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David McKenna

Boy Or Girl?

Shanks looks north and south for methedrine as the stars come out. Bob Dylan is at Broad and Snyder, scrounging for butts in the gutter. Miles Davis is at 52nd and Market, sparring with an imaginary foe. Iggy Zeitz, who bears an uncanny resemblance to Henry Kissinger, is distilling a lifetime of experience into a major speech to the bartender at the Boot n' Saddle. America needs a great man to strike a balance of power in the post-Cold War era. Someone who shows an instinct for distinguishing between the permanent and the tactical. A Richelieu, supremely realistic, with an aversion to moralizing and a talent for adapting to adversity.

Shanks can barely make out the words, Iggy's accent is so thick. He creeps closer to the bar, waiting for a chance to speak.

"Eliminate weaklings, and those who champion them," Iggy says, turning to point at Shanks. "Power should rest with a man of power, period."

Shanks sidles up, puts his foot on the rung of Iggy's barstool and whispers politely, "You got that ounce of meth you promised to hold?"

The pudgy policy wonk eyes him coldly through horn-rimmed glasses. "Every choice has a price," he croaks, pointing a stubby finger. "Great men do not make favorable assumptions about the future."

"Yes, but where's the meth?"

"I have Grade-A her-ion, but no methedrine," Iggy snaps, dismissing Shanks with a back-handed wave. "Balance must be restored."

Shanks regrets braving the late-night trip to Philly. Fighting a case of the sniffles, he retreats to his rusty Thunderbird and strikes out in all the other dives on Broad Street. The Queen's Bee Hive is deserted, Luster's Fun Spot burnt to the ground. Richard Pryor raves empty promises at the Utopian Pub. No meth or even bootleg Beauties. Donna Summer is vamping at

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the Terminal Lounge. She's got cocaine, a waste compared to meth, even when its not cut with baby powder or something worse. Good for a nervous buzz that never blossoms to a full-blown high. Coke is like almost getting laid.

Shanks hovers like a praying mantis, tall and bent and still. Donna sits him down just like Reba used to and plops a big black hand on his skinny thigh. "I got sumpin' make you forget that fairy dust."

Chin stubble peeks through her heavy makeup. Shanks backs from the bar and says, "An incurable disease."

Donna laughs. "Don't be such a fag, hon."

It's a long drive home to Atlantic City. He cat-naps at the wheel, dreams of sex and food, and wakes wanting neither. Dozing muffles his true desire. Asleep at 60 miles an hour, he's like an amputee feeling pain where his leg used to be. Chastity, who once asked to have his babies, is pregnant by one of the Amazing Alou Brothers, Dominican triplets who juggle butcher knives and basketballs, and look exquisite in spandex. Swifty Agamemnon, his bartender/lifeguard friend, caught the Virus and has to be wheeled down to the beach to watch the ocean.

Sickness breeds resolution. Pushing the gas pedal to the floor, Shanks vows to sober up and save cash. He'll quit the A.C.-Philly loop, look sharp and live large. Sunbathe on volcanic ash in Costa Rica. Eat kangaroo pizza baked in ovens fueled by brush from the outback. He'll find the beach on Cyprus where Aphrodite was born out of the sea's foam. It's just up ahead, he can smell the salt air. A group of pale swimmers is testing the waters. Andreas, the innkeeper at the crowded cliff-top tavern, beckons him with a backgammon board.

The usual suspects on Pacific Avenue are holding only heroin. Shanks' casino sources are no help. Roger the floorperson hanged himself with his socks, and Vincent the bookish bartender has been missing for weeks. If all else fails, he'll try Bad Sal.

Don Rickles is in Avalon's main bar, pointing at a scrawny, four-eyes porter struggling with a huge bag of ice. Look, it's Woody Allen's son!"

Everyone laughs. It really is Rickles, on his way to perform in the upstairs theater where Chastity met her jugglers, and where Shanks once let her climb over the bar to escape a panther who'd bolted off-stage from the wild animal act. Tired from

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the hunt, Shanks watches Woody dump ice into a steel sink and orders a double bourbon. Booze will do till he finds a better parachute.

His apartment is a stone's throw from TropWorld. He finds a bottle of Jack Daniels and, after a ferocious search, a single 10-milligram Valium. Just in time. Heartache he can stand, but a speed crash is like being flayed and rolled in a bed of salt. He slumps at the kitchen table as the elegant blue pill dissolves in his knotted gut. The benzodiazopene courses through him, numbing a billion neurotransmitters. He flutters like an apple blossom, reading People magazine, humming his grandmother's favorite hymn. There is a balm in Gilead.

Now he's strolling in the Easter parade, in a pink crushed velvet and white lace dress, holding hands with Reba and her friend Flo, wearing five pounds of dried flowers on her head. The baby's breath is his favorite.

Last year, Shanks won the Pre-School Girls prize. It's Reba's annual Easter joke; only the three of them know. She says he'll be a star someday, the prettiest star, and don't worry what his father has to say about it. The good-for-nothing bastard dresses like an undertaker, even on holidays, and isn't man enough to make fashion decisions for anyone.

The low rumble of a chopper brigade disturbs the peace. Harleys roar up South Street, and the parade becomes a stampede. Bassets shake off their baskets and bonnets, synchronized skaters collide and fall. Musicians scramble up church steps, and Shanks slips in just before they slam the door. Rampaging bikers use a phone pole for a battering ram. The church echoes and shakes with each attempt at forced entry. Shanks dips his long, slender fingers into holy water and says a prayer to St. Theresa.

The rhythmic thudding shifts to the ceiling, then smacks him in the chest.

He lifts his head from the table and reaches for more bourbon, awed by the force of the collisions. Bad Sal, the landlord's son, is in the bedroom above with one of his whores. Sal's headboard is banging against the wall and shaking the flimsy seashore house to its foundations. Shanks squeezes his hands between his thighs and shudders. The noise persists for anywhere from ten minutes to two hours. When it

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stops, Shanks hears a door slam and the clatter of high heels on wooden stairs.

Good Sal is the landlord's legitimate son. Bad Sal is his son by a woman he never married and is mortal enemies with the landlord's wife and with Good Sal. Bad Sal is in constant trouble with the law, but the wife can't persuade the landlord to banish Bad Sal and his motorcycle. The landlord, ever eager to divert blame, will evict Shanks in a second if he finds him socializing with his bastard son.

Discretion is essential. Shanks creeps upstairs and asks Bad Sal if he's holding. Bad Sal washes down a handful of blue Valiums with a beer and belches. "All I had was a few tens."

It's an emergency for Bad Sal too. His girls can't make money fast enough to feed his \$200-a-day heroin habit. He owed every white dealer on the island. Shanks drives him to Kentucky Avenue, where they hail a black guy called Sugar Pop. Bad Sal does the talking. He's wearing jeans and a T-shirt, with his greasy hair in a ponytail. Snow flurries swirl around him in the T-Bird's headlights. Shanks can feel himself wasting away, but Bad Sal radiates greatness. Conan the Barbarian with needle marks.

Sugar Pop directs them to the Boardwalk. Bad Sal commiserates with E-Ram outside the Serene Custard and Golf, then pulls Shanks aside. "We're in business if you front me."

The Valium has worn off. Shanks is shivering. His belly muscles coil like razor wire. He hands Bad Sal a wad of bills. "Get me something will take the edge off."

Bad Sal snaps his fingers and fidgets. "Boy or girl?"

A challenge. Shanks retreats to a tin-roofed Caribbean hotel, to watch green fields of sugar cane roll to the sea. A pink sun is setting. Dinner is served: melon sweetened with Madeira, swordfish filet, lemon sorbet. Over coffee, Johnny Mathis invites him to spend the night at a gray-shingled mansion with manicured gardens.

Bad Sal repeats the question. Boy is an opiate, girl is methedrine. Bad Sal, like Iggy, condemns stimulants and anyone who favors them. He says meth makes him flutter his eyelids and chatter like a canary.

Shanks is feeling swishy, truth be told, and wants to toughen up. "Boy," he says.

Money and product change hands. E-Ram slips away after engaging Bad Sal in an elaborate handshake. Bad Sal leads

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Shanks off the boards to a dim motel and unlocks the door of a unit that smells like sex and seaweed. He has six rock-hard pellets. Shanks wants to crush one and snort it, but Bad Sal pooh-poos him. "You'd puke for three days."

Bad Sal uses water, spoon and butane lighter to cook up a pellet, then draws some of the liquid into a syringe. Shanks wraps a rose-colored stocking around his upper arm and pulls it tight. Bad Sal steadies Shanks' bony forearm, pokes it, pulls blood into the syringe, pushes everything into the vein. The thumping resumes. Shanks huddles with Reba on the marble floor in the vestibule. The Best-Dressed Family tramples him. His petticoat rips. There, there, Reba says as the battering ram slams his chest.

Shanks lets go the stocking, exhales and nods. Bad Sal shoots up on the sofa. The door opens and one of the girls enters with a middle-aged john.

Their progress is blocked by Shanks, on hands and knees, gasping.

The girl stops chewing her gum and looks at Bad Sal, who says, "I think he likes you, Meg."

She and Bad Sal laugh. Shanks gulps air. "I can't breathe."

The john says, "It's indigestion."

"Drink some baking soda and lie down," Meg suggests.

"Take a Bromo, wake up a homo," Sal says. "I hear you got a crush on Cesar Alou."

Shanks staggers out the door toward the boards. Invisible blows to the midsection double him over. It's an unusually cool night for the islands. He hikes past palm-shaded bungalows, among red gum and bastard apricot trees, breathing the sea breeze, anticipating warm beige sand and turquoise waves at daybreak. Dustin Hoffman is rooting through a trash bin on the outskirts of the mangrove swamp. Shanks would pump him for tips on breaking into the business, but he's shy. Stage fright is destroying his career hopes. He worked one day in the wild animal show, then went back to the bar.

At least it's not high season. He can stroll the golf course to the mansion, with its oval swimming pool and sculpted hedges, or hike a dirt road to the knobby hills and watch the sun rise. With any luck, the custard stand will be open by then. Just the thing for indigestion.