

i Am the Grass

by Jeff Somers



I Am the Grass

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"...Shovel them under and let me work...

Two years, ten years, and passengers ask the
conductor:

What place is this?
Where are we now?

I am the grass.
Let me work."

-Carl Sandburg, 1918

I Am the Grass



THE FUCKERS think they can stiff me on the drinks, but I'm unstiffable, baby, and I've got them all on probation; I am not soaking up another fucking round until the Fuckers buy one, just out of common courtesy. Look at 'em, the fat fucks. Yeah, wave at me, fuck you. Wave back though. Never know.

Hate this bar. Too much fucking brass. Looks like a goddamned machine. Matches, matches...Norma giving me that look of disapproval, fuck her, over there with Chuckles, playing the faithful girlfriend. Chuckles smoked like a goddamn chimney, and you never saw her complain to him. No law against smoking, yet. Goddamned bluenoses ruining it for the rest of us, kill myself if I want.

Hands on my shoulders, it's Charlie Hammonds, maybe reading my mind. "How're you doing, Mack?"

His breath is a natural disaster, a rich supply of pepperoni, scotch, cigarettes, and bar nuts, all of it wheezed into my airspace with gusto, against all local ordinances. I wince, but manage a smile. Say something about being fine.

Chuck signals the bartender, a busty brunette who smiles at me in a friendly way, instant erection and quick fantasy, three seconds of something that will never happen. I flash my charmer smile, not much but all I have. Chuck lingers, sipping a new drink. Irritating man. The bartender waited a moment, was she eyeing me can't tell, now she walks away, and I'm left with Chuckie. Bastard. I smile at him and beam death threats his way via karma police band.

"Listen, Mack, got a proposition for you."

"Fantastic. Buy me a drink, then. No one else has."

Chuck's always a soft touch, and he laughs, and brings the brunette back to me with a wave of a fifty dollar bill. I myself cannot remember what a fifty feels like. I smile at the bartender like a rich man anyway.

"He's got a proposition for me." I say.

She grins. "Be careful. He looks mangy."

"He'll have a scotch on the rocks, a double." Chuckles says, oblivious.

Eyes meet. I shrug my eyebrows, she pours liquor silently. Could happily murder Chuckles, wonder if she'd rat me out. Takes Chuck's money and walks off, I eye her ass appreciatively, wondering if I have it in me to be a seducer. Am I the guy who picks up bar chicks and bangs them? Can't tell from internal probing. Never know with Chuckles hanging about like a bad skin.

"So listen, chum, and let me talk to you about something."

He's already talking, goddammit, the words coming out in a mushy jumble drowned out by the buzz of bar noise, sounds like a foreign language at first,

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until some mysterious higher function inside me deciphers it, translates it. Monstrous little bugger. Images of murder, Chuckles looking pale and wan, bled dry.

“Norma has this friend, you see -great girl, knockout, and she’s been bugging me to set her up with someone, and I figured, you’re perfect: no noticeable scars, relative good health, no public history of VD: perfect! Whatya say, double with Norma and me sometime? Come on, it’ll be -”

Glance back at the bartender, was she looking at me? Can’t be sure. Chuckie is still droning on. Norma, christ, he had no idea, there was no fucking way Norma wanted me to date one of her disciples, her minions, one of the many shellacked women ready to drain me of my precious bodily fluids and make me into a Chuckle. Pod people. Always recruiting. Had to be strong, forget this male bonding polite bullshit.

“No thanks, Chuck.”

Crestfallen. Idiot.

“Aw, c’mon, Mackie! This girl, she’s great-looking! And easy. Drops her drawers like at the slightest provocation.”

Cretin.

“Norma tell you that?”

“Common knowledge.”

Poor girl, I think the bartender is eyeing me again, when will Chuckles get the hell out of my airspace? Poor girl, got a reputation, probably started by assholes like Charlie here trying to pawn her off on salivating frat boys with no fucking visible fucking scars.

“Jesus, what are you gonna do instead?” Chuckie is saying. “Stay home? Watch TV? Come one! Come out, have a drink, dance with a girl, maybe get lucky, where’s the harm?”

My grandma she’s ninety-five, she keeps on dancing, she’s still alive - christ this guy’s the worst decision I ever made. She’s drifting around us again, waiting for him to leave. I can smell her. Satin bra, tight jeans, beer and perfume, cigarettes and shampoo.

“No harm -just not interested in getting involved in your little passion play - or *non*-passion play- with Norma, is all.”

Offended, little shit, people are so goddamned delicate these days. Like the fuckers over there, suggest they buy a fucking round, the fuckers’ll be all offended too, like I’d suggested they clean my bathroom this weekend, why not, where’s the harm?

“Jeez, try to help a guy get laid,”

I roll my eyes, but only inwardly. “Chi-rist, Chuck, here let me buy you a drink.”

Shithead Number One on my left drains his glass while shaking his head. “Naw, fuck you, man. Don’t need you to buy me any drinks.” He signals my

bar gal and she saunters over, smiling at me, no doubt about it, at me, those great blue eyes fixed on me and smile back and her nervous giggle and

She looks at Chuckie and the smile blands up a bit - I'd swear it. He orders us both a new drink, generous ass that he wishes he was, and then settles onto the stool next to me with dedicated, permanent weight, depressing, dooming, final. I've got a drinking buddy, just like that.

"Hey fellows, what's swinging?"

Reptilian, etherized grace, Conklin on my right now, another sweated-in suit, open collar, one of the Fuckers broken off from the rest of the pack somehow, sensing rebellion on my part, perhaps, seeking to quell the Pandy before he stops the booze from flowing. Bastard. Billy Conklin, friend to the crowded masses.

Drunk as hell, Billy Conklin. Wide, round face. Pale, white, sheened in sweat, seeing those sweat stains hidden under his arms, inhuman amounts of sweat, Billy's dying right in front of me, liquifying, melting. Distracted, look at him twitching on his stool, dark circles under his eyes, no sleep, that's what that is, exhaustion. What the fuck is exhausting Billy Conklin?

"Conklin, you know Chuck, eh?"

The reach-around handshake, limp and forgettable. Mumbles drift between them, half-assed familiarities. We're all friends. My bartender wanders over and looks at me as she asks us what we need. Charm, charm, I'm pushing charm out my eyeballs, a Death Ray of charm hitting her in the face and occasionally the chest. Christ! Cold and dark in here and my girl has no undergarments on. I let Conklin order for himself: bourbon, double, no ice.

"Billy," I offer with half-crooked sincerity, "you look like absolute shit." Wince, morphing into face-saving grimace, then the manly insults.

"Buy a guy a drink and you think you can just fuck with him, huh, you stupid Irish fag."

Friendly nonthreatening shrug. "Sure."

Perfume and nipples, Conklin has his drink. Prodigious gulp, coughing fit, patting himself for cigarettes. I glance at Chuckles to silently wonder about Billy. Chuckles is staring at the bartender. Underbrow animal weirdness. Looks like he'd as soon beat her up as fuck her.

Eyes on the bar. How did this happen to my evening?

Conversation wells up out of a previously undiscovered deposit, a gusher, involving what else when in Rome the bartender's chest.

Other Fuckers, then, swimming up to our boozy atoll, attracted by the smell of prurience and the bartender and her tightly poured little package driven away by the combined desperate funk of so many drunk bastards with slitty little eyes and too-loud laughs.

Oh and Norma, feeling ignored now in the face of this wall of testosterone, sniffing at us because she won't wear a white T-shirt with no bra and attract

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this kind of sad scene. I catch her eye and wink. Smile for Billy, then. Why not? You never know.

“Sombreros for everyone!”

Out of the murk a shout, Phil Dublen, flush with money he was secretive about, sly, jealous of the little shit sure but then his wealth might be bullshit considering how freely he spends it pasty white little The Fuckers laughing, now, slapping his back. Why in hell sombreros? Some odd little joke only he would understand, or his oddball pals.

Melt, the spring thaw, sloughing off Fuckers like so many Cinderellas racing out the door they’ll be pumpkins come midnight and we can’t have that, one by one they escape without having bought me a goddamned round in hours.

Burning cigarettes bitterly.

Me and Chuck and Norma and Billy. Norma because of Chuck, the ties that bind, after all. Billy there obviously waiting for Chuck to leave. Chuck a mystery. Me a mystery, why am I still here? Can’t say. I watch the bartender serve other people, drunker than us, happier than us because of it. She doesn’t look my way.

Sip my drink bitterly, my night ruined by Fuckers.

With a perceptible shift in the oppressive climate, Chuck finally scents Norma’s irritation and the Superstar Couple make their glorious way to the door, handshakes, chaste kisses, the subtle clink of icicles as they make their cool way to the door, where Norma turns her head and mouths call me at me, and winks.

Wink back, you moron.

“Mack, I need to talk to you, now I’ve got you here.”

I’m popular. William Conklin, my namesake, my fellow William, flushed and sweating and trembling slightly as he balances a tumbler in front of his face and studies it with feigned interest.

“You got a few minutes before I completely run out of gas, chum. Shoot.”

“Thanks, man.”

Naturally, for a few moments, silence, awkward male bonding discomfort and me swimming in its bitter atmosphere I just want to make some snappy see-you-later smalltalk with the bartender and see if I’ve been kidding myself all night I just want to go home and call Norma those tits! Poor Chuck and all but my god that’s what life’s all about: other guys’ girlfriends.

Then, Billy begins talking.

“Aw, forget it, Mack. Not worth it. And you got better things to worry about. Just loan me a cigarette and you’ll be a saint in my book.

Fair enough the pack comes out and crap, snake eyes only one crumbled butt left. I look up and Billy looks up from it too, his ashen face somehow even more desolate than before.

I start to say sorry man I need this to survive the walk home

“Come on, man, cut me a break.”

He’s pleading. Evil MacKenzie rises up from the pool of alcohol and spreads his tattered wings. Grin, sly.

“I’ll sell it to you.”

The first sincere smile from the old bastard Conklin, last King of the Ancient Conklins. He starts reaching for his wallet.

“How much, smartass?”

I hold up a hand. Evil MacKenzie is soaring on the warm winds of his own evil meltoff.

“You soul, Billy. Sell me your soul for this cigarette.”

Wide smile. Kidding, but a little bit of mean. He deserves it, eh?

Conklin’s face, white as a sheet, the hollows under his eyes in sudden sharp relief, rubbery like a mask.

“What’s that, hoss.”

I laugh. “Sell me your eternal soul, you addict. Write it down on that napkin, and sign it.”

Conklin’s smile like a bug crawling across his face, appearing from each ear, a line of ants.

“In blood?” he says quietly.

A moment, please, a quiet time of introspection, the easy thrill down my back - I knew he’d do it. By some trick of ESP, I knew it.

“No, Billy,” I say slowly, kindly, though the thick bastard won’t know I’m being kind to him, the thick bastard just thinks I’m being smug and mean which I am but kind, too, in an odd way you only get in the midst of extreme smugness and meanness. “Not blood. Pen will do, man. I’ll write it out, you sign, you smoke.”

That smile again, insectoid. “Deal.”

My revenge on a disappointing evening, drawn in cruel entertainment. Cocktail napkin, damp, take another. Drunker than I thought, can’t write well. Slide it over to Billy, who signs it with a shaky, palsy hand. Chuckling, apparently uncontrollably.

“What’s funny?”

Corner of his eye, red and swollen, unhealthy. “Hoss, I ain’t got a soul to sell.”



“WERE you worried I wouldn’t call?”

“Jesus, Mack, it’s...it’s after two.”

“Were you sleeping?”

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“...No.”

“Is Chuckles?”

“Don’t call him that. But yes he is.”

“You wanted me to call.”

“Hours ago, yes. Now I’m asleep.”

“No you’re not. No you weren’t.”

“...”

“I think about you.”

“You shouldn’t.”

“Then don’t ask me to call.”

Dial tone. The cycle complete, and I can sleep.



NORMA and I old story familiar ending -oh well, she still had me over Chuck or no Chuck which I doubt had anything to do with my irresistible charm, more likely the simple and dumb inertia of life: once you get into the habit of fucking someone it’s easy to keep fucking them. Nine tenths of the battle is getting into her bed, the rest is, as Woody Allen almost said, is just showing up. So after years of a mildly sexual relationship with sorority gal Norma, did Chuck cast that deep a shadow? Not on me, friends, not on me, and certainly not on Norma.

“What are you thinking about? And I’ve asked you not to smoke in here. He can smell it, you know?”

Take the girl out of the sorority but you can’t take the sorority out of the girl, I watch smoke rise to their pretty white ceiling with the occasional cracks spidering their way to freedom.

“Are you listening to me?”

My whole life I ignore Norma, Norma of the creamy skin and the buoyant tits, the fine aristocratic nose and the tapering tan legs. The only reason she paid attention to me, the only reason she slept with me in her husband’s bed. Show some interest, immediate sniffing in my low-class direction and be nothing but polite to me the rest of our lives. Not very original, but there it was.

Turn slightly to get her in vision, bedsheets up over her breasts as if I’d never seen them.

“Chuck smokes two packs a day. He wouldn’t know it if his house were on fire. If he does, just say it was you.”

Nostril flare, dramatic but gorgeous. I've pissed her off. Again and again, every little thing about me causing rashes and boils up and down her hide.

"What are you lying there thinking about?"

Confidences she was always mining me for confidences, little gems of revelation she could assume only she knew. I was a shallow man. I didn't know what she saw in me, or my small obsessions.

Amiable, relaxed, defusing.

"Billy Conklin. He sold me his soul the other night."

Silence

"What?"

Was that genuine interest, surprise?

"He wanted a cigarette, and I sold him one for his soul. He signed it over to me on a cocktail napkin." Shrug. "It wasn't serious."

"I think that's terrible."

"Billy thought it was funny."

Liar. Billy's face, flushed, sallow, unhappy, haunted.

"Well, I think it's mean-spirited."

"Of course it is. That's why it's funny."

Silence.

I V

I have never been followed in my life, as far as I know. It started as a feeling, a dull, barely noticed itch and a glimpse of some shadow I'd already noticed, hovering.

Paranoid, maybe. I get paranoid, sometimes, I admit.

V

Janine eyes me warily as I step off the elevator but fuck it, she's the receptionist, for god's sake, I'm not supposed to give a shit what she thinks if she knows does she suspect fuck she doesn't even know Norma and Chuckles, what could she know? Can she smell sex on me, sex that men like me unrepentant bastards like me assholes like me slip out of the office at one in the afternoon to go have? Does it hang around me like a cloud? An aura? A stink?

I smile at Janine, who is professionally middle aged and acts it every inch of the way.

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“Hey, Janine.”

“Long lunch, Bill.”

Fuck you, you goddamned

“No rest for the wicked!”

Gay, gum-snapping, insincere, but viscously so.

She buzzes me through, and I wink at her as I walk past. Down the featureless gray hallway, nodding at everyone, know half of em, but you never knew, the sallow-looking guy you ignore might be the Vice President in charge of Scraping Gum From the Bottoms of Desks, in a place like this. Must be a million VPs, who knew who they were? Janine might be one, undercover.

Loverly familiar desk ancient piles of paper never disturbed by the dirty touch of humans. Contemplate. Solid, dusty, serious, somewhat foreboding. That’s my job, those papers. Ought to do something with them.

Guilty glance at wastepaper basket.

Phone’s ringing, spike of unease -who is it?- but can’t hide forever, they know where my desk is too.

“Hello?”

Ladies and Gentlemen, I offer you Billy Conklin as I live and breathe!

“Hey, Mack.”

Begin five or six other things to distract me from Billy’s usually vapid conversation. E-mail. Video games. Memo to Human Resources re: vacation days. Short skirt at three o’clock.

“What brings your melodious voice to me, Bill?”

Heavy breathing - panting?- and lots of noise on the line, a pay phone, sounds like shit

“I need to talk to you, Mack. Tonight. Can we meet? Have a drink?”

Silent, internal groan. Having a drink alone with Billy Conklin, the only thing worse than simply having a drink with Billy Conklin somewhere in the room. Fevered thought...get out of it...but he does sound like hell...even more reason.

“Bad night, Bill -”

“Please, Mack.” Hisses, tight, rancid. I could just about smell his breath over the line. “It’s important.”

Fuck.

“Yeah, all right, Billy.”

“London Towne, okay? Seven?”

“Okay. But not out late, man. I need my beauty sleep.”

A little spirit then, comforting to hear. “Like it’d do any good.”

Dial tone. Fucking phone, this is all your fault. Short skirt at three o’clock again, who the hell gives a shit.

VI

Fucker's late, and here I am with a bunch of Tuesday night losers, Tuesday definitely not being the new Friday, contrary to what I've heard. The fellows in London Towne, scurvy bunch, hunched over dollar special beers and listening to Sinatra in a doleful, funeral kind of way. Just my fucking shoeshine has more spirit than this place -can't understand it, the place is usually so alive, Friday, Saturday, filled with me and my stinking friends, spending money, wasting time. Where are all these Fuckers on Friday and Saturday? It's a mystery.

Still, you can think in a quiet, desolate bar like this, long as you're not part of the desolation. Long as you're not on a first name basis with the off-hours bartender.

Give Billy until - here he is, dripping through the front door like an odor, wet from the soft misty rain outside and somehow washed out too, faded, like he was just becoming background music, the static that was Billy Conklin, to know him is to ignore him, the sort of fellow everyone knew but no one cared about, that everyone invited but no one and christ here he is, dripping in my general area, and I have to switch my cigarette to the left hand awkward and resentful and shake his limp damp hand.

Doesn't even take his coat off, sits down.

"Thanks, Mack."

Nod, friendly, observe the protocols. "Billy. What can I do for you?"

Slumped, defeated, limp. Grey around the eyes, thin on top, swelling around the waist.

"Mack, I...aw, hell. Let me have a drink, first."

Doesn't need a drink - but who the hell am I to say? I mean, I don't turn 'em down too often, do I. Wonder if I look like him, and don't realize it. Watch him limp up to the bar, pull some damp money out of his pockets, order a shot, down it with a wince, order another and a beer back to bring to the table. He's still gray, but with a tinge of sick red around it, like a nimbus, or an infection.

"God," Sounds like mud and gravel. he stares anywhere but in my general direction. "Mack, where'd it all go wrong, huh?"

Beat. Beat. Beat. I clear my throat. "What, Billy?"

"Everything." It's a sigh, an exhalation of sour air. "Christ, only ten years ago we were *kids*, you know? Young and dumb and all that. How'd we get here?"

Admittedly, London Towne on a Tuesday fucking night is depressing, but the drama is a little much. "Speak for yourself, compadre. I feel okey."

Eye drag up, finally, latch on, stare, bore in, and I feel the slick oily weight of them, regret all my bluff, all my bullshit here and just want to get

“Mack, you’re gonna think I’m crazy when I say this, but I need....that....remember the other night? You gave me a pack of cigs? We were joking around?”

Cocktail napkin, drunken scrawl, one soul. “Sure.” Resist smiling. Be nice.

“I need it back.”

Blink. “Huh?”

“My soul. I need it back. You gotta nix the contract. Tear it up.” Further collapse of the shoulders, impossible, but there I am seeing it, a man folding up into some sort of white dwarf.

“You’re kidding.”

Anguish, fleeting, maybe I imagined it. “No! Jesus, Mack, I wish to hell it was. But I’m not. I need it back. It - it wasn’t mine to sell.”

“Uh.” In my mind too. *Uh.*

“It’s okay if you don’t still have the fucking *napkin*, Mack.” Voice too fast, sputtering, spitting a little, words tripping over themselves. “That’s okay, you know, doesn’t matter, you can write something else, something just like it stating that you’re voiding the sale. That’s all.”

Stare. “You want me to write a note saying I void the sale.”

Billy opens his mouth and it hangs there, open, for a moment. A smile, frightening, edges its way along his face, groping the walls. “Come on, humor me, huh?”

But then, there is a simple logic there, why not?

“Okay. Got a pen?”

Pockets. Billy must have more pockets in his clothes than any other human being; I mean, it’s a scene of poking, prodding, rummaging, scowling into coat pockets, jacket pockets, shirt pockets, pants pockets. Expecting him to rummage through his shoes, but then he looks up

“Don’t go anywhere!”

Not smiling anymore. Voice creepily cheered despite no smile.

Tapping the table, here I am alone again. The scurvy bunch has brightened up in comparison to Billy I notice, an interesting effect and I wonder briefly by way of entertaining myself whether one could make a living dragging Billy Conklin to social events in order to make clients look good in comparison. Might be an untapped market, worth billions to the right visionary. I decide I’m not that visionary, cash-poor as I am.

Billy shuffles amongst the glitterati, begging for writing utensils, pauses to have another shot, twisting to wink obscenely at me, and then he’s in the back room, out of sight. Light a cigarette, pretend I’m doing exactly what I expected to be doing at this moment, try and look extremely interested in the grain of the wood, the worn-away varnish, whatever.

VII

Don't know where the bastard has gotten off to, images of Billy with his pants down around his ankles twitching on the floor of the bathroom, but I've had one drink too many for tonight and am definitely quitting cigarettes soon, as I am red-faced and tired just standing up in the poisoned air of the bar.

City sidewalks early evening, a depressing clutter of commuter boozers and homeless people not yet knocked cold by the daily shit of their lives. Hands in pockets. Scowl in place. I get to my block, grim little section of asphalt and concrete, fake light and nosy neighbors sitting on the goddamn stoops, staring at me as if I didn't live there, like I had no right. I had eight hundred and fifty dollars of right, every month, I bought my rights just like everyone else in this great country.

Scowl. Walk by my building. Can't face leftover pizza and dishes and no messages on my machine.

Feel like I'm being followed again, can't explain why. No one I can see, but I've got an itch between my shoulder blades, making me jumpy.

Two cigarettes and three turns around the block and I'm no closer to giving up on the evening and no less convinced that I'm being watched. Give up, flick butt into the street, push hands back into pockets and, shamed, make way back to apartment building, burning with disappointment, glowing red with its embers.

Dusty apartment, not an open window in the place. Blinking red light on the answering machine.

"Mack, you're a prick." Norma, pledging her troth. "A huge prick. Fuck you."

Mysterious, Norma's moods. No idea what had been done this time, or if maybe Norma was going gently mad. A beer out of the fridge, crack it open, throw myself into the big easy chair in the living room, promptly commence dozing off.

VIII

The doorbell at this hour, not one of my finer moments, christ must be a mistake. Let it go, not going to answer it in white briefs and black socks anyway, regret that last drink last night now fuzzy and stuffed and somewhat

not at the top of my game and with all those vice presidents swimming around down there that could be fatal.

Where the fuck is my belt and why is getting dressed in the morning always such a chore for me? I'm a skilled professional who somehow manages to navigate the world, here I am mystified as to what shoes to wear, what tie goes, and where the fuck is my goddamned belt?

Doorbell again, almost quarter-after-seven, christ. Pull on yesterday's pants, buzz them in, open the door and wait to see who the hell is bothering me at this time of morning. Haven't even had my -

Heavy steps on the stairs. Walk up, everyone lives in a walk up around here, these goddamned buildings are so old. Character, though, you know.

Old man. Bent, thin, in the gloom of my windowless hallway. Not breathing hard enough, even I gasp like the out of shape gut-on-legs I am, but he's walking towards me without even a gasp. Sharp smell, though, like, like

"Mr. MacKenzie?"

I straighten up. That voice, sawdust ground between pumas stones, rough, dry, ashes in his throat. That smell, as dry as his voice but with something else underneath that curled my toes, enveloping me as he stands close. Quite an old man, I can see through the gloom.

"Who's asking?"

A business card, laboriously produced from some inner pocket. Yellowed, but an expensive print job: linen paper, gold ink, fancy design. A lawyer. A Mr. Maury Couslyn, Esq. I glance back at him. "A lawyer, eh?"

"Please, Mr. MacKenzie, it has been...quite some trouble...to come see you."

Something in that voice makes me bite back the sarcasm brewing up concerning my interest in his troubles. Something aching, creaking with agony, licking the edges of his words. I step aside and implicitly invite him into my little apartment. He emerges into the light in slivers, thin sections of him forming before me. He *is* old. Older than I would have expected, considering how effortlessly he climbed three flights of stairs. Something...wrong...with him, too...skin too dry, too thin, moves the wrong way on his face.

The smell comes into my apartment with him, like a pet.

His suit is expensive but worn...looks dusty, almost, with some hastily repaired tears here and there. He moves with a disturbing liquidity beneath his clothes. He sets a huge and well-used briefcase on my kitchen table. His eyes...they settle on me like grease on water and I look away, suddenly nervous. They are flat and yellowed around the pupils, and they move in their sockets with a felty dryness I imagine I can hear.

"Mr. MacKenzie. Thank you for seeing me. I promise this will not take long."

Do something, you idiot...clear throat, by way of springing into action.

"Have a seat, Mr. Couslyn. I was just about to make coffee...?"

The Smile is the worst. Like a plague it creeps across his face. “No, thank you, Mr. MacKenzie. If you don’t mind, if you’ll excuse the early hour, I would like to attend to business.”

Force some cockiness, raise an sardonic eyebrow. “What would that *be*, Mr. Couslyn?”

“You have something my client believes belongs to him. He would like you to turn it over to him, sign away any claim to it, and leave the matter at that.”

Voice like corduroy on a dry, hot day, it raised pimples on my skin.

“My client believes you were unaware of a previous arrangement entered into by my client, and thus has no ill will towards you, forgiving ignorance. However, he insists that the matter be settled as I have just outlined. I have the papers with me, of course, for your review.”

Blink. Can feel thoughts trying to form, like crossed wires trying to complete a circuit.

The huge case opens with a creak of ancient leather, and Mr. Couslyn reaches on pale, emaciated arm into it, retrieving a thick binder of papers, which he places on my table with exaggerated care.

“What?” I manage.

The Smile again, mucous and mold.

“Please, Mr. MacKenzie, time is short. For me, at least, it is, and I have many other matters to attend to for my client.”

Quiet, christ I swear I can hear the faucet dripping in the bathroom, and the old man has those dry, off-center eyes on me again, and The Smile, sitting on his face like a mistake.

Cigarettes. I need fucking cigarettes. Hate leaving the dusty old fuck standing unobserved in my kitchen.

“What is it that your client thinks I have?” I call from a frantic ransack of my desk drawers. Always an emergency pack, somewhere.

No answer. I locate a crumpled and vintaged pack of Luckies and extract one in desperation. I stride into the kitchen and stop three steps in, burning match halfway to my cigarette.

The old man is fucking *frightening*.

“You are acquainted with Mr. William Conklin?”

Billy. Sudden inspiration. Sickening relief. This is somehow Billy’s fault - and the universe makes sense again. Typical.

Not my fault makes me a little bit bolder

“Who do you work for, Mr. Couslyn?”

The only part of him that moves is his mouth. Everything else is still, not a tremble, not a shudder, not a shifted bit of weight up there.

“Mr. MacKenzie, my client wishes to remain anonymous, for the time being. Do you know Mr. Conklin?”

I nodded.

Damn cold in the kitchen. Shivering.

No bigger, really, but The Smile spreads in terrible delight.

“Excellent. Mr. MacKenzie, it is my understanding that you purchased something from Mr. Conklin some days ago. For a cigarette.”

Cocktail napkin, drunken handwriting, can't fucking possibly mean -

“However, it is the position of my client that the commodity in question had already been purchased for a fair market value, and that the sale to you is void. My client would like you to simply attest to this fact so he may complete his business with Mr. Conklin without incident or delay. Or...unpleasantness.”

The Smile, frozen and stillborn.

Bubbling up out of nowhere, unexpected, unrestrained, I start laughing, my face brightening into a wide split grin and guffaws spilling out, loud and undisciplined.

Mr. Couslyn takes a sudden step back, and The Smile disappears. He looks positively distressed, standing there, all of a sudden.

“You,” I managed, “you want to buy his fucking soul?”

More laughter; I've lost control.

Couslyn shrinks away, swear he's almost put his hands up in front of his face.

A cigarette burning between my fingers, well hello, look at that, that's damned convenient. I sit down on one of my seldom-used kitchen chairs and beam up at Mr. Couslyn, smoking. He's recovered The Smile, weighty piece of facial architecture that it is, and the sight of it takes the edge off my good humor, and I sit there, beaming at him, sniffling in minor amusement.

“As you say.” He replies, taking up his briefcase and heading for the door. “Please do review the materials. I will be in touch for a decision from you in two days. I hope we can avoid further action. A good day to you.”

Jolly still. “And to you, Mr. Couslyn!”

Packet of papers, his smell still around.

I sit for a while and finger his business card. I suddenly notice it is yellowed, ancient, creased. I wonder if he had only one card which he passed out to everyone. Couslyn, odd name, odd guy. Conklin...there's something going on here I can't see, that's for fucking sure, but Billy's gonna have some answers for me, or else I'll have to get mean about it.

I X

Tedium. Greenhouse effect in the conference room, steaming the windows. Too many people pulled in for this one, table meant to seat fifteen, maybe twenty if you ignore the Geneva Convention, but there are forty-odd people stuffed in here, sitting on chairs, on window sills, practically on each other.

Notepad in front of me. I have written *he thrusts his fists against the posts and still insists he sees the ghosts* in a beautiful, insanely neat block font, deeply blackened in via good felt tip pen. No one else can see the pad, thank god, or I'd look like a fucking maniac.

Not even sure what this meeting is about.

Art Bentley is talking in his deflating monotone about the new company policies concerning bonuses, which sound very grim just from his tone and the few words I manage to fish out of the warm soup of his voice. I don't give a fuck, though. Money's mysterious. It comes, it goes, I have nothing to show for it except I am not in prison and I have a few things.

Mind's wandering. Lunch coming. Can't wait.

Art finally pauses long enough for someone to breathe deeply and end the meeting. Art looks stunned, as if he expected to just keep talking until he expired and all of us around him from starvation, thirst, atrophied limbs. The room bursts into joyful movement, stretching, talking, slurped coffee and the squeak of chairs being pushed aside. I let the tide carry me out, trying to be unnoticed. It was what I did best at work.

My desk, explosion of paper that it has evolved into over the millions of virtual years I have spent in this office, is the closest thing to a haven that I have. I know that in event of firing, sexual harassment suit, or nuclear war I can always hide underneath my desk. I know that if I ever screw up some project, or possibly completely forget one, I can always drop it onto this maelstrom of paper and claim I never saw it, and who could argue? I know that it is the only, thin, barrier between me and the rest of the world, the crazies and the monsters that I work with.

Into chair, deep, weary sigh. Blinking light on phone, messages. Once I make sure that I can remember no good reason not to answer my phone, I pick up the receiver and enter my code.

"Mack, Bill Conklin. I'm at Aprini's. Call me here as soon as you get this. I gotta talk to you."

I want to talk to you too, *Billy*. Grim. Bastard. I can feel a piece of my mind forming, a physical chunk of brain detaching itself and grimly making its way to my lungs, there to be expelled towards Bill fucking Conklin at high speed. Ashamed that I know the number of the bar by heart, I dial it and ask for Billy Conklin, who is part of the furniture in a way, always there, rarely noticed, dusty. I didn't like to hang out at Aprini's, it was a dark and lonely place, even when full. The sort of place the Bill Conklin's of the world thrived in, like mold.

Drum fingers. Twist phone cord. Pick nose.

Billy's voice, rough and slurry.

"Christ, Mack, thank fucking god. Come here. Meet me. We gotta talk."

Sure, motherfucker, I got nothing better to do. "Is this about Mr. Couslyn's little visit?"

Crackling silence.

“Did,” long pause, “did someone contact you...about me?”

“Yeah, Billy, and I didn’t appreciate it.”

“Couslyn, you said?”

“Cuz-lin.” I confirm. Drum fingers.

“Mack,” heated whisper, must have hand cupped over phone, “you gotta get down here, please. We gotta talk.”

I got some words already picked out. Consider Janine, guarding my escape, ready and willing to sink her canines into my spreading ass and drag me to my exit interview.

“You’re damned right we gotta talk. Stay there. Don’t flip out on me again. I swear, Billy, I get there and you’re gone -”

“I’ll be here.” Serious. Shockingly dry. “This is too important.”

Dial tone, in my ear.



Couldn’t face Janine and her flinty little eyes so I snuck out while she was at lunch, wonder why all receptionists seem to hate me, they really do.

This time Billy is waiting for me, sitting there with that low-light drained-battery look on his face. The blood vessels bursting in his nose right before my eyes. Weary, flaccid, paper-thin skin with no secrets from anyone, a mockery of the phrase closet drinker, that’s my Billy.

My stomach turns.

“Mack!” Boozy cheer, cheapest kind. Hint of careworn dignity, but only a hint. He stands up and beckons me to a rear booth, furtive glances all around.

Seated across from each other, young lovers on a first date, he leans over and grins at me.

“Something to drink?” Signaling the waitress, a drowning man signaling the shore.

“No, thanks.”

Doesn’t faze Billy Conklin. Gin and tonic, baby. No, I’m fine.

When she’s gone, he leans in on me again, bright red face giving off heat like the worst sun in the universe, tiny and puffed up and reeking.

“Did you bring it?”

Blink. Slight twitch of the head. “What?”

“Oh, Jesus, you didn’t *bring* it?”

Piece of my mind swells, detaches, launches. “Christ’s sake, Billy, I don’t still *have* the goddamned *cocktail napkin!*”

Venom. Frustration. Disgust.

Billy's face: mouth open, horror. Eyes wide, terror. Skin red, burning.
I lean back sharply, shocked.

Slowly, he reverses the collapse, puffs out, undents himself, reaches into a jacket pocket and extracts a newspaper clipping.

"Look at this."

New, recent, folded carefully. The spitting image of Maury Couslyn. *It is* Maury Couslyn. Or so says the caption under his stiff, formal portrait. Glance at top of page: obituaries.

"Three days ago." Billy wheezes earnestly. "Oh, I knew Mr. Couslyn. I knew him pretty well."

Snort. Derision, my best bravado. Back at the paper, looks real enough.

"What the fuck are you talking about? Billy, I saw this guy *this fucking morning*."

Grabs his drink from her tray in a desperate, graceless move. Slops some into, onto himself with equal fervor.

"I believe you, Mack. I do. You have no idea."

Pause.

"But you will, now." Anguish. "Why the fuck didn't you just keep the fucking napkin?"

Who the hell hangs onto garbage like that, I'd like to know.

"Billy, you're telling me the man who was standing in my kitchen this morning, is dead?"

"Was dead. Three days. Heart attack." He leans back with his glass, a look of dazed blandness on his face. Terrifying blandness.

"And this is because of a cocktail napkin?"

Try to match him bland for bland, fail but feel better for trying.

"My soul, Mack. It's because of my soul. Which I sold to you that night. Wrote the contract on the napkin. Gave the napkin to you."

Need a cigarette after that plot point.

"Problem is, I didn't still *own* my soul, by then. I suckered you. I didn't have the right."

Smoke enveloping me. "I forgive you."

Glasses jump, Billy's little-used fist pounding the table. Quiet, all around us, as the other monkeys study Bill's flabby presence for signs that he might be a threat.

"Fuck, Mack, we're in trouble!" Billy hisses, grabbing my hand, arresting my cigarette inches from my face. He's shaking like a leaf.

Skin, cold and sweaty. Grip, loose and weak. I extract my wrist from his hand and place my burning cigarette between my lips.

"I gotta go, Bill. This is ridiculous."

Sudden panic, half rising. "Wait a sec, Mack -"

Pause, uneager.

"Be careful. You have no idea...what you're fucking with."

For a moment, consider being nice, taking it serious-like, throwing the old fuck a bone.

Can't do it.

“Dry out, Billy. If I find your goddamned soul at home I'll give you a call.”

I walked around a little, thinking: you can tell a lot about someone by the people they hang around with. And here I am having drinks twice in a week with leading light and founding glitteratus Bill Conklin, quite possibly the low point in an otherwise completely disappointing social career.

I step into the middle of the sidewalk. The foot traffic breaks around me in a surly wave, muttered and undulating, particles acting on each other invisibly. I decide that I need to drink with some real people for a little while, remind myself that I'm charming, and that, at least as far as I know, *I* still have a soul.

XI

“Is he home?”

Norma leans against the doorway, blocking entrance to her home.

“Why, are you afraid he'd beat you up?”

Cocooned, a warm layer of top-shelf booze under my skin, keeping me upright by the sheer fermented fumes rising up, like a hot air balloon I float gently in the breeze before her. She's beautiful. She's all perfume and backlight and bare shoulders in a tank top shirt.

Lunge forward and kiss her, note she takes ten seconds to push away. She's flushed.

“Maybe.” I grin.

“You taste like bourbon.”

This as she backs up enough for me to force my way in.

I shut the door behind me, lean back against it, rakish, I think.

She comes to me in waves.

“I *feel* like bourbon.” I make my mouth work, “got any?”

“You...like...had...enough.”

This with a grin, though, happy and red-cheeked, she's being pursued and it pleases her. Her neck is warm, and perfumed, and offered up to me with a soft laugh and something murmured, gently.

She tolerates me through the hall, into the living room, onto the couch, into her. I undress her frantically, her shirt, her jeans, her underwear. She leaves me fully dressed.

Drowsy, with my head in her lap, her fingers raking gently through my hair. The whole room smells like us. Want a cigarette but can't possibly get up.

"Hey." Languorous, blurry, best I can manage with my cheek against her gurgling belly.

"Mmmmmn?"

"Do you believe in a soul?"

Slow words, unrehearsed, uncared for.

Almost fall asleep, waiting, the steady rise and fall of her belly, the steady raking of her hand, the steady pumping of boozy polluted blood through me. Eyes, opened, closed, opened.

"No."

A single word, it follows me into darkness.

XIII

The phone, ringing, at night.

If humanity's greatest thinkers were all contracted to get together and develop a sound that would instantaneously produce anxiety in any human who heard it, likely they'd come up with a phone ringing in the middle of the dark night.

Open eyes, silvery outlines. Head pounds, I smell like sex. Can't remember getting home.

The phone, undaunted, is still ringing.

Roll around a little. Moan. Doesn't help. Head pounds. Now I feel nauseous.

And the goddamn phone is **STILL RINGING**.

"Hello?"

"Bill. Mack, sorry to wake you."

Jesus Christ.

"Charles." I close my eyes to intensify the pounding. "What's up?"

"You up for a drink?"

Stomach turns.

"I don't know, Charley, I -"

"No, no, no," his voice is serious, dry, thick. "We're all heading to Jimmy Ray's. All of us. Everyone who knew...Mack, Billy Conklin's dead."

At least the fucking phone isn't ringing anymore.

"What?"

"Conklin's dead, Bill. He...he jumped out of a window. A high window. Anyway, I'm making the calls, and we're gonna have a Toast. Jimmy Ray's. Okay?"

Eyes open of their own accord now, I sit up and stare around blindly.

“Billy’s...dead?”

“See you at Jimmy Ray’s.”

The Toast is a remnant of our overly dramatic youth. My friends and I were not old, but a troubling number of us had perished in the great stampede, weak runts dragged down by Lions. It had started when Willie Booge, the Booger, had snorted water purification tablets on a dare, convulsed, and died in Sally Williams’ basement when I’d been sixteen. Numbed, startled by inappropriate laughter, we’d been determined to mark the event, even though none of us had known or liked Willie all that well. With Sally weeping hysterically, we’d gathered in her basement and had a beer each. There had been a solemn gravity to the moment, and I’d sat up all night with Charley and some kid I never spoke to any more named Miller, smoking cigarettes and wondering about it all.

Since then, there had been eleven Toasts. They were jolly but subdued. Basically, they were all about reminding ourselves that we weren’t dead, yet.

My stomach was turning when I arrived at Jimmy Ray’s. I felt damp with ill-health and the wave of brown air that hit me with the dull heat of a hundred cigarettes. I pushed limp hair back from my face and paused in the doorway, feeling like this was it, this was where I was: the biggest social event I could lay claim to, and I felt nauseous.

I stood unnoticed for a moment, counting people I knew. Red-faced, panting, sweaty, I was wearing a brown sportsjacket, a white shirt that had seen better days, and tan pants. I was earthtones and vomit, pasty, dulled, and dreadful.

Then they all noticed.

Jimmy Ray’s was a pleasant, wood-paneled, affordable sort of bar where old men feared to tread and the kids weren’t allowed in, which left pasty specimens of out-of-shape youth such as myself, this was our oasis, our zoo, our spawning ground. I feel like I’m swimming upstream as I move from the door into the ghoulishly cheerful circle of friends come to Toast Bill Conklin, who I could not believe was dead.

Last to arrive and we immediately make a spectacle of ourselves, standing up each with a drink (a few more club sodas this year, I thought), making a solemn, silent toast, and then the sight of me trying desperately to not get sick on the fumes of booze that were curling my stomach. Then Chuck had an arm around me and was steering me away from the softly humming crowd.

“We’re dropping like flies, chum.” Charlie says. I look over his shoulder and catch Norma’s eye. She looks away without any expression.

“Yeah.” My brain felt muddy.

He drifts away. I rattle ice in my glass, and glance at the tumbler in dismayed shock; I was drinking again.

A strange procession, then.

“We gotta stop meeting like this.” Saul Our Jewish Friend says with a leer.

“Hey, MacKenzie, we ain’t so young any more, huh?” Tom Doughty says, clinking his glass against mine.

“I don’t know if I can take another one of these.” Says Sally Williams herself with the single glass of club soda, and a peck on my cheek.

“Rough end for Conklin, then,” says Simon, shaking my free hand reverently. “Kind of depressing, that.”

I unlock my jaw. “I never liked Billy all that much.”

Eyebrow up, smile forced, pats his growing gut protectively. “That’s all right, ain’t it?” Wink. “Like ‘em for three days, can’t ya?”

I fight back nausea and let Chuckles buy me another drink, and another.

Simon and Saul are talking to me. I stare at the coal of my cigarette and sweat, not hearing them, feeling my heart pound in my chest, trying to break free.

They’re relaxed and pleasant; I hadn’t seen them in a while, and they are eager to get caught up. Nothing to offer them but tolerance, and that seemed like enough.

Saul, dark, shadowed, deep-set eyes hidden, curly hair, prim on the chair, legs crossed at the knee, like a girl. Smokes imported cigarettes daintily. Simon, recklessly undone, tie loose, shirttails out, glasses slightly off-center on his long, aristocratic nose. Drinking shots of bourbon, one at a time, passing the glass amongst us.

Their mouths work, nothing comes out though. Nothing I can hear anyway. I am thinking of a dead man.

I can hear the jukebox, “Hey Jude”. Don’t make it bad, take a sad song and make it better. Saul sings a line, then Simon.

Saul: “Hey, Jude, don’t make it bad. Take a sad song, and make it better.”

Simon: “Remember to let her into your heart, then you can start -”

Together: “To make it better!”

The conversation was predictable, I thought, and so I studied my cigarette and thought about the fact that Billy was dead. Poor troubled Billy, who’d thought he’d sold his soul to me, who jumped out of a window and hit the ground. Hard. The room is spinning.

I wobble a little, drop my cigarette. Saul half-stands and reaches for me.

“Hey Jude, don’t be afraid!” he says earnestly. “You have found her, now go and get her!”

Simon is now leaning over me, as if I were lying on the floor. “Na na na na na nanana na!” he says, as if from a great distance.

I close my eyes, relieved.

XIII

The hum of insincere overly polite mourning. The smell of a dozen perfumes, colognes, aftershaves, fabric softeners, shampoos, hand soaps, skin moisturizers, panty shields, cigarettes, foot powders, car air fresheners. The tight green ball of nausea in the pit of my stomach. The mannered furniture. The too-soft carpet. The grim, silent man in the dark suit. The casket. The dead body. The obscuring flowers.

I am at a wake.

Billy Conklin, he late of misery and futile insectoid existence, now with a saintly calm about him. Better dressed than he'd ever been in life.

I reek of cigarettes. I am breathing nicotine and tar and chemicals and choking on oxygen and nitrogen and carbon dioxide. Out standing in the chill parking lot squinting through white smoke at the sun more than I was inside, hands in pockets glumly air-kissing every cunt that walked in the place, touching people I did not really ever want to touch, ever. Shaking hands. Patting backs. Holding hands.

“Come on, Mack, it ain't you that's dead.”

Chuckles, back for an encore of wasted prep-school charm. Chuck has a load of family money waiting for him as soon as he got desperate enough to crawl back to his parents and apologize for not getting into an ivy-league college. They'd poured thousands into his education and the little bugger hadn't gotten into Stanford or Brown or Yale. They hadn't kicked him out, really, but their enthusiasm for his continued existence had dwindled, and he'd fled.

The knowledge of so much money -of a return to his old life- at such a price was a little maddening. It almost made me feel sorry for the little bastard. Almost. I eye the dead weight of his hand on my shoulder.

“Cheer's a little inappropriate for a wake, don't you think, Chuck?”

I lean against the rear wall, watching the casket for sudden moves, thinking of Couslyn. Chuck joins me, pushing his patrician hands into his pockets.

I wonder -does desperate money like his rob you of anything?

He sighs. “Look, Mack, you know as well as I that our man Conklin wasn't a good insurance risk.” he whispers in my direction, looking straight ahead. “Man drink like that and man don't eat, man is going to die.”

Of course, Chuck has a Trust, I think. He doesn't have to work if he doesn't want to, he was one of those people who worked because he felt compelled to do something. If he told his family to kiss his fat white ass he'd

have his Trust, which guaranteed him comfort, if not great wealth. I feel ratty, suddenly, standing next to him.

“Have some respect, man,” I say slowly, “some of these people liked him, you know.”

Chuck cracks up, a noble fight against guffaws which invade and conquer despite his resistance. “Some of these -actually -oh, man, that’s cold!”

I sneer at him. He doesn’t notice, and I smooth my face in time.

“Come on. We’re getting a drink before we dry up and blow away.”

XIV

The crusty yellow of my painted kitchen walls. The gray white linoleum. The dripping faucet. The dead plants hung from the window in eternal lazy optimism. The humming fridge and the ancient menus held to it by magnets. The murky, damp pile of dishes in the sink, breeding. The greasy feel to everything. The lousy heat. The creaking floorboards. The stuffy smell. The chill. The cleft.

A sheet to the wind and I pick up the papers Mr. Couslyn had left, so long ago. A little surprised to find them still here, not a figment of my imagination. The open fridge gives me some light to read by, but the words all run together uselessly and I shut it and put the pack of papers on top of it carelessly.

“Don’t lose that, chum.”

The skipped heartbeat you’ll never get back. The knick-knacks knocked off the fridge in panic twitch. The pale echo of his dead voice off my mean mustard walls. The sudden confusion over whether you’ve pissed your pants or not. The hand to the forehead. The shaking laugh. The unbelieving stare. The fear. The discord.

It was Bill Conklin sitting at my kitchen table. I hadn’t heard him come in. Crazy laugh, courtesy of me.

“It’s okay, Mack, have a seat. There’s still some time. Thanks to you.”

Without realizing it, I’d backed into the small corner between the fridge and the window. A small squeaking noise emerging from me as I pant, and without realizing it I was attempting to squeeze myself through the two inch opening of the window. Without much success.

“It’s okay.” He repeats. “Have a seat, please. Got a cigarette?”

Crazy laugh. “Sure!”

We watch each other for a moment. Bill sighs. “C’mon, Mack, have a seat. C’mon.”

The nervous shakes slinking down from the head and finishing in the toes. Spastic movement, jump start. Slow approach, just in case. Pause for last-

minute eyeing of the door. Incremental collapse into a loose-jointed wooden chair. The yawning chasm. The heavy smoke. The old grease stains. The impossibility. The quiet.

Bill Conklin, looking relaxed, giving me the eye.

“Jesus Billy, you look fantastic.” I blurted.

He smiled. “Sure, for a dead guy. You okay, Mack?”

“Why the fuck are you here?” I managed. “How the fuck are you here?”

He shrugged. He was calmer and more together than the Billy Conklin I’d known.

“I’m dead, Mack. I’m a ghost. Got a cigarette?”

Crazy laugh, again. I shake one out for him. Why not? I lean back and took as deep a breath as I could. “Bill,” I said, “My grandmother died five years ago and I didn’t come home to find her sitting at my fucking kitchen table, huh?”

Bill shrugged again, feeling himself up for a light. “Maybe your Mom did. Got a light? I can’t actually carry anything for very long. Stuff keeps disappearing.”

I stood up. “Bill, just tell me why the fuck I’m having this hallucination and let’s get on with our lives. My life.”

“I’m not a hallucination, compadre. I’m a tortured, damned soul, and I’m here because you own me.”

Full stop with matches in hand. Stare at the dishes instead of anywhere else. Taut and tense. The stretching, questioning quiet. The utter silence of a room that only has one person in it, really.

“Say that again?”

Stretched-out moment. “I’m a damned soul, Bill. And you own me.”

Swallow. “Because I fucking sold you one goddamn cigarette with a contract written on a bar napkin?”

“I don’t make the rules, sahib. I just serve them, now.” Scrape of chair on kitchen floor. “I’m dead, I’ve forfeited my soul, you are the legitimate steward of it, and I’m afraid that puts you in a world of trouble, friend.”

Look back at him. “Why, because I’ll have a ghost following me around?”

“No.” He stood up. “Got another cigarette? I lost that one. Listen,” he went on as he plucked another cigarette from the pack and struck a match, sucking in smoke. “I’m yours to command. Anything you tell me to do, I’ll do. Tell me to go away, I’ll disappear for a while. You own me. You bought my soul, and right now that’s all that’s left of me, see? I can’t hurt you. I’m the least of your problems.”

Great cloud of exhaled smoke.

“Then why am I in a world of hurt?”

Billy’s bright yellow eyes on the packet of papers left by Couslyn, then back on me. “Because there’s a prior claim, Mack.”

Close eyes in spirit of exhausted defeat. “Oh, fuck, Billy, just go the fuck away.”

When I looked up, Billy was gone.

XV

“Jesus, Mack, what the hell is this?”

Kenbo Jones was holding Mr. Couslyn’s sheaf of papers in one hand as if they were glowing softly with radiation.

Feeling gray, badly wanting more nicotine, sitting in a thick jellied air found only in funeral homes and law offices, I did my best to shrug. It was meant to convey paragraphs of explanation, but it ended up being just a shrug, so I took a breath of really really expensive air.

“Ken, like I said. Exactly like I said.”

Kenbo Jones was an old friend I only contacted when in need of free legal advice, which he always gave me, so I considered the whole situation his fault. He was the tallest man I knew, and inky black. He was the sort of black man that scared the hell out of white racists. He could put on a black running suit and stand in a shadowed corner and you’d never see him. Every time I went to see him I thought the same thing: Crickey, they make suits that fucking big?

“Then this cat is crazy, Mack.” He tossed the papers towards me. “It’s in English, and it’s structured like a contract, but it’s crazy. Someone’s fucking with you.”

Half smile, ashamed of myself. “Maury Couslyn’s fucking with me, apparently.”

A dark eyebrow went up. “Maury Couslyn the lawyer?”

Icy pit of poison in my gut. “Yeah -you know him?”

“Knew him.” Kenbo corrected. “He’s dead. Funeral’s today, actually, if I can clear some time I’ll go. He gave you these? I knew he was a twisted fuck, but this is crazy.”

“Twisted?” I croaked.

Kenbo shrugged leaning back. “Most everyone who intends to be at that bastard’s funeral, including me, will be there to make sure he stays down, get me? He was an evil old man. No one is gonna miss him.” He fingered the packet again. “Never heard of the old fuck pulling something like this, but then, he *was* getting old. Maybe he lost a few grooves on the record, you know?”

I ran a hand over my face. “Yeah.”

Raise hand, hail cab, bend, lift handle, climb in, sink into the odd comfort of vinyl, speak an address. Keep eyes closed against your dawning Sense of Defeat.

“I always thought myself well-liked.”

Everything stops. Oxygen pauses in my blood, disintegrates, choking me as I gasp and pant.

Maury Couslyn shrugs amiably. “Well, if nothing else, death gives one perspective.”

“How -”

“I’m *dead*, Mr. MacKenzie. No great trick.”

Mutiny spreads to the lungs, which deflate and refuse to push air, form words, to even make noise at all.

“We did say two days, did we not? You have the papers my client requested you review and sign, yes?”

Dumb, I nod.

“Have you edited any of the terms? I certainly hope not.”

Dumb, I shake my head.

“Then I can assume you are willing to sign and turn over both the agreement and the...item in question?”

I work my mouth like a newly found appliance. “Mr. Couslyn...I don’t think I have it any longer.”

“Once you sign the agreement, Mr. MacKenzie, physical possession of that item is no longer material.”

I open my eyes, finally, turn to say something, and scream. The grave was not being kind to Mr. Couslyn.

He grinned, his yellowing teeth showing through his cheek. “Ah. I’m afraid you now see the need for haste in this matter. In some short time I will no longer be useful to my Master in this endeavor.” He winked, a slow lowering of an eyelid over a dry, wrinkling eyeball, the bulge of a worm behind it. “I assure you,” he said quietly, his grin increasing, “that I feel everything as if I were somehow alive. I am an exposed nerve, dipped in alcohol, forever.”

A second of clear, undiluted short-circuit.

I pound on the glass divider, hard. Again, spiky pain moving up my arm. Again, and the hard plastic stars.

“Stop the cab! Stop the cab! STOP THE FUCKING CAB!”

I hit my forehead against the partition as the car screeches to a stop, and then am thrown back against the seat.

“Mr. MacKenzie!” Couslyn shouts.

Unwilling, I look at him.

“I urge you to sign the papers I have drawn up! If you do not I will be forced to turn the matter over to my superiors. They will not be pleased.” He leaned forward, the smell of rot and semen and shit welling up around me. “Let Mr. Conklin suffer for his sins, Mr. MacKenzie. As he deserves to. As he has agreed to. Do not choose to suffer in his place. You,” his tongue, winding its way along his teeth, dislodged several before poking out of the gash that was his cheek, “will have enough suffering of your own.”

Janine's sarcastic little eyebrow when I crawl out of the elevator sparks a small, petty coal of resentment, which lodges behind my eyes like a headache and makes me scowl at her. I'm sweating, I know, and I haven't slept well, and my suit has become disheveled. I've got the funk and steam of despair around me, and she raises that fucking eyebrow in glee, smiling as I approach the front desk.

"Morning, Bill." she chirps, and I want to slap her. "Rough morning? Or night?"

It's humorous in tone, implying a joke I ought to take with good grace. It's cowardly abuse, though, and my little hot coal flares up and cooks my better sense.

"Shut the hell up and buzz me in, goddamn it."

Her look of astonishment, brief as it is, warms my belly. When she starts to bitch at me for the tone, the language, the disrespect, I reach over and buzz myself through, which seems to anger her even more than my outburst. I leave her, sputtering, behind and know I'll never safely order in lunch again.

In my office, I am relieved that no dead people are waiting for me, and that makes me laugh. I shut my door, laughing.

The phone rings and I stop laughing, staring at it, its evil noise a mechanical and unfeeling, malevolent and predatory sound, a hunting call. I don't move except to lean over and pick up the receiver.

"Hello?"

"Avoiding me?"

It's Norma. She sounds irritated. I can picture her at her own desk across town, playing with artfully loose tresses of hair, frowning slightly, admiring her sleek, carefully crossed legs, the power of which she had no illusions about. She was licking her fingers, but I'd been more than the appetizer I'd supposed I was.

"I can't go a day without calling you now? What am I, in high school again?"

"Cranky-boy." She sounded less irritated, and I wondered what I'd done right in the conversation for a change. "Where have you been?"

I laughed, and it felt good. "Having the weirdest fucking day of my life. Scratch that. Weirdest fucking *week*."

"Ah." she said. "Glad to be a part of that."

I ran a shaky hand over my face. I wanted to say, *jesus fucking christ* Norma do you have any idea what I've been through dead men in my kitchen, vague threats over a soul I wouldn't have thought worth it, and now: shit from someone else's girlfriend. I wanted to say, fuck, Norma, I fool around with my friends' girlfriends so I don't have to deal with this sort of psycho-bitch PMS bullshit, so serve it hot and steaming to Chuckles, what say?

Instead, I said "Didn't mean it like that and you know it."

“So nice to be told what I know.”

“You ought to know it.”

“I see.”

I sigh. “Look, Norma, whether you buy it or not, I’ve had a hard goddamn day. So if all you’ve got for me is icy disdain -”

Dial tone in my ear.

I stand with eyes closed and dead phone to my ear for a moment, trying to envision myself collecting energy from the air, absorbing static electricity through my hair. I open my eyes, place the phone back on the cradle, glance up. Billy is lounging in my chair.

I think of Couslyn. Compared to the lawyer, Billy looks showered and calm.

“Hey, Mack.”

I swallow and back up enough to make sure I really did shut my door, my perception of reality suddenly not worth the spit in my mouth.

“Billy,” I manage, “Jesus.”

“Sorry to keep dropping in like this. But you see, I have to stay near you, but I can only appear when no one’s around.” he frowned a little. “And you did banish me last time. That wasn’t nice, man.”

I can’t seem to get any spit in my mouth. I lean against the door.

“Fuck you, nice. What the fuck is happening to me, Billy?”

“I *told* you. You bought my soul. I sold my soul to you. I’m yours now, yours to command, to torture, to reward. I’m a spirit, in thrall.”

“And Mr. I’m-a-dead-lawyer fucking Couslyn?”

Billy shrugs. “He roped me in. He’s been damned a long, long time. He brokered my deal. *That’s* why you’re in trouble, kiddo.” He looks almost abashed. “You’re not the first person I sold my soul to. And the prior claimant is...dangerous.”

I look at him.

“Christ, Mack,” he laughs, “ain’t you never heard of it? Selling your soul?”

I licked my dry lips with a dry tongue. “To the Devil?”

The smile vanishes. “Want to know what I sold out for?”

I open my mouth, and a panic so huge I thought I’d have a heart attack right there welled up in me and strangled my vocal cords. I settle for shaking my head violently, and Billy smiles again.

“Thank you, Mack, thank you.” He looks down and then up again. “I’m sorry I got you into this. See, you both have legitimate claims, see? You entered into a contract in good faith. There are rules.”

My heart was merely pounding by then. “So what? I get haunted the rest of my life?”

“Unless this gets resolved.”

I look at him. He looks just like Billy, if a little trimmer, a little less sad, a little more in order. I looked at him and remembered that he'd been a friend, once, if an unpopular one.

"What can I do, Billy? Tell me what I can do."

He leans forward suddenly, his face intent. "Release me."

"What?"

"Help me, Mack! I'm damned. but he's not really after you. He's not. He's after me. You've got a life ahead of you, whatever sins you've committed might be forgiven. But me, I'm a bird in the hand. He *wants* me." He laughed humorlessly. "You know what it's like to be *wanted* by the Devil himself? Oh, christ, Mack...but you're in charge of me. You can sign me over, and all this ends...or you could just release me. Wash your hands of it."

"What happens to you then?"

He smiles, a little sadly. "I don't know, to be honest. But at least it won't be him, and that's enough." He studied me. "Please, Mack. *Please.*"

The low-level irritation of fluorescent humming. The click click click of the office outside my door. The solid silence of a thousand tiny sounds. The low-volume scratching of my shirt collar against my whiskers. The oily feeling of sweat inside my middle class leather shoes. Dopplered voices muffled by plaster and wood, far away, outside my door, far away again.

"Mack?"

"Go away, Billy."

"Mack?!"

"I said, go away."

The hollow sound of crank air.

XVI

When not surrounded by all the Fuckers, I can handle all the brass, and the scotch isn't half bad. And there she was, black t-shirt, faded, soft jeans, nipples and all, an eyebrow raised just for me as I slid up to the bar like the reptile I was.

"Thought you'd gotten lost." she said, sliding a coaster my way.

"Kidnapped." I suggested. "Scotch, double, neat."

She winked.

I watch her work the bar, which was pretty crowded for an early Friday afternoon. She worked those jeans like a pro, too, making all the men thirsty, and the women icy.

"Man, what I'd do with her."

I turned to the guy sitting next to me. "Hmmm?"

“The bartender. She’s gorgeous. I wouldn’t mind getting to know her a little better.”

Smug vague agreement, she’s mine, he’ll never get a wink from her.
“Yeah.”

A moment of quiet between us.

“Good to finally meet you, Mr. Mackenzie.”

A closer look, then:

He was a normal-looking guy in a dark suit, not tall, or short, really. Dark hair, dark eyes, pasty, pale skin, sickly. He’s drinking scotch neat, stirring it with the little plastic straw, grinning at me.

“Excuse me?”

He nods in her direction. “Know what I’d do with a cunt like that? I’d bash her brains in and fuck her til she bleeds.”

I stare at him. He grins, the smile getting bigger and bigger until I was sure it was impossible...and he slaps me on the knee. “Let’s not talk shop, though. We’ve got business together, you and me, don’t we?”

I open my mouth.

“I love a good drink.” He says to me in a stage whisper, leaning in close. “Goes straight to my fucking head, though, and then I do things like blow up bars, killing dozens of people.” He slides off the stool and takes my arm.

“Take a walk with me.”

I open my mouth.

He thrusts out his arm, bent at the elbow, and looks at his bare wrist. “Really, buddy, there isn’t a lot of time. I have these blackouts, when I drink, you know, and I really can’t remember what I did or didn’t do. So, you know.” He tapped his wrist.

I open my mouth.

He grins again, tugging me up out of my seat. “Walk and talk, Mr. MacKenzie, walk and talk, okay?”

I follow him out of the bar, blinking in the sudden sunlight, taking small, careful steps on the warm concrete, through the cold air. He put his hand on the small of my back as we walked. His hand left a burning outline of itself on my nerves, flames licking me.

I open my mouth.

“Gas leak, as I recall now, it’s all coming back to me. There’ll be thirteen dead, and the fire department will rule it accidental. Here’s a convenient car to duck behind, what say? Come on, right around here, crouch down now. The windows’ll blow when the concussion hits, so best to keep your eyes averted, okay?”

I allow myself to be lead behind the car, to be pulled down, to have my head turned slightly, so that I was looking down at his shoes, which reflected the sun back at me.

I open my mouth. He glances at his bare wrist again.

“A few seconds, I think. Listen to me, William. Is it all right if I call you William?” A moment passes, wind through the air. “It’s okay, you can speak now.” He nodded gently.

“Sure.” I croak.

“Listen to me, Billy.” He went on in that gentle tone. “Listen to me. I’m appearing to you like this because none of this is your fault yet, okay? I can’t blame you. You’re the victim here, really. So I choose not to terrify you to the point where you are reduced to a pissing blubbering heap of misery, do you understand that? That I’m approaching you here in a spirit of sympathy? That I’m taking it easy on you?”

I open my mouth.

“Brace yourself.”

The explosion seems to go on forever, a hot hand pushing me this way and that, slipping into my clothes and warming my skin, clogging my lungs, singeing my hair. Glass shatters, falls in tiny raindrops all around me. The noise is punishing, my ears shut down in terror.

A second or so of quiet, the burning hand on my back, dead air in my ears. Then, debris starts to rain down on us. Chunks of wood, metal, shards of glass. The disintegrated bar. Sifting through the heated air, onto my shoulders.

The burning hand slaps me on the back.

“Wow, that was fun.”

The smell of my own burnt hair. The grit of destroyed bar in my mouth. The cold metal of the car. The sun-warmed pavement. The creak of impossibly shiny leather shoes. The smell of ozone. The crackling of flames like dead grass. And rising, as if from a great distance, muffled at first and then sharper, and then loud, was his laughter, like oil being poured into my ears while I was held down, immobile.

“Here’s the deal, kid,” the voice said, pouring into my head in an icy sludge, coating my insides with upset-stomach grease. “Sign it over to me, and you’ll get to go on with your life, no harm, no foul, and I could even be convinced to reward you for allowing a quick resolution to this situation.”

Bursting, I couldn’t stop it.

“Fuck with me, and I’ll be waiting. In the mean time, you’ll wish for death. In the mean time, you’ll see your demise coming, looming, and you’ll know that I’m there, waiting. Who is without sin? Who does not fall under my hand in the end? Keep it in mind, fellow. Stop jerking me around and give me what I want.”

Ice on the air. Crystalline. Perfect. Seamless. It oozes out my eyes, drips from my nose. It burns. On the inside.

“By happy coincidence,” the voice, like vinegar, continued. “I have a copy with me. What say you sign it?”

Little concussive explosions every few seconds as pockets of gas catch flame. Smoke swirls everywhere. People are screaming, now, running around.

Glass keeps shattering. Thrust under my bleeding nose is an exact replica of the papers Couslyn had left with me, only days before. I stare at them for a moment, swallow the coppery taste of my own blood, and blink the soot out of my eyes.

“If I sign,” I hear myself saying, “what will I get out of it?”

Everything goes quiet.

I chance a look up, and the Devil is smiling at me. The wind is still whipping the smoke everywhere, people are still running around with their mouths open, but I can't hear anything. Except for his calm, smiled reply.

“Have you had lunch yet, Mr. MacKenzie?”

“I get off at seven.”

The Devil looked up at our waitress with his slight grin, and her knees visibly buckled under his lighthearted glance. Without saying a word, he flicked his eyes towards the other tables, and she went without a word.

All the way to the restaurant, women had been throwing themselves at him.

I stared down at the soup, which steamed elegantly up with the scent of ease and formality, the velvet feel of money. It soaked into my poor wide-pored skin and made me hungry. I rubbed the napkin between two fingers. I'd never have eaten here in my life. The Devil had a table waiting with a little Reserved card on it. The coat girl, the hostess, and now two waitresses had come on to him like animals in heat, as had the girl we took a cab ride from (rudely) and two women on the street, one of whom was old enough to be my grandmother.

The Devil smiled and sipped his scotch. “What can I say? There's a shortage of men with my obvious means.”

I look around with a dim smile on my face. I felt nauseous.

“All business, huh?” He says, sipping water. “I like that. I think I like you. Understand, Mack, that I don't have to make a deal here. I can just take what I want. But you've got balls, and I respect that. So I'll make you a deal. Why not? I've got the time and inclination, and men like us, we do what we want, right, Mack?”

I swallow. I quietly monitor my heartbeat. Alarmed, I take several deep breaths to try and slow my heart, which then skips one, two beats, thudding into my chest. I play with the silverware, which looks to cost more than I made in a month. I put it down carefully. I swallow again.

“I understood,” I say quietly, clearing my throat, looking down at the tablecloth, “that you can't just take it. Otherwise,” I shift in my seat uncomfortably, “why haven't you?”

After a moment, I glance up, and the Devil is staring at me.

The soft noise of polite conversation. The clink of expensive glass. Sizzling meat, somewhere. A smashed glass, a muffled curse. The slight creak of a lighter. The ragged scrape of my breathing.

The Devil smiled.

“Order whatever you want, Mack,” his voice, smooth and genial, sliced up my spine. “It’s on me.”

XVII

And I am on the subway, and I am smoking a cigarette in violation of all the rules, and I am alone on the car except for two black kids playing their radio and staring at their hundred-dollar sneakers, and I have no idea how I got there, and I am sweaty and jittery and starving. And Billy is sitting next to me, looking like a dead man for the first time.

I imagine him saying, what if you could sell your soul in exchange for everything you ever wanted?

What if you could sell someone *elses* soul, instead. I reply, and try to wink, but can’t.

Billy is staring at me in what can only be described as bug-eyed terror.

“Don’t.” he whispers.

My eyes shift to the two kids. They’re ignoring me.

“I don’t know, Billy,” I whisper back. “You made your mistake. You fucked up. You *fucked up*.”

“Don’t Mack, don’t believe it.”

I kept my voice low, down in my chest. “Billy...Billy...I don’t know. It’s like...” I swallow. “It’s free. It’s like it’s for free.”

“Don’t believe it. Couslyn, *that’s* what this is. Remember Couslyn.”

XVIII

The Excalibur is one of those motels that has secret hourly rates for the highway whores who work the gas stations and hotel bars. It is all earth tones from twenty years ago, everything slippery from a thin scum of something best left uninvestigated. It is the sort of establishment you hesitate to touch anything in. You reach for a light switch and pause, a second, squinting at the odd stains, the vague smell. You wonder if some other couple was in the room just moments before you.

Norma. Norma's face has the intense unfun look she gets when she's trying very very hard to have an orgasm. I knew this expression as well as I knew anything about Norma. The lines between her eyebrows, deep, struggling. Eyes closed. Mouth slightly open, lip bitten, unbitten, bitten. The slight rise and fall of her body. The small sweet river of sweat making its way between her breasts. Her hands on my wrists, guiding me, putting my hands where she wants them.

I might as well be a life-sized anatomically correct dummy for all the input I have on the process.

The word input suddenly threatens to crack me up and ruin the dignified frown I have maintained for Norma's sake.

I am so distracted Norma could probably do this all day and never bring me off, but my own orgasm is the furthest thing from her mind, of course. I lay there and idly tried to trace how I'd come to be in this crappy motel with Chuckles' wife, especially after the day I'd had Friday. A phone call. An apology. An early morning bottle of wine in Norma, not the first time. Somehow it had all mixed together and baked up nice and fluffy into the Excalibur Motel.

That Norma was becoming a souse in her early thirties was increasingly obvious -but then, Chuckie wasn't exactly a teetotaler, either. They were both headed for a real Days of Wine and Roses thing, and I sure hoped to be far far away when Norma and Chuckles hit the step about making up for old sins and telling the truths and all that. Nothing worse than a repentant drunk, taking everyone with them.

I closed my eyes. I wanted to get this over with. I felt numb from the waist down, though, I think Norma's cut off my circulation. I've always been delicate.

I think of my bartender.

Twenty-year-old thighs in skintight black jeans. Nipples obvious and eager through a white t-shirt, no bra. Hair pulled back, just a hint of makeup, just a little lipstick. Perfume and cigarettes. She moves with that stupid grace young girls have, all sex without even knowing it, five years away from that epiphany, completely surprised every time an old cock like me gets all sweaty over them. Completely surprised.

I keep my eyes closed. I start moving my hands on my own. Norma silently resists for a moment, and then I guess I'm still on her page because her hands drop away. I feel them brushing against me here and there as she touches herself.

In my head, I'm fucking my bartender. I'm thinking, I've made her a part of the package, of the deal. I'd make him give her to me. I dress her up, any way I want, she does it. I take her, any time I want, she likes it. Her friends, too...I keep letting my mind wander and it becomes a harem, a sorority of long-legs

and blank stares and I'm fucking them all, over and over, getting fat and stupid on easy sex with taut, tan bodies smelling faintly of cigarettes and perfume and "Oh, not yet!"

and I'm coming. Inside my bartender. Inside Norma.

She leans down as I convulse and punches me on the chest, not too hard. She's panting. "Goddamn it." she pants.

I watch as Norma gets dressed. It annoys her, but I keep watching.

"Now I'm sorry I called you." she huffs, rolling a stocking up one leg. The room smells like us, or maybe it's the remnants of yesterday's couple, or last year's, woken up by the sweat and the semen and the groaning. Ghosts.

I didn't respond. I was looking at Billy, who stood mournfully in the bathroom doorway, smoking a cigarette. I hadn't noticed him arriving on the scene. Wonder if he's been watching us.

Norma keeps talking. And talking. Her bitter voice, all angles and edges, sinking down and covering the floor like mist, shouldering against my ankles and murmuring, filling the room with the waves and crests of her voice. Billy just stared at me with his dry, dead eyes, leaning against the doorway, one hand in his pocket, looking sad. I stare back. I can't move my eyes away.

Norma hunts down her shoes, stalking the room, her dimly rumbling words drifting from her and rolling under the bed, lost in shadows, mixing with the husks of all the conversations ever had in this stinking, browned room: how much, what was your name again, fuck you, get out, come here, just shut up and go to sleep, shut up and go to sleep.

And Billy keeps staring at me.

"Stop it." I mutter at him.

Norma stops. Thinks I am talking to her. Says something else that sounds like she is speaking from the next room.

Billy shifts his nonexistent weight, but his eyes stay on me.

"I'll do whatever I want." I snap at him.

Norma somehow has the door open, is all put together and spins to face me. "Yeah, Mack, I guess you do.

I look back at Billy as she shuts the door. "Come on, then," I say, "let's get a fucking drink."

I told Billy over the brass and wood and bourbon served up by some other bartender, a garish blonde with a nice ass but heavy makeup issues, in some other bar, with fewer Fuckers, that I was going to hand over his soul in return for three wishes, the classic package with all the perks.

"Good decision," The Devil said from next to me, and clinked a tumbler against my own. "I happen to have the papers with me. You sign, and we'll throw a celebratory party in your honor. lots of girls, booze, whatever you want."

I kept looking at Billy, who was just sad, sitting there shaking his head at me wordlessly. I felt rather than saw the thick sheaf of legal papers as they were slid into my field of vision.

“I can’t pass up this opportunity,” I said to Billy. A pen, smooth and cold, was pushed into my hand. “It’s like free beer.”

He shook his head slowly, mouthing words I didn’t bother to make out. Other fingers molded my own around the pen, pushing my hand into place, and squeezing encouragingly.

“Anything I want, Billy.” I said earnestly, watching him. “Surely you can understand. Surely you. *You.*”

Slowly, sadly, reluctantly, Billy nodded. Looked away.

Smooth-skinned hand wrapped around my own, moved it. This way. That way. Familiar patterns.

Billy blinks, opens his mouth, his eyes, raises his hands, and is gone. The burning hand slaps me on the back again.

“Good show.” The voice wedges in between two discs in my back and spreads them apart roughly. “It goes fast. Enjoy it.”

I signal the blonde. She swings those hips my way, not smiling.

“You okay? You look terrible.”

“Feel great.” I pant. “Bourbon.”

She turns away carelessly.

“Bring the bottle!!”

I look around. I don’t know anybody.

XIX

THE FUCKERS were talking about me, young men who thought they ran the place. It had been peaceful until about five o’clock, when the young bulls from the brokerages and banks and corporate law offices had escaped for a begin-the-weekend snort. Mists of testosterone pooled around my expensive shoes. I hadn’t felt very good all day, heartburn that just wouldn’t go away, and I was in no mood for their shenanigans.

I signaled the bartender. He nodded and held up a finger. He was making some time with the waitress, pretty little thing. I tried to take an interest in her short little black skirt, her ankle bracelet, her curly blonde hair.

I looked away, bored.

Henry finally came over to me. He was a good kid. He’d been here for about two years and hadn’t made a bad martini yet.

“What can I get you, Mack?”

I'd been getting martinis here for thirty-three years. Sometimes they forgot, and I can't blame them, since I myself forget so much...thirty-three years. I can't remember any of them, it seems. Sometimes I can remember the first time I walked into this place, and then...nothing. Until today. Nothing from then until today, as if I'd been asleep.

"Martini, as usual, Henry."

"You got it."

I stared at myself in the mirror across the bar. I can remember so much, so many incredible things, all mine. Money. Women. Fame and fortune. I'd been all over the world. I'd flown planes, gambled with millions, bedded starlets and models and...I ran a hand over my face/ I was tired. What had I been thinking about? I couldn't remember. I concentrated very hard; my memory was very bad. I found myself always trying to remember things. It was like waking up in the middle of your day, and having no memory of what you'd been doing. For thirty years.

My martini came and I smiled. Henry winked at me and slid some bills from the small collection before me. I sipped the drink and nodded. Henry knew how to make a drink. I liked the kid. I wondered how long he'd been working here.

The little bell on the front door tinkles and I look around. Gorgeous thing, brunette with cool blue eyes. She reminds me of someone...who...I can't recall. Maybe I'm wrong. She sits down at the bar and pulls out a long cigarette, ignoring the grins and stares from the boys in the corner, and orders a white wine.

I can smell her perfume. It brings back...I frown, confused again.

I sense movement and look up just as she glances at me. Our eyes meet. She has pretty eyes, and they widen and stare at me.

I smile and raise my drink. I wonder if she's the sort of young girl who likes distinguished old men, and then wonder if I might manage to come across as distinguished.

"I'm sorry," she says with a startled smile. "I don't mean to stare. It's just that you remind me of someone I used to know."

"I get that a lot." I said cheerfully, which I think is true, though I can't be sure. I smile at her again. "I dreamt I was someone else once, and I think you were in my dream."

She smiled a little at that, but it's an affectionate, what-a-cute-old-man smile. "I used to come here with him, long ago."

"What does long ago mean to a girl like you?" I asked sadly.

She didn't think it was sad. "Oh, you know. Almost two years now. It's okay, he wasn't very good to me."

"Ah, too bad. You deserve to have someone be good to you."

She toasted me with her drink. "Thank you. You're very sweet."

We retreated to our spheres. One after the other, the young bulls approached her, made conversation, bought her more wine, made little jokes, and eventually she left with one of them.

“Hey, Mack?”

I looked up, and it’s Henry. He looked troubled.

“You okay? Why are you crying?”

I blinked up at him. “I don’t know.” I said, shaking.

I didn’t know.

THE END