

THE RESTAURANT AT NIGHT

There was a diner down the street that never locked its doors. There was no closing time. No last call. He knew this, and he also knew he had a \$20 bill in his wallet. He lay half-clothed, tentatively covered in a blanket, his stomach empty and his head in a dozen different places. Without looking at the clock he knew it was probably two, and he began to reason that staying in bed listening to the broiling buzz of the city through his window was entirely pointless.

He swung his legs onto the wooden floor and put on his crumpled pants, standing up and tightening the belt. He buttoned up a shirt and grabbed his hat. The call to go out was some compulsory feeling that felt hard to shake. But eating always made him sleepy and it seemed better than tapping his thumb on the top of the mattress.

As his fingers worked the laces of his shoes, he looked at the mess of his studio apartment. There were small piles of work clothes he only used intermittently when the phone rang for two or three days of work at a time. Scattered newspapers with sections circled or underlined in pencil, magazines carelessly thrown around --some paid for, some lifted from unattended newsstands. He didn't own any furniture. The kitchen was a modest room with a small stove on the 2nd floor. It was shared with other tenants of the building, and the smell of poached eggs seemed to cling to the room at all hours of the day.

Carefully shutting the door, he tiptoed down the stairs. A woman in the flat directly below him had made a remark about his nocturnal comings and goings. She had used the word insomniac, and it stung in a way that felt like a label had been placed upon him. It sounded very medical, rolling off her lips like a judgment or a bad stigma. He was a man currently out of work, and never really got tired. It was that simple really. Being over a month behind on rent will make only an overabundance of thought at the wrong hours.

There had been a fresh rain in the evening that tried feebly to cleanse the sidewalks. It was quiet out, or at least as uneventful as the city could get. Forgotten men in sleeping bags stirred in the doorways on 71st street, and a stray taxi here and there went by in the hopes of picking up a lucky fare. This was his favorite time of day. The people lay in their beds asleep, or at least trying to. If the daytime was a bleeding wound then the dark early morning was its salve. Everything healed itself before the clockwork of chaos started over.

He liked the rain. It took away or at least covered up the stench of piss, the lingering odor of trash that hung around like the bad evidence of population density. It made everything rise, the dust and the dirt smelled like mud filtered through a cloud. He didn't find himself repelled by the filth of the city, but when given a light scrubbing he could feel the difference it made.

The 24 hour diner was not a long walk. It was on 78th street right past a blue chip art gallery he'd always wanted to enter. But he felt as though his status as a poor temp worker would be written plainly on his shabby clothes --that whoever tended to the paintings and sculptures would rightly view him as an imposter with no money for fine

art. But he often lingered near its windows to look at whatever work was on display. On this particular night it was a woman in a blue dress with a stoic expression, lips closed, her cheek bones rising upward as if wanting to smile but unable to. Her hair was blonde and her eyes were innocent; she was depicted standing with her side facing out, her right arm gently clutching a shawl draped across her that rested on the right shoulder. It had a dark green background that made everything about her that much more vivid. He held contact with her luminous eyes, seeing into them for an extended moment before tearing himself away and continuing down the empty street.

He came to the giant glass windows of the restaurant and glanced inside before entering. Except for a couple sitting in the corner, it was as vacant as the sidewalks he'd crossed to get there. This corner eatery was always brightly lit, standing on the corner of 78th and a narrow one way leading toward uptown. At night it was like a terrarium. You could see everything going on inside. On this particular night, there were only a few occupants. The fellow who worked the overnight shift was doing busy work, washing and drying glasses while a man and a woman were perched over the bar in the back corner. There was a solemnity to the scene inside that matched the mood felt out on the road.

He went in and made his way toward the end of the bar, several seats down but away from the entrance. There was something about sitting near the door, particularly with his back to it that spurred superstition and anxiety. The three glanced up at him, gently sized him up, remained silent, and went back to how things had been a few seconds before. It was cool inside, so he left his hat and coat on. A menu was slid in front of him and the man behind the counter dumped ice in a glass and poured him some water.

"I just want a burger and fries," he ordered, pushing the menu away. The fellow tossed it under the counter and went to the kitchen, where moments later the tell-tale sizzle of food could be heard and smelled.

He tried not to look at them, but couldn't help but notice the couple seemed to be in a tense and unhappy mode of silence. There seemed to be a gulf between them, a stark divide that could be felt even ten feet away. The woman had striking features –dark and expressive blue eyes that were nearly overshadowed by a long and full head of flame-colored hair. Something about her expression seemed sad and distant. The man seemed to be a mite older than her, with a hawk-like nose and chin that carried a perturbed gesture of discontent. They each had a coffee cup in front of them, but neither seemed interested in drinking from them. They both looked downward, clearly thinking heavily but lacking the will or desire to turn these thoughts into words.

How strange to be in a place like this in the early morning hours, he thought. A person has to have a real reason to be here. It takes an effort to be awake still, or to get up this early and wander out into the world for a seat at this bar. He was hungry and restless, that was good enough for him. But this couple who were oddly dissatisfied merely seemed to exist in this space, like an ornament that gave off no beauty. Perhaps they'd been out all night drinking and weren't ready to go home yet. This explanation didn't seem particularly plausible. They both seemed sober. There was something deeper at work.

The cheeseburger and fries came and he set in quickly to eating. "Can I get a coke too," he asked. The man behind the counter pulled a glass from the refrigerator and went over to the fountain. He came back with dark bubbles, tossed a straw into it, and walked

away saying nothing. As he took big bites and tore into his meal, the couple began gathering their things to leave. The woman took a crumpled bill from the wallet in her purse and tossed it on the bar. She stuck her palm out and did a small wave to signify that she didn't need any change, and the two headed brusquely off into the night.

The food wasn't great, but it was worth the short walk from his frustrating bed. As he dipped the fries in ketchup and sipped his coke, he couldn't help wondering or theorizing about the cold couple who had just left. Whatever their arrangement was - romantic or otherwise- seemed deeply beset by some kind of problem. Their body language had been steeped in a kind of painful distance. Though they sat next to one another, neither one seemed like they wanted to be there. In over ten minutes neither had uttered a word. It was almost unsettling being in a room with three other people and no one had said anything. It was as if a funeral were taking place. The only thing that kept the room from an eerie quietude was the sound of piano rags coming from the kitchen. The faint and familiar music could be heard from an AM radio underneath the order window, tinkling in whatever tiny cheer it could summon underneath the austerity of florescent lighting.

As he took the last few bites of his food, a sense of satisfaction came over him. He felt content to go back home and lay his head down. With his stomach full he could make a real commitment to sleep. He paid his tab, left a little extra, and went back out into the cool morning. I hope I receive a call tomorrow, he thought. If I can just get a solid week of work, I can buy a few groceries and have enough to get the landlord off my back. Even just a couple of twelve-hour construction shifts would make a huge difference.

As these circular thoughts preyed into him, he suddenly noticed an unexpected sight. Two blocks from the diner, that unmistakable flame-colored head of hair from the cafe was directly in front of him. The woman was in her large grey overcoat, curled up in a ball against the brick of a savings and loans office with her face tucked into herself. The man she'd been with was nowhere to be seen, and the sight of her gave him a feeling of intimate dread.

He approached her carefully. There were tiny sobs and sniffles to go with her precarious state, and it was clear something had happened after the two had left. When he got close, he decided to say something to her. It was none of his business, but he felt some sort of moral obligation all the same.

"Excuse me, uhm, miss . . ."

She didn't look up, either ignoring him or unable to respond.

"Ma'am?"

A moment went by and she finally acknowledged him by looking up. Her dark blue eyes were dulled by tears, and the make-up that had once been so carefully applied now ran despairingly down her face.

"What do you want?" she asked.

"I just wanted to check if you were okay."

She looked at him through her tears and said, "I'm fine. Go away."

He noticed a bruise across her face that hadn't been there before, a scarlet blotch that was so prominent across her left cheek that it was impossible not to notice. He felt a sort of chill go through him. Rather than address the obvious, he tried to think of something to say.

"Do you have somewhere to go?"

She sniffled. "No."

"You shouldn't stay out here in the cold. Do you want to come with me to use a phone? Maybe there's someone you can call . . . "

The woman was silent, thinking it over. He stood there clenched up in his clothes, trying to project an aura of good faith. She was a battered creature in the damp morning and it was impossible for him to ignore her. This twilight circumstance wasn't a situation she chose. Something had happened to thrust it upon her, and despite her stubbornness it wasn't going to fix itself by huddling in a cold doorway and streaming with tears.

"Listen," he began. "I live just down the street. You can come with me and figure out what to do. I want to help you. Don't stay out here. Please." He felt whatever indifference he had to his fellow humans melting away in layers. The city can harden a person. But all it took was this woman in a state of shock and abuse and pure vulnerability to trigger his deepest resources of empathy.

She looked at him under the bath of streetlights, her eyes straining across the shadows of his face, his shabby clothes, his weary expression, the boots that were coming apart. She looked for reasons not to trust him, to scream at the top of her lungs for him to run off into the night and let her be. But she couldn't. Nothing about him intimidated her or gave her cause for worry. So she stood slowly, unassisted, and took a long look into his eyes. He seemed beaten down, perhaps even in a state of perpetual unhappiness. He was unshaven, a bit morose, maybe even plagued by a touch of some form of desperation. But his weak posture and dull expression rendered him harmless. They stood about the same height, and her instincts spoke to walking with this man so as not to be alone.

They began in the direction of his apartment. He tried to think of something to say but he didn't find the words. She broke the silence after three blocks of tense footsteps.

"He doesn't usually do this," she said. "I don't know."

His head was cast downward, eyes on the pavement, the path, choosing what to say.

"Has he done things like this before?" he asked.

She paused inside at the question, ever more unsure of herself. "Yes. Not like this though. Not the same. But yes."

They arrived at his building and he produced a key to let them in. The stairs up to the 4th floor were kindly deserted, and they entered his messy flat.

Upon looking at the scattered debris of his little world, she wondered to herself why on earth she had decided to accompany him. He began to quickly clean and organize his newspapers and magazines and kicking the dirty garments of clothing in a corner pile. She wasn't sure whether to sit or stand.

Taking a cue from her mild confusion, he told her she could have a seat on the edge of the bed.

"Would you like to use the telephone?" he asked.

"No, I'll be fine."

He finished his rudimentary cleaning tasks and sat down on the floor, his back propped against the wall.

"If you need to stay here for a day or two, you can. I live alone here. If you're in trouble at all, I really don't mind."

She gazed up at the high ceiling, sized up her surroundings, and let out a stifled yawn. "What do you do for work?"

He half-smiled with his lips but cast his eyes away from her. "I'm unemployed right now. But I'm on call with a temp agency. I fill in when people are sick or take time off. Lately it's been pretty dry. The phone barely rings."

She regretted asking, but made up for it by digging even deeper.

"You can't find a steady job? There has to be something. This city is so large."

"It is. I've applied at different job sites. But I've always been what people call an unskilled laborer. I don't own any nice clothes to move up. And I'm dreadful in interviews."

She smiled and laughed for the first time, a pleasant yet flimsy giggle that briefly lit the room. "You can't be that bad!"

"I am though. It's terrible. Imagine going to see a theater production and nobody claps. Or a comedian and the audience just stares at them and doesn't get the jokes. That's how it is."

She doubled down on her laughter. This time it was more pronounced, maybe even a bit mocking. He frowned and tried to shake it off. "Well, what about you, miss?"

Her expression got somewhat serious, and there was a sense it wasn't going to be an easy answer.

"Three days a week, I would put together flower arrangements. I loved it -- smelling and touching petals from far-off lands. To be delivered for adornment on the tables of all the city's most rich and powerful.

"The other job, the one I made more money on, was at Broderick's. The furniture store on 37th street. I'd spend the day convincing people they needed the most luxurious pieces, whether they could afford them or not. The wealthy elite would write a big check and I'd take a commission from every sale.

"And that was fine. It was the young couple starting out or the man who wanted to impress beyond his means that began to push me away. The ones who couldn't afford it were always extended credit with exorbitant finance rates. I never liked feeling responsible for putting debt onto people.

"My sales were high but my soul was low." Her story came to an end and she looked somewhat worse for the telling.

"You speak about these things as if they were in the past," he said.

"I don't work anymore," she declared. "He made me quit. Both jobs. Said he made enough for anything we need and that I should stay home. My domain has become the space between our bedroom and the cookstove.

"I don't miss pushing armoires and China cabinets and bed frames from Italy. But the flowers gave me peace. I do miss that."

He wanted to respond, but he knew everything he thought of saying wouldn't come out right. Comfort wasn't going to come easy in this situation. But he didn't like the idea of her crying on the cold streets. And though she didn't want to admit it, she was at least a little bit reassured not to be alone.

"May I have one of your cigarettes?" she asked. He nodded, and she took one from the pack on the bed and lit it with a deep satisfying drag, holding it in her slender fingertips at face level in an exaggerated metropolitan style. Even the inflection she used

for the word seeg-uh-ret seemed to indicate a person who had at least tried to move in high society.

She leaned her neck toward the open window and exhaled a wispy plume of smoke, unable to hide the apprehension slipping out from her eyeballs. He took a deep sigh, more out of a listless fatigue than anything else.

"Before I was at the diner I stopped and looked at a painting in a window of an art gallery." He paused for a moment, trying to decide if this story was worth telling at all. He had begun to talk without considering where his thought process was going.

"I was enchanted by her. She had a quality the artist was able to capture that seemed rare to me, at least in that moment. I wish I had money. I would buy it."

She looked at his face. It was deep in thought. "Where would you hang it?"

His head swiveled around and he pointed at a short expanse of wall parallel to his bedside. She nodded her approval.

"I didn't even look at the price. Why bother? I'm behind on rent and I'm worried for the winter. You can feel it getting colder. It would be the worst time of year to go homeless." He stopped and regrouped his thoughts, realizing he was bringing the mood down. "I want to know who she is . . ."

The woman smiled. "It sounds like whoever did the painting must really love her. Maybe it was painted by a man and she was his gorgeous daughter."

"That could be. She didn't look famous to me."

"Or . . . maybe it was a girl he was in love with when he was young. But he lost touch with her and doesn't know where she's ended up so he painted her from memory because he still loves her."

This made him glow with ideas. "You're imaginative. I like that."

"I have to be," she said. "Life is better that way."

He detected something inside her that was partially broken, a touch of sadness in her that wouldn't be easily fixed. She stopped talking and stretched out on his bed, letting her arms lay motionless at her sides. The cigarette sat in the ashtray, slowly burning down to the filter. Her eyes were closed and she had finally been able to stop fidgeting. If he could look into her mind a few moments ago it would have been a circus of turmoil and uncertainty, but now her face read only calm. She was in the meditative space before sleep fully set in and he let her be, shifting his worn body onto the hard floor.

He lay there for an untold quantity of time, eyes half-open as the dawn began to break and morning's paleness gave everything the newborn ethereal treatment that seems even more potent when one hasn't slept.

When she stirred awake, he opened his eyes, his face looking away from her as she quietly gathered herself and readied to leave. He heard her putting on her shoes, and so he sat up slowly.

She looked down at him. "I was trying not to wake you."

"It's okay. I wasn't fully asleep."

She walked to the hanger by the door to retrieve her jacket, and he stood up to let her out.

"Thank you. For being kind," she said.

He followed her out into the hallway and she turned to him as she left, as if hesitant to confront her life waiting on the other side. Her eyes seemed to tell several stories at once. There was a pause, an awkwardness that can seemingly last forever when

two people are walking away without the proper formality of words. A connection made was being severed, and neither seemed to know how to keep the line open.

"Is there any way I can call you?" he asked.

"I don't think that's a good idea."

He felt a sense of concern, but knew he had nothing to do with her life.

"Are you going back to him?"

She looked at the carpet at her feet. "I must. It's where I live. All my things are there. It's my life. I'm not a runaway."

He didn't respond. These words seemed like they were meant to assure herself more than him. The bruise on her face had turned a darker shade, and in that moment he never felt more sorry for another person.

"Have a good day," she said.

He watched her walk down the stairway, and as she got to the first landing he went up to the rail and leaned down toward her.

"If you ever need to come back, the number on the box is 417 . . . "

She looked up and smiled, then continued down the steps.

He went back to the room and shut the door, sitting down on the edge of his bed where she had lain moments ago. He could detect her fragrance amid the full ashtray of charred butts on the windowsill. There were two cigarettes left in the pack and he lit one. Somehow he knew that he'd never see her again. He also knew someone with money would come along and buy that painting in the window within no time at all. Nothing beautiful ever lasts very long, he thought.

There was a small piece of blue sky visible just above a brownstone on the other side of 10th avenue, and he looked at it until it became a cloud.