The Night Bud Fought

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"Oh, you sing," said the Gryphon. "I've forgotten the words."
So they began solemnly dancing round and round Alice, every now and then treading on her toes when they passed too close, and waving their fore-paws to mark the time while the Mock Turtle sang this, very slowly and sadly:

"Will you walk a little faster?" said a whiting to a snail,
"There's a porpoise close behind us, and he's treading on my tail.
See how eagerly the lobsters and the turtles all advance!
They are waiting on the shingle—will you come and join the dance?
Will you, won't you, will you, won't you, will you join the dance?
Will you, won't you, will you, won't you, won't you join the dance?"

From The Lobster Quadrille, by Lewis Carroll.

The time is early spring, 1955. The place is the city. It is not many months after the death of Dylan Thomas, weeks away from the deaths of Charlie Parker and James Dean.

The nonsense language is the language of that place and that year, called jive, or bop, or what you will, man. It is a language of emotion, suggestion intonation, and repetition. Its meaning is its acting out, for it has no meaning of its own.

The cast consists of:
1. Freddie King, who bears the quality of loneliness, the terrors of his private world. His older brother, Tom, was thrown from a jeep and killed some years ago.
2. Irma Delong, whose intention would be to find some order, some beauty no matter how ugly, in a chaos of sensation.
3. Bud Tanner, whose every breath is defined in terms of death; he lives each second as if it were his last. Yet it would be difficult to determine his personal moments, for it is difficult to determine his separate identification within his acts of participation. He is not what "beat" has come to mean, for he would never bother to care about not caring. His nose was broken in one of his many fights.

They are all reflecting reflections of the other characters, other situations. They are all detached.

The story is called: THE NIGHT BUD FOUGHT.
All afternoon Mame perched before the blue shadows, but toward dusk I could tell she wasn’t watching much any more, and the ashtray was overflowing with long cigarettes burnt on one end and crumpled on the other where she snapped the filters when she tamped them out.

The phone rang, and she was already releasing her hair for the comb as she picked the receiver up. I kept my eyes on her mouth still blotchy with last night’s lipstick, and knowing I would listen to every word, she talked so loud it sounded funny.

I tried to catch her eyes when she replaced the receiver, and it made me half laugh when she wanted to stare back. She swung her head right past my view and marched on through the bedroom.

Gradually I settled in my everyday daze with one leg motionless over the arm of the chair, the other beating time on the balance of my heel to a musical commercial. Sometimes I would think about King.

When I was a kid I could imagine him as one of the dark and husky throated forms in tunnel places where the walls were jukebox green and purple, where sometimes eyes in the corner of a mirror glinted out to the street. Then thoughts of King held the same strange excitement as being huddled with others in the caves we made from card tables, rugs, and turned over chairs.

But now I’d seen some of those tunnels myself, watched the man with a spinning cloth beneath his hand and day old toothpick in his mouth, heard the dull mutters of those who leaned for tired hours above a glass of beer. And now I could only picture him as the heap home under the fluff gushing quilt with the broken wall clock hanging by threads over his head.

I sat forgetting King, hearing Mame pat her wrinkled cheeks with rouge, twisting my leg above the balance of my heel until the doorbell buzzed and I forced myself up to let the thing in.

“Let Mr. Sutton in, would you, dear?” Mame called as sweet as she could for a woman whose best voice, my friend Bud says, is like an old neon sign.

Sutton tried to pat my shoulder with his spadey hand as he brushed by, but I dodged into the folds of the curtain to Mame’s bedroom, black already in the late afternoon.

“Honey?” Mame coughed from the can. “Honey, did you let Mr. Sutton in?”

Sutton answered by rapping softly on the bathroom door. I leaned against the back of the television chair, feeling a little sick in the commercial music silence.

“Ham?” Mame said with a whisper not really very stunned. “Ham,” Mame said again, her voice this time loud and hoarse. “Ham Sutton, you get away from that door!” Sutton sauntered back to the center room, turned to me and smiled.
“Well kid,” Sutton said through a yawn, raising his hands to a half stretch behind his head, “I suppose there’s a cold beer around?” He flicked the tip of his tongue across the blade thin mustache on his upper lip and walked on to the pantry.

“Hon,” Marne husked, shoving the door a crack. “Freddie, hon, would you get Mr. Sutton a glass of beer, and I’ll be out in just a jiff.” I turned the television up so I wouldn’t hear Sutton gulp foam across the room.

“Ah, hah,” gruffed Sutton, heading toward the television, “that there Bombo Scotty, my favorite comedian, kid, the very best.” He paused and scrutinized me leaning against the television chair in the dark folds of the curtain to Marne’s bedroom. “There I go again,” he spoke suddenly, slapping his bony cheek with his free hand, “thinking only of myself. You want a beer too, don’t you kid?”

“I don’t want no beer;” I said standing straight at last as Sutton stuck his slender hand into the open icebox.

“What’s that?” Sutton said plucking off the cap.

“I don’t want no beer,” I repeated loudly.

“A boy of fifteen who doesn’t like beer?” he cried with doubt. “Listen, son, I was a boy once myself.” He approached me with two beers, a wink and a smile.

Son. He’d said son.

“And us kids, yessir, we all drank beer. Oh, we didn’t let our folks find out, you bet your boots on that . . . But I’ll tell your mom old uncle Ham said it was all right.” He set the beer down on the floor when he saw my fists were clinched.

Sutton went to the couch and sat licking the mouth of the bottle. He watched the television with the half interest a dog observes a fly. Marne came out of the bathroom in a faded robe and reached around me to draw the curtain.

“Hon, sit down now and talk to Mr. Sutton,” she pleaded. I scowled—she knows the way I feel—but sat.

“Mame tells me you don’t go to school,” Sutton said spinning the bottle in his hands and smiling. “A kid your age—”

“Turn the TV down a little, won’t you, Fred” Mame called from behind the curtains, Sutton jumped up and clicked the button.

“That Bombo Scotty’s getting paid for murder.” Sutton waved his bottle at me and felt for the edge of the cushion with his other hand as he settled back. “Why, five years ago, I could fall down twice as hard and do it for nothing, too. But like I was saying, here you are a bright kid of fifteen or sixteen—”

“He was sixteen last month,” put in Mame.

“And the whole world’s your oyster. But, kid, you just got to have a high school degree to get ahead in the world today.” I was watching pools of light still appearing on the dark screen like raindrops in the river.

“He used to do real good in school,” said Mame. “He brought home mostly Excellents on his report card, and we thought he was going to be the smartest one in the family.” You could hear Mame dress as clear as if you were watching . . . Now the other shoe . . .
“Why, once when he was in the sixth grade his teacher drove him home from school . . . And she told me he could do arithmetic better than any other kid in the class. She told me that. She said maybe he’d grow up to be an engineer.”

Sutton made loud, slupping noises when he swallowed, and you could see his Adam’s apple jerk.

“And he used to make his brother Tom so proud. Tom would maybe take him to the movies . . .”

Please stop, I thought. Please stop.

“. . . and afterward they would have a soda or something down at the corner, come in laughing and roughing around . . . Tom would tell me when Freddie went to bed, ‘Mame,’ he’d say, ‘Fred’s going to show us all some things.’ That’s what he said . . .” I gnawed my knuckle. “. . . ‘Mame, Fred’s going to break this family out of the rut.’”

Mame came through the curtains, her puffed red face and sleek black hair surrounded by the frizzly fur collar of the cloth coat she’d been wearing for years. Sutton, on the edge of the coach with a lighted match in the cup of his hands, looked up at her and smiled around his cigarette.

“Here, hon, hold the light,” she said, and quickly snapping a cigarette from the pack to her mouth, she dipped down to the flame. “Big words he used, too,” Mame said spitting out a cloud of smoke. “But listen to him now—talks like the kids next door.”

“Well, if I had a son as sharp as Freddie here,” said Sutton, coming to his feet, “I’d make the boy finish his school, you can be sure of that.” Sutton coordinated a head swivel and a smile in my direction.

“Oh, he’d hate me, he’d hate me at the time all right. But when the chips were down, and the kid cashed in because of his education, he’d thank me, he’d be glad his old man made him toe the mark”

I should tell him whose son I am, I thought. I should tell him any minute King’s going to stagger in the door and fall all over him. Any minute now, any minute.

“Hold on just a sec, Ham, hon,” Mame said with her finger in the air. She hurried across the room to the pantry, and Sutton eased precisely back.

“You got the kid trained on one account, anyway, I never knew a kid of fifteen who didn’t drink. I brought him a beer, and there it sits. He doesn’t touch a drop.” I watched his mouth open at me in a little smile, and I wished I could feel more mad than sick and hit it just once there, hard like Bud would do, cover the bristles of that little mustache quick with my knuckles and watch his head drop back.

“Oh, he drinks all right, I guess,” said Mame, placing utensils on the table. “He just doesn’t like beer.”

Sutton grunted and looked at his watch. He cleared his throat, stood up and sighed, “Look, Mame, I told Pat and Mike we’d be at the junction by six, and it’s—”

“Coming, coming, coming.” Mame slammed the icebox and brushed back her hair once more before the mirror over the sink. Sutton opened the door to the outer landing as Mame scurried across the room, stopping momentarily under his arm to frown at me plea-
santly. “I got chops on the stove, and there’s milk and bread on the table, Fred.” She took another step and said, “I left some change, too, if you want to get ice cream up at the corner.”

“Okay, Mame,” said Sutton, inching out in the landing.

“You be good now and go to bed tonight, hon. I’m coming home early this time for sure.”

Mame left Sutton holding the edge of the door. In the mahogany shadows of the darkening outer hall, his narrow face seemed to float all lemon white.

A crooked smile parted his lips. “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do son,” and the door swung shut.

I sat in silence hearing the faraway drip, drip of water across the room. A car honked in the street. Next door a baby was crying in fitful gasps, but at last I could hear myself breathe, feel my own presence. Someone near was cooking cabbage; the odor steaming under the door and leaking through unseen cracks in the walls is like my sore throat, a sure sign of early spring.

Slowly the room turned dense, and the small dark thoughts came out of hiding. I knew them, but I could not call their names. A corner cobweb thick with black dust expanded before my eyes, fluttering like a veil in a moist draft. I tried to breathe the shadow back inside me, but the light went bad. In the shadow I guess I trembled as if some unknown horror must appear.

Frozen in the chair I was shivering inside because I could not see my fears or call their names. It was like waking at night to know the face of the thing that bounded red-eyed over the desolate moors of a wild dream is in the window above your bed—and that face is you.

Mame, I thought . . . King . . . Bud . . . Tom. The fears flickered about me like dark flames dancing faster, closer and faster.

On my feet, that was the answer. Walk quick, I thought. Put back the chops and milk and take the coins and walk, dance or fight or drink, and the flickering thoughts will stop . . .

The last light in the sky was a cloud-formed yellow wedge sinking between the television antennas on the flat roofs of James Street’s flats, and a cold, moaning wind rushed from the maze of the city, singeing my sweater with ice as it passed.

I crunched through crusted trash in the space parting Fargo’s grocery from Stewbert’s hardware to reach the back stairs. The wooden steps steeped lattice like, open over the locked bathroom Bud shared with the store. I was feeling better now, but still uneasy, and I tapped out rhythm with my heel while waiting for an answer to the knock.

I rapped off some more flaky paint, and the door jerked back.

Bud’s hair surged black and uncombed over his forehead and ears. One moment he stared at me with frozen glitter. Suddenly creases of something like a smile broke his face, and the color of his eyes changed from green to brown.

“Rock id man!” he growled, and grabbing my hand and arm, pulled me quickly in.

“Hey, Bud,” I laughed. “How ya been?” Bud waved me to the chair’s tattered plush by his bed.
“Thoughd you might be someun else. Wanna shod?” Bud asked picking up a glass from the table by the drawn green shade. A naked light bulb swung brightly from a chain in the room’s center, but it seemed my eyes were adjusting to the dark.

I nodded, “Make it short.” Bud handed me the glass and poured one for himself. He leaned against the table lifting the yellow liquid up to light.

“You hip, man?” I stared at him peering into the whiskey until he cocked his head and coughed, “The sound, man! The sound!” Guitar music was throbbing in the box. Low and moody, it sounded like a yellow jungle or an empty bullfight ring.

“Yeah, sounds great.”

Bud studied his glass. For a long time. I could see an ash floating on the surface of the liquor. Bud watched it and the guitar strummed.

“Is going do be a fighd tonight,” he said.

He spoke so softly it took me awhile to consider the words.

“A fight? You? . . . You mean tonight? Who are you going to fight?”

“Mmmm, some weazel . . .” Bud swallowed the shot. “Call him “Dromagik?”

“Dromakik?” I almost shouted the name but checked myself. Bud’s nervous whenever I act impressed, but I knew of crazy Dromakik and the gang he rumbled with. Bud waited.

“Why?” I asked, my voice still too high.

“Mmmm, was getding dark, man, and I was low for gicks—(shook) for action, you tune?”

I listened cautiously.

Bud poured another drink and held it again under the light, his hand supporting his elbow, his words directed at the bottom of the glass, muttering as whenever he said much, half to himself:

“See, lasd nighd I tunes Dromagik down at Mac’s, he’s sounding about this chick, and it bugged me, like. So tonight I buzz him at the Green Wall . . . I says, ‘Man, you stuck Lola Wadson for a pig. Well, I think she’s somethin’ else . . . !’”

Bud chuckled, “He’s swearin’, ‘Who you! Say who the muck you think you are! Say, do you know Lola Wadson?’”

“I says, ‘Maybe I don’d Lola Wadson, bud I know you! You’re the lowesd, like under the toiled sead—dig!’” Bud chuckled almost enough to spill whiskey, then shrugged and reclined in the other chair by the record player.

“So I tells him I could tear him righd apard, bud sdill no action. He’s all turkey for a trick. Bud I tells him Chuck will pud me on the level, so I have to hold the phone while he talks to Chuck. Then he wands to make the vacend lod scene, bud I tells him thad could sdir the fuzz, and no one bugs this turf ad nighd. I says, ‘You and me alone, no guns, no blades, up ad my pad, huh?’”

Bud sighed. “Man, whad swead id takes to blow some up these days.”

“Yeah, but uh . . . Won’t they wreck your pad?”

“Mmmm, is justd id. Like, I’m cutding oud tomorrow for good.
This been a boring pad, man. God to have somethin’ to remember id by.”

“Crazy,” I said. shivering. Sometimes Bud could make me dizzy like that. And now he was leaving.

“Too much.” He yawned. “Wan another drink?”

I shook my head, and Bud swirled his liquor. “How’s Mame? Still ona tail of thad barracuda?”

I nodded. “Yeah, that slob,” but the word was empty. “That... that...”


Bud’s last words faded and he seemed to shrivel inside himself, his chin lightly touching his chest. I watched him listen to the record, wanting badly to ask a question. But I knew Bud was through talking for awhile, and I had to wait silently. I couldn’t keep my foot from tapping always a little faster than the music.

When at last the door knock came, the trembles had spread from my stomach to my skin, but Bud remained a low hump, apparently lost in the sound. “Led em in, man,” he said with a slight gesture of his hand.

Dromakik. He had two buddies behind him, but all I really saw was Dromakik’s immense shape bulging forward. His face was scarred, and the long curve of his mouth balanced the spiked arc of fuzzy hair above his forehead. He scowled, examined me carefully and grunted “Where’s Tanner?”

I pointed to the chair as Dromakik’s friends pressed in behind.

“That’s Tanner?” Dromakik squinted, although the narrowing space in the door was night black. Dromakik pointed at Bud hunched low in his chair, his head tilted back as if pulled by the music. “Hey, you,” Dromakik growled. “You Bud Tanner?” Bud looked small and wadded. The guitar strained against the silence.

“Mmmm, I’m Tanner.” Bud’s voice sounded faraway.

“Well, I ain’t going to fight you,” Dromakik’s face wrinkled and creased as he spoke. “You’re too small for me to waste my time.”

Bud flowed to his feet, and then he looked taller. I shivered as I saw his eyes change from brown to green. He stared a moment at Dromakik before padding behind the chair and taking the record off the box. Carefully, he closed the cover, pulled the plug and placed it gently under his bed. Dromakik advanced to the bed himself, his face a continual scowl. As he talked he inched forward over Bud.

“I don’t like guys playing games with me,” he rumbled deep in his throat. “An I ain’t ever seen you before in my life, Tanner. I ought to mash your pretty face.”

Bud’s eyes glittered with liquid green as he slowly wiped the spit from his face. “Freddie,” he said quietly, “lock the door.”

I stepped around Dromakik’s friends, trying to control the wobble in my legs, to act like I never knew or cared about the way they watched me move. I placed the hook in its latch and turned to see Bud over by the shelf now, placing the whiskey and glasses in a cab-
inet. Dromakik grabbed him by the back of his sweatshirt collar, and Bud spun around with the twist. Dromakik clutched both hands in the neck of Bud’s sweatshirt and swore loudly, his mouth shaped like the dark yawn of a cave. A moment they stood motionless as a photograph, Dromakik with his mouth open while Bud smiled and the green in his eyes glittered. Then Dromakik sprawled back, his stomach doubled by the force of Bud’s blow.

Bud hit him three more times, sharp and loud in the face before he reached the floor. Dromakik twisted on his knees, wheezing and holding his stomach. Bud circled him, jogging on the balls of his tennis shoes, his arms expansive and balanced in the air. Dromakik’s two friends drew back in the shadows against the wall away from me. “Ged up! Ged up!” Bud’s cough was like a big cat. “Ged up! Ged up!”

Dromakik struggled to his feet, his eyes almost indistinguishable in the mass of wrinkles contorting his face, and tottered heavily forward. He huffed twice as Bud pumped both fists into his stomach and darted back beneath Dromakik’s wild swipe at his head. Instantly Bud danced in again and jabbed short blood bursting blows on Dromakik’s nose. Dromakik lunged for Bud, sweeping both arms out before him and staggered against the bed as Bud stepped aside.

“Huff huff,” Dromakik grunted, his stomach heaving as he ground at Bud’s face. Writhing and snapping, with a push Bud rolled away, and as the two wrestled to their feet he clamped his arms around Dromakik’s thick neck.

But Dromakik swivelled, caught Bud off balance, walloped his chest and sent him flying across the room. There was a tinkle of glass and the shade plopped in a heap.

Bud came raging back, his sweaty hair streaming loose behind like a mane. His arms were slashing even before he tore into Dromakik, his fists pumping so fast you could hear them better than see them.

Dromakik retreated tottering, a little spray of blood and sweat dancing above his head. We three spectators were like shadows of the room; we stood motionless and dark; watching the fight we had no form or substance.

Bud and Dromakik bounced off the wall. The room shook and I could see Dromakik’s face, the blood and wrinkles, the shredding skin.

Snarling and huffing they thrashed across. Bud looked like the walking windmill, his legs always leaning forward, his heels in the air. Dromakik seemed the bear trying to brush away a swarm of bees. Then Bud’s fist smashed through the one lightbulb above his head and darkness came with a spark and a shower of glass.
The fight went on.
Bud's snarls became short vicious howls, and Dromakik's huffs thickened into heavy grunts. The dark was very black, but I could smell the blood and sweat and feel the heat.
The table crashed to the floor. The walls shook. One of Dromakik's friends screamed. Either Bud or Dromakik had slugged him in the dark. "Oh Jesus," he sobbed, "Oh my Jesus," and his voice was surprisingly shrill. Someone hit him again. He shrieked and began to whimper.
Through it all I could hear a pounding now like a drum. Someone, Dromakik's other friend, bumped me running along the wall. Desperately I pushed him away. He was pulling on my shirt—no he was pushing me. I stumbled and fell. The drum pounded on with the whimpers and snarls and moans and grunts. Above my head I could see the dim white of Bud's tennis shoes, dancing to the beat of the drum.
"Someun's ad the door, Freddie, someun's ad the door." Bud danced away as Dromakik lumbered by.
The door, the door, I thought, I was dizzy, and the shadows reeled around me full of sound and dance. It must be the police, but Bud wanted me to open the door, and I crawled along the wall searching for the latch. The pounding was just above my ear. I pulled and a woman's voice came pushing in with night.
"Hello, what is this? Hello, what's going on in here?"
Mame.
"Hey, Irma, come on in," Bud coughed.
The girl hustled by. "Bud . . . Bud! Stop a minute. Stop that right now. Already I could barely see her as she swirled around Bud and Dromakik. "I said quit," she snapped, and I think she was between them.
"Just a little fight," snorted Bud. One of Dromakik's friends slipped by me through the open door.
"Who is this, Bud who is this man?" Funny but she didn't really sound angry, only loud.
"Going to kill you." Dromakik's voice was breathless and low.
"Just led me ged by, Irma," Bud muttered, Dromakik's other friend, still snuffling, slipped through the door.
"You, you leave like right now," and she was wrestling between them again, shouting, "Get out, out, you get out."
Dromakik and Bud pumped some more.
The girl screamed so loud the fighting stopped. Her scream was a high warble, and I think she was pushing Dromakik.
"Okay, Tanner," Dromakik huffed. The girl continued to scream. "Okay, Tanner, okay." The girl followed him across the room. His body seemed to slump as he moved out, but his voice was still ominous and low. "Okay, Tanner," he said once more, stepping out into the night. I think the girl's scream could have been heard for blocks.
But behind the closed door she stopped suddenly, and I could hear Bud panting in the dark. She began to laugh in a way that started like tears, but she was hilarious.
"Ah Ah Ah, Bud . . . This is too crazy . . . This is too much . . ." Finally Bud was chuckling between hacking coughs. I stood silently in the dark. "Ah ah . . . The only way a girl can get to see you . . . is be . . . like crazy! Oh Bud Ah ha . . . I haven't . . . so much fun in weeks. Oh, ah ah, who was that guy, anyway? He was big enough aha. You know someday," she said sobering "you're going to kill yourself that way, Bud . . . Bud, where's the light? You broke the light, didn't you?"

Bud chuckled. "S good to see you, Irma," he said.

"You know I'm getting good at this kind of thing," Irma laughed. "Like soon I'll come to see you screaming through the door. Say, are you really leaving tomorrow? I guess you'll have to—this pad is probably a wreck. Look, I'll go get a lightbulb and some brew. You stay right there and I'll be . . . Bud, who is this?" Irma nearly knocked me over, bouncing toward the door. Her cold fingers probed the outline of my head.

"Who? Wha?" Bud jumped off the bed. "Oh, Freddie. Irma, meed Freddie. He's kindof quieted, like sometimes you don't know he's there." Irma's fingers resting on my cheeks still seemed to move. "Bud," she said, her voice curious and surprisingly intent, "he feels so young. Were you here all the time, Freddie?" What I could see of her eyes in the dark was gleam, and I shifted uneasily on my feet.

"Yeah," I said.

"Poor kid," she mused. "Bud, I'll be right back," and she bounced through the door.

When Irma returned her arms full of packages, Bud was standing on the chair, carefully unscrewing the lightbulb with a crumpled handkerchief.

"God a light?" Bud asked as Irma shelved the packages.

"Okay, Tanner, okay," Irma husked, passing the new bulb to me. "And some Gin and Vermouth, too," she added. "Like it's Martini time."

"Gruff," Bud tried to locate the socket. "You know this swingin' Irma, Freddie, whadyou think, she teaches English. Some highschool on the south side."

"Yeah? Gee, that's real good," I said, trying to think of something to say.

"Bud the kick here with Irma, she's god to be one of the ardy crowd, too." Bud snorted. "She thinks she can be a jumpin ardisd and teach school ad the same time."

The light flickered on.

"Dad, your pad is bad!" Irma groaned. Blood flecked the walls and was spattered over Bud, especially on one side of his face and his right hand.

Irma found the broom under the sink and began to sweep up glass. "Bud, even the window," she laughed, "And you could comb your hair."

Bud brushed back his hair so his eyes no longer peered like through a jungle thicket and pulled out the box. "Les have some sounds to sweep by," he gruffed.
I held the dustpan. Her breasts bending over looked hard and round as rocks through the tight red sweater. “Thanks, Freddie,” her smile was as slender as her arms and surprisingly slow.

“This the first time that broom been used since you were here last,” Bud said, and the record started. “Hey rock!” Bud shouted.

“When the dawn was breakin’
I told her she had to go.
Shakey baby looks up and dig me—
‘Daddy wanna rock some mo’’

“What kind of things, kind of people do you like, Freddie?” she said easily, ignoring the record. “That’s silly. I should say what don’t you like.”


“Rock,” shouted Bud, and pushed me from my crouch to the floor.

“Bud, the glass!” Irma cautioned.

“Mmmm, fix us some Martinis, Irma,” he sang and slapped her on the behind. That smack was sure loud.

“You never get tired, do you?” she said, moving over to the sink.

“But I didn’t want to do it,
No, no, I didn’t want to do it,
But she sends me so.”

“Look, man, the broom, she hip!” Bud began to rock with the broom, swinging it around, making it shake and waddle. His face was turning blue.

“C’mon, Freddie, the broom, she rock with you.” He passed me the broom still twitching from his hand.

“Aw, Bud,” I said.

“‘Mon, Freddie, don’t be square,” he gruffed, pulling me out and making me move, clapping to the beat.

I began to dance with the broom.

“But I didn’t want to do it,
No, no, I didn’t want to do it . . .”

Bud laughed, and I laughed too. It was so silly. Bud grabbed a Martini that Irma had just poured and swallowed it whole. “Mmf, make some more. Thad woman makes the besd Martinis.”

Later, Irma was dancing with us too, and we were making our own drinks. Lots of them. Bud would dance with Irma, the box blaring thumping, and Bud’s hands jumped and pawed around her as she spun and whirled, her hips in rhythm with his knees, breasts nibbling air beneath his swinging arms.

Irma was dancing with me, leading me into patterns that made my feet dip and do funny tricks. She smiled and spun in close, her hair across my face, bobbed off again, twisting her slender hips. Bud was dancing me, his rough arm crossing my shoulder, pushing me out, speeding me up, keeping me in time with his frantic feet, saying, “Go man, hey, we’ll cram this jam to dawn. Tough chick! Bad sound! Hey, man, go!”

We were dancing together, all three arms entwined like small children, swaying and laughing.
“Someone fed me feathers,” giggled Irma. “Like I’m high in the sky.”

“Like you god goose pimples big as crabapples,” sang Bud, and the two of them pranced around me, weaving their arms. “Hey, dig da wild gig, girl! Shake off the wall and down da hall!”

“Gas me daddy! Ninety-nine, blow down the line!”

“Like sixty-nine is jusd as fine. Hey, hey, go, go!”

“Oh, won’t you blast me last, oh?

“Jusd pass the jumpin’ end, fox . . . Hey, go, go!”

We danced alone, and that was best, for then it seemed we were the most together. We could see figures, detached forms dancing in and out the mirror above the sink. A red face, not mine, not mine, was staring from the mirror, and whose throbbing hands were pouring another drink, another drink? A voice not mine was laughing, singing: “But I didn’t want to do it, but I didn’t want to do it.”

Bud and Irma were rolling on the bed, and funny, the music from the box was no longer swinging. No. Slow, drifting, the cold progressive flute. I sang low and soft, settling in the corner. Bud. Tom. The room was spinning. Thick with shadows. Mame. Irma . . . Sutton . . .

It was early morning.

Heavy fog covered the marsh, filtered through the reeds, waivered steaming off the water. I was shivering, and when I tried to hold my arms still, my teeth began to chatter.

“What’s matter, kid? Tom’s jacket not warm enough for you?” Bud spoke softly through his teeth.

Tom smiled. “Freddie’s gonna be okay,” he whispered. “Aren’t you Freddie?”

I stopped shivering, and there was a movement over the water, a flap of wings.

“Look!”

Bud and Tom shot together. The arrows flew parallel before one dipped beneath the rise of the duck. The other rose up up and stuck, ruffling wings. A burst of motion. The duck was coming down, flapping awkwardly. It sputtered into the water, splashing mist.

Bud and Tom stared at the duck. My throat was aching sore, and I was shivering again.

“I told you we should have brought guns,” Bud muttered. “We would have killed it dead.”

“What’s the sport of guns?” Tom’s voice was so low you could hardly hear it.

“Sports, crap,” Bud said clearly. “Bows and arrows, Jesus!”

Tom watched the duck’s feeble flutters. I kept trying to clutch his hand, and he kept brushing me away.

“We can’t leave it there.” Tom said with a small quiver.

“Well, what else you going to do—not go in—Aw, no, Tom.” Tom was taking of his shirt. Then his shoes. I knew if only I could bite my tongue hard enough, I wouldn’t cry.

“Look, now, your kid brother is crying,” Bud said suddenly, turning on me. “Hell, not only bows and arrows but a six year old kid.”
I wasn’t either crying, I just couldn’t keep the water in my eyes.

“Freddie’s going to be all right.” Tom’s voice was kind of sharp now like the cold. He stood naked in the fog just yellowing with the light of dawn and the smoke from the city. Rims of ice crackled in the mud beneath his feet as he walked down into the reeds. I pulled Tom’s jacket tighter around my shoulders, but the cold seemed to creep up my legs, and my teeth chattered loudly.

“Wait up!” Bud was stripping too.

Tom looked back, the water spreading in small ripples around his legs. “Only takes one to get a duck,” he said and moved on.

“If you don’t hurry up, I’m going to beat you to it,” Bud laughed, tossing his pants aside and splashing after Tom. “Wait till we tell the guys we went swimming!” he shouted.

“I pulled Tom’s jacket tighter around my shoulders and watched them race away. The fog eddied and billowed over the mud. My shoes got wet, and I think I was calling Tom, only I knew he couldn’t hear me. Tom . . . But the fog was growing thicker. Tom . . .

“Whadsa madder, Freddie, you cold? Hey, Freddie! Jesus, man, are you drunk?” Bud was slapping my cheeks, and then Irma was standing over me too. “Looka the way he’s huggin’ himself,” Bud chuckled.

“Hey, Freddie, don’ sdare ad me thad way.”

“Freddie, are you feeling all right?” Irma asked cautiously.

“Yeah, I’m okay, okay.”

“Irma, make me ’nother Martini, whadyou say, huh?”

“No, now wait,” Irma said, her cold fingertips moving to my brow.

“I want to make sure Freddie’s all right.”

“Bugs,” Bud muttered, moving away. “Thad damn mother instinc.’ You know why women will never make ardisds?” he said, mixing a drink. “’S thad damn mother instinc.’ Happens to the besd of them.”

“Freddie, don’t you think you better go home now?” Irma was sitting by me, moving her hands through my hair. Her words sounded from her chest, and she felt warm like rocks in the sun.

“Naw,” Bud said, holding his drink up to the light, “Freddie don’ wand to go home. He likes being with people don’cha, Freddie?”

I looked away from Bud.

“And there’s noone home tonightd, huh, Freddie? Noone home.”

Bud was grinning.

He’s so young, so very young,” Irma murmured, rocking me slowly.

Bud splashed his drink down the sink. “Aaach, I don’d make ’em like you can, Irma. Hey,” he said standing back and grinning again, “You wand to take him to bed?”

“Don’t listen, just don’t listen,” Irma whispered in my ear, hugging me closer. I was getting nervous and wanted to stand up, but maybe it would hurt her feelings.

“No jive, I think he’s cherry. Would do him some good. Irma, take him to bed.”

Irma stood up and glared at Bud. “You never know when to stop, do you?”

Bud spread his legs under the light—grinning, his hair loose again and tumbling over his eyes.
Irma fumbled down over my knee, found my hand and squeezed it, but her gaze seemed frozen on Bud and gradually she trembled.

Bud waited.

Then I saw a funny thing. Irma said not another word, but walked slowly to Bud where he stood motionless, the grin fixed upon his face, his eyes deep and watery with a glint of brown. Momentarily, she paused before him, her legs moving slightly like the tail of a cat, her hands curling behind her back. And she sprang into his arms, her fingers digging in his neck, her legs twitching, her breath full of whimpers.

Bud clamped his arms around her, bending her back and gnawing at her ear. Then he pushed her away and reached for the light. In the dark, Irma continued to whimper. Bud jerked on the light again, and Irma was leaning over the bed. He pulled a blanket out from under her and grabbed the pillow.

“Here, Freddie,” he said, “make a bed.”

The light went out again. Bud and Irma jounced around, squeaking the springs. Bud’s shoes clopped to the floor, then Irma’s. I pulled the blanket tightly around my neck and wallowed in the pillow.

I felt heavily tired, and again I was dizzy.

“You know, Bud, I wrote another poem, today.” Irma’s voice drifted like a distant rustle. “You want to hear it?” Bud grunted. “I remember my poems only when I’m drunk, isn’t that funny?”

“I because you wride ‘em when you’re drunk.”

A soft breeze was blowing through the window, not quite so cold. A dog barked, and faraway a diesel moaned, grinding slowly through the night freight yards, sounding its horn long and low.

“Children of tomorrow, you come from a dazzle of broken glass, a beam of sorrow, a light not heat nor reason, an anarchy of stunted grass.’”

Bud laughed, “Murder, Irma, murder.”

“But in the season of your tomorrow, burn the ways your children pass, they turn like rays of light beneath the earth, not forgiving or forgiven for the darkness of their birth.’”

“Mmumph,” Bud grunted. “Wadsa tidle? Mother goose geds the siph?”

Irma sighed. “I did another, too: ‘You are the night, the anxious night . . . ’ Uuuuh, Bud, you . . . smuddering me . . . Oh!”

The room was silent. Almost. The train was hooting out of the yards now, rumbling faster, straining in the wind. The shadows whirled in rhythm with Bud’s quick breathing, growing harsher and thicker.

“I had a funny dream. I dreamed of Sutton dressed in black, how he stood with his white undertaker’s hands, shovelling earth into a pit. I watched in the grey rain, and I called to him, “What’s in the grave, Sutton, what’s in the grave?”’

Sutton only peered at me blankly and said, “A stitch in time saves nine.”

“Nine what?” I called, running toward the grave.

“Nine lives, nine cats, nine wives,” Sutton chuckled.” A stitch in time saves nine.”
“Stop,” I howled, wrestling with Sutton over the pit yawning dark beneath my feet.

Then I fell, dizzily down with the dirt, down far into the warmth of the earth. From high above a voice was saying, “You’ll never get out of there, son, you’ll never get out of there . . .”

I was gasping for breath and fumbling on the door when the light snapped on and Bud came bounding over the floor. He grabbed me, his hands rough around the neck of my shirt, but not before I let in the night.

“What you doing?” he coughed, “Freddie!” and slapped me sharply across the face.

“Look how dark it is,” I sobbed. “It’s dark outside, it’s dark outside.”

Bud kept slapping me across the face, and then I shuddered. His glittering eyes had changed to green.

“Bud!” Irma was shrieking and trying to pull him away. My whole face was stinging like a burn, but I hardly felt it. All I could think of was those sharp green eyes. Gosh, Bud is crazier than me.

He stopped as if in a daze. Irma saw it too and let him fall back.

“Bud, are you all right?”

A morning bird began to sing. I noticed now the night was turning blue.

“Huh? Huh . . .” Bud shook his head. “Huk, I’m all right. . . Jesus, whad time is id?” An alarm clock was under his bed. For the first time I noticed its ticking.

“Rod,” Bud said prowling back across the room. “Irma, I’ve god to splid, be ad south side ina hour.” He slammed a suitcase out from the bed. I trembled a little against the wall, my face still numb. Irma started rummaging through the drawers, tossing clothes out into the middle of the room. My kidneys were killing me. I couldn’t remember using the toilet beneath the stairway all night. All that drink, and yet, I had never asked Bud for the key—or had I?

“Uunh, Freddie, call a cab, huh?” Bud was gathering his records, packing up the box.

I shivered over the telephone. “Where you going, Bud?”

“South Side Sdation. Tell ’em South Side Sdation. Tell ’em, ged here in half an hour.”

As light widened in the window, I could see how purple and swollen Bud’s face was. I finished the call, then watched Bud and Irma frantically packing.

The time passed fast and dizzily. Soon the room was emptied, and the three of us were out in the deserted street, in the warm tarry smell of an early spring morning.

Bud examined his belongings carefully, then stared at me. “Hey, Freddie, aboud back ad the pad . . . I guess I wend a little off the wall . . . Jusd flip, man, dig?”


“Hey Irma, here comes the cab.” Bud picked up a suitcase, set it down again. “Give me a buzz.” He gathered her into his arms and released her as the cab pulled up to the curb.
"You the party going to Southside, bud?"
"Hey, man, you hip!" Bud's hair was thick and black, loose around his eyes and shining in the early sun.
"Bud," I said.
"Mmff, whad's thad?" Bud looked over his shoulder as he helped the driver pile boxes into the trunk.
"Bud, where are you going?" I asked.
"Why, Freddie, I don't know yed, man."
"But how'm I going to get to see you again," I forced myself to ask. "I mean how will I find you?"
"Mmff. I think I'm going to be in the suburbs. Maybe Irma will know ina couple a days. Ged in touch with Irma."
Irma watched silently, her face without expression.
The driver waited, tapping his fingers on the window as Bud paused half in the rear door. Bud's face creased suddenly into his old grin. "Id's been, man," he said, sticking out his hand. I shook it, feeling the strength of Bud's grip. Then the cab hummed out from the curb, and Bud waved once more to the two of us, his hand forming a small dip in the air. We watched the cab shrink down the yellowing street past tenements, bars, and pawn shops into the edge of the sun.
Irma stretched so her breasts pointed the sweater. "I guess I need some real sleep," she yawned. "My bus is up a block. Going that way?"
"Yeah, I guess so," I said. We started to walk.
"Spent all my money on liquor last night again," she said, talking to herself. "Only bus fare left and barely that. Shouldn't, but I always do." Mame won't be back for an hour, I thought. "Say, do you know what Bud does for a living?" Her eyes were half laughing, but kind of cold.
"I guess he sells stuff. Don't know. I've never asked him."
She glanced away, her mouth half laughing too. "Yes, he sells stuff all right," she said.
We came to the corner across from the dime store and stopped.
Irma looked into her purse and then at me.
"Well?"
I scuffed my feet on the pavement, studying the running cracks.
"You're a lonely kid, aren't you?" Cars went crackling by.
"Oh, I got some friends," I said. "Like, well Bud, and Ronney—he's the kid lives next door, and ..." I looked up for a moment, but she was all eyes and I looked away again.
Two business men strode past, alike in navy blue, one talking, the other laughing in a deep voice. The one talking watched us over his shoulder as they waited on the curb. Half way across the street I still could hear the other's muffled laugh.
"Look, Freddie, you've got a lot to learn if you think guys like Bud care at all for you ..." Her voice sounded bitter. "He doesn't care for anyone, least for himself." Then I looked at her, my lips tight. Her hair hung frowzy and dull in the growing sun, and her skin seemed grey.
I stepped into the street. "I guess I better be heading home," I said. "Freddie ... wait" Her hand was on my arm. "You're going to
need my number..." She went back into her purse. "To get Bud's address... and maybe some time you might want to come up to my house... I could help you with your English themes." She came up with a gnawed pencil and a ticket stub.

"I don't go to school," I said.

"Well, here's my number," she scratched it out in the palm of her hand. "Look, Freddie," she said in an advice giving tone, but she stopped there, her mouth curved on one side in a funny smile.

I took the ticket. "Thanks," I knew I should say something, but I had no words. "Guess I better be heading home." I was walking across the street feeling hangover dizzy. I wanted to look back, but I knew she would be watching me. The giddy sidewalk felt unreal beneath my feet. I kind of bounced. I was taller than I really am.

Not quite ready to go home yet, I walked north into the city. I could see people busy behind the windows of stores, my reflection winding in among them. I passed the black glitter of a furniture store into the display of a funeral demonstration. They had a coffin right there in the window, shiny brass and maroon plush.

A slow thought grew in me that was more a feeling. Gradually, I knew that maybe it would be all right with Mame and me if I wouldn't forgive her. I wouldn't forgive her, and then she would know I didn't blame her, and like Tom said, everything will be all right. I shuffled faster, my hands shoved deep in my pockets. I guess I was still drunk a little or I wouldn't have been making those funny sounds from my mouth.

"Hey, catch the cat," the voice said. "Man, he's really swinging."

Felt good, like maybe it was going to be a real long day. I bounced along, sounding louder, above my head the miles of glass kindling fire.