

The Fire

You know who you are.

We were angels, bowling paper towels down aisle nine killing Father Time, waiting for a girl who had said ‘hi’ to me in Spanish class. Bleach bottle strikes we’d score down the rows of dog food and windshield wiper fluid and Tab would wind up and strike poses, making sure the bulge in his pants was just right. Cascading heads, using metal shelves to sport fuck the inventory, we’d knock everything down and we’d yell and whoop and cry out, initiate conquer, Roman soldiers on a holiday in a Walgreens.

Tab bought a pack of cigarettes from a decrepit toothless old cash register jockey. We stepped out into the city lights and Tab lit one up, lent one to me, I lit up, and we both breathed smoke and ash into the street. Winter was coming. I was nursing a cold. We turned the collars up on our jackets that just weren’t quite warm enough.

“Who are we waiting for again?” Tab said.

“This girl. We call her Gorgonzola. I don’t know her real name. That’ll be the first thing I ask her when she shows up.”

“Gorgonzola! Ha!”

“Right.”

“In my mind, she looks like a Hi-Ball. I’m calling her Hi-Ball.”

“Do you even know what she looks like?”

“Yeah. Of course. A Hi-Ball.”

The snow turned to rain and we crept up under the awning. The streets were covered in ice.

The Eau de Tab is the scent of smoke, cheap cologne and even cheaper condom lubrication, a stink that stuck to the molecules in the air long after he was gone.

I rented my extra room to him from the university standard my sophomore year and, immediately, we knew we were kindred spirits stuck in an ugly world.

“I had this crazy dream last night,” Tab said. “I’ve been having crazy dreams for a while.”

“Jesus.”

“Seems that me, my dad and my junior high school Phys Ed teacher were all at a Sheryl Crow concert together, front row. I had my arms around those two guys and my dad asked me about a movie that starred four young teenagers wanting to live in Robert Blake’s old house. I don’t know.”

“That’s not a real movie,” I said.

“I think I’m going to die soon.”

“What would make you think that?”

“My life is passing before my eyes in a very slow and indeterminate way.”

“Dreams are about the past.”

“I know.”

“I don’t remember any of my dreams,” I said.

“I remember all of mine. I even remember yours.”

“You’re not dying.”

“I’m not so sure.”

There was a pause in the conversation. It always happened when it got heavy like this. I waited for something to say. Waited for something that was brilliant and comforting to come to me, but my mind was a frostbite breeze. I just stood there and smoked and looked at the rain and sleet pour down over the awning.

“Let’s go back inside. It’s getting cold.”

I had gotten into college through the back door, but Tab and I used the front to enter into the drug store.

“How many Children’s Ny-Quils you think you can drink?”

“I don’t know. Four. Maybe five. Why?”

“I’ll give you ten dollars for each bottle of Children’s Ny-Quil you drink in the next fifteen minutes. You have fifteen minutes.” Tab looked at his watch.

“How much alcohol does it contain?”

Tab looked at the bottle, read the content label and looked surprised.

“Well?” I said.

“I wouldn’t have asked about the alcohol. I would have asked about the other shit.”

“Jesus, can I get sick and die from something like this?”

“No, no. Don’t worry. Drink up.”

“Do I get to choose the color?”

“Sure.”

I picked purple.

Tab lined up a dozen bottles of the stuff on a metal shelf in the picture window of the pharmacy.

“I’ll start timing. As soon as you finish one, I’ll crack the seal on the next one to conserve time.”

“Maybe this’ll cure my cold,” I said.

“Maybe it’ll cure your herpes, too.”

“Fuck you.”

I cracked open the first bottle and chugged it. It was terrible. Purple was a poor decision.

Two then three.

I was getting dizzy and my tongue was numb.

“This is wonderful entertainment.”

“I’m getting sick. Sicker than I was.”

“Define sick,” Tab said.

“I’m ready to throw up, that’s for sure.”

“Ny-Quil is an aphrodisiac.”

“Really?”

“No.”

I drank four and a half bottles of Ny-Quil in fifteen minutes. It felt like someone had dipped my tongue in latex house paint and left it to dry in the sun. I fell around the store, knocking a stacked display of dishwasher soap to the ground, cardboard lady and everything.

We were asked to leave by management, a scowling fat pockmarked teenager in a greasy wrinkled uniform with an inflated sense of her own power.

“Eat shit and die,” we replied in unison, as if it was written for us.

We left the store anyway.

We stood outside the revolving door and smoked a few more cigarettes. I started seeing Tab in triplicate.

“Gimme my forty-five bucks, Tab.” I reached out and poked a hallucination.

“You didn’t finish the fifth one. It doesn’t count.”

“Fine, then. Forty.”

“Don’t worry. Pay you tomorrow. I’m good for it.”

“No, you’re not.”

“I got the cash. Don’t worry, man.”

“Just don’t fuck me.”

I was never going to get my money. It didn’t much matter, though. I had done what he asked because his words resounded in my head like the echo of a conscience. I was not the type to back down, but I felt a little ripped off.

Besides, I was hungry.

Hi-Ball (or Gorgonzola or whatever the fuck her name was) still hadn’t shown an hour later. We stood outside in the rain, under the awning of the neon white drug store sign, waiting for her in the cold.

“The rain might let up in a while. Walking drunk in the rain sucks.”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Besides, there were some magazines I wanted to look at.”

“You want to look at magazines. I’m leaving.”

Tab peered into the store through the plate glass window.

“Check out the girl behind the counter?”

I looked in at the shift change.

“The blonde one?”

“No, the dark haired one.”

“Yep. She’s hot.”

“Oh yeah.”

The afternoon was turning into evening. A woman and a man waited silently for a bus across the street, seated at a park bench.

They struck up a conversation. I couldn't hear what they were saying but she laughed, tucked her hair behind her ear and smiled at the guy coyly.

"Looks like something is going on over there."

"Sure does."

"What do you think? Bus stop a good place for picking up women?"

"Good as any," Tab said. "Better than most."

We headed inside, right for the magazine rack, and started picking through the periodicals. Tab went straight for the celebrity rags, flipping through one after another.

"Look at these women, man!"

Tab showed me a glossy portrait of Natalie Portman in a red dress.

"When I die," Tab repeated, "When I die, I'm gonna get four or five Natalie Portmans. It's my idea of heaven, man. Infinite Natalie Portmans all doing my laundry, washing the dishes, scrubbing my boxers, really getting in there, keeping it generally tidy."

"Oh yeah?"

"Heaven is a stack of folded underwear."

He showed me a picture of Scarlett Johansson, black and white perfume ad.

"Hey, man. It's my paradise," Tab said. "They'll be all over me like white girls on brown rice."

There was a pause in the conversation.

"This shit is fucking killing me," I said.

We ducked outside for another cigarette. Tab swiped a tabloid to take with him. As we lit up, he flipped through the magazine innocuously. The fag dangled at the end of his lips and the glossy pages in his hands, he tore through for the shots of celebrities in pearl necklaces and diamond cum shot earrings.

"My idea of hell is bugs. Lots of 'em," Tab said. "I once had a dream that Bob Dylan was parking my car. I was driving a 1997 grey Hyundai Sonata, real shit box, and he took the keys and my leather coat, handed me a valet ticket made out of an orange sponge. And from my coat sleeves came all these bugs, spiders, roaches."

"Fucking bugs."

I pulled my bottle opener from my front coat pocket. I had swiped a beer from the drug store fridge.

Tab flipped through his celebrity rag, silent for a moment.

“Hey, look at this. Rock star ashes for two hundred dollars a pop.”

“That’s gotta be the hustle fuck of the century.”

“Without a doubt.”

“I would have to agree there.”

The sun had gone down completely now, and in the haze of the evening, lights from the street burned through the darkness of an otherwise silent night.

Tab ripped the picture of Natalie Portman from out of the celebrity rag, folded it up and put it in his shirt pocket. He tossed the rest of the magazine into the street. A stray dog that had his nose in a sewer grate lifted his head and watched the pages flutter onto the pavement beside him. The dog went over and nudged the magazine with his snout and started chewing through the glue that held the binding together.

“I wonder how one goes about writing phony scripts for pharmaceuticals,” Tab said.

“That’s a good question.”

I took another hit off my beer.

Headlights from cars quickly passed us by. The store closed. It was after six o’clock. Hi-Ball never showed. Figures.

Tab had an extraordinary idea. I was ready for anything.

It was cold and damp, dirty and the streetlamps illuminated the alleyway behind the store. We ducked into it, under a green awning, took our refuge next to a closed dumpster.

“Let’s start a fire,” Tab said.

“First things first.”

I made a futile attempt to start a wet cigarette. A dozen clicks of my dime store lighter—a flame, red and orange—I lit it and smoked it lopsided.

The inside of the dumpster, though, it must have been dry and warm.

The streets were covered in frozen rain. We needed some heat before the walk home.

“Are you ready for this?”

“Ready as fuck,” I said.

“Let’s do it then. Fuck those assholes.”

“Right-E-Oh.”

We took off one of my holey argyle socks, which was the only article of clothing on my body that was halfway dry. We doused the sock with the stolen beer. We stuck the sock halfway into the neck of the glass bottle and lit it.

The flames from the sock immediately burst up and produced billowing smoke.

I lifted the latch on the dumpster and threw open the cover. It banged hard on the brick side of the building next to the silent alleyway.

There was a pop of oxygen being consumed when we tossed the flaming bottle in. The fire burst into the air, six, seven feet high. Flames tore into the garbage, licked the side of the building. The smoke made our view of the night sky opaque.

We inched closer to the wild, warm fire, rubbing our hands together like hoboes in front of the blaze. Tab glowed in the light and his face recalled a distinctly funny joke.

And then, the screaming.

From inside the dumpster and within the flames, a figure arose.

The person was difficult to make out initially, but milliseconds passed, and from within the fire rising now two stories high, I saw the outline of a human being.

“Holy shit,” startled into reality.

The voice grew wild and frenzied, crazed. Part of me wished I could be taken away, but it was done, and all of me watched the figure in the flames moving with frenetic action, glowing like my awakened perception.

I watched, seemingly above myself, out of my own body, watching myself watching the fire in front of me, immobilized.

The figure climbed out of the trash receptacle, flames licking his back and head, his hair on fire, his face on fire. And the panic oxygenated a fire that ate through his body, blackening his bubbling skin, coursing through his veins. The scream started to die off. Fire had eaten through the figure’s neck and vocal cords, severing his ability to voice.

And as soon as the scream died away, I heard sirens.

We ran. We got out of the alley as fast as we could. My immediate empathy for the figure, if there was any to begin with, faded as his cry faded.

And that empathy completely died away as we heard the sirens getting louder, and we rounded the corner into a maze of alleyways behind the storefronts on the street.

The air grew colder as we rounded each turn, the heat of the fire grew more distant, the air wet with the mist of frozen rain. We ran in tandem, step for step, the clip clop of our shoes on the wet pavement sounded like wild horses stampeding inside my skull.

“Stop, stop,” I cried. I hugged a brick wall for support, out of breath, exhausted, a mile away.

“They won’t find us,” Tab said.

“I think so too.”

“Good thing.”

“God damn right.”

The sirens faded into the background noise of the city streets. I threw up on the sidewalk beneath a neon sign for a liquor store, bright red arrow picking me out of a lineup. My nausea was an afterthought and I surprised myself with the amount of vomit I produced. It was copious. Tab took a step back and let me exhaust myself. I got some on my shoes and my pants but took no notice. I wasn’t used to all this exercise.

“Damn, had enough excitement for tonight?”

Tab laughed, laughed the way he always laughed. And Tab kept laughing, uneasy and nervously at first, but soon I joined in, and once again, our laughter was raucous and loud.

Tab lit up a cigarette. He stood fast and tall, proud, invincible. He lit one for me, held two in his mouth for a moment, plucked one, put it to my lips. I was filled with an addict’s gratitude for the smoke to clear my lungs, for the taste in my mouth. I trembled slightly.

The two of us. We caught our breath and filled the air with the noxious odor of cigarette smoke and criminal sick. The street had gotten suddenly calm again, quiet without a car passing on either side.

In fact, my mind went to the image of Hi-Ball, dark hair and dark olive skin. The thought aroused me. She was stark in my mind, naked, turned. She had her hands at the small of my back. I had my hands around her throat.

Tab and I remained ducked in the alleyway for another few moments, the neon red sign with the bright and crooked arrow pointing conspicuously down at us, cycling through. We smoked. We turned up the collars of our leather jackets. We were free.

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