

Life at War

Tonight was my night. Tonight I was reading. There is a certain feeling that comes with getting up in front of the masses of strangers. It's the tightening of your lungs, making it harder to breathe. It's the sweat that pours from your pores then chills to make you feel something other than scared; discomfort. That discomfort keeps you moving, keeps the words flowing. It's speaking without knowing, whether you'll make it to the end, for fear that someone will pull out a gun and shoot, killing you and your creativity, metaphorically. Luckily, I live in a bullet proof vest. It's the applause, or the booing, both are just as the other to me. With clapping comes praise, but also lies. Groupthink is a real son-of-a-bitch. While the few boos that weakly resonate within the applause are the honest disapproval. That's what I listen for. Honest disapproval. Makes me know that I'm doing something right. I round the corner of 5th and Maple, entering the convenience store for more cigarettes.

Inside was empty. The store clerk was either in the back or not in. I walked up to the counter and rang the service bell, once. A few moments passed, I rang it again. Still no one. I turned and walked over to the snacks aisle. I picked up a pack of trail mix on sale and read the label. "A mixture of high energy, all natural ingredients to keep you fueled up and going! Ingredients: Peanuts, Cashews, Almonds, Cranberries, Raisins, and M&M's." I put the packet back on the shelf. To my left there is an ice box. A "ON SALE" sign hangs above the beer section of

the box. I open it and grab a six pack of Pabst Blue Ribbon, "Originally \$5.99, now only \$4.99," and go back to the counter. Still no clerk in sight. I ring the bell, this time with much more frustration released in my tiny slaps to the chime. A teen runs out from the back room, hands wildly attempting to button the buttons on his shirt, belt still undone.

"Hi...uh...ho...how can I help you?"

"I'm in need of service so I can get the hell out of here. Some of us have things to do, damn it!"

"Of course, sir!" the kid took a large gulp, "What can I do for you?"

"This and a pack of Spirits, menthol." He hastily reached up and grabbed the cigarettes, then rang me up fast as if he were trying to make up for lost time. What he may not realize is, time can't be made up. Once it's lost, it's lost."

"\$12.31," he tells me.

"What, no discount for killing my time?"

The kid just stares at me, not knowing how to respond. I hand him my last twenty and get the change. Seven dollars and sixty-nine cents. I slide it in my pocket and look up at the kid.

“Look, kid.” I say to him, “I know what you’re doing back there.”

The kid’s relaxed expression falls from his face. He is frozen, turned towards me, unsure how to respond.

“You’re back there disposing of the shop owner’s body.”

“Excuse me!” the kid cried out.

“Wait until I phone the police about this.”

“That’s not what I was doing, sir! I swear!” A young blonde with a decent face, but large bust walks out from the back. I turned away from the both of them and headed for the door.

“I swear, sir! We were just...” I cut the kid off.

“Listen, if you really swear over something, you wouldn’t jinx it by swearing. That’s how I know you’re lying. I hope, for your sake, you don’t drop

the soap in prison. A good-looking guy like yourself will make a tasty treat for some butt-fucking inmate once the police hear about this. I swear they will.” I turned and left. As I exited the store I could hear the kid begin to weep and the faint words, “What a fucking asshole,” leak from the blondes ruby lips.

As I continued down the walkway, passing a closed down barbershop, I crack a beer and begin to think. That’ll teach him to fuck on my time, I reassure myself. The world is a shitty, cruel place, and someone had to show him just how horrible people can be. Had he killed the insane man’s time, he’d be dead. My sanity spared his sad soul. He’ll realize when he calms down that it was all just a rouse. Nothing more than an awfully hidden lie. Either way, kid had it coming, and kid will get over it. Especially like a woman like that at his side. I take a gulp of the beer as I walk, feeling victorious.

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Three cigarettes and four beers later, I’m almost at the location of the reading. It is placed in a more pleasant part of town. I’m not fond of it. The upscale, classy nature of this area. It is just a breeding ground for people who like to think they’re better than everyone else, when really, no one person is better than the other, or worse for that matter. We’re all capable of the same things when we’re pushed in just the right direction.

I’m two buildings down from the spot when I pass a local bookstore. I usually never stop to look in the window. There never seems to be anything worth

reading. For some reason, tonight I was compelled to do just that though. I pause in front of the large bay window, and turn towards it. Just as I suspected, there is not one author worth reading in the window. Just a bunch of new age gimmicks and contemporary sex stories. These were the Hemingway's, the Huxley's, the Vonnegut's, the Hansum's of our time, and it made me sick to my gut. I continued to scan the books desperately for something worth while, some sort of salvage to our cultural downfall. That's when I saw it. One decent author had made the cut. "Broken Petals, Fluttering Wings," by Rachel Le'Oré. She had made the cut. I stood staring at her book, wondering what the contents of this one may contain. Her last book was all poetry. It wasn't filled with any pain, any struggle, but only the beauty of the world that we tend to forget about. That was why I enjoyed it. It was an escape from my monotonous lifestyle of up and downs, with the one singular outcome. I checked my watch. The time was 7:43pm and the reading was in one hour and seventeen minutes. I took one more look at the book then walked away from the large bay window. Had the store been open, I thought to myself. I probably would have bought it with what few dollars I have left.

I walk pass the shut down adult store and a double-wide McDonalds that was built out of necessity to provide for those less fortunate. The spot, which is conveniently named **The Spot**, is right next store to the fat factory. I grab the tarnished bronze handle and pull.

Inside the tiny venue is a bar and a small stage. The carpet is plush and red. The walls are a disgusting mixture of pink with hearts, with hues of deep blues scattered randomly overtop. It's ugly and beautiful at the same time. I go

straight for the bar and order a vodka-7. The bartender, Jillian, asks me if she wants me to hold anything for me. I nod and hand her the remaining two beers. She labels them with my name, "Charley," and places them in the ice box. I sip at my vodka-7 and wait for 9 o'clock to roll around.

After some time passed, and I finished my first vodka-7, I looked up at the clock that hangs on the wall I'm facing. It has a moldy green portrait of Benjamin Franklin as the background, with numbers that are written identically to those that are presented on currency. Money is inescapable, I think to myself as the clock rolls onto 8:33pm. Jillian glances over at me. She's a large woman, with thick thighs and broad shoulders. Her build is almost reminiscent of a man's, except she has these cannons that she likes to let hangout, perhaps to remind the patrons that she is a woman after-all, despite her large frame.

"So how's the writing going, Charley?"

"Oh. Just fine Jillian. I'm working on my latest novel these days."

"What's it about?"

"I don't know yet. Can you get me another drink?"

"Can you actually pay for this one? The last one was your house drink for reading and I'm not picking up anymore of your tabs."

“Of course I can pay for this one.”

Jillian glares at me then reluctantly mixes me up another vodka-7. She slides me the drink down the rail.

“So where the hell are you going to get a real job? You look like shit.”

“I feel great.”

“You know you can’t live like this. Bumming off each woman that feels sorry for your pitiful ass. Being a writer is no excuse to live this way.”

“I feel more alive living like this than any other man who has a decent job. They just waste away behind a desk, and for what? A nice retirement plan? The hell with that!” I throw back my vodka-7, downing half of it. This is all I ever hear from people anymore. This is why I can’t stand being around people very long. They all just act concerned for my well-being, when they don’t really know what is good for my well-being. How else do they ever expect me to make it in life with a dull day job that leaves no time for me living? They just don’t understand the requirements of the occupation I pursue.

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As I continue my pre-reading ritual of drinking to numb myself, I hear the door open then close. The first of the crowd, I think to myself. The first lemming. I take another sip and ignore the audience member.

The crowds haven't been very big, which I am fine with. I don't enjoy reading much, but it gets my shit out there and that is what is important. By getting to the place early I'm able to gauge the size of the crowd before going on stage. It's good to do so as not to be overwhelmed once you did get up there. It's part of my pre-reading ritual. My preparation. I'll be relieved if it's a small draw tonight. I haven't written anything worthy of a large draw recently. Although, tonight I will be reading something new. Even this piece isn't worthy of any more than fifteen ears. I get wrapped up in thinking about the crowd size when the lemming takes a seat next to me. I turn to see who it is. I stay at the face, trying to remember where I've seen that face before when it hit me.

“You wouldn't happen to be Rachel Le'Oré, would you?”

I could feel my lungs start to tighten with nervousness just sitting in her presence. She turned her head gently towards me.

“I would happen to be,” she tells me with a French wisp in her words. She turns back towards the bartender and lights up a cigarette. It's thin and elegant looking, much like her.

I look up at Jillian and hold up two fingers. She rolls her eyes at me, but complies. Moments later, two vodka-7's are placed in front of us. Rachel Le'Oré looks at the drink, then back up at me. She flashed a subtle smile, then nipped at the drink.

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“How do you do it?”

“Do what?”

“Make it? Stay calm for readings? Be successful? How'd you do it?” I asked her, my words were beginning to slur. The vodka was winning the war.

“Don't be a young hot shot, for starters.”

“You're young though.”

“I'm almost forty.”

“Well shit, you don't look a day older than your twenties.”

She laughed lightly and continued talking, “As for staying calm during readings, just breathe. Just remember that they come to listen, regardless whether it’s good or bad. And don’t drink too much or eat too much before hand.”

“Guess I’m fucked on the drinking aspect.” I slug down the half-cup of remaining Vodka-7 and order a beer and a shot of whiskey to go with it.

“You should slow down if you’re reading.”

“I’ll be all right. How’d you become so successful?”

“Patience. It’s all about patience and perseverance. Don’t stop when you think you should, don’t stop when you’re told you should. Just clock in, put your time in, and never stop putting pen to the paper. Even if it’s not at a very convenient time. The more you write, the more likely you’re going to have that one thing that is good and is going to take you places. Just always remember, you are your words.”

I look into her eyes, hypnotized. Her words floated right through me. I’m caught in this drunken trance over her again until a patron bumps in-between us. I snap back to reality. I look up at the clock. It’s 9:01pm. The show is about to start and I’m headlining. I finish my drink and head around to the back of the stage to do some final reads and finish my pre-reading ritual.

I peek from behind the curtain at the crowd. Full house. I'm sweating terribly now. My gut is in knots. I go to the bathroom in the final minutes I have remaining before the reading starts and begin vomiting.

"You all right, sir?" A gentleman in the bathroom stall to me left asks me.

"Yes, yes. I'm fine. I'm reading tonight."

"First time? I can see how that could get to a man, especially with Rachel Le'Oré following you up."

"It's not my first time reading."

"Oh." The man hastily wiped then flushed.

Over the loudspeaker, I heard my name being called to go on stage. I splashed some water on my face, dried it, then left for the stage. As I made my approach, I dug around in my pockets for my nights reading material. My hands furiously wandered all over my body, frantically trying to find them in one of the four pockets I had on my person. Switch swiftly between butt pockets to side pockets, my jeans were empty.

"Damn!"

Rachel looks over at me. “Everything all right?”

“Yes, yes, yes. Everything is fine!”

I grabbed a napkin and quickly scribble down some words. I can’t help thinking to myself, “Maybe this is my first time.” I walk out on stage as they call my name for the final time before moving on to another candidate who’d like to read. I stand, center stage, covered in sweat. I swallow hard, clear my throat and begin.

“This is a new poem I wrote. The only poem I brought with me. I’ll make it short and sweet so we can get Rachel up here fast as possible. Okay. Here we go. This one is called “Wounded Dogs:”

**we’re all just
wounded dogs,
bleeding out.
waiting for
something;
anything
that could
save**

us.

The crowd remains silent. No one claps immediately, but slowly, looking around at each other with confused faces, they begin to clap. It builds and builds until there is thunder in the room. No one is standing, although, a few stood then sat right back down. There I stood, center-stage, applause washing over me. I acted grateful, but deep down I hated it. I knew no one would love my words, love me this much. Over from the bar, I heard a soft boo under the thunder. It was just barely strong enough to kiss my ear. I looked over and Rachel was booing me. Her face was serious, yet there was a smile locked on it. Finally, I think to myself, the truth.