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Broken Record

by Victor J. Banis

I don't believe I've ever seen him wear a dinner jacket before; and I must admit, he looks rather handsome in it, like an altogether different man. In fact, he's been sitting at the other end of this bar for quite some time now, and I just a moment ago recognized him, when he smiled at me in the mirror. That smile I'd know anywhere.

He doesn't recognize me either, or he'd never have smiled at me. Won't he be surprised . . . only, I won't tell him, of course. I'll let him go through the motions; I know them by heart now. He'll watch me in the mirror to see if I've noticed him, and when he catches my eye, he'll smile again, politely embarrassed. If I smile back, he'll nod, and soon after that, he'll be down to introduce himself. He'll think he's met me before somewhere—only, we'll neither one of us remember just when . . .

But *I* do remember—how long has it been? months? years? It could have been yesterday, or today, even. It was in a bar, not like this one, but a dive, one of those dimly lit spots where boys with too long hair and too high voices trail woefully about, chatting incessantly and striking outlandish poses.

He stepped in from the street, stopping just inside the door to survey the room, and his appearance brought all of the chatter and the motion to a halt. He was younger then (I would have doubted him old enough to be there), and he wore a tee shirt and jeans, tight and faded, that left little to the imagination. But the blonde hair spilled across the forehead just as it does now, the chin was high and thrust forward in the same way, as though meeting some unseen blow, and the eyes held their melting glow that seemed to absorb everything and everybody in one glance.

He sat in the empty stool beside me. It may have been the only one empty, or he may have chosen it from preference; I didn't know and I was too frightened to look. Instead, I sat in tense silence, staring into my glass.

He ordered a drink from the excited barboy, in a soft, throaty voice. Gradually the hum of voices and the blur of motion resumed, but he seemed to remain at the center of it all.

Beside him, so close that I fancied I felt the heat generating from his hips into mine, I sat in an agony of discomfort. I had gone earlier to an early show, by myself as always, and afterwards I had walked about rather aimlessly, loath to return to my silent, unwelcoming flat. Realizing that I had wandered into the neighborhood of this place, I had stopped impulsively for a drink, and regretted it at once. My suit, an expensive one, and tie left me rather overdressed for the place, and my father's ring, a fairly large diamond, made me feel even more so. The not-too-subtle glances and the whispered comments had made me only more painfully aware of my loneliness. I knew, too, that I was plain, rather uninteresting, and in the overexcited atmosphere of the place, I felt rather like a mallard cast suddenly into a flock of brilliant and noisy peacocks.

«That's a good looking ring.» It was young Adonis who had spoken, jarring me from my reverie. I started, spilling part of my drink on the bar.

«Thank you.» I mumbled hoarsely, wiping clumsily at the spot with a paper napkin. «It was my father's.»

His eyes caught mine in the mirror behind the bar, and I froze into stiffness, held by the magnetism of his gaze. For what seemed an eternity, he held me there; then, his eyes laughing silently, he spoke again: «At least let me buy you another drink. It looks like I've made a loss of that one.»

I could feel all of the eyes in the room boring into me as my drink was whisked away and another set in its place. I found the courage at last to face him.

«You're new here, aren't you?» I asked. It was a foolish question; I had been there only once before myself.

He smiled openly at me, flashing even, white teeth that intensified the striking redness of his mouth. «New in town.» Was his answer. «I parted company with the U.S. Navy about a week ago, decided I liked the town—so, I got myself a room, and here I am.»

That was the beginning. Such meetings, I know, happen over and over, in countless cities, but it had never happened to me. It was as though the drab, dark curtain of my life had suddenly been lifted, to expose a new and thrilling stage, waiting only for me to take my place upon it. You must try to imagine that here, dropped into my loveless, miserable existence, was the vision, the ideal, that haunts all of our longings and searchings. Here, warm and close, was youth, strength, virility. We talked, we laughed, we sat with lips poised only inches apart, and shared intimate, promising glances. The evening flowed like so much wine into a bottomless bowl, sparkling and bubbling as it fell.

«Why don't we get out of here?» He asked me suddenly, interrupting some silly story I was telling. «My place is just a few blocks. We can have a drink there, or talk. I don't care what.» His voice rolled slightly with the last, coloring it with the drugged splendor of the imagination. It was impossible to refuse.

It was, as he said, only a few blocks, and the cold night air left us short of breath, and a bit giddy. I leaned against him as we climbed the stairs, and at the top, he opened the door and stepped aside for me. I giggled at this unexpected chivalry.

The room was rather what I expected, a plain, sad place. A large Hollywood bed stood against one wall, beneath a window, and a dresser against another. A bulky, shapeless chair completed the furnishings.

«Nice.» I commented, unable to think of more to say.

He laughed softly at my politeness. «It's a dump.» He corrected me, drawing me gently toward him. «But I won't be here long.» His lips sought mine, searing them with his eagerness. My legs seemed to melt beneath me, and I hung limp in the strength of his arms. Slowly I felt myself lowered to the bed, saw him hovering above me, eclipsing the light, and the room.

When it was over, I lay weak and exhausted in his arms, and at last, senseless with my ecstasy, I slept.

It was nearly dawn when I again opened my eyes. The dim light of early morning filtered weirdly through the drawn shade. I raised an arm to shield my face, and looked for my companion.

He stood beside the bed, his back to me. I stared wordlessly, enthralled again by the sheer beauty of his body—the graceful curve of his spine as he bent—the golden tan melting into the small area of soft whiteness.

I realized suddenly that he was holding my trousers, searching the pockets. I watched in shocked disbelief as he emptied their contents—change, keys, billfold. He finished with the trousers, and, dropping them on the floor, took my jacket from the chair and began to do the same.

My mind reeled. Should I stop him? I remembered the Herculean strength of his arms, that so soon before had crushed me to him. Should I pretend to sleep?

He finished and turned toward me. My arm shielded my eyes; he could not know that I watched him. Then I saw the knife, its blade gleaming viciously in the half light. His eyes were upon me, staring intently. The ring! He would never leave without it, and it would be impossible to take it without arousing me. I suddenly realized he meant to kill me.

Like an animal of the jungle stalking its prey, he glided nearer to me. I wanted to cry out, to beg, to remind him of our night together; still I remained immobile. He towered above me, the dagger raised . . .

With a cry, I threw myself from the bed, toward him. We fell sprawling to the floor, twisted together in a grim mockery of our earlier embraces.

The feel of his body against mine, the memory of our passion, my heartbreak—they swept over me like a wave of numbness, and I lay helpless and sobbing beside him, awaiting the blow of the knife.

He remained motionless. The seconds dragged by, filling the room with an overpowering silence. At last, unable to endure the suspense of it longer, I turned my face to him.

He had rolled unto his back, and the knife, with which he had meant to kill me, protruded grotesquely from his chest. He had fallen on it, driving it into his own heart.

I thought that he was dead; he certainly looked it, and I was too horror-stricken to examine or help him. Forcing myself to action, I dressed hurriedly, avoiding the sight of his body sprawled awkwardly on the floor. I replaced the things he had taken from the pockets of my suit, glancing furtively about for anything I might have missed. There was nothing to connect me with him. He was unknown, a drifter. No one could know for certain what had happened. I fled.

It would be impossible to describe with what terror, agony, and humiliation I fled. Where I went, how long I wandered, I myself cannot remember. Somehow at last I found my way to my own apartment, collapsing across my bed to fall into a tortured and restless sleep.

The horror of that night haunted me for weeks and months to follow. I could not sleep without seeing it enacted again. Awake, I found myself unable to eat, to go out, or, most of all, to face people. In a stupor, I remained inside my room, a veritable hermit.

Autumn became winter, and at last, spring again. Time, the all-healing, began finally to ease my torture. I found myself able to rest, and even to go out again. But I could no longer bear the city and its reminding familiarity. I determined to leave.

Having made my decision, I acted quickly. I took only what could be carried in my car, leaving the rest behind for whoever might stumble upon it. The necessity of travelling, however, and encountering strangers, brought a new surge of uneasiness, and to relieve it, I bought a gun to take with me. I found one at a pawn shop, where the amused clerk showed me patiently how to release the safety, and to fire it. With this safely beneath the seat, I started out at night, a short two days later.

I did not know where I intended to go, but drove aimlessly away from the city, eager only to leave it as far behind me as possible. The night, and the road, rushed quickly by. My long months of misery had drained my health, and I began to feel the strain of driving.

A figure loomed up ahead of me, a hitchhiker. Impulsively, I moved my foot to the brake. Perhaps the company . . . I brought the car to a halt, deciding to give him a ride. To relieve my doubts, I took the gun from beneath the seat, and put it on the cushion beside me, close to my leg where it would not be seen. There would be no danger.

The door opened, and he slid unto the seat beside me. He was in uniform, a sailor. «Thanks,» he greeted me, a little breathlessly. «I've been there for hours.»

The smile, with teeth flashing, and the bright clear ring to the voice, struck a chord of uneasiness within me as I started off again. Once on the road, I turned to have a better look at him. He turned too, leaning against the door to face me, and it was then I recognized him.

The hair was different—lighter and shorter—and he was thinner, making him seem somehow younger—but it was him! Adonis, my lover, my would-be killer!

«Been driving far?» He asked. He hadn't recognized me. I shook my head, unable to trust my voice.

We drove in silence. I could feel him gazing at me from time to time, and I waited tensely for some move, some sign. At last I could bear waiting no longer. I would start it myself.

My hand dropped to the seat, moving casually across to brush his leg. He turned a surprised face to me, and for a moment I thought a glimmer of recognition crossed it.

«Oh sure, I get it.» He said quietly. I held my breath, waiting for his next move. «Okay.» He finished. «Why not? It's been a while.» He moved his legs, drawing them apart, and moving his body toward me.

My blood surged warmly through my body. I was aware again of the beauty, the animal thrill that had entranced me before. My hand moved,

as though of its own will, across the firmness of his leg, grasping the firm flesh beneath the whiteness of his trousers.

«Wait.» He whispered, his own breath as short and fierce now as my own. His hands fumbled awkwardly with the cloth.

There were no other cars on the road. I drew the car to the side, bringing it to a stop. Beside me, he lay against the door, his body straining eagerly toward me. I stared fixedly at him, suddenly unable to move my frozen hands.

«Hey, what's the matter?» He asked, his voice anxious. He reached for my hand, and as he did so, I suddenly regained my senses. My hand avoided his, fumbling on the seat beside me, for the gun. He rose in the seat, moving toward me, and at the same moment, I fired.

He stopped, in mid-air it seemed, and for a moment he stared down at me with the horror of realization; then, like a deflated balloon, he crumpled and fell backward against the door.

I reached beyond him, opening the door, and he fell from the car, rolling into the ditch. Slamming the door, I put the car into gear and started off again, leaving him quickly behind. This time I was done with him, it was over. At least, I thought so.

That was the second time. How many times have I seen him since? In what guises? Under what names? How many times have I killed him? I no longer remember. Each time I think that it is finished, free of him—but he is clever. Always, at some time when I least expect it, he comes again. Once, to be certain, I used a knife, and . . . but it doesn't matter; for here he is—and in a dinner jacket, this time.

Ah, he has seen my glance—he smiles again, and nods. And I nod back. I wonder—what shall his name be this time . . . and . . . what should mine be?

The Drummer Boy

By Alan Anthony

I must hear a drum. I must find a bar with a drummer. I'll go there and sit in a darkened corner and sip Bourbon and water while I listen to the drums and think of Mark. I've never heard Mark play his drums. In fact, I've never paid much attention to drums before. But Mark is a drummer, and drums have become synonymous with him. I'll probably never see Mark again. I'll probably never hear him play his drums. So I'll have to imagine him beating those in the bar.

Right now, the memory of Mark is dominating my days. I know I must forget him, and in a little while I shall. At least, soon the memory of him won't hurt. But before I dull my senses to him I must hear those drums. I must feel close to him once more, and this is the only way I know to do it. I met Mark a week ago. He stopped for me in his car in Hollywood when I was hitch-hiking home to the beach from a play. We hadn't gone very far into conversation when we reached Sunset Strip,