The Wasted Man

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Abstract

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DAN HUNG his coat on a wall hook and sat down at one of the dimly lighted corner booths. He wiped his forehead on a shirtsleeve and turned to look out the window. Rain seeped through a crack in one of the glass panes and dribbled down the wall to a slowly enlarging puddle on the floor.

He looked up as the waitress came over to his booth. She walked with the tired shuffle of a woman who had never had a chance to be young. The shadows drew hard lines on her face, and he wished there were more lights in the room.

“What’ll it be, mister?” Her voice was flat and worn like the land that reared her.

Dan waited for a moment, then realized he was to order without a menu.

“Oh, a hamburger, with fries, I guess.”

“Coffee?”

“Yeah.”

He leaned back as the waitress went into the kitchen and glanced around the room. Pale yellow paint peeled from the walls, and an old man sitting at the bar in the opposite corner seemed to be an integral part of the room.

The old man turned and looked at Dan with half closed eyes. He lifted a bottle to his lips and drank the last of the beer, then set the bottle on the bar with an unsteady rattle. Immediately, the waitress opened another bottle and placed it on the bar in front of him. He picked up the bottle and slid off the battered wooden stool.

Dan’s eyes narrowed as the old man made his way across the room. Dammit, it was bad enough to have to eat in this miserable hole without the company of some stinking barfly.
The old man stopped in front of the booth.
“Can I sit down?” He shifted his feet and swallowed loudly.
Dan nodded and watched the old man fold himself carefully into the booth. Most of the men in this part of Oregon smelled like horses or sheep or diesel tractors. This one smelled like stale beer and sweat. He wore a faded denim shirt, blue jeans and loggers’ boots. His smooth yellow hands had not worked for many months.
The waitress brought Dan’s order, then shook the old man’s shoulder impatiently.
“Jess, get up and leave the boy alone. C’mon over to the bar an’ I’ll get you a beer. On the house. C’mon now.” Her voice was insistent.
Jess blinked his watery eyes and twisted his shoulder under her hand.
“The kid don’t mind. Ask him.” Jess looked directly at Dan, his eyes pleading. Dan glanced up at the waitress, then looked back at the old man.
“It’s okay.”
The waitress shrugged apologetically, then walked away. Dan picked up his hamburger and began to eat. Jess took a drink and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.
“You just passin’ through?”
Dan nodded.
“Work around here?”
“I did have a job at Bend.”
Jess drank some more beer.
“Where you headed now?”
“Back to Iowa.”
“Iowa? You an Easterner?”
“I go to college in Iowa. I just worked out here during the summer.”
Jess grunted and drank the rest of his beer. He sat without moving for several minutes, watching Dan eat. Finally he got up and went over to the bar. The waitress came in from the kitchen and opened another bottle. Dan watched the old man, hoping he would stay at the bar. Jess turned and started back toward the booth, weaving slightly as he
approached. Dan did not look up as the old man sat down.

Jess tilted his bottle carefully and stared down at the foam inside.

"Tell me, Eastern fella. You ever worked out here before?"

Dan noticed the old man's speech was becoming fuzzy.

"Nope. I try to go to a different place every summer."

Jess nodded.

"I was like that once. . ." His eyes brightened. "I've worked in every state west of the Mississippi. Fella, I've worked at jobs you never heard of. I ain't never stopped movin'." Pain creased the old man's face. He coughed harshly, then took a drink and almost dropped the bottle. Dan finished his hamburger and looked at his watch.

Jess reached across the table and grasped Dan's wrist. Dan winced and jerked his arm away.

"Don't go yet. Stay awhile."

Dan stiffened, then nodded and relaxed.

"Okay, I guess I can stay for a couple minutes."

Jess slumped back and took another drink.

"You . . . married?"

"Nope. I've got big plans for the next ten or fifteen years. A wife is the last thing I need."

Jess coughed again, then leaned toward Dan.

"You listen to me, Eastern fella. You listen to an old man. Movin' all the time gets you tired of livin'. You get a good woman and settle down. You're startin' all wrong."

Dan smiled as Jess tipped the bottle to his mouth. This old guy would live and die being sorry for the things he hadn't done, and there wasn't anyone to be sorry with him. Except the waitress, maybe.

Jess pushed the bottle away and gripped the edge of the table. His voice was a slow, hoarse whisper.

"Eastern fella, I'd hock my soul in Hell if I could trade places with you. You only got one life. Don't do it wrong." He scratched the back of his head and looked out at the dark storm clouds. A spatter of rain blew against the window, and Jess blinked.

"Fella, you find a good woman an' settle down. A man
ain't nobody if a woman don't love him." He lowered his head and stared at his hands. Dan got up and stood for a moment by the booth.

"I've got to hit the road, old timer."

The old man coughed and rubbed his eyes but did not look up.

Dan went over to the bar and paid his bill. The waitress nodded toward the old man.

"Jess been givin' you a speech?"

Dan was silent for several seconds.

"Yeah. I guess so."

The waitress wiped her forehead with a corner of her apron.

"Poor old Jess has been livin' too long, I reckon. He goes through that with every young fellow that comes in here. Can't hardly live with himself when he's sober. Last time he was sober he tried to kill himself. I figure he's better drunk than dead."

She brushed some hair back from her eyes and looked at the old man.

"He came in here a couple months ago. I don't know where he's goin' from here . . . don't guess he knows either."

She looked back at Dan and began polishing a napkin dispenser.

"Drop in again if you're ever in this neck of the woods."

Dan shrugged.

"Not very likely. Next summer I'll probably go to New Mexico or Nevada."

The waitress frowned and shook her head, almost imperceptibly. Dan went over to the booth and got his coat. He slipped it on and stood looking at the old man.

"Take it easy, Jess."

The old man stared at his empty bottle and blinked.

"A man ain't nobody . . ." He shook his head slowly.

"I'd hock my soul in Hell . . ." A tear spilled out of the corner of his eye and fell on his twisting hands. He coughed for several seconds, and his shoulders bent lower. He studied the wet spot for a moment, rubbed it absently, then looked up at Dan.
“Eastern fella . . . Here . . . here is Hell.”

Dan was suddenly conscious of the waitress standing behind the bar, watching. He reached into his pocket and jingled some coins, then walked back to the bar and placed a quarter by the cash register.

“Give the old guy another beer.”

He turned quickly and walked out of the cafe, into the rain.

—Ed Hill, Ag. Jr.

Raindrops smash against the window,

where once we watched the moon slide through clouds.
And cold night air sneaks into this room,
this room that now has shrunk from boundlessness.
Was it yesterday, or weeks ago, or years?
When did it end? When did the end begin?
Where are your lips, your black-fringed eyes?
Time does not dull the you I knew.
The you of swamp-black currents
eddying on a pillow,
of straining thighs and hardening nipples.
There was purpose then, and beauty,
and satisfaction in finding the solution,
so simply, so infinitely.
All this before the little things.
The little things too big for us.
We had the answer.
Or do we have it now?
Raindrops smash against the window.

—Ron Baker, E. ’58