The Night in Question

STORIES

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VINTAGE CONTEMPORARIES

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Bullet in the Brain

Anders couldn’t get to the bank until just before it closed, so of course the line was endless and he got stuck behind two women whose loud, stupid conversation put him in a murderous temper. He was never in the best of tempers anyway, Anders—a book critic known for the weary, elegant savagery with which he dispatched almost everything he reviewed.

With the line still doubled around the rope, one of the tellers stuck a “POSITION CLOSED” sign in her window and walked to the back of the bank, where she leaned against a desk and began to pass the time with a man shuffling papers. The women in front of Anders broke off their conversation and watched the teller with hatred. “Oh, that’s nice,” one of them said. She turned to Anders and added, confident of his accord, “One of those little human touches that keep us coming back for more.”

Anders had conceived his own towering hatred of the teller, but he immediately turned it on the presumptuous crybaby in front of him. “Damned unfair,” he said. “Tragic, really. If they’re not chopping off the wrong leg, or bombing your ancestral village, they’re closing their positions.”

She stood her ground. “I didn’t say it was tragic,” she said. “I just think it’s a pretty lousy way to treat your customers.”

“Unforgivable,” Anders said. “Heaven will take note.” She sucked in her cheeks but stared past him and said nothing. Anders saw that the other woman, her friend, was looking in the same direction. And then the tellers stopped what they were doing, and the customers slowly turned, and silence came over the bank. Two men wearing black ski masks and blue business suits were standing to the side of the door. One of them had a pistol pressed against the guard’s neck. The guard’s eyes were closed, and his lips were moving. The other man had a sawed-off shotgun. “Keep your big mouth shut!” the man with the pistol said, though no one had spoken a word. “One of you tellers hits the alarm, you’re all dead meat. Got it?”

The tellers nodded.

“Oh, bravo,” Anders said. “Dead meat.” He turned to the woman in front of him. “Great script, eh? The stern, brass-knuckled poetry of the dangerous classes.”

She looked at him with drowning eyes.

The man with the shotgun pushed the guard to his knees. He handed the shotgun to his partner and yanked the guard’s wrists up behind his back and locked them together with a pair of handcuffs. He toppled him onto the floor with a kick between the shoulder blades. Then he took his shotgun back and went over to the security gate at the end of the counter. He was short and heavy and moved with peculiar slowness, even torpor. “Buzz him in,” his partner said. The man with the shotgun opened the gate and sauntered along the line of tellers, handing each of them a hefty bag. When he came to the empty position he looked over at the man with the pistol, who said, “Whose slot is that?”

Anders watched the teller. She put her hand to her
throat and turned to the man she'd been talking to. He nodded. "Mine," she said.

"Then get your ugly ass in gear and fill that bag."

"There you go," Anders said to the woman in front of him. "Justice is done."

"Hey! Bright boy! Did I tell you to talk?"

"No," Anders said.

"Then shut your trap."

"Did you hear that?" Anders said. "'Bright boy.' Right out of 'The Killers.'"

"Please be quiet," the woman said.

"Hey, you deaf or what?" The man with the pistol walked over to Anders. He poked the weapon into Anders' gut. "You think I'm playing games?"

"No," Anders said, but the barrel tickled like a stiff finger and he had to fight back the titters. He did this by making himself stare into the man's eyes, which were clearly visible behind the holes in the mask: pale blue and rawly red-rimmed. The man's left eyelid kept twitching. He breathed out a piercing, ammoniac smell that shocked Anders more than anything that had happened, and he was beginning to develop a sense of unease when the man prodded him again with the pistol.

"You like me, bright boy?" he said. "You want to suck my dick?"

"No," Anders said.

"Then stop looking at me."

Anders fixed his gaze on the man's shiny wing-tip shoes.

"Not down there. Up there." He stuck the pistol under Anders' chin and pushed it upward until Anders was looking at the ceiling.

Anders had never paid much attention to that part of the bank, a pompous old building with marble floors and counters and pillars, and gilt scrollwork over the tellers' cages. The domed ceiling had been decorated with mythological figures whose fleshy, toga-draped ugliness Anders had taken in at a glance many years earlier and afterward declined to notice. Now he had no choice but to scrutinize the painter's work. It was even worse than he remembered, and all of it executed with the utmost gravity. The artist had a few tricks up his sleeve and used them again and again—a certain rosy blush on the underside of the clouds, a coy backward glance on the faces of the cupids and fauns. The ceiling was crowded with various dramas, but the one that caught Anders' eye was Zeus and Europa—portrayed, in this rendition, as a bull ogling a cow from behind a haystack. To make the cow sexy, the painter had canted her hips suggestively and given her long, droopy eyelashes through which she gazed back at the bull with sultry welcome. The bull wore a smirk and his eyebrows were arched. If there'd been a bubble coming out of his mouth, it would have said, "Hubba hubba."

"What's so funny, bright boy?"

"Nothing."

"You think I'm comical? You think I'm some kind of clown?"

"No."

"You think you can fuck with me?"

"No."

"Fuck with me again, you're history. Capiche?"

Anders burst out laughing. He covered his mouth with both hands and said, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," then snorted helplessly through his fingers and said, "Capiche—oh, God, capiche," and at that the man with the pistol raised the pistol and shot Anders right in the head.

The bullet smashed Anders' skull and ploughed through his brain and exited behind his right ear, scattering shards
of bone into the cerebral cortex, the corpus callosum, back
toward the basal ganglia, and down into the thalamus. But
before all this occurred, the first appearance of the bullet in
the cerebrum set off a cracking chain of ion transports and
neuro-transmissions. Because of their peculiar origin these
traced a peculiar pattern, fluikushly calling to life a summer
afternoon some forty years past, and long since lost to
memory. After striking the cranium the bullet was moving
at 900 feet per second, a pathetically sluggish, glacial pace
compared to the synaptic lightning that flashed around it.
Once in the brain, that is, the bullet came under the mediation
of brain time, which gave Anders plenty of leisure to
contemplate the scene that, in a phrase he would have ab-
horred, "passed before his eyes."

It is worth noting what Anders did not remember, given
what he did remember. He did not remember his first lover,
Sherry, or what he had most madly loved about her, before
it came to irritate him—her unembarrassed carnality, and
especially the cordial way she had with his unit, which she
called Mr. Mole, as in, "Uh-oh, looks like Mr. Mole wants to
play," and, "Let's hide Mr. Mole!" Anders did not remem-
ber his wife, whom he had also loved before she exhausted
him with her predictability, or his daughter, now a sullen
professor of economics at Dartmouth. He did not remem-
ber standing just outside his daughter's door as she lec-
tured her bear about his naughtiness and described the
truly appalling punishments Paws would receive unless he
changed his ways. He did not remember a single line of the
hundreds of poems he had committed to memory in his
youth so that he could give himself the shivers at will—not
"Silent, upon a peak in Darien," or "My God, I heard this
day," or "All my pretty ones? Did you say all? O hell-kite!
All?" None of these did he remember; not one. Anders did
not remember his dying mother saying of his father, "I
should have stabbed him in his sleep."

He did not remember Professor Josephs telling his class
how Athenian prisoners in Sicily had been released if they
could recite Aeschylus, and then reciting Aeschylus him-
self, right there, in the Greek. Anders did not remember
how his eyes had burned at those sounds. He did not re-
member the surprise of seeing a college classmate's name
on the jacket of a novel not long after they graduated, or
the respect he had felt after reading the book. He did not re-
member the pleasure of giving respect.

Nor did Anders remember seeing a woman leap to her
death from the building opposite his own just days after his
daughter was born. He did not remember shouting, "Lord
have mercy!" He did not remember deliberately crashing
his father's car into a tree, or having his ribs kicked in by
three policemen at an anti-war rally, or waking himself up
with laughter. He did not remember when he began to re-

gard the heap of books on his desk with boredom and
dread, or when he grew angry at writers for writing them.
He did not remember when everything began to remind
him of something else.

This is what he remembered. Heat. A baseball field. Yel-
low grass, the whirr of insects, himself leaning against a
tree as the boys of the neighborhood gather for a pickup

game. He looks on as the others argue the relative genius of
Mantle and Mays. They have been worrying this subject all
summer, and it has become tedious to Anders: an oppres-

sion, like the heat.

Then the last two boys arrive, Coyle and a cousin of his
from Mississippi. Anders has never met Coyle's cousin be-
fore and will never see him again. He says hi with the rest
but takes no further notice of him until they've chosen
sides and someone asks the cousin what position he wants
to play. "Shortstop," the boy says. "Short's the best position
they is." Anders turns and looks at him. He wants to hear
Coyle's cousin repeat what he's just said, but he knows bet-
ter than to ask. The others will think he’s being a jerk, rag-
ning the kid for his grammar. But that isn’t it, not at all—it’s
that Anders is strangely roused, elated, by those final two
words, their pure unexpectedness and their music. He
takes the field in a trance, repeating them to himself.

The bullet is already in the brain; it won’t be outrun for-
ever, or charmed to a halt. In the end it will do its work and
leave the troubled skull behind, dragging its comet’s tail of
memory and hope and talent and love into the marble hall
of commerce. That can’t be helped. But for now Anders can
still make time. Time for the shadows to lengthen on the
grass, time for the tethered dog to bark at the flying ball,
time for the boy in right field to smack his sweat-blackened
mitt and softly chant, They is, they is, they is.

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