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TRIVIA NIGHT

Tait Vigesaa

As I came nearer to the Lucky Stone Pub, I began to recognize John's too-tall and too-lean-to-be-inconspicuous frame idling outside of the brick building. He stood closer to the alley than the entrance. He seemed to carry a tension in hunched-up shoulders that were typically as relaxed as his demeanor, one that bordered between carefree and smug. He craned his neck around in a search for something or someone that I realized was me upon seeing his reaction to finding me. I hurried my pace to meet him at the side of the building. As I got closer, the smell of cigarettes from the idlers outside was quashed by John's heavy cologne as I approached him. It was a familiar and aggressive citrus which he always applied liberally.

"Ike! Where the fuck have you been?" he asked.

"Good to see you too. What? Am I late?"

John recollected himself with a deep breath as he glanced back toward the pub. "No. Trivia hasn't started yet."

"Cool, then what's the problem?"

"You didn't get my texts?"

"No. I left my phone at home. I'm trying to go without it. Be in the now ya know?"

John sighed again. "No, Ike. I don't know. Okay." He glanced over toward the bar again and then down the alleyway which was empty save for some homeless loiterers. "So here's the thing. You remember that job offer I passed on?"

"For that tech startup? Jance?"

"Janus. Yeah, that's the one. Well, they gave me a second offer. A better offer. And I'm taking it. I leave for San Francisco on Sunday."

John spoke energetically and with purposeful articulation, one of many traits that made him well-suited to the public relations work he excelled at. While John had been a climber and well-suited to the sharky world of business, my own talent in copywriting had never been enough on its own to propel me out of freelance hell. John was already earning more than I wanted to imagine, and a job at Janus Tech meant even more. So I congratulated him.

"That's great man. So I probably won't see you and Laura for a while I guess."

John looked around again to see if the coast was clear. "That's what I texted you about. I didn't tell Laura."

"Jesus, man. Really?"

“Don’t give me that. I’m going to break up with her when we get home tonight alright? But I need you to play it cool tonight.”

“Why would you tell me in the first place? Why not just *not* tell me? Then I don’t know. Nothing easier than not knowing something I don’t know.”

John did the calculus of my statement in his head and then continued his pitch. “Just keep the secret tonight man. I want it to go easy for her so just help steer any conversation away from the future or relationship shit.”

“So you want a breakup wingman?”

John’s frown curled back into his familiar smirk. “Exactly. So what do you say?”

“No.”

As I turned to walk away, I felt John’s hand clamp over my arm.

“I forgot the cherry. I talked to Janus Tech about recruiting and they need a kick in the marketing department.”

I stopped and turned to face John. “A job?”

His smirk remained and his eyes squinted as he snared me in. “And you don’t even have to leave Kennewick.”

“So a work-at-home gig. Are you serious?”

“Very. C’mon man. Just help me out. Just pretend you don’t know what you don’t know, right?”

I weighed the prospect of steady work against keeping my newly found knowledge quiet through a few rounds of trivia. I convinced myself that John’s relationship was none of my business. A briefly shitty thing to endure that I didn’t want to involve myself in the details of.

“Okay.”

We walked back into the pub. The Lucky Stone had a narrow interior with a raised set of booths in the back corner. The bar stretched nearly the length of the room, cutting off before a small area with pool tables and keno machines. A large, mounted moose with a green bra hanging from an antler loomed above the bartender, a short man with a wiry, black mustache and fisherman’s cap.

John led the way toward a booth where the girls were waiting.

“Hey, I found him,” he declared.

“Long time no see,” said Laura as she stood up to give me a hug.

Laura possessed a similar energy to John, but where his was calculated and directed, hers was excited in all directions and effortless. As she hugged me, I felt a twinge tense up my shoulders. The agreement had sounded easy in theory outside the bar, but I was beginning to realize that the actual act would be more difficult.

Laura reclaimed her seat by the window.

“We got here early so we could get this spot,” she said.

“Sorry we started drinking before you guys,” another voice said.

“Oh my God,” said Laura. “I forgot to introduce Kelsey. Don’t I have any manners at all?”

She playfully elbowed John as she directed this question at him. He looked at me while forcing a quick nervous laugh.

“Hi. I’m Kelsey.” She offered her hand to shake mine. As I sat down next to her on our side of the booth, I noticed the smell of alcohol and vanilla perfume.

“We met at school,” Kelsey stated. “She’s a nurse. Did you know that? Do you want some margarita?”

“Not a nurse yet,” said Laura, “but I’m pretty close.”

“I’m going to grab some more drinks,” John said, “but not for you.” This was directed at Kelsey who feigned a pout.

I took Kelsey’s offer and was sipping a tart and very alcoholic margarita when I noticed Laura’s hand. It took an effort to make sure I swallowed the drink without letting it back up.

“Where, where did you get that? Is that...” I quickly recognized the panic in my voice and tried to tamp it down.

“Oh this?” Laura held out her hand in the way that engaged fiancées hold out their hands when they’re engaged fiancées. “I guess we haven’t seen you in a while. But John proposed just a couple months ago.”

“Congratulations,” I offered in disbelief as I searched toward the bar where John was supposed to be getting drinks.

Kelsey was busy tapping at her phone and intermittently laughing soundlessly to herself. Laura swirled a straw in her drink and looked toward the bar. I remembered that I was supposed to steer the conversation away from relationships, but an engagement was a different caliber of relationship that I was not prepared for.

John sat back down. I looked at him and Laura as if I were seeing them for the first time. I studied them for a moment before realizing that John was trying to signal something to me with a squinting, maybe twitching, eye. The noise of the bar began to dim in the background. A Joy Division song was playing from the jukebox.

Kelsey quietly implored, “Where will it end,” to herself along with Ian Curtis.

Suddenly a voice interjected, amplified by a small PA system. “Welcome everyone to Trivia Night! I’m your emcee, Reggie, and we’re gonna have some fun tonight.”

Reggie stood in a cleared area next to the booths with a console on a table. For some reason, he wore a fake rasta wig hat with dreadlocks. He explained the rules and rounds and how the devices in our booths where we could input our answers were linked through Wi-Fi to a computer that Reggie was using.

“It’s the future! No more paper!”

“Future...” Kelsey slurred.

“Make sure your phone is put away or we’ll get disqualified,” said Laura.

Kelsey pouted again and put her phone into an enormous, sequined

purse.

“Jesus,” John said, “what do you keep in there?”

“Ohhhh...lotsa stuff. Makeup. Snacks. Some stickers. Mace.”

“Can’t be too careful,” said John.

“Right? I always get hungry when I’m out and don’t have any snacks.”
Everyone laughed but Kelsey.

The first round of questions began with sports. Which we got mostly all wrong, save for my knowledge of Dock Ellis’s acid-fueled no-hitter and Laura’s esoteric knowledge of curling having originated in Scotland. Kelsey had pretty much checked out and John had been focused on keeping chitchat preoccupied with quiz strategy.

“So what’s our strategy?” John asked.

“What if...” Laura offered, “we answer the right answers.”

“I’m in favor of that one,” I said. “How ‘bout you Kelsey?”

Kelsey was dozing in the booth.

I gently poked her shoulder and she sprang up.

“Second wind!” she yelled, energetically but still clearly drunk.

The next round was music trivia.

“It’s Apeman,” I said.

“Huh?” said John.

“Yeah it’s Apeman. Write down Apeman.”

“How do you know all this stuff? It’s crazy.”

“I don’t know. I just know a lot of stuff I wish I didn’t that I might be better off not knowing, I guess.”

I looked at John and his eyes locked on mine. The left one twitched once or twice. He let out a forced laugh, overly eager and designed to change the conversation.

“Hey, uh, how about another round. It’s on me,” he said.

“Thanks buddy.”

The round continued until phones started going off. Reggie took the microphone and warned the audience.

“Hey guys, I hear a lot of phones going off. I don’t want to have...”

A stout man approached Reggie, and he held the microphone to his chest and turned his head to hear him whisper. His eyes grew wide.

“Okay everybody,” he stammered, “there’s been a, uh, an incident. We’re gonna turn the bar TV to the news and put a hold on trivia night.”

The short bartender with the black mustache reached up to the flat screen above the bar to turn it on. As he searched the channels for breaking news, the bar was filled with murmurs and people holding their hands over their mouths as they read from their phones. In the relative quiet, a glass shattered somewhere in the back of the pub. Someone shouted, “Shit.”

On the television, a white-haired news anchor was addressing the

country while a helicopter camera hovered above the Capitol building in D.C. The banner below the man read, "VICE PRESIDENT AND SENATORS SHOT AT CAPITOL BUILDING." The news ticker below gave developing details about a lone gunman that may have had ties to IEL, that there was a late-night vote where the vice president was present, and that the president had been taken to Camp David or some other secure location.

In our booth, John stared intently at the television. Laura stared through the table and fiddled with the ring on her finger. Kelsey tapped at her phone.

I stood up in a daze. My head felt heavy. I decided to walk home, but I came up with a cover. "Hey, I'm gonna step out for a smoke."

As I got up, John's attention snapped in my direction.

"I'll join you," he said.

Outside of the pub, I lit my cigarette and inhaled deeply. It was one of those moments where it tasted bad enough to quit. None of the pleasure. Just ash and tar.

Near the pub, a food truck had parked on the curb. The distinct smell of Indian food wafted in with the smoke, and I started to feel sick. Across the street at a bar called The Hard Place, punks loitered outside. The nervous air outside of the pub contrasted with the punks across the street who either didn't know or maybe didn't care.

"Give me one of those." John had appeared next to me and was pawing at my pack of cigarettes.

"I thought you didn't smoke."

"I don't but we need to regroup."

I gave him a cigarette and watched him hack and cough after inhaling. "What do you mean *regroup*?"

"Things have been going pretty well so far. But we have to keep trivia night going, ya know?"

"No, I don't know, man. I'm gonna call it. I'm going home."

"Hey, the reason I came out here is that there's talk about calling off trivia. Now, I don't mean to be insensitive, but I can't break up with you-know-who if everyone's just going to go home and sulk."

"Seriously?"

"Well...yeah. C'mon man you gotta help. Let's try and get spirits up in there. You got my back right?" John didn't wait for an answer but patted me hard on the back and went inside.

I stood on the curb and studied a young man across the way. He had a jean jacket with the sleeves cut off. A flaccid mohawk that rested over a face that looked like a boxer's. He noticed me and flipped me off. I returned the gesture. He smirked and gave an acknowledging nod.

I walked into a different atmosphere inside the bar. Reggie was gone, and John was leading the trivia hosting ceremonies. He stood on the bar and rattled off questions, trying to censor any that might be related to ei-

ther terrorism or romance, which was a difficult task in the movie round.

"In this Oliver Sto...uh, nope let's not do that one. Uh," he shuffled through the index cards, "here we go. In the opening scene of *The Godf... fuck!*" he muttered under his breath.

I sat down at the table where neither Laura nor Kelsey was engaged in playing trivia. Laura looked listlessly at her drink while Kelsey sipped a new drink. I felt a pain beginning to pulse behind my eyes, so I closed them and sat straight, leaning against the hard wooden back of the booth. I massaged my temples as I tried to drown out the sound of John's questions.

A moment passed, and surprisingly it was Kelsey that broke the silence in the booth. "You think it's terrorism?"

"Probably. Why would one guy do that?" Laura said.

"Lotta reasons," I offered, my eyes still closed.

"Amok," Kelsey whispered.

"What's that?" I asked, leaning back onto the table.

"It's this thing my grandma told me about. A normal person just snaps one day and goes out in this like violent blaze. It can happen to humans or animals. She said sometimes it would happen to rogue elephants and they would kill people for no reason."

She returned to her drink as Laura and I pondered the amok.

Slowly at first, but very steadily, the noise of John's awkward questions grew into a speech until it started to gain attention from the people in the bar.

"We cannot let the terrorists win! If we change anything about how this night should have gone then the terrorists win! Is that what you want? Do you want those motherfuckers to control your lives? Do you want to bow down to them?"

"NO!" was the resounding cry from the pub that grew louder with each question.

People were standing now and cheering. Clapping for John's empty gestures of patriotism. Laura was resting her head in one elbow of her folded arms on the table.

I leaned over and put a hand on her shoulder. "You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," she answered through her arm in a muffled voice, "just a little drunk and a lot tired."

I leaned back against my seat. Laura began to breathe evenly, dozing into a nap. Kelsey had finished another drink. I finished a shot that had been left idle from before the news broke. I hadn't expected tequila, and it burned going down. I exhaled a hot breath and wiped the tears from my eyes. Laura snored, and Kelsey rocked in the corner even more drunk while the crowd continued to chant, "USA! USA!"

Then Kelsey said something to no one or maybe to me.

"So excited," she slurred.

"Excited?" I asked.

"Yeah, I'm so excited."

“Why?”

“For San Francisco, silly.”

I felt a shock go through my body at this revelation. I stood up and ran to the bathroom, vomiting into the toilet but mostly on it and the wall behind. I spit into the toilet and wiped my nose with a wad of toilet paper. I stood up and walked toward the sink and drank from the faucet. I took handfuls of water and splashed my face. When I looked up to the mirror, I was confronted by my reflection. I was involved whether I liked it or not. I took two deep in-and-out breaths and walked out of the bathroom.

What I returned to in the pub was a room half-empty. The rowdier members of the group had formed a posse and were outside chanting. I looked at the mob outside and walked the long walk back toward the booth trying to come up with a way to explain. How to tell Laura. How to get her away from Kelsey. What to say.

As I came to the booth, Kelsey was now the one sleeping and Laura was awake staring into nowhere. I sat down and tried to find the right words but couldn't break the silence.

Laura spoke first. “It's just so fucked up.”

I froze and struggled to reply.

“It's okay,” she said, “we all process things differently. I've never known John to be so patriotic and feel so strongly. But if that's what helps him get through something like this...”

Tears welled in my eyes and I searched deep down in me for a reply. Even a single word to begin. Was now the right time?

Suddenly, I heard the crash of glass breaking behind me at the front of the pub. The cry of voices had turned from cheers to anger. The muffled noise from outside had entered the bar, and I stood up and walked quickly toward the entrance.

When I pushed open the door, I looked up the street to see a group of men rocking the food truck and yelling. John stood in the midst of them, motivating them and chanting. “Fuck you terrorist!” was the new chant that had caught on. I surveyed the scene in helplessness before I saw that some of the truck pushers were brawling in the street with the punks from across the street. The boxer-faced punk was kicking a man on the ground and making his way toward another group.

I walked toward where John was standing and grabbed him by the back of his shirt and pulled him from the group. Surprised by the grab, he whipped around and backhanded me across the chest.

“What the fuck are you doing, John?”

“What does it look like, Ike? I'm leading a movement.”

John looked not unlike himself but like an exaggerated version. He still wore his smirk, but his face was gripped with an intensity that gave it a shine of menace. The mob continued to push the truck as others were picked off into individual tussles. John wiped spit from his mouth. He breathed heavily and was drenched in sweat. Underneath the sour smell

of sweat in the crowd lingered the faint bite of citrus cologne.

“Just go home. You’ve wanted to go home all night, so just go,” he said.

“No. This is too far, John. Jesus, can’t you see what you look like?”

“Why is everyone trying to hold me back? You’re no better than Laura, you know that?”

“What are you talking about?”

“This whole fucking world, man. Everyone is out here trying to tell me what I can’t do. Where I can’t go. What I can’t be. We can’t let the terrorists win!”

John shoved me, and I tripped backward against the curb. I struggled to my feet.

“John. Listen to yourself. This was never about the terrorists. It was always about you covering your ass.”

“Excuse me? What the fuck kind of friend are you anyway?”

“One who didn’t used to know better.”

I took a swing with all my strength at John. It was my first fight, so I barely grazed him on the jaw. I recoiled in surprise at the pain in my hand. John wiped his chin and checked for blood. The shock on his face curled back into his smirk as he lunged at me.

We fell to the ground, and my back hit the wet, hard pavement. John was over me, with both size and position to his advantage. He pummeled his fists into me as I tried to block him with my forearms, feeling the sharp stinging blows in my arms as I tried to protect my face.

“Are you a terrorist, Ike?”

“You’re fucking insane!” I shouted.

My arms were exhausted and beat. With John kneeling on my chest, I struggled for breath as his knees dug into my ribs and ground my back into the pavement.

“You’re gonna keep your fucking mouth shut!” John yelled.

I felt woozy, and the sound of the crowd and John’s ravings started to become drowned out by the muffled and close sound of each blow. My vision began to blur as I felt the first punch connect to send a burning electricity through my face. I thought he would get up, but he punched again and then paused. I knew in my mind then that John wanted to kill me. I braced myself for the final blow but instead felt a wet burning in my eyes and nose. I started coughing as the weight of John fell off of me.

I rolled onto my side coughing and trying to rub my eyes to unblur my vision.

John howled like a mad man on the ground and clawed at his face and eyes.

Above both of us stood Laura with Kelsey’s mace. She was breathing heavily and had clearly not finished processing what had just happened.

“What the fuck?! My fucking eyes!” John yelled.

I stood up clumsily and surveyed the scene. Many of the truck-pushers had dispersed, and the punks were back on the other side of the street.

John howled on the sidewalk. I walked over to him and kicked him in the stomach.

“What the hell is going on?” Laura asked, standing between us and the pub.

For better or worse I said it. All of it. The job, the plan, Kelsey. Through pauses to spit out pooled blood in my mouth or to try and recollect the order of events. What I knew and what I didn’t. Things that now made sense to Laura that seemed strange before. It was all out and I wasn’t carrying it anymore.

She asked a few stern questions to clarify fuzzy points. And then she stood there looking at me.

“If you need someone to talk to about all thi...”

She slapped me hard on the face, zapping all the areas already bruised and bleeding.

We stood there another moment before she opened her mouth to begin to say something but held it and left. I didn’t go after her. I didn’t stay to talk to the police. I didn’t go into the pub to talk to John or Kelsey.

Blood pooled again in my mouth, coppery and wet. I spit it onto the ground, and I turned and stepped off the curb. I walked across the street, my limbs aching, my eyes still watering. I made a motion toward my wallet pocket, but the man at the door waved it off and opened the heavy door to the bar and let me in.

Going down the stairs, I began to hear the faint chimes of a glockenspiel. The basement venue was filled with smoke and flashing lights, half-filled with enthusiastic bodies crowded tightly together as a band played a Ramones cover. It was a song I hadn’t heard, but I caught on to the chorus of “la la las” and joined in. I maneuvered my way tightly into the mass of bodies jumping up and down, shaking the floor. The buzz of guitars and thumping bass traveled through wires to rattle and resonate in my chest. The smell of sweat and smoke and alcohol and perfume all wafted into one. I swallowed the blood in my mouth and let my body become one among the pulsing mass.