

THERE'S A GHOST IN MY GLASS

FLORENCE POLLOCK

Life is cheap. And I know mine's worth a wooden nickel.

In the dresser mirror, I watch the flurry of acts backstage preparing themselves. White clouds of smoke rise from powdering wigs and faces. Brown paper rustles as performers take swigs from bottles hidden in bags. Heavily lidded girls apply lipstick in wide strokes, their mouths frozen in comical 'o' shapes.

Lights dangle in round bulbs, plinking against glass.

The showgirls donned costumes of rich fabrics, delicious to touch—satins, silks, chiffon—all intently beaded into webs of finery. My hands remain starch in my pockets.

In the cupboard, glasses are stacked in large wooden boxes. Wind tickles my ear as a girlish voice hushes.

"Hello, lover."

I jump back, meeting peroxide-dyed hair and an array of vibrant feathers, which rather reminds me of an exotic bird.

"Hi, Anita." I nod.

Acknowledging and hoping to end her warm greeting, but her bare arms snake around my neck, holding me hostage.

"Eddie baby, how come you don't ever play no more?"

She pouts her lips, and her eyes blink with false sincerity. The feathers taunt my face, tickling the sinuses in my nose.

"Busy with my work, I guess."

I snatch her fingers, forcing the release of my captivity.

"But the piano keys miss you so," she whines, twisting away from my grip. "It's such a waste to let nimble hands pour drinks". Tracing her tongue down my knuckles before wetting my finger in her mouth. I quickly revoke her taste, with an audible pop, as it met air once more.

"Not all of us can get work so easy," I say, hauling the crate into my arms.



A playful thwack from her fan meets my shoulder.

“Now who said what I do is easy?” Wiggling her eyebrows “I’m only paid to make it look that way”. She throws me a playful wink before running off into the giggling line of girls. Prancing onto stage their large feather tails swing behind them dusting the floor as they leave.

I shouldn’t be so hard on Anita.

The winters here bit down hard. The teeth marks scarred most folk and would draw in pools of blood across the town. It wasn’t easy finding work, some of us had to disregard dignity. I should be grateful.

Even my ancestors had a bad run of it. It seemed to be a generational curse, some misfortune must befall the McGraw name. Ma thought she’d survived it, a devout believer, no wrongdoing. Only for her husband to drink himself to an early grave. I wonder if souls stirred beneath the stone. At least I haven’t been sent to the bone orchard.

Yet.

Besides the girls attracted crowds, and with every dice roll their fortunes ebbed. Quirley in hand and cards held with the other, here they wasted their lives. If I had a penny to my name, I would throw my hat into the sacred game. For now, I’ll drink what I’m allowed.

Setting the crate by the bar I begin to wipe down the sticky surface. Pickled something sits on the counter. A man sloshes the jar around, dregs of green residue collecting at the bottom. Eating irons clenched in his friends’ hungry hands. The smell of rump steak and sight of tightened bustiers wet their palettes.

“I’m down to the blanket.”

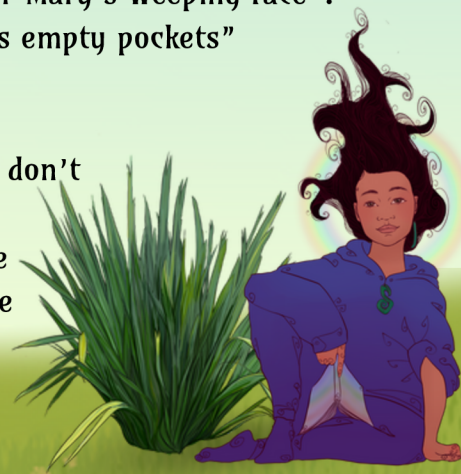
“What about that gold stream hmm?” He snuffed something great before spitting it back into his glass. Great more work.

“What? That non-existent one by the dried up creek?” He said with a look of disbelief which rather resembled a toothless walnut.

“Heard old man McDuff hit a vein shinier than the tears of Mother Mary’s weeping face”.

“Thought McDuff’s face was what would make Mary weep. Not his empty pockets” He snorts to himself in gleeful content.

The best part of my job is people-watching. Or rather listening. I don’t care to hear their woes, just as you wouldn’t mine. But a conversation unkempt for your ears makes a day easier to muddle through. Then again, hearing saloon drunks signals nostalgia. Like a fading first love she wraps me in a groggy embrace, and I’m



reminded of my youth spent at bars. When I couldn't keep my eyes open wide and I'd crash from days of forgotten rest.

That's when I hear it, pulling me out of my daze, boots clicking against rotting floorboards. He carried in the city smog that clung to his clothes. His hat was weather-beaten by the sun and his shoes had more holes than the victim of the most fearsome outlaw. He reeked of death and his cigar swung lazily around his wet mouth as he spoke. This man was mauled, but there was a certain swagger to the way he moved. He knew what was what; no man could convince him otherwise, and he didn't need to convince you.

"What can I do you for?" I wipe the rim of a glass.

"I need a room for the night." He takes out his cigar and chews at the dirt under his nails.

"You want a room here?" I ask in uncertainty.

His eyes bore through me.

"Does the booze make you slow, or are you just born that way?"

Knowing my father, booze probably had a hand in my birth.

The broken beds harbour springs with a thick record of violence; only fools would stay here, and even then they'd wake at 1 AM with swollen eyes. I grab a key from under the bar, letting it fall in front of him.

"First door on the left."

He waits a beat longer.

"You're not after a specific girl are ya?" I ask him.

He chews for a moment in thought, eyes still seeing past me.

"Not a girl specifically. No."

Oh. My face is as blank as Anita's mind.

"Don't I know you?"

"I think I'd remember you."

"Hm. Maybe not," his eyes saw me now. "But I know your type."

"Look. Folks here don't take too kindly to differences." I lean in, my voice murmuring beneath the room's buzzing chatter.

"Well, I guess that depends. What kind of differences are we talking about?"

"The kind you don't say out loud," my eyes dart around us. "The kind that'll get you killed."

"I won't say it, but I can show you. If you're looking for company," he says with a slow, knowing smile.

