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The Recruit

She led him off the floor the same way she'd led him through the steps of the disco dance. She was laughing, and through the monotonous blare of the music

don't stop till you get enough

he heard her voice raised (“...absolutely... *parched*...”). He paused by a waitress, pointed at their table and ordered two drinks. She collapsed, still laughing, into the booth and he slid in beside her. Now she was saying she hoped they'd play some

when I'm bad I'm so, so bad

Donna Summer. He said, “I can't believe there's a place that has disco! What year are we in again?”

“Something different every night here,” she told him. “Thursday nights they have rock.”

“That's what I like,” he told her. “Rock. We should come here on a Thursday.” He couldn't believe he'd said that; he had been fairly certain that he wasn't enjoying this date of theirs, and he had just implied that he would like another. They'd been out a few times now, and the evening always ended with him not completely sure why he was arranging to see her again.

He paid for the drinks when they arrived. “You like jazz?” he yelled to her and had to repeat it

don't stop till you get enough

twice. She moved over closer and yelled back, “Sometimes!”

There was a lull in the music at just that moment so that in the brief silence her voice was startlingly loud. She thought that was funny and he picked up his drink, watching her laugh.

Just then

Once I had a love and it was a gas.

They started playing a song she liked and she dragged him back to the floor.

soon turned out, had a heart of glass

Again she led him with the trick of a touch or turn, showing him what she wanted him to do.

Once I had a love and it was divine

When they danced she never took her eyes from his face and through the blinking colored lights and the spinning-swirling red of her dress, those curiously vivid blue eyes seemed strangely immobile, the only two points in the room that remained constant.

soon turned out I was losing my mind.

It was so like she didn't want to miss a thing.

it's just no good you teasing like you do

Soon after that, she wanted to leave. As he got their coats she said, “I want you to meet my friends,” and the words echoed again and again in his head.

“I’d like to,” he answered, the polite lie automatic. As they headed down the sidewalk she pointed at another, smaller club across the street. “There’s the place where you met me,” she told him, then nudged him with her elbow and added, “Don’t I know you?”

She kept reminding him that this was the first thing he’d said to her. But he really had, for a lightheaded moment, thought that he knew her. It was when she’d turned into the light, smiling ironically, that he knew that the angles and shadows had played a trick on him.

When he’d told her he was a policeman she’d laughed the way she did at almost everything he said. Then when he’d told her he’d been overseas, in the desert, she’d said, “You like guns or something?”

Each time before calling her for a date he had to debate with himself over whether or not he really wanted to see her. He always ended up calling without really having decided.

The staring eyes with their unnatural blueness, her sardonically smiling mouth, that drawling, ever-amused voice, all combined to unsettle him. She seemed to detect something humorous in everything he said, something he himself did not see. But he kept calling her despite the feeling of being covertly ridiculed. At moments he had felt defenseless near her, even threatened by her, but this made so little sense that he steeled himself against it. He’d dreamed about her.

She invited him into her apartment and something about the way she was moving around made him think that he might sleep with her tonight.

maybe tonight... your hair is beautiful tonight...

The crashing drone of the damn disco music wouldn't leave his head. "Fix us some drinks!" she gaily commanded, and he obeyed. While he found ice, she slipped a disc into the CD player, saying, "You said you like rock?" She flourished the remote, jabbed a button and the Stones

please allow me to introduce myself

wailed and she turned to dance toward him, hair flying, shoulders swaying. There was something false about her energy; her vigor seemed not to come from a natural abundance of high spirits, but as the result of the switch of an automaton being turned on. And suddenly he knew her again as she smiled at him, knew her the way he had for that brief but dizzying moment the night he met her. Suddenly he knew her very well and he felt a prickling of apprehension. Sometimes she frightened him and she knew it, too, she thought (of course) that it was funny. He heard his own words in his head, 'Don't I know you, don't I know you, don't I...'

"Wanna dance and drink, or wanna drink and dance?" she asked him and then he didn't know her anymore and relaxed a little. He set down the drinks and started dancing with her. They'd never danced to rock together before and he was glad to be able to show her that in this he didn't have to be led. This he knew, and

if I should stick a knife in my heart, suicide right on the stage

she was delighted. They fell down laughing on the couch but she leapt up again immediately to retrieve their drinks

would you think the boy's insane

“So when do we get together again?” she demanded, brushing her hair back with curved fingers. He realized they weren't going to sleep together after all.

“Thursday, remember? Rock night.” He didn't feel all that disappointed that they wouldn't sleep together.

he's insa-a-a-ne...

He followed her to the door but she didn't open it right away. She leaned against the wall, hand resting on the knob, watching him, slightly smiling. He saw that she realized he'd been planning on kissing her and she was waiting for him.

would it satisfy ya, would it slide on by ya

He felt a hot flurry of annoyance, because this was the thing that bothered, sometimes frightened him about her: The way she let him know he was helplessly anticipated in everything he said or did. Just with a look or barely discernable gesture she let him know that he held no surprises for her. She was so far ahead of him, watching from a distance, maybe interested, maybe not, but somehow bound to watch.

would it be enough for your cheatin' heart if I broke down and cried

He kissed her anyway.

“You’ve gotta meet my friends,” she told him as he left.

If I cri-i-ied

*

And then he was home – safe? – and he was, like, oh, what is this anyway? Man, I hate her, I don’t know her, but yes, I know her. Why do I know her, she’s got it out for me, she’s picked me out. Don’t make me meet them, they want to kill me, they always kill me

that’s the only reason, oh yes, that makes sense, the fear, they want to kill me. I will die.

I was getting’ my head together, yeah, just then, just then, she comes along... I can just walk away. Get away.

it’s just a shot away, just a shot away

Why’d he have to buy that bottle on the way home anyhow, like he wasn’t already in a fucked up state of mind.

He found himself drunkenly remembering his mother’s method of discipline when he and his brother had been very young; if one of them got in trouble, both were punished. He’d never understood it and remembered the anger and helplessness, confined to his room when all he’d done was watch his brother spray-paint the shrubbery red, had only promised not to tell when his brother had used his mother’s lipstick for Indian war paint and his father’s golf clubs and golf balls for guns and grenades. Funny it would come back to him now, that same weak rage and frustration, in such a totally different context. He woke from dreams with that feeling washing over him in hot waves.

The dreams had started with her, Angela, but weren't always just about her. There were other people whom he knew well in the dreams but who were strangers again when he awoke. He was always in the center of their circle, the only one who didn't understand what was happening. That was the way of dreams, wasn't it, they were confusing because you didn't know what was happening – really, that was the basic thing, the not understanding. He'd done something wrong: He knew this by the way they were looking at him, and he knew he was expected to pay for what he'd done. But he didn't know what that was. But the penalty was severe, so much more severe than was warranted, especially when his crime went unexplained. And there was no way of asking forgiveness or

would it be enough for your cheatin' heart if I broke down and cried

making amends.

They seemed to be trying to make him understand but he never quite grasped it. Perhaps they were deliberately unclear, maybe they didn't care.

He always awoke hot and shaking and thinking that it was not fair. It never was. At least that was how he felt.

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“This is Kate Monck... and Philip Morton.”

He leaned over the table to shake hands first with the older, dark-haired woman, then with the vaguely smiling young man beside her.

“It's good to meet you.”

Angela, finished with her introductions, took a few crackers from the basket and began spreading cheese on them. He watched the other three smile at one another. He briefly knew them, but the knowing diffused almost immediately into a harmless but uncomfortable dislike for the group before he could analyze it. And anyway, there was one missing, he was sure. There ought to be four faces watching him now with that somehow detached interest.

“Angela says you’re a policeman?” smiled Kate Monck and Philip laughed softly.

“Yes,” he answered, glancing at Philip who smiled back, demonically innocent.

“He’s been in the desert, too,” Angela spoke up, “with guns and everything.”

“Rough, huh?” asked Philip soberly.

“You do what you gotta do,” he said, and all three of them stifled giggles. They were always, he could see, laughing like this, playing a game and daring one another to keep secrets from the one left out.

The waiter came and they placed their orders. “Whatever you want,” Kate assured them. “On me.”

“She’s the one with money,” Angela told him, and Kate shrugged, smiling slightly.

“Did you see much action?” Philip asked when the waiter was gone.

He hesitated, glancing at Angela who was looking at him expectantly. “I was discharged, wounded,” he told them.

“Who is more evil?” intoned Kate Monck, “The madman who leads the battle or his followers who obey his commands?”

He didn’t actually think that she’d meant for him to reply, but looking up saw her waiting.

“His followers,” answered Angela for him. “Without them, the madman would be powerless.”

Philip Morton held an imaginary camera before his narrowed eyes, pointed it at him and said, “Click.”

“Maybe I shouldn’t have ordered the sole,” mused Kate. “Last time I had it here it was so *buttery*.”

“You can still change your order,” Angela said eagerly. “Look, there’s our waiter. If I grab him he can real quick go in and change your order.”

“Eh, doesn’t really matter,” said Kate. “What did you order, by the way?”

He looked blankly from one to the other. He saw that Kate was speaking to Angela, but then he also saw another Kate sitting on the other side of the restaurant, alone at a table; she raised her glass of wine to him and nodded. He saw another one wearing a chef’s hat lean out of the kitchen to call something sternly to a waiter. Yet another Kate was ushering a group of four to a booth and saying, “You do know, don’t you, that I feel utter contempt for you?” and all four of the diners laughed lightly and asked about the specials.

Philip pretended to snap another picture.

“Doesn’t that get obnoxious?” giggled Angela, then to Philip, “Go to hell!” They both laughed.

“He’s a photographer for The Herald,” Kate told him.

“Plus I do a lot of freelance stuff,” added Philip.

“Yeah,” said Angela, “you go around saying ‘Click’ to people!”

Kate was the public relations director for a state Senator. She said to him, “Working so closely with politicians I’ve had many opportunities to observe how it is the so-called ‘little man’ who in the end puts power into the hands of the madmen. War is only one example of the ways in which the many will unquestioningly carry out the wishes of the demented few. Those wishes are generally a lust for power. Power can take any form, of course.”

“The little guys never seem to realize they might have a choice,” added Angela, taking another handful of crackers.

“They don’t want to know,” said Kate. “Rather than take control and responsibility, they prefer willful ignorance, it’s so much easier. They really need to be taught lessons and made to understand, over and over again, if necessary, until they get it right.”

Over and over and over...

Her voice was bland and almost bored, like that of a teacher repeating the multiplication tables to students she knows are staring out the window, not listening. But when he looked at her she was staring so directly into his face that he was startled, and drew back.

“I’m starving,” declared Philip. “I could eat a... a water buffalo!”

“They don’t have it here,” said Angela. “And anyway, you’ve already ordered some kind of decadent burger with, like, everything under the sun on it.”

“Angela says you’re from the West Coast?”

Angela says Angela says

“Yes, San Francisco. About twenty years.”

“Then the military?” asked Philip, and he nodded.

“In all my traveling,” admitted Kate Monck, “I’ve never been to San Francisco. Extraordinary, when you think about it.” She sipped her water, looking at him. “Which madman will you be voting for?”

“Excuse me? What?”

“Next month? The elections. Who are you voting for?”

They all giggled and he imagined their laughter as being dangerous, like the hiss of a viper sliding across your foot and pausing to look up at you with yellow eyes.

“Oh. I don’t know. I hadn’t really thought about it.”

That quiet, watchful menace he felt lately, a polite and somehow sedate danger, like having a wild beast sitting across the table from you, holding a china teacup and cloaked, for now, in a veneer of innocuous small talk and detached interest, but sizing you up all the while, calculating, planning to lunge.

“Will you be content with whoever is elected?” Kate asked.

He broke a cracker in half. “It never seems to make a difference,” he said. They didn’t like him and, what was more, they’d already known ahead of time they wouldn’t like him. They’d just wanted to see him in the flesh, size him up. As he had imagined he already knew them, so they knew him as well. He ventured, bravely, he felt, “Why are you so cynical and down on the system when you’re a part of it?”

“Simple,” shrugged Kate. “Connections. They make things easier in the end. It’s my part.”

She looked at him with an Angela-like smirk and he had to remind himself that he was hearing these words for the first time.

“I see,” he said.

“Click,” said Philip.

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She lit tall white candles, smiled through the thin flames so that he could know her as he’d known her when she’d danced to the Rolling Stones. Except now

You drove me, nearly drove me, out of my head, while you never shed a tear

It was... Joe Cocker, maybe? On the stereo. And he did know her, too, for only a moment, but it was always getting clearer lately.

remember, I remember all that you said

“Too bad you didn’t get to meet Ron at lunch,” she said, sitting down beside him and pouring wine for them both.

“That’s the minister?” he asked.

“The Reverend Barry himself,” she told him, rolling the capital R. “Busy, busy guy. Hard to pin down.”

He’d known there was one missing. He tried to fill in the blank face.

cry me a river

He saw her cross her legs in such a way that her skirt rode up to mid-thigh. As with everything else, he knew he was incapable of interpreting this development.

“Your friends are interesting,” he remarked.

“Yeah,” she said. “They’re into stuff...” She laughed and waved an arm in a sweeping gesture, “... way *out* there.”

“And you?”

“Yeah,” she said, looking into her wine glass. “I’m into what they’re into.”

he knew her, he knew her no

“Ron’s going to be at Kate’s party Saturday after next. You wanna come?”

She was daring him. He could tell by the way she didn’t look at him, just leaned forward, elbows on knees, gazing distractedly toward the music. It was now

what goes up must come down

some song he hadn't heard for years, decades.

spinnin' wheel gotta go 'round

Of course he didn't want to go to Kate's party Saturday after next. He couldn't think of one earthly reason why he would.

you got no money and you... you got no home

"So, you want to go?" she asked, turning to him again. She had an expression he'd never seen on her before, slightly sad. Maybe she didn't want him to go with her; maybe she didn't want to go herself.

"If you want to, sure. I'll go with you."

talkin' 'bout your troubles and you... you never learn

"Then we'll go." Had there really been a choice? He'd always known he wasn't one to take the lead. He was never out front, not in the desert and not on the Force. On the street, in a tight situation, he always deliberately hesitated, inconspicuously he thought, just enough so that his partner was a critical step ahead of him at crucial moments. This tendency, as it turned out, had been noted by his fellow officers. Cops noticed everything. He'd overheard one guy ask his partner how it was going with 'Tag-Along' and his face had frozen. But he'd never put anyone in danger, he did his job. Self-preservation was a human instinct.

Which had nothing to do, did it, with why he was letting this decidedly peculiar woman lead him by the nose.

She played with the gold chain around her neck. She reached over and toyed with, then loosened the top buttons of his shirt. As when he'd spoken with Kate Monck, he felt again as though he were watching a poisonous snake easing across his body and all he could do was remain very still, hoping it would slide away again without doing harm.

This was not the way one responded to an attractive woman's advances.

"You're not too crazy about me," she pondered aloud. "You're not even too sure you like me very much."

He just stared at her. He wanted to refute this adamantly, as anyone would, but he somehow knew this was not expected. She went on as though he'd agreed, "Then how come you keep on seeing me?"

It was because of an idea he was forming that if he tried to run now a small but essential prop would be pulled from under the intricate foundation of some vast, timeless paradigm, whose shape and form he didn't yet grasp but which terrified him all the same. This was a numb, passionless thought and his fear of her, his desire to run from her and never, ever sit with the four of them again could not alter it.

Another song started playing and he listened

I don't care if you hurt me some more I don't care if you even the score

and once more he didn't answer her question aloud.

"You don't know, huh?" she smiled abstractedly.

'cause you're all I've got tonight you're all I've got tonight

“No,” he agreed, but he was starting to, a little. Maybe.

I need you... tonight

“If you thought about it long enough, you’d know,” she said. “If you knew *how* to think about it, you’d remember things.”

He looked down at the white candles. That was it; he didn’t know *how* to think about it.

I don’t care if you use me again I don’t care if you abuse me again

He heard her voice, wrenched his mind from the music to listen to it.

“Think about little things,” she was saying. “Little memories, and they’ll lead you to others. Think about...” She paused, frowning. “Think about a yellow field, a pasture bordered by thick pine trees. It’s a little cloudy, gray clouds. Someone’s yelling in the street that a soldier’s become separated from his regiment, he’s wandering toward the village, disoriented. In the distance there’s smoke rising. Try to remember that. It nearly always starts something like that – there’s someone lost from the group.”

He swirled the wine in his glass.

“What do you see?” she asked, leaning toward him.

The thing was, he did see it, from a great distance. “A soldier...” he began, then jerked his head back in a sharp, convulsive movement because suddenly words and images began spilling into his mind, and he was afraid of them but couldn’t stop them. Not only because she wanted them to form but because they were already there, had been there waiting to be seen. “A

village and people,” he went on, gazing coldly into his wine glass again, “and one of them is calling for... for...”

“Who?” she insisted, her voice growing excited.

“Dovi... Dovidan...” He shook his head and closed his eyes, scared of her voice and the way she was making him see these things, making him think he remembered them.

“Dovidania!” she cried, the wildly blue eyes shimmering, pleased. “What else?”

“I don’t know.” He kept his eyes closed as though to shut her out, make her stop asking. But the scene only became clearer as he looked inward and suddenly, helplessly, his eyes opened and his head snapped around sharply to stare at her.

“It was...”

“What?”

“It was after a battle. Very violent, no prisoners. There were hundreds of us... them, coming west from a city to the countryside.” And he looked away from her. The words had suddenly rushed from his memory almost before he knew what they would be. Angela was laughing with a childish glee that struck him as macabre. He was trapped in a madhouse, an asylum, as real as if there were concrete walls around him. He wished he could see the walls so that he could claw his hands bloody on them.

“Now try to remember the time... let’s see...” she pondered, an almost mischievous look of excitement on her face. He thought that if he didn’t drag his eyes away from her he would scream. “How about the time you...”

“No!” he cried, spilling his wine. “No more!”

He felt her draw back sharply and he looked at her, confused and frustrated and saw a bolt of anger pass through her eyes. But it was more than anger and when he looked at her more closely he nearly shrank away, a coldness sweeping him. Because she was not just angry at him, she was loathing him, *hating* him. Of all the things she had told him and shown him, things his mind was agile enough to find ways to deny, this was more real, so terrifyingly real that his thoughts spun back to that vast paradigm of his imaginings and thrashed there, snared and helpless and, inevitably, uncomprehending of it all.

“You do these things and then you think you can walk away! You think you don’t even have to remember! That’s how much of a mindless pawn you are!”

He’d never been confronted with such plain rage that was directed solely at him, him alone. Then, bizarrely, the fury melted from her face like snow sliding gently from a tree bough. “You don’t have to remember any more tonight,” she said and he watched the sly laughter creep back into her eyes. “But you did the first rather well.”

He had to keep from putting his hands over his ears so that he wouldn’t have to listen to her. She refilled his wine glass. He picked it up.

“We like you to remember ahead of time, as much as you’re capable of, at least.”

He sipped the wine. Maybe she had drugged it. He kept sipping anyhow.

“You were lost, disoriented, and just sort of wandered into our midst.”

He drank. She waited with an air of utmost patience, as though she were actually observing the slow struggling in his mind, was listening herself to the confusing myriad of hysterical questions and loud denials, until she felt him reach that painless, tired resignation that felt familiar to him, which he always felt, finally. She smiled as he turned to look at her.

“I remember a little,” he said.

“You’ll remember more. Maybe when you see us all together. That’s always the key.”

Seeing them all together. That’s what he should never do. But he only nodded. “Who was...” He paused, not wanting to but trying to recall. “The big man? Black beard? In the village...”

“You’ll meet him Saturday,” she said.

He’d known there was one missing. He put down his glass and leaned far back into the cushions of the couch. “There were other times?” he asked.

“Of course,” she told him. “Lots of times. Lots of places.”

“I can’t really remember. Just faces sometimes. But not... not things that happened.”

“You were always the one to have the hardest time understanding. But you’ll remember everything.”

“Will I want to?” he asked, feeling the scream.

“That’s never really mattered,” she told him. “Has it?” She began unbuttoning her blouse. “Hey,” she said, winking, “sorry I got a little uptight before.”

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In Sunday's paper he read a piece describing a fundraiser hosted by the State Senator for whom Kate Monck worked. She was present, of course. The press had later tried to grill the Senator on his inexorably controversial stands on a number of issues as he was leaving, heavily surrounded by staff and family. But he'd turned his back saying this wasn't the time or place and left Kate to make a few statements to appease them. He could almost hear that flat, droning voice and the printed words in the paper seemed more intense than they had probably sounded when spoken, because one imagined they had been imbued with passion.

The Senator, always to the outermost left, had been becoming increasingly, as his opponents put it, eccentric and his views unapologetically extreme. He almost sneeringly shrugged off his critics lately, to the outrage of many and the delight of quite a few. Waiting for his latest incendiary remarks had become a gleeful sport to the press. With elections coming up, his right-wing opponent had put out a television ad: It consisted first of a cuckoo clock croaking out the hour, then a picture of the Senator with the simple caption: Why is this guy in office?

A former anti-war activist from the 60's had come out with a controversial best seller on his experiences from that time. The Senator had been asked about it, specifically the focus on draft-dodging. "Those were the good ol' days," was his comment and, once again, the journalists sighed with rapture. The footage of that remark was incorporated into the cuckoo clock ad.

"Ms. Monck," said one on the evening of the fundraiser, "regarding his continued popularity with, in particular, young voters, the Senator was recently described as the bad kid in

class who gains pointless approval by his schoolmates simply by virtue of his bad behavior.

Your comments?”

“What a convoluted sentence,” mused Kate, then said, “It’s probably time to rethink our definition of the phrase ‘bad kid.’”

He put down the paper, shaking his head. She had an answer for everything, didn’t she? He got up and left his apartment to go for a walk. He felt that as he moved he was leaving behind the lofty, disdainful words of Kate Monck, the hate-filled eyes and smiling mouth of Angela. He imagined as he traveled that their ghosts were dissipating with every moment so that when he returned to his apartment they would be gone altogether. But instead, they followed him, as he saw now.

Half a block ahead of him, walking in the same direction was a pair of sloping shoulders, a shaggy blond head and a long, angular body. With weak laughter at the inevitability of it he knew it was Philip Morton, noticed the camera equipment bag, the straps of which were criss-crossed over his back. He made no effort to catch up with the fox-like young man.

But when Philip paused to adjust one of the straps he had no choice but to pass by him, unless he wanted to be foolish enough to stand there waiting for the other to continue.

“How you doing?” He saw Philip’s lazy smile and the almond eyes looking at him sideways as he came abreast of him. He stopped and managed to look pleasantly surprised to run into the boy.

“Nice day for taking pictures,” he said, and saw that Philip wasn’t adjusting the straps of his equipment, but pulling a ring of keys from his pocket.

“Come on up,” said Philip and turned to climb the steps of the brownstone they’d stopped in front of. “Have a beer,” he added, unlocking the front door.

“Been taking pictures in the park?” he asked, following Philip up a flight of stairs. He wished he could give some excuse for not being able to stay.

“All over the place.” Philip let him into his apartment. It was spacious if a little cluttered, decorated mainly with enlarged black and white photographs and some wall hangings.

“I’ll get us some beers,” said Philip, disentangling himself from his gear. He disappeared into the kitchen.

While waiting, he wandered around the room, looking at the photos; some must have been things he’d done for The Herald, others seemed to be of friends. He stopped before one of Angela and Kate together. They were both just standing there, smiling into the camera, but some kind of intimacy between them came through so vividly that it made the simple black and white striking. There was another of Angela alone and he stared at it a long moment before realizing it must have been taken years ago; she was twenty-eight now, but in the photo she had the taut, fresh look of a teenager. Her hair was cut differently; she was waving a peace sign and winking. He wondered if Philip and Angela...

“Here you go.” Philip was standing behind him, his smile twisted slightly, holding out a beer for him. He wondered, since he and Angela had obviously known each other for some time if they had, together, practiced that slow, sardonic smile.

“Nice stuff,” he said, and sipped the beer. “Been at it long?”

“Yeah.” Philip idly gazed across the photos. “Yeah, quite awhile.”

He noticed an object hanging near a cupboard and bent to survey it more closely. It was something like, what, a mandolin? Ancient, seemingly, but well preserved. He knew nothing about musical instruments and glanced at Philip questioningly.

“Fifteenth century,” he told him and stretched out on the couch. “Not a mandolin, a lute.”

“Where did you find it?”

Philip shrugged and picked up his beer. “I don’t know. Somewhere.”

He saw in the cupboard, behind the thick glass, a collection of scrolls of some sort tied together loosely, stacks of parchment and some stone sheets with engraved script of some sort; he felt Philip’s lazy stare following him.

“What’s all this?”

Philip, watching from his lounging position said, “Poetry. Music. A play.”

“How old is this stuff?” He couldn’t connect the languid young man on the couch with these obviously ancient and seemingly genuine artifacts. He’d never seen these kinds of things in a private home before, they seemed like they ought to be in a museum.

“The play’s French Revolution. There’s some fourth century Greek poetry. The Armenian scripts are records, early Christian.” He propped himself up on one elbow and nodded toward some busy looking apparatus connected to the heavy cupboard. “It’s hermetically sealed,” he informed him, sounding pleased about this.

He stared at Philip, unbuttoned the top button of his shirt, because it was too warm in the room.

“How did you get these things? Aren’t they valuable?”

Philip shrugged and chuckled softly. “I pick them up here and there. I don’t know. A hobby. You can open the window.”

He stared wonderingly at the young man a moment longer, then went to the window, pulled it open and paused before turning around again, long enough to feel a breeze slip into the room.

“Do you know what they say?” he asked, looking again at the dusty collection. “Have you ever had them translated?”

Philip downed his beer and instead of answering, stood up and went down a short hall. He returned with a stretched canvas which he gazed at a moment before turning it towards his guest. It was old, like everything else, a painting in murky, heavily shadowed colors. It was morbid, depicting a group of people gathered around a lone figure in partial armor being led to the hangman’s noose. There was a tone of bleak, joyless triumph in the painting; like catching a solitary enemy but knowing that the rest of the army was marching off safely over the hills.

His eyes moved to peer closely at the painted face of the condemned then swung sharply to that of a disturbingly exultant young woman on the fringes of the crowd. Then to another, older woman at her side who seemed to be speaking to the crowd.

Then back to the condemned.

Then to the two women. The executioner's face, he saw, was hidden in black.

He started to lean forward but before he could, Philip lowered the canvas and returned it to the dark hallway.

“Fourteenth century, Austria.”

He looked blankly at Philip a long moment, threads of fear, watched the blond man's lazy smile widen a bit. He looked back at the glass cabinet.

“Where did you get these?” he asked again. “Where did you get them?”

Philip picked up his camera, adjusted it, focused it on the tense face before him and snapped a picture. Lowering the camera, he shrugged.

“They're mine,” he said, with such gloating possessiveness in his voice that one would have thought not only did he own them, but had created them.

“They're mine,” he repeated.

*

He was no longer able, when with her, to remember the rest of the day without her. That way she had of compelling him to conjure up vivid, dark images, even that became merely a backdrop to the commanding reality that was her. He always resisted at first, of course. She loved noisy clubs full of music and that's where they would start out their evenings,

Aruba, Jamaica, ooh I wanna take you to Bermuda, Bahama, come on pretty mama

drinking and dancing. He'd never known there were so many clubs, so much music to be found simply by walking what never seemed like more than a few short blocks.

He mentioned he'd run into Philip that time.

"He's always been the creative one," she said.

you wanna stay out with your fancy friends, I'm tellin' you it's gotta be the end...

On another night, when he picked her up to go out she greeted him with an uncharacteristically tentative smile. "What do you think of my hair?" she asked, toying with a dark lock. "I spent a fortune."

He studied her a moment or two then ventured, "It looks great."

She hooted with laughter. "I didn't do a thing to it!"

He stared at her. She liked playing these pointless little tricks. She'd done something similar a couple evenings ago, encouraging him to admire a supposedly brand-new sweater then telling him she'd worn it on their very first date. The purpose, he supposed, was to amuse herself and to make him feel vaguely duped. It had occurred to him, naturally, that she was somewhat off her rocker. And yet this possibility didn't seem to invite contemplation.

don't bring me down

There was a musical in town that he kept hearing people talk about.

Oh, what heights we'll hit! On with the show this is it

He thought about getting tickets for it, not so much for their own pleasure, but to show her that he could be - what? - a man about town, do something she didn't expect. When he broached the idea to her, however, she seemed disinterested. No, she preferred the night clubs. She liked places where she could move around, not be forced to remain seated in one place the whole time. Even in restaurants she was continually looking around, gazing at the other diners as though she were... well, not quite in charge of them, but was keeping track of them. Like a camp counselor not exactly making sure her charges didn't fall into the lake, but checking, out of curiosity, to see if they had.

So he thought about her, and clearly she studied him. But they never compared notes, never had a reckoning. He drank too much on their dates. Surely she noticed, but never commented. One evening heading home from a club he'd never known of, one featuring classic rock

sometimes the light's all shinin' on me

he staggered a little and she simply put out an arm to steady him without even glancing his way.

other times I can barely see

"There's the Senator," she said, pointing at a newspaper folded neatly on a park bench. The Senator was staring beyond the camera, jabbing his finger into the distance. He squinted to make out the headline, but he couldn't get the words to appear anyway but doubled. Lately he'd been trying to stay at least slightly abreast of the election issues so as not to sound completely uninformed to Angela and, when he met them again, her friends. He had, in fact, rehearsed a point to make in the event the subject of the election came up. Something about global

warming? No, he'd crossed that off his list: He didn't have enough background to converse intelligently and he'd be floundering in moments. Crime? Something about crime? He'd had something, but his brain was swimming right now.

lately it occurs to me

“That guy's puttin' himself way out on a limb,” was what he finally came up with. “All the time. Everything he says. Everything he does.”

every single day and every word you say every game you play every night you stay I'll be watchin' you

“Yup,” agreed Angela. “He never used to be like that.” She snickered rather gloatingly. “Kate's got him in hand.”

“Will he be at Kate's party? The Senator?”

“Not that I know of. Probably not. But she's in constant touch with him.”

every breath you take and every move you make

They always slept together now, after their dates. The sex was... Was it good? He couldn't say that it was. It was inevitable. Like in a silent movie he imagined jolly organ music playing as a curlicued sign announced: The Part Where Our Hero Sleeps With The Girl! Is He Doing The Right Thing?” Crashing chord of foreboding.

So they went to clubs with noisy music. He'd thought at first that she had an uncanny talent for discovering these places but now he knew that the clubs were just there when she wanted them, and their 'themes' depended upon what she wanted at the moment.

And it really doesn't matter if I'm wrong I'm right. Where I belong I'm right where I belong. Silly people

So she chaperoned him around, kept an eye on him (that's what it felt like) and after the clubs they slept together. Except in between the clubs and the sex there was the remembering. Was the remembering a wrapping up of the club stage or was it a prelude to the sex stage?

run around they worry me and never ask me why they don't get past my door

He was getting better at it. She would give him the wine, they'd sit back, and she would describe a scene. It was alarming how little it took lately to jog his memory. The blueness, cloudiness or turbulence of a sky. The swarming faces of the people surrounding him. The method of execution he saw, the form it took. The helplessness, of course, the impotent rage. The inevitability.

“See those three stars?” his brother would say. “Start there, that's his belt.” His brother had for awhile been interested in identifying constellations in the night sky. “Start with the belt. Okay? Now move your eyes straight up from the middle star of his belt, and that's his head. He's holding up a club, so move to the left and go up...”

He would realize at some point that he'd started from the wrong cluster of stars, so the ensuing directions were meaningless. Still, out of frustration he'd nod and pretend he was following. He would even yelp in supposed, delighted discovery, and his brother would believe that he saw the picture and would sit back, pleased to have shown him. She didn't fall for this, however. When he murmured, “Yes, yes... I see that...” she would impatiently shake her head and say, “No! No, you're not seeing anything! Concentrate!” And finally he'd resign himself.

This resignation seemed to be a key, for that would be when he really did see, finally. It was when he realized that it was all essentially out of his hands that it became clear. The need for this resignation to achieve self-actualization, she told him, had always been his tragic weakness. But at least he saw, finally, a little. And not that it mattered much in the end. That much he knew.

*

He appraised himself in the mirror. He liked how he looked for Kate Monck's party (and Angela approved). He turned to her and said, "On the way over there should we pick up maybe a bundt cake? Or some éclairs?"

She laughed so much she had to sit down, and it wasn't the cutting, mocking laughter, it was so real she got a tear in her eye. He waited for her to calm down before saying, "*What?*" She actually patted his cheek, almost affectionately. "I'm sure Kate's well supplied with chips 'n dip with plenty of pigs-in-blankets! Come on."

She'd shown him that his past extended far beyond his birth. Still, entering Kate Monck's expensive, elegantly appointed apartment (no need to proffer a bakery box of éclairs here, he saw immediately) he felt he'd never been anywhere else, with anyone else.

Philip pretended to take their picture as they came in. Kate herself waved across the room to them from amidst a group of friends. He looked for the other one, but knew he wasn't there yet. Angela introduced him to some people, then Kate introduced him to some more. He didn't know any of them and knew he never had. Hearing the smart talk bubbling all around him he knew he was out of his element. There was a professor of anthropology. Someone had just

published his third novel. A woman owned a prestigious art gallery and was excited about her upcoming showing for a new talent. He'd had a strong drink while getting dressed, then just before Angela came to get him, he'd guzzled another; he didn't know if it was this or having Angela constantly at his side that kept the intimidation at bay, but he was more relaxed than he'd anticipated.

I'm not scared of dyin' and I don't really care if it's peace you find in dyin' well then let the time be near

He felt pretty good, actually. He found suddenly that he liked Angela with her slightly cruel smile. A couple of weeks ago she'd said, "You don't really like me, do you?" and he wished now he could take back the silence he'd responded with. As always she knew what he was thinking – when he glanced down at her she nodded to him as though in acknowledgement. He smiled, glad they had cleared that up.

He found also that he liked Philip with his sly gaze and his 'Click' and also Kate Monck and her austere, superior bearing. The three of them, he noticed, were never all together at one time during the party, but he observed each of them, at some point, glancing about the rooms to see where the others were. There was music playing somewhere, so softly he could barely hear it

thunderbolt and lightening very, very frightening me

and he thought of asking Angela

caviar and cigarettes well versed in etiquette

to put on maybe some

ain't superstitious, blow that black cat cross my trail

blues. She could do it from here, he knew, from where they were standing. Anyone hearing the sudden change would be slightly startled and she'd wink at him and he'd laugh. It was good having his own witch and he leaned to her and said loudly, "It's good having my own witch!" and indeed she winked, and indeed he laughed. He went for yet another drink and rejoined her quickly, laughing to himself.

Angela's wink was like Philip's 'Click,' he thought. Where was Reverend Barry? he wondered. Where was el-famouso, el-reverendo? "Where's...?"

*everybody knows I'm him. Oh you know I'm the hoochie coochie man everybody knows
I'm him*

"Ron? I just saw him, he's..." she pointed vaguely, then said, "Oh. Well, he *was* there. He's around."

"He's important, right?"

I'm the hoochie coochie man everybody knows I'm him

She smiled. "Have another drink," she suggested.

"Don't mind if I do," he replied, for some inane reason in a barely passable British accent. He was drunk, he knew, but he felt he was concealing it well. He saw that Angela looked slightly weary, he even saw her glance at her watch. He had never seen her tired before. She was a windup toy, he thought, and her juice was running down. Tick tick... tick... ti...

He'd never seen her sleep, he realized. When they ended the night at her place, she always sent him home later. When they were at his place, she left while he dozed, was simply gone when he opened his eyes.

“Do you ever sleep?” he asked her.

“No,” she answered. They'd drifted close to a group where Kate Monck and the ever so important anthropologist were holding court. They seemed to be debating whether or not man was by nature an aggressive animal. Kate did not think so. Kate felt that most people were in fact quite passive and that the aggressive individual was the aberration, the exception to the rule. She said the aggressive man, the anomaly, counted on the passive tendency to follow in his fellow beings to advance his own interests.

He listened for a few moments, but grew restless with the talk. For the first time he separated from Angela and wandered off on his own. He felt good and was pleased with the conversations he was having and with

baby you can drive my car

the old Beatles songs he could now hear dimly on the sound system. He heard a ‘Click’ from behind him and

think I'm gonna be a star

turned smiling to see Philip who grinned back and thumped him on the shoulder.

“Great party,” he said, raising his glass in salute.

“Kate gives swanky parties,” agreed Philip, and looked around to see where Kate was.

“Where’s the guest of honor?” he asked, and Philip looked bewildered.

“Oh,” Philip said, after a moment. “The Senator rarely makes it to purely social stuff like...”

“No, no, I don’t mean him. I mean... what’s his name... Reverend Barry.”

He really felt great and liked Philip, thought he was a damned good kid. But Philip’s perpetual smile was wavering and uncertain. “You mean Ron?” he asked. “You know Ron already?”

“Oh, I haven’t met him yet,” he shrugged, grinning. He attempted an Angela-like wink. “Not *this* time, anyhow. But we can’t get the show on the road without him, right?”

“Angela told you about it?” asked Philip, his face like that of an incredulous child finding out he’s been left out of something. “But we were going to do it together. We *always* do... Where’s Angela?” he demanded, looking around petulantly. “I mean, put the *brakes* on, man!”

Beep beep beep yeeeah!

He put down his drink and closed his eyes a moment, the febrile mood ebbing abruptly. He realized with near panic that he didn’t know what he’d been talking about, he had no idea. He started to turn away, not even to look for Angela, just to run away, get away from them all. Then Philip’s hand was on his shoulder and the eager, vague smile was floating before his face again.

“Hey, man, hey,” he said, “Yeah, we’ll see Ron tonight. We’ll all see him.” Philip’s grin was reassuring, the amused eyes comforting and his moment of piercing dread passed away. In a

minute they were both laughing and both pretended to take pictures of the guests. He saw Angela staring at him through the crowd and

close your eyes and I'll kiss you tomorrow I'll miss you

smiling, and he couldn't wait till later when they'd probably sleep together. He turned to Philip but the young man was gone. He wandered toward the bar but stopped abruptly when he saw who was leaning against it on one elbow, head tossed back, smiling benevolently. Kate Monck was suddenly at his side.

“Would you like to meet Ron Barry?” she asked him and

would it be enough for your cheatin' heart if I broke down and cried

someone put on the Stones.

if I cri-i-ied

*

I've been around the world, had my pick of any girl. You'd think I'd be happy - but I'm not. Ev'rybody knows my name, but it's just a crazy game. Oh it's lonely at the top.

He liked the Reverend Barry. He'd been a little nervous about meeting him, maybe just because of hearing his name so much in the past few weeks. But the Reverend (“Ron, please!”) was nice, smiled at him, and was good-naturedly tolerant of the way he kept getting all the names and faces confused.

“I know,” he agreed, in that sonorous and soothing voice. “There are so many, aren’t there?”

“Yes!” he agreed, smiling back at the Reverend. The party had cleared out awhile ago but somehow the room was still crowded with only the five of them.

He knew them all, now, but it was still hard and not just because he’d drank so much tonight. Something still told him that he ought to run away but he didn’t seem to care much anymore. It seemed impossible, anyhow, perhaps because of the Reverend Barry’s weighty presence, a presence that seemed to set things in stone so that you knew you were just where you had to be. Plus, the Reverend encouraged him to get the faces and names right, but was so forgiving when he couldn’t quite do it.

Morrigan and her daughter, Brigid laughed and talked with him and it was awhile before he realized, wait a minute, that Morrigan was certainly not old enough to be Brigid’s mother and, in fact, it was really Kate and Angela he was talking with. That was a whole other thing, a whole other time when it was Morrigan and Brigid. And he asked the bard Ethain to play his lute but it wasn’t Ethain at all... He remembered it must be Museaus and asked him to recite his poetry. But that was wrong, too and it also was not Morivania the German artist, either. Finally he was told that it was Philip, the photographer, and it was like a game and he was a child outrageously pleased with himself for solving a puzzle. Kate and Angela put on their many other faces for him and made him figure out who they were. They laughed, and felt the amused gaze of Dovidania the Druid upon them, except it wasn’t

you know I'm the hoochie coochie man everybody knows I'm him

and that started a whole new game because if Philip was Morivania that meant it was the Emperor of the Rosicrucian who smiled patiently, so deadly, at him. Or was he Bakid or was he Bellanti...

everybody knows I'm him

Now he grew slightly irritated because they were purposely changing too quickly for him to identify them and finally Morrigan soothed him as she once had with her herbal tea (because they were always nice at first) and she told him the real names.

At some point he realized he was the only one in the room still laughing and he was quiet, and suddenly

no music

He was slouched in a chair seeing who they were, feeling tired and tense all at once. And he noticed

no music

how alone he was and no more fun and he could not remember again how this game always ended.

He closed his eyes but the blackness spun so he forced them open again and saw again how empty and silent the room had become.

“Each time the roles and situations change, depending on where we are.”

He looked slowly toward the farthest corner of the room, heard Reverend Barry’s voice emanating from the shadow there.

“You knew that?”

He didn’t want to think about it right now, but they were all looking at him and waiting, and so...

...one time there’d been black boots, long marches, flames... but there always seemed to be flames in there somewhere. And always he got somehow separated from the rest, found himself alone amidst an undefeated, defiant group. And the thing that happened after that... there was never anything he could do about it. Someone had to pay.

He remembered wearing a red uniform with gold braid but he couldn't recall the rest. Once way, way back he'd come with thousands, streaming across arid plains toward a gleaming city to storm and plunder. And he'd been lured away

His eyes shot to Angela's face.

from the rest and again he'd been alone.

“And you know the roles by now?” This from Kate Monck, watching him speculatively. He nodded. He looked at the tall, dark shadow of a man in the corner, the leader, who was maybe not a man at all. Philip, always finding himself with a means for recording it all. Kate Monck who was sibyl, priestess, friend of the powerful, whose stern wings protected the others, allowed them to see it through and then move on without harm.

Angela came to sit beside him, caught his eye and winked at him. But he didn't try to follow her lead. There was no need now, she'd done her part.

“And do you know,” asked dreamy faced, always smiling Philip, “what always happens?”

He remembered one of the times he'd been on a routine mission to aid in an execution. He'd later been lured away by a young woman

would it be enough for your cheatin' heart

into a small group of people who were sorely aggrieved

if I broke down and cried

but would not go down without striking back. Even if it was only him they struck at.

If I cri-i-ied

“And do you know why,” asked Angela, in a sober voice, though he could detect a somewhat weary laughter in it, “do you know why it’s you? Why it’s you and not the powerful ones? The leaders? Why it’s you?”

They explained it each time, they’d explained it over and over (I just gotta learn) and he would, each time, forget until it was too late.

He was shaking his head slowly, numbly but

Yeah

“Yeah,” he said.

*

He never would have thought he'd sleep that night, but he felt himself growing hazy, beginning to float. Angela was curled beside him and he could tell she was asleep already. She'd never stayed with him before, had never let herself sleep in his presence before.

He remembered most of it. No, he remembered all of it now. And he knew already, or suspected, how it would happen this time. It would be tomorrow when he was to help police a big demonstration planned to take place in front of the State House. Mostly students, some radical groups. But Kate, of course, would be around and Angela, no doubt. There were rumblings that there might be trouble

Oh, there'd be trouble.

There were thousands of ways it could happen. People got excited, tense. The trigger had a mind of its own – But no! That was exactly what they wouldn't believe.

Give me the beat boys and free my soul, I wanna get lost in your rock n' roll and drift away

His head turned to stare at the radio, just out of reach, just beyond his outstretched hand.

Philip would be there, taking pictures

Click.

for his newspaper. Maybe he'd get the big money shot. Reverend Barry ("Ron, please!") was going to speak.

beginning to think that I'm wasting time I don't understand the things I do

A slight surge of rebellion welled weakly within him, but it was gone almost before he'd acknowledged it. Because he realized that he'd known all his life, or part of him had known – he was never meant to be here for long, just long enough for them to make their point. So he felt nothing more than that impotent frustration as when he'd been punished for something his brother had done. A lonely pawn recruited from a hoard of them into a timeless power play. A play performed over and over again and he still had not learned how to refuse either side.

the world outside looks so unkind I'm counting on you to carry me through

He wondered if they believed he would change. Maybe they were trapped in a timeless groove the same as he was, and kept returning and teaching the same lesson again and again, no longer anticipating a result, simply repeating the only actions they knew how.

He thought of getting up to turn off the radio, but it was only a thought, and

Give me the beat boys

it didn't matter at all.

* * *