

Hollis Porter

DELINQUENT GOSPEL

Four barstools. Three occupied. Chrome-tube bases bolted to the floor. The black leather seat of the leftmost is still warm with my residual heat. The remaining three are occupied.

We're the final four. We're John. Paul and George. Ringo. Or we would be if a person could freely speak those names.

This bar is one of the few still to be officially repurposed by the Silver Regime. Petri dishes of unpoliced mendacity; that was the official line. Ordinance broadcast over all remaining channels. Messages followed, as always, by the customary slogans. *Deliverance in deference; ruin in rebellion.*

I'm a teacher. English. I appreciate the alliteration, if nothing else.

So the bars underwent metamorphosis. Some became discussion venues for the Qualified Syndicates. Others turned into cafeterias. When I possessed the funds, I even frequented one they converted into a massage den. Licensed, of course. But full-service - if you know what I mean. Johanna used to roll her eyes whenever I told her I'd stopped by the place after work. Black orbs rotating atop sculpted cheekbones.

She's on the rightmost stool. Johanna. She was first to audition this morning; a tough act to follow. But let's flip the chronology.

On stage before me was Louie. Tall enough that his toes touch the worn carpet; this despite the raised stool. Black work boots. Scuffed. Black jeans. T-shirt the same. In fact, he's the full Johnny Cash; though it would cost me dearly to quip that aloud. Steel cable muscles. Bull-leather skin. Scarred; the most vivid a curdled cream etching drawn from shaggy eyebrow to pitted cheek. Eyes with all the emotion of a cruising shark. Impressive voice, mind. I closed my eyes during his recital; the rich tones brought back memories of dark ale. The imported stuff no longer on-tap behind the mahogany bar counter.

"The only solution to the issue of human rights is oblivion." His final line. They gave him Pinochet, and his recitation was immediate. Silk and iron syllables wound together in a tough-love act of vocal adoration.

Judged on voice alone, he'd have a chance. But you also need the face; one that will hold up in high definition. His mug's a haunted colonel snatched from one of those banned war flicks.

Next to Louie - and in the middle - is Nero. Remember Jack Nicholson's white suit in *Chinatown*? No, me neither. To admit it would beg immediate ostracism and unbounded damnation. But let's pretend you have. That's the look Nero's chosen. It's a few sizes too large, and it drowns the kid; for that's all he appears to be. Cheeks as smooth as black-market porcelain and eyes so blue and permeated with fearful optimism I want to hug the poor guy; and spit in his face at the same time. Chestnut hair cascading in lazy waves. An outdated style.

He shook. On stage. His feet planted where mine are now. Wavering syllables; corn stalks vibrating in a gale. The Pol Pot line they ordered him to recite: *Look at me now. Am I a savage person? My conscience is clear.* Well,

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it had all the clarity of the frosted glass windows blindly staring into the cubicles in Madam Albina's massage lounge.

Nero's no competition.

Which leaves Johanna. It's the first time I've seen her since she moved out of our shared apartment. That's one of the reasons I'm auditioning today - I need rent money. *Delinquent in thought*; that was her excuse for bailing on me. She's one to talk. Sure, she's sitting there now in her dress-to-impress ensemble: pinstripe skirt tight over legs crossed from left to right; crisp white blouse with the top two buttons left unfastened to offer an appetiser of that store-bought cleavage. Fingernails painted silver and gold. Alternating. The same silver as the Regime's Picasso-lite emblem. Sycophant. Perhaps I should tell them about the tattoo - that tangle of thorns blooming into a rose on the underside of her left wrist. It used to be a Dharma Wheel making love to the Star of David. She soon moved to alter it once the decree went out. Black hair smoothed down to border her unblemished white moon face. Burst-cherry lips. Starshine eyes.

Delinquent? Me? It was she who coaxed me into purchasing a stranger each weekend. To bring home. She said she enjoyed watching me. With them. Fat, skinny; flat-chested, surgeon-enhanced; blonde, brunette; red-head. Shaved. A taste of each continent. Aged. Young. Scarred.

Damaged.

And when the act was over, she'd take their place; voraciously, and those precious metal nails would be talons. Scratching. Stabbing. And, to be fair, I welcomed it.

I drew the line when she told me to bring home a guy. So instead, she ventured out and brought one back herself. And I watched them. I felt nothing. But I didn't look away. The next day she said he was twice the man I'd ever be, and that she would find her own place. Where she could truly be herself; and adding that anyway, the music I listened to, and the films I watched, they were bound to solicit negative attention sooner or later.

She sends me videos. Each weekend. Of her. And one of them. Always the Regime types. I can't help but watch.

Delinquent? Perhaps she was right.

Her stained-crystal eyes are watching me. Nero's baby blues, too. The lifeless lenses of the hulking Louie. Six eyeballs. Three faces. Though I know Johanna's are the only ones that matter. She's got the brushstroke beauty; and her voice is cut-glass clarity.

They're not the only ones here. Off to the side of the room, below an antiquated beer poster half-peeled from the white-plaster wall, stand the twins. Not related. At least, I don't think so. I've named them such on account of their mirrored stature, identical buzz cuts, and pressed-to-perfection uniforms. You know the type. Fern green trouser and jacket combo; silver lining along every available seam. Cut a size too small so the material strains with each muscle twitch. Regime.

They're the judges. They also call out the names of the esteemed leaders and luminaries we must quote.

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They'll decide whether I get the job. Or her.

"Somoza Garcia."

Before I respond, a silent curse: my outfit choice. I'm sweating; the stains are growing under my arms. I should have plumped for linen rather than cotton. Johanna's looking at my darkening pits. Bitch.

I breathe. I answer.

"Gold for friends. Lead for foes."

Despite the distracting perspiration, and the surveying eyes, my voice holds up. I've been told it's the oral equivalent of rooibos tea; the type they serve in the restaurants I could never afford to frequent. Fresh and mellow. Wholesome.

"Idi Amin." The twins' voices are eerie in their similarity.

"In any country there must be people who have to die. They are the sacrifices any nation has to make to achieve law and order."

I'm ignoring the lie in the words. Concentrate on their sound. Articulation. Nero looks away. He's fiddling with the white lapels of his jacket. Johanna's chewing her bottom lip. I take satisfaction from that. Louie's a portrait of indifference.

I'm now the lie. Perspiration halts.

"Leopold the Second." Which twin speaks? Doesn't matter. I know the words I'm required to recite. And that's all they are: words.

"In the Far East, compulsory labor can work wonders, just like here."

With my dwindling salary and spiraling rent, I'm in danger of dropping into the compulsory myself. If my finances dip below the black line, I'll be repositioned. Waste recycling plant? Infant daycare? Cleaner in one of the Regime blocks - the type Johanna now boasts she shares with the latest silver-seamed drone she's offered her salacious appetite to?

She'd love that.

I need this job. Fourth and final name imminent. Beautify the words and I could be the new face and voice of the local news bulletins.

I don't need to believe the words; just say them. They have no meaning if I remove my intellect. My soul. If I keep it purely physical.

Memories flicker back to our shared time together. How I ignored the scars of the double-breast amputee. How I licked the sweat from the fatty folds of the street cleaner's belly and thighs. How I did it all at her behest.

This isn't selling my soul. Necessary means to a desired end.

"Bob Dylan."

Sweat stains re-blossom. A salted pearl skips down my ribcage. It tickles. Johanna's stopped chewing her lip. Nero's face is colourless. Louie's eyes raise from the dead.

She told me not to play Dylan. Back when we lived together. That it would bring trouble. That I was an idiot to believe his words.

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Possession or public performance of such artistry invites immediate repositioning. Or worse.

Is this a test?

I look at the twins. No expression. Only silver lines on green. To Johanna. For the answer. But she's looking away. Eyes averted. Forefinger twirling in velvet hair.

I close my eyes. A vision. Her weight on my hips; even as the Chinese woman with the knife-cropped hair is still refastening her bra. Johanna never waits. Nails already circling my nipple.

I begged for more when she did that. Every time. For my sins.

Eyes open. The bar appears gloomier than before.

Shadows of memory.

I need this job.

My mouth moves of its own accord. Rooibos tea vowels and fine-china consonants.

"All the truth in the world adds up to one big lie."

The words of my hero echo off the stripped walls. A sparkle in Johanna's eyes. And that redcurrant smile. The one I see every weekend in the videos she sends me. Greed spread across painted lips. And worse; I now recognize the twins as they step towards me in military synchronisation. I've seen them in the videos, too.

Louie and Nero are already departing. Are they a part of her game?

"One big lie," I repeat. But now my voice is diminished; dregs left cold and stale at mug's bottom. I look at her. She's in front of me. Twins behind. "You set me up?"

Statement or question? Does it matter?

"Yes," she says. "But it's earned. Those films. The music. You've a diseased mind. I should have understood sooner."

"A lie," I say again. My voice is as threadbare as the carpet. "The job. Contest. None of this is real."

A click. Metallic. Pressure on my wrists. It's the first time I've ever been shackled. I've only seen such inhumanity on the news bulletins.

The click is the sound of reality. Present truth.

"Not entirely a lie," she says. Her lips are close enough for me to see the smudge of colour where her teeth chewed. I thought it was nerves. Now I know it was anticipation. "Here's the reality. You're in violation of the public decency law. Utterance of deviant words. Also real, are the two comrades behind you. They will take you downtown. For questioning. At least initially. I encourage you to speak the truth. They are not always gentle."

With that last sentence, the stars in her eyes bloom into galaxies.

I feel a trickle of blood run down my wrist. It's warm.

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"One last thing." A pause as the lilting music of her voice hangs in the air like fading perfume. I recognize that tone. That rhythm. It's her hunger. Craving. I hear it each weekend in the videos she sends. I used to hear it in our home. "One thing." Again. "On our way downtown, we'll stop by my place." She looks behind me. At the twins. Widening smile. "Our place. A parting gift. Remember the thing I asked you to do once? That you wouldn't do. Before they take you downtown, you'll do it for me." Lips grazing mine. The tip of a tongue. Voice now a breath. "How does that sound?"

"All the truth in the world - "

A kick from behind and I drop to my knees. Before the full lie can be spoken.