

## The Diner

By Barry Fitzsimmons

Mary stumbled boozily against Horatio and giggled as she groped for the handle to the diner. With a tired sigh, Horatio settled himself on the cracked vinyl seat which reflected his weariness with a little sigh of its own.

Mary extracted a cigarette from a packet of Marlboros with delicate movements of her long fingers. With an unconscious gesture, she twirled the virginal cylinder through one hundred and eighty degrees and slipped it between her smudged lips. Horatio lit it for her, ever the gentleman.

She inhaled quickly, sighing with pleasure on the exhale as the chemical cocktail soothed her tired and jangling nerves. The night had been like old times, like when they had first met; those wild and heady days when they couldn't seem to get enough of each other. While Horatio extracted and lit his own cigarette, she reviewed the night to try to pinpoint when it had all gone wrong. Theatrically plucking the excuse for momentary non-interaction from her pouting lips with fingers so straight that they curved, Mary noticed the crescent of transferred lipstick with equal measures of annoyance and nonchalance and stared at the burning tip to find—what?

As they silently enjoyed the shared experience



of the satiated afterglow of an all-nighter-on-the-town, water cascaded from the windows in the street around them and gurgled up from the manholes and gutters until the windows were completely obscured by a dark blue-green kaleidoscopic shimmering. A manatee slid gracefully through the murk and nuzzled the dark roadway in search of sea-grass. It found some weeds in the pavement cracks where roadworks had left an imperfectly sealed tarmac repair open to the elements.

“I think it’s just time, that’s all,” mumbled

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Horatio, continuing a conversation last referenced over an hour ago, but instantly re-joined by Mary.

“I don’t understand *why* you have to do this when we are so good together.”

She cringed at the recognition of repetition, at the alienation it fomented. “Haven’t we just had a wonderful evening?” in a low, but despite herself, rising register.

“We’ve been over this so many times,” said Horatio wearily, wiping his hand downward across his face, “and nothing changes. My explanation; your understanding of it. Nothing... changes.” Looking down. Exasperated.

His peevish and defeated tone flashed the smoky, roiling oil of her resentment into sudden black-fringed flame. The cords in her neck straining and standing out against her suddenly reddened and animated features, she spun on the stool and spat,

“You’re right, I *don’t* understand.” Her supple waist twitched and twisted in what, under the circumstances, was a parody of sexual allure.

“I don’t understand why I am not enough, why you need *him*. He is just a ticket dancer at a sleazy Marimba dance-hall selling thrills to aging

society matrons who fawn and drool over his overstuffed basket, for God’s sake.” Panting. Her flashing eyes challenged him to respond... to defend himself against what she saw as his indefensible position.

A green sea turtle wafted into view from the waters above. With lazy waves of its stiff horny flippers, it cruised around the curved corner of window glass, barnacles adorning and dignifying its patchwork emerald shell. Suddenly, a grey and white torpedo with rows of nightmare teeth, crashed into the turtle, gripping one of its flippers and threshing, ripping, and in a moment tearing it off. The turtle, flapping wildly and erratically, tried to fly away home, trailing smoky blood, while the Great White crunched its way through sinew, shell and bone, and was satisfied.

Horatio removed his hat and studied its sharp lines and stylised peaks and troughs. He turned the hat by its brim, his eyes never leaving the satin band as it slid with liquid grace across his vision.

The diner attendant had seen it all before, in a thousand different combinations and permutations. As long as they don’t start throwing things, he thought, then ducked to the back door to bring in the morning delivery of milk and eggs

and spent the next twenty minutes packing away, rotating goods, all the time hiding, shivering and dripping on the cold-room floor.

“If it was another woman,” Mary wailed, with her eyes rolling wildly, “I would know how to fight. I would know what to do, but THIS...” She trailed off into frustrated and snorting derision, looking at the only other occupant of the diner for support, who steadfastly remained focused on his coffee, finding astral truths in the depths of his scrambled eggs.

A tentacle crept around the corner opposite the diner, then another, and another, each one larger than the last until they were as round as tree trunks, the suckers as big as manhole covers. Then the Kraken’s huge eye surrounded by its enormous head slid into view and surveyed its surroundings.

Without looking up, Horatio now spoke smoothly and coldly.

“He dances, not because he likes to be groped by flabby, high-society types with bad teeth and bad breath who stand on his toes while he smiles. He likes to dance... and as a Cuban immigrant, it’s the only work he can get.”

A giant basilisk slithered into view and stopped, anchored by its fluidly waving tail. The basilisk spied its adversary, then darted forward to embrace the Kraken, jaws straining to snap and tear at its tentacles while the Kraken tried to smother the basilisk with its writhing.

“But at least he works,” Horatio sneered, beginning to warm to his subject. “He has his

own place and his own money and doesn’t rely on Daddy’s money for his good times. He is not a spoiled little bitch who cries ‘Why, why, why’ every time he doesn’t get what he wants.” He had gone too far, he knew, but he could not turn back now. “He doesn’t whine and whinge and try to get me to change to what he wants me to be.” Finally, he looked up at her. “He lets me be...”

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Horatio realised he was shouting. Mary looked away as tears stung her eyes and the lines beneath her makeup suddenly sagged and stood out in stark relief.

Relenting in his attack, exhausted emotionally and physically, Horatio crumpled and almost whispered, “The truth is... he doesn’t want me. He wants a woman.”

Mary experienced a blinding flash of epiphany, her anger subsided and she was quickly filled with anguish and compassion for her companion’s plight. Curiously, she was reminded of, and found herself contemplating, Connie’s breast—the way it settled into her palm when she dozed in the morning, thumb resting lightly and languidly on the nipple. She slid her arm around Horatio’s back and her head onto his shoulder... and he let her.

The seemingly impossible untangling of the

tentacles and coiled, shining scales took place almost as fast as they had first entangled. The creatures sped away in opposite directions and the water drained away down the streets and gutters and manholes as quickly as it had arrived.

Mary and Horatio trudged the walk of the exhausted, but satiated, as they stumbled away—too tired to appreciate the freshness and promise of a million diamond points of light from the glistening droplets covering everything, into the new dawn. Mary stepped gingerly over a piece of calamari left on the footpath and thought to herself,

“God, some people are pigs.”

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