

Vegas I

By Jon Cass

I walked the strip on sore legs, trying to find some refuge at a fresh bar. I needed to escape the last one.

Earlier that night, I found myself on the corner of Flamingo and Paradise, sitting at a joint with a beautifully appropriate name. They called it the Terrible Hotel and Casino. Yeah, right off Paradise.

I had bellied up to the bar with a book and shortly found some conversation with this old timer over shots of bottom shelf gin. This guy was in his late eighties and it showed. I mean SHOWED.

We chatted for a while about booze, some broad he was giving it to way back in '58, and how he remembered being able to get a shot for fifteen cents when he was my age. This cat was half in his grave. He could barely conjugate a sentence. It took him three minutes to say something that'd take me four seconds. Though that's not saying much, I never shut up. It's a serious condition. It really is.

Well, conversation died and I retreated back into my book. A drink or two later, the old goat puts his hand on my shoulder and says to me, "You intrigue me, son."

I just figured he was an affectionate drunk, so I laughed and said, "Thanks, mano." Suddenly, he got real serious like. CANCER serious.

"Why do you laugh?" he asks.

"I don't know, man. I laugh at everything." That was true enough. It's the sort of social defense mechanism that comes from having too large of a mouth and a Cheshire, shit eating grin. "Why do you think I'm intriguing?" I say, trying to ignore his skeletal hand as it slid to my back.

"Your eyes and lips. I want to kiss you. Hard."

I almost started to laugh until the words finally registered, "Um, wait. What?"

"I want to suck you all over," he says. No kidding. I don't know if it was the seven double shots of gin, or the thought of his toothless mouth on me that caused my stomach to turn.

"I appreciate it, man. But I have a girlfriend." I can't remember if that was a lie or not, but it didn't matter. I did my best to keep my smile on as the old bird put his other hand on my thigh.

Maybe I should have pulled away, but I didn't. Even half hammered, I sensed something off about the old shit. Something more than liquor induced lust. Something more than a craving for a body to warm his bed. Something almost hollow.

His hands paused briefly as his old eyes caught mine as I was trying to figure out his angle. He smiled

and taking my lack of physical protest as some sort of invitation, continued the already awkward advance. "I've never been with a man," he says. I try not to scoff.

"I got a girlfriend, man." Lying and smiling. I'm a cruel piece of shit, especially when I'm trying to be kind. Must have been that Minnesota nice thing I picked up in the Upper Midwest. I hate the thought of being rude. I hate the need to be congenial. Hell, maybe I just hate. It's in our blood, after all.

His hand still on my thigh he says, "Girlfriend? That don't matter," Maybe not, but it should. Maybe I'm just a romantic.

"I think it matters."

"Do you have a car?" he whispers as he slides his hand from my thigh to my front. I guess I should have felt violated, or angry, or SOMETHING. But honestly I just felt sorry for the old prick. I'm too fucking compassionate for my own good sometimes. I mean I really am.

"No car, man," his hand still cupping my crotch.

"Let me kiss you." He leans in, I lean back.

"I can't, man. I have a girlfriend. Young and in love, you know?" Always with the lies.

They're in our blood too, I guess.

"Let's go to my place. It's four blocks away. We can talk about it," he says, one hand stroking my back, the other on my groin.

Finally I brushed his boney, wrinkly, death hands off me and stood up. I had enough. He was a persistent old fuck, but no amount of pity or sympathy was going to let me let him palm my dick for more than a few seconds.

"I got to go. I got somewhere to be." I took my eighth (or was it the ninth?) double gin and took the last drag on a cigarette that was running far too low. I grabbed my book, pocketed my smokes. "I'm sorry, man. Really."

I was. I am. Part of me wanted to make sure the man was going to be alright. I wanted to make sure the guy could find some happiness. I wanted him to feel wanted, to feel needed by someone. I wanted to help him get what we all want. Some sort of connection with the rest of the herd.

I hate a lot of people, but I didn't, DON'T feel hate towards that old shit. Maybe it's because I see myself in him. Or my potential self.

I left him there, with his drink. Alone. I left him to be eaten alive by that loneliness. And I still feel guilty about it. I could feel his sadness and emptiness like a cold draft.

Now, some bastards would think I was a lying son of a bitch. Some would think I'm trying to flatter

myself, or be melodramatic, or whatever.

But fuck it. I felt his pain, his suffering. You could taste it and smell it. It POURED off him. And it was more desperate and more concrete and far more real than any sort of connection I've ever had with another human being. And that scared and scares the living shit out of me.

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