he doesn't ask anything about me, my experience, he just seems eager to have someone to talk to. I think he's just lonely. I get that though. I haven't had anyone I can actually connect with, in a while, so I humor him. Some time goes by, it's hard to tell how much. I'm just grateful to still have a home. Besides, this place isn't the worst. Isaac and I became friends. He seems thankful to have someone listen to him and not want anything in return. I think the guy was just lonely. We have a few regulars and they're usually decent spenders. I can't say I enjoy the bands that come through here, but I respect that they're actually putting themselves out there. But something's been throwing me off lately. We've been getting this one guy in here a lot, damn near on a daily basis. He seems beaten up, the kind to drown himself in booze after work. There's such a sadness to him, looking at him breaks my heart. I always try to strike up a conversation with him when orders, but he shuts it down every time, says he's just there for the drink and the music. Finally, after about a month, I break through to him.

I finally get a name, Ken. He slowly starts telling me about his job, his life, how nothing ever changes, and nothing he does feels worth it. How he married too young and how he wouldn't mind dying at a moment's notice. It's a shame, he's a beautiful man. You can tell he truly loved life at one point. Whenever he talks about his old paintings, that's when you see his eyes shine. It's in those moments he remembers what romance feels like. I know he's married; I see the ring every time he walks in. I can't help it though; I live for these talks. I can't get him out of my head. Another month goes by, and I break down. In an accidental moment of weakness, without thought, I invite him back to my place. I damn near start crying when he says sure. As soon as we get through the door the world melts away. Nothing matters, it's just me and

him. I feel a passion from him I didn't know was there. In that moment, we belonged in bed. As the night moved along, I tell Ken I'm not expecting anything, he can just go. "But I am. I don't want to leave you. Something's happening here, and I need you with me." "So where do we go from here?", I quietly ask. "I don't know, but we'll get there together." That was the moment I knew I loved him; I couldn't let him go. We continue our relationship, talking about how we want to proceed with our future, but nothing's set in stone. It had been a day or two since I had seen Ken, which wasn't unusual. What was, though, was the fact that this random woman was heading straight towards me. I've never seen her around here, so I figure she just wanted to check out the bar, but as she got closer, I saw her expression. "So, this is where he's been going."

Limbic Resonance

I'm not a bad person. I'm not known for fits of rage or outbursts of hatred. I've been pretty levelheaded throughout my life. At least, I think so? How much do we actually know about ourselves? How about others? These are the thoughts that consume me when Ken doesn't come home. I know we're not in the best place, we haven't been for a while, but I never thought things were ever really that bad. I know he doesn't paint anymore. He says taking up an office job killed the artist in him, but how were we going to survive? I was patent for years, but we had bills to pay. We met back when we were kids. He was the mysterious painter, always contemplating the nature of reality and the true state of humanity. I was in my early twenties, and I absolutely ate it up. I became his model and muse, turning my body and soul into a series of experiential movements, or at least that's he would say. I never quite got his art. The medium just never made sense to me. My head was too wrapped up in music.

My dad was my bassist back in his day, playing poetry through his four strings. He transferred his love of jazz and funk to me, and when I found hip hop, it was over. There was nothing else I wanted, especially when I found out you could mix all three together. But when I tried explaining this to Ken, he wouldn't listen, he was too wrapped up in his own world, but at the time I didn't mind. We were in love. I thought we were. When we moved past lovers and got married, we had responsibilities. We had a life to forge together. I waited as long as I could, letting him paint while I worked, but I wasn't making enough. We needed that second income. I think that was the day he died. When he realized that I was right. That was when I noticed a shift, there was a gap between us. Maybe it was already there, but the day he put up his brushes was when I saw it.

The love between us was slowly drying up. Ken wasn't the same man I married, he was this sad husk, barely existing. That was when he started drinking. He said he found this bar, Metamorphosis. He started going there every day after work, but he would be home before it got dark. I thought he might need the room to breathe, so I didn't say anything. It seemed to be working because he seemed happier. The gap was still there, but it seemed as if he had something in his life worth living for again. After a while though, he started coming home in the middle of the night. That was when the gap became a chasm. He had completely separated himself from me. The love was gone, but he was happy, joyous. Life was once again in his body. It was clear what was going on. It hurt, but it was obvious. I can't stand it anymore; I have to know who it is. Who's offering Ken what I can't? Who is it that's taking him away from me? So I go to his spot, to Metamorphosis, and that's where see him. The man that Ken's been going to. I'm not sure how, but I know it's him. He's the type he would crawl all over. I walk up to him,

and it slips out, “So, this is where he’s been going.” “Sorry, ma’am, who are you talking about?” “Cut the bullshit, you know Ken, don’t you?”

That’s when the panic takes him over. I didn’t mean for it to come out that angrily, in truth I’m not that upset. I figured something like this would happen sooner or later, I knew he wasn’t happy. I just wanted to see who it was. “Yeah, I know Ken. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean for it to play out this way.” “How did you mean for it to play out? What the fuck are you doing with my husband?” That’s when I get the whole story. He tells me how much they love each other, how he knew he was married, but he couldn’t stop his heart. How even when they’re apart, he can feel Ken with him. “Do you know what limbic resonance is?” I can only muster a one-word response, “What?” “It’s a connection that’s formed by people who are exceptionally close. It’s a connection of souls. They share an emotional state. In a way, they become one. I know how this sounds...” I interrupt him, “But that’s what you have right? That’s how close you feel to him?” “Yes, I’m sorry. I never meant to hurt you. I didn’t mean for this to happen. It just did.” I let everything sit for a second, take everything in. “I’m not sure if I buy into that, but I believe that’s how you really feel. I see the good you’re doing him. You changed his smile, it’s one I’ve never seen before.” What’s your name?” “Jonathan.”

Jonathan and I stand in silence, the noise of chattering and music filling in the empty space. “We’ll figure something out, Jonathan. I can see you love him, and Ken clearly loves you. More than he probably ever loved me. We’ll figure something out.” “You’re not upset? You deserve to be.” I snap at him for a second, “I know what I deserve. Don’t tell me what I fucking deserve.” “You’re right, I’m sorry.” “No, it’s fine. Let me just sit with this.” That’s when I finally hear it. The band on the stage was playing acid jazz. It felt like a warm breeze, like a hug from my father. It was that warmth that calmed me down. “I’ll be back tomorrow; we’ll talk

more about this then. Sound fair?” “Sounds fair.” As I leave, I see another man standing by the door, he looks familiar, but I can’t place him. My mind is being pulled in too many directions. He opens the door and gives me a smile. It’s one I’ve seen before, but I still can’t place him. “Good night, hope to see you again soon.”, he says as he opens the door. I’m not sure why, but it feels genuine. I believe him.

It Was You Who Got Me Here

The new kid was a good choice. Before he showed up, it was just me, I took care of everything. I never had much traffic in here, but it was wearing me down, I was getting tired of dealing with people. I knew if I wanted to keep the place open, I’d have to bring someone else in. Someone else needed to tend the bar, someone who could actually speak with others, hell, maybe someone who actually enjoyed it. Jonathan seemed competent enough. He didn’t know his way around the booze at first, but I taught him what I knew. Kid’s a natural, he’s been drawing in an actual crowd. At first, I hated it. The noise of conversation, the vocal waste of people’s lives. I couldn’t stand it, it made it hard to appreciate the music. At least, that’s what I told myself. The kid did something to me. He changed me, softened me up. He actually listened, he at least pretended to care. With him, it was hard to tell what was bullshit and what wasn’t, and that was enough for me. Before I knew it, I started mingling with the regulars, even got to know their names, except one.

This guy was cold, dead, only there for the drinks. Seemed like he was running from something. I know that feeling all too well. Jonathan finally broke through to him though. Before you knew it, the guy had life in him, he was happy. They look good together. That wedding ring on his finger might complicate things, but they'll figure it out. That happiness seemed infectious. There were smiles and laughs everywhere. This was the way of things for a while. This was the new normal, and I gotta say, I didn't hate it. Then yesterday, someone new walked in. I knew her the moment I saw her, but she came in with a purpose, so I left her be. I knew that the wedding ring on his finger was gonna cause problems. She walked right up to the kid and asked what the hell was going on between him and her husband. Jonathan kept his cool, but you could tell he was hurting. He didn't mean for it to happen this way, it seemed like it just kind of did. After an hour they make a bit of peace, and she starts leaving. I make my way to the door, wish her a good night, and flash her a quick smile. She looked to be in a better place than when she walked in. That being said, the only thought crossing my mind was that I couldn't believe it. Twice in one lifetime. It was her.

Today's been just another day. Same crowd. Got the usual band in, but I don't know. They're playing something fierce tonight. I ask Jonathan how's he holding up. He's putting on a brave face, but I can tell he's hurting. I offer him the night off, but he says he's got it, that he wants to settle things and move forward. I can respect that, so I leave him be. About half the night goes by when I see them. They head straight to the bar and ask Jonathan to talk with them somewhere quiet. I'm worried about the kid, but deep down I know he'll be alright. If he loves him the way he seems to, it'll work out. Sure enough, they all pop out of the back another hour later and seem the better for it. Jonathan and Ken, I think that's his name, embrace, and all seems calm. Her, though, she's fine, but obviously hurting.

I don't know if this'll work, but I figured what's the harm in trying. I walk up to the stage and ask the band to play something special. Jonathan walks up to me and says he'll go ahead and take that night off. I tell him goodnight and wish him luck. I don't know what happened, and really, I don't need to know. It's not my business. After him and Ken leave, I notice she's still at the bar. I just walk behind the bar and ask her, "How are you holding up?" "How the fuck do you think?" "Fair enough, fair enough", I reply sheepishly. "Here, drinks are on me tonight." I pour two glasses of our most expensive whiskey. "What's the occasion?", she asks bluntly. "Figured you could use a drink, and I find whiskey goes down the smoothest after a rough night." We down our drinks and keep our eyes on the bar. "Thanks. It's been a bizarre one. I'm just feeling lost." "I find whenever I need direction, I turn to music."

I point towards the stage and the band starts blasting. It takes her a moment, but she recognizes it. "This is Free Your Mind. James Taylor Quartet, right?" "Good ear. I figured I'd finally hook you up." "What do you mean?" Her face wore an expression of utter bewilderment. "Back in ninety-five, you asked me if we carried any James Taylor Quartet. I know I told you we'd have it in next time you were in the shop, but I figured it's better late than never." It took her a second, but it finally sank in. "You worked at Empire in Queens?! You remember me?!" "Remember you? Shit, you're the reason this place exists! It was you who got me here!" For a split second, a spark of joy flashed across her eyes. "Before you, I'd never heard of acid. I hunted down any information I could, trying to understand what the genre was, who the players were. By the end, my life was changed. That's why I opened this place up. I wanted to spread the good news." There was a smile on her face now. In that moment, she forgot her worries and remembered what it was like to connect with another human being. "I can't believe you remember me. I can't believe this place exists."

We talked and talked. It felt like time froze. “By the way, I still don’t know your name. I’m Isaac.” “Hi Isaac, I’m Lauryn. It looks like I’ll be coming here again. Hopefully under better circumstances.” “Miss Lauryn, you are welcome here any time. Your drinks will forever be on the house.” “Oh no, don’t tell me that. I might never leave then.” “This is something I never say, but I’d be glad to have the company. My doors are always open.”