

The Devils We Share

I WATCHED THE SMOKE GATHER on the ceiling in coils, like so many snakes over plaster of Paris. The hum of street-noise, so like childhood with its rolling tires, anxious drivers and overeager newsboys could still be heard six floors up, and sometimes – I could swear it – I could make out whole halves of conversations. Whole slices of words and slivers of paragraphs, growing in back of my ears like a tide. A woman chided a child who had run barefoot in the street. An old man spun tales to the bootblack. It was all one in the noise. The air in the office was growing heavy, stifling. I wanted to go, raise the sash and lean out over the rumble, breathe it in to escape. But then the din and glaring sun would hurt all the worse. That was why I had drawn the blinds.

“What in God’s name has got into you this time Harv?” Morry took his cigarette from between his teeth and tapped it over a tray. His ordinarily stiff collar had wilted with the heat, and he had rolled up his sleeves exposing hairy, apish arms. “First you turn in an article sayin’ it’s done, which, by the way, it sure as hell wasn’t, and then you go an’ tell the old man that you won’t be available all mornin’. And you came in late, *again*, I might add, and not only that, *Barbara* says you haven’t drunk your regula’ four cups of coffee and you know somethin’s up when *Barbara* notices anythin’. So, what’s the spiel, huh? What’s the game, what’s the deal?” He waved his hand as if to get my attention, pulling the smoke in a lazy zigzag. “Are you even listening Harv?” I followed the smoke. His voice thundered in my ear and behind it churned the words of the passersby.

“Sure.”

“Bullshit. C’mon Harvey, just tell me what’s up will ya? For old time’s sake, will ya?”

I checked my watch. I could not make out the time.

“I’m fine,” I said, putting my hands flat on the desk, my knuckles bruised. “Really. I am.”

He watched me, very closely, lips pursed. He and his family were from the island, and he knew intrigue when he saw it.

“It’s about that party tonight, right?”

“Party?”

“Yes! You know? The party where every other major publisher this side of the Atlantic will be attending, and every fashion model will be too I shouldn’t wonder. We’ve been lookin’ forward to it for months, and now ya don’t wanna go?”

My mind swirled.

“I... guess I forgot.”

“Forgot? Well now’s not the time to be forgettin’ buster we gotta be at the Steak House at eight an’ we won’ be stoppin’ ‘til mornin’. I hope you dig yourself outta this funk before then because if you wanna land a deal with that publisher you were talking’ with, tonight’s the night buddy-boy. No slip ups, no muck ups, no meshugganah, understand?” He flicked the ash at me as he stood, I tried to brush it off, only succeeded in spreading the black deeper into my shirt.

“And hey...” he said, turning to look back at me. “I wouldn’t say this to just anybody okay, but... I know you don’ take a smoke or anythin’ but... you got any o’ that Whiskey I got ya at Easter?”

I looked at him, mouth suddenly dry.

“Well do ya? If you do, take a swallow okay. Steel yourself a bit. It’ll do you some good, I think.”

“I...can’t,” I said.

“Drank it all?”

“Not exactly.”

“What did you do with it then? Throw it out?” He laughed. “That was good product, I’ll have you know. My uncle’s special reserve.”

I looked at him, seeing everything in the frame of the door, the line of his clothes, the hunch of his neck. It was as if I was seeing him for the first time. Of a sudden, I was filled with an endless hate for him, the kind that burns in your throat and makes you want to spit.

His face slackened. He opened his mouth, then closed it, smoothing his pencil line mustache with a thumb. It was the way he thought.

“Well shit Harv. Never knew... Goin’ dry?”

I nodded, biting my tongue.

“As a bone.”

“Well... don’t say I didn’ warn ya.”

The night prior – the last night as I called it – had come like all the ones before it had, in a slow and evil way. Every minute, I fumbled at my papers, my pocket, wasting the seconds until I was free to go. I always began well, early in the day, writing out my thoughts with precision, and what others and even I could call a kind of artistry. But that was before it began to pound at my brain, demanding a drink. Spirits, liquor and wine were like water to me; taken as regular as breath so I felt the want.

Sometimes I would temper my appetite, testing myself, watching my hand tremble for need of ease because I sought to prove that I was so much better than the men I saw in *Puffin's Bar*. I proved myself, again and again, usually on Sundays. I would go entire days sometimes. It was in those hours that I made my worst work. The column I wrote devolved into clunky passages and Morry cursed me for it. Thus, I turned back, every time without fail – and that night had proved no different. I left the office and headed down to my apartment to change, get out of my work attire and into something a little more fitting.

I chatted with the neighbor who was a doctor. Sometimes he caught me going in and out of my door though I rarely caught him. Doctor Keller was his name and we got along very well.

“Now where are you headed tonight,” asked the good doctor in his piping, Teutonic voice.

“An old haunt,” I said, with a laugh. I toasted the doctor with a splash of my finest malt. He and I downed it, eagerly.

“I wish I was your age again,” said the doctor, wistful as he left my apartment. He was always welcome and had the spare key. “Such times we used to have,” he sighed. “I remember them well.”

I bade him goodnight and put on my coat.

“And what did she say to me dear? What did she say? Well, I tell you, nothing! Nothing, nothing nothing!” The woman cackled and put a hand on my arm. I suppose it was some kind of affection. If it was, I was too tired to care.

The Party was a swill of people, spinning whirling tops that fuzzed in the harsh electric glow. The women wore dresses and the men wore suits. Ties were white and gloves also, though these had been taken off so they wouldn't get greasy. It was a party for the few and we knew it well, dancing and eating and gossiping and drinking.

I was a stranger.

The men from my publisher gathered themselves in a little band of black and white, occasionally breaking themselves apart and mingling with the rest. It was a business party after all, so why would you waste a night talking to your friends? This, I think, was the philosophy of the woman on my arm.

I had planned to extricate myself after a conversation and a mouthful or two of caviar but now two hours had gone by and this woman, this overtalkative, clingy, desperate example of the female sex was as attached to me and I saw no possible way of escape. I did not even know her name.

She made a joke, a cruel one and one that was at the expense of some poor colleague of hers, but it was still funny. I laughed.

“That was good,” I said.

“No, it wasn’t,” she said, patting my arm.

“She’s right.” I looked to the third voice. It was on my right, but no one was there.

“What is it?” asked the woman.

“Nothing,” I said, confused.

“*Nothing*,” mimed the voice mocking. “Don’t be *stupid*. If there is anything I am sure of it is that I am very much *some*-thing.”

I thought I saw him then, standing with a drink in his hand. I could not see his face. My eyes blurred and I could not see him, but that voice was so much like...

“Who—”

“Oh you don’t want to talk to me,” he said, all snide.

“I’m *Miss* Gill, dear,” said the woman, hissing the *miss*. “Don’t you remember? I’m with the group that’s going to publish that book of yours, and say, have you finished it? I called your office today but...”

“You don’t want to talk to me,” said the man rolling his eyes. “I get it. So much for fun, old man. You’re turning soft in your age. Very sad. I wouldn’t suggest talking to her either, but then again you don’t listen to me anymore.”

I could see him now in a break of the party goes. It was me, in the way only a reflection is like you.

Puffin's Bar was a riot of people in party-going rig. Suits and skirts tossed this way and that as the radio played swing, though we could barely hear it for laughing. The bartender, owner, operator shook his bald head and I paid down my bill. He knew when I was done, and I knew that the man was honest, so I never complained, never once.

"You're a good man," I said loudly, counting change. He thanked me and clattered the register before tending to his guests.

As I fumbled for the door I heard a noise at the bar. A man was leaning over a girl in white, grinning. She was laughing. He was saying something into her ear. She pushed at his chest and he batted her hand. It was not playful at all, though she plainly thought it was.

In a moment, I figured he had had enough to drink. I closed the door, and moved back toward the bar.

The band turned to a dance that was slow and miss Gill pulled me onto the floor. My feet were heavy and I think I stepped on her toes but she didn't seem to care. Now that I think back on it, I think she may have been drunk, but then again, it all was little fuzzy. My hands were trembling, I know that much. And that image of myself, with its drink followed me and my partner. It kept close, muttering underneath its breath.

"No fun anymore Harvey, is that right? Save this? No offense at all but I find that depressing. No more nights on the town, no more drinks, just little greasy plates of appetizers and lonely women, because frankly, who would want you? No one worthwhile that's who. But you know something Harvey, you know, I really admire you..."

The woman was whispering something into my ear I couldn't make out. I turned my head to look at the thing, dead in the eye.

"I admire your courage, your gumption, your spunk! Really, I do. Because... it does take courage to walk away from someone's inner *ar-teest*. Someone's sense of culture acquired taste and all that but I'm glad you saw the light. Really. I am."

"Why?" I asked, not entirely certain of the answer I would get.

"Because," it said, "struggle's part of the game. All a part of the socio-political-spiritual-economic theory of the human race. It's all a powerplay of emotional self-denial and capitalistic

desire baby!” He threw his head back and laughed. “What a wonderful life you live in Harv, what a time to *live!* Don’t you see the world around you? Don’t you want to be in it? Experience all you can and take everything with you? That model talking to the executive is more worth your time than this shit-brained bitch. What an awful world it is too! Such injustice, in power, politics—all of it. Would you like to throw them down? You could! Would you like to leave them as they are? You may! What a life you’ve given yourself. What a century I gave you and its yours, your choice, to live and die! Think on that! But what a *choice!* What a choice to live without this!” he raised his glass in salute. “I say it’s worse than dying Harvey. Good buddy, I say you don’t know anything. I say,” he leaned in close, “I say, you are a fool.”

“Harvey? Harvey!”

The woman was clutching at my shirt as I slipped, twisted something, my ankle, perhaps, and fell. Another hand, stronger this time, caught me up and I was looking into Morry’s face..

“Ho now Harv, ho now slow down...”

We were there, in the middle of the floor, flies caught in amber as the music died.

“Shit Harv,” said Morry, looking into my face. “What’s gotten into you.” I looked over and it was still there, smiling down at me.

Quiet.

It was the last thing I heard.

I had made my way to the bar, and the young man set down his drink. He did not like what I had to say. He stood and the girl tried to tell him no, but he would not listen. The operator looked at me, shook his head but I was committed. Just why I cannot fathom save that something deep down had turned against this man and his obvious youth.

We went outside. It was cold and our breath stood between us.

I was strong, and it showed in a flare of speed.

I stood over him after the fact, and watched, suddenly stupid. He breathed, shallow, not at all deep.

And with a sudden clarity I walked home, away from the crowd on the street, up the stairs into my apartment. I was resolved. I took every bottle, opened the window and threw them to shatter on the walk. A car horn blared, and I closed the sash.

“That’s it, that’s it,” said a voice. It was the doctor’s. I could hear footsteps all around me. I tried to open my eyes, but the light hurt. “Don’t try to do that,” said the doctor, putting a hand on my shoulder.

“Easy now, Harv.” It was Morry’s voice. “Doc here’s gonna take good care of you don’t you worry.”

“Thank God...” It was a woman’s voice. After a moment I placed a name to it and tried to speak.

“Don’t do that, now, don’t do that,” said the doctor. “Here. Take this. It will help.” I heard a clink of crystal and felt the cup at my lip.

Out of habit, I drank.