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“The New Year”

I rang in The New Year listening to Dick Clark speak some strange English dialect. Below his iron lung or protein chamber or whatever other marvel of technology is keeping him alive, stood Ryan Seacrest, fawning over the pubeless Jonas Brothers as they brought a horde of shivering nymphs to a frenzy. Nearby, formerly discarded American Idol contestant Kelly Pickler effusively proclaimed her love for everyone. Times Square was packed and everyone had some deeply dramatic gesture intricately planned out to signal their own rebirth. Some men proposed to their girlfriends; some women joyously announced they were gravid. A lucky few had their moments immortalized by the cameras.

I spent the first two hours of 2009 in a perfectly flaccid bar down the street from my house. It was karaoke night and no amount of liquor could mollify the cacophonous renditions of "Roll Over Beethoven" and "Friends In Low Places." The bar was packed with caricatures of some of my neighborhood's saddest characters. I recognized a few of them from my previous visits.

There was Sweaty Obese Woman #1. She periodically snorted and incessantly honked into a noisemaker. She had large googly eyes that gaped at everything as if they were taking it all in for the first time. They were sunk deep into her fleshy folds just above a large sniffing nose. She had gotten a hold of a kazoo and each time she blew it in her man's ear she would become excited and start bouncing on her haunches. She watched me play pool for a while and then made friends with:

Dapper Dan. His presence seemed non-sequitor at first; I thought he belonged at an airport bar, hitting on decaying old waitresses. His thinning white hair was meticulously gelled anyway and messed to perfection. He wore a gray three-piece pinstripe suit and wingtips. Perhaps it was this ensemble that confused me, but then I realized that he was guilty of the same moral turpitude as the rest of us simply by proxy. His wife was a dark amorphous silhouette whose withered breasts leaked out of her halter top like rotten cantaloupes after a frost. They sat in the corner and fondled each other while a birdlike creature flapped about on stage murdering Janis Joplin. It occurred to me that this bar was not a place any self-respecting person wandered into. Unbelievably, this was a room you had to know about to find, for there was only a crepitating neon sign outside that read: LOUNGE. Dapper Dan put to rest any lingering doubts I may have had about his depravity by getting up on stage and torturing me with a fantastically horrific version of "My Way." I ordered another drink and tried to focus on the cue ball. He was coaxed off the stage by:

The Gingerbread Boy. This was his turf. He owned the karaoke machine and all roads to the stage ran through him. This pale kid had the face of a forty-year old, yet he was not a day over twenty-five. He had closely cropped strawberry hair and wore tight stone-washed jeans and a mechanic's shirt. At some point, before he got into the meth and his teeth turned into coral, he had been a singer in a youth choir. After high school, he lost his scholarship to ___ State to the usual symptoms. He partied too much and since

his family had no money to pay for tuition, the dream died. He joined various bands, but his ego was disproportionate to his talent and he soon found himself bagging groceries for a family of Arabs with resentment souring his heart. He got the karaoke gig after an ugly incident with the youngest Arab son and now he enjoyed working at this bar. He was by far the best singer and everyone knew it. He liked that. After he led Dapper Dan off stage, he said into the mic: "Give it up for Mike Shanahan." There was only the slightest tinge of mockery in his voice. "Well, I think I'll do one now," he said and I knew exactly what he was going to sing, though I'd only seen him once before. He'd done Bohemian Rhapsody the last time I'd been unfortunate enough to stumble into the joint on karaoke night. He was very proud of his interpretation and he grasped the mic like a seasoned veteran. He wished more people would actually listen to him sing. Occasionally, his eyes fluttered shut like butterflies when he was really feeling it. When he opened his mouth he belted out the lyrics with purpose: "Just gotta get right outta here!" Did it ease the pain for him? Did it bring him just a tiny bit of solace knowing that he was the big fish in this filthy festering brine swamp? He got a roaring round of applause and I saw a nervous little crease form on his lips. But the moment was short-lived for him because there was still a long list of eager crooners waiting their turn. After all, it was still a job.

Sometime around 1am a race war erupted near the bar. I was still in the pool hall, sunken a few feet below the bar. I looked under the varnished log-wood railing and saw two young men rabidly trying to get at one another. The black one was being held back by his black friends and the white one was restrained by his people. I watched them for a moment, like two savage beasts yelling and spitting and clawing, but I found that this display bored me. I had sensed all along that sooner or later a fight was inevitable. I wasn't disappointed or upset. I didn't lose any faith in humanity and I wasn't really interested in watching any kind of violence unravel. I briefly thought that maybe they would shoot each other, and that that would indeed, be exciting. But these boys were just ordinary trash. There was nothing special about them. I knew that neither of them would be carrying a gun so I returned to my game. They were like a square of soiled toilet paper and a used condom tangled together on the sidewalk-nasty to look at, but not really dangerous if you keep your distance.

Some old beanpole kicked everyone out at a quarter till 2. I could see the dust gathering in the deep brown furrows all across his face. He seemed tired and irritated. I looked for my jacket, but it was gone. I felt something seethe in my gut and I raced up to the bar level and scanned the floor. I found it hanging on the back of an empty chair across from a well-groomed Mexican.

"Excuse me man, this is my coat."

"This jacket here, homes?"

"That's right. Someone must have grabbed it by mistake."

"I don't know, man. I think that's my boy's."

I took the jacket and put it on. He straightened in his seat.

"No, it's definitely mine," I said nodding slowly as I put it on. "See, I got my keys in the pocket." I shook it until the sound of metal jingling was audible, but he wasn't convinced.

"Yo man, I think that's my boy's coat," he said again, standing up and looking me in the eye.

"Where's your boy at?" I zipped up the jacket to my neck.

He looked around quickly and didn't see him. His eyes quickly returned to mine. Everything was jagged about him. His lip was curled upward to the left and he was squinting. His pupils seemed to be growing smaller, as if a great pressure was building inside of him, transforming coal into tiny glinting diamonds. Then from behind him a hand reached out and touched his shoulder.

"Hey Nick, it's cool, dog. I got my coat. That's this fool's jacket."

He immediately relaxed. His face widened and his eyes popped back to their normal size. He smiled and his teeth were as white as pearls.

"Oh shit, alright."

He stuck out his hand and I took it. He slapped my back and said something I didn't understand. The old beanpole reached up and turned off the television above the exit and I saw Nick and his boy watching me in the screen's gray reflection as I pushed open the heavy blue iron door and left. Outside, a cold swell smacked me in the face. A small group was huddled together, smoking silently with their eyes closed. It was windy, but there were no drifts. The snow had melted earlier in the afternoon, but was now frozen again into large porous chunks of ice that choked the hollow light pole in the middle of the parking lot.