The Thickening Haze

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by

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English 2

At ten o'clock, the bar stools would fill and the air begin to clog with smoke. Quarters would clank, at regular intervals, into the jukebox, and the lyrics of country-western heartbreaks would sift into the thickening haze. After the first round of empty shotglasses had hit the bartop, the conversation would gain volume and lose inhibition; soon, it would force the music into the background where the lyrics could only be found by the “regulars” who tossed quarters into the jukebox every night. At ten o'clock, Saturday night would begin at Larry's Tap, and Nate was already waiting to watch the opening ritual.

Nate looked at his watch—nine forty-five. Not long now, especially if the regulars were coming early as they had begun to do. Nate lifted his shotglass and held it between his fingertips for a moment, looking through the clear, minty schnapps. Eyes closed, he tossed it down his throat and felt its warmth slide down into his stomach. Good schnapps... cheap but good. He set the empty glass down but kept his fingers around it as if to touch any peppermint warmth the glass had retained. It felt good to toss down shots of schnapps. Outside, the winter wind was cold and Nate liked to feel some warmth.

Ten o'clock. Most of the regulars had already slid onto their stools and ordered their first rounds. With winter's onset, a new group of drinkers had come into Larry's to warm their hands and minds on whiskey and schnapps. They were a younger group, perhaps college-age, and many were female. With skeptical indignation, the whiskered old men and barmaids of the classic style sat and observed the new crowd. Nate and others of the under-thirty regulars merely arrived early to claim their favorite stools, and went on with their jokes and stories. But out of the corners of cynical eyes, even they noticed much about the young men who drank too heavily and
sang too loudly, and especially about the young women who drank whiskey in straight shots.

Nate turned his bentwood chair to face the door of the bar. Until the bar was full, the door would open many times and Nate kept his army surplus jacket zipped against the icy draft. He sat quietly, alone, tapping his booted toe to some distant melody. With a half-smirk of his lips, he watched as the drinkers arrived, shaking the snow from their bulky mittens and heavy boots into melting puddles on the scuffed wooden floor.

Nate lifted his empty shotglass and paused as if surprised at its weightlessness. He looked at the women who were leaning across the bar, snowflakes still distinguishable in crisp form on their long, straight hair. Again, he considered his glass, then rose from his chair and swaggered toward the bar. "Time for another, Larry," he announced and slid his glass across the bar.

Larry handed back a silver-filled glass and leaned toward Nate. His voice was low and confidential. "Y'ain't spending tonight alone, are ya, Nate?"

Nate's lips twisted. "You know me better than that, ol' man. Ain't got that many nights left in this town." For a moment, he paused, and the smirk relaxed. It returned, tighter than before, as he spoke. "Good night?"

Larry nodded and began wiping his hands on a soiled bar towel. "For me . . . and for you." Nate's eyebrows arched casually, and Larry's laugh was low and masculine. "Yeah, I been watchin'," he winked. "Little one over by the window . . . there's something about her. Anyway, she's alone . . . and drinking bourbon, straight shots."

Nate turned, his gaze probing the thickness of the smoke that drifted at eye level. Among the crowd of troubled, creased faces, her blond hair and pale skin glowed like candlelight. Her paleness illuminated the somber plaid of her oversized flannel shirt and the thick cables of her black sweater. As he narrowed his eyes, Nate smiled; she had felt his gaze and frozen for an instant. With satisfaction, Nate imagined the shudder he had seen in tougher shoulders than hers. From deep in his throat, he chuckled.
She saw him watching from the bar and knew his steps would lead to her table—that much Nate could sense from her actions. With a visible sigh, her shoulders raised, but she tensed them there and held her small form taut, as if fortified. As he grasped the back of the chair opposite her, Nate smiled. But his first words were not spoken. Instead, they darted, cold and clear, from his translucent, grey eyes.

It won't work, sweetheart. This is my game, and I'm good at it. Still, the angle of that chin is not bad—very strong. But not strong enough. His eyes, still unblinking, focused on her pale, firm jaw. Nate sat before her at the table.

Even beneath the layers of her winter bundling, Nate could see the thin bones of her shoulders pushed high by elbows planted on the tabletop. "Strong stuff for a lady." Nate gestured toward the shotglass that glowed golden between her cupped palms.

She shrugged. "It's cold out." The glowing end of a stubby cigarette swelled, then dimmed, as she held it between her lips. Nate's gaze fell on the small, rounded fingers which held the cigarette—the crow's feet near her pale eyes, briefly visible, went unnoticed.

Nate patted the olive-drab pockets on his jacket until his fingers tapped the square edges of a cardboard pack. Without removing the pack, he fished out a long, white cigarette and a narrow butane lighter. In the hazy, dim bar light, the butane flame was bright. But the draft from outside was still strong, and Nate tipped his head and stared in concentration at the cigarette he was lighting. After the lighter went out, and Nate looked up once again, the fine creases in her forehead had vanished in the darkness and haze.

Nate leaned forward across the table, but her only reaction was to blow her smoke slightly to the side. "A Saturday night," he winked, "should be a party night." Nate looked at her face, at the chin that was still firm. "And you're here, alone?" It was less a question than a suggestion.

For a moment, her expression was almost a smile. Her words were slow and emphasized. "Yes, I am," she responded and held his gaze unflinchingly.

Sucking on his cigarette, Nate wondered if she had missed his point. "That's too bad."
With the same hand that held the cigarette, she picked her glass off the table. She stared at the yellow-brown liquid. "Not really. It gives me a chance to sit here and think." As she smiled, the fine etchings around her eyes became dark creases.

A flash of surprise widened Nate's eyes. She's not as young as I thought. But the smile had passed and the lines diminished, and Nate hesitated only slightly as he spoke. "What can there be to think about... on a Saturday night?"

His voice was smooth and suggestive.

With a deliberate slowness, she ground the butt of her cigarette into a sooty, wrinkled lump. She looked straight into Nate's transparent eyes, ignoring the tone of his comment. "Listen to the lyrics... they're so blue, so true. ..." Her voice faded, and she closed her eyes as she tossed down the warm bourbon.

Nate's eyes blinked in confusion. "How can you hear the lyrics?" He paused a moment, but all he could hear was the roar of drunken, late-night conversation. Through the floorboards, he could feel the beat of the music, but nothing more. Nate shook his head. "Can't hear a damn thing."

Her eyes were closed, and she hugged her arms tight across her chest. With her shoulders, she swayed to the same beat Nate had found with his boot. "Oh, they're hidden, underneath the noise. You're not trying hard enough." She began to sing, "'Times are hard, and you're afraid. ...'"

In amazement, Nate stared across the table. Never... never once had he made such a mistake. She's crazy, that's what she is, a goddam madwoman.

Suddenly, she spoke to Nate. "Now? Now can't you hear the words?" As her words gained intensity, she drew her eyebrows together into earnest furrows across her forehead. "They mean so much... don't they... something different to everyone."

Nate's muscular hand had tensed around his glass—for once, he was glad it was empty. "Uh... listen," Nate broke in, "I'm ready for another drink. Um, I'll be back."

"Sure." Her voice was calm, her eyes still closed. She resumed her song. "'...so you find yourself somebody..."

As he hurried toward the bar, Nate whistled through his
teeth. He pounded his glass on the bar, and Larry leaned toward him, still wiping his hands on a filthy towel. Nate shook his head. “Not worth it, Larry. She’s a strange one.”

Larry twisted the cap from a fresh bottle and laughed. “She don’t know what she’s missin’, huh, Nate? Especially now that you’re leavin’ town.”

“No, no she don’t.” Nate’s smile was jagged and tight. “Say, Larry, what’s playing on the jukebox?”

“Who knows?” Larry chuckled and shook his head. “Don’t know why people put money in the damn thing.”

“Neither do I, ol’ man.” Nate tossed down the minty schnapps and looked at his watch. “How about another, Larry?”

Without comment, Larry poured. It was midnight at Larry’s Tap, and in the noisy haze, even voices were obscured.