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**Smoke & Coffee**

One day when the leaves had turned damp from the Autumn rain, I took a right when I should have gone left and realized too late that my mistake had brought me upon the outskirts of town. A purple haze began to cover the sky to let the barflies know it was time to come in. Illuminated rectangles of the city across the bay winked their colossal geometry as I walked my way to the nearest bus stop.

 I sat myself on the bench, hands in my pockets. I listened to *Space Oddity* with old earphones and wondered why people only make their beds if they are only going to mess it up again. I then countered, that if we are only going to get hungry after eating, why eat in the first place? I ate a bag of Cheetos from the vending machine next to the bus stop because the only other option was Fritos. And I waited.

 And waited.

 And waited.

 It was halfway through *Whip It* when I accepted that I knew the bus was not coming. I was three-fourths through *Whip It* when my phone shut down. I leaned my back against the glass wall of the booth. Whip it, whip it good.

 Hands returned to my pockets, I walked down the way I came, avoiding cracks on the street because Devo warned me so. My footsteps were painfully obvious simply because I had no choice but to hear them. Somewhere in an alley two cats were having very noisy sex. A car alarm went off a couple blocks down and was immediately silenced. To my right was a bar that I had not remembered seeing on my first time getting lost. It was called The Smoke & Coffee and quite obviously sold neither of those things. The sign above the doorway was of a plump man with skin the color of liver. He wore nothing but briefs, and even these were in threat of being pulled down by a large dalmatian who held the elastic in between its large teeth. His back was turned to the sidewalk, but he pivoted and held a finger to his cheek, looking bashful and flirtishly embarrassed. It sort of looked like the Coppertone Girl, which I suppose was the point.

 A string quartet was playing from inside. Their hunched bodies were silhouettes in the tinted windows. I entered through the doors and into a miasma of whiskey and gin. Candles flickered on the tables, illuminating only the hands of the guests who sat in twos and faced the string musicians. They were as silhouetted by the lack of light as the quartet looked from the outside, and it was difficult to see where the rest of their bodies led because they melted so perfectly with the darkness in between the candles. I could tell they were facing the stage, where all four musicians were very illuminated.

The musicians wore plastic masks with diamonds on their cheeks, and their faces were twisted into permanent, almost cartoonish sadness. Their suits where as black as shadow with pinstripes the color of blood. They bent their heads low as they played, bobbing their plastic masks as if they were sobbing.

I went to the bar, which was located to the right of the audience and on a platform two feet up. I sat two seats down from the only other patron: an old man with more salt on his beard than pepper, and more thin patches than that. He wore a denim jacket that was frayed at the shoulders and the cuffs. He was drinking a gin and tonic with no lime and seemed to nod his head to his drink each time one of the performers put their eyes to their feet.

The bartender asked what I wanted, and I said well whiskey. I sipped and watched as the quartet sway and sob. Suddenly the old man turned to me, “Beautiful music, isn’t it? So sad yet so optimistic. You’d agree, right?”

“Yeah,” I said, feeling the fiery slug of whiskey travel down my throat.

“What brings you around these parts?”

 I told him of the bus that never came. I left out the getting lost part, and the man did not ask where I was going nor where I was heading.

 He said, “So you need to charge your phone, so you can call a taxi?” He pulled out a white cord from his breast pocket. “You can use mine.”

 “How did you know…?”

 “That you had an iPhone?” He shrugged, “I could tell.”

 His eyes were kind and warm, and it was immediately evident that he has witnessed much throughout his years. The quinine from the tonic wafted into my nostrils. Two patches were sowed on his jacket. On his right breast pocket was a rectangle with the words *The World is YOUR Oyster* written in large blocky lettering. On his left was a similar rectangle with the words *I HATE Seafood* in similar style. They were just old enough to start looking like scabs.

 I took the charger, plugged it into an open outlet near the door. Once it gets enough charge, I’ll call a cab, maybe have another whiskey for the road, and forgive myself for ever trying to visit a friend in a foreign part of the city, where the sidewalks are not just sidewalks, and the pavement is not just pavement. Something is always a bit off, like a twisted dimension…like an empty parking lot past 11pm.

 He did not wait for me to return to my seat when he asked, “Have you ever dropped a light bulb before?”

 My legs swept under the bar. “Once or twice, yeah.”

 “I dropped a light bulb the day my brother killed himself. Dropped it ‘cause I walked in on the bullet coming out the back of his skull, pulling his head back like a blooming flower. I had two thoughts. You want to know them?”

 I nodded. Sipped my whiskey. The presence of my phone charging called me from the corner of the Smoke & Coffee’s candle lit interior. It is an old model and getting past the base charge will take no less than ten minutes. Plus, I owe the man a conversation. Hopefully it will take no more than ten minutes.

 He ordered another gin and tonic and said, “My first thought was that getting the plaster for the bullet hole would be another trip to Home Depot. It was actually Mr. Sardine’s Department Store, but most people recognize Home Depot so I just say that. My second thought was, hypothetically, that if I could pick up the fragments of a light bulb and use a light glue to make the fractured pieces whole, can’t I just do that with my brother’s skull? Hypothetically, of course.”

 “Hypothetically.”

 “My third thought was that he had killed himself.”

The gin and tonic came. He bent his head down as the quartet’s bodies crumpled in anguish. They finished a song. No one in the audience clapped or made any notion of movement. They were as still as mannequins and as shaded as the encroaching shadows in the darkest corners of the room. The quartet restarted their instruments.

 “I’m sorry to hear that. To your brother.”

Our glasses clinked. The *I HATE seafood* patch crinkled on his jacket.

 “The point of the story was that I didn’t really care.”

 “I thought it was your denial. Most people-”

 “He was a Face Stealer,” the man said. One of the cellists played his instrument and cocked his plastic face towards the ceiling, wailing in silent agony.

 “I’m not sure I follow?”

 “A Face Stealer. A group of people who are very, very good at their job.”

 “I still don’t quite understand.”

 “You wouldn’t,” the man said, sipping his drink, “that’s the point. My brother was so good that he didn’t become good. He belonged to the bunch of them.”

 “Like the illuminati?”

 “Beyond. They started off as no lives in big cities. Would exist in thrift stores. You know the type.”

 “Sure.”

 “Here’s another question,” the man said. He reached across the bar and fished an olive from the jar, put it in his mouth and sucked on it like hard candy. “You got a cat?”

 “No, but I think I imagine enough.”

 “Alright. Let’s say you find a cat on the side of the road, half chopped. Tendons resting on the pavement, and sinewy like raw meat, which I suppose it is. It looks at you with those eyes. Eyes of pleading. Puts out a soft *mrow*. What do you do?”

 “I go get help,” I say as I take another sip. I look back at my phone. It should have enough base power to start. I’ll call the taxi and keep talking to this man until it arrives. I’d rather keep him engaged and in my sight than in the shadows.

 “No, you kill the damn thing,” the man said.

 “With what?” I found my voice rising. It was not above the string quartet but enough that several of the shaded audience members stirred. Or I think they did.

 “You’re boots. Unless its new boots.”

 I looked at my hands and figured I should not stop drinking. It was stronger whiskey than I thought, and I was beginning to get light headed. The Cheetos did no favors to stop the alcohol. I turned to him and realized he was still looking at me, always looking at me.

 “Pardon, I’m going to order that taxi now.”

 I escaped from my chair and walked to my phone, called a taxi company. The operator said he knew exactly where the Smoke & Coffee was, would bring dates here, even, but he was dropping off another client and it would be about 30 minutes.

 The man kept his gaze on me the entire time. It was almost penetrating. I steadied myself on the bar top as I swung back in. The guy seemed like a talker, and I can easily listen until the taxi comes. “Tell me more of the Face Stealers.”

 The quartet finished a song, and the audience kept silent. They kept their gazes to the stage as if embarrassed by their own playing. If the audience were a bunch of mannequins, then the performers had to be automatons.

 He continued, “Well, in most thrift stores you’ll find framed pictures, and some you’ll find discarded certificates, documents, even degrees. Patricia’s EMT certification in 1983, John’s 1994 hair stylist certification. Gerald Montgomery’s B.A. in arts from some forgettable campus in 1960. Turns out, you don’t need four years to get a B.A., you can just buy Montgomery’s from a thrift store in a lonely avenue with a strip mall, crying kid, and fresh roadkill. It’s real easy to become other people. And the Face Stealers were good at it, and my brother was good at it. But there was a balance. You can’t be an eye doctor and a professor with two different names. Too much to juggle. Hubris gets everyone.”

 My spine turned to jelly and nausea hit me like someone pushed me in front of a subway train. The corners of my vision started to creep with black static and it reminded me how old televisions used to shut off. Vertigo, yes. Vertigo. I pushed my drink back and put cash down on the wooden top.

 The bartender was at the other end of the bar, wiping the inside of a glass with an ivory cloth. His face was shadowed as the audience and his hands were gloved, prompting my own question of whether all bartenders are butlers or if all butlers are bartenders, which even then I knew did not make much sense. I don’t remember what the bartender even looked like in the first place. He said, “Keep your money. Everyone has a long day once in a while.”

 My eyebrows felt suddenly heavy. My forehead pulsed.

 The man put his hand on my shoulder. It felt like a brick. “Do you know how my brother did it? How he got so good?”

 My head hit the bar. My vision creeped in, like the light of dying candle.

 He picked another olive. It looked like an eyeball. “He was good because he only stole the faces of people that would never be remembered. The people that took a right when they should have gone left. He only offed himself because he eventually felt bad about how good he was. He stopped remembering who he was.”

 The lights of the Smoke & Coffee blinded me when I woke. I felt like I had fallen asleep in a classroom and woke up to everyone staring at me. The old man moved my body with incredible strength and carried me to the audience, where they stared with silent conviction and curiosity. They looked like mannequins in the darkness because they were mannequins in the darkness. They sat at rows of tables with their suits and black dresses, blending into one another, stroking my arms, my sides, my thighs as I was carried to the stage.

 The audience wore plastic masks like the string quartet, who had stopped playing and listened to my feet dragging along the tiled floor. Their masks were smiling with lips the color of rose. The grins were cartoonish and hungry and beneath the plastic they looked at me with wolfish abandon.

 The old man pulled me on stage and held me up by my armpits. He walked over to one of the quartet, who had huddled together like penguins looking for warmth, their instruments behind their backs. He pulled the nearest from the crowd, pulled off his anguished mask, and handed it to me.

 “Put it on,” he said.

 I did. Under the plastic mask I felt protected. The musician handed me the cello and I took it, admiring its beauty and how the wood looked like the material made from the bar. I fought vomit from rising in my throat. It tasted like salted jam.

 The old man whispered into my ear. “Play this music, even if you aren’t good at it. It’s the only thing about your identity, now.”

 I played a note. It was discordant and ugly. I will get better because I must. I will get better because if I am not a musician, who am I?

 The old man took the crying musician down the aisle, his arm wrapped over his shoulder. The back of his head was stitched together and looked like a completed jigsaw puzzle made of pink, soft flesh.

 And for the first time that night, the smiling, plastic faced audience gave a round of thunderous applause.