

The Staircase

By Gibson Culbreth

The back room of the bar was mostly exposed brick wall. Eric sulked into it, sidling behind the door and closing it, taking in the small enclosed space and where, in front of him a black wrought iron staircase unfolded below. Eric had decided after the last three hours of attempting to drink his sadness away that he would rather just find a quiet place to deal with it. So he slid down behind the door and began quietly coming down from the adrenaline kick of being inside illegally, hanging out with all the cool kids. And alcohol was on his breath and he heard over the bah-booming of his heart a girl shriek.

It wasn't untamed and he realized as it echoed that the black spiral staircase at his feet was unwinding towards the girls screech, pounding through his blood with the bah-booming and the bass thumping from a track the bar was blasting. He decided to follow his yellow brick road.

His feet took him down, weighing at least fifty pounds each, popping down the wrought iron staircase like a kid down a mountain, just trying to hang onto the rail while his body brought him closer and closer to the girl at the end because he knew the girl at the end would be there and she would need some saving. He thought that maybe just maybe this beautiful feeling dancing through him could rub off, maybe through a hug or a kiss or an offer to buy a drink and drive her home.

"I didn't mean to hit her, I didn't mean to but she just got in the way or something, Joanie you gotta come get me. I don't care about your sick kid! Get that deadbeat dad a his to watch it I need a ride. Joanie! GodDAMNIT!" She had long curly dishwater blonde hair and was wearing all red, from her eyeliner to her lipstick to her dress, nails, shoes. Even the whites of her eyes were glowing like a Christmas tree. She held a phone in one hand and the stem of a broken beer bottle in the other. She was looking at the boy.

When I say boy I mean maybe 19, when I say girl I mean maybe 23. Courtney and Eric stood staring at one another about three stairs away. Eric took in the jagged edge of the bottle, the shards lying around her fancy red boots. Courtney took in the skinny dark haired boy unwilling to flinch or move because he'd caught her in her hour of complete desperation.

"What are you looking at?"

"Red."

"Yeah? Whatever."

"You're all red."

"And you're all black, who cares kid?"

"I'm not a kid."

"You're not? What are you fourteen or something? C'mon. Who even let you in?"

"The bouncers."

"You from Hawaii then?" His fake ID was indeed from the island state. He nodded his head. She snorted, sneering, her whole face making a beak. "Yeah right, they let whoever into this goddamn bar anymore. Like they need the money or something." Eric sat on the stairs, immediately overwhelmed with her loud presence. He felt the alcohol leaving him just a bit, his blood got a bit faster. His heart was wide.

"What happened to you?"

"What happened to me? What? What happened to you little boy? Why're you here without your mommy? What was she busy tonight? Where's your little girlfriend?" Eric had no girlfriend. But he did not feel the need to give Courtney more to go on.

"I'm alone."

"Whatever kid, kids like you ain't ever alone."

"Did you kill someone?" Eric noticed more red, a bit of blood on a piece of the glass on the ground. Courtney chuckled a bit.

"Not my finest hour I guess," she smiled, this time a little more kindly. Like she had a secret, a big soft inside secret she wanted him to pry into, to dive into so she wouldn't be alone like him. "No kid, I didn't kill no one. Just got into a fight is all."

"What was the fight about?"

"What're you the freaking FBI or something? God, kid. Stop asking questions." So Eric stopped asking questions and just stared at her for a second, noticing the layers of makeup, the smear of eyeliner down her left cheek ending in a long red scratch. Her lips were full and her lipstick cracking like old paint. He felt like she was at the end of all of her ropes.

"Stop staring kid, it's embarrassing."

"For you or me?" This time Eric felt a bit of his old charm well up and pop like a light bulb. She moved closer to him, swinging the broken head of the bottle gently, slowly so that it elapsed next to his knee. He shivered.

"For you. What do I got to be embarrassed by?"

"You hit someone with that didn't you?"

"Why does it matter kid, it wasn't you that's all you gotta worry about."

"You seem really angry."

"I seem angry? Oh kid, you got no idea what I'm like when I'm angry. Why're you prying so hard? What, there was nothing good on tv tonight you gotta come down to a freaking club to find entertainment? Ain't it a school night or something?" Eric stared at the ground, his face vibrating a pink color he wanted to suppress, tried to suppress, thought he might be able to pass off as effects from the alcohol.

"What are ya blushing about kid? What did I say something to hurt your little feelings? Why're you so sensitive? God. Kids like you disgust me, want to know why? Hey kid, look at me, wanna know why?"

"Not really. I was just trying to be nice."

"Why? Why do you wanna be nice to me? Is there some point to it? Do I seem like someone who deserves niceties?"

"Everyone deserves some nice interactions every once in a while." Courtney was quiet for a second, contemplating the sad, skinny boy curved towards the ground in front of her. She moved to set the bottle down, to disarm herself so that maybe she could come down from her post battle high and connect with another human being in a way that didn't have to involve blood.

"Why're you being so sad kid? You're bringing the mood way down."

"I didn't get in."

"To what? You got into the bar alright, I can smell that beer on your breath. Don't lie to me now kid. I can still pick up that beer bottle." Courtney extended her hand, her long red talons reaching towards Eric's face. "C'mon kid get up, I can't stand a kid that cries."

"I'm not crying. But if I was I don't see why it wouldn't be acceptable."

"Why is that? Crying is never acceptable unless your face is broken."

"I didn't get into college. I applied to one and I didn't get in. Now I don't have anything."

"So what you didn't get into some fancy schmancy college. I didn't go to no college and I'm fine." Eric stared up at her.

"You just beat someone's face in with a beer bottle."

"You don't know that!" Courtney took her hand back, placing both on her hips and angling her body in a way that said she was ready to fight, to argue till the death. Courtney always fought to the bitter

end.

“Got a cigarette kid?” Courtney asked, quickly sliding a silver zippo from her pleather jacket pocket. He handed her a Newport. “Newports? Kid really? Where did you learn to smoke, you’re ghetto grandmothers house? Jesus.”

“What happened?” Courtney thought back to a few moments earlier when that bitch Elia Luca stepped through the door with her ex-boyfriend Gino, with that shiny little dress on and her hair piled up all high on top of her head. Her fake tan was evident even in the dark lighting and Gino had his hand on the small of her back like he was in love with her, like he hadn’t been dating Courtney just a week ago and fucking this chick in the bathroom stall of the same club on the side. Like she fucking mattered.

“I just... Got a little carried away, not a big deal kid.”

“How carried away?” Courtney looked at him and then grabbed his wrist quickly and solidly, pulling him down a couple of stairs and into her perfume cloud.

“Maybe just a few stitches, relax kid. Everyone is going to be fine.”

“You say that like you mean it.”

“I do, what I can’t be a hopeful bitch? You gotta have hope kid.”

“I think I lost it somewhere...”

“This is stupid kid, stop being such a douchebag.” Courtney flopped down next to Eric and blew a bit of Newport smoke into his face. “Smell that kid, that doesn’t smell like a real cigarette. Real men smoke Marlboro Red 100’s.”

“What do real women smoke?” At this Courtney laughed, a rough cut snort.

“They smoke fucking...” Her eyes roved for a moment, searching for something to grab hold of. “They smoke whatever they damn well want to smoke. They smoke Marlboro’s or camel filters or motherfucking Virginia slims.”

“Why does it matter that I smoke Newports then?”

“It’s just a cliché kid. You’re just some high schooler that picked up a pack of menthols, you’re not dedicated to shit. All that fiber glass in your goddamned lungs, no wonder you don’t know how to fight. Betcha can’t even scream.” Courtney was close now, her boots touching the side of Eric’s leg. She smelled like tobacco and shiny new plastic with a smell beneath like fall leaves. He imagined it emanated from her face.

“I can so scream. I listen to screamo bands.” Eric said this with the first ounce of confidence he had

felt all day, a sudden boost.

“I don’t know what the fuck a screamo band is but let’s hear it. Let me hear you scream.” Eric blushed suddenly and shook his head. “What? Who’s gonna fucking hear you? It’ll feel good and fuck’em if they do hear you. You’re out on your own, you’ve already broken a law, it’s not even 3 o’clock in the morning. C’mon kid it’ll do you some good. Scream.” Eric looked at her, meeting her brown eyes for the first time that night and seeing nothing but determination. He felt wish-washy in comparison. He stayed quiet though, even though he could feel a roar begin in his toes.

“I’ll join ya, just do it kid. I promise, when things get shitty just find a quiet place and bust it all up. It’ll let your anger out. I know you’re angry kid.”

“I’m not angry, just disappointed.”

“Don’t be disappointed! Get fucking mad! What’s life if you don’t let yourself feel the extremes? They’re there for a reason.” Courtney took another drag of the cigarette, making a face on the exhale and staring at it again. “I’m never smoking another Newport again in my life. Goddamn.” Eric stayed quiet and he felt Courtney’s own anger begin to rise right next to him.

“All right kid, I’m not gonna sit here all night. Give me a list.”

“A list of what?”

“What are you “disappointed” about?” She said disappointed in a wimpy voice that Eric imagined she thought sounded like his own.

“I’m disappointed that I didn’t get into school.”

“Alright, what else?” Eric shrugged. “What does school mean to you?”

“I don’t have a future.”

“Aw, fuck that kid you have a fucking future. You’re fourteen years old!”

“I’m nineteen.”

“Whatever, you’re young you have the whole future ahead of you. You haven’t experienced shit.”

“I’m disappointed that I’m still a virgin.”

“Well, I don’t know what kinda girl you take me for but I can’t help you with that one.”

“No! I just meant, I thought college was where I would find the right girl.”

“Oh kid, you got so many problems...” Courtney laughed, extinguishing the cigarette on the stair between them. “Let’s keep going...”

“I’m disappointed that I’m graduating this year and I haven’t made any lifelong friends.”

“Hah, kid, high school is not the best time of your life. Only jackasses think that.”

“I’m disappointed that I didn’t get asked to prom.”

“You’re the boy you’re supposed to do the asking! Who fucking raised you kid? Jesus.”

“I’m disappointed that you’re goading me like this...” There was silence for a second before Courtney clapped her hands on her thighs and turned to look at him, her hair sprayed curls looking more like a Madame Alexander doll than real hair.

“Are you disappointed or angry kid?” Eric thought for a second, watching the slight gleam in Courtney’s soused eyes tempting him to continue, to dig deeper.

“I’m angry I guess.”

“You don’t guess you know!” Her voice vaulted up and down the staircase, echoing in a way that he could tell made her happy.

“I’m angry!” He shouted a little too, testing the water. The way his voice expanded made him feel like more of a man.

“That’s it! Go on kid, what else are you angry about?”

“I’m angry that I have to live at home while everyone else leaves!”

“You don’t have to live at home, go somewhere else!”

“I’m angry that I’m poor and can’t find a good job!”

“That’s it kid!”

“I’m angry that my mom ruined my life by fucking the mailman!” Courtney laughed at this one, hooking her fingers around her mouth and giggling so hard she shook. Eric smiled at her, feeling free of the weight of sadness that had been harnessing him.

“I’m angry that I’m not 21! I’m angry that I live on Long Island! I hate that America is in the shitter and there’s not anything I can do about it!”

“Yeah!”

“I’m angry!” He yelled, his voice echoing around him in the stairwell like a riot. Courtney was grinning big, her lipstick cracking and exposing her lips underneath, her yellowed teeth glinting in the light.

“That’s it kid! That’s fucking it. Now break something!” Eric vaulted off the stair and reached to the neck of the beer bottle, still sitting where Courtney discarded it. He threw it and it shattered on its way down the stairs, sending a shower of gleaming green glass down, down, down.

“Now let’s come down, let’s sit and have some quick silence kid.” Eric sat down next to her,

shaking with excitement and anger and feeling. He felt as red as she looked, like he should match her somehow, he found himself smiling.

“See kid, isn’t expelling your demons kinda fun?” She grinned again, patting him on the back. Eric shook his head and grinned too. Another noise began on the stairs. The sound of heavy boots, a lot of them.

“Courtney is that?”

“Just let ‘em come kid. I’m ready.” A swarm of police officers pounded down the staircase, guns drawn. Others came from below and immediately the two were surrounded. Eric stood quickly but Courtney stayed still, her elbows balanced on her thighs, her chin resting in her palms.

“Courtney Jasper you are under arrest for the assault and battery of Gino Giannelli.” Courtney stood up and put her hands behind her back as the officers jumped around the stairs trying to find a way to put the cuffs on her without falling.

“See kid, sometimes letting the anger out is worth all the trouble that comes after,” she said with a smirk as the cuffs clicked behind her.

“Who are you?” An officer asked, shining a light in his face.

“Just a friend.” Eric began to walk away from the fray, but was quickly caught in the iron grip of a chubby police officer.

“You’re not going anywhere kid...” Courtney laughed again and shook her head as the cuffs went on Eric’s skinny wrists.

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