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THE ESU ROLY SUSSEX SHORT STORY COMPETITION
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Harry Walsh

Temptation

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Temptation

As Oklahoma City fell behind Floyd, he felt exhilaration bubble in his stomach. Behind him was a life of mistakes, a life where he had poisoned everything he had touched. Finally, he was leaving it all behind. He let out a whoop, which lingered for only a moment before it was whipped away by the wind coursing over the car's open top. The sun was beginning to set, but not even the oncoming darkness could dampen Floyd's spirits.

By the time Floyd found somewhere to stay, the night had well and truly fallen. The stars were out in force, scattered across the sky in ways that Floyd hadn't even dreamt of back among the lights of the city. But still, Floyd wasn't going to be able to drive all night, he would need to sleep. So, he'd stopped at the next place he passed, which he was beginning to regret.

When he'd rolled into the little roadside hamlet, it had seemed innocuous enough. Barely more than a petrol station and a few buildings clustered on the side of the road. You could find a million just like it all over the country. He hadn't even needed to go looking for a place to stay, not with the bright sign in front of him.

'Carrington Hotel: Bar and Rooms,' it said.

Floyd couldn't help but feel a twinge of unease at that sign. But he'd already been sitting in his car, wracked by indecision for a good ten minutes, and the night was too cold to wait any longer. He needed somewhere to stay, and this was his only option.

Floyd looked around as he entered. A fire crackled in the corner and a juke box sat right next to it. Soft music flowed from it, underscoring the low buzz of conversation, though Floyd couldn't quite place who the singer was. Fred Astaire perhaps. A library of bottles lined the far wall, silhouetting the figures of the few hunched patrons at the bar. Floyd wrenched his eyes away, forcing himself to the adjoining lobby.

The lobby was small, just a desk and a sleepy looking man to sit behind it. Floyd closed the door to the bar behind him, silencing the seductive call of the jukebox.

‘I’d like to book a room,’ he said. The clerk looked up, as if surprised to see a customer.

‘I’m verry sorry sir, but we are currently full up. We will have a vacancy in half an hour if that would suit your needs?’

‘Uh... Yes, that would be perfect thanks,’ Floyd trailed off, unsure of how to proceed. From the clerk’s gaze, Floyd could tell that he was meant to do something, but he couldn’t tell what. The clerk eventually broke the silence.

‘If you would wait in the bar...’

Considering the bonfire that that statement lit in his stomach, Floyd did an admirable job of keeping his expression blank. For a moment, He thought again about sleeping in his car. But he could see the beginnings of snowfall out the window, and all he was wearing was a light overcoat.

Feeling like a cornered animal, Floyd stepped back into the barroom. Without warning, he felt his legs beginning to buckle as the day’s exhaustion seemed to hit him all at once. He glanced around; eyes wild as he searched for a seat as far away from the bar as possible. But where the reception desk had been deserted, the barroom was packed, the only free seats at the bar itself.

As he slid into his seat, he took a good look at the other patrons. They looked haggard, tired, the kind of men who had found themselves on a course in life they didn’t like but were also past the point of no return. The kind of man Floyd had been until a few weeks ago.

‘So, why’re you here?’

Floyd looked, up searching for the source of the question. It appeared to be the man directly to his right. He was nursing an empty glass of whiskey and the stale aroma of alcohol hung around him. Floyd felt his eyes begin to involuntarily slide towards the glass.

‘Just stopping by. I’ve got somewhere to be tomorrow,’ he replied.

‘You’re the only one in *here* who can say that,’ the stranger said bitterly. ‘Most of us here just got laid off from Johnson’s farm.’

‘Oh. I’m sorry.’

‘Buy us drinks then.’

Floyd hesitated for a second, before calling over the barman.

‘A whiskey, please, and a... water,’ he had to force himself to change his order. It was pure force of habit that had propelled him that far into the sentence. The barman poured their drinks, called over by another customer, and the stranger turned to Floyd, his expression ugly.

‘You said you’d... you’d get a drink for me too,’ the man snarled.

‘That’s for you. I don’t drink.’

The man snatched up the glass, as if he were afraid Floyd would take it. And indeed, Floyd’s will might have broken if it were sitting there any longer.

‘Why don’t you?’ he said.

‘I used to. It got out of hand.’

The man looked at him, his brow furrowed. His gaze roved over Floyd, taking him in as if for the first time. A shrewd look came over his bloodshot eyes.

‘I’ve been drinking for most of my life. Hell, the whole town has. You don’t give it up unless you’ve got a damn good reason.’

The unspoken question hung in the air, the silence stretching out. Floyd briefly considered ignoring it, but then he’d just be left to sit at the bar in silence. Listening to the clink of ice in glasses, and the burble of the barman pouring drinks.

He began to speak.

‘I haven’t always made the best choices in my life,’ he began with a sigh, ‘A few weeks back, I’d given up. I’m ashamed to admit it, but it’s true. Debts, gambling, drinking obviously. You name it, I was neck deep in it. I just couldn’t see a way forward. But then I got a telegram from my uncle. I’ve never been on the best terms with my family but apparently, he’s been tracking me down. Offered me some money to come meet him down in Texas and work for him.’

Floyd had written it off as a scam. It was just too good to be true, people like him didn’t get second chances. When the same letter arrived again, just a few weeks later, his conviction had waivered. By then he had started to fantasize about the letters being true, but he still wouldn’t let himself believe it.

When he’d gotten a third message with a cheque enclosed, he’d been struck speechless. Any doubt about the messages’ veracity had vanished. Moreover, that someone, anyone, would care enough about him, trust him so completely as to go to all that effort just to find him...

It had brought tears to his eyes. Even now he smiled thinking of it.

‘So, I tried to clean up. Stopped drinking, sold what I could to pay off my debts. Now I’m here,’ he said, snapping back to reality as he finished his story.

‘That does sound mighty fine,’ said the stranger, suddenly morose. ‘Doesn’t seem fair that you’d get that opportunity, and I wouldn’t.’

Floyd looked at the man’s drink. ‘The world isn’t a fair place friend.’

The man looked up at him, his gaze now sly, cunning, and most of all cruel. ‘Well that’s a real accomplishment. You should celebrate.’

‘I told you. I don’t drink’

‘It’s just one drink. how much harm could it do?’

Floyd couldn’t bring himself to respond. The man was echoing the thoughts that had been tearing through his head like hurricane winds this whole time. He had just begun to muster the strength of will to decline when the man drove home the final blow.

‘Haven’t you earned it after all this effort?’

Floyd woke up the next morning on the floor of his room with an all too familiar pounding in his head.

The night was a stretch of dark fog in his memory. What little he could recall seemed hazy and dreamlike. That didn’t keep him from knowing exactly what had happened of course. He’d woken up like this enough times before to guess.

The dull ringing in his ears resolved itself to an insistent knocking at the door. With a groan, he pushed himself off the ground and lumbered towards the door. He needn’t have bothered, however. Just as he drew up to it, Floyd heard the rattle of a key in the lock, and the door creaked open. It was the clerk again, but now his eyes shone with dislike.

‘Mr. Holloway, I’m going to have to request that you leave,’ he said.

‘What, why?’ Replied Floyd, his stomach sinking even further.

‘Frankly sir, after your conduct last night, the owner thought it better to eject you from the premises.’

‘Please, I’m sorry, I... I just had too much to drink, it won’t happen again, I-‘

‘Be that as it may sir, the owner has decided not to risk it. We would appreciate if you leave quietly.’

Floyd stepped back into his room and picked up his bags. He hadn't even gotten the chance to unpack last night, so at least he could leave quickly. The clerk stayed in the doorway, keeping a watchful eye on Floyd.

As he thundered down the staircase with the clerk close behind, Floyd tried to remember what had happened last night. Snapshots flew through his head. The burning sensation in his throat as he downed a shot of whiskey. The sting of his knuckles as they connected with someone else's flesh. His voice growing hoarse with anger as he found himself shouting.

Each one felt like a hammer blow to Floyd. But worse was that he couldn't tell which was true, and which was just his imagination. Any remorse felt hollow without the knowledge of what he had even done.

But that didn't really matter. What mattered is that he'd broken down, the moment he'd done that he'd known what was going to happen.

When they got to the lobby, Floyd couldn't resist peeking into the barroom. The once neat furniture had been strewn about, and it looked like no one had bothered to rearrange it. But even now, Floyd couldn't focus on that. He could nearly hear the siren's call of the bottles. He became suddenly aware of the stale cloud of stink surrounding him.

As Floyd turned to leave, he met the clerk's eyes. On a whim, he reached deep into his pocket, intent on at least leaving a generous tip for the man's troubles.

His wallet was gone. Wonderful.

Trying to weather the clerk's death glare, Floyd pushed open the door and stepped outside. The snowfall looked to have kept up for most of the night. Everything was covered by a layer of powder. Floyd hoped that he'd be able to get his car started in the cold. It had never been the most reliable vehicle.

Wait. Where was his car?

With dawning horror, Floyd reached into his pocket, searching for his keys. Nothing. Briefly, he considered returning to the hotel to search for them, but he dismissed the idea. The clerk would probably call the police. And anyway, he would have noticed if he had left them in the room. It was obvious what had happened. He'd lost his keys and wallet last night and someone else had found them. They'd taken his car, left him here stranded, with no money or way of contacting his uncle.

Again, that wave of shame and self-loathing rolled over Floyd, smothering him. His legs gave out beneath him and he fell to his knees in the snow, heedless of the biting cold. It was all his fault.

Perhaps he could have hitchhiked the rest of the way; it wasn't too far. But something held him back. He hadn't been strong enough, *good enough*, to stay clean. If he went on to his uncle, he couldn't guarantee he wouldn't break again, let down the man who had shown him so much kindness.

He deserved to stay here. Wallow in his misery

It was better for everyone if he did.