

A wave of relief passed through her as she burst through the heavy metal doors. He was still there: seated on a leather stool in the corner, haloed by a pathetically dim light, half filled tumbler gripped in his right hand. She ran home the moment she recognized him, nearly breaking her ankles as she took the steps to her room two at a time. It wasn't until she stuffed the book from the nightstand into her bag when a thought hit her. What if he left? She cursed her short sightedness and barreled back down the stairs.

She darted back in half the time it took before; feet barely touching pavement, shoulder checking those that stood to slow her time. She bounded across the street, cars headlights causing spots in her vision. A horn blasted behind her but she paid it no mind, the bars neon sign was in view.

Her sudden entrance drew attention from the scattered handful of patrons: some seated in conversations around chipped, wooden tables, others playing billiards on a faded-green felt table - but he remained still, either unfazed, or unaware. She avoided the curious onlookers who, one by one, lost interest. She wiped the sweat from her brow and steadied her breathing. She hadn't noticed the sharp stinging in her lungs and the stabbing pain in her side. A rivulet formed at the nape of her neck and ran down between her shoulder-blades.

The book in her hand was a well-worn hardcover. Pages were rabbit eared - some ripped - and a thick coffee ring stood out on its crinkled sleeve. It was a source of pride to her, and she hoped to him as well, as there could be no greater authorial compliment than a well read book.

A jukebox in the corner, that had been spitting out an upbeat rock tune, fell silent before sputtering back to life with an old, colored blues song. The vocals were low and raspy, the guitar painfully dragging between broken minor chords and string-bending melodies. She had heard the song before but couldn't place where from.

The man finished his drink and beckoned for the bartender to fill him another. The man behind the counter obliged, filling it with an opaque, reddish liquid. Her breathing at bay, and the dagger in her side now a dull pain, she gripped the book, inhaled, puffed out her chest, and approached.

He was bigger than she expected, not taller, but broader. His frizzy, brown hair was a mess. His chiseled chin and puffy cheeks were streaked with heavy morning shadow. He wore a denim jacket, and she noticed that his boots were untied. He mumbled to himself as he sipped deeply from his drink.

She felt the urge to turn away. What nerve, she thought. She had no right to disturb him. He was probably deep in thought, working out his next book.

Yet, she countered, when would she have this chance again?.

'Take the shot,' she thought to herself. 'Now or never.'

She softly cleared her throat, realizing just how dry and tight it had become. She balanced her teetering mind, and stuttered out, "e-exc-cus-ee me, Mr. K-ker..."

"Friend or foe," he quickly interrupted.

"Excuse me?"

"Friend or foe? Questions simple enough."

Her mind went blank, unprepared for his abrasive counter-fire. "Friend," she responded.

He finished his drink then sighed. "Shame."

"Why?" she asked.

"Friends are in such abundance these days. Foes'r far more interesting."

She stood in silence, feeling foolish. He turned his head and eyed the book in her hands.

"What you got there?" he slurred, raising his glass for another drink. The bartender quickly filled his glass then made his way back to a pair of dolled up middle-aged women who were both giddy with liquor.

She looked down at the book. "I w-was hoping..."

"To get my scrawl?" he interrupted again.

"Yes."

"If so, then why'd you lie?"

"Excuse me?" she asked, befuddled.

"You claim to be friend, when your clearly foe." He swirled his drink in the glass.

She could feel the blood draining from her face, leaving it a ghostly pale. Her chest tightened violently. Her mind betrayed her, calling her every foul world she knew. She wished she hadn't approached him. What nerve she had.

She began to stammer out an apology when he chuckled and half turned to her. The dim light just illuminating the mischievous gleam in his eyes.

"Don't lose your dinner now, girl. Not with the price of things these days. Lets see what you brought."

She stiffly held out the book, eyes at her feet, ashamed.

"Well..." the word was drawn out. "It would seem I pegged you wrong."

She looked up. He had turned completely to her. The gleam was gone. Deep wrinkles formed between his furrowed brows. The clamping vice in her chest released when she noticed he had left his drink on the counter. His attention was fully hers.

"How so," she managed. A cheer bellowed from the ladies. One had fallen to the floor, leaving a clear view of her underwear to the prying barman. Her friend grabbed at her wrists, struggling to get the fallen girl upright.

"It's not every day you encounter authenticity." His eyes rested on the girls. He swiveled back around on the stool, motioning for her to take the seat beside him. She tentatively took the seat, still shaken from the unexpected banter. He took a sip from the drink. She noticed the smell, his smell. He smelled of heavy liquor. Not the kind that comes from one night of heavy drinking, or even a weekend bender; but the kind that comes from years worth, a lifetime's worth.

"Forgive my sourness," he continued after she had settled herself, placing the book atop the spit-polished counter. "I've grown cynical. More cynical than I expected." His words trailed off and for a moment he seemed lost. The jukebox fell silent. The blues song fading out an a low note. It kicked back to life with a funky jazz tune. The middle aged women cheered and began dancing together. The bartender watched on yearningly. The sudden change in environment seemed to snap him back to life.

He chuckled again. "What'll you have?"

"Nothing," she moused.

"Nothing?" he repeated, aghast. "Nothing won't do. Nothing good ever came from nothing." He waved at the bartender who begrudgingly pulled himself away from the drunken women. "Same for my friend," he ordered.

Before the words had left his lips, the drink was filled, set on a coaster, and the man returned to the women, enjoying the flash of thighs, stomach, and chest. The drink sloshed when she picked it up. She brought it to her nose and smelt. It was poisonous, acrid. Her nostrils flared and burned. Her reaction went unnoticed as he picked up his own glass.

"What should we toast to," he asked?

"You decide," she said, holding the glass away from her, dreading its burn.

He looked over the bartender and nodded his way. "How about to him. May he get his jollies, as it were."

She smirked. "To his jollies."

"May they be satisfied."

They downed their drinks, him with ease, her with difficulty. The substance was worse than she imagined, it was like swallowing liquid fire. He sighed pleasantly, his tumbler emptied. She coughed, bringing some of the dreadful substance up and out her nose, sending her into an even more violent coughing fit.

He laughed and slapped her on the back. "What's life without a little pain, huh?"

"Right," she mustered, setting down her glass, taking deep breaths. She wiped the spittle that had formed on her chin, then the tears that fell from her eyes.

He looked to the bartender imploringly, like a dog sitting before an empty food bowl. The women had made their way to the jukebox and were inserting coins into the machine. A fast paced Chuck Berry song began to play which made the two of them entirely giddy.

"Say what you will, but at least those girls have a decent ear for music," she said. The fire now settled into her belly, causing an uprising towards her throat. She couldn't believe anyone could drink this stuff, digest it, and she had seen him down multiples. She already felt heady.

His attention fell on the book which still rested on the bar. He picked it up and flipped through its pages. "Where'd you find this relic?"

"Was my moms."

"Was?"

"Yeah. Mine now."

He set it down and fished into the front pocket of his denim jacket. "Well, its been well loved. No one could argue with that." He extracted a metal ball-point pen and opened the book to its title page. "Who should I make it out to?"

"Ellie."

"To Ellie," he muttered, scribbling onto the paper. She watched as his hand masterfully danced across the page. No amount of alcohol could remove that ability, she thought. That was there also, not just the smell of drink, but that ability. Some things can't drown.

He finished scratching in the book and closed it, returning his pen to the front pocket of his jacket. "There you go, friend Ellie. Now maybe it's worth enough for you to buy a new copy."

She laughed. "Maybe. But would you sign that one also?"

"Probably not," he said.

"Then this'll do me just fine."

She held the book firmly, afraid to let it go. It felt heavier somehow, burdened by some new, unseen weight. It also seemed more delicate, precious almost, as if the slightest whisper would crumble its pages.

He noticed her reverence and sniggered. "It's not the grail, girl. Ain't even a piece of it."

"All a matter of opinion, really."

He shrugged. "S'pose so."

She turned her gaze from the book to him. His attention was hooked to the bartender. He'd left his post behind the counter and joined the ladies at the jukebox.

She laughed. "Not subtle is he?"

"Subtlety is a gift of the bright. Those in the dark clumsily stumble."

One of the girls planted a kiss on the bartender's cheek.

"Doesn't look like he's stumbling," she said.

"S'pose not." He stood from the stool, and if he did sway, showing signs of the liquor, it was momentarily and uncaught by the untrained eye.

"I've lost my taste," he said, patting down his jacket and resetting it over his shoulders. "Best to be off. Lovely meeting you, friend Ellie."

Without another word he strode across the bar and disappeared through its double doors.

She thought about getting up, about following him. For a moment she almost did, but somehow it didn't seem possible. She didn't feel as if she'd met a person. He felt more like a specter, or a haunting. The room cooled when he was near. She bet if she tried to grab him there would be only air and dust.

Her attention turned back to her book. She opened it and found the page with his fresh scrawl.

'I didn't pay for the drinks. Best to run. - Jack'