

A chill morning breeze sweeps across the street. I walk towards the church towering above the town centre. On my way I buy some sunflowers at the Daffodil & Dandelion. "I hope these will keep you warm," I murmur to myself as I turn the corner.

I stand in front of the church, looking up at the massive spire piercing the sky. Dwarfing every building in town, it casts a long shadow during the early and late hours of the day, stretching nearly to the town border. My eyes drift back down as I walk around the architectural marvel, and I find myself at the entrance to the graveyard. I greet a woman as she passes me by on her way out. As I walk amidst the stone altars and tablets, my mind drifts to better times, long past.

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It was mid-August in the summer of 1957. Temperatures were dropping and perpetual rain plagued the countryside, foreboding the early arrival of autumn that year. I opened the pub at noon, although I didn't expect any customers due to the rain. At least not before dusk would shed its twilight on the streets. With little else to do I started cleaning the place.

To my surprise, a visitor entered the pub around two o'clock. I was cleaning the tables when the shop bell rang. Before me stood a man wearing a black coat and bowler hat. He held an umbrella in his right hand which, judging from his dry coat, had successfully shielded him from the downpour.

"Good afternoon Sir. Welcome to The Heartfelt."

"A good afternoon indeed!" said the man. "I'd like a whisky please."

"One whisky coming right up. Please, have a seat."

I prepared the drink while the man hung his coat and umbrella on the coat rack near the door. Then he walked to the bar and sat down in front of me.

"That'll be two shillings and six pence Sir," I said, as I put his whisky on the counter.

He handed me the money and took a quick sip of the whisky. Seemingly satisfied with its quality, the man held the glass against the light before putting it back down.

“So, what brings you here this time of day?”

The man lifted his head and smiled.

“Business,” he said.

Not surprising given his attire. But with so few companies at the edge of town, visitors like him were not exactly common.

“Out here?” I asked.

“Yes. There’s a small factory about two miles west from here.”

I knew the place. Some of the factory’s employees were regulars at the pub. But this man was clearly no factory worker.

“So what’s your business there? You don’t seem like the type for the conveyor belt.”

“Oh no,” he laughed. “I visited the factory this morning on behalf of my employer. We sold them some new equipment. Safer and more efficient than what they’re using right now.”

“Good to hear. Their employees keep me in business. I wouldn’t want anything happening to them,” I joked.

The man laughed again. “Don’t worry,” he said, while raising his glass. “I got you covered.”

He downed half the whisky in one go, then put the glass back on the counter. A brief silence followed.

“So,” I said, trying to keep the conversation going. “Already done for the day?”

“Yes, I just had to wrap up the deal at the factory. I have the rest of the day off, with a wedding to attend here at the church later today. My cousin is getting married to ‘the man of her dreams’. Her words, not mine.”

“Congratulations.”

“Thank you,” said the man, before throwing back the remainder of the whisky.

“Truth is, it’s been a long time coming. Those two have been together for as long as I remember. We’ve just been waiting for them to tie the knot.”

“Well, we’re glad to have you. But are you sure you should be here then?”

The man waves his hand dismissively.

“It’s fine. The deal wrapped up much faster than expected, so I’ve got some time to kill anyway.”

He ordered another whisky and we talked for about half an hour before he went on his way again.

“Oh, right,” he said, as he opened the door. “I would like to buy some lilies for my cousin. It’s her favourite flower. Any idea where I can find a flower shop?”

“You should come across one if you follow the main road to the church. The Daffodil & Dandelion. Huge sign, can’t miss it.”

“Thanks.”

The man gave a friendly nod and stepped through the door. Under the overhang he opened his trusty umbrella. Then he started marching forward, into the downpour.

After the man left I resumed cleaning the pub and busied myself with other chores. Once done, I read the newspaper for the rest of the afternoon. It wasn’t until early evening before the shop bell rang once more. Three men entered the pub, drenched.

“Good evening gentlemen,” I said. “Rough weather.”

They were employees at the factory nearby and regulars at the pub. We were familiar enough to be on a first name basis.

“Evenin’ Alan,” said Fred while he hung his coat. “You damn right about that. Weather’s been shit.”

Ben and George also hung theirs, but skipped the greetings. Although not unusual, I could feel something was amiss.

“So what’ll it be this evening?” I said.

“The usual,” said Fred.

I looked at the other two and they nodded. I prepared their beers while the trio seated themselves at the bar. I glanced over while I filled their glasses. Their eyes were downcast and they seemed exhausted. Must've had a rough day.

I served them their beers while they laid their payment on the counter. They wasted no time emptying their glasses.

"Is something the matter?" I said. "You all seem quite drained today."

Ben looked up.

"I'll tell you what the matter is. Those bastards are firing us," he shouted, slamming his fist on the counter.

"The factory is firing you?" I said, taken aback by Ben's sudden outburst.

"You heard me, those assholes are just throwing us out to the streets! You're slaving away at the conveyor belt for years, and out of nowhere they're tossing you to the side! Out of a job by the end of September!"

"Calm down, Ben," said Fred.

"Calm down? You expect me to be calm when we're getting sacked? You're acting like this is someone else's problem!"

"There's no helping it," said Fred. "The machines aren't exactly safe. I understand the decision to replace them with an automated system."

"Aren't safe?!" shouted Ben, as he rose from his chair. "That's bullshit and you know it. There hasn't been a single accident at the belt in years. The only reason they're replacing us with machines is so they've got less people to pay!"

"That's not true Ben," said Fred. "Accidents at the conveyor belt can be devastating. I've seen it ruin lives. I don't want to see it happen again."

"Oh, I see. So that is why you've been working the conveyor belt over a decade! Makes a lot of bloody sense Fred!" said Ben.

Fred was clearly getting agitated.

"Look Ben, if the conveyor belts can be made safer, I'm all for it. Yes we'll need to find work elsewhere, but at least nobody's losing an arm."

George decided to intervene.

“Guys, please stop. It’s shit, but fighting isn’t going to make things better.”

Ben and Frederick give each other a vexed look.

“Forget it,” said Ben. “I’m going home.”

He left his half empty glass on the counter and walked to the coat rack. He grabbed his coat and opened the door. Before he left the bar, he turned around and said: “You’re a damn hypocrite Fred. You deserve getting fired.” And with those words, he disappeared into the rainy night.

A painful silence followed in the pub.

In an attempt to lighten the mood I tried to reassure Fred.

“Don’t worry Fred, you know how he is. Don’t take it personal.”

“Yeah...” says Fred.

But it was clear that Ben’s words had hit home.

The mood in the pub remained heavy. Fred and George still ordered a few beers, but every attempt at conversation quickly died down. After his third beer, Fred stood up.

“I should go now,” he said. “My family’s waiting. I still need to tell my wife.”

“Right,” said George. “Good luck, I’ll see you at work.”

“You’re not going yet?”

“No, I think I’ll stay a little longer.”

“Alright then,” said Fred as he put on his coat. “See you George, Alan.”

He waved goodbye and left the pub.

With everyone else gone, my attention shifted to George who was downing his fifth beer by now. George had never been very outspoken, but he was even more quiet than usual this evening. Losing his job must’ve hit him hard.

“Hey George,” I hesitated. “Losing your job is difficult, but I don’t think drinking away your problems like this is a good idea. It’s probably best if you went home.”

A bitter grin appeared on George’s face.

“That isn’t it Alan. The reason I’m here is exactly because I don’t want to be home right now.”

That caught me by surprise. “What do you mean?”

There was a brief pause as George stared blankly at his drink.

“You know I live next to the church, right?”

“Yes,” I said, somewhat confused.

“There’s a wedding being held there right now.”

A long silence followed.

“The girl I love is getting married.”

I stared at him, speechless. I wanted to say something, but I felt a lump form in my throat instead. I don’t know what I could have said anyway.

“I don’t want to be there right now,” said George, voice cracking. “I can’t handle it. Not right now.”

The rain clattered against the windows. The sound of water echoed through the otherwise silent pub. Tears were trickling down his face. George’s expression warped by the bottled up emotions that came pouring out.

“I’ve loved her for so long, but I wasn’t the one who could make her happy. Instead, all I did was get in the way.”

He broke down. The sound of the rain outside become faint background noise. All I could hear now was the weeping of the man in front of me, grieving over his lost love.

It took a while for George to calm down. I tried to encourage him. I told him he was a great and kind guy and that everything would turn out all right. But I know it hardly mattered. I was not the person he wanted to hear that from. I couldn’t give him what he truly needed.

Once he calmed down, I took two glasses from the cupboard and a whisky bottle from the shelf. I poured both glasses and added some ice cubes.

“Here, it’s on the house,” I said, as I shoved one glass towards him. George looked up, his eyes still red and face stained with tears. I gave him a faint smile, and he took the whisky.

As our glasses clinked I chanted: "To better times."

Two years later I saw George again. He was taking shelter under the overhang of The Heartfelt when I arrived to open up the place. I invited him in, which he happily accepted.

From what he told me, it seems that the years had not been kind to him. He neither managed to find new love nor work after he lost his job at the factory. Eventually, he was forced out of his house and left for the city in desperate attempt to get his life back on track, but to no avail.

Out of pity, I let George spend the night in the pub. So he could at least have a warm night and a roof over his head. But when I arrived at the pub the next morning, I found one of the windows smashed and the register stripped of cash. I cursed at the time, but looking back it was clear how far this cruel world had driven him into a corner. He had little choice if he wanted to survive.

In the end, the world took everything from him. In the winter of the following year, George was found in the snow on the outskirts of town, his frozen hands clasped together. It may just have been to keep himself warm, but to me it seemed like his final prayer to god. He now lies at the graveyard next to the church. Next to the place he once called home.

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I stand in front of George's grave.

"Hello George. It's been a while."

My eyes drift across the tablet, eventually fixing themselves on the date. 24 January 1961.

"Winter is a lot milder than last year George."

I shake my head. What good does it do him now?

“Fred and Ben are doing alright,” I say. “They’ve patched up and are visiting the bar together again. I’ve heard they’re doing fine at their new jobs too.”

I kneel next to the grave.

“I brought you some sunflowers to keep you warm.”

I lay down the flowers next to the bouquet of lilies already on the grave. I smile sombrely.

“I hope you had a nice chat with her.”

For a while I sit there motionless, hand touching the grave, thoughts fleeting. I feel a small splash on my hand. Drops of rain surround me, slowly growing more numerous.

“George, there’s always someone out there in the rain. If there’s no one to shield them, they’ll simply be swept away. It may not always help, but someone needs to listen. To pour their drinks, while they pour out their hearts.”

I get up, fold open my umbrella and look at the grave one last time.

“I gotta go George. It’s time to open the pub.”