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Joker and the Drunk

THE JOKER IS THINKING: *Look at them, what a pair of troglodytes. They're from some other genetic strain, as if maybe they got too much Neanderthal DNA in their genomes—or maybe they checked in from some parallel universe. But the bottom line is they don't understand the subtlety of the game.*

Joker and the drunk are drinking at a local bar, watching two construction workers guzzling beers and playing eight ball. The burlier of the two leans forward for a shot. He has a big belly and a seismic-level butt crack; whereas the other man, a lanky fellow with a rawboned face half-hidden under the bill of a soiled baseball cap, looks on dubiously and pulls a tin of chewing tobacco from his shirt pocket, packing his lip with a large wad.

He'll never make the shot, the drunk thinks to himself. His hands are too big and his fingers are like overstuffed sausages, not the deft grip of a truly skilled player. The man lets go the shot and the intended ball misses the corner pocket.

"Shit!" he says. "This cheap-ass pool table is out of level. The cue ball drifted."

The lanky man grins exposing a mismatched collection of yellow teeth. "Yeah right, dude, your aim is drifting from too many beers." He laughs and struts around the table eyeballing the angles of potential shots, scratching thoughtfully at the stubble on his chin. He considers himself a serious pool player, or so the drunk has surmised.

"Listen to those two," the drunk mutters under his breath. "They remind me of a couple of cavemen swilling fermented berry juice while they whittle on their spears."

"They're just having fun ... so don't start anything," the joker advises.

The lanky construction worker finally settles on his best shot and aligns himself behind the cue ball. He pauses, fiddles with the bill of his baseball cap, rechecks the angle of the shot several times, fiddles with the hat again and then chalks his cue with such vigor that a cloud of powdery-blue dust descends on the green felt of the table.

"Why does he go through that little routine?" the drunk asks in a loud whisper.

The joker smirks. "I'd say it's like a fixed action pattern. His way of appeasing the pool gods in the hope they'll intervene on his behalf."

"You mean like when football players cross themselves?"

"It's all pretty much the same thing—compulsive ritualized behavior. God will help me make a touchdown even though that means the other guy gets chumped."

Three years ago the drunk and the joker purchased an old duplex as a rental investment. It was a bargain fixer-upper but it enjoyed a great loca-

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tion. Location, location, location—that's what the realtor had said, but then the unexpected happened. Shortly after escrow closed, the drunk's wife filed for divorce; she'd caught wind of rumors, and not for the first time. A year later the judge split up the assets and she got the townhouse; the drunk got to keep his half the duplex, along with their modest investment portfolio.

"Finding an affordable apartment in this goddamned county is a major pain in the ass," he had complained more than a few times. So he decided to evict his renter and move into his half of the duplex. Four months later the joker did likewise. He sold his house and told friends he was planning to take a sabbatical, buy a yacht and head to sea.

This is what the joker says when he describes the duplex to his friends: "After I moved in, we added a large redwood deck that overlooks the valley. It's a fantastic view."

In addition to its agrarian charm and scenic beauty, San Pasqual Valley is the last major farming preserve in North County San Diego and the site of a state landmark—*The Battle of Mule Hill*—a skirmish where Mexican soldiers surrounded a contingent of Californians led by Kit Carson.

"The historical society must have been desperate," the drunk once noted. "They memorialized a battle where our boys got their asses squarely kicked and ended up eating their own mules."

Of the two, the joker keeps a neater house. He planted shrubs and colorful flowering ice plant in the front yard. The drunk's half is uncut Bermuda grass mixed with weeds, and his trashcan is usually full of beer cans, pocketsize vodka bottles and empty liters of tequila. The drunk and the joker teach at a private university in the suburbs. Neither has been promoted beyond associate professor. They agree it's a political thing. Despite the joker's unconventional teaching style, he receives the highest student evaluations in the Psychology Department.

"Too many big egos are grazing in the green pastures of higher education," the drunk says. "A bunch of stuffed shirts and pencil pushers who don't know how to teach."

The drunk resides in the English Department and some colleagues considered him a very good teacher, although he has a weakness for college girls. The wall connecting the two halves of the duplex is not soundproof, so the joker hears when coeds call on the drunk. For a middle-aged man, he's a magnet to young women, and the joker has warned him more than a few times.

"You're walking on thin ice, you know that don't you? Not to mention you're a textbook case—you need to confront your sexual compulsions."

Administration policy concerning such liaisons is clearly defined but difficult to enforce; nevertheless, the head of the English Department—a shrewd, hawkish woman sharing mutual enmity with the drunk—is waiting for her chance to pounce on him.

The construction workers continue playing pool, growing more boisterous by the minute. The joker notices a familiar young woman walk into

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the bar, escorted by a stocky young man with short hair. The drunk had a fling with her a couple months ago, although fortunately she hasn't noticed him. The joker elbows the drunk. "One of your girlfriends is here," he says in a low voice. "You'd better keep your head down,"

The drunk glances furtively over his shoulder. It's Melissa Manning and she's a knockout with a rosy bloom on her cheeks and a figure to kill for, even if you weren't middle aged, suffering existential angst and the first signs of midlife crisis. That's what the joker is thinking. His last date was a forty-three-old woman who wouldn't stop talking about her two ex-husbands. She also had a pimply teenage son with purple hair, tattoos and earrings—not to mention an over active Oedipal complex. The joker is better educated than the drunk, graduated magna cum laude from a prestigious university in the East; plus he's better looking and in good shape for a man of forty-five, although the college girls never give him so much as a second look. This frustrates the joker. *What do they see in that man?* Although the truth is, he lives vicariously through the drunk, but it's not something he would ever admit.

The construction workers begin a new game and the big guy cuts loose a ferocious break. It's what he's best at, blasting the cue ball and scattering the rack in every direction. He chalks his cue and surveys the green felt. The lanky man narrows his eyes and digs in his ear with a fingernail.

Melissa Manning and her young man have seated themselves in a booth at the opposite end of the room. The drunk heaves a sigh of relief. He has deftly avoided her ever since she asked: *Why aren't you taking our relationship more seriously?* The drunk is basically a kindhearted man, and despite his inability to resist young women, he secretly worries over them like a doting father.

Enter the joker: "How many times are you planning to put yourself in this risky position? I mean, for chrissake, why don't we try shedding a little light on this compulsion of yours?" The joker has a Ph.D. in clinical psychology, although after five years he stopped practicing.

"Why'd you quit?" the drunk had once asked.

"It can be a lonely job at times ¼ and I guess, figuratively speaking, I lost my faith," the joker said. "Young people who can actually benefit from therapy can't afford it, and the insurance companies expect the six-week magic fix. It takes decades for dysfunctional families to instill these problems. I'm supposed to repair them in six weeks? It's bullshit."

Meanwhile, the construction workers are getting louder and more intoxicated. The husky man measures a shot, chalks his stick and then strikes the cue ball. It rolls straight and fast and knocks the three ball into a side pocket. He swaggers around the table for his next shot. The lanky man groans and pulls his baseball cap lower over his eyes. "Just lucky," he says, and removes the soggy ball of chewing tobacco from his mouth, dropping it into an empty beer bottle. The big guy blasts another shot.

"Hell, the more I drink the better I get," he says, red-faced and beaming.

"Ain't what your old lady says." The lanky man grins and packs his lip again.

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The joker glances sideways and notices Melissa looking dreamily from across the room. *Oh, Lord there's going to be a scene.* He elbows the drunk.

"What?"

"You've been spotted."

"Oh, shit ..."

She beelines across the barroom dragging the young man behind her.

"Professor Ravenscroft!" she gushes. "You're the last person in the world I expected to see here ¼ and Professor Rainey. Omigosh! Aren't you two quite the pair?"

Her lips have a pouting sensuality. The drunk smiles sheepishly. The joker forces his own smile before staring down at the bar and wishing he were elsewhere.

"This is my date, Mark Devon," she chirps. "He's a math major, and he's the starting fullback on the football team."

"Isn't that sort of an oxymoron?" the drunk offers, half under his breath.

Oh, no, the joker thinks, *he's going to be rude. I hope he stops before he goes too far.*

The young man seems perplexed. The girl continues: "I'm having trouble in my speech class, Professor Ravenscroft. Can I stop by your office for help?" The baited hook has just splashed into the water. The drunk makes a face that reminds the joker of Jack Nicholson during his younger days.

"Were we planning to bring the football player?"

The joker cringes, buttressing himself for the worst.

"Hey, this old dude's drunk," the young man says. "He's a disgrace to the university. Why do you even talk to this loser?"

The joker stands and guides him aside and says in a loud whisper, "Take it easy, Mark, his grandmother died the day before yesterday, and he's been drinking too much. But tell you what, take my social psychology class next semester and we'll make sure you get a really good grade."

The young man glances cautiously around the room and says in a low voice, "Sure thing, I get it. A man deserves a few drinks after his grandmother dies." Then he escorts Melissa back to the booth. She smiles at the drunk over her shoulder and waggles her fingers. There's a seductive twinkle in her dark eyes.

"We better go," the joker says, nipping at a fingernail. *Why do young girls fixate on this man?* He asks himself this as they walk outside into the cool evening. Long shadows spill across the road. The neon sign in the bar's window is blue and red and creates a purplish glow, but only from certain positions. *It's a little like pool,* the joker thinks to himself. *The subtlety of angles ...*

Back at the duplex, the joker and the drunk have reclined on lounge chairs on the redwood deck; the drunk has a bottle of tequila and two shot glasses. "Here," he says, "payback for keeping that snot-nose jock from

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beating up on me. I couldn't resist. God knows how little pricks like him made life hell when I was in high school. Brains never do well against bullies with thick skulls and brawn."

"I fully commiserate, but every now and then the old worm turns," the joker offers. "I remember my high school's twentieth, two ex-jocks with bellies hanging over their belts wanted to talk, but they weren't sure if they recognized me. One of them says, 'Hey, man, what sports did ya play?' — as if playing a sport was the defining aspect of life, the essence of being human."

"No doubt," the drunk nods.

"I didn't play sports," I said to him. "Then the moron recites his athletic accomplishments—like he's trying to impress me. So I cut in and ask what he's doing now. He says, 'I work at the so-and-so tire company,' and I say, 'You're a real renaissance man, aren't you?' He gave me this vacuous look. Back in the day he'd have probably kicked my ass, but you know after high school I grew two more inches and filled out by thirty pounds, rendering guys like him less intimidating."

"Early to blossom, early to seed— isn't that the old saying?" the drunk says, grinning.

The drunk and the joker chuckle and pass the bottle of tequila back and forth, sharing more stories about their younger days. The drunk becomes somber and swears he's going to make some changes in his life and cut down on his drinking.

"It's starting to take a toll," he says earnestly. "I don't sleep so well anymore. I wake up at two or three and can't get back to sleep—then I get heartburn."

The joker nods and takes a swig from the bottle.

"And I really have to stop succumbing to young girls," the drunk adds. They sense my weakness and before I know it, I agree to a rendezvous. They always arrive dressed in those outrageous outfits—breasts and waists and the way they look at you. Oh, Lord, and Heidi—have I mentioned her? She's about five-foot-nine, wavy blond hair with cute little curlies in front, a model's figure and eyes like liquid emeralds."

"More temping than mortal sin itself," the joker says.

"You got that right. One afternoon we met for lunch at a restaurant not far from campus, and I swear she looked so good I almost passed out. Later I took her in my arms and she whispers in this hot and breathy voice, 'You can have me if you want.' And of course, I did want her and spent the rest of the semester sweating bullets. But I swear I'm changing my ways. I may teach under-division English—God forbid—but in my heart I'm an existential poet, an artist. I follow a higher truth."

The joker has heard this pledge before. He gazes down at the valley. Only the dim lights of a few old farmhouses dot the expanse, and the San Pasqual River meanders through the cool darkness like a winding shadow in the night. For some reason he's reminded of his youth, and how North County San Diego was before the building glut. He looks at the drunk and says, "You know, they've ruined our homeland. We've almost be-

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come another Los Angeles. I won't even drive north on I-15 between three and six. The bumper-to-bumper traffic makes me crazy—I can't stand it and I get road rage. And I won't even think about doing the morning commute unless I'm on the freeway before six."

The drunk nods but remains quiet, his head tilted back to the night sky. The joker suspects he's composing a poem.

"Recite it for me," he insists.

"Only have a few lines."

"Nay, good sir, you have a plentitude—now read for us!" the joker says in his theatrical voice, trying to lift his friend from his somber mood.

The drunk takes a swig from the tequila bottle and begins: "Valleys and the Pharaoh's sacred river flow like emerald starlight to the sea, but these could never touch or trace the lines of a heart that pumps the blood of destiny.

"And bolts of lightning fade into the darkness, the moons of Saturn sail the blackened night, a flock of doves fly into the sunrise, shadows of their wings are like my dreams."

It's hauntingly beautiful," the joker says, and means it. The drunk has the soul of a poet, or so the joker has always believed. He was born a hundred years too late, and teaching English 101 is a waste of his talents. "Will there be more?"

The drunk rubs his face with both palms. "Yes—I feel a good one coming, but that was the second verse—ah, here's the first. He begins tapping cadence with his right hand on the arm of the lounge chair. "Yes, this is the first verse," he says and begins:

"The morning light trembles at my doorway, afraid to wake a world grown so cold, but the passions of your crazy timeless beauty sing softly to the sun to rise again ... and sorry winds rustle in the leaves, rain lies frozen at my feet, the echoes from the valley seem so empty, save for a moment in your arms."

The joker depends on logic and sharp-minded reason to keep his emotions at bay, but he's half in the bag and the drunk's recitation has moved him. *Such a lonesome sadness in those verses*, he thinks. After swallowing the lump in his throat he says, "Will you remember the words tomorrow?"

"Doesn't matter ... the greatest beauty is fugitive. You my friend are sole witness."

"Is there more?"

"First let's have a toast," the drunk says, generously filling two shot glasses with tequila. He pauses for a moment. "Here's to the beauty of young women and the tragedy of their innocence."

"Here, here," the joker responds with an indulgent grin. "And here's to Freud and the innocence of his tragedy."

The drunk tosses down his shot and laughs; the joker takes a sip and sets his shot glass on the wicker table between them. Next door, in the yard of a neighboring house, a tomcat yowls. The drunk curses him. "Goddamn

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flea-bitten cat. Every time I leave my car window open that useless creature pisses on the brake pedal, and it takes every chemical under my sink to get rid of the godawful smell. If I had a rifle with a silencer and could get a night scope fixed on that mangy beast, I'd blow him away."

And this our great poet, the joker says to himself, ever amused by the drunk's shifting moods. "Where's the next verse, do you have it yet? Before you go to murdering the neighbor's cat."

The drunk closes his eyes. "Yes, I see it now on my mental screen. It's a gift, I see whole pages right inside my head. I read them like a script."

He has offered this piece of information at least a dozen times. The joker nods. The drunk pauses, still tapping cadence with his hand, and then speaks:

"Dying flowers growing at my doorstep remind me of the days that slipped by, and the dust that clings so gently to his wings, when lost will destroy the butterfly.

"So I listen to the river softly singing, I listen to the music of the birds, I listen to her heart so gently pounding, and hope someday to feel beyond my words."

The joker can't contain his sadness. His fellow professor, his drinking buddy and best friend, has touched his loneliness and his sense of isolation. The joker feels he has somehow lost the best part of himself to the past. Tears spill down his cheeks, but it's dark and the drunk won't notice. The joker wants to say something. The drunk downs another shot.

"I have an early class tomorrow." He stands and walks unsteadily toward his half of the duplex.

"Make sure you write it down before you pass out," the joker says, knowing the drunk never does.

"Sure thing," the drunk mutters and disappears through the sliding door.

The joker looks to the night sky. The Milky Way is ablaze this clear October eve, the wind blowing from the east. "It'll be hot and dry tomorrow," he says aloud to himself, then rises from the chair and wobbles across the wooden deck to his door.

Later that night he dreams of a pool game. He's playing the same two construction workers in a round of cutthroat, while a voluptuous young woman watches from atop her barstool. She looks like a gypsy with a wild mane of shaggy hair and flashing dark eyes—her red lips moist, her breasts full and supple—and there's a golden ring in her bellybutton.

It's all about subtlety and the mystery of the game, a dream voice says—yes, yes, the joker mumbles in his sleep, *but if only I could get the girl*.