



The Tulane Review

— SPRING 2019 —

THE TULANE REVIEW

Spring 2019

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Before September

Dan White

"We better lay off the hard stuff," suggested my good lady. "You know how you get when you're drinking that."

"Right. Let's go with the wine."

—Bukowski, *Hollywood*

The rain had stopped, earlier—well stopped perhaps too generous, it had never actually rained to begin with. Rather the streaked-grey skies had hinted with a whisper, promising something about moisture, but it was only a bluff, really, and you could tell by the pause in the wind's breath that there was no substance behind the threat. And now the breeze ambled in through the doorway at an even more gradual rate than the pace of conversation, pretending to refresh the octogenarian bar without putting any actual work towards it. It was early afternoon, probably, although this was only a guess; the establishment had around longer enough to know the danger that clocks presented, and never kept them visible. The woman was wearing a white shirt, not an ordinary, simple-to-make-sense-of kind of shirt, but one of those shirts that hangs in only partially definable ways somewhere around the shoulders, with minuscule hemlines running around the neck and short, abbreviated sleeves. He thought it looked nice on her, especially seeing as it was, after all, only a white shirt. In any event, the garment did what it could, and that was more than most did, really.

They'd been sitting there for some length of time, that much was certain, but he wasn't really sure of anything more specific than that. There was a pool table in the center of the floor, but not centrally located in the way that bars nowadays set things up; the tables were arraigned in no way 'towards' or 'around' the table, rather the table was there, right where it was, and everything else had sort of fallen in around it, at some hazy, earlier time when drinks had fewer adjectives and the music fewer abbreviations. He was wearing one of those buttoned-down shirts that the men wear when they are trying to place themselves somewhere between openly indifferent and really making an effort, but it worked for him, she thought, anyway. In fact, she noted briefly, in the month or two or so that they'd been sitting together around tables, he'd almost—definitely?—only worn shirts of that varietal. She made a note to think about that later.

Her hair was doing that thing it'd been doing lately that really bothered her, and now one strand hung down around her face like an incessant puppy scratching its way across the polished linoleum of an under-used kitchen. She'd been meaning to get it trimmed again for some time now. She had to renew the blonde soon anyway, not that she'd ever given too much worry to that. Actually, she had

been loosely planning to that afternoon, before he'd called with news about an early departure for work and request for an idle afternoon beer. She was happier with the course of the afternoon now, but hoped she wouldn't forget to reschedule the appointment soon.

He'd lied, earlier, about the afternoon. Well, not exactly lied, but rather let on that the news was fresh at the time he imparted it. In fact he'd known he would have the afternoon off for over a week, but they'd just seen each other the day before yesterday, and for some reason he felt more...secure, perhaps, in calling up 'out of the blue' with an impromptu invitation, as opposed to asking to plan something out in advance. They were nearing the point in which such things wouldn't have to be thought about so much, he knew, but they weren't quite there yet. He had never been one to lack for confidence, and he was sure that nothing had changed, but with her everything was higher pitched, elevated in a way that made him think twice about things he hadn't before.

She was surprised, in a way, about how infrequently found herself second-guessing herself so far, how much she'd let herself simply go along with it all, without thinking about what it all meant. In the past she had always ended up trying to be some particular and focused version of herself, a her that was catered to the possible proclivities of a potential date. It wasn't something that she ever realized in the momentum, only afterward, after things had fizzled or died down or I've just been so busy lately. It was only then that she would look back and realize that she had, without ever planning to, spent arduous half hours before a dinner or a meeting at a bar thinking very intently about wardrobes and hair-styles, topics of conversation and how exactly she should frame her profession in a way that seemed the most adult-yet-still-fun. Carving out small principalities within the vast territory of her personality to offer up for tour, to say 'yes this is exactly how much of me I assume you'd like to meet, at this precise time in this undefined string of dates we've been on that I don't have the nerve to call dating'. It was this ongoing routine of self-self-appropriation that she realized had been missing now, this time, with him. It was working rather well. Besides, she knew he liked her; besides his having more or less said just that, she knew. But of course that was nothing new, a lot of people liked her, in varying degrees and towards varying ends. What was new was her growing certainty that he liked a full and unfiltered version of her, a her that hadn't been spending every moment with him constantly evaluating what she was presenting. That was new, and it was welcome.

He'd finished his bottle of beer a few minutes ago but he'd waited, not wanting to break up the pleasant subset of conversation, and carried on with it for a while, in that way people have of semi-consciously speeding up towards the chapter break in their dialogue in order to both A) get there and B) avoid waiting too long to do so. He was enjoying this conversation just as much as practically all the others they'd had; what he enjoyed most about them, it had occurred to him the other day, was that for the most part, five minutes after they would stop

talking, he wouldn't be able to say what it was they'd discussed. He liked this. He also noticed that they'd skipped over the ceremonial exchange of biographies on their first date, to the effect that he now only had a vague notion of her job or the members of her immediate family. He did know, however, that she'd traveled to only three states but seven countries, she always read the last chapter of a novel before starting from the beginning, and that they apparently shared a deep affinity for button down shirts. He liked that they were skipping steps, he liked even more than they'd done so without trying, and as he smiled at her, waiting for her latest story to end, he liked that he was in no rush for it to happen. When they reached the lull he paused a beat and took it, asking with an extended rise off his barstool whether she'd like another. It was a question asked only from routine, and he hadn't really noticed he'd asked it until he already had. She did, of course. He nodded softly, easily, in a cool manner that disputed the lack of air conditioning. That outward self-assurance that hung around him, that she'd noticed first, and the novelty hadn't faded.

The scan of the room she made as he walked over towards the bar in that easy, purposed gait was her first since they'd arrived. It was done quickly—there was not much to see—and yet it comforted her, the fact that it all seemed too standard and ordinary, almost dull, them sitting at this bar on an increasingly stagnant afternoon, as if it could happen again and again, so long as there were mediocre lagers left in the cooler. It was a feeling that this...thing, whatever it was that she didn't quite yet want to define, could have permanence, could be real, and it was a feeling she welcomed. She'd long held on to a loose idea that she wasn't like everyone else in all the ways she wanted to be—unconcerned, self-assured, tall—and was identical to them in all the ways she didn't—scatterbrained, poor at parallel parking, unsure of exact career path. But as he got up to get another round of beers, he offered a smile which dropped those worries out of focus. Plus, he always offered to drive.

The bar was something just shy of indifferent about its patrons in a familiar way he'd always enjoyed, but now he'd really just rather get his beers and return to his conversation, thank you. He leaned over the railing, meaning impossible to misinterpret, and idly watched the highlights on the TV above him. He glanced back over his shoulder, just missing her as she turned back from him and he thought that if this had been a movie their eyes would have met. It seemed to sum it up for him, and he as he found himself smiling he realized he was happy that they had imperfections.

She hadn't mentioned much about him to her friends, but she knew this was good. She had always gone too quickly with that, filling everyone in, plastering over whatever cracks lay in the cheap foundation of her and whatever guy. Force-feeding seriousness. But it was different now; she didn't feel the need, in fact it hadn't really occurred to her. Everything had happened so organically that it seemed as if telling her friends would be almost superfluous, explaining a known and given fact, a state of things. For the first time her lack of concern

didn't concern her, and she laughed and shook her head and brushed the hair out of her eyes.

It was getting later now, all of sudden, as if the hands of the nonexistent clock had loosed ever-so-slightly the moorings and sped up a bit. Perhaps the reason was something ethereal, romantic, an antiquated notion of gravitas forcing its way into a moment and imbuing it with feeling; perhaps it was only a passing cloud. He'd thought he'd saw someone he knew, earlier, as he'd been pointedly not looking for a few moments. He was happy he was wrong—it was a little too early for knowing people, even though he really wouldn't mind. He assumed she would, and immediately after felt guilty for the assumption. It was one of the happenstances of his mind that he wanted to share with her as soon as it passed, but he didn't, of course. Far too hard to explain. But he was certain that she would understand, and he was satisfied with that, for now. He offered a quick, perfunctory assent to add the beers to his tab and turned back toward the—their—table, stepping around an ancient whiskey drinker at the jukebox as his face fell into a smile.

She returned it and thanked him while doing so, having felt him over her shoulder before seeing him. He resumed his seat and tried again to tame the bucking table, to no avail. The street outside was picking up steam now, like a locomotive of yesteryear, building up enough originality and rushed meaning to keep up with the approaching evening. There was a bus stop just beyond the window, although clouded by indifference and the mutual hatred between the glass and any bottle of Pledge. She could see the people sitting on the neglected bench, and an old woman laden with shopping bags. She briefly wondered where the woman could possibly be going, before she snapped herself out of it and returned to the present, silently admonishing her preoccupation, as in days gone by. But he hadn't seemed to notice at all, rather when she turned she saw he'd been watching her, grinning again, but a look that was meant to let her in on it too, and she relaxed a bit and took a drink. It was still early, after all.

The Budweiser had joined them at the table now; it had always surprised him just how effective it could be—he tended to forget that there was a full fifth percent lurking behind that cheap red label. He was happy now without thinking about it, buzzing along with the dawdling afternoon and the beer and the expressive, semi-blonde her across from him, animated and welcoming and very present. He was almost too content in this sliver of now, what did they call it, Out Over Your Skis, and he halfheartedly tried to remind himself of that. But it's hard to convince yourself of something that you've little belief and less interest in, and so he didn't put up much spirit in the resistance. He got the feeling he wasn't alone, in that.

Beginning with the more planned venture the other day, they'd begun to notice—independently and, for now, separately—that their conversations were beginning to merge in that way that happens after some amount of time, like the confluence of two headstrong rivers, and the talks could shift now from narrative

to reminisces. It was as noticeable as it was subtle, and seemed to change the air around them, as if it'd been filtered through a screen fitted for insecurities. He adjusted the third button on his shirt, at once focused and absentminded, but without taking his eyes from across the table. She thought again that he looked at her in a more real way than anyone she'd met, and then she thought that if she was thinking something like that, she must feeling the beer.

They sat there, letting the conversation and the bar and the afternoon go on around them, trying not to think too much, sipping their beers in order to both assist and hold back that effort. It was the late afternoon, now, and it seemed very important that the evening not arrive for a while yet. She laughed at some cheap joke of his, one that was only a touch less humorous than she'd made it out to be, although they both knew it. Not that that was a bad thing, he thought.

Later, perhaps, they'd sit together in the mornings, waiting for the dallying sun and attendant coffee maker to come to life, at a time when the days weren't quite as vibrant as they were now. That, she thought, might come—would probably come, she supposed—but if it did it would be later; for now it wasn't really visible, some elusive potential future that hinted at far more than it promised. For now, it was still the summer, late though it was, and there were still far too many happy and upsetting and complex things to do before the days lost all their length and nonchalance. The street picked up in noise again, now with more permanence, as she neared the end of her latest beer. She waited for the cacophony to quiet down a bit and then refocused her attention on her companion across the table. He was wearing one of the many medium-rare, unaffected expressions he seemed to carry around with him at all times, and she returned a smile and the noise from the street gave up and faded away. The sun was slipping lower now, and the bar filling up with new people, harder and more determined than they were, and so they decided to go, to head out into the rising twilight, to meet all the evenings of their days.