

## In From The Cold

Dirty water lapped against the heavy wooden quays of the dock. A smell that mixed fish and rusted iron into one drifted on the air. There was a harsh sea breeze blowing in from the water, and the dangling machinery of two empty hawser cranes groaned helplessly into the wind. It was a salty wind and tiny granules brushed my cheeks and clung to my numb lips. Other than that mournful sound, which seemed threatening to me, silence surrounded me as I made my way towards the far edge of the docks where the abandoned warehouses stood.

I tensed to my own footsteps as they echoed over metal grates and manholes. Nearing my destination, faint light from beneath a door and a curtained window could be seen reaching out into the night, dividing the darkness. Pushing down on the heavy door handle, I huddled inside out of the icy cold.

The interior of this small warehouse was sparsely furnished. It had probably been a customs office, years ago, but was now given over to the general dereliction. A table and two chairs of different styles stood to one side of the room and, on the other, three very large but battered sofas were lined up against the wall. On the table lay a number of plants, most of which had withered and died. Faded blue and fuchsia petals drooped from their stems, edges crinkled and shrunken. A small puddle of water surrounded the base of one of the pots, the liquid having seeped from a hairline crack in one of the terracotta vases. The walls were clad with old sheets of iron, gone to a bronze colour, and discarded pieces of hardboard, giving the place an unwelcoming feeling.

I tossed my hat on to the table, where it landed on the tangle of dried blooms; my dark tweed overcoat I slung across one of the mismatched chairs. A bottle of whisky and an empty glass in the corner of the room were inviting me to take a drink and relax into the evening. Glass in hand, I lowered myself on to one of the beaten-up sofas and began to take small sips of the dark, spicy liquid. My fingers traced the uneven edges of holes in the dusty fabric, where stuffing was emerging in greyish-white tufts. The watch on my wrist felt heavy and cold, as I stared down at hands which moved restlessly.

It was late when the door opened for a second time, letting in the evening chill and a number of my companions. Greetings were passed from person to person and then, silence. Hands delved into pockets to draw out cigarettes and match flames sparked to ignite the slender sticks. Soon a cloud of bluish

smoke hung in the air, obscuring vision. The hush, however, remained unbroken. Finally, someone got up and crossed the room to where their jacket lay in a crumpled heap on the floor. The figure crouched down and fumbled about in the cavernous pockets until he found what he was looking for. From the folds of his coat, he pulled a small Bakelite wireless. Setting it on the table, he turned the dial and tuned the radio from a crackle to the brassy notes of jazz. The sound of saxophones and horns soon filled the room, and conversation slowly began.

Outside, the moon had risen to its full height. Thin rays of light illuminated the hidden corners of the dockyard. Through a small slit in the curtain, I could see the waiting night. Far off, the hub of the city was throbbing with neon, creating a harsh orange haze in the sky above. I cradled my empty glass in my hand. Couples all around me were engaged in secret conferences but, I sat alone on the periphery, waiting.

My partner, Jude, had still not arrived. I felt a tingling in my spine. Was it fear? I can't say. I sneaked another glance at my watch; tapped the glass; nearly ten o'clock.

Deciding to replenish my glass, I pushed myself up out of the sofa and crossed the floor to where the bottle was. As I stood pouring, the music stopped and a deep, cultured voice announced the ten o'clock news from the BBC light programme. Hush fell on the room. Another bomb test, this time somewhere on the other side of the world. The Americans' turn.

And despite being on some pointless barren island far away it felt too close to home.

It seemed odd to me that this environment in which we met caused so much discomfort. No-one was willing to talk freely without reassurance of the fact that others were not listening in. The warehouse had become our escape from the everyday, yet we had little enough resources with which to make it more inviting. Flowers on the table were a rather sad attempt at lightening the dullness of the room, but now they stood shrivelled and dead. Dull grey and black coats lay on the hard concrete floor in heaps like small bomb craters. I turned to watch the couples around who were perched and squashed on all the seating available. I felt a sudden emptiness for the world outside and their having driven us to this. We did not deserve it.

It was late now, nearly eleven, and I had almost given up hope of Jude arriving. I was growing tired and was close to getting up and leaving when the metallic door swung open. The biting wind rushed inside, whistling, bringing with it a dark-clad figure. Jude? It was not. All heads turned to face the anonymous intruder while he pulled off his hat and scarf.

No-one breathed a word as the stranger advanced into the room and attempted to greet those who surrounded him. Some of the group became guarded and suspicious, others were just curious. After all, how had he found out about this place and why had he come if he was not one of us?

Everyone relaxed a little as the man took up a place on the chair on which I had slung my coat. This bothered me little, however; I was instead intent on watching this newcomer very closely. I sipped my whisky and observed as he glanced around the room as if he were recording everyone's faces. His eyes glinted in the light and his mouth was almost twitching into a smile. A glass was balanced on one of his crossed legs and he took small sips every now and again. I did not like him - he was too watchful.

Almost midnight. The group was lifting themselves wearily out of their seats and scrabbling to find the correct belongings from the piles on the ground. I watched the mysterious man out of the corner of my eye. His movements were slow, as if he were waiting for something. Through the slit in the curtains I could see out into the night, but it was not pitch black over the dockside as it had been before, now thin beams of light from unknown sources crept erratically across the ground. I was not the only one who had noticed. The room fell silent. I watched a smile twist on to the stranger's face. The clock sounded the hour and the last wasted petals fell silently from their stems.

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