**One More Time Around**

“Whiskey, friend.Rye. Rittenhouse. Double.”

The barman smiled and said as he gathered tumbler, jigger, bourbonit must’ve been that kind of a day huh.

 “Bottle of beer, too. Red Church. Been *that* kind of a that-kind-of-a-day.” The mansettled up, pulling notes from a tarnished billfold; waved away change while mumbling some flattened thanks; settled himself at a small circular table back in the corner shadows of the bar. He pulled a phone from inside his jacket, flipped it open and stabbed at it, keying a number from memory. He held the phone against his ear for a short while and adjusted his flat-cap, palming it down at back then giving the underside of the peak a sharp flick. He sipped his whiskey, closed his eyes, swallowed; pulled his lips tight and sucked the fumes over his teeth. His eyes remained shut as he held the tumbler to his nose and inhaled. He snapped the phone shut and placed the handset on the table. He stretched his short legs before him, crossing brown leather boots so faded they looked coated in dust.Yes, indeed:*that* kind of a that-kind-of-a-day. He chased bourbon with beer as, too loud, “The Bright Side of the Road” started playing. His eyes darted towards the jukebox and the woman mock-dancing her way back to herfriends.He held the tumbler near its top and traced small circles in the air.The corners of his mouth flickered slightly, pulling down and back. His eyes looked suddenly glassy.

\*\*\*

Ground-floor house conversion, the owner-manager living upstairs – a small bar. Twenty people made it feel like a busy night, fifty thatthe room might burst its seams. The wallpaper – purple diamonds on gold or gold lattice on purple, depending on how you took it – made the place feel smaller yet. The music from the jukebox seemed to fill every space not occupied by a drinker. He took down the last of his beer and signalled for another round.

 “How you doing tonight? Everything ok?” the barman asked as he set the drinks down.

 “Fine, fine.Fine. Fine so long as I don’t leave here the way I came in.”

 “Come again.”

 The man paused. “All is well. Well as could possibly be.”

Alone once more, the man alternated sips of each drink. Something must have caught his eye, for he tilted slightly to the left and looked down at the floor. He let out a brief laugh, *sotto voce*, and, still looking down, hitched his left trouserleg at the knee. He returned attention to drinking. He’d ordered another round before he’d finished draining the beer.

\*\*\*

At the start of his fourth round, he took his drinks and limped the short distance to the jukebox, nestled tight against the wall and between the end of the bar and a two-seater naugahyde sofa. His left boot caught and dragged behind, like a half-on-half-off sock. He put in money enough for five records. He looked for a moment at the wallpaper – trying to work out whether he was seeing gold-on-purple or purple-on-gold –then started flicking through the jukebox menu. Eclectic, hodgepodge: anyone’s guess.

When his first choice – Mahalia Jackson, “In the Upper Room” – started up he braced himself on the jukebox, shoulders bunched, and watched the record spin. He remembered a years-ago Sunday when wandering Harlem midmorning he’d been arrested by the sounds of distant haunted singing rising up through the ground. It came from the basement churches. Standing at an intersection, he got wisps of music from two, three, maybe fourcongregations. He was struck by the lack of dissonance in it all.

As Jackson finished, he lost his right hand and lurched forwards off the jukebox, jolted back to presence. He looked down atthe baggy cuff of his jacket.

Second and third tunes were hardly bar music any more than the first had been. Grant Green’s “My Favourite Things” – the volume of the jukebox failing to do justice to the group’s fire: Green’s clean skipping lines, Jones’s polyrhythmic wash and pots-and-pans-clatter, Tyner’s driving dotted-quarters – followed by the Julie Andrews version. Did he register the fight that broke out during the Andrews version? Two too-drunk friends whose play spilled over, and was ended by an open-palm across a nose, a spray of blood over one gold-purple wall and a woman. She went away screaming but left behind her outline, perfect in dappled red. As this played out, the man was thinking about the time a stranger – on her way to the airport – had given him a bag of apples (*neither time nor stomach to eat them before, can’t take them through*) and he, in return, had bought coffees from the nearby van. They had talked awhile as they drank. And they had parted not ten minutes later without the asking and giving of names.

He looked to the barman,and, having caught his eye,jabbed a finger twice at his empties and nodded. Now Blakey’s Jazz Messengers were moanin’, while outside – framed in the bar’s bay window – the too-drunk friends and the blood-spattered woman wept: she on her own on a bench, rubbing her bare arms, her mascara running into the red specks on her face; they on one another, professing eternal fraternal love forehead to forehead, the neck of each clamped in the other’s right hand.Round five appeared at his elbow.

\*\*\*

He was into round sixand had kicked his dusty boots off under the shadow-draped table by the time the last pick came on. “Sweet Caroline.” He smiled as, during the build-up to the first chorus,someone started singing along, was joined by another, and then another, until anyone who did not pipe up for the words joined the horn section, singing the stabs that made stranger point in rough and ready time with the musicto stranger, as if sighting an old and nearly-lost friend. At some point, he may have been swaying arm-in-arm with the barman and singing along as the gold and purple danced around him, each colour switching roles between fore- and background; he may too have shown to anyone who would look some dogeared photos he kept in his inside breast pocket. *Boy, you need trousers that don’t come all the ways down over your feet* someone laughedwhen the bootless manslow-stumbled over his cuffs onto his knees, spilling round seven. That same someone had round eight sent to the man who, back at his table, raised his bottle in thanks; that same someone tipped a wink in return.

The barman brought the drinks over, and suggested thatthis be the last round.

“Told you,” the man said.

“Told me what?”

“Wasn’t going out the way I came in. Watch me fade, brother: legs have already started to vote with their feet.” He nodded his chin downwards. The barman’s eyes followed. Then he lifted and straightenedhis leg. The barman was only vaguely surprised not to see a foot.

“You need some trousers that fit, man.” As the barman turned away shaking his head, the man made a move for his beer. He missed, and his bagged and threadbare cuff caught and overturned the tablecentre. “Jacket, too.” The barman righted and reset the small glass vase and single plastic flower, while the man looked for his hands.

\*\*\*

One or two people may have noticed, without marking, the solitary, raggedy drunk – the one who emerged from the corner shadows to start a singalong; too far gone even to hold a drink in one hand (let-alone-stand, let-alone-walk). Noticed without marking him cradling his drinks – now bourbon, now beer– in the folds of the cuffs of his too-baggy coat. No one would remember whether or not they saw him leave. Somewhere in the thick of the evening, perhaps that samesomeone thought about sending another round over, but thought better when he saw the deflated and crumpled shape of the man: slouched into the seat, peak of the flat-cap down against his chest, like a slow-melting candle.

\*\*\*

The barman, mopping up at night’s end, merely shruggedwhen he came across a flat cap, worn coat, and dusty brown boots. In the cap:scattered change; a tarnished billfold gripped a few dogeared photos, creased and cracked,the images faded to indistinction.