



HARLEY LETHALM

Would Someone Please Turn Up the Miracle, Dammit?

LETHALM

“That hawthorne finch you saw earlier this morning,” Kromer says.

“Sure,” I say.

“I think it’s not so bad that you saw that finch this morning. I don’t think it’s so bad, yeah?”

“It’s probably not so bad,” I say.

Kromer reels toward me. He has got a cigarette stiffened to the lip and it is not right, I think, that a stiff should wake up and look at a hawthorne finch and another stiff should wake to tremors, or the wagging hand of the bulls, or the jive of the shop-owner hassling him to say, *Take A Walk You Wasteful Tramp. You’re Clogging Up My Damned Business, You Sure Are.*

I give him the bottle now, a nice four-dollar rum that doesn’t complain too much the stomach, the lung, the invariable kidney shake at forty-nine-years-old.

The hand snips it real brusque, wields it like a kid holding onto the Mother for the last time, or a rose.

That hand confronting the bottle; and the mouth, crudded, responding somewhere in all this big intercourse of bulging around and bottle and hand. A number of men in tweed-floss coats and brogues stamp by us; two stiffs on the corner look to these genuine tweed-nosed yups like a losing game of slouching electric wires. They stamp by us because they are fearful that a stiff might geek him down if he steps in too close.

“Boo,” I say to one among them and he goes jagged and piss-peckered toward whatever he’s got - that’s how you know a stiff from these yups. The yups care to tour dead folks’ houses for a fright. They make a real bash out of those sorts of things. But, gads forbid, the dead folks give them a little poke and they go on with that running.

But a stiff don’t got nowhere to run. You plant a few of us stiffs in a spookhouse and we’ll lay out our legs real good in that place; and you give us the ghosts, why don’t you, baby, maybe they got us a nickel-bit.

“You seen that whore, Millie?”

“No.”

“You seen her, you seen her later on or say, tomorrow, or when it is that you see Millie...you tell her she owes me two rounds of cunt.”

“O.K. I thought you were off the floozing with that one.”

“Easier to keep a pact with devils than try to clean yourself up for the Virgin Mary, yeh? I would rather be a particularly inconsistent man morally, though consistent all and elsewhere, than be someone who could not depend on himself to jump a stranger for bread without feeling morality had somehow accomplished his soul better. Yeh?”

“Sure.”

I don't tell Kromer that Millie got locked up by the bulls two nights ago on a high-calibre cunt hound; and I don't tell Kromer that what happened was that Millie was all goofed up on the white-sick gas again. The bulls like the goof. More: they like them, too, if they got that god damned cunt pinched into a miniature Cruella skirt. So it happened was Millie got them all hysterical with that cunt and all else and after they'd been with her for that little while, they poached her; gave her the fat sob of three-months' rot in the slag. Kromer and her were maybe going along but he abused those hands too often on the neck of the bottle, and she tossed the easy fuck around to anyone who'd lay into her with cock and then she'd lay back as the old man sighed and she'd smile, chewing apart the lipstick and the small tears and the old man would sleep and she would just chew at the mouth

and cry for a while; turn around and maybe the Moon would look into her like some fat poppy-ball. Painless Hollywood. And she would go asleep too, not long after; and sometimes she remembered the Oregon childhood and the first love and the roses starting again through the accident, everything beginning, the Sunset mixing into the dark Broadway in early summertime dusks, like a temple scorching backward through time and the roses paving beautiful concourses through the granite of the misplaced Father. And the Moon watching as Millie slept beside unoriginal senility or the occasional novice blood, and the Moon pattering off as Millie talked through the night, and I don't know that Millie ever said “Love” but for those nights when she could sleep and remember the shape of it on her tongue.

Kromer lets the hand down. The bottle plinks to ashes; ashes that pool up the little spread of alley like some leprous elephant tusk. The elephant hunted for its white ending, its glinting flesh of ethyl Nirvana mimic. Kromer tilts his head up; yesterday's blood shavings still spat-stuck onto a tuft of loose beard. Howls. Kromer saying, What Shit It All Is.

I don't necessarily disagree.

The Moon Is Rather Bulbous Tonight, Would You

Perhaps Accord That It Is So?

I squint at the Moon. It looks like a lazing, misplaced loon. It looks god damned idiotic. Yes, I say, I Accord That It Is So.

What Shit It All Is.

Yes.

A man trundles through our slag solitude. Jeers. He has got on a flouncy tweed jacket mastered by an overtight overcoat of dotted changeant moiré. But under the vintage and the Fitch these men have bogus skin and unsure philosophies. What shit, I think. Here is this yup jeering at a couple of stiffs, snipped unthinking from the Dream for want of corny Republican intelligence, and there is this god damned yup. He has got nothing to do with himself but to invite a stiff to feel poorly for what he is doing himself. The bastard has laced closer to us. The mouth opens, the tongue a slab of cardboard.

“Get work, you thrifts.”

Kromer taps the bottle-neck with his crudded lips. The Moon flicks up big and mean; I wait on that Moon to drop disturbed onto the earth and God and overweight salami-pitted men who jeer. But there is no mother-axe conclusion. It just sits there and puffs its white bloat. The old cannonball stuck to the high-jointed Dream.

Kromer puts down the bottle. Not necessarily softly. Says, So Hire Me, Jackboot. The yup tells Kromer that he would rather his wife sleep with a dozen men than that he should think to hire any bilgy scamp.

Kromer suggests that he knows a few friends, maybe an even twelve, or would the Missus prefer a baker's three-dozen? The tongue draws back. Kromer has got the bottle halfway to his god damned heart again and the man is cussing through the cardboard as the legs find their right place to leave. I watch the belches of tweed coattails drag up the Pike. The working man is going on toward some place or elsewhere and I crumble myself down next to Kromer and when I have made sure to myself and to Kromer that he has gone asleep, I take out from my insleeve a pint of four-dollar rum.

The hands again. My hands. Chirping the pain downwardly, commending it to the ashes and the ivory plops. I sip. It is rather the haggard sort of stuff but I have minded worse things than a bad drink on a bad night - I have found that no drink on a bad night is more terrible, as it were.

I sit. (The Elephant Man playing a clarinet.)

It is nearly morning when I call it off and hunker down to go my way.

“God dammit,” says Kromer. (Who, large and up, and overlarge, looks starkly into the day’s new 3 p.m. trick.)

The magic wound down. The women wiped out. The hysterics dulled and the lilac doesn’t even begin to try. Kromer has got a cigarette fastened to the lip and shoots small gawky pops of smoke out at the teenaged boys who jilt by us.

“What?”

“It’s all shit and everything is lousy.”

“Listen, that’s O.K.,” I tell him, “but how about a cigarette?”

“O.K.”

The hands. The cigarette. I light the Pauly.

There are a few or more stiff’s shanking about the corner of Putnam’s main drag; one among them maimed things rides it into the off-license. He aims in there and you know he’s got luck. The others stick around back and jostle the factory-workers for change. The factory-workers comment that they are empty. Or scoff. Or say, “Get working, you god damned bums.”

The one stiff smiles back out the liq with two bottles and they all are cheering at him and there is much wav-

ing of muscle and you can see the guilt in the blood dim out – the unnecessary blood that packs the vein’d body with starvation and grit and the rotgut sadness, the tramway suicides, and so forth.

They drink. They look prettier than when they got there, I think. They laugh not wanting to. The somber tackle in the cheeks flushes out. The allowance of bad love and pig childhoods cheapens its stock on them: their fingernails identify each other as Brother and the factory-workers walk by and drop change. They don’t pick it up.

“No,” I say. “No, I sure have not heard anything to do with Millie. Maybe she has gone on somewhere better.”

“I got her for two rounds of cunt, dammit, that’s impossible.”

“So catch another flooze if you’re that shit off.”

“I don’t want no flooze but Millie’s flooze. Look, is that Danny Ó Pronntaigh over by the liq?”

“I don’t know that he’s shanking nowadays. Might have got himself locked up for a while, locked up real high and tight. Or, gads, he found himself a good flop.”

“What’s a better flop than jail? I’d rather be in a jail than in a mission. The missions rattle you and make you

feel poorly for being a stiff; the jails are just madhouses with a more easy repute. Yeah?’

“Sure.”

I feel doomy. I wait for the Atomic bomb to swim us all away; gobbling the factories and the mail-carriers and the elephant and the ass. That’s a good day when that happens, I think. That’s a god damned good day when the melting paper screams the weary to sleep: HOMO SAPIENS SAPIENS PREVENTS RISING MIDWESTERN CLASS DISPUTE; CUTBACKS ON GUBERNATORIAL COCK-FLASH CAMPAIGNS - EXTENDED PHYSICAL RECESS FOR ALL. GOODNIGHT---

The Sun looks underfed and underpaid, its hot not hot, begging a truce for something – substance? recognition? what? – as the kid lamb sobs pax to Mother Cotton in a junked farmyard maybe seventy miles southeast from here.

“Listen,” I say, but Kromer cuts me off with a cigarette.

“Save you the job.”

I go, Thanks.

What Shit It All Is.

I go, Sure.

Would Someone Please Turn Up The Miracle,

Dammit? I Do Not Feel Assurance Of Christ.

The bunch by the off-license are laid down (now) by the terrycloth grass, shrunken into each other like buckberries forming the necessary terms of alliance between the bourbon windfall. I walk on over the street. Hit into the liq and the man behind the counter has a teak face and pushes his eyeballs at me. Does he expect a stiff to start dancing? Does he suspect that I mean to rob him? Men like this one haven’t felt any precious flesh but only the doormat lay, the body that doesn’t care. His failing aftermath is looking at me and so I look away. There is a stack of newspapers by the door.

“Look, how much for this stack of newspapers, here?”

He is looking me over.

“Ten.”

“I’m on the fritz, Jack. I’m real bad on the fritz. Can you go eight on the lot?”

“I won’t go eight on the lot.”

I walk over there. Set down a few bits on the counter.

“That gets you three papers.”

“I don’t want the papers. Give me that bottle southwest of your shoulder there.”

By the time he’s got that bottle down, there’s a gat

ready to print the heavy blues into his belly.

“Set that bottle down,” I say. “And, uh, be slow about it, Jack. My nerves are on the fritz, you understand.”

“Of course.”

The mother is shaking. He’s pre-spasm, for certain. I say, “Could I get a bag, if it’s no trouble. It’s just that a stiff don’t need to make himself so conspicuous when he’s already got the croup in his countenance and the piss-stains on his heart. You know, Jack?”

“Oh, of course. Here, I’ll double-bag it if you’d like.”

“That won’t be necessary. I don’t want to give you any trouble; a man’s got to make himself a sure business, I think. And those bags don’t come cheap. I bet that’s right; I’m not wrong thinking that those bags might cost something, Jack?”

“Of course.” He does me the two, anyhow.

I quit easy out of there, jilt up toward the stiff on the grass. I lay them up and over with the newspapers so that when the bulls come to ask the man inside what about the stiff with the gat, they’ll pity these stiff, here, all cold with today’s news and lounging through the dreams of roses and women. “Say, you fellas got clammered by that wild stiff with the gat? You fellas sure do look pretty bad. Let me buy one of those papers off you. And, well, you

hear anything else...you see the guy...here, you know, let me buy you for all the lot of these papers...”

And the one stiff will go back in with that new luck and that smile and he’ll throw the bits onto the counter and the mother behind the counter probably gives him the bottle on the merry cuff. Bags it over double.

“Son of a bitch,” that one stiff will say to the other stiff, “I don’t know, baby, but the luck is on tap tonight for lack of good Christmas past.” And that smile. And the bottle, then. And all those hands.

I go on toward the solitude (now). My heart gambles itself and throws an easy monarch flip; my Argine soul runs itself to the edges of my legs, my walk, my stiff’s shank – the risk burns up and the Black Maria tilts seventy miles on its soups. I wedge up at the ordinary post and wait for the bulls.

Kromer has left a note by the Dumpster. “How Good It All Is.” It is signed with lipstick. I think it is perhaps Millie’s lipstick but I cannot be sure.

I sit down, uproot the bottle from my insleeve, and I don’t look at the sky. It’s easier that way, I think. I lay into the garbage, tug on the singsong bottle, and wait for the bulls.