In A Street Cafe

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Abstract

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“Once we were six—and now...”

“We are two. Yes, the youngest and the oldest, my dear.” He smiled at Elena’s dark brown eyes focused on him. Then he carefully measured out an even teaspoonful of sugar from the grimy pottery bowl on the table and held the spoon to let the sugar fall slowly into his coffee.

She waited for him to speak, thinking of the others who had so often gathered with them around the larger table nearby, in those days of five years ago. They had been drawn together by a common admiration for this man who now faced her. They had marveled at the life of travel and adventure he led. And they had wanted to be like him—to cut themselves free and see the world.

“This is a treat, Elena, for an old man like me. But what brings you sixty miles from your newspaper so late on a Saturday night?”

“You, of course. You’re home now—and I never know for how long...” There was banter in her voice. But inside Elena felt no banter—only the confusion which had tormented her ever since the offer of the job with the syndicate in Mexico City had come.

The man lifted his cup. Five years since she’d first met him. Five years which had found her moving from one newspaper to another—four times in five years to something new and different.

As she watched the man she wondered as she had many times before about his age. Fifty...fifty-five. Only the deeply engraved lines at the back of his neck indicated that he might be more than forty-two or forty-three. He was a handsome man—the dark red hair, steel blue eyes. The steel—always it was there, ready to lash out. Just like the voice, so low and sure, which, on provocation, could sear like a red-hot poker.

The girl felt the steely eyes—touched with warmth now—sweeping carefully over the fine lines of her features, over the
dark brown hair, the curled ends of which just skirted her nar­row shoulders, down the fitted brown jacket.

A slight smile played in the wrinkles about his eyes.

The girl leaned forward, one long arm resting on the other.

"Which way does the wind blow this winter—to the north, the south, the east—or is it west? Ah, but I forget . . . It's not the wind, but that little dog of yours that directs your travels. How is the pooch—and which way does he point his nose this time?"

The smile ebbed wider.

"You've a good memory, Elena. This time she says the Carib­bean. We'll be on our way soon—the pooch and I."

Elena's arms relaxed and she shifted back farther on the metal­armed chair. She did not ask how long he would be gone. They had learned not to do that in the days before. Tonight she would get from him the reassurance she had come for—that the kind of wandering life he knew was best for her, too. It had been only recently that she had felt a vague doubt. She felt his eyes searching again.

"Till the end of time." The music of the nickelodeon swung into the babble of voices which surrounded—yet isolated—them. Elena turned to look at the red and yellow-lighted machine shoved against the green-plastered cafe wall. She wished she could stop the music. Eric's voice drew her attention.

"Elena, I had a note from Jane. She wants to stay in the Navy."

Elena's memory drifted back to Jane. She'd been one of the six. The county nurse. Blond, attractive Jane. Jane with the sad eyes.

"Did I tell you, Eric, that Jane had been married? I just found out a couple of months ago. She thought it was a way out of the unhappiness at home. But the marriage didn't jell."

The man's strong fingers played with his spoon for a moment. He looked up then.

"No. No, I didn't know. But I knew there was something. She loved that boy Don. And he loved her."

Elena looked down at the heavy white cup. Jane was Catholic. That must be why there'd been no marriage with Don.

Elena watched the man as he picked up his coffee again. The brown tweed suit . . . the tie which almost matched the deep red of his hair. The huge green zircon—glittering hard and cold in the silver setting on the second finger of his right hand. The power in the square cut of the broad shoulders. He put the cup down, looked again to Elena.
“I think, Elena, that Jane has found herself. I saw her once about eight months ago. She’s doing a job that’s vital. It’s hard work, but she says those men need it—appreciate it.”

Elena’s narrow fingers twisted about the tiny gold stem of her watch. The answer for Jane—but not for her. Her fingers left the watch to wind themselves tightly about her wrist. Her mind was on last week’s visit with another of the four—Helen who had been closest to her.

“I saw Helen last week, Eric. She’s just in from England, heading for China with UNRRA.”

The man looked up, expectant. The wrinkles partially erased themselves from his broad forehead.

“She’s a thousand tales to tell. Of trips to France, Germany, her stay in Paris.”

The man laughed. A stronger warmth submerged for a moment the steel in his blue eyes.

“And the liquor?” He and Helen had traded liquor arguments many times across the table nearby.

“Good, I guess.” Elena’s hands slid to her lap to wrench against each other. The vision of Helen alighting from the long Greyhound bus gripped her mind again. Still petite. Still clever and gay with the conversation. But those lines of dissipation etched around her mouth. . . . Picked up the habit on the continent, Helen had said. Had to have something to shut out the suffering she saw day by day in the hospital, something, she’d said, to give her the heart to be gay with men who could no longer be gay. But Elena knew that most of all it had come to be a way to forget. She could not bring herself to tell the man Eric of the new Helen.

“And whether or not the men were good, there were plenty of them and they were interesting as hell. There’ll always be men, dozens of them with that gal.” A strange note of bitterness had entered the man’s voice—a bitterness Elena had not heard there before. She had heard fury—a powerful fury. And she had heard the softer notes, too. But never bitterness. She wondered why.

“But there’s only one man who ever counted with Helen.” Elena’s hands gripped the cold metal of the chair. The man was silent. He knew, like Elena, of the artist Helen had gone through school with. The artist with whom she’d built a palace of future plans, only to have him sweep it away to let the art engulf his life. Elena had depended upon Helen, looked to her for strength,
for courage. But the girl she had seen last week had no courage even for herself.

Elena lifted her eyes only to see Eric's lowered head. He was staring at the table. She felt the rigidity sweep through her body. And for the first time since she'd known him she questioned his pillar-like strength.

She remembered as he sat, still staring downwards, the violin in the case in the closet in his apartment—the apartment where the six of them had shared gay conversation of adventure and travel. He had closed that violin case long ago—forever. Now, her eyes on his bowed head, she questioned why for the first time. She felt again as she had when she'd seen Helen—a feeling of foundering in deep water.

The man reached in his pocket to pull out the silver monogrammed cigarette case, opened it slowly and offered it to the girl. She took a cigarette, and he removed another before putting the case back. He lit them both, then settled back in his chair, puffed at the cigarette, thoughtful. His eyes searched the girl's again. Her gaze lowered.

"More coffee?"
"Please." He signalled the waiter.
"Two more, please."

The waiter removed their cups, plunked the fresh ones down. The man checked his watch.
"Eleven-thirty."
"They won't close for an hour and a half, will they?"
"No. That's about the time most of these,—his gaze swept the room—"will be heading home. Those that have a home to go to."

The bitterness was there again. Elena felt stranded.

"Elena." She looked at him. He was staring at the three farmers at the counter. But Elena did not think he was aware of them. Unconsciously she brought her chair nearer to the table, leaned forward.

"Elena. When I met the five of you youngsters five years ago . . . well, I sort of softened up, opened the door and let you come inside."

He stopped for a moment. And Elena remembered with new understanding the townfolks' failure to understand how they could be friends of the man Eric. Cold, hard, they'd termed him.

The low voice spoke again.
"Elena, when someone swings hard and cracks a bat even a
little—well, it's not so good for the batting afterwards."

The voice stopped and the girl waited, expectant. But he did not continue. He stopped—as he had so many times in those days before when he had talked a bit and they were waiting for more.

He drew out another cigarette.

"But we're wandering so far from you, Elena. Come now. Tell me. What's new with you?"

His question brought a smile to her face again. He'd picked up the "what's new" from her.

"Well . . ."

"Is the Blakesville Daily good for another year?"

"Well . . . You see, I have an offer to go down to Mexico City next month on a year's contract with Syndicated Features. I'd be doing some writing about Mexican life, should be a splendid opportunity."

Elena stopped, trained her eyes on the door to the kitchen. Oh, I know I'm not fooling you, not fooling you for a second she thought. But I can't put the old enthusiasm in my voice when I don't feel it. He'd loved to kid her about that before. That enthusiasm. Those shining eyes when there was a good story to cover for the local gazette.

"I think maybe I'll take it. Chances are I'll have an opportunity to go down into Central America later, and perhaps even into South America."

Six months ago she'd have snapped it up in a hurry. But the last few months . . . She remembered when something had first seemed a little off the track. That was when she'd gone out to that farm over by Kirkswood to get a story about their neighborhood labor pool.

Mrs. Trainer had asked her to have lunch after the interview. There'd been something about that small kitchen. The red and white checked tablecloth. The spotless cleanliness of it all. The shining white of the stove. The hot rolls they'd had, the amber coffee. The peace, the permanence of it all. She had hated to leave.

"Not tiring of the smell of wet ink, typewriters clicking, Elena?"

"Oh no." The rebuttal came quickly—too quickly.

He changed the subject then.

"Elena, soon after the war started Allan and Betty wrote me." They were the others. "And both wrote about the same thing."

"Yes?" His adroit changes of conversational topics still amazed
her sometimes.

"Their marriages. Allan had to go to war—and Betty's fiance, so they wanted to get married right away. You know how it was. Everything so unsettled. Talk of five or ten years of war."

"I know. And I wondered about all the things Allan had talked of doing. Going into that aircraft corporation out in Hawaii. Seeing Australia."

"They wanted to be anchored to home base, though, both of them. When the world looked topsy-turvy, they wanted, as nearly as possible, what they'd always known."

Elena felt his gaze again, that searching gaze she'd felt through most of the evening.

"And you, Elena?" She shifted uncomfortably in the chair. His aim was good. Before she would have evaded. But this time—she was still the poor swimmer looking for refuge.

"And when there's never been an anchor—that sort of a one, I mean?"

"Why, Elena?" The question came, demanding, powerful.

"I guess because we lived temporarily permanently. That sounds crazy, I know. But I remember when I was just a small kid—early in grade school days—and the folks started talking about selling out, selling our business and moving away. I bragged about it at first—about how we might go to Illinois or Minnesota to live. Illinois, Minnesota—they were the unknown to me—the greener side of the fence. Sort of impressed the rest of the kids."

"Yes?"

The girl's voice dropped.

"Even I got sort of unimpressed with the idea after the first three or four years."

"But the town, the people?"

The girl laughed and this time the bitterness was hers.

"That's easy. Most of them were Methodists. We belonged to a handful of Catholics. I hated some of their narrow ideas, and I didn't act like the Roman in Rome. So I left . . . as soon as I could . . ."

The girl cut the answer short, suddenly realizing that in a few minutes he had asked of her more information about herself than in any other conversation since she'd known him.

"At least, your family, Elena?"

She started to protest. It wasn't like him. But she answered.

"They thought the future looked more secure for me as a
secretary. Well, I wasn't interested in that kind of security. So I fought it out alone, independent, you know.'

Eric pulled out the silver watch again.

"Just about closing time. You're stopping at the hotel?"

"Yes."

"I'll walk down with you." Elena stood as he held the tan coat for her, then waited while he paid the sleepy-eyed proprietor. She was still foundering.

He joined her, and they walked slowly down the darkened street, transformed so quickly from its Saturday night brilliance. Elena's steps dragged. She wanted to cry, "You've got to help me," when they reached the hotel corner and he still was silent. His shoulders, usually so square, drooped a little.

He stopped at the corner. Elena paused, too.

"Elena, do you remember those lines—I've forgotten at the moment who wrote them. 'I am the captain of my fate, I am the master of my soul'."

"Ye—es . . ." Elena saw the bitterness edging into the lines on the man's face under the corner streetlight. The vision of Helen came again. She puzzled.

"You still are, Elena." His words were low—and they were tinged with bitterness. Elena wanted to reach out, to place her hand on his arm, but she refrained.

"Thank you, Eric."

"Good night and the best to you, Elena, till we meet again."

"I'll write you from Mexico City, Eric. I suppose this address will always reach you—wherever you may be . . ."

"Yes. Goodnight, Elena."

He walked on down the street, his shoulders drooping slightly. Elena stood for a moment thinking of the apartment to which he was going. And for the first time, the Chinese red walls with the black woodwork, the huge Mexican hat on that red wall, the German music box which tinkled "Auld Lang Syne" faded to disclose only three large, empty rooms. Three rooms, and the closet with the closed violin.

"Trouble, miss?"

The elevator boy ventured the question.

"No, nothing at all." She was only crying.