

Paying to Forget

By Leeroy Berlin

"I don't know man." The bar was too loud to carry on much of a conversation, but at least I felt comfortable talking there. The walls were covered in novelty signs; "It's Five O'Clock HERE," "Act Your Age, Not Your Dick Size," and "If you're drinking to forget, make sure to pay in advance!"

"What are you going to do if you don't come to the party? Sit at home and cry over spilt pussy?"

"Not exactly." There was a woman sitting at the other end of the bar who kept looking at me. I thought she was looking at me. It could have been the football game on the television behind me, the Cowboys were getting stomped, but she didn't look like a football fan--though that raised the question of what a football fan should look like. Male? Overweight? Bloodthirsty? Why not a five-four brunette in a tight black camisole with a touch too much eyeliner and a respectable B-cup?

"We both know how your night will go if you don't come to the party," Leeroy said.

"And if she's there?"

"She won't be. She's not even in town right now."

That didn't make me feel any better. "Fine. If it means that much to you I'll make an appearance."

"I'm going to hold you to that."

"I know." I hung up the phone, and I finished my beer. "Another," I said to the bartender. Her name was Stacy. We had a special relationship. She kept my drinks full; I kept her wallet full. It worked well. We always knew where we stood at the end of the night; the tabulated tab and cash left on the table. We didn't complicate it. We couldn't have if we'd tried. This was the only fit we had. I took my drink and walked over to the brunette at the end of the bar. "How's it going?"

"I'm good," she said. "And you?"

"Well, I was just wondering."

"Wondering what?"

"You don't look like you're from Texas."

"Don't I?"

"Only two things come from Texas." She laughed. "What are you drinking?" I asked.

"What are you buying?"

I waved the Stacy down. "Churchill martini." She pulled a martini glass down from the hanger, and walked back to where the bottles were.

"What's that?" the brunette asked.

"A real drink," I said.

"Oh, you're one of those," she said.

"No, but I do believe that life's too short to waste on anything but the best." I say this like it's deep philosophy, wisdom from some arcane age far removed from our own. I'm pretty sure it's just a tagline for a mid-shelf brand of Cognac, but I looked her right in the eye as I said it anyway. She seemed to buy it.

Jerry called out my name; it was my turn to sing. "Excuse me, I have to do this," I said. I finished off the last of my beer, smiled at her, and walked up to the front of the room where Jerry was waiting for me with the microphone. I whispered to him to change my song to better suit the moment. Krieger and Manzarek came on in unison.

Hello, I love you

Let me jump in your game

I carried the mic over and sang the song right to her. I missed a few notes, but it didn't matter. It still worked. After the song was over I sat back down next to her. "So, won't you tell me your name?" I said.

"Lisa."

"Well, Lisa, wanna get out of here?"

Later we were in my bed; she was on top, facing away from me, and she rocked back and forth, grinding against me. She turned her head, and looked me in the eye; her hair draped over her shoulder the way Tule's used to. I sat up underneath her, reaching one arm across her breasts, and bit down on her shoulder. She moaned, and we shuddered together. We paused there, as the wave passed between us, clutching at each other until it was over. I laid back down, and she rolled to the side, laying down with her head on my chest, and one leg draped over mine.

The night dragged on. A streetlight leaked through the blinds and fell on my eye. Flitting in and out of the beam was a fly, the interloper shattering the moment, buzzing against the window. My skin crawled, up one leg and down the other, right under hers. I reached one arm over her, as if to hold her close, but felt nothing.

In the morning I drove her home, and then I went to meet Leeroy for lunch down at Maloney's. He was already sitting by the bar when I walked in a little after noon.

"You look like you had a long night," he said.

"Every night is a long one when you don't sleep," I said. I hadn't slept more than two hours at a stretch since Tule had kicked me out.

"You should probably see a doctor about that."

"Either I'm dying or I'm not."

He just shook his head. "Oh, and you know it's a costume party, right? Favorite dead celebrity."

"Yeah, I've already got it all planned out."

"What are you going as?"

"Hunter S. Thompson."

"Nice."

"Yeah, it should be fun," I said. I didn't want to argue it anymore. I ordered the turkey club and a pint of Shock Top. Leeroy went for the steak sandwich and a pint of Sam. We ate, and complained about the Dodgers' losing streak.

After lunch I had to run around town picking up the various pieces of my costume. A short cigarette holder from the smoke shop on J. A loud blue Acapulco shirt and a suitable hat from the thrift store. The sunglasses I already had. The flyswatter was key. It had to be the right color, otherwise the whole getup would have been out of balance. I managed to find a black one at Walgreens.

I had more planned for the costume. Vicodin mixed in an electric lemonade and a bottle of Xanax I'd scored for the occasion. There was also the handle of Wild Turkey, vile stuff, but it was what Thompson drank on the campaign trail in '72, and character was the point of the costume--to live and breathe a frenzy drowned in pharmaceutical haze. To go down and out.

The party was across town at Leeroy's house on Saturday night. The street in front of the house was already packed with cars when I arrived, so I had to park around the corner. I stopped in the yellow glow of a streetlight, tipped my chair back, and pulled the pill bottle out. I slipped one of them under my tongue, and waited for it to dissolve. It turned to bitter powder, and then to bitter nothing, and I washed it down with the lemonade which didn't taste much better, and I washed that down with the whisky. I was ready.

I walked up to the house with the pills in my pocket, a bottle in each hand, and the flyswatter holstered in a hammer-loop on my shorts. As I approached the house I could see a white writhing on the lawn, and one voyeur peeking from a lit window across the street; Buddy Holly and Marilyn Monroe were already going at it right there on the grassy knoll. My impulse was to applaud, cheers from the cheap seats, to congratulate their conquest of death by vigorous humping, but I didn't. I swigged from the lemonade, and then from the whisky as I stepped over them. I kicked the front door of the house open, and descended through the threshold.

A crowd of the not so recently dead was spread throughout the inside of the house, orbiting the two beer kegs in rudely intersecting ellipses. "Bad Romance" blasted at four thousand watts--my body vibrated when I passed too close to the stacked speakers, and I was simultaneously nauseous and aroused. Two Abe Lincolns of

conflicting genders walked past me hand in hand and went upstairs together. Someone's sheets were about to be irrevocably soiled and scarred. I imagined the mattress in the shower, trying to scrub itself clean--"It cannot be unseen!"

I drank freely from each hand, and I slipped another xanax under my tongue. The vicodin was coming on strong, and I was feeling very happy. Not like an old drunk feels happy when he gets his shaking hands on his next shot, but liked I'd just fucked my way to nirvana.

I went into the backyard to escape the assault of Gaga's noise. I found a seat next to this smoking blonde done up as Cleopatra. I didn't point out that Cleopatra wouldn't have been blonde. "So where's Marc Antony?" I asked her.

"Huh?"

Perfect.

"Who are you supposed to be?" she asked.

"I'm the pure id. You know, Freud."

"I'm a psych major actually."

"Bully for you." I swigged the lemonade. She didn't have a lizard's head yet. This was promising. "I'm a famous writer," I said.

"Which?"

I gave her a confused look like I didn't know what she meant.

"You think there's more than one?"

"I don't think you're dressed as Shakespeare."

"Ouch. That hurts."

"You're supposed to be Shakespeare?"

"I'm supposed to be better than Shakespeare."

"What author is better than Shakespeare?"

"The id." She laughed. It wasn't funny, so this was another good sign. I offered her some lemonade.

"What is it?" she asks.

"Black magic," I said, unsure if this was drug slang for something else. I decided not to worry about it. A short Janis Joplin walked out from the house. I'd been so nervous about avoiding Tule that I'd forgotten her friend Sheila would be at Leeroy's party. "Oh look, someone forgot to take out the trash," I shouted loud enough for everyone in the backyard, and a few of the closer neighbors, to hear. Sheila stopped right in the door and glared at me without speaking. I wiggled my cigarette holder at her between my teeth and glared back. I knew

that look. Everyone in the yard was looking at me. I shrugged, and swigged from each hand again. One of the moths swarming around the porch light passed between us. "God damn bats!" I shouted. I popped the flyswatter out from its holster and swung frantically at the airborne terrors. The xanax had settled into my brain, and rearranged all the furniture in my frontal lobe. I slipped another under my tongue and turned back to Cleopatra, but she was gone. So much for that.

I saw Sheila saying something to Leeroy, and I was sure that I was going to be in trouble, so I kept drinking. The Wild Turkey was still awful. I decided that next time I'd spare the authenticity. Leeroy walked over and sat in Cleopatra's seat.

"Someone prettier than you is already sitting there."

"Yeah dude, I think she's gone."

"Eh, she wasn't that hot anyway."

"You feelin alright?"

"Don't I look alright?" I smiled at him. It felt like a smirk. With that much vicodin--half the bottle of lemonade was gone--it was more of an ear to ear shit eating grin. I probably looked like a stroke victim.

"Not exactly."

"I'm grand." A moth landed on my face. "Fucking bats!" I sprang for the flyswatter, and swung it about, smacking myself in the face and feeling only one or two attempts connect with the fuzzy winged menace. Leeroy laughed, like I was joking, but I swear the moths had grown, maybe one of the neighbors had been dumping nuclear waste under their porch light--did that one have TEETH? Oh dear god. I wound up with the flyswatter and swung hard. I felt the tiny thud and watch the moth tumble quietly into the night. "How do ya like them apples?" I demanded of the other moths, and in their tiny moth brains maybe they hatched their plots to avenge their fallen comrade, or maybe they just kept bumping into the porch light while I screamed at them.

I decided to cut my losses. I was outnumbered, with no hope of reinforcements, but inside the impregnable fortress of the sliding glass door they'd never reach me. Maybe I could patch things up with Cleopatra and salvage what was left of the night. The door was about fifteen feet from where I was sitting, a treacherous fifteen feet in my condition. Somehow I managed not to stumble through the glass, and got into the house with only a scraped knee.

More shitty music poured out of the speaker system, filling every nook of the house with bad vibrations, but I couldn't identify the song anymore. It was just noise. I managed to make my way down the hall, knocking only one picture frame off the wall, and into the living room where people were dancing. There was Audrey Hepburn wearing Holly Golightly's dress, shifting to the beat, and I decided that she was just my type, so I

stumbled over and sat down next to her.

"No matter where you run, you just end up running into yourself," I said.

She turned and smiled at me. "How are you?"

"Very good. I must say, I'm amazed."

"That's good." She smiled. It was a perfect smile. It was a real smile.

"I'm a writer," I said.

"I know. How's that working out for you?" She seemed far less drunk than I was--no good. I offered her some of the lemonade.

"What is it?"

"Magic."

She shrugged, and took a swig. "Tastes awful," she said.

"But it feels wonderful."

"We'll see."

The two Abe Lincolns came back downstairs and walked past us on their way to one of the kegs. I pointed them out to her. "That bed will never psychologically recover." She laughed; it was a familiar laugh, and I could have sworn I'd heard it before. The room was getting unstable. The geometry of space was bending; the walls refused to stay where they belonged, and even the floor suddenly seemed unsure of what it was supposed to be doing. It took most of my focus to keep the universe from collapsing in on us long enough to keep the conversation going.

"I've been worried about you," she said. This confused me--we'd just met. How long had I been sitting there? Did I black out? "Are you okay?" she asked, leaning over closer to me, but I wasn't. Suddenly it occurred to me. I smiled. She smiled back--I did know that smile, but it was too late because I was already puking on her, Tule's, dress, and, yes, into her cleavage. She froze; she didn't say anything. Her face made an expression I'd never seen on her before. I adjusted my sunglasses, and I got up and ran out the front door without saying a word.

I didn't make it far. I tripped in the yard, and fell face first into the grass right where Monroe and Holly had been. The whisky went flying one way, the lemonade another. The pill bottle jabbed at my chest where I'd fallen on it. Terrified of being apprehended with it on me I rolled over and yanked the bottle out, pouring the last pills into my mouth and swallowing dry. I tossed the bottle away. I stood up, and ran, screaming, down the street. A confused crowd had gathered out of the house and onto the yard when I stopped to look back. I didn't see Tule. I took off running again.

When I woke up the sun was high overhead again, almost on its way down. I was laying on my back in the dirt in the middle of a bulldozed field a few blocks from Leeroy's house. I struggled up onto my feet and looked around. Both my shoes were missing; my socks were full of pickers and thorns. I adjusted my hat. My sunglasses were laying a few feet away, missing a lens. I put them on. I was caked in layers of vomit and dirt. I tried brushing the dirt off, but that just revealed the globs of half digested goo, so I stopped. I checked my cellphone--no calls. I walked across the field, hopping uncomfortably every time a thorn stabbed my foot, and made it back to my car. I drove home.

When I got home I went straight into the shower, still in full costume, and turned the hot water on. I sat down in the tub and let it rain on me while I tried to remember as much of the night as I could. I stripped off my soaked clothes, threw them in the trash, and changed. I went out onto the street, and walked to a hole-in-the-wall Mexican restaurant around the corner, Tonita's Cocina.

Luis was at the counter. He was never at the counter. "Ey, buenos dias señor Erik. Como estas?"

"Como siempre. Y usted?"

"Ah, bien, bien."

"Donde esta tu hija?" Luis didn't run the counter on weekends. His daughter did, usually with her schoolwork laid out, working hard on some math problem or a history paper in between taking customers' orders. She wanted to be a dentist. Luis was very proud of her, and took every chance to show it.

"Oh she is, como se dice, on a field trip? Al museo del arte."

"Good for her."

"The usual today?"

"Si, torta de adobada por favor. Para lleva." I handed him the money, and waved off the change. I sat down to wait, and I tried not to think about the look on Tule's face and what it'd cost me.

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