

WAITING

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He was seated, as usual, on the far side of the bar, a newspaper spread out on the small table, a beer within easy reach of his right hand. A tall, thin man, with close-cropped gray hair and a face that had less expression than the wall at his back.

Were it not that every night he could be found at the same table, he'd probably have gone unnoticed. But he'd been coming into the bar of the Drovers Rest Hotel for a few years now, and we'd learned to accept his silent presence, regarding him, I suppose, as an essential part of the fixtures.

He looked up as I made my way to where Artie and Nick were perched on high stools, then returned his

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eye to the newspaper. He had only one of them. At least, only one any of us had ever seen. A brown leather patch covered that part of his face where his left eye would have been.

“Bull!” Artie was saying as I stepped up beside them. “Either you're born lucky or you —”

“Hi,” I greeted, throwing a leg over a vacant stool, signaling to Rusty, the barman.

Artie flicked a glance at the digital strapped to his thick hairy wrist. “You're late.” He made it sound as if I'd missed roll call.

“Held up at the office,” I explained. “So what's the argument about this time?”

“No argument,” Nick answered. “I was just trying to tell this overweight clown that luck is something you make for yourself.”

“Ah, come on,” Artie moaned. “If that's the case — hell, the bookies wouldn't stand a snowball's.”

“Luck's a mental attitude,” Nick insisted. “If you believe you're lucky you'll be lucky.”

Before he could expound further, the gangling

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figure of Rusty loomed up before us. “Evening,” he greeted, reaching for the empty beer bottles in front of Artie and Nick. “What'll it be?”

“Three of the same.” Artie jerked a thumb in my direction. “And he's paying.”

Rusty nodded, long freckled face unsmiling.

“Hey, Rusty,” Artie called after him. “What's your opinion about luck?”

Rusty turned, frowning. “Mine stinks. Why?”

“Then you'd better have a talk with Nick,” Artie grinned. “He reckons we all have the power to attract our own luck.”

Rusty raised a pale eyebrow. “So how come he hasn't made a good bet in months?”

“Ask him,” Artie laughed. “Ask him.”

“Okay,” Nick said, somewhat miffed that neither of them would take him seriously, give him a chance to elaborate upon the theory he was presently nursing. He had theories about a great many things, though few were retained longer than a week or two. “All right. But watch me this Saturday. If I don't pull off a big one I'll —”

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“You'll what?” Artie chuckled.

“Laugh,” Nick said. “We'll see who's laughing on Saturday.”

Artie nudged me heavily in the ribs. “What do you think?”

“He may have a point,” I answered, though I'd only been half-listening.

“At least someone around here has an open mind,” Nick growled, and hoisted his beer.

The argument continued and they tried to draw me into it. I tossed in a few ideas but kept my feet on neutral territory. For some reason I was more interested in the man with the eye-patch.

Why, I don't know. Though I didn't visit the pub as frequently as did Artie and Nick, I'd seen him often enough before. I even knew that he arrived at five-forty-five each evening and stayed until closing. I knew also that he never consumed more than two beers, that he was always alone, that no one ever went over to him or invited him to join them for a drink. He just sat at his table, reading the paper from front page to last, lifting his

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head only when the swing doors opened to admit another customer.

When Rusty put down our drinks I nodded to where the one-eyed man sat. “Ever find out who he is?”

“Who's interested?” Rusty shrugged. “He's been coming in regularly for more than four years, and in all that time I've hardly had him talk to me.”

“He never talks to anyone,” Nick supplied. “Once I saw a guy invite him up to the bar, but he turned him down cold. Nobody's ever bothered again.”

“Wonder what happened to his eye?” I said, mostly to myself.

Another shrug from Rusty. “Accident, probably.”

A voice from the other side of the horseshoe-shaped bar called him away.

Artie said something that changed the subject and took my mind off the one-eyed man, and as the bar began filling up, the talking and laughter, the clinking of bottles and glasses, grew louder.

Drovers Rest was a pleasant watering hole, and it had always been so. Years back, when I was a kid, it was

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considered to be a country hotel, standing on a large tract of wooded land some twelve miles from the center of the city. In those days the main road that linked our town to others passed in front of it. Time, though, had changed a lot of things.

The old road was still there; so were some of the oaks and pines. But a new freeway had been constructed which, for a few years, had reduced the flow of traffic past the hotel; almost killing it's trade. Then the residential areas began to spread, until Drovers suddenly found itself surrounded by houses, gas stations and supermarkets. Traffic in the area was even heavier now, and most nights of the week you could find the parking lot in front of the rambling single story building packed solid with a variety of vehicles.

I'd started dropping in a year ago, after we'd bought a house in a nearby suburb. Not every night, as did Artie and Nick, but perhaps once or twice a week. And then never for long. My job has me working irregular hours, and often at night. I'm a reporter on *The Chronicle*, the town's only morning paper.

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I'm not sure how I became acquainted with Artie and Nick. I think it was Nick who had borrowed my cigarette lighter one night, who afterwards had struck up a conversation — introduced me to Artie. After that, whenever I'd arrive they'd call me over to join them, or I'd gravitate to where they sat.

They were several years younger than me — in their early thirties — and both had wives and children. Nick had a girl and a boy; Artie had managed three daughters. Nick was rather small of build, with sharp features and a mind like a grasshopper. He had ideas and opinions about everything, and frequently gave the impression of having the solution to the world's problems. But he was a pleasant sort, neither pushy nor demanding, and when he talked there was never anything boastful in his manner.

Artie, on the other hand, had a well-fed, slightly dozy look about him, and a fairly unimaginative approach to life. They were as similar as beans and grapes, yet they'd been close friends since their school days.

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Artie was telling me of an incident at the plant where he worked as a maintenance fitter, when the pub's doors swung open.

“Check what just blew in,” Nick said from the side of his mouth.

“Yeah,” Artie nodded. “Makes you feel ancient, huh?”

The new arrivals swaggered over to the other side of the room where a few tables were lined up against the wall, where the man with the eye-patch sat. One was of medium height, with hair bleached almost white, and long enough to touch his shoulders. His companion was dark and bulky. Both wore black leather jackets festooned with silver studs, skin-tight jeans, and Western boots. Neither could have been more than a year or so beyond twenty.

The racket in the room dropped noticeably when they bellied up to the bar, calling to Rusty in loud, impatient voices.

“Heroes,” I heard someone close by mutter, and another added a similar disapproving comment.

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I could understand their attitude. Drovers was a friendly place at which to spend a little time in the company of other men, most of them family men who wanted to maintain the long-established atmosphere. On a couple of occasions in the past a few rowdies had tried to move in and make themselves at home, but it hadn't taken long to freeze them out.

Most eyes were fixed on the youngsters in their black leather, but it obviously wasn't bothering them. In fact, they appeared to enjoy the attention they were getting. One of them said something that contained a string of loud and colorful words, and the other thumped the bar and burst into raucous laughter. They shouted to Rusty to bring over two more beers.

"Keep the language clean," he scowled when scooping up their money.

"Why?" giggled the swarthy one. "There ladies around?"

"Maybe he's religious," his blond companion suggested. "That your problem?" he asked Rusty.

"Keep it clean, or get out," Rusty warned.

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The blond boy laughed softly, picked up his drink and deliberately turned his back on the barman.

A quiet muttering rippled through the bar, but no one moved. Everybody there wanted the leather jackets out of the place, but none wanted trouble. I reached for my beer, experiencing a twinge of cowardice, ashamed that, like the rest, I could allow myself to feel intimidated by a pair of kids who were still damp behind the ears.

Voice held down, Artie said, "Boy, aren't they the tough guys." His big round face was twisted into a sneer when he spoke.

"Ah, they're all noise," Nick said. "Lean on them and they'll wet their pants and run."

From the corner of an eye I noticed movement over at the wall behind the two rowdies.

The man with the eye-patch was slowly getting to his feet, folding his newspaper. I watched as he pushed his chair back against the table, buttoned the old corduroy jacket around his lean middle. The pockets of the jacket bulged and sagged heavily.

Our friend's leaving early," Artie observed.

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I said nothing. Suddenly I felt very tense ... because instead of moving to the door, the man had taken a few steps closer to where the pair in tight jeans lounged against the bar, laughing too loudly at their own jokes.

“You!” Cold and flat, his voice cut across the room and brought down a curtain of silence. “You!”

The boy with the bleached hair was the first to turn. “Talking to me?”

“Both of you.”

The swarthy one put down his glass, straightened up and faced the one-eyed man. “What the hell's eating you?”

“You don't remember me, do you?”

The blond smiled insolently. “Sure I do. Seen you in dozens of porn flicks.”

His friend erupted into idiotic laughter. “That's it — that's him! Now I remember. Hey, old man, you were great!”

“My name's Ralph Muller,” the man announced.

“And mine's Tarzan,” returned the darker of the

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pair. “So what's it you want, Bum-Eye?”

“No,” the man said, his voice like ice. “No, you don't remember me, do you?”

“Listen, what the hell do you want?” the blond demanded. “You got something on your mind — spit it out.”

“Oh, I have something on my mind all right. And I have something else — something just for the two of you.”

After that it was like watching a scene from an old-time Western movie. His right hand dipped into the pocket of the baggy corduroy jacket and when it came out again it was holding a large automatic pistol.

A yell went up around the bar as heads ducked below the counter. Next to me, Artie moved so fast he toppled his stool.

“Get down!” Nick shouted. But I couldn't move. I swung my gaze to where the two boys stood, eyes stretched wide, jaws dangling. Rusty started towards them, then stopped and backed off to safety.

“Listen —” he began, and whatever else he'd

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intended was lost in a double crack of thunder.

I think I heard one of the boys scream a moment before he was flung violently back against the bar, but I can no longer be sure. Two more shots struck them even as they were sliding to the floor. Then — nothing but the deafening echo of gunfire.

The man lowered the automatic, allowed it to hang down at the side of his leg. If there was any expression on his face I couldn't find it.

Rusty was the first to come to life. He leapt over the bar and went up to where the man stood. Several warnings were shouted, but he ignored them. Beside me, Artie breathed words he'd probably not want repeated.

“Give me the gun,” Rusty told the one-eyed man. “Come on” — he extended his hand — “give it to me.”

In that moment, I'm sure, we all came to know Rusty somewhat better.

The gun lifted. Again there were warning yells as faces vanished below the level of the polished mahogany. Rusty never budged.

“I think,” said the man who had identified himself

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as Ralph Muller, “you had better call the police.” He surrendered the weapon to Rusty.

I looked to where Nick and Artie were climbing to their feet. Their faces the color of old ash.

What followed was mild chaos. Everyone was suddenly talking at once. Someone got down to examine the two boys and announced that both were dead. Another pair took Ralph Muller back to his table and stood guard over him. Still shaken, the rest were trying to get drinks. Nick and Artie were among the latter, and not long later I found myself holding a welcome shot of Scotch. Many of those present had witnessed death in one form or another. But cold-blooded murder ...

The rest was slightly anti-climatic; the police arrived, asked questions, took statements, and finally an ambulance came for the bodies. I left when the police escorted the one-eyed man away. I may have been off duty, but I was still a newspaperman who took orders from an editor who chewed nails and breathed brimstone.

I didn't feel much like stopping for a drink the following evening, but I knew that Artie and Nick would

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be there, waiting for news. The morning edition of *The Chronicle* had carried the story, but it was only surface stuff, information they already had.

There was a beer waiting for me even before I was seated. I looked over to the table at which the one-eyed man had always sat and, not finding him there, revived the feeling of emptiness that had dogged me most of the day.

“So what was it all about?” Artie demanded. “What happened after the cops took him away?”

“Yeah,” Nick said somberly, his narrow face stiff. “He say why the hell he did it?”

I shook my head. I'd spent a lot of hours thinking about it, trying to make some sense out what had happened, and I was still confused.

“It's a long story,” I said, “and so far all I have are bits and pieces — and, anything I tell you, it's off the record.”

“Sure,” Artie nodded. “So shoot.”

And I told them, the story Ralph Muller had given the police, and which, in part, I'd been able to

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substantiate. It was a story of a man who, ten years ago, had stopped at Drovers Rest for a couple of drinks. There had been two young men in the bar that night — boys in silver-studded leather jackets who'd had too much to drink. Somehow they'd succeeded in starting an argument with Muller. The barman had been forced to intervene, to order them to finish their drinks and clear out.

“This was . . . ten years ago?” Nick queried softly.

I nodded. “Anyway, it turns out they left, but they didn't go away. They were waiting for Muller at his car. They beat him up — so badly he wound up in a hospital for several weeks.”

Artie swallowed some more of his drink.

“In case you ever wondered about the leather patch,” I went on, “that beating cost him an eye.” Neither of them said anything. They sat there, fingers clamped around beer glasses, waiting for me to continue.

“After he was discharged from the hospital he had trouble settling back in his job. A few months later he lost it.” I reached for my beer; the talking was making

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my throat dry. “Muller used to be a traveling salesman and, according to the company he worked for back then, a very successful one. But that incident did something to him. It made him cold, distant . . . his relations with people began to change. He landed another job, but it lasted only a short while — as did others.”

“Lousy luck,” Artie offered quietly.

“Anyway, things were all downhill from then on. He was forced to take lesser work, and all the time he was — well, building walls around himself. Then his marriage began to head for the rocks. Eventually his wife left him, took the kids, the house, and most of the money still left from their savings. All of it happened over a period of six years. About then,” I said, taking another swig of beer, “something inside of him must have come unstuck. He'd always blamed the two boys who'd beaten him up for what afterwards happened to him . . . but now he decided to do something about it.”

Artie swallowed hard. “Like . . . kill them?”

“He'd been living in a dingy room,” I told them, “thinking about nothing else. It's what he was doing here

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every night for the past four years: sitting there at that table, waiting for them to come back.”

Nick whistled softly. “And last night they did . . .”

I shook my head. “This happened ten years ago, remember? The boys who beat up Muller were in their early twenties. Same as those he shot.”

Artie's face went blank.

“Don't you see?” I asked. “The ones who put him in hospital would be in their thirties by now.”

Artie's head bobbed slowly. “Yeah . . . of course.”

“Then why . . .?” Nick remained puzzled.

I shrugged helplessly. “I don't know. Perhaps after four years of waiting he became tired. Perhaps his mind began playing tricks on him . . . perhaps when those two came in here and started behaving as they did . . .” I shrugged again. “Hell, I don't know. I'm no psychiatrist; I can't tell you what went on inside his head. But I'm reasonably certain he was convinced he was killing the right people.”

Only then did I realize that Rusty had been hovering close by, listening. I said, “Rusty, were you

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working here ten years ago?”

“Yeah.” He moved in closer, hands flat upon the bar-top. “And if you're going to ask if I remember the incident, the answer is yes. But only vaguely. Matter of fact, I'd almost forgotten it.”

“I seem to recall asking you who Muller was,” I reminded him. “You told me you didn't know.”

“I didn't. At least I didn't recognize him, and that's the truth. He wasn't a regular. If I saw him that night it was for only a few seconds, when I served him. The place was crowded; they had me running my feet off.” His long freckled face took on an even more forlorn expression. “Besides, none of it ever got into the papers. Until last night I'd never heard his name mentioned.”

“But you remember the argument? It was you who told those kids to get out?”

“Listen,” he sighed, “it was a long time back. I remember the night, but not much of what went on.”

“Can you recall who those boys were?”

He paused to think about it. “No,” he said after a while, red head moving from side to side. “I can't.”

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Without taking his eyes off the barman, Artie reached for his glass.

Rusty said, “Anyway, they'd be grown up by now. Probably married and settled down and raising kids. People change, you know?”

He collected the empties and took them to the other side of the bar. Neither Artie nor Nick said anything. We sat listening to the buzz of voices around us, waiting for someone to break the silence, to shift the subject away from the one-eyed Ralph Muller.

Nick made the first attempt, and Artie picked up on it. But it was obvious that they were no longer in the mood for conversation.

I drained what was left of my drink and called to Rusty. It occurred to me that he'd been keeping himself mighty busy all over the place, except at our end of the bar. I had to call three times to get refills.

Nick and Artie accepted the beers I bought, but they left early that night. Earlier than I did.

THE END