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Last Call at Shakespeare's

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by Jacob Adamson

According to the bartender, Shakespeare's jazz club was always just an hour away from peak time. The bar wasn't a seedy place. Calling it so would have been a compliment. At some point in the past, back when I was in my twenties and the world was in the fifties, the bar was seedy. It had now moved beyond seedy, it was just sad. I'm in my late fifties and the world has moved on to the nineties. What the nineties would be looked at as, I wasn't entirely sure of. What I was sure of is that they wouldn't be considered the Golden Age of Jazz. No one listened to jazz anymore, hell, this may have been the only place in the city that still had live music, but, again, it would be a stretch to call it live music. I would call it dead music, dead music in a dead bar.

Back in the fifties, this place had been hopping with thugs, mobsters, and the various scum of the era. There was a different crowd at the bar now. There were the old men who had traded their dreams of success for dreams of another beer. They would sit at the end of the bar nursing their drink, staring into its murky depths trying to see the happiness that might be found at the bottom of the glass. They were as much part of the scenery as the stools they sat on. There were suits hiding from their wives. Their ties loosened and top buttons undone they crawled to the bartender about their boss and the market and how they would probably be fired the next day. They muttered about the end of the Regan boom and stocks and the Federal Reserve. They complained about Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, but only about how it affected the market. What the nineties would be looked at as, I wasn't entirely sure of. What I was sure of is that they wouldn't be considered the Golden Age of Jazz. No one listened to jazz anymore, hell, this may have been the only place in the city that still had live music, but, again, it would be a stretch to call it live music. I would call it dead music, dead music in a dead bar.

At one end of that room, on a faintly blue-lit stage, sat the faintly beating heart of Shakespeare's. She clutched the microphone in her hands like it was the last source of warmth in the whole gray city of Philadelphia. Sweet melancholy notes escaped her lips. Her slender, silver dress was spotted with cigarette burns masquerading as bullet holes. When she ended her song and stepped off the stage, not a person in the whole place so much as glanced away from their drinks.

She walked over to me, balanced precariously upon her 6-inch heels. As she took a seat, her hand fell upon mine so casually it may as well have been an accident. She turned to me, her face the same as the last hundred times I had seen it. "Would ya like to go upstairs suga' ?" she asked. Given her family's name, it seemed unlikely to find her here. If I were a rich man I would call her old money. Of course this meant she had a name, but nothing else. However, I am just a sad old detective in sad old jazz club in the sad old city of Philadelphia, so I just call her Debbie. I'm getting awfully tired of her also. When she talks she betrays the fact that her teeth have a speckled look, and for a jazz singer, I find her voice remarkably annoying. Still, we've been doing the horizontal mamba for the better part of the last two months, and I'm not one to turn that down.

I can't stay with someone that long and not get bored, not notice her flaws. Once I discover them, they're always there; they grow and become the only thing I can focus on.

"I sure would hun." My stellar mimicry of her accent went unnoticed.

She took my hand and led me through the crowd. A dog on a leash, I followed her to the room upstairs.

An hour later, she was putting her clothes back on. It had been similar to the other times, but with even less emotion and passion, if that were possible. It was probably time to move on from this relationship and find one with some emotion in it.

Wind berated the large window on one side of the room. In the darkness, I saw Debbie walk up and stare into dim streets below. I got up, put my pants on, and walked up behind her. I contemplated how I should tell her that I didn't want to see her anymore, or if I even should tell her at all. A loud sound shattered the silence as a bullet burst through the window. Instinctively, I turned and raised my arm to cover my face. Glass sprayed over it and drew thin red lines across the surface.

I waited a moment, felt my chest, and realized happily that I was still alive. I allowed a sigh of relief, whoever was trying to kill me had missed, terrible shot. I rose up and realized my terrible misinterpretation of the situation. By the entirely shattered window lay the still body of Debbie. The glass shards covering her body glittered like pure white snowflakes. A cold wind was pouring unabated into the room, taunting the red curtains to move. I approached hesitantly and rolled her body onto her back. I single red hole in the center of her forehead had ended her life.

At least now I wouldn't have to find a way to leave her. I'm a glass half full kind of person.

I wondered why anyone would want to kill Debbie. It real-ized that, in the months that I had known her, I had neglected to learn anything about her. All I knew is that she was a jazz singer at a bar where no one listens to jazz. I unclasped her purse and searched through it for something that resembled a clue. [IM]

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