"And Never the Twain"

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Abstract

The nurse slid the screen back from around Josh’s bed, pushing it to one side. “Yes, I called Mr. Mahoney again today. He said he’d try and make it over to see you.”...
THE NURSE slid the screen back from around Josh's bed, pushing it to one side. "Yes, I called Mr. Mahoney again today. He said he'd try and make it over to see you."

"Well it's about time. You called him two weeks ago, just a couple days after I got here." He turned a little more toward the window as she left the room. Across the street, he could see the row of low apartment buildings. Each one looked like the next with only a street number to distinguish them. Just like people, he thought. They all look the same, on the outside. By looking past the apartments, he could see the hot air billowing up from the flat tared roofs, rippling what lay beyond. He rolled a bit more toward the open window. Beneath it was a narrow strip of grass with a few scraggly shrubs. It wasn't much but it was the only real sign of life he could see.

He moved back to his original position to ease the strain on his suspended arms. The hospital, itself, was clean but lonely and frightening. He wriggled nervously thinking about it. Hospitals had always scared him. Looking out the doorway, he could see the blank walls and doors with only two small rolling trays to break their monotony. Inside his room, it was not much better. All four walls looked alike to

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him with the exception of the one across from the foot of his bed. On it hung a picture of Abraham Lincoln. Good old Abe he thought. As for furniture, the room was almost void of it. What little there was consisted of a small writing table, one white chair, his hospital bed, and the white cloth screen that stood beside him. It was used in weather like this to prevent a draft when both the door and window were left open, they told him. Josh couldn’t help feeling as though it were hiding him.

Here he lay, motionless, Joshua Jackson set off by the never-ending whiteness that was all around him. Lumps and bulges in the crisp sheets showed his tall slim stature. Two plump pillows raised his head into the air. The black corkscrewed hair seemed out of place on their smooth surface. His face was clear and free of wrinkles. Wrinkles are caused by smiling and there had been little in his life about which he could smile. His stern expression showed the hard road that he had traveled. His eyes were bold and penetrating while again, afraid and searching. A white plaster cast held his left leg stationary while over his head hung the two mangled hands that had once been his life.

“That damn Mahoney. I wish he’d get over here to see me pretty quick. He knows what kind of situation I’m in and he knows I’ll be needing work when I get out of here.”

A slender hand slid around the door followed by a man of medium height and slight build. “What’s that?” It was Dr. Barnes.

“Nothin’. I was just thinking out loud.” This Barnes would probably make a great doctor, for somebody who needed him, he thought. With that funny walk and smile, I’ll bet he’s got a terrific bed-side manner.

“Well Josh, after the examination this morning maybe you’ll be able to leave.”

“I hope so. I gotta get out of here and back to work.” He had been here for almost three weeks now. They had been three lonely weeks with only the nurse and Doc Barnes to talk to.

The doctor gently unwrapped Josh’s hands and examined them closely. He pushed on them with his fingertip. “Does it hurt at all when I do this?”
"Yea. . . a little bit maybe."

"Looks like you're going to be in good enough shape to leave. We'll have to put a lighter cast on that leg before you do, though. I'll be back later this afternoon to see you before you're discharged." He stood up and turned to leave the room.

"Wait a minute, Doc."

Dr. Barnes turned to find a strange searching look on Josh's face that he had never seen before.

"How about giving it to me straight for a change? What kind of shape am I really in?"

The doctor returned to the bed and sat down on the edge of it. "Well. . . as far as I can tell you're going to be all right. You'll have to walk with crutches for a couple of weeks but other than that you should be completely healed before long. As for your hands, you'll have to watch them 'cause they're going to be awfully tender."

"That's what I'm talking about Doc, my hands. Will they be all right?"

"Like I said Josh, they'll be tender for a while but in a week or so they'll be healed completely."

"For Chrissake Doc. . . quit beatin' around the bush! You know what I'm talking about. Will I be able to play again?"

Dr. Barnes fingered his stethoscope for a moment. The perpetual smile was now gone from his face. "The way it looks. . . your hands were pretty beat up and mangled. . . We've done all we can, Josh, but it probably wasn't enough. You'll be able to manipulate the fingers but it's doubtful if you can do it well enough to play the piano."

Josh turned his head to stare out the window at the apartments. Dr. Barnes stood for a moment beside the bed, then silently left the room.

"I guess it's really not so bad, I've got friends now. Jim Mahoney said he had a job at the Starlite Room for me anytime I wanted it." He rolled back over and looked at the ceiling.

Friends. . . I'm glad this didn't happen before, when I had no one. If it had happened when I was at the Green Gander. . . the Green Gander. . . He had to walk down a flight of stairs to the basement level. Upon entering, all he could see was the thick blue cloud of cigarette smoke that
hung head high and motionless. When he walked through it, large swirls formed behind him disturbing the groups of patrons seated at the dozen or so bare tables about the room. The marred and ragged bar held another fifteen unruly looking characters. The bartender wore a dirty white shirt, no tie, and a dishtowel around his waist. He strode over to the piano.

"Not much on color but it’s the best we could get,” the bartender chuckled.

Josh ignored the remark, learning from past experience that it was better to keep his mouth shut.

If it had happened to me while I was still at a place like that, I don’t know what I’d have done. No friends, no nothin’. Sometime I wish I could wash this off. He reached for his face but the supports held his arms firmly.

If I hadn’t met Jim at the Union Hall that day, it might have been at a place like that. He remembered how he had started. Jim Mahoney told him to be uptown at the Starlite Room at 8:00 that night.

The Starlite Room was unlike anything he had ever seen or been in before. The floors were not bare wood but were covered with carpeting from wall to wall. The bar was clean and polished and the tables were all covered with cloths. When he played, the people smiled and applauded. Every night it had been the same way. The customers would come up and talk to him, they joked with him, and had asked him to play his originals over and over again. At last he had found some friends in his lonely world of music.

Then it had happened, he got his big break. One afternoon while he was practicing at the Starlite Room, a booking agent from New York stopped in to see him. The agent told Josh that he had an opening for him with a big name combo in New York City. Not wanting to appear too eager, he had told the man that he would be willing to drive down and play with the group for a while, to see how things would work out. After the agent left, Josh realized he had no transportation and his money was not too abundant. After looking around town, he found an old ’53 Dodge that could get him there. Before he left, Jim told him there would always be a job at the Starlite waiting for him.

Once on the road, Josh was more eager than ever. Un-
Fortunately he had been penned in behind a semi-truck for the past twenty miles or so. Being so impatient, he decided to chance passing the truck with his old Dodge. He was just about around when they pulled up over a small rise. The road suddenly made a sharp turn to the right and he hit the wheel hard to make it. The sudden turn was just too much for the old car, though. It slid off the road and down into a narrow gorge. Josh lay in the halted car for a moment, unable to move. Suddenly there was an explosion. . . .

He relaxed and fell back onto the bed. Small beads of sweat rolled down his face as he tried to straighten the pillows with the back of his head.

"Let me help you with that," a husky voice boomed. It was Jim Mahoney. His fat hands with their short stubby fingers reached behind Josh and pulled the two pillows back up. Josh looked into the rounded face with the black cigar hanging out of it.

"How the hell are ya, Jim? I though maybe you'd forgotten me already."

"I've been meaning to come over but you know how it is. Workin', keepin' the business going." He dropped his large frame onto the small chair, almost hiding it.

"Yea, I know how busy you get over at the Starlite."

"Well how are you, Josh? When are they going to let you out of here?"

"The doc tells me I'm in good enough shape to leave today."

"Gee kid, I hate to just drop in, say hello, and then run, but you know how it is. I'm a pretty busy man these days, so let's get to the point. When the nurse called me today, she said it was urgent that I come. Is there anything I can do for you?"

Josh's eyes held that same searching look they had held so often before. "You mean you can't stick around for a while and just talk?"

"I'd like to Josh, but I really gotta run. I just stopped in on my way over to audition a new singer for the club."

"Well. . . what I wanted to talk to you about was getting a job over at the Starlite again."
“Was that all you wanted to see me about? You didn’t have to drag me clear across town to ask me that. Of course we’ve got a job for you. You know we can always use a top notch jazz player.”

“That’s the whole bit, Jim. You see . . . the Doc tells me I’m not going to be able to play anymore. What I meant was something like a bartender or a waiter in the dining room.”

“For real . . . you can’t play anymore?” Jim moved uneasily in his chair. He drew out the cigar from between his teeth. “Look Josh, I’d like to help you out but we’re full up with help right now. This season’s been real strong for us and we’ve hired all the help we can handle.”

He stood up to leave, replacing the cigar in the hole in his face. Josh leaned forward.

“Listen Jim, I wouldn’t ask you, but I can’t play anymore. Don’t you understand? I need a job, and I need one bad! What with all these bills and having to find another place to live, I need cash.”

“I know how it is, kid, but like I said we’re all full up on the help right now. Besides, by the time we trained you and bought you a uniform . . . well it just wouldn’t pay. You know how it is . . . I gotta think of the business angle.”

He reached into his back pocket and pulled out his wallet. “Here’s twenty bucks to help you out a little. I know a guy down on the south side that might be able to use a clean-up man. Tell you what, I’ll get in touch with him and call you if anything comes up.”

Josh remained silent and rolled his head to stare out the window.

“Hey, you listening? What’s the matter, don’t you want my help?”

Jim Mahoney turned and walked out the door. Josh moved back to look at the picture of Lincoln on the wall.

The nurse walked into the room and around his bed to the screen. “We don’t want you to get a draft.” She pulled the screen of whiteness around him again.

“Visitor gone already?”

“Yea . . . he left me.”