

The Regular

It was that perfect time of day that passes by so quickly that is often missed because one is inside or doing something else so as not to notice. But Ellis had waited for it. It was that time where everything outside was the same perfect shade of yellow. It looked as if it were in a movie. The sky, the trees, the wood of the porch, the pond with the gently floating fall leaves: all yellow. Even the air itself seemed to be this color. Everything was still, everything was quiet. "It's past five, Wilbur," Ellis said quietly to his cat who was sleeping on the patio chair beside him, "time to go to the bar." Ellis always came out to see this phenomenon, without fail, since he had noticed it more than a year ago.

He lived a comfortable retirement, in a comfortable neighborhood, with a comfortable patio. His life from the outside could be considered fairly normal. He had gone to school as a young man, worked steadily in government jobs his entire life, and for the most part stayed out of trouble. There was one peculiar thing that was a source of great discontent from his entire family, especially his probing mother: Ellis had never married. There had been a few women, yes. In his youth he was handsome and harmless and they gravitated toward him. If they remained for long, they felt he was hardly aware they were there, and some would pick small fights just to see if they could get a rise out of him. They did not succeed. They thought it was because they were not important to him, and that was why he didn't seem to take any interest. But this was not the actual case. In their company, or in anyone else's, Ellis felt as though some sort of important life essence was being robbed of him, something was being taken away. He felt he must have time alone for something important, to breathe, but as soon as he left them, he suddenly felt stranded and alone, and was angry at himself for wanting to be alone. Whenever he returned to them, though, he felt it again. Eventually the women were just too lonely to survive such a relationship.

It bothered him a good deal to think about all that, but he would eventually comfort himself and settle down once again into the routine of things. "It isn't a big deal," he told himself, "some people are not supposed to marry." Or perhaps, "The woman I'm supposed to marry just hasn't been born yet. She hasn't been born, or she died a long time ago." In more recent years, out on his patio during that time of day when everything was yellow, he would nostalgically look into the past, over all of the years of his life. Some memories rushed up at him and gave him great joy. Always, though, if he stayed in that nostalgia for long enough, there crept in a sharp pang of emotion, as a thought deeply buried hurried to unravel itself, and he would think, "And who do I have to share this with?" and he would think much less of himself suddenly. "But to admit that I had done something wrong... would be to admit I had wasted the best years of my life!" And as quickly as the thought had entered his mind it would leave. He would harden with twice the conviction as before. He had succeeded in loving no one, and in return no one had loved him.

Since it was past five he found his wool jacket, wallet, and keys, and gently shut the door behind him. Ellis noticed the time was already passing. It was no longer all yellow, but now the sun was about to set, and soon it would be all blue and all the trees

black and silhouetted. He lived in a small town a few miles outside of Chicago, the city where he worked as a young man, and only a few blocks from his favorite bar. He enjoyed the daily walk; he loved looking at how all the apartments were clean and lined up. And most of all he loved watching the people under the cover of his cap. He felt he knew the entire neighborhood as he watched them pass. "They are all so friendly... and it is such a day, such a lovely day, which can only happen when you are old and can appreciate it." A woman walked by with her dog and Ellis instinctively moved to the side, but had done so from a distance, so that the woman had barely noticed that he had gotten out of her way and her eyes and mind passed over him. He tensed as she walked by but then relaxed when she passed. "We go through this ritual so often! Pretending not to notice each other, ha! So be it, take all the room you like. I must be a cornerstone to these parts," he thought afterwards, happily.

He reached the bar. It was a restaurant and bar, though it was not particularly known for being one or the other. It was known for just its name, Charlie's. There was a floor-to-ceiling window that ran all along the dining area so that customers inside felt like they were in the open air. The chairs were wooden and old. Some felt sturdier to sit on than others. Crumbs of bread were hidden on the wooden tables and were only noticed when someone's hand pressed on them and they felt a sharp thing crumble, or you saw them as they were being swept off by a hostess seating guests. What Ellis liked about this place the most was that it was a quiet place and was not as noisy or bustling like a train station like some other places he had been to. He sat down at a usual spot along the bar and waited. Everyone at the bar knew him and his habits. He did the same thing every day. Only on rare occasions did he not come. The bartender would come and greet him, bring him a whiskey, and ask if he were hungry. Depending on the answer, he would bring food with his next whiskey, and would bring him one drink after another until hours later when, already dark outside, Ellis would pay and leave.

When he first started coming the people that worked there tried to open conversation with him, just as a way to pass the time if they were in the mood, as they would with anyone sitting at the bar. "What's your name?" they would ask. Ellis would keep his eyes down at his drink and finally after a long pause he would reply and exhale deeply. They would try again with some distant and periphery topic. They were met with the same disinterest. "It's the quiet ones that worry me," they would joke to him, trying to entice him into conversation. Eventually he would stop replying at all. From a distance, it would appear as if he were troubled or thinking of something serious and important. But he was thinking of nothing, just continuous thoughts, thoughts with no beginning and no end. He seemed not to notice he was being asked questions, and he forgot his answers as soon as he said them. "Did I reply? I did say something back, right?" he thought sometimes. If there was a new bartender or waiter working that night there was always a conversation about him as soon as he left. "Did you see that guy?" they would ask. They knew almost nothing about him. "An enigma wrapped in an enigma," some said, "a troubled old man," others offered, "a genius," a few guessed.

As a child he had been thought of as odd by his classmates. He said little to anyone, offered nothing of himself. He was smaller than everyone else and somehow carried himself differently and weak like a terrified animal. He would often just stare at things in his own little world. One day, when he was ten years old, he was riding the bus home from school, and he watched the houses and driveways pass through his window,

and very carefully he listened to the sound of the rumbling engine of the bus as it started and stopped, and the screeching of the door as the bus let people out. He was in his own fantasy world and looking out the window when the bus was moving he imagined himself running alongside the bus, running through the lawns they were passing, jumping over driveways and over the tops of cars. He was sitting in the second to last row and an older boy behind him slapped him across the top of his head. His mind jumped with fear. The fantasy disappeared. He did nothing, sat still, and pretended like nothing happened.

Another slap came.

“See? He doesn’t do anything, isn’t that right?” the boy behind him laughed. He slapped him again.

“Stop it!” the girl next to the bully said. “Don’t you see he wants you to leave him alone?”

“No he doesn’t!” he said and slapped him again. “He doesn’t care. You idiot! No one likes you!”

“Stop! Stop!” the girl said, grabbing the boys hands before he could hit him again.

Ellis said nothing. His breath came out in spasms he tried to control and hide. His mind went from turmoil into numbness and into turmoil again. At his stop, he walked down the aisle and out of the bus without looking back, without saying anything, and never telling anyone afterwards. The day was bright and the white sidewalk hurt his eyes. The sound of the rumbling engine of the bus faded slowly into the distance. He walked half a block and then suddenly fell on the lawn of a neighbor and openly wept. The grass was soft. He wiped his cheeks and eyes and made sure his mom would not be able to tell he was upset before coming in. After coming in he went directly to his room and tried to forget the whole thing. Ellis never remembered this moment later in life. If he had been placed on that bus to watch the whole incident again he would have been astonished.

When he entered Charlie’s that night, everything seemed the same, and Ellis got his drink like usual. On the bar there was a radio playing music. And though it was only just early November, and during a period of unusual warmth for the area, one station was already playing Christmas songs, in particular the classic oldies that are played every year out of tradition, and he could not help but to stop for a moment and focus on those ghostly voices of the past. He remembered a girl he had once loved, or at least in his memories he had loved her, and they were ice skating in Chicago. She was warm and sweet and wore something red, a sweater. She had red laces on her white skates and a white headband.

Ellis was enjoying this fantasy and then began to feel a little hungry. Looking around, he saw someone new, a girl who he had never seen working there before, doing something in the backroom, and he became suspicious of her and worried. The woman he was ice skating with disappeared. There was one of the usual bartenders working there, but with him was the new employee he was training, Candace. She was young and there was something about her that appealed strongly to men. She knew about this and even came to expect it from them. There was a delicacy in the way she spoke and there was a graceful flow in the way she moved that made it seem like life was easy for her.

That was her first evening shift. She walked by Ellis to grab a napkin and looked up at him: he wasn’t looking. Immediately she felt an immense curiosity and attraction to him. She went to the back to the other bartender.

“Who is that?” she asked.

“Who? Oh him? He’s a regular.”

“What’s his name?”

“I don’t know.”

“He’s a regular and you don’t know his name? That’s what’s wrong with this place! You need to know how to treat people right.”

He looked at her as if he were about to say something to defend himself but felt it was not worth the energy and went back to pumping air out of opened wine bottles.

She came back to the bar and dining area. When she looked in another direction Ellis studied her a little. Something about her disturbed him. He did not know what it was but before he could decide on what it was his thoughts had turned to something else, and he had already forgotten about her by the time she walked near to where he was sitting.

“Hey there,” she said.

He did not move or look at her to acknowledge he had been spoken too. It was as if he had not heard anything.

“What’s your name? I just ask because I hear you’re here all the time.” She said it louder this time and walked even closer so there could be no mistake. She pretended to clean a salt shaker to stand near him.

“Ellis,” he said, and then he breathed heavily and fell back into his former position. At this point in the conversation she expected much more interest but got nothing. All she could feel was the emptiness and unspoken words between them. She decided immediately that he was special, and that he was noticing she was special too, and she failed to see it any other way.

“What do you do?” she asked, putting the salt shaker down.

As if with great effort and perhaps double meaning, “I’m retired,” he said, slightly nodding.

“Oh that’s nice. My grandparents are retired. They live in Maine. Can you imagine? It’s so cold out there! I keep telling them to go someplace warmer but they never listen. My grandfather was a business owner. He owned a business that fixed watches, and there were more business than you would think! People get sentimental about their watches I guess. He would spend hours just fixing watches! He tried to show me once but it was so boring and I couldn’t understand how anyone could do it. My grandfather is really handsome, you kinda look like him! Do you have any grandchildren? Maybe you have a granddaughter that’s close to my age.”

She kept her eyes on him as if waiting for something.

“Could you get the other boy, I want to make an order,” he said.

“Oh, I can get it for you, what is it?”

“He has my ticket.”

“Oh that’s ok! The way it works here is that it doesn’t matter who puts it in.”

He was disappointed. “Never mind,” he shook his head, “I forgot what I wanted.” She was called for from behind another door that led to the kitchen and she left. Suddenly after that Ellis felt a new anxiety and he looked desperately around the bar for something but did not know what it was and did not find it. Earlier he had felt calmness within the bar and with all of the things in the bar. Now he felt singled out. Just as he was about to take another sip of his drink, Candace returned.

“Did you remember?” she asked.

“What?”

“What you wanted to get?”

He never answered.

“I love our California Clubs here; I love sprouts, what kinds of sandwiches do you like?”

“I’m sorry. I’m not in the mood to talk.”

“Oh ok. Well, if there’s anything else I can get you, let me know!”

She left him. The other bartender came to the bar. Ellis paid his bill and left. It was much earlier than it had been, leaving there, than on other nights, and he was much less drunk. Walking home he looked at all the houses in the neighborhoods he was intimately familiar with. He had named them and they had personalities and spoke to him as he walked by them. But that night they were silent. They spoke to him when it was only him but it seemed like when he was walking home that night Candace was walking with him too.

He came home to Wilbur who was awake on the couch and tried to pet him. Wilbur moved away and jumped off the couch. There was nothing but silence. Silence in all the wooden floors, on all the shelves, on all the books and furniture, and yet he could not feel alone. The girl, or the idea of the girl, had followed him from the bar and into his home. “This is unbelievable!” he thought, burning with anger. “That girl was being completely ridiculous, annoying her customers! Some stupid thing like that can ruin a whole night. Though I know everyone else that works there would agree with me, to raise the question directly, to confront her about her rudeness, no, they would have to defend one of their own. They would ignore it on purpose. Perhaps she won’t be there tomorrow. Some people do get fired, I’ve noticed, and it is most likely when they are new.” All of this flashed through his mind almost instantly. The poor impression, the bad taste had been left with him. He hoped that it, as with all things, would fade in time.

With nothing left to do that night Ellis waited in bed for sleep.

The next afternoon, it was yellow and nice, and soft air swirled around Ellis on his patio, and he was comforted by the vagrant noises of the surrounding city streets, and for a moment he almost forgot the previous day’s incident.

That is, until he picked up his wool jacket for his daily drink.

Out on the streets, his mind was plunged into an eerie gloom. He looked about him for signs of familiarity, but found nothing. There was no one on the streets to look at; the apartments and houses seemed dead and empty. Down the street no cars passed. He could see for miles without seeing anyone, and this terrible loneliness grew in volume as he arrived right outside of the bar. He stood for a moment and then suddenly a peculiar feeling struck him. He felt as though there was something he could not perceive about life, something vital and obvious that evaded him no matter where he looked, and that the absence of this knowledge was what ultimately separated him from other people. He became frightened and a whole train of anxiety raced through his mind. The thought spread to his idea about his person and it followed that there must also be something vital and wrong at the heart of him. Some quality, some essence of human nature was apparently missing from him, and this lacking of spirit convinced him he did not belong in this world. Surely he would be found out soon enough and judged not to be a human being and exiled. “They all must know,” he thought in a blur.

He entered the bar. The girl was nowhere in sight. Like an infant he was calmed by the loud ambient sounds of the bar. It seemed more private among many other people, surrounded by so many strangers that had no reason to talk to him. It was when there only a few people that he felt it was inevitable that something would go wrong. He found a stool and sat on it. As soon as he became comfortable Candace came out from the back, immediately saw him there, and came straight for him.

“Why hello there! What can I get for you?”

He did not want to answer. He was hoping that perhaps this time it would be better.

“A whiskey.”

“Right away!” she said, cheerfully.

It came almost too fast, and Ellis resented the special attention. “She is as intrusive as my mother was,” he thought to himself, “always standing over me.”

He sat in quiet contemplation. She was busy taking orders from other patrons. After going to a counter to enter in some orders, she came back to his side of the bar.

“I was thinking, I know what your problem is.”

“What?” he said, offended.

She gathered herself, and hoped her next words make clearer her intentions.

“You’re too quiet you know, I asked around, no one knows you.”

“Everyone knows me. What are you talking about?” he said spitefully.

“You’re wrong, no one knows you. They know who you are, but they don’t know anything about you,” she said. She was not about to be proved wrong by this old man.

“I just wanted a drink. What’s gotten into you, little girl? Give me some one else.”

Realizing it would not be good to continue, she obliged, but the offense she had taken still lingered in her voice. “I’ll get you someone else,” she said, turning away. Ellis perceived her body language, the expression on her face, everything about her screaming, “I’ll go get you someone else, because you’re too weird!”

“Hold on! You can’t think that... you can’t say that without knowing a person!”

He had become visibly upset and shaken. Candace looked at him with confusion.

“Say what? I didn’t say anything. I’ll go get you someone else.”

“No... I’m leaving now... good bye!” he said, turned as quickly as he could and headed out. As he opened the door, among all the noise inside the bar he could have almost heard her saying, “He’s just too weird!” followed by a rise of laughter. He hurried his pace, never looking back, too terrified to look even back.

On the walk back home his mind kept turning over and over again what had happened. Darkness consumed his thoughts. What did she mean that no one knew him? Was there anything really wrong with him? The look on her face when she agreed to get someone else kept reappearing to him over and over. He felt suddenly exposed, undressed. Had he run into anyone he knew, by some random chance, even an old friend, Ellis would not have acknowledged them, would have felt no need to greet them or anyone else.

He came home, threw down his coat, and sat on the couch.

There was something stripped in his soul and contents long forgotten came pouring out. In those moments of terrible clarity, visions came into his mind, visions that he had lost touch with all of reality, visions of large parties of people celebrating life with effortless joy across all their faces. An emptiness seized him in all the far corners of his

mind and for a moment he remembered the dreams he once had for himself. All of the lost opportunities, all of the unfulfilled relationships and moments of youth he failed to take advantage of, everything wasted. He realized that all this time he had been alive but not living, and that ahead of him were only more years of loneliness and regret. There was a strange sensation that what he was feeling then he would feel forever, that nothing would change and time was frozen. He felt a primitive need to go back to some place he could not go back to, something that was no longer there, a place he might have dreamed of once that was vivid and at the same time strange.

Perhaps to completely counter the feelings these thoughts gave him, a period of numbness overtook him. He stared numbly at his surroundings, not really understanding what he was looking at. Ellis, without thinking, got up and opened a wooden cabinet. In it there was a dusty box, a record player. There were a few records in the cabinet and he grabbed a familiar looking one. He turned it on and waited. A flood of sound filled the room with color. The walls, the floors, all became alive again. Listening to the music, memories came over him of his past, memories of times when he imagined himself being happy, perhaps also colored by the music. There were many songs he enjoyed not because they were well done, but because they reminded him of a particular part of his life. He clung onto this nostalgia with a sort of desperation that he did not understand. He started dreaming about people he had once known and then began to have conversations with them, and told them all the things he had wanted to tell them but never could.

Filled with this nostalgia he began to feel better. The urgency that gripped him a moment ago had subsided. The thought of Charlie's seemed long gone. Dimly, he sensed that all of these pains came only when he drifted too close to people, that the problem lay not in what her probing revealed, but in the fact that there was even an inquiry. He thought about never going back there, of never going anywhere really, of just staying here, in his cocoon, and it seemed to him one of the best ideas he ever had. He would go out for food and for walks to say hello to the neighborhood, and also for that perfect time of day out on his porch when everything was yellow, but nothing else. Wilbur was sleeping next to him. "Don't you see?" he asked his cat, the only creature he felt that ever understood him, "I would like them all better... if only they would leave me alone."