Blizzard

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Teddy watched her glide across the stage. The dark-haired Mexican boy had his hand at her waist as she twisted her hips.

“Here you are.” The waitress thumped the coaster and drink onto the table and left with the second emptied glass.

Here you are. Yes, here he was at Sassy Cats’ Bar. It was a first. His friends were having game night as usual but he wasn’t up for cards. He wasn’t up for their infuriating easiness and the clouds of cigar smoke that tainted Mrs. McNab’s dining room wallpaper yellow. Memories fermented beneath that peeling parchment. No, a good drink amongst unfamiliar people was what he needed right now. An atmosphere to nourish the dry pain, not starve it to insanity.

He gulped down the Cooley in one and slumped back in his seat, but somehow his shoulders refused to sag. He hauled back into sitting position and slipped his hand into his pocket. His fingers touched the cold brass square.

The guitar’s last strum was muffled by wind rattling at the door; dry hinges screeched and the old wood groaned. The two dancers stepped down from the stage. Teddy watched the young woman’s thin collarbones heave and the glitter twinkle upon her pushed-up breasts. It made him think of his girlfriend’s slumped shoulders. She was probably dealing the deck as he sat there in the dank chill. He could envision the jerking of her wrist where the tarnished charm bracelet forever hung.

He pulled out the lighter and flicked it open.

“Another round?”

“Yeah.”

Shrieks crackled at the dingy glass windows. The dim overhead lights flickered, then died. At the next table, somebody fell to the ground with a grunt.

“What’s gone wrong?” The man’s belligerence pitched him forwards; there was a snap and splintering wood. A table leg rolled
away into a dark corner.

“Damn, Neal! Sit the hell down, won’t you? The storm’s probably just blown over another tower.”

“No-no! Here, see, I’m going to Charley’s.”

Teddy gripped the lighter hard as he watched the hunched form of the man called Neal trip his way across the room.

“Neal, I wouldn’t go out there. Hey man, come on back!”

The bar door was flung open and wicked whiteness blasted into the room. A few people screamed, furiously ducking out of the icy stream. Neal disappeared into the blizzard and the door thudded shut behind him. Never to be seen again, Teddy thought.

“All right, just calm down,” the barman shouted. “We’ll have to wait it out. No big deal. Just nobody else leave, right? It’s too dangerous.”

The waitresses lit a few candles. Teddy pushed his thumb against the brass and the flame blazed in the darkness. He closed it. He opened it again. White pellets bombarded the window pains. Condensation from his half-empty glass trickled over his fingers.

She was standing in front of him. The flame illuminated the sparkles shimmering at the corners of her eyes. The smell of sweat and exotic perfume wafted with her.

“Why do you keep flicking that thing?”

Teddy shrugged. “Nice dancing.”

“Thanks. I’m Reina.”

“Teddy. . . . I don’t smoke.” He wasn’t sure what made him say that. He was thinking of cheap-smelling cigars and bent cards. The rancid smell of perfume and barley alcohol filled his nostrils. In the dark, he saw the silvery silhouette of her glossed lips turn upward in a smile.

“Then why do you have a lighter?”

“Doesn’t matter. You don’t want to know.”

She dragged a stool over and hopped onto it. The little beads at the bottom of her short-cropped skirt jingled.

“Yes, I do.”

“It’s a long story.”

“Make it short.”

“It belonged to a friend.”
“Who?”
“A dead man.”

Somewhere in the darkness, radio static buzzed.
“Did you kill him?”
Teddy grunted into his drained glass. “You want to know all this?”

“Seems to me like you need to tell somebody. Did you kill him?”

Teddy fingered the lighter. “I did.” (God, he hadn’t seen him in time. They all looked the same in their green and tan uniforms.)

“What?”

“I can’t control war.”

“You’re a vet.”

“Iraq.” Teddy felt the familiar lurch in his gut. Andrew Carson’s voice. Snow in Iraq that January. (God, Andrew. Why had he run out from the bush like that? Of course, Teddy had let the bullets fly. Red holes. Red dirt. Red metal square.)

“Is it awful?”

“What kind of question is that?”

Reina’s eyelids smeared in moondust shadow flickered. “A quick one.”

“Yeah, it’s hot there. Usually.” He could see the tattered children leaping in the white downpour; an omen of peace they called it.

“How old were you?”

“Eighteen. I looked forward to joining for a whole year. Then I went. And I realized it was stupid to dream.”

“Maybe it’s just stupid to dream about war.”

“Maybe. But, I’m telling you. It’s not about us. Any of it. Life in general. There’s something bigger than the both of us.”

The door flew open and it took two men to force it shut again. A waiter shoved a table against it. White wisps floated dazedly to the floor and dissolved into little puddles. Teddy gripped the lighter. He could see Andrew’s face, his dark eyelashes trimmed in snowflakes. His voice rang through the silent snowfall; his red nose he kept submerged in the yellowing book he’d dragged with him halfway across the world. He was so addicted to Thomas and all
those other dead poets. (God, Andrew. God.)

“What do you mean?” Reina said.

Teddy shrugged and drained another glass he hadn’t told the waitress to bring. The cool spice and froth warmed his throat, then left it lumpy and dry.

“Why’d you sign up?”

“My dad’s a politician.”

“So?”

“So I dreamed. I yearned to know.”

“Stop flicking that thing.”

Teddy snapped the square shut and put it away in his pocket.

“I dream,” she said.

“About what?”

“Dancing. I want to travel the world teaching Salsa. I can make that happen.”

Teddy laughed, the froth roiling in this throat like boiling blood. “That’s what you think. You’re a weekend dancer at a Wyoming bar. And there’s a blizzard outside. Isn’t it supposed to be sunny where people dance Salsa?”

“I’m not staying here forever.”

“That’s what you think.” Teddy felt his hand creeping towards his pocket. He laced his fingers around his glass. “Why’d you come over here, anyway?”

“Couldn’t tell you. I was watching you flick that lighter and it seemed to draw me to you.”

“That’s deep.”

“Lay off.”

“Was it a mistake? Coming over here?”

“I don’t know,” she shuffled on her stool, “Maybe.”

“Good.”

“Why would you want that?”

“That’s just what I expected.”

“Seems like a weird thing to expect.”

“Which is why expecting something or waiting for something to happen is so pointless. Things will happen or they won’t. No reason in anticipation. It just drains you dry.” (God, Andrew.)
Teddy felt himself lurch forward, the alcohol seething on his breath. “Let me tell you something,” he breathed, “you never want to know.”

“Well, you’re quite the philosopher,” Reina said, leaning back slightly.

“Not really. I’ve just learned.”
“Mean you’ve been hurt.”
“Same thing.”
“Everybody’s been hurt, though. That doesn’t mean they have to stop dreaming.”
“No, but they should.”

Somebody nearby chucked a tankard at the radio. Alcohol sizzled on the ancient speakers and the buzzing stopped.

“You’re wrong. That’s not how life works.”
“That’s one opinion.” Teddy pulled out the lighter and the flame again flickered between them. “You’ll know. One day.”
“Really? You’re going to start that again?”
“Yep.”
“I’ll see ya around.” She dismounted the stool and straitened her tinkling skirt.

“No, I don’t expect so.”
“Either way.” She left.

After another glass of Cooley, Teddy watched the tree fall. Laughing snow clung to its broken bark and starved branches. Howling, the wind thrust the enormous trunk through the window. Glass shattered and the pieces skittered like diamonds across the white floor. Teddy’s grip slipped on the lighter and it danced away from him. Flames churned inside him as the square spun high and he saw the same lighter skittering across blood-soaked dirt, Andrew’s white hand lying outstretched feet away. Teddy reached wildly for it and just managed to clasp it in his numb fingers, smacking his leg on the side of a table. Pain seared through his thigh muscles like hot water on skin.

Everyone had to move into the back dining room to escape the screaming chill. Teddy pressed the cool metal shakily and the little flame sparked; Andrew’s voice carried on tufts of hot breath.

“Rage,” Teddy whispered to the darkness. “Do not go gentle
into that good night. Rage, rage against the dying of the light.”

He flicked the lighter. “Rage…..rage.....rage....”

Cramped in the corner, Teddy watched Reina talking with the Mexican dancer boy. Her cheeks glittered when she laughed, like snow under pale moonlight.