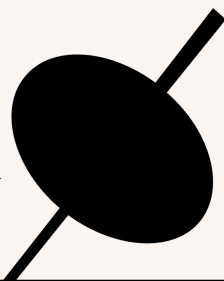


DRINKS MENU



a Magazine for
Thirsty
Readers

November
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DRINKS MENU

A Magazine for Thirsty Readers

#1

A Toast to Our Inaugural Issue

By Gabriel De Santis

Welcome to the bar, word lovers!

Pull up a stool and get ready to indulge in the first issue of Drinks Menu - the literary magazine brought to you by the Amsterdam chapter of "Writing Under the Influence."

Every Tuesday, our diverse global group gathers at Vice Versa to share drinks and unleash our creativity through a series of writing sprints. Now, we're thrilled to extend that spirited energy beyond our local meetups and share our talents with the world.

Within these pages, you'll find a curated collection of works - most penned in English, with a few pieces sprinkled in Spanish and German. After all, a good drink knows no language boundaries, and neither does great writing. The contributions are arranged from shortest to longest, allowing you to pace your literary imbibing accordingly.

Our objective is to celebrate the joy of the written word, unrestrained by themes or genres. Whether you favor a classic cocktail or are adventurous enough to try our weekly cask-strength special, we've crafted this literary menu to satisfy every palate.

So, take a sip, flip the pages, and get ready to be intoxicated by the talent on display. Printed copies are coming soon, with new issues planned for every few months. We hope you'll become a regular at our bar and join us in toasting to the beauty of the written word.

Cheers!

The Bartender of Drinks Menu

Aperitifs

Two poems by Tilman.....p. 4
Two poems by Gabriel De Santis.....p. 5
'Solace' by Tom Fuchs.....p. 6
'Bone-Breaking Light' by Alfid R. R. Hadiat.....p. 8
The Life by Simone Gorny.....p. 10

On Tap

Vest Pocket Park by Jeroen Jelsma.....p. 11
Pebbles by Chris Elyassi.....p. 12
Care to dare, dare to care by Pedro Monteiro.....p. 14
Building a Fantasy World by Ophir Miron.....p. 16
Shift Change by Beverly Rose.....p. 18

Our Blends

Visitors by Sauvik Bhattacharya.....p. 21
The Last Dream by Sauvik Bhattacharya.....p. 24
The Pilgrimage by Rebecca Spelman.....p. 30
Zak's Bar by Jack Shamon.....p. 38

Two poems

By Tilman

Kein Frühling mehr

Ein suchender Blick auf die Uhr:
ja, der Zeiger bewegt sich, nur
wie auch das Herz in mir schlägt
und der Atem mich durch die Welt trägt,
so bleibt die Erinnerung an dich,
an rotblaue Lippen, an Liebeslicht,
ein Teil von mir im Angesicht
einer Maiwiese voll Vergissmeinnicht.

Ein Gedicht für Dich

Viele Blüten in den Gräsern
Setzen wie du einen feinen Akzent
Sie summen mir wie Bienen in den Gläsern
Wo man noch keinen Ausweg kennt.

Ich sehe dich an und fühle bewundernd
Wie als dein Blick den meinen traf
Für dich würde ich die Welt unrunden
Wie der Vogel der zur Reise bat.

Vor mir lockt der Duft den ich begehre
Und das Gelingen scheint so fern
Aber auch wenn ich mich noch so wehre
Denke ich nichts anderes, als an dich gern.

Tilman

A stride through a spring meadow, a passage through an autumn forest. A glance over lakes, seas and mountains. Tilman writes poems and novellas. For this issue about the optimism and pessimism of love.

Two poems

By Gabriel De Santis

Atardecer

En su cara había un infinito
y la memoria deshacía sus pupilas
como una carta navegando el océano.
sus mil palabras estrelladas en el mar

No hay boca más profunda que su silencio
ni mayor misterio que un pliegue
diminuto
las horas y luego años

¿Dónde está el pedacito de acordeón
que posaste en tu mejilla o brazos?

Vi suspiros, también el no saber,
vi algo que enmudeció mi ver,
vi la música, vi las olas que engullían
barcos, velas y vi el atardecer
traslucido en un iris esquivo
como el vivir, como el querer

Deja que el viento hable

La puerta azul que no abre
una casa en llamas
el viento destroza las celosías
y los gritos

No se oye nada
solo pequeños gestos
el crac de unas ramas
y una inmensa mirada
como un libro la historia encerrada
a punto de estallar ante ti

Gabriel De Santis

Messenger without
message.

Solace

By Tom Fuchs

I remember my grief and
with it comes my exhaustion,
Or is it the lack of caffeine?
I try to remember how I felt
when I first found out there
were other religions
and exoticism overwhelmed me and
I gave in to the belief that the
Daoists might be on to something,
It seemed like
Mohommud really had it figured out,
or was it Baha'ullah?
We're all children of Abraham after all,
Maybe that seed of godliness in all
of us is in me as well,
hard to tell through my headache,
- my inner Buddha is small today,
Maybe after a few months of sleep
I will return to the path of enlightenment,
Seeking awe I forget to see
divine in mundane -
and drugs don't do the trick anymore,
not like the moment a mother
sees her baby for the first time
breathing and as real as anything,
something like seeing Jesus heal
the sick but resenting him as some
kid I knew from my home town,
I'm not sure whether I'd
raise a sword against
my family no matter what Krsna says,
Fixated on myself I wonder why
Azazel was to expect our sin-
filled goat or why adam and eve were
made twice,
do the squirrels three trees over

Tom Fuchs

Tom Fuchs was born left-handed. In poetry and songs, he tells stories of loss, longing, and love, transporting you to a time and place where things may have once been better.

carry the burden of fear and loss
when their children are hit by
cars or carried away by a
Northern hawk?
From where do they draw strength
in the face of
the abyss we lose our brothers to?

Bone-Breaking Light

Alfid R. R. Hadiat

Tolstoy sang to me
A song of bone-breaking light:
The valley of dance

And I danced and sang
Like all in the world was good
Until tomorrow

Dilated pupils
Drawn towards the auburn eyes
Drawn toward 's pain

Her eyes, and her lips;
Her voice, and her hips — drive me!
do what exactly?

I want to be friends
Nothing more, and nothing else —
Although I love you

He does not know
And, unconditionally,
He accepted me

The fucking bastard
Had the indecency to
Act decently

I was happy
But then you show me a world where
I was happy with you

I fall and I fall
For those unavailable
And cherish each one

I wished to be friends

Alfid R. R. Hadiat

Alfid left his desert home to
find comfort in the rain of
Amsterdam.

To escape any chance of
Your wish to be friends

Your approval is
Wholly unnecessary —
But sorely needed

To love deep and true,
One must be like the old tree:
Shade without promise.

I will let you go
As I have with others;
When it was too late

Yesterday's rain
Laid siege upon the streets
Mirroring the stars

Tomorrow will be
When the sun shines on the grass
Wilted by the heat

I watched color drain
From a chipped blue cupboard and
Understood nothing

I am well, I think;
Happiest I've ever been!
Staring at the abyss

When what you want is
What the world wills, then why would
You want anything?

Aching heart and mind
Of love unmet or unwise;
This is happiness

The Life

By Simone Gorny

“We chose a hard life for ourselves.” a friend said once.

A life of goodbyes. Of tearful hugs and heartfelt declarations. Of “I love you” and of “you are the best this city brought me” and of “I am going to miss you so much”.

A life of grieving the geographical loss of a friendship while fighting to maintain an emotional one through calls, long voice notes and instagram reels shared late at night.

A life of searching for new friendships while feeling like no one can match the one you just had to accept the loss of.

A life of somehow finding new people who have burrowed themselves into your heart when you weren’t looking, and starting the cycle again.

Until you have bits of your heart spread out in different places.

Until you have made promises of visiting all your long distance friends, but don’t have the vacation days.

Until you are going through messy feelings and all your soulmates are there for you, but none can hold you tight.

Until the community you have built for yourself does not have a home.

Until you crave a home, but cannot find it on the map.

Until you even start envying the childhood classmates who never left your hometown and never had to start over, and over again like you have.

But this is the life you chose, my dear friend. You collect soulmates from all over, who go all over. You create bridges with people and keep extending them further apart. They create peaks of happiness in between the valleys of loneliness.

This life you chose: a heart so empty but so, so full.

Simone Gorny

Simone, 28. She is not a fiction writer; she is also not a poet; or a memoirist. She is none of those, but she is trying them on to see if they fit her. Indulge her as she does. Or don't.

Vest Pocket Park

By Jeroen Jelsma

Walking down the street in Lower Manhattan. FiDi. She's not calling it fucking FiDi. Another Duane fucking Reade. She feels like the city is hiding the real world from her. Or maybe she is hiding from the world.

Goddamn tourists. Just standing around blocking the sidewalk, don't they have anything to do, anywhere to go? Push through them. Going to the park for her lunch break.

There's a section of the Berlin Wall in the tiny park. Typical, cities are all walls. Redistribution of wall, she thinks. She knows she's not happy. She eats her salad.

She thinks of the Q train. It's a comforting feeling. Imagine the amount of digging that has gone on here. They built a city, then built a city under it. And one above it. And sideways, hundreds, thousands of cities. Villages, tribes, communities, cultures, concepts. Some of them even pleasant ("she added, cynically"). Like this park, on the edge of one or more realities. Maybe the park is on the outside. Maybe this is a metaphorical suburb. Maybe this is the countryside, if you close your eyes and imagine the countryside.

She rains down on the fields stretching out under the weather-worn parasol. Steam rises from her tea. The section of the Berlin Wall smiles at her. Feeling floral, she takes root. Her leaves and petals expand and retract with night and day, summer and winter, life and death. Tomorrow is forever away, life is an instant. She reaches for a cigarette.

Jeroen Jelsma

Hi, I am Jeroen. I thought I might like to be a writer, and only 30 short years later I'm in the middle of a lively and active writing community. I am 100% biological and locally sourced.

Pebbles

By Chris Elyassi

There's a pebble in my shoe. It's aggravating, but not enough to do anything about it. The boots I'm wearing are a bitch to take off, so doing something about it would be an ordeal. I guess I prefer aggravation to an ordeal. It's only a ten minute walk anyway, and I'm already late. I'll put up with the pebble for that long. The boots look cool tho.

I haven't been here in ages, but I still know these streets like the back of my hand. I remember once standing on that corner there holding a guitar. I remember someone jokingly asking if I could play a tune. I didn't know how to play the guitar. I still don't. In that moment, I felt awkward. I still do sometimes. Why was I holding a guitar in the first place? Why can't I remember that part? I start walking faster and the pebble in my boot starts to feel increasingly aggravating.

I turn and go down a dirt road across a muddy field. We once built a tree house around here. Except there was no tree, just a stump where a tree used to be. We lined up pallets around it and pretended it was a treehouse. We used the stump as a table to play cards on while we smoked. I remember it being very windy, the cards flying off into the mud. Pallets don't offer great wind resistance. Did we have nothing better to do? If so, was that a good thing or a bad thing? I lie to myself and pretend I don't mind the mud getting on my boots.

Up ahead I see the house. Two stories, white brick, blue roof. It somehow looks bigger than I remembered. What were we doing with all that space to make it feel so small? The last section of the road leading up to the house is a steep incline.

Chris Elyassi

Chris Elyassi is a writer and performer who is not known for anything anywhere. But if he were, it would be for his love affair with the many absurd realities of mundane life.

Everyone who would visit would arrive out of breath, just like I'm out of breath now. I take a minute before going in and look at my reflection in the window of a parked car. I look good. I dressed up for this. It's been a lifetime and I want my return to be seen as triumphant. Vain, I know. But they also know. I've always been vain. A lot has changed, but not that. Sometimes I wish more would have changed. I look good tho.

I feel warmth along my heel. Blood. God damn it. It hurts now, but I keep ignoring it. I'll take my boots off when I get in anyway. There's a strict no shoes policy in the house. Or at least, there used to be. For the first time I wonder how much they must have changed. For the first time I realize I don't actually know what I'm walking into. This gives me pause. What am I even doing here? Am I sure I'm doing the right thing? Either way, it's too late now. Deep breath. Long sigh. Weak smile. I ring the doorbell.

Care to dare, dare to care

By Pedro Monteiro

This morning I called my father. He is retiring today after decades teaching psychology and philosophy to young adults. All started 35 years ago in the middle of the Atlantic. Picture a school window overlooking the highest Portuguese mountain. Long gone was hardship in Brussels remaking what the family lost after the independence of Angola, where he grew up. I know few with his grit and curiosity: in his mid 50s, my father took a part time PhD and then lectured part time in university. He cares to dare.

My father always valued my passion for storytelling be it travel stories in magazines or my multi-year research for my books. By the summer 2003, I had published my first story overseas. Meet my late grandpa, a retired shop owner with four years of education. Picture him seated in an old leather sofa. He patently reads my magazine story, despite being in Spanish and on a topic he knew or care little about. He did not say much but did everything right. He dared to care.



Pedro Monteiro

Pedro is a Portuguese with a global twist and in love for Rivierenbuurt, the Amsterdam neighborhood where he lives for a few years now. On the side of his corporate job, this psychologist turned his childhood dream of being a Tintin-like journalist into a writing hobby of sorts.

We all need clarity and connection. They allow us to move powerfully, not just fast.

My late grandpa started his work life pretty much as a kid, being a traveling salesman in the poorest part of Portugal. He needed to sustain his younger siblings, who lived in a remote village called Quadrazais. He trekked mountains with a small horse carrying his merchandise. Eventually he made enough money to open a little shop in the big city. At night, with only us two left in a big living room, he would finally relax and share a wonderful flow of stories. He never complained or bragged. Fair or unfair, things were what they were. As a small kid, I simply watched him and learned.

A few years before, my grandpa also took under his wing a boy named Carlos. He would cut my hair and my cousin's at the shop floor after the last clients left. Carlos worked for my grandpa as a deputy of sorts until he retired. By then he was ready to buy the shop and run it. And so he did. I hugged Carlos with the same love I did to my uncle at my grandpa's funeral. Christmas morning of 2017. Less than two days after my grandfather died unexpectedly driving at speed after a morning feeding his little chickens in his tiny but beloved farm outside Covilha. He died tragically but happy. Today my retired father takes care of the farm. The fruits of the trees he planted remind him, me and everyone that the perfect days are the simple ones. And that it's more important to move powerfully than just fast.

Both my father and grandfather moved the world forward. I love stories like theirs. They move us too and bring us joy and togetherness.



Building a Fantasy World

By Ophir Miron

It was 2003, and my dad took my siblings and me to the cinema. We were about to watch the anticipated third installment of the now-all-time classic, **The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King**.

As a 30-year-old man today, how can I describe the jubilation of a child plunging into such a vast fantasy world? It was the conclusion of a journey to save that fictional world. It came as a great war that broke out between humans, hobbits, elves, dwarves, orcs, ghosts, dragons - and let's not forget those freakingly huge elephants. For over 3 hours, I sat there transfixed as if in a trance. My own heartbeat drummed louder in my ears than the epic soundtrack that encompassed the theater. It was exciting, touching - scary at times - and above all, magical.

Though, if you had asked me what actually happened in the movie as I left the cinema, I would have shrugged. You see, this was the last movie in that trilogy, but the first one I had watched. Calm down; I would later on watch the trilogy in order. I've actually marathoned the extended versions of the trilogy (4 hours each) many, many times. But that first experience could never be recreated.

What I find most special today is the wonder and awe that the world of Middle-Earth inspired in me. Because most of the details made no sense to my child-self without the context of past movies, I kept trying to guess and imagine what it all meant. Why were some people tiny? How could the trees walk and talk? What was the story behind that demon in the heart of the mountain? How did those ghosts end up in that cave, and why did they listen to the man who would become king?

Ophir Miron

Ophir, born in Israel and for the past 7 years a world nomad. I've worked as a teacher, farmer, security guard, boutique toy shop vendor and a tour guide. I love and hate writing in equal amount. Currently working on a full length novel based on a fantasy world I've created.

Years later, I discovered the **name J R R Tolkien**, the man who created the literary world of Middle-Earth and wrote the books **The Hobbit** and **The Lord of the Rings**. He inspired generations to ask these questions and more and eventually to create the cinematic trilogy. In my case, I was inspired to attempt to create my own fantasy world—to be the creator of a fantastical realm that might inspire others to wonder, to delve into the sublime of our world as if it's a portal to another, to understand human nature better by stripping away everything we call familiar, to be the true master of one's own reality.

To be a worldbuilder.

Worldbuilding is an increasingly difficult, never-ending task. It concerns history, politics, warfare, biology, astronomy... you get the idea. The more you know about a subject, the more coherent that part of your world seems. But above all, it's understanding and exploring the human condition in those subjects that bring your world to life. Every fictional race in your world is a reflection of humanity, either a few aspects or the sum of it.

When I set out to create my world, I realized that I would have to research and expand on these subjects to bring them to life. My first step, however, was to create an anchor. A concept that the whole world would revolve around - past, present, and future. I chose to have it be a hero. One who came not at the literal genesis of the world but at the literary beginning of it. I gave her a name and a mythology. I constructed religions to either worship or condemn her. I created nations to fight in her name over the lands she once wandered. I also made up a tavern with talking chairs that mock those who sit on them, but that doesn't really have to do with anything. Not everything has to.

Consider the first anchor as the sapling of a future forest. It will grow into a tree with branches that stretch in all directions, eventually seeding its surrounding area and creating new anchors. As you go through this process, you will advance in your world history. The next anchor may not be another person, but rather an object, or an incident. 300 years after my hero had died, a great exile sent many witches as refugees into a land that might not sympathize with their struggle. How would my world be affected in the centuries to come?

Worldbuilding is everything from that hero saving the world to the talking chairs. The task by itself is an exciting adventure into that fantasy world in your mind. It has been the closest I have ever felt to that evening in 2003 and the reason for giving my past few years to this endless endeavor. If you have ever considered building a world but have been afraid to start such a monumental project, remember that even the incredibly complex world of Middle-Earth started from a simple children's story written by an already 40-year-old Tolkien, wanting to entertain his kids.

Shift Change

By Beverly Rose

"coffee?"

The woman glanced up at the waitress through tired eyes. She managed a nod before the waitress glided away. Slowly her eyes scanned the room. She glared at the big heaping plates of food; bacon, eggs, grease dripping on the table. She could never muster up an appetite for breakfast. The waitress brought a steaming cup of coffee. And waited patiently for an order. When she realized that there would in fact be no order, she frowned slightly and walked away.

She took slow sips from the mug, slightly burning her tongue each time. She was in a rush. Not for anything in particular, just perpetually in motion. Anxiously, she looked around. Shifting her eyes around the small peaceful diner, not paying attention. A part of her was hoping for something to happen. Everything is always the same. Same coffee, same burn, same people, same waitress, same tick-tick-tick of the clock over her shoulder. She took out her computer. Today she was going to get something done.

A plain looking man coughed loudly from the corner booth. She glanced at him. He looked down at his paperwork. She moved on. As she scanned to the next person, the man straightened up in his chair.

She found herself passively people-watching all the time. Today was no exception. She continued to scan thoughtlessly. Maybe it was just a form of procrastination; if you asked her who was there in the diner with her, she wouldn't know the answer.

Something about her struck him. He watched her typing furiously away at her computer, face illuminated by the screen. Her brow furrowed and she placed her knuckles against her mouth. There was something familiar...

Beverly Rose

Beverly Rose arrived to Amsterdam from New York. She writes about the strange connections that bind people together and the persistent influence of the past.

Back to the computer. Another thing to look at without really seeing. Nonetheless she tapped away on the keyboard. Time passed. She did not notice the people coming and going. The changing scenery. The waitress becoming worn down and antsy towards the end of her shift. The woman still hadn't ordered anything but the mug of black coffee. She rubbed her eyes and started to pack up, throwing her coat on haphazardly. Leaving some crumpled bills on the table, she slowly got up stretching her limbs. She sat right by the exit and so could leave right away. She pushed open the heavy door and instead of walking to the bridge as intended, she got into her car and drove back to her home.

The plain looking man quietly paid his tab and even more quietly slipped out of the diner. He walked home, ending his day just to have another start in a few short hours.

The man worked quite a few blocks away. It was winter and it was cold, but he walked anyway. His steps on the concrete were slow and heavy, but they carried him to the double doors of the office. Mind blank, he sat down at his desk without remembering the commute. He was certainly not going to get anything done today.

He was distracted. But the man didn't know why. Sometimes nostalgia just takes over. He found himself thinking of the past. This was a thought he ordinarily would have pushed aside, but this time he couldn't help it. He couldn't prevent the waves of regret. She hadn't allowed him to do anything and he accepted it. But why? He had to go see her. Now he knew.

The workday still goes on. The man rubbed his tired eyes and let out a big sigh. At that moment the phone rang. He automatically picked up the phone without hesitation and answered in his most pleasant voice.

“Sorry to keep you waiting.”

“My client isn't happy,” stated the woman on the phone.

“Sorry to hear that.”

“They have been waiting for 2 weeks, and this just will not work for them.”

“How can I help?” he answered absently, shifting the phone to his left ear and his left shoulder.

“I need a new draft, yesterday,” she said with urgency.

“I'll have to talk to my team about that...” He trailed off, reaching for a drawer slightly out of his reach, inching his desk chair over to the right. The telephone wire stretched under the strain. A strained voice was still speaking over the phone.

“Well how long will that take?”

He slowly crawled his fingers over the numerous files; too crammed against one another that simply sifting through would be impossible. He had to fight with each manila folder and strategically pull some out, check it, and put it back.

“I said, how long will that take?” said the woman, quite annoyed.

“I have a good feeling we can arrange to have a meeting later today...”

“Well. They are not happy.”

“I’m sure once we get this all sorted out, they’ll forget the whole thing. I have a good feeling they’ll like the next draft we put through.”

“They better.” Click.

At last he pulled out the file he was looking for, and gingerly pulled it out. It was a fat file. Definitely a few hours worth of work. With a sigh, the man slowly untangled the telephone cord and replaced the phone in its holder. He then immediately picked up the phone again, dialing the extension to the office next door.

“Yes?”

“They aren’t happy with our first draft.”

“They never are...”

He continued answering his e-mails and phone calls. He finished one fat file after the next. He continued the conference calls, the water-cooler chit-chat and niceties. He took his last break. Only in those few minutes he had alone in the dark cafeteria did he think about her. He stayed overtime, because that’s what was expected. He waited for the slow trickle of employees to say their goodbyes. And finally, the man ended his workday and headed home.

The next morning was a Saturday, and even though under normal circumstances the man would head into work to prepare for Monday, he treated it like a weekend. Today was the day. He caught the bus right on time, and took it exactly two stops, where he promptly stepped off.

What would she look like? What would she say? His mind raced with the endless possibilities as he wandered down the street. Funny how close the house was. He turned the corner as the wind blew past him, allowing just enough of a cold breeze to make him pull his jacket closer to his face. Curled leaves rolled around like tumbleweeds, brushing against him. The world was strangely devoid of birdcalls and animal sounds. He clenched his hands into fists in his pockets; both expressing his anticipation, and also creating just enough heat for his cold fingers. Each house looked exactly the same, varying in only slight shades of dull gray. Just a few more doors down. His foot crunched on some crumpled newspaper. He picked it up as he slowly made his way to the front door and tossed it in the nearby recycling can.

Visitors

By Sauvik Bhattacharya

As a train she flows through me.
I am the station.
Never a destination.

I am the avenue,
through which the retinue
of a hundred thousand steps
stomps by. Their passage
flows less and rips more.

(I feel my bones grow sore.)
From my tissue, they extract their due.
Unconscious, they do.

I am the station.

A watcher, a judge, jury and victim.
These human tornadoes on a whim;
Whirl through my town,
while a smile must cloak my frown.
Forever passing through, this torrent of souls.

Stops not to rest.

In their haste,
My garden they do lay to waste.

Like a train she rips through me.

I am the junction, only a conjunction.
I bar not her passage.
To do so would be dysfunction.

She speaks, thunders, rambles and grieves.
Eventually, she leaves.

Sauvik Bhattacharya

Sauvik Bhattacharya hails from Kolkata, India, a city confused between progression and nostalgia. He comes from the India of the 1990s, a culture stuck between a sepia past and a harsh future. Himself lost between multiple lands and cultures, he writes about lonely streetlights, heavy curtains, loneliness, identity loss and self discovery. His experiences and emotions influence his writing and music, which can be found at windowsocializer.com

Leaves behind an impression.
A footprint in the mud.
A stray thought, in my mind wanders through.

“Does some of the mud stick to her shoe?”

Do these stomping feet,
Steal away discreet;
some of the pain of the street,
on which their boots do beat?
Do I leave a mark?

Will their morning after
Sighing through drafty rafters
Leave with them a nostalgia slightly stark?
The faint smell of a Cutty Sark,

and a memory
“This shy guy slinking by
in a corner, like an accidental mourner.
His dark raiment cloaking
a flickering flame beneath.

Like a silvery blade hidden under a mouldy sheath.

Melting away into the grey
that lingers beneath streetlights.
The dread
he carries in his wake,
Washes as waves on the shore of a lake
that is fire. He hides a desire,
of what I do not know.
I doubt he does.

His occasional scowls raise a fuss.
Restless, silent, he lingers back,
watching the rest of us.
Together, but apart.

His teeth white, grin wide, eyes black.
He does not judge, but neither welcome
 Are we in his domain.
Watching us, his smile does strain.
 He seems a visitor, is forever so.
But through his realm without leave
 that we pass,

 he does let us know.”

The Last Dream

By Sauvik Bhattacharya

(October 5, 1983.
The homecoming month.
Somewhere in Italy.)

1

He did not wake well.

He was already aware in the final half hour (dream time) that he was sleeping. As this realisation hit, he ceased struggling and quietly let himself go. Easing back into the (now seemingly random) flow of events in the dream. Knowing that it would soon be over. A small part of his mind did try to hold on to what had happened and its effects on him.

Still, he did not wake well. Funny, people always say they didn't sleep well. They forget that even the deepest night's sleep matters for nothing if it ends by being jerked into wakefulness. Gasping and struggling. His awakening today is the opposite, equally disturbing. He slides slowly back into his tired and sore old body, in his bed. A beached whale rolling on to wet sand. He feels the room around him, hears its creaks, hears the little footsteps of the farm animals outside his door, long awake before him. He does not open his eyes for the first five minutes, trying to hold on to his thoughts and emotions from the final moments of the dream. They feel so strong. Almost more real than anything he felt the day before. The feelings are already fading, turning into shadowy memory. They gallop through his body, leaving him shuddering and screwing up his face with the sadness of it all. He welcomes it.

2

He dreamt he was young.

A newly initiated member of the free society. Healthy, successful and utterly drained with boredom. A shiny recruit with stars in his eyes and dreams of glorious conquest, tramping instead through the mud of daily shopping lists and loan payments. In the present, he smiles crookedly through broken teeth. At least here, he is free of that. It is the twilight of his life. No more radiant glare to hide from, no sunny day to make the most of. This is the golden hour. Night will bring peace.

He dreamt he was in the mountains.

Glorious, massive, harsh and unforgiving. The epitome of timelessness. Uncaring, unfeeling, immobile, ever changing. He dreamt of rolling meadows rising into green hillsides, bare granite monoliths towering over them. Ruins of cabins on the grass. He kept slipping on the gravel. Even standing still, there was no respite.

There were familiar faces nearby, distant and uncaring. They were muttering half-mumbled pieces of advice at him, sharing their wisdom on how best to climb the mountain. He tried to ignore them, self-important marsupials, and turned instead straight into the faces of the repo men who had appeared behind him, come to tell him of their latest offers and pull the latest payments out of him. In the dream, he didn't even have the energy to be sick of it. He was completely immersed in it, lost in the pointless circularity of it all. Listening with polite absentmindedness, too suave to interrupt, mildly agitated inside. Something of what they were telling him had to be important, surely? It all seemed to be vaguely alarming. He couldn't get to a compromise and ended up signing away his car to them, with promises of going home and looking up other possessions they could confiscate.

In the present, he sniggers at the memory. The fact that this was indeed so close to what reality had been back then, made him feel a bit of schadenfreude at his younger self.

3

He dreamt he was happy.

They were at a cafe. It was from the golden time of his life, the few months he unexpectedly spent in that great city, that shelter of free thought and ideas. In his dream, he was happy. It was a good day, one of the best. He was sitting with his toys and his poison of choice, uno espresso doppio. His notebook and pen were next to his miniature cup. He had already managed to spill a bit of the little coffee he had, both on his notes and on the pristine white tablecloth. His lover sat in the other corner of the room with her friend. She was laughing. The room was full.

He remembers the surprise he felt in his dream. She was usually more self reserved. Her friend was laughing as well. There was a fragile, glittery quality to their laughter. He remembers white teeth, sharp edges, harsh fluorescent light. He remembers his emotions in the dream change. He remembers standing up, walking over for a chat, the faces turning, the laughter not stopping. He remembers an image the dream him had. Of a child

watching an approaching train with wonder, only to have the excitement change to horror as the train changed directions to a collision course. He remembers his shock, their faces watching him, the continuing laughter, directed at him now. Faltering, he continued, asking the banal question he had in his head. She could barely speak. Sparing a fraction of her thinking, she finally gasped out an answer before turning back to her friend. He remembers the shock, disillusionment and above all, unfamiliarity he felt in the dream towards this person he considered his friend and confidante. The sense of betrayal he felt towards the insulting laughter of her friend and her stare was even stronger. He had always considered themselves kindred spirits. The feeling grew in him still it was almost surreal.

He dreamt he was sad.

He remembers the concoction of feelings he was experiencing in the dream grow to a point where he was forced to speak out.

“Are you ok?” he asked the friend, slowly. Taking care to enunciate each word. He ignored his lover.

She kept laughing, now covering her mouth with her hands in a half-hearted attempt at control, and stealing glances at him. Not bothering to answer. The sloppy subterfuge was the worst part.

The anger grew in him as fast as the sadness. He remembers how it felt in the dream. The anger was a series of Tetris bricks filling him up from his feet up, popping and snapping into place. Locking his feet solid and stiffening his spine. The sadness raced through his body almost as fast, a black whirlwind of negative gravity throwing everything in its path out of skelter and sucking him into himself.

“Are. You. Ok?” he asked again.

No reply. He turned to look at his lover again. She had finally stopped laughing and was smiling at him. A harsh, cold, glittery smile. Eyes burning like fluorescent lamps near the end of their lives.

“We were just having a discussion about you.”. Calm. Slow. Barely cloaked mirth in her eyes. Eyes as cold as a North Atlantic rain.

He remembers the poison growing in him. A sudden realisation, something had changed. This was not the person he had fallen in love with anymore. He had changed. She had changed. They, as a unit, had changed. He turned and walked away.

He dreamt he was sad.

4

He remembers now this sadness as he rolls back into the world. It was hyper real, burning his insides and prickling his joints. He tries to hold on to it. He hasn't felt something this real in weeks.

Slipping slowly back into wakefulness like someone slipping down a mountain road full of gravel. He feels the last crumbs of the dream drift away like grains of sand on a Sahara wind. Standing up, taking care not to slouch, he walks out into the cold air. The green mountain stretches out in front of him. It is still early, the sun is hitting the treetops on the other side. He is in the shadow. His breath frosts in the moist air. Night still clings to the blades of grass. He is barefoot. Wriggling his toes, he feels the green meadow roll away from his feet in waves before dropping down suddenly to the ravine that separates his mountain from the next. Summer is over. A last few solitary flowers stand proud in the grass, ready to make this meadow their last stand. He turns, taking in the vista, breathing deeply, It is a good place. A tiny apple orchard on the next hill. His dog snoring on the edge of the meadow. The chickens have already been exploring his front yard, leaving him little offerings to clean up. He laughs a little, feeling annoyed and affectionate at the same time.

The flow of water down in the ravine is loud. Calling it a stream would be an overstatement. The wooden bridge over the water is slowly becoming part of the forest, its collapsed roof overgrown with weeds. He knows the stream is a favourite of his dog's, regularly visiting it to bark at the small fishes that struggle through it.

"I could do worse." He sighs, starting around himself. There is a not a soul in sight. He likes it here.

He will die here.

He knows that now.

5

Evening.

The day has been busy. He feels every elapsed hour in the small of his back, and his shoulders. It was a good day, hot, one of the last. His heels ache with the efforts of the day, an honest pain. He walks over to the dry grass, the last bit still in the sun, takes off his work boots and stretches his toes on the warm grass. His dog, dozing on the porch, yawns at him. The chickens have already fled, trying their best to stay ahead of the foxes who will soon rise with the moon to explore the mountain. He feels a tiny bit of envy at them huddling up with each other in their shed, wondering at their strange sense of community that made them stuck together and yet share so much cruelty with each other. He shuffles over to his dog and scratches his ears, wrinkling his nose a bit at the smell. He has been in the water again.

He turns around to finish his work for the day and starts to find himself surrounded by chickens. It is not dark yet. Watching him walk across the yard to the grass, the little birds had sneaked out in hope of food. He smiles at them but chooses not to indulge them. Its best if they turn in for the night. He stares up at the green uninhabited mountain opposite his house. The sun, completing its daily circuit, has just disappeared over the treetops. The leaves at the summit seem exceptionally vibrant, enjoying the yellow embrace the longest. He feels a bit of envy, and something else. A pang of remembrance, a sense of *deja vu*. The chickens still surround him, clucking gently. His mind conjures up the image of the repo men from his dream. A mix of emotions return in a rush.

Claustrophobia, frustration, panic.

Part of him feels as if back in the dream.

Humour, relief, kindness.

His chickens are gentler. They still stare curiously at him. He realises he hasn't moved since turning around and starts walking back to where he left his boots. Behind him, his dog starts to whine.

6

A time comes when all our memories drift away from us like sparks from a log collapsing into a campfire. He knows it is not that day. Today, he remembers. Last night, he had a

dream. He dreamt he was young, happy, sad. He remembers all of this. He remembers his lover, her soft laugh. He remembers her shyness, her kindness. He remembers her friends, her family, how they accepted him. He remembers his own family, their wonder at this new land. He remembers his life, past and present. He remembers the city, he remembers the war, the struggles that came after, he remembers every time he died, every friend he lost.

He remembers the journey, he remembers the layers peeled from him. Perceptions, images, judgments he had, falling off him like cakes of mud dried in the sun.

He remembers changing, remembers being left with nothing but a tiny, inner "him" when there was nothing left to fall off and he was left on this mountain with a ruined farm and a meadow grown wild over a ravine with a wild stream.

Most of all, he remembers the dream being a lie. He has seen a lot, lost a lot. Above all however, he has lived. It has been a good meal. He is not sure if he has the appetite for dessert. He leaves his work boots by the barn door, and walks back to the farm. There is a small ache in his chest, and in his heart. Behind him, his dog gently whines.

The Pilgrimage

By Rebecca Spelman

Note: This story has been split into two parts. Part 2 will be available in the next edition of Drinks Menu.

“I want to visit Galway. The old Galway.”

Colm froze, his forkful of shepherd’s pie suspended in front of his open mouth. He seemed physically stuck, as if he couldn’t move until he processed what Helena had just said. After a moment, he put his fork down and focused entirely on his confusion. “Why?”

It was a fair question, Helena thought. No-one had been to Galway in years, and New Galway had, for all intents and purposes, taken the place of its namesake. It had been eight years since Helena had left Galway, ushered out with everyone else when the city was declared unsafe. She still remembered the argument with her landlord, who had insisted that he should get to keep her deposit because “technically speaking, the apartment is damaged beyond repair”. As if she was the one who had let it all happen.

Helena paused, trying to find the right words. “I want to see it again, one last time. I have to make this decision about Prague and, I don’t know, maybe seeing what I’m leaving behind will help me decide one way or the other.”

Helena’s eyes turned back to the laptop in front of her, its glowing screen as garish as a flashing neon sign. She’d read it so many times that she could probably recite it by heart if she tried. But still, she scrolled down to the last sentence.

We’d love for you to start in this role before the end of the month, so please let us know by Friday if you’ll be joining our team in Prague.

Rebecca Spelman

Rebecca Spelman is an Irish writer who publishes short stories and poetry on her Substack (rebeccaspelman.substack.com) and documents great places to write in Amsterdam on Instagram (@rebeccaspelmanwriter). She’s currently working on her first novel.

From a practical standpoint, accepting the job was a no-brainer. It was interesting work with a great company, and Prague certainly had more to offer her than New Galway. The makeshift town was supposed to house Galway's displaced population until an alternative was agreed upon, but no-one had ever decided what that alternative would be. It wasn't a great solution to say the least, but it worked just well enough that the people in charge felt like they could justify letting it stagnate. Too temporary to improve, too permanent to replace.

"I mean, go if you want," said Colm, returning to his dinner, "but I can't imagine you'll find much. It's not like you'll be able to really do anything, you know what it's like out there."

Helena's silence prompted Colm to put down his fork again. "We don't have to go to Prague if you don't want to," he said gently. "It's your job offer, your career, your decision. You know I'm here for you either way."

Helena reached across the table and squeezed his hand. She wanted to share her insecurities with Colm; her frustration, her confusion, her intertwined excitement and fear. The problem was, she couldn't put any of it into words. She didn't know what was holding her back.

"Thanks," she said. "I know."

* * *

There's something odd about a coastline suddenly beginning halfway down a street. No signs, no railings; just water swallowing up the road, lapping against the sides of abandoned buildings. Helena's pick-up point was a car park beside an abandoned takeaway, where the water was deep enough for a boat to pull up. There may have been a ditch or a stream there previously, Helena couldn't tell. She supposed it didn't really matter, seeing as it was all ocean now. In the distance, Helena spotted a hotel where she'd attended a wedding years ago. A family of seagulls eyed her through the broken window of their suite.

Her guide was due to pick her up at one o'clock. She'd hoped to go earlier, but apparently these things were dictated by the tides. Her watch showed five past, ten past, quarter past. She tried calling the number she'd been given, but no answer. Was she in the

right spot? She couldn't imagine there was more than one takeaway called *Chicken Palace* in this small, abandoned town. At twenty past, a small motorboat pulled up.

Inside the boat was a man who could only be described as "windswept". His knitted hat was askew, with strands of white hair poking out wherever they could. His skin had been toughened by years of exposure to the elements, making it hard to tell how old he was. Helena wondered if he was as tough as he looked when he barked, "What are ya staring for? Get in girl, there's no point standing around." She supposed that answered that.

Helena awkwardly climbed into the boat, her unsteady steps making it clear this was her first time doing so. She'd have appreciated some help, but the man simply watched in silence. His silence continued as he pulled out from the car park and headed west. The longer he stayed quiet, the more awkward Helena felt.

"My name's Helena," she eventually built up the courage to say.

"Mícheál."

Her "Nice to meet you" wasn't met with a response.

The journey to Galway was one of the strangest she'd ever made. It was a calm day, but it was still clear that they were in the sea instead of on a river. Small waves broke against tree branches and lampposts, creating a strange sensation of feeling tall but still close to the ground. They passed through a housing estate, the water just high enough to peek in at the bedroom windows as they passed. Some still held abandoned bedframes and built-in wardrobes, but most were empty. As they moved into more rural areas, Helena realised that what she had thought were large rocks were actually the roofs of bungalows. She shook her head, trying to forget the news stories of isolated people who had refused to leave their homes when the time came. She couldn't, though. Sometimes you just can't.

Helena turned to Mícheál every so often, hoping to catch his eye. More than once, she opened her mouth to say something, anything, before closing it again. She'd never met someone so comfortable with silence, and it only fanned the flames of her growing anxiety.

"Do you do this often?" she heard herself say.

"Do what?"

“Bring people to Galway.”

Mícheál snorted. “No, I can’t say I do. There aren’t many who want to visit.”

“Oh.” Helena waited for a moment in case he had something to add. He didn’t. “I had thought maybe you’d have eco-tourists or something. Or, y’know, there are some people who like to visit dangerous places on their holidays. There’s a name for them, I can’t think what it is.”

After a moment of silence, Helena heard her own voice again. “I’m thinking of emigrating. Prague. Got a job offer.”

If Mícheál was interested in this news, he didn’t show it.

“I just wanted to see it one last time.” She couldn’t seem to stop herself. “It was the first place I moved as an adult, when I moved away from home. It was... I don’t know, it means a lot to me.”

Mícheál looked her in the eyes for the first time since they met, just for a moment. “We’re not going there, I’m afraid. It’s Galway, but it’s not what you remember.”

Helena didn’t know what to say to that, so she stayed silent.

They continued west for another hour, their silence broken only by the sound of the waves and the boat’s engine. The wind had gotten harsher, and Helena bowed her head to protect her face from its cold sting. She hadn’t even realised she’d stopped looking around her; instead, the time passed as she stared at her knees, wondering why she’d thought this would be a good idea. She felt the boat slow, then come to a halt. She froze in her huddled position, knowing this was the last moment she had before her memories were tainted by the truth.

“Here we are. Galway.”

The strangest thing was the quiet. Even though it was abandoned, Helena had still expected some life, some activity, *something*. But there was nothing, just the sound of the waves and distant seagulls. Helena felt stupid for expecting anything else. What did she think she’d find, some magical awe-inspiring monument to her old life standing helpfully in the middle of Eyre Square? *This might be one of the stupidest things I’ve ever done*, she thought.

“So, where am I taking ya?” asked Mícheál, “Shall we do the tourist spots? We can do it like those hop-on, hop-off buses. I’ll wait here while you go for a swim.”

Helena couldn’t muster the energy to humour him with a fake laugh. “Sure,” she muttered miserably. “Show me the sights, I suppose.”

As they wound through what remained of the side streets, Helena felt the melancholy settle in her bones. Most of these buildings had originally been three storeys tall, their signs now grazing the waterline.

“It’s tough to see, I know.” Mícheál kept his eyes ahead, steering to avoid a lamppost. “I remember the first time I came back. It’s funny how much difference a few feet of water makes. You expect the buildings to look the way they do, but you don’t expect your own reaction.”

“When was that? The first time you came back, I mean.”

Mícheál stayed quiet for a moment, and Helena worried she’d asked something very personal without realising. Just as she was about to rescind her question, Mícheál spoke in a quiet voice.

“12th August, a few months after the evacuation. The water wasn’t as high as it is now, but you still needed a boat to get around. Our wedding anniversary, myself and the wife. We got married in the Claddagh church in 1987, and every year on our anniversary we’d make the trip to Galway for a picnic at the Spanish Arch. We’d bring sandwiches, maybe get an ice cream after if the weather was nice. We’d sit by the Arch and look across the water at the church. It was nice to talk about the day and remember it, but it was nicer to just sit there and be together.” Mícheál paused to covertly wipe away a tear.

“She died a few years back, Una, but I would still always make the trip. It’s not the same without her of course, but nothing ever is. The year of the evacuation I didn’t know if I’d come back, but I woke up that morning and there wasn’t a hope of me doing anything else. It was what I always did on 12th August, a bit of water wasn’t going to stop me. Got the aul’ boat out of the shed, packed a sandwich, and that was it. I’ll be here every year, don’t you worry about that.”

Helena thought the reassurance was strange and turned to look at him, but Mícheál wasn’t talking to her. His promise echoed through the empty streets, and Helena had never wanted to believe in ghosts more.

The boat turned a corner, bringing them to what remained of Shop Street. They passed the point where the statue of Oscar Wilde and his friend would be sitting on the bench, though it now looked like just another anonymous patch of murky water. Helena wondered if the statue was still there, or if it had been removed and now sat in a museum somewhere. She had always meant to check the statue, to learn the name of Oscar Wilde's companion. Whose stone lap had she sat on for photos at the end of nights out, while her friends demanded the statue treat her like a lady and keep his hands to himself? She supposed it didn't matter now.

They motored down the street, a few feet over the cobbles Helena had walked a thousand times. She remembered standing on a loose stone on the way to a job interview and rainwater splashing on to her dress, and the time Colm had tripped on a night out and spent the walk home raving about the benefits of tarmac over cobbles. The boat turned left down High Street and the water began to engulf the building's second storeys as the street gently sloped downhill. They passed the spots where buskers used to play, twenty-something year old lads with acoustic guitars, lively bands with a dozen members, and the occasional local character whose personality more than made up for their lack of musical talent. The boat glided through the streets, like a lone gondola through a grey Irish attempt at Venetian glamour. *Though Venice is probably quite similar these days*, thought Helena, remembering the news reports. Venice had been evacuated at a similar time to Galway, and every Irish tabloid had their own crappy pun comparing the two tragedies, usually accompanied by a photoshopped picture of a gondola by the Spanish Arch.

"A Tale of Two Wet Cities!"

"Going, Going, Gone-dola!"

"Here Today, Galway Tomorrow!"

She wondered where the people of Venice were now; if they were pretending to believe the promise of a new home like the people of New Galway, or if they had moved on, hoping to find somewhere that would keep them safe and dry.

As they reached the bottom of Quay Street, Helena felt that sudden gust of wind that used to always hit her when the narrow streets opened up to the river and the Spanish Arch. The vastness of the open water was a shock; even after travelling through the flooded city centre, the sight of where the river had previously been truly showed how Galway had been swallowed by the sea. The waves were a little rougher here, though Mícheál still deftly manoeuvred them between the tops of two traffic lights, as if they still needed to obey the laws of the road a few feet below them. The old plaza and the River

Corrib were nowhere to be seen; it was all the ocean now. Across the way, the roof of the Claddagh church stood alone, signalling the edge of the sunken city. Behind it was a housing estate that had been built on a hill, its visible upper storeys a hopeful sign that, further on, Salthill had fared better. Helena knew the truth, though. What had once been the go-to site for summer walks and intrepid weather forecasters reporting on storms had been utterly devastated by the waves. She wondered if the fish in the Salthill aquarium had been moved, or if the ocean had reclaimed them.

The boat took a left as if they were on the old river, sailing out to sea. Helena thought Mícheál was taking them out toward the old bay, but he almost immediately veered toward the buildings along what used to be the river's edge. He slowed the boat in the middle of the water.

“And here we have our first stop in the “Sunken Sights of Galway Tour”,” said Mícheál, making a sweeping gesture to his left.

“The museum?” It had been a nice little spot, but Helena hadn't visited often.

Mícheál chuckled. “I know it's been a few years girleen, but don't tell me you've already forgotten the Spanish Arch”.

Helena's stomach dropped as she realised what she should be seeing right now, but wasn't. “It's... It's completely gone. I can't believe I didn't notice.”

“Well,” said Mícheál, turning the boat toward the vacant spot, “Not completely.” They moved slowly, but as they got closer Helena saw the top of the Arch barely visible above the water. The waves obscured parts as they washed over the bricks, the ancient stones peeking through as the water moved around them. Helena leaned over the side of the boat and touched one.

“This is all that's left... That's crazy. I don't know why, but I expected more of it to last. It was never really that big, I suppose.” Helena murmured. “I remember tourists standing right beside it and asking me where the Spanish Arch was. They always thought they were in the wrong spot because it was so underwhelming.”

“Yanks, I'm sure.” Mícheál grunted. “Always looking for somethin' flashy.”

“They actually were, now that you say it.” Helena leaned back in the boat. “It never really mattered to me that it didn't look impressive, though. I just liked that it had been a part of the city for so long. I mean, it was built in, what, fifteen-something, I think? I could never remember, but there used to be a plaque above the arch. Sometimes I'd walk

under it, just going about my day, and I'd think about how many thousands of people over the years had walked there too. It's not the kind of place you'd get a great photo for your holidays, but it always made me feel like I was a part of Galway's history."

"Well, there'll be no-one walking under it now," said Mícheál, starting up the boat again. "Maybe a couple of scuba divers in a few years, but I'd say that'll be it. Might be a bit of a recurring theme with this tour."

Mícheál drove the boat out a little further, following the Long Walk out to the bay before doing a wide turn and heading back toward the city. It wasn't the street she remembered; the buildings' famous colours dulled after years of negligence, rain, and saltwater. The colours were even duller in the water, the rippling of the waves giving away the falseness of their appearance. She remembered attending a house viewing there once, desperately hoping she and some friends would be accepted for an apartment. They hadn't gotten it, but Helena had never forgotten how breathtaking the view from her potential bedroom window had been. Looking back at the bay, she couldn't deny that it was still incredible.

The sun had just passed its mid-afternoon peak, hitting the clouds at the perfect angle to create a wash of colour that made the bay look more like a painting than reality. Everywhere she looked, the water reflected the sky like glass, its rippling waves like shattered pieces that moved in unison. It wasn't the view she remembered; that view was gone forever. It was something different, something new. It was a world of stillness, disturbed only by the waves, the boat, and the clouds gliding across the sky. It had always been said that "nature had taken over" when people talked about Galway, but Helena didn't think that was quite right. What remained here wasn't purely natural; the wind and the waves hadn't destroyed every brick in the city and swept it all away. It had done something else, something she wasn't sure humanity had a word for. It had moved into the space gradually, the same way that a wave moves on the beach as the tide comes in. Moving forward, then a little bit back. Forward again, then a little bit back; over and over until you realise that the water's up to your knees and you can feel the current pulling at you, reclaiming the sand beneath your feet. The current had reached Galway, and it was starting to pull back.

Zak's Bar

By Jack Shannon

You could see the light reflecting in her tears. They would well up in her eyelids, and collect until they dropped, splattering all over the raised numbers of her bank card that was sitting on the bar. She was sobbing, letting out loud, laboured cries, nearly knocking over her gin and tonic with each heave. I could tell that she was trying to say something, but god fucking knows what it was.

“What’s wrong with her?” I asked, but the Bartender ignored me. He was too busy staring at this girl, glowering at her, like he was trying to drill holes into her skull with his eyes. All the tiny LED lights, which lined the mirror behind the bar, only forced more attention on her. She cried on, ‘til her mascara reached her chin and her cheeks were a deep red. She reached for her gin and tonic and took a gulp, before hacking out a shriek - “WHY?!”

And she was back to drenching her ATM card. Meanwhile, I was getting a bit fucking impatient.

“Em, excuse me?”

The Bartender threw his eye my way. “What?”

“What’s wrong with her?”

He looked directly at me now. The LED’s roared against the sides of his eyes.

“She’s in jeans. Her gal pals aren’t. Now she’s up at the bar-”

Jack Shannon

I am a writer in my twenties who has been living and working as a secondary school English teacher in Amsterdam for the last two years. I write (mostly) plays in my spare time and also help run a writing group in my local area.

He leaned into the Crying Girl's face while he said -

"-getting her card declined, where everyone can see her!"

At this, she let out another howl, one that would freeze Walt Disney's heart.

Looking back, I'm pretty sure she was dead. I'm pretty sure I was dead too.

*

I know I'm not perfect. I know that.

I've lived a life, the same way everybody else has. And if you can show me someone that's made absolutely zero mistakes throughout the whole thing, I'd buy all your drinks on a night out. But you can't, can you? No. So I don't think there's much point in reminding me of my mistakes, because when you think about it, stuff just happens. Not a whole lot I can do about it.

I've no regrets. If I did I wouldn't be who I am right now.

But I wasn't thinking about that just then - not at that fuckin' bar, where this Crying Girl was sobbing and tapping her card, and I just had the furniture and fancy lights to talk to, because this Bartender wouldn't look at me until now.

'Would you not give her a hand, no?'

He's still standing behind the bar, a broad six foot four, staring her out of it.

'She has to do this' he said, not looking away.

'Why?'

'Just does. All of ya do.'

I sighed. 'Well, gimme a beer then.'

And that was the first time he turned in my direction. There was a slight curve at the corner of his mouth, like he was holding back a grin.

‘Grab a table,’ he said. ‘I’ll bring it down’.

Nice of him, to be fair, I thought. So I hopped off the stool and went down toward the back of the place. There didn’t seem to be any lights down there – just candles on the tables. You could barely see the chair in front of you. This place was going for the rustic-trendy vibe, evidently. I hadn’t been sat down two seconds when a fresh pint was put in front of me.

“What is it? Heineken?” I asked.

“No Heineken”, said the Bartender, already twisting on a heel to go back to the bar. “Only Impotent”.

Well, if the vibe was shit, they made up for it in good service. I grabbed the pint and took a good long sup, closing my eyes. That’s when I heard her in front of me:

“HERE YOU!”

I spat back into my glass and my eyes shot open to see a young girl, around thirteen, sitting on the other side of the table. Her hair was tied up in a long, high ponytail, and her eyelashes looked like the hair from a shoe polish brush, but that didn’t hide the glint of rage in her eyes. That was vaguely familiar.

“Sorry, what?”

“You! I’m talkin’ to ya!”

“Do I know you?”

She straightened up on her stool, her ponytail wiggling. She was squaring up to me from across the table. Then she put on her boy voice.

“Holly Fitzpatrick, she’s a slut, she’ll do anythin’ at all. Sure she dragged me into the girls toilets and -”

I grabbed the beer and put at least half the pint away, just to stop my stomach dropping. The last time I saw this girl, I was in school, at a dance.

After the whole year at a private boys’ school, I was a target for never having kissed anyone. Not something I should have openly admitted to. Every time I spoke, it’d be “who asked the virgin?” So I had to kiss someone - anyone. At this disco I’d been weaving through the crowd, tapping shoulders and pointing at myself until I got to Holly. I’d been getting looks that could kill all night, but she got a bit colourful with telling me to fuck off:

“Get ou’ me fuckin’ face you posh little scrote. I’d kiss a donkey’s arse before I touched you!”

I can still hear her mates cackling as she turned back to them. They weren’t even holding back - just full on making a mug of me. So I had to do something.

Next minute, Holly had two chewed up pieces of gum stuck in the end of her ponytail, and I was long gone. She went to the rough school a town over from us, so I reckoned it was fairly safe to mouth off about her to the boys at school. She’d never find out.

“She was lovin’ it , yeah she was, couldn’t get enough a me-”

“Here, stop, please.”

“I reckon anyone could get a go, you were sayin’ about me-”

“Jesus Christ, would you fuckin’ stop?”

She raised her eyebrows at me, dead black caterpillars on the coming to life on her forehead

“No I won’t fuckin’ stop. You told everybody in your poxy posh little boys’ school that I was a massive whore!”

She yanked the pint from my hand and dumped it over my head. I've taken a few drinks to the face, but this one stung like acid for some reason.

"Fuckin' rat," she hissed, as she hopped off the stool and disappeared into the darkness between the tables.

*

"Did you even see that, man?"

I was back at the bar, wiping myself off with a few napkins. The beer was clinging to my hair - I was tearing napkins up trying to get the shit out. The Bartender was still staring at the Crying Girl. She was tapping her card a bit more now, wiping away the tears so she could see better.

"See what?"

"That fuckin' child you let in here. She basically verbally assaulted me and threw my pint over my head. What kind of place are you running?"

He just shrugged. "Ya have to do it."

"What?"

'Ya have to do it.'

"What are you on about?"

Still staring at the Crying Girl, he jerked a thumb over his shoulder toward the mirror on the wall. Etched in the glass was:

MEN DIE ONCE. THEN COMES JUDGEMENT.

"And what the fuck does that mean?"

He finally turned to look at me.

“You all have to do something here. See her?” He pointed at the Crying Girl. “She’s here, gettin’ declined at the bar, in fuckin’ jeans, making a right show of herself. D’ya not think she might have left already?”

I looked at her again. She was in agony, sobbing and tapping away, but he was right - she had not budged.

“She was a judgy little bitch before she got here,” he continued. “And now what’s happenin’? She’s gettin’ humiliated, for all of her mates to see.”

I turned on my stool and sure enough, there was a group of early twenty something girls gathered around a high table in the back. They were all wearing shapely skirts, in colours that matched the cosmopolitans sitting in front of them. They were all stealing glances toward the bar, then giving each other these sideways looks between elegant, measured sips of their drinks. If I can sense the judgement from here, I’m sure this girl can feel it jabbing into her back and turning sideways.

“She’s here doin’ this ‘cause of what she was like before now. You’re the same.”

“What did I do?”

He pointed at the table. “Who was that girl? The one you’re cryin’ about?”

“I dunno, some girl from years ago.”

His look darkened. “Some girl you fucked over from years ago. And there’s been a few. A good fuckin’ few. They’ve a lot to say to you, so they do,” he said, “better get back to that table and get on with it, fella. It ain’t happening up here.” And he went back to staring.

“How long will I be here?”

“Would ya fuck off with your questions? Christ.”

“Well at least get me another fucking pint then!”

He grabbed another glass from below the bar, put it under the tap and started pouring. Yes, the beer would help. If I was pissed, whatever was coming would just bounce right off me. But as the Bartender topped off the head and placed the glass on the bar, with the logo facing out, I saw it on the glass:

IMPOTENT. ABV 0.0%

*

So there I sat again, at the candlelit table, waiting for whatever was coming. Every few seconds I'd sip the beer, but of course it did nothing. It just sat in my stomach, making me bloat to the point where sitting was uncomfortable. The girls with the cosmos were still there - I could sense them glancing at me but I could never catch them. They'd all take a sip when I looked over, looking away. No doubt they were making faces at each other about me. Cunts.

Between all the quick looks at the Cosmo Girls, someone was sitting across the table again. Another girl in her early twenties, but she wasn't one of them. She had straight blonde hair that was a bit too much on the sandy side, innocent brown eyes, and a top on that had a generous amount of room for the belly and love handles. Black of course - insecurity's colour. Orla - she was a friend of a friend from college. At least I remembered this one. Her eyes were flickering around the room, across the different tables, anywhere but at me.

I'd have to take the lead so.

"Hi. How're things?"

Still not looking at me, she pursed her lip, like she was totally unsure how to respond. I sensed this wasn't gonna be a quick one.

"How are your folks?"

"Did you cheat on me?"

Fuck.

“No, how could I ha-”

“You did!” she said, forcing it out against her anxiety. “On your ‘holiday’ with your friends, you pig.” Her hands were gripping each side of the table - either she was bracing herself against her own rage or hanging on in case she fainted.

“Which holiday?”

“Berlin. Do you not remember?”

I shrugged. “I didn’t expect a test”.

“Did. You. Do it. Or not?!”

As I made a grab for her hand - to shut her up - I could feel all those Cosmo Girls’ heads turning our direction, smelling gossip and looking for a feed.

Now, this was not at all like Orla when I’d known her previously. I’d met up with her every once in a while in my first year of college. She was one of those sort of pretty girls, who’d gotten sort of pretty over a summer or so and hadn’t realised it yet. Quiet, unconfident, inexperienced, and would believe whatever you said to her. Handy to have around when you needed a sure pull on a night out. I was a good enough talker at that stage. Enough to get my bit where I needed it. But I was never a creep. Never.

“Well, what makes you think I did?”

Orla dug a hand into a clutch bag on her lap - a black River Island one, a birthday gift from me as it happens - and she pulled out a phone. My phone.

“Where the fuck did you get that?”

But she wasn’t listening. Pattern, swipe, and she was away. She almost winced when she stopped scrolling, and she just about shoved the screen into my face. I had a few incriminating pictures on that thing, but she hadn’t gone for any of those. She was showing me a text, in the group me and the boys used solely for that holiday. It went like this:

DRINKS MENU #1

MCGINLEY

Dya bring that mad one back in the end?

ME

Ye got her back at 11ish

She was fucking dog rough

However

She did the job

MCGINLEY

Ye she wasn't great now haha

FINN

Bit of a smelly hippy vibe off her

Deffo an arts head. Scaldy

ME

Head case in the scratcher tbf to her

FINN

Bet you went raw you scrote hahaha

You not shagging that girl from your course?

ME

No time for jonnys haha

Ah listen, vanilla shit at home, tapped birds on
holiday

The candle was still lit in the middle of the table. I could see it reflecting against the tears in Orla's eyes. Her bottom lip was quivering.

"You're a fucking...a fucking scumbag!"

"I didn't cheat on you Orla."

She picked up the phone and rapped her knuckles on the screen. "Can't you read? It says it right here! Right here!"

She was getting louder, and the Cosmo Girls were blatantly staring at us now, I could feel the hairs on my neck pricking up. I couldn't have them stare at me much longer. I'd go insane. I'd just have to finish this. I'd just have to tell her the truth.

"We were never really a thing though."

"What?"

"We were never really a thing".

She put the phone face down on the table. "Yes, we were."

"Well, sorry you thought about it that way, but from my end it was just a bit of fun like. And it was, no?"

"But.. but,," She wasn't looking at me anymore. Her eyes were darting around, and landed on the clutch bag. "You got me this. For my birthday. Remember?"

“Yeah. And it looks good on you. Doesn’t make me your boyfriend though.”

“I...I... lost my virginity to you.”

I sipped on the beer. “You were a virgin the first time?”

And that’s when she started to cry. She was being quiet at first, looking away, but she soon fucked dignity to the wind and heaved out these big, loud wails. I couldn’t bear the sight of her reddening eyes and runny nose, but all I saw when I looked away were the faces on those Cosmo Girls, full of filth and daggers, just for me. Those fucking bitches. They didn’t know the half of what went on there, but of course if they see a woman crying in a bar they’ll just blame it on the lad she’s with. Then it’ll spread like the clap all over this place, and suddenly everyone thinks I’m a cunt.

I couldn’t take it. I couldn’t fucking do it.

I downed the rest of the beer and made for the bar, empty pint glass in hand. Soon as I reached it, I raised the pint glass in the air and smashed it down on the surface. Shards trickled like hail, behind the bar, onto the stools, onto the floor. I found a bigger chunk with a sharp edge to it and jerked it across my left wrist. I closed my eyes and waited for the blood to seep down my forearm. I waited for the air to sting the open wound. I waited for the pain. But nothing came.

I peeked an eye open, and my wrist was fine. Not a scrape. I dug the pointed end of the glass into the fleshier part of my arm, hard as I could. Nothing. Tried the other arm. No joy. I was just short of bringing it to my neck when the Bartender smacked his hand down.

“Ya not read the fuckin’ sign, fella?”

In the same motion as before, he jerked a thumb over his shoulder toward the phrase on the mirror:

MEN DIE ONCE. THEN COMES JUDGEMENT.

*

I swept up all the shards with an old wooden dustpan and brush – pushed into my hands by the Bartender. The stuff was impossible to clean up. The smallest shards wedged themselves into the cracks in the floor, and the big ones kept cutting my thumbs open when I picked them up.

“How come they’re cutting me now?”

The Bartender had moved his death stare to me since I’d started cleaning. Between him and the Cosmo Girls, I felt like my every move was being watched.

“Men die once. Doesn’t stop ya gettin’ bitch cuts.”

“How did Orla get here? Why was she here, even?”

“Cause of what you did to her.”

“Hold on now. I did nothing.”

His expression, stern as hell up to this point, softened into slight confusion.

“What?”

I stopped cleaning, stood up and made eye contact with him.

“I didn’t do shit to her.”

‘D’you hear what she said to ya?’

“Listen man, she can think whatever she wants about me and her. That’s nothing to do with me. I didn’t do anything shady. If she thinks I did, that’s her problem.”

The Bartender, rolling his eyes, pulled another pint glass from under the bar and started pouring. He was shaking his head, and for the first time, not looking at me or the Crying Girl. Some fucking brass neck on this cunt. Thinking he’s better than me.

“So when do I get to leave?” I said to him.

He stopped pulling the pint midway. I could see his square jawline shuffling – grinding his teeth against my questions.

“Are you deaf? When can I leave?”

“Not till you figure out how to leave.”

“What the fuck does that even mean?”

“Will you shut the fuck up!”

He pulled the handle down, pouring again. Eyeing the glass as it filled, he rang off, as if rehearsed:

“You’re gonna stay here until you’ve figured out how to leave. You’re here because of all the shit ya did before. All of it’s gonna come back to ya, and keep coming back to ya until ya can look at yourself for what ya are. ‘Til then, ya do what ya need to do here.”

After tipping the excess of the head off, he put the pint down on the bar.

“Now get back to it. You’re not here to burn the ear off me.”

*

But I couldn’t get back to it. Not to that fucking table with those cosmo bitches staring me out of it. I wasn’t going to sit there and take a bollocking off some random bird I might-or-might-not know, while everyone else is watching, making their mind up, without knowing the real deal. So I walked well enough into the dark of the place, to where I thought that Bartender might not see me, and darted left for the toilet. I pushed the big fire door open, and the room was lit up like day. Huge strips of phosphorescent light bulbs lined the ceiling, exposing every corner of the place. It was all white, dirtless, antiseptic. After all that beer, I was bursting for a piss.

I looked around. No urinals. Must be the girls’. Fuck it. Doesn’t matter.

I went inside the first cubicle I saw and sat. I think I deserved a good sit down after all the shite I'd put up with that night. I let rip and there was that distinctly feminine sound of piss hitting the ceramic bowl. Kind of fitting given where I might be. All relieved, I pulled up my jeans and made my way back out. Confirming it for me was this girl at the sink, her facing the mirror, away from me.

Bang average bird. Straightened hair, some flowery top on her, a dark skirt with a hint of arse to it. I'd probably go for her if I was about six deep. Nothing special. I was about to head out when she said it.

"Do you've a key?" she asked, turning to face me. Her face was as nondescript as her body. The only memorable thing about it was the eyes. They shined against the lights above us, and I reckon if I looked deep enough into them. I'd see my reflection. I didn't make eye contact for too long, though. I fished my keys out of my back pocket, and she took them in her right hand, but there was no bag or bump in the other hand. She just held them by the keyring, dropping her hand to her side. You could hear them jangling in the silence.

"Do you know my name?" she asked.

"Should I?"

"Well, it didn't matter much to you at the time, did it?"

She went back to staring in the mirror, dabbing her make up or throwing a strand of hair back. Normally I'd bail at any sign of a girl being tapped - but she still had my keys.

"Have we met?"

"Just once."

"Where?"

"Some dancefloor."

Honestly, I could not place this girl for the life of me. I was supposed to be here getting done for fucking over people I knew. Knew. I wasn't supposed to be drawing blood out of a stone with some bitch who claims to have met me in a club.

“Jesus, what did I fucking do to you? Just tell me.”

She turned.

“It was late on a Friday. Half two or something. I was just out for a dance with some friends. I wasn't drinking much. Maybe one or two. Less than you had anyway.”

She'd lifted her hand now. She had the Yale between her finger and her thumb, pointing it at me.

“You literally bumped right into me. You were staggering about that dance floor. I ignored you at first, but then you asked for a key. I don't usually give mine out to randomers, but you wouldn't leave me alone. I just wanted you to leave me alone. So I took them out, I was about to hand them to you, and then you pulled me in. You grabbed me and pulled me towards you. It didn't last long - I pulled away after a few seconds, but you got your mouth over mine. Your tongue got in my mouth, down my throat. I could taste the beer and the cigarette smoke from you, I could feel your saliva coating my mouth, the smell of your breath invading my senses. I almost gagged. It took me a second to realise that my hands were still free, so I used them.”

The key was shaking in her hands, pointing right at my jugular. She took a deep breath.

“And when I pushed you off, you stumbled over to the girl beside me.”

She threw the keys into the sink.

“There's your fucking key.”

*

I closed my eyes and waited to hear her cry. She was gonna bawl, and everyone would hear her. Someone would pop out then - those Cosmo Girls would barge out of the stalls, filthy plastered onto their made up faces, all for myself. Or the Bartender. It had to

be him. He was gonna be behind me, with a toilet brush ready, so I could wash out all the bowls in this bathroom in front of everybody. Everyone would know, and I'd be fucked.

But I just heard the door bang. She was gone, and it was just me. So I left.

As I pushed the door open, I suddenly felt relief. That was easy! Some girl just gave me an earful - big fuckin' deal, happens to every fella, no? Definitely. No point dwelling on that one. I seated myself at the bar, chest puffed out.

"Well, man, that was an absolute breeze. Piece of piss. Another one, yeah?"

The Bartender sighed and pulled the tap down again. The piss coloured foam started pouring into the glass, and for the first time I noticed that the tap was filthy. It was one of those ones with a metallic finish, which I'm sure was clear and pristine at one point in time, but it had specks of dirt and grime all over it. You should have been able to see your reflection so clearly in the metal.

But I couldn't.

DRINKS MENU

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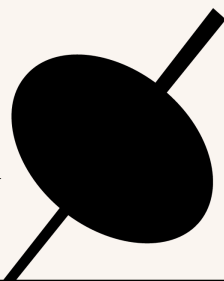
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