***The Big Fall***

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***Raymond Chandler Does Genesis***

**1. *Names of the Bone***

I was sitting on a pile of rocks with a cigarette in my mouth, looking around with an expression you wouldn’t bother calling bored.

I must have named a hundred things that day. You give it a name, you change your mind, you call it something else. Maybe the first one was better, like your first answer on a multiple-choice quiz. Too late. It was stuck there, stubborn as spray-paint graffiti. There had to be a better way to spend eternity.

      At night I lay on my bed in a neon-flooded room at the Red Clay Motel, smoking too many Chesterfields and blowing smoke up to the ceiling in a string of zeroes. Nothing figured. I touched myself in various places: “The name of this bone is ‘rib.’ Sure, ‘rib.’ Why not?”

      I opened the night-table drawer and pulled out a Gideon’s Bible. It wasn’t a book, it was a pamphlet, thin as a courtesy map. Looked like the writer was still working out his plot.

      I tossed it aside. I opened a window: the beasts of the field were out there, and all the things that creep and fly. Christ what a racket. I tossed and turned and put a pillow over my ears.  That didn’t drown out the saxophone solo doodling a sad little riff out of nowhere. I counted several flocks of black sheep. A friend I named Jack Daniels climbed out of my suitcase and started telling me bedtime stories. They were fascinating but eventually I fell asleep.

      When I woke up, there she was, pretty punctual, no more than three days late. God knows where she’d been. The phrase “previous whereabouts unknown” popped into my head. Oh, I was getting to be quite the phrase-maker.

      When I started asking the dreary, necessary questions she gave a startled wince like I’d just inflicted a flesh wound. Maybe half an eyedropper’s worth of tears welled up in her baby blues.

      “Well, at least one of us knows what you’ve been up to. But I can’t believe you’re seeing that *Snake*,” I hissed. She dug her fingernails into the palms of her hands

      “I don’t know,” she said with a sharp laugh. “One green-eyed monster’s as good as the next.” She’d dropped the teary-eyed act. Her expression hardened. The tension in the room was like a cocked trigger.

      She walked to the bar to pour herself a drink, talking back to me over a stiff shoulder: “Say I tossed the bones, and they rolled his way.”

      My face tightened like a fist. So now *she* was a wordsmith.

      We sat there staring at each other till the silence felt as prickly as the sweat on a ploughman’s brow. Sure, we could “talk it through.” And maybe we could dry the sweat off with a damp towel.

       “Pretty cagey, aren’t you,” I said, to kill the silence.

       “Yeah. Rib-cagey.”

2. ***Bum’s Rush***

He was closing in on us. Days shriveled into hours. What the Hell. We drank too much and shot craps.

      “Garden State, huh?” I said, throwing my cigarette away as we trudged the boardwalk. “Lovely as a tank farm, fragrant as the city dump. Paradise, if you ask me.”

      “You’re the one who said we could make a fresh start here,” she reminded me helpfully. “You said we’d at least be safe.” It was starting to drizzle. Hard. She exploded her umbrella, a punctual “poof.”

     The moon was looking down on us with the plump face of a society matron. You would not call it a look of approval.

      “Sixteen hours at the wheel,” I said. “Poorer than richer, in sickness and no health insurance, till death by boredom do us part.”

      “Amen to that,” she said, grabbing the whisky flask out of my hand and clenching it in her fist, tugging at the friendly poison.

      “Why did we bother,” she said. “You’re not lucky anymore, baby. Your credit’s not so good either. Though I must say you look cute when you’re getting the bum’s rush. It was so romantic, fishing you out of the dumpster.”

      “What are you worried about? You can always go back to *Snake*. By the way, what does he do with his time besides hang around?”

      “He went out on a limb for me. That’s more than you’ve ever done.”

      “Didn’t I tell you not to take candy from strangers?”

      “It was an apple.”

      “Applejack is more like it.” She had made the acquaintance of booze some time ago, and didn’t much care which variety. Her tastes were, shall I say, “eclectic”? By now she was at the “like there’s no tomorrow” stage of seriousness in her relationship with the bottle. Maybe there *was* no tomorrow.

      Then he appeared overhead in all his seraphic menace. The tiniest hour of the morning, not a drunk or a mugger in sight, and there he was, with the angry white lights, the deafening bass-line of the chopper blades. Michael. I could see him in the cockpit, wearing sunglasses. That might have been a grin on his face.

      Rebellion rose from the pit of my stomach to my knuckle-ends.

      “I know why he sent you,” I shouted into the roar. “It’s not because we broke the law and went on the lam.  We can gamble, and he can’t stand it: it’s the one thing he can’t do. Tell him we’ll take our chances.”

      We made a dash for it till we found ourselves in a slummy maze. We barricaded ourselves in on the fifth floor of an abandoned warehouse. I checked my .38. Good. Just enough ammo to blow out each other’s brains.

      That night we made love like alley cats. Sleep was fitful—till he called for us, through a megaphone. We couldn’t hide. The searchlight was intense enough to irradiate the brick. Our veins showed through our skin like an embryo’s. Closing our eyes only brought him into focus. The light got brighter and brighter till the lights went out.

****3. *The Mark***

The door opened.

      “Where is he,” I said, pushing her steadily back into the room. There was something dangerous in her eyes staring back at me, cool and glassy. Caution was called for. Maybe violent caution. She was trying a bit too hard not to look at the bedroom door. Don’t botch this, I said to myself like I was grabbing my own lapels.

      “Listen, he’s my son, too,” I said in a flat hard voice while in my mind I was squeezing something just a bit too tight.

      “You’ll never get him.”

      “Be smart. You can’t hide him forever. He’ll drag you down with him.”

      “All you can see is your filthy job,” she shouted, making a run for the bedroom. I was right with her. She spread herself over the door. The dangerous look was focusing in her eyes.

      “You see a case. I see a scared kid.”

      “He killed a man, don’t you understand? He killed his brother, our son.”

      “*You* be his executioner. I’ll be his mother.”

      I lunged at her. In one push she and the door gave way. Inside, an unmade bed and an open window, gauze curtain lazing in the breeze. The fight went out of me. I crumpled over on the bed.

      I sat there for a while, looking down at my wrinkled trench coat, thinking how it could use a dry-cleaning.

      She picked herself up and went into the kitchen. Back with a bottle and a couple of glasses. She sat down next to me and handed me a partially clean glass of bourbon. We sat there in silence for a moment, sipping our drinks, watching the curtain twist, lazily.

      “It’s just as well, you know,” she said. “He’s Theo’s boy. You can’t touch him.” She lit a cigarette, exhaled and talked through the smoke. “Haven’t you heard about the tattoo?”

      “What tattoo,” I said, pouring myself another shot.

      “It’s on his forehead. Looks like a bullet hole. I think it *is* a bullet hole. Nobody can touch him.”

      “You’re worried he’s coming after you,” she added with maybe just a hint of a sneer.

      “Think a moment. Just *two* steps ahead. Everything depends on what we do now. We have to set a precedent. Otherwise the murder’s the precedent.”

      “When did you become a lawyer? It’s not enough that one son is dead? That’s how you think, isn’t it? Kill one and it’s murder, kill two and it’s justice. This isn’t about justice, this is about jealous. You think he’s a bastard.”

      For no good reason I found myself thinking of the Sinatra tune:

*It’s funny to everyone but me.*

     “How are things between you and *Snake* these days?’” I snapped back and drained my glass. “Anyway, I don’t need to play the lawyer. You incriminate yourself every time you open those beautiful lips.”

      “Listen. I’m going to tell you one last time. He’s Theo’s boy. We’ll never see him again. He’s heading…somewhere you’ll never find him. He’s getting out of the produce business. Got a head start in real estate. You, me, all we can do is start over.”

      “You mean you, me and the *Snake*,” I laughed without smiling.

      Everything was as clear as it ever is when you look through a dirty glass.

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