Someone To Talk To

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Abstract

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COLD rain rattled against the plate glass front of the little cafe on the corner across from the Midwestern University campus. A gust of wind made the window vibrate as it moaned past. Alan Johnson, sitting alone at the empty bar, shivered imperceptibly as he gazed out the window, watching the wind sweep sheets of rain across the pavement.

"What a lousy night," he said aloud to no one in particular. It was quiet in the cafe. Only three or four of the booths were occupied. Later on it would be crowded, because it was Saturday night. But it was early yet.

The cafe was clean and bright with chromium and red leather seats in the booths. The sign in the window said, "The Red Mill," but the students who gathered there called it simply the Mill, or, more often, Tony’s. Tony was the owner, the cook, and the waiter. Sooner or later, everyone got to know him.

He came up to the front of the counter now, wiped it with the towel he always carried, and leaned against it. "It’s a helluva night," he said, with only a slight trace of an Italian accent. He was a friendly man, and when he had time he enjoyed talking to the students who came in.

Alan turned away from the window to face him, and nodded. "And Saturday night, too."

"The girls in their long dresses will get wet at the big dance tonight, eh?" Tony said.

"Yeah, I guess so." He hadn’t been thinking of that. It was just that a rainy Saturday night was so damn lonely somehow.

"How come you’re not going to the dance?" Tony asked. "No girl?"

"Yeah," he said. "They all had dates by the time I got around to calling."
It was a lie, he thought. He could have found a date if he'd really wanted one. But it was easier to lie a little than try to explain that he didn't care about going to dances just to dance, or just to be seen there. His room-mate had never been able to understand that either. "Hell," he'd said just last night when they were arguing about women, and how you had to make small talk to keep them amused, "you don't have to talk. Just dance. It doesn't matter if she can think or not, as long as she has a body. It's better than spending the evening alone, anyway."

But it wasn't. Not for him. He wanted more than just a body, or a pretty face. He wanted a mind too, a mind that could question, that wondered sometimes about the meaning of life and whether religion had the answer. Things like that. Most of all, he wanted someone to talk to.

"There's a girl that doesn't have a date," Tony said, breaking the silence. He nodded toward a booth on the other side of the room.

"Oh?" Al turned around and looked at the girl in the booth, pretending a little surprise; He had already noticed the girl when he first came in. She was alone and that was unusual on Saturday night. For a girl as attractive as this one anyway. He inspected her again now. She seemed to be different from most of the co-eds he saw on the campus. A little older, a little more mature. Short dark hair, nice mouth, long sensitive hands.

"Nice stuff, eh?" Tony said. "A good shack job, maybe?" Tony was proud of the slang he picked up from the students and he used it whenever he could.

"She's not that kind," Al said, feeling a need to defend the girl as if he knew her. In a way, he felt that he did. She was alone on a rainy Saturday night, too.

"You know her?" Tony asked.

"No, but she's different. She looks different."

Tony looked at her with a practiced, skeptical eye. "She's probably in here hoping someone will pick her up," he said. "Why don't you go over and try it?"

Al shook his head. "Not me. I'm no operator." Still, he felt the excitement rising in him. She does look lonely, he thought. And God knows, this is a miserable night to be alone.
Someone called Tony from one of the other booths. "Excuse me," he said, and went to wait on them.

The wind and rain beat on the front window and Al listened to it. He had planned to walk downtown and take in a show but the rain had changed his mind. It would be fun to just sit here in a booth the rest of the evening and talk. There was so much to talk about, and the girl over there looked as if she would understand.

That was the important thing. Being able to understand. There were so many things that you couldn't quite find words for, things that had no answers yet. But to a person who felt the same way, the words weren't important.

The girl looked up and he realized suddenly that he had been staring at her. Their eyes met and then he turned quickly away, embarrassed but feeling a glow of pleasure as he realized that she had noticed him.

He looked out the window again. Bill Miller had been one who understood, he remembered. They had met in France when he was transferred to Bill's outfit. They were in action together for three weeks and they had talked a lot. You talked easier then, because there was a lot to say and you were always afraid your time would run out. They'd have more time. And then a sniper got Bill on that hill near Metz.

"Looks like it's raining harder than ever." Tony was back standing at his usual place behind the bar.

"Yeah," Al said. "It's rotten weather."

"Why don't you go over and talk to that girl," Tony said. "A man shouldn't be alone on a night like this." Tony was a bachelor and familiar with being alone. That was why he had never hired a man to help him in the cafe. It was better when you had something to do all the time.

"She's probably waiting for someone," Al said, wavering in indecision.

"No," said Tony. "I see lots of people come in to wait for someone. I know them. They look at their watch. They're nervous. This one isn't."

Al was silent. Suppose, he thought, she isn't different after all. Suppose you just make small talk all evening. Talk about bridge games, and swing music and what her sorority sisters are doing.
"She is giving you the eye," Tony said.
"You're crazy."
"No. She is lonesome, that one. If I was a young man, with nothing to do, I would go over."
"I don't know what I'd say to her. I'm no good at making up a line."
"What does it matter what you say. She is lonely, you are too. That is all that matters." Tony sometimes fancied himself as a philosopher.

"How come you're so interested in all this?" Al asked, pretending to be suspicious.

Tony grinned. "This way, you stay all evening and talk and I sell more coffee and hamburgers."

Al smiled. Hell, he thought, why not try it. What did it matter what kind of a girl she turned out to be. This was Saturday night, wasn't it? And if she said no, so what?

"You've talked me into it, Tony," he said. "Wish me luck."

He bunched his long legs under him and started to get up. As he did, his hand hit the half-full coffee cup in front of him and knocked it over. Coffee sloshed across the counter and the cup slithered over the slick top and fell, smashing on the floor. He sat down again quickly, embarrassed, conscious of heads turned in his direction. Taking a paper napkin, he began to mop up the coffee.

Tony reached over to help him. "What's the matter?" he said. "My coffee so strong you get drunk on it?"

"Gee, I'm sorry," Al mumbled. "Clumsy of me."

"Don't worry about it," Tony said, sopping up the spilled coffee with a rag. "It happens a hundred times a day. You've got some on you." He pointed to a spot on Al's pants leg. Al took out his handkerchief and began wiping ineffectually at it.

"Here," said Al, "I'll pick up the pieces." He stooped and began to gather the broken cup.

"Put them in this dish," Tony said. "I'll be right back."

When he had finished picking up the broken pieces, Al straightened and dumped them in the dish on the counter. Tony returned.

"Your girl friend just left," he said. "You want some more coffee?"
"No thanks," Al said. "I'd better be going." He stood up, buttoning his rain coat, and paid for his coffee.

"If you hurry you can catch her," said Tony.

"Too late for that. I've muffed my big chance." Al tried to grin, but it didn't come off very well. He walked out into the rain.

It was getting colder, but the rain was still falling. He looked up and down the street. The girl was gone. He wondered what she was going to do now. Go home, like he was, maybe, and try to read a book. Or just lie on a bed and stare at the bare light bulb swinging from the ceiling until at last sleep came. He wondered how many people were lying in rooms tonight and staring at the ceiling, waiting for sleep to come and blot out the ache of loneliness.

He ducked his head against a blast of wind and rain. God, what a night.

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Spring

Spring is the blotted moon
Suspended like a pearl
Against the evening sky.

Spring is a woman
Who, standing half a mile away,
Looks at you
And kisses you with her eyes.

Spring is a pasque flower,
The returned wren,
The quivering sod—
The paint of budding green earth
On the canvass of a sky-blue God.
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