



December 1975



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HELL'S LEITMOTIF

*trouble at school • couple of uninvited guests • reluctantly, minor
gets involved • secrets upon secrets • a palaver is interrupted •
minor and john varley make their introductions • that terrible,
familiar stink of blood • a head made of smoke*



1

Early afternoon, with bruised, ugly clouds hanging above the notched teeth of the buildings across the street, the sleet all coming down sideways, holiday lights blinking red and green in the windows of the bar. The waist-high Christmas tree in the corner done up in silver tinsel. Cold winter light on the floor. Duane Minor, alone in the Last Call twenty minutes before open, puts ashtrays on the tables. Makes sure he's got his lemon slices and his cherries, that the racks are stocked with clean glasses, there's enough ice to get him through to early evening at least. A night of shit sleep gives the world a blighted, gritty cast, and he's got Blue Oyster Cult on the jukebox in the back, turned up high enough to rattle window glass; it's only the break in the song that lets him hear the phone ringing.

"Last Call Tavern," he says. "We open in twenty."

"Hello, Mr. Minor. It's Patty Garent over at Joseph Middle School."

Minor's heart sinks. "Hey, Mrs. Garent. Jut a sec, please." He sets the phone down and trots over to the stereo console at the far end of the bar, lowers the volume on the jukebox. Walks back and closes his eyes for a moment before picking up the handset.

"I'm here, ma'am." He fishes a cigarette out of the pack on the counter, lights up.

"Well, Mr. Minor, I'm the bearer of unfortunate news."

"Ah, damn. Another fight?"

"Yes, I'm sorry to say, and the girl was hurt this time. We need you to come pick Julia up and discuss the issue with Principal Reed. You and your wife both, if that's a possibility."

Minor looks at the clock. There are odd, mismatched stitches of

sorrow and shame and anger all sort of roiling inside him, the most prevalent one being the certainty that he's failing miserably at this. That guardianship—parenthood, whatever the hell the state of Oregon wants to call it—is a thing simply beyond his means. This child has brought him out of his depth. He runs a hand down his face, and notes the day's first desire for a drink. "Okay," he says. "My wife's in class right now, but I can make it. Give me twenty minutes?"

"Thank you, Mr. Minor. She'll be in the office when you get here."

Minor hangs up, calls Joanne, his mother-in-law. Ed picks up on the second ring, spends a moment coughing before he says hello.

"Ed, it's Duane."

"Oh, boy," Ed says, not unkindly. "Let me guess. It's either something with Julia or someone burned the bar down."

"Former. Gotta go talk to the principal."

"Oof. Fighting?"

"Again, yeah."

"Shitfire," he says. "I'll let Joanne know."

"I appreciate it."

The *thunk* of the handset, and then he hears Ed and Joanne talking. Ed comes back on. "She'll be there in fifteen. She says to just lock the front, she'll take care of the rest."

"I appreciate it. How you feeling today?"

"Oh, upright and taking solids, you know. Tell that girl not to be such a hard-ass, would you? She's got every right to, but still."

"I hear you."

Minor hangs up, gets his coat, his keys. Spends maybe a little too long looking at the gleaming tiers of bottles behind the bar. Just a nip wouldn't be noticeable, he thinks, and it'd maybe sand off the barbs of this anger he's feeling. But one drink's a road that twists, he knows it full well, twists and then turns down a darker trail, and it's been eighteen months since he's had a drop, a lot of that time spent white-knuckled. It'd be some real sad-sack shit to throw away all that time, so a minute later he's outside, shoulders hunched against the sleet, still sober. Locking the Last Call's front door behind him, running

toward his truck parked around the corner.

Joseph Middle School hasn't changed a bit since Minor was a kid. A one-story, L-shaped building with bike racks out front, chipped cement steps. An American flag rattles on its chain, and through the school's long banks of window, the bent heads of children can be seen. Minor walks inside, makes his way to the front office, where Mrs. Garent peers at him over her bifocals. She'd worked here when he was a kid, and had seemed old to him then. Since Julia's moved in with Minor and his wife, Heidi, he's become intimately familiar with the place again, the staff. Mrs. Garent promptly directs him to Principal Reed's office, and he sees Julia slouched in a chair next to the man's open door; she won't look at him, so Minor steps inside. Reed, bald and mustached, wearing a mustard-colored shirt and brown tie, looks up from his desk with hound dog eyes. The air of the perpetual administrator about him.

"Hey, Duane," he says unhappily. "Why don't you shut the door."

Minor does, then settles himself into a chair that faces Reed's desk.

"So," Reed says, sighing heavily, "sounds like it was a fight in the lunch line."

"Alright. Damn."

"Far as I understand it, someone took cuts in front of someone else, and Julia objected. Something was said in response, probably an unkind thing, and she hit the other student in the mouth. Twice."

"What unkind thing was that?"

"I don't know," Reed admits. "We're going off stories from multiple kids here. But hopefully you'll agree with me, Duane, when I say it doesn't really matter that much. Even if someone said something, it doesn't justify what happened."

Minor doesn't know if that's necessarily true, but also knows Julia's on thin ice here. "No, yeah, I hear you."

"Can't have people getting punched over a disagreement, you know?"

“Absolutely.”

“The other student’s currently at the hospital waiting to see if stitches are necessary.”

Another moment of drowning, wishing like hell Heidi was here.

“Yeah, you’re right. She crossed the line.”

Tony Reed’s not a bad guy. Not really. They’ve filled him in on Julia’s story: Mom doing a life sentence in upstate New York, stepfather dead, Julia separated from her stepbrother. The whole heart-breaking thing. At first, it was all harrowing enough to afford her some disciplinary leeway, but looking at the principal right now, it’s clear that ship has sailed. *Stitches?*

“So, the other student’s parents are requesting expulsion,” Reed says, and Minor looks at him in alarm.

“Tony, I—”

Reed holds up a hand. “I’m not going to do it, Duane, but I want you to know that that’s the point we’re getting to.”

“I understand. It won’t happen again.”

Reed nods, smooths down his mustache. “I’m going to give Julia a three-day in-school suspension.” Before Minor can say anything, he’s already got his hand held up again. “It’ll go on her permanent record during her tenure here at Joseph Middle. Mrs. Garent will bring her each day’s assignments, and she’ll spend her class periods in the library. She’ll eat lunch there too. We’ll do these three days, she’ll come back on Friday, and we’ll have Christmas break after that. And then, ideally, Duane, we can all get a fresh start in the new year. Meanwhile, Julia will sign a contract stating that the behavior will stop, and if something like this happens again, she’ll no longer be invited to attend this school. Do we understand each other? I know she’s been through a lot, but you should consider this her last Get Out of Jail Free card.”

Tight-lipped, Minor nods. His gratitude from moments before has evaporated like smoke, and he feels that familiar fury in him, that sliver of heat that make his hands flex against his thighs. This little speech feels practiced, and it sets off in Minor the same bells as any

rear-echelon motherfucker that ever gave his platoon an ass-chewing over something beyond their control. People just feel the need to jaw at you sometimes, feel big. Reed's likely behind the pocket himself a hundred times a day, getting his own ass-chewings from parents and superintendents and all the rest; sometimes you just need to pass the misery around. And really, he's not far off on his assessment of Julia—this isn't the first time Minor's sat in this chair, after all.

"I understand," he says again, the anger gone as quickly as it arrived. Just tired now. "I want to thank you for giving her another chance, Tony. She's had a hard road."

"I know it," Reed says. "And I'm sorry for it. We all want her to succeed."

He and Julia are getting in the truck across the street from school when the bell rings and kids begin spilling out the doors. Laughing, running, jumping off benches. The sleet's stopped and kids unlock their bikes and begin gleefully slaloming through puddles, trying to splash each other. Julia sits in the passenger seat with her arms crossed, chin dipped to her chest, watching it all from the corner of her eyes. Newly thirteen, wire-thin, ink-black hair that falls to her shoulders and a scowl like a minotaur. Minor cracks a window, lights a cigarette. He's trying to stay calm, trying to feel like a *parent*, like an adult. Julia's been with them for a little over a year now and he can count those instances of feeling like he's got his shit together on one hand, maybe. He threads the truck out into the street, waits for kids to pass in the crosswalk.

"So you're not going to say anything?"

A mumble.

"What's that?"

She turns and looks at him; she has a scratch laddering one cheek and her mouth is a small bow of resentment. "I didn't do anything wrong."

He laughs. "Tell that to the kid with stitches."

"It's not like I punched her for no reason. That's not what hap-

pened.”

“Okay. Well, why don’t you tell me what happened, then.”

More silence. Rain ticks on the windshield. The inside of the truck is quiet save for the clack of the wipers, and Minor sighs and rolls his window up. Puts his cigarette out in the ashtray and turns the radio on. He hears the words *local authorities are asking anyone with knowledge of the girl’s disappearance* and moves the dial, but there’s nothing else besides disco and evangelism, so he turns it off.

They have an early dinner, he and Heidi and Julia, the sound of the Last Call below rising up through the floorboards. Julia’s still quiet—kid’s rarely a font of chatter on the best of days—and beyond the bass-throb of the bar downstairs, there’s little noise in the apartment save for J. J. Cale’s *Okie* on the turntable, snaking low and sinuous from the speakers. Heidi’s occasional attempts at conversation die horrible deaths. Minor eats quickly, and notices, not for the first time, how he and Julia handle their food the same way: hunched down, their free arms curled around their plates. It was something he picked up in chow halls throughout his tour; Julia earned it by living with Ray Ray Sikes, her stepfather.

She pushes away from the table, asks if she can be excused. There’s still a mess of spaghetti on her plate, a half-eaten piece of garlic bread. Minor’s distracted, feels bad that Joanne’s down at the bar by herself now, tackling his shift for him. He and Heidi have had the requisite talk with Julia, about her anger and where it should go. How she has every right to be furious, given what’s happened, but that there’s a right way to express it and a wrong way. She’d responded with mute impassivity; they might have gotten a single “Alright, fine” out of her. It’s a conversation the three of them have had many times before. As ever, Julia takes it in and gives nothing back.

Heidi points at Julia’s plate with her fork. “You got to finish your dinner, babe.”

“I’m not hungry.”

Heidi sets her fork down, just looks at her. Julia is her niece, her

sister's child, blood of her blood. In the past year, quiet or not, Julia's become attached to Heidi in a way that she hasn't to Minor. It's understandable: he's a man, and Heidi had relayed enough info from her sister's trial to know what kind of a man Ray Ray Sikes had been, what he'd done to earn that bullet through his mouth. Julia hangs on to Heidi like something borne of necessity.

Heidi shrugs. "Yeah, well. You still got to finish it."

Julia rolls her eyes, sits back down. Picks up her garlic bread and takes a bite like it's been doused in arsenic.

"I gotta go help downstairs," Minor says, wiping his mouth with a napkin and running his plate to the sink.

"See ya," Heidi says, then lifts her face up to his for a kiss.

"I'm gonna close tonight, send Joanne home," he says. "Your dad didn't sound great on the phone."

"Got it," she says, then looks at Julia, who's giving her plate the death-stare. Heidi winks at the girl, unbothered by all of it, patient as ever. "Us girls will hold down the fort."

It's four A.M. when he makes it back upstairs, showers off the smell of the bar.

He's stepped to the kitchen for a drink of water, standing quiet amid the dark press of the room. The world outside the kitchen window is a chiaroscuro of power lines, black sky, the apartment buildings across the street. Glass in his hand, he listens to the ticking radiator, a sudden spat of rain against the window.

Buried under the other noises, he hears Julia crying softly in her bed down the hall.

That night, the dreams come at him, teeth bared.

It's been like this since he stopped drinking. Like the drinking smashed all the fear down. Sober, everything bubbles up bloody and foaming. He'll fall asleep and then, most nights, *boom*—a riff on the same brutal melody, dream-logic that merges horror and history.

They almost always start, the dreams, with Minor walking the wet

darkness of the jungle. Almost always a squad of three: Lyle in the rear, then Minor, then Ferris, another grunt that Minor hadn't even hardly known in life, a guy who'd drawn READYMAD MEAT in painfully careful marker strokes on the fabric of his helmet cover. The dream-logic is malleable as taffy, but Minor, without even turning, knows the three of them are spread out too far, knows that something's behind them, that it's about to start picking them off one by one. Lyle gets got first, dumbass hillbilly Lyle who in actuality had been on his third tour when Minor shipped in in '72. Lyle, a crazy motherfucker who was feverishly strung out on heroin by then, shooting dope between his toes even while in the bush, and thinking he was invincible. In real life, Lyle had gotten his jaw pulped by a sniper's round at the fence line of their fire base one night, high as shit, but in *this* dream, he's right behind Minor, and the *thing* is there too, this monster, and then it gets Ferris, his helmet suddenly rolling on the ground, and Minor's got two choices—run back or run ahead, with the understanding it'll be death either way. Like so much of Vietnam, there is no good answer. There is no right thing to do, there is only the world happening to you, the world encroaching upon your body and your heart and your will, and then he looks up from Ferris's helmet at his feet, its bowl filled to the brim with blood, and then the two men, the ones from last year, chunks of glass gleaming in the face of one of them, their twitching, animated bodies, the dirt on their faces turning to mud beneath the rain, in their hair, both striding toward him like something out of a stop-motion film, and then fingertips graze his face—

He wakes, gasping, Heidi shouting in panic and then pressing a hand down on his chest, trying to calm him. He dreams this dream, or something like it, three, four, five nights a week. Zero fucking desire to rest his head on the pillow afterward. You'd think that he'd grow more acclimated to it, but no. Not at all. Every night feels like the first night. If anything, the dream's grown sharper with time, more cutting.