

Waiting in the Wings

By Tyler Lynch

It's one of those glass strewn, bricked up, dead quiet, inner city streets. Grown a coat of bad graffiti and lying like the carcass of a once-powerful animal under the sodium orange glare of the street-lights. The asphalt looks like ground beef. It sits between idle structures and forgotten mausoleums to the American Dream. Nobody goes in those buildings, and you know it's holy ground because the detritus of urban decay and refuse is circumscribed about them.

The cracks in the sidewalk look like varicose veins. Light pollution renders the night sky a toxic brown. Into the decrepit stillness of this tableau intrudes a young woman. Breaking the humming drone of distant traffic and the occasional chorus of sirens—aloof and alien as nocturnal birds— she clicks her feet in little, panicked steps. She's clutching a little yellow handbag that doesn't contain anything valuable. It doesn't matter.

Pretty, thin-boned women are often followed on ugly city streets by men of dark intent. And these men are young and empty-eyed, loping casually with the subtlety of starving dogs. Perhaps they carry around the stench of dirty booze, and bear in their blood a bright, chemical insurgence of cheap, hard drugs. This too, doesn't matter. It is a squalid, pathetic drama of little depth. The goal is the assertion of power on the weak, and the means is forced sex. Rushed, rash, incompetent, and ugly.

A twisted procession: the girl trying not to run, and every time she takes a short, sharp step she lets out a little whimper; the two men strolling some paces behind her and alternately directing obscene compliments at the woman or laughing at their own perceived sexual dominance. Were this primal conflict left to the players on this bruise-coloured street, you could guess the ending. But there is a fourth agent, waiting in the wings.

Here is a man. In years, quivering on the edge of a century; in stature, he is creaking bones in put-down muscles in wrinkled, paper skin. This man is hunched like a broken tree, swaying across the ground-beef road watching the girl and the gang from cloudy, yellow eyes. They do not see him, for he lies outside the dirty pool of light spilled on the road. We do not know why the man is outside on such a street, at such a time. Perhaps he does not know either.

The girl is struggling to find a gas station she knows sits in neon squalour on one of these corners. The men are in no hurry to initiate their whims, for the longer they keep up the pretense of a fair hunt the more they can fester in their own predatory power. The sorry old man lacks the physical power to enact his will and fight the wolves. An innocent bystander, caught in the clutches of a mocking, sadistic ethical dilemma.

The ancient hands with their gnarled arthritic fingers begin to tremble in his pockets. He takes one shambling step in the direction of the woman, as she pumps her heels over the veins in the sidewalk. Her eyes pray to the windows above her, black and empty like toothless mouths. By now she has begun to sob and walk faster and clutch her yellow purse harder. A low mumble escapes the old man's lips: a feeble denunciation of rape and violence, aimed at the pale men. A salty tear burns down his weathered cheeks and stains his straggly beard. He wishes he had a phone, a signal in the sky to call someone with strong muscles and shiny weapons.

The old man is silently crying, too. He takes a step backwards, retreating from the stage. His lines were erased, his role a mockery. Decrepit and feeble and sobbing, the old man shambles his way off the road into the ruins of a fallen house. Outside, the sounds become grim and messy. As the girl begins to scream and supplicate the bricks, the road, and the hollow buildings, the laughing men—jostling at her elbows—form a cacophonous and fading harmony. The man removes his fumbling hands from his pockets. In his anger he begins to shake and

raises his hands to his ears, gritting his eyes shut, moaning like a dying animal to drown out the noise.

When he opens his eyes, he sees that he has, once again, set something on fire. The fallen timbers and moldy couches and wallpapers, charring, blistering, boiling in mythical fury, scorching an infernal display of energy and brute force.

He sets down his hands and sways, silent and penitent, among the blazing yellow fury of his perfect flames.