

UNTITLED

A film noir love story for the ages

I remember her like she was yesterday.

Oh, I'm telling you, that dame had moxie. More moxie than you can throw a brick at. And I've thrown more than a few bricks in my time. She had the cutest little blue eyes, and these legs that must have gone straight up to heaven. I know they took me there on more than one occasion.

I take a long, cool drag on my cigarette and swirl the smoke around in my mouth, tasting the aroma as I lean back in my rickety wooden chair, and hike my feet up onto my desk.

Yeah, she was the best.

Pity about this dame in front of me, though.

“Hello? Are you even *listening?*”

The morning haze fills my office, mingling with the cigarette smoke, pierced in alternating shades of light and dark by the vain attempts of the sun to make it through my curtains.

“Yeah, doll. I hear ya.”

“*Doll?* What do you think this is, 1930's Chicago?”

I don't say anything as I reach into the bottom drawer of my desk and grab the neck of a cool glass bottle I've called friend for the last twenty years. The soft clink against the stained wooden desk, and the play of light off the amber liquid as it fills the dusty shot glass is music to my ears. I grab the glass, and gesture what I guess is her general direction with it.

“Want a belt?”

“It's *nine am,*” she says.

I shrug and drain the glass. “The original liquid breakfast”, I mutter as amber fire cascades down my throat. I look at her – or at least, I assume I do. It's still far too early for me to stop squinting, even in this musty cocoon of an office.

“Remind me again what you want?”

She strides up to the desk, tosses a plain manila folder at me. The contents spill out across the beer-stained surface and I see it was filled with black and white photographs. I pick one up after several uncertain attempts and examine it through bleary eyes. A vaguely

familiar face peers out at me, a broad, plain face of a young man. He has a ponytail, and is wearing a slightly quizzical expression.

“This young man goes by the name of Tim. I need you to find him,” she says. “He’s about to do something very stupid.”

“Eh?”

She moves closer, takes a reluctant seat on the chair in front of my desk and fiddles nervously with her handbag. “He’s just about to start writing his final piece for his creative writing class, and he’s having trouble coming up with something clever to write about.”

I take my feet off my desk, and lean forwards on my chair. “Sorry lady. I think you’re wasting your time. I don’t do nutcases.” She leans forward to match me, unfazed, and pins me with her eyes.

“You don’t understand. If he can’t think of something clever to write about, he’s considering writing something... something *meaningful*.” She spits the last word out as though it is purest venom, and a chill passes through me. For a moment I think it’s the onset of another cardiac, but it feels different somehow.

“Okay, alright. Let’s say I find him. Then what?”

“Stop him.”

“Stop him?”

“If he writes something meaningful – some tripe about the triviality of human existence, or the darkness within the soul, or heaven forfend – something with *symbolism* in it... he’ll never forgive himself.” The intensity in her voice is mesmerising. “If that happens, he’ll be a broken man. And I can’t let that happen.”

“Why? Why are you asking me to do this? *Who are you?*”

She smiles ruefully. “I can’t tell you, I’m afraid. But you can call me... a *plot device*.” Reaching into her handbag, she pulls out a wad of notes so thick that you could beat a whale to death with it, and places it down on the desk. I look at them for a second, then at her. Then, helplessly, back at the money.

“That amounts to about triple your usual fee, I believe. Upfront, in unmarked bills, as requested.”

“What makes you so sure I’ll say yes?” I manage to say, still staring at the money.

She laughs as she stands up, a lilting, musical sound. “What else could you possibly say?” she says. “If you don’t say yes now, the story will end, far short of the required word limit. It’ll be as if you destroyed him yourself.”

I look up at her, helpless, eyes narrowed. She had me by the narrative drive, and she knew it. Without looking, I pour myself another glass and slug it down. Her eyes tighten, for a brief second, but she knows what my answer will be.

“Alright,” I hear myself say. “Alright, I’ll do it.”

“Excellent,” she says. “We’ll be in touch.”

The door slams and she is gone, replaced by the quiet hustle of traffic that filters through from outside. For a few minutes I sit, motionless, before remembering that I had a cigarette. It’s still lit and I pick it up, preparing to take a long and much-needed puff, but I stop halfway to my mouth. Suddenly I don’t feel like it any more.

The cigarette ash hisses as I crush it out, disgusted with myself. I rub my chin with my hands, feeling three week’s worth of stubble, and decide I need to shave. Then I remember the photographs, and the money. Particularly the money.

One thing at a time, I think to myself.

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Gary’s Grill looms out of the smog of Backdrop City and, following the smell of refried grease, my nose leads me in. The smog was thick today, but that’s not unusual in this town and besides, there’s nothing I haven’t seen in a million detective novels. I push the door open and, rubbing my freshly-shaved chin, slide inside.

The diner is just as I remember it. The wallpaper is yellow with years of nicotine-stains, and peeling from the moisture that permeates everything in this goddamn town. Lit by dim, dusty bulbs, the place is mostly empty, except for a few sketchy characters, whose details don’t seem to have been filled out properly. They’re probably not important to the story, so I ignore them and with a bit of effort, lift myself onto a stool at the counter.

“Just the usual, this morning?” says Gary, nodding to me as one professional does to another.

Gary is an interesting man. He’s interesting, you might say, because he’s so absolutely bland, which, in this city, makes him the perfect man for the job. He looks at me carefully, waiting for an answer.

“Just the usual, thanks Gary.”

“One burger with the lot, hold the salad, coming up,” he says, a faint smile dancing across his face for the briefest instant.

“Wait a second,” I say suddenly. “Leave the salad in there. And, uh, throw some onion on the burger as well.”

“*Onion?*” he says, confused.

“Yes, please.”

A quizzical eyebrow is arched. “I thought you hated onion,” he says.

“Damn it, Gary! Just gimme some damn onion, alright?” The words burst from my lips before I can stop myself, and I regret it instantly. Gary looks up at me, his expression a mixture of concern and surprise.

“...I’m sorry,” I say, after a brief pause. “I’m not having a good day.”

“Don’t worry about it.” He puts a coffee cup down on the counter, brimming with thick, black coffee. “On the house.” I take a long, deep drink of the coffee. It’s steaming, oily and absolutely revolting. “Fantastic coffee, Gary,” I mutter as I reach into my coat, and place the manila folder onto the counter. “Take a look at those for me.”

He picks one up, holds it carefully between thumb and greasy forefinger. His wife trundles out from the kitchen, a short, depressed woman moving with jiggling purpose, and takes my order from his other hand.

“*Onion?*” she says, confused.

“...yes.”

She shrugs, spreading ripples outwards across her body, and returns to the kitchen. Gary takes out a dirty but serviceable rag, and starts to polish an old coffee mug absentmindedly, eyes still on the photographs which he has spread out across the counter.

“His name is—“

“Tim. I know.”

“You know him?”

“Yeah. He used to come in here and eat a few times. He was in here just yesterday, in fact. Quiet fellow, kept to himself a bit. Told a great story, though. Used to sit over there, as I recall.” He gestures towards the far corner of the diner.

“Go on,” I say, grimacing as I take another slug of Gary’s coffee. I can feel my stomach complaining, but it’s nothing that the heartburn can’t handle.

“Well, that’s about it. He just showed up out of the blue one day, ordered a milkshake and sat in the corner, scribbling in a notebook he was carrying, and reading through the paper. I tried to talk to him a few times, but I could never manage to make any sense out of what he said. Always muttering about *setting* and *exposition*.”

He is silent for a moment.

“Why do you need to find this guy?” Gary says, his eyes suddenly very intense.

I pull out the wad of cash from earlier. It makes a delicious thump as it hits the counter.

“I gotta tell you, Gary, I don’t really know. But for that amount of... *motivation*, I guess I don’t really care.”

He eyes the wad of cash warily, and then puts the mug he was polishing down on the counter. Leaning on his elbows, he looks at me carefully.

“Who gave you this money?”

“Some dame.”

“*Some dame?*”

“Yeah, she was, uh... she was about. Uh.” I trail off, trying to remember. Gary’s expression doesn’t change. “Shit. You know, I can’t remember what she looked like.”

“Listen,” he says. “Just be careful, alright? I’ve been around a little while, you know. I may not have much depth of character, and I may not be much in the way of physical descriptions, but I know a *cliche* when I smell it.”

Gary’s wife returns with my burger on a plate, and sets it down on the counter, interrupting the conversation. “I remember this one time he came in. He had this woman with him,” she says, “I’ve never seen anyone like her.”

“A woman?” I say, instantly intrigued. “What did she look like?”

“...I can’t remember,” she says after a while, slightly sheepishly. “Sorry. She was very plain. Could have been anyone, really.” She smiles again, sheepishly, and walks back into the kitchen.

“Thanks, Gary.” I say, more than a little unnerved. I pick up my plate and move over to the far corner of the diner, where he had pointed. A crumpled copy of the newspaper lies

on the table, open at the comics section. I push it to one side and sit down in the seat, placing my burger down in front of me.

I thumb idly through the newspaper, thinking, as I eat my burger. The onion is piquant and delicious, and I wonder why I've never had it before. As I turn the pages, a scrap of paper flies out, skimming across the table and floating down to the floor. I bend down to pick it up. It looks like it's been torn from a notebook, and in a patently neat hand that I just know is Tim's, I read:

*"I love you," she says, eyes gleaming.
"What does that mean, though?"
"I don't know. But it's true. I love you."
"I wish I had your surety."*

Good God.

I haven't got much time.

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I throw my coat on me, and myself out the door. Pulling my coat tight against myself, I stand on the corner, thinking. Throughout the smog, the people mill and wander, vague and faceless, mere constructs of a frustrated mind. Occasionally I half-glimpse a face or an idea I recognise, but the smog seems to be endless.

Force of habit makes me reach into my coat pockets for my cigarettes, but they are not there. Swearing loudly, I pat myself down furiously, before realising I don't really want a cigarette at all. Immensely annoyed with myself, for a reason I don't quite understand, I shove my hands violently into my pockets.

One hand brushes against something rough, and I pull it out. It's another scrap of paper, torn from the same notebook, and written in the same, steady hand.

*"These are things I don't really want to remember."
"Nobody's forcing you."
"I want to tell you. If we're going to be together, you need to know."
"Okay. I'm listening."*

Goddamn, I think to myself. *Notes, mysteriously appearing in pockets? This just gets more ludicrous by the minute.* I fold the paper away again, into my pocket, and check the time on my watch. It's getting close. Too close. I need plot development, and I need it now.

Something grabs me, forces me to look up, across the street. Like a splash of detail in a generic sea, she walks past – the same dame from earlier. Her movements are smooth and

assured and she turns to look at me, with eyes that I could swear for a second are the most perfect baby blue.

She smiles, wryly, and disappears into the crowd.

I stand there on the street corner, dumbstruck, as a wave of nausea slams into me. Around me, the storyline starts to boil and evaporate, plot threads, twists and turns billowing into the smog. If I don't do something now, this may never end. Gritting my teeth, I make the decision I have to make, and, dragging resolution in my wake, I follow her.

The people on the street ebb and flow around us, silent and seemingly sullen as I tail her down the street. She knows I'm there, I'm sure – but she doesn't turn her head, doesn't look back once, as she leads me onwards.

Eventually she stops, at the mouth of an alleyway. Seemingly afraid of being spotted, she looks around in a wildly over-dramatic fashion, before stepping quickly into the alleyway and vanishing from sight. I sigh inwardly. *Oh, please. Not the old vanishing-in-an-alleyway shtick.*

Knowing exactly how it's going to play out, I step up to the entrance of the alleyway, and peer around the corner. Just like I expected – it's a dead end. A pile of urban detritus litters the ground – cardboard boxes, empty beer cans and brown, rotting leaves arranged into haphazard piles by the wind. Of the dame, of course, there is no sign.

I step into the alleyway, hands in pockets. “Oh, come *on*.”

“And a good afternoon to you, too,” she says from behind me. If I hadn't seen this a million times already, I'd probably be startled. As it is, I have to fight to keep the frustration out of my voice.

“Vanishing in an alleyway? Reappearing behind someone? Come on. You can do better. You can do a lot better.”

“Don't give me that. You know The Rules.”

“The Rules? What makes you think I care about the damn *Rules* anymore? Have you seen the word-count lately? This is getting out of control. I don't know what you're playing at, but I need answers and I do *not* have the time for this!”

I go to turn around, but the *clack* of gunmetal behind me stops me dead in my tracks. A fraction of a second later, the cold metal barrel of a Luger presses itself into the base of my neck, and I swallow hard.

“Threatening the main character? Now who's breaking The Rules?”

Her voice is low and insistent. “Be quiet and listen. Behind that pile of crates there, is a door. Through that door, you will find what you’re looking for. You haven’t got a lot of time.”

Pages of frustration boil over inside me. “Damn it! Why the hell are you doing this? You’re just a damn plot device! You don’t even have a *name!*”

“I may be just a plot device,” she says, with a note of sadness. “But even a plot device can fall in love.”

The cold metal pressure on the back of my neck disappears and silence drops in its place, only the hustle of traffic and the gentle, chill breeze remain. I want to turn around, but I know she won’t be there. I know what I have to do.

Walking to the end of the alley, I shove the crates aside to reveal, as promised, a rusty iron door. I press my hands against the rough metal, and push gently. It swings open, creaking with protest, leaving a dark, shadowed doorway.

Pulling my coat tight around myself, I step inside.

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The first thing I notice is the smell. The dark corridor is filled with it, a dank, musty smell, like old paper and dust mixed together. In front of me, a set of wooden stairs ascends into the darkness and, seeing nowhere else to go, I climb up them, to find myself face to face with another door. From beyond it, muffled conversation filters through. I bend down, put my ear to the door, and listen.

“No, no, *no!* It’s not meaningful enough! Where’s the symbolism? *Symbolism!*”

“I... I’m sorry, I just – I just can’t.”

“Can’t? What do you mean, *can’t?* You listen to me, boy. I better see some new insight into the bleak existence of humanity in a desolate and uncaring universe soon, or there will be *hell* to pay!”

“But I – ow! *Ow! My grades! Stop it!*”

I’ve heard enough. Powered by a fury I didn’t know I had, I put my foot to the door and boot it open, splinters flying from the doorframe as the door is flung inwards.

Inside I see my worst fears. Chained to a small desk is a dishevelled, bleary-eyed figure, his face sprouting weeks worth of stubble and holding a pen limply in his hand. The desk is covered in sheet upon sheet of paper, piled in haphazard stacks and spilling onto the cold stone floor.

Behind him stands a beret-wearing monster, a thin, ascetic figure whose neat, fastidious, art-house-moustached face I know all too well. He looks down his perfect little spectacled nose at me, and sneers.

“Well, well, well. If it isn’t our protagonist.”

“Leave him alone, Professor. He doesn’t deserve this.”

“Oh, spare me your moralising, you pathetic construction of last-minute creativity. Fools like you are always standing in the way of the Fine Arts! By the time I’m finished with this *student*, he’ll be seeing phallic symbolism in everything, and there’s *nothing you can do about it!*”

Angry beyond words, I take a step closer, my fists clenched. “Uh-uh-uh,” he says, holding up a piece of paper. I recognise it instantly, and stop dead. It’s the final marking sheet for the class.

“You *bastard*. You wouldn’t dare.”

“Wouldn’t I?” he says, popping a slim, pretentious cigarette into his mouth and lighting it up. “Take another step closer, and I’ll fail him. I’ll fail them all.”

My shoulders slump, the anger draining out of me. “That’s better,” he says, stepping closer, blowing a cloud of smoke in my face. He smiles indulgently as I cough.

“Now, here’s what’s going to happen. You’re going to turn around, right now, and leave. And if I see you anywhere near the Arts in the future, well...” Suddenly I feel something thrust into my hand. The dishevelled figure chained to the desk is looking at me, eyes afire, and he nods, almost imperceptibly. I look down at my hand. He’s given me a heavy paperback book. *The unit reader*.

The Professor halts in mid-sentence. “Oh, *no*,” he says, as I swing the heavy book in a wide arc, connecting heavily with his jaw. His glasses fly off into the darkness and he is flung backwards, slamming into the wall with a satisfying *crunch* and sliding to the floor, unconscious.

I throw the book at his sprawled body. “And they all lived happily ever after”, I mutter, disgusted.

Suddenly I remember the figure at the desk, and whirl around. He’s already standing up, the shackles falling away as he walks over to me. He’s wearing a thin, stained shirt and looks very cold. Without quite knowing why, I give him my coat.

“Thankyou, Tim,” he says as he slips the coat on, in one smooth, practiced movement. It fits him perfectly.

“...Tim? But you--”

“Me? Hah, no. You mean you hadn’t worked it out by now?” I shake my head, confused. He laughs, a cynical, jaded sound as he pulls out a packet of cigarettes from my coat pocket and lights one up, taking a long, deep pull on it. “Well, I guess we can’t all be detectives.”

He looks at me for a while, a long, appraising gaze. “You did well, son. Don’t worry about it.” He stops, looks down at his watch. “Damn. I’d better get back to the office. Here. This is for you.” A wad of papers is thrust into my hand. “Take care. I’ll see you around.”

Turning on his heel, coat flying out behind him, he walks out of the room, tipping his hat to someone I can’t quite see on the way out. Then, like a long-lost memory, she enters the room, smiles at me.

“Hello, Tim,” she says, her baby-blue eyes sparkling. “I’ve missed you.”

“Hello...” I say, breathless.

She hands me a pen.

“What do I do with this?” I say, already knowing the answer.

“You know what you need to do,” she says. “You’ve been doing it for pages, already.”

I look down at the pieces of paper the strange, dishevelled figure gave to me before he left. It’s a detective-mystery, and it’s a damn good one, too.

I sit down at the desk, and I finish the story.