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Freeze

Joseph R. Honescko

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FREEZE

Joseph R. Honescko

THE COUNTER FELT COLD AND WET TO MY ELBOWS.

I HELD MY PALMS FACE UP, PROVIDING A SAFE PLACE FOR MY HEAD TO REST. MY FINGERS REEKED OF THE MARLBORO'S I hid from my wife, and the whole place smelled like whiskey other men were hiding from theirs. I closed my eyes and pretended that time was frozen. I was transported to a place where I could be proud of the man I became, where I was the husband my wife deserved and the father our daughter needed. I stayed there for a while, dreaming, until time returned to its normal pace, and Allen, the bartender, brought me back to reality.

"Who's your meeting with today, Riley? Mr. Daniels or Mr. Beam?"

"I think I'll meet with Jack. Neat, please."

He nodded his head as he walked away. Allen was great because he treated everyone like gentlemen instead of cowards. He helped us hold on to the fantasy that we were good men, honest men, or even men at all. He was a lawyer for a while but decided he wanted less responsibility. Didn't we all.

Allen placed my drink on the cold bar, and I quickly brought it to my lips. I let the lukewarm liquid sit on my tongue, taking in every bit. I liked when a drink burned, as if it were punishing me for sipping it.

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BOY WITH GUITAR Michael Nguyen

A poorly lit stage stood in the corner, and sometime around 8:30 this young kid, must've been twenty-three or twenty-four, walked on and mumbled his name into the microphone. The two pawnshop speakers amplified his words and guitar to the rest of the bar. His music competed

**THE KID HAD WON US OVER.
WE BEGGED HIM TO KEEP PLAYING
AND PROMISED TO BE RESPECTFUL.**

against the roar of a busted air conditioner and the mindless chatter of bitter, weekday drunks whining about how the world had it out for them.

The kid must've gotten fed up because, after a while, he announced that the next song would be his last, and that after, we could all go screw ourselves. He had grabbed my attention. I had seen many bands come through that bar, and this was the first time I ever listened. The other ten or fifteen people must have been intrigued with his announcement as well because they turned their attention toward the stage. We sat and listened like civilized men.

The kid covered a lot of faded away folk tunes. He probably would have been great in the sixties, but by the time he was born, protest songs were

out of style. He began singing "Mr. Tambourine Man," and when he got to the line "let me forget about today until tomorrow," we all cheered, causing some guy to buy a round for everyone. The kid had won us over. We begged him to keep playing and promised to be respectful. He agreed, and he played while we drank and sang along the best we could.

We wrapped arms around each other's shoulders feeling the prickly hairs and sweaty skin of strangers. We inhaled the whiskey and beer from the breath of other men, and everyone complained of jobs and wives and children and

**WE KEPT ALLEN BUSY WHILE WE
PUSHED AWAY ALL OUR FEARS AND
IGNORED EVERY BIT
OF THE REAL WORLD.**

lack of purpose in this world that was out to get us all. We kept Allen busy while we pushed away all our fears and ignored every bit of the real world. The kid kept singing, and we kept pretending that time was frozen. Every couple minutes, one of us would yell "Tambourine Song," and he would play Bob Dylan again. Together we sang, "Let us forget about today until tomorrow."

He ran out of material at about 11:20, and slowly, time returned to its normal pace. The crowd spilled out of the bar and by 12:00, it was just Allen and I. He had started closing up, collecting empty bottles and glasses. As the dish sink filled with water, I thought of my wife washing the dishes after her long day transporting our girl around and fielding her questions.

"What's the white things in the sky?"

"Those are clouds, honey."

"Are clouds the white things on the ground?"

"No, baby, that's snow."

"Will Daddy eat dinner with us tonight?"

"If he gets home from his meeting."

She was making spaghetti, so it was probably messy. I pictured our little girl refusing to eat with silverware, and her hands and face covered in tomato sauce. My wife would laugh and call her silly as she cleaned up. She was strong and put together. She didn't mind cleaning up messes. I wished I were more like her, selfless and sacrificial and brave. I wished I believed her when she told me I could be.

Allen finished the dishes and drained the sink. The busted air conditioner kept the bar from being silent, reminding us that it was still there, and that it was still broken. He offered me a ride home since I was a little impaired, but I told him I could walk. I stopped by my car to grab the gum I had left in there earlier.

The walk was further than I thought, and the snow was beginning to fall. I lit a cigarette to keep me warm, or at least, to make me forget that it was cold. I breathed in deeply as I pressed the butt against my lips. I could taste the paper on my tongue and felt the smoke find its way to my lungs. I made the fingers on my left hand dance in a pattern against my hip. I was still cold. I inhaled again, this time focusing on the warmth of the cigarette. I kept the smoke in my mouth allowing it to burn the top of my tongue. I let it sit there, frozen in time for as long as I could. I let it hurt and hurt some more until I couldn't take it. I exhaled and time came back.

I was still cold.