

The Friends

It's still early in the evening but already dark outside when Drake wakes up. He's used to getting up at night. After closing the lid of the coffin he sleeps in, he opens the only window of his small one-room apartment and sticks out his head.

The streets below are empty but in the distance he hears the wail of a siren. The monotonous sounds of the city fill his ears. He listens to the drone of cars passing over the bridge, occasionally honking at each other as if in some secret code.

A single streetlamp is burning just in front of the drugstore on the other side of the street. The curtains flutter unevenly in the breeze from the partly opened window. Dim yellow light from the streetlamp filters in. Shadows flicker and dance about the room.

Drake's nightclothes are damp with sweat. The breeze from the window sends a chill over his body as he takes off his clothes and stands there naked on the cold hardwood floor. Only when his feet touch the icy wooden panels is he fully awake. He struggles to pull on his pair of old trousers. As he buttons his shirt, he catches himself pausing at each button with a shiver. The leather feels cold and lifeless as he slips on his shoes with no socks.

Muffled noises are coming from upstairs. A man and a woman are talking excitedly. Drake can't hear what they are saying, but it sounds like they're having an argument. Somewhere in the same room a baby is crying.

Drake puts his hands over his ears, trying to block out the commotion. How had he ever ended up in this tiny, noisy apartment anyway? It isn't just the people upstairs. The lady living next door has a very old bed, which whines and squeaks every time she and one of her lovers take to it. The squealing penetrates the flimsy walls. Even though he prefers to stay up all night, Drake can only escape the racket by climbing back into his coffin and closing the lid.

The bickering above him grows louder. There is no longer any point in trying to avoid it. Removing his hands from his ears, Drake walks over to the half-open window and slams it shut with a loud bang. The noise from upstairs stops momentarily but then resumes as if nothing had happened.

After closing the window, the breeze ceases and Drake feels warmer. He's sweating again. It must be a fever, he thinks. He is coming down with something.

A rotting table and plain pine chair are set conspicuously in the center of the room, but Drake can barely see them in the faint light. He fumbles around for a match in his shirt pocket. Finding one, he strikes it on the heel of his shoe and lights a kerosene lantern sitting in the middle of the table. Screwing up the wick, a faint trace of black smoke ascends from the flame like incense. He lights a cigarette from the fire and watches the smoke from the cigarette mingle with smoke from the lamp. The kerosene fumes are nauseating, but once he's adjusted the globe, the lamp gives off a warm, almost sentimental glow that fills the otherwise cheerless room with an impalpable ambience. The lantern is from his camping days and now, since they've turned off the electricity, it's his only source of light.

The happiest times, he recalls, were the times he'd spent camping. He remembers waking up in his sleeping bag, crawling out of his tent to greet the morning sun, making a fire and cooking breakfast. Once he climbed a hill nearby. The trees were so thick he couldn't see the sky. But when he reached the top of the hill there weren't any trees. Standing on a huge rock, he could see for miles and miles all around him. He was alone but not lonely. Solitude is not the same as loneliness.

He had no idea how he'd ended up in the crowded, noisy city. All he longed for was a bit of solitude.

Buddy drops in about an hour later. He wants to go out for a drink. Drake spits on the floor.

"I'm not up to it."

"Come on, man. Just one drink."

"Why don't you go by yourself?"

"What's the fun in that?"

"Buddy, I really don't feel like going."

Buddy paces the floor. "You've been nothing but a bastard ever since you got fired. Goddam it!

I'll even pay for your drink if you want. Money isn't everything, you know."

Drake's head feels warm again.

"I've got a fever," he says.

"That never stopped me," Buddy replies.

Drake sits in the wooden chair, knowing that as soon as he gets up he'll feel dizzy. Buddy's a nice guy to have around, but Drake doesn't really think of him as a friend. Just someone to go out with. Trouble is that Buddy wants to go out a whole lot more often than Drake does. And he always wants someone to be with him. He can't go anywhere by himself. It seems he can hardly even get to the toilet on his own.

"What do you care about how sick I am?" Drake says. "But all right, I'll go out with you. But just for one drink. That's all. Then I'm coming home."

Buddy is triumphant but tries not to show it. He waits patiently for Drake to get ready, then the two of them leave the apartment and head for the bar.

Drake doesn't feel very good being out. The air is cold and he is shivering. He can barely walk a straight line as it is. What's the point in going out drinking? He wishes he were back in bed. He feels like throwing up, but holds on to himself, even though throwing up would probably make him feel better.

Things get worse at the bar. The smoke is so thick Drake gags with nearly every breath he takes. There's no point in lighting a cigarette for himself. Normally Drake can take almost anything, but tonight he simply doesn't want to deal with it.

Buddy orders whiskeys on the rocks for both of them. Drake figures that whiskey is better than beer. Even though the alcohol content is higher, there's less to drink. Drake plans to take it slow. He waits for the ice to melt a little to dilute the whiskey. Before he has even taken a sip, however, Buddy has downed his first glass and ordered another.

There are two girls alone at a table on the other side of the bar. Buddy points them out to Drake with a nod of his head.

"Why don't you ask them to come over?"

"I'm not interested."

"Why not?"

"I'm just not interested."

Drake takes the first sip of his whiskey. Immediately he feels hot. Buddy's second whiskey has arrived at the table and Buddy starts into it.

"Here," Buddy says, reaching for his wallet. "I'll give you some money and you can go over and offer to buy them a drink. Then you can casually suggest—"

"Listen, Buddy," Drake cuts him short. "Ask them yourself. I don't give a damn what you do, but you ought to start learning how to handle things on your own."

Buddy is instantly fuming and is about to say something when a man approaches the table. Buddy recognizes him and offers him a chair.

"Phil, long time no see," Buddy says. "How you been?"

"Oh, I'm doing all right," Phil says heartily, slapping Buddy on the back and then sitting down. "Who's your friend here?"

Drake, trying with some difficulty to be pleasant, doesn't wait for Buddy to introduce him. "Just call me Drake."

"Drake the fake," Buddy says contemptuously.

"Whatsa matter, Buddy?" Phil says good-naturedly. "You got a hair up your ass or something?"

"He's always got a hair up his ass," Drake says, giving Buddy a friendly punch on the arm just to show there are no hard feelings.

Buddy doesn't reply. He looks down moodily at his now half-empty whiskey glass. Phil orders a whiskey. Buddy gulps down the remaining whiskey in his glass and orders another for himself as well.

"So, whaddya do?" Phil asks Drake.

"Not much of anything right now," Drake answers. "I just got laid off over at the mill. Well, not really laid off. I guess you might say I got fired."

"Yeah," Phil says. "I hear it's one helluva place to work. Myself, I haul steel. The company gives me the orders and I follow them, but they'll still screw you every fucking time if you don't keep your eye on them."

"Come on, Phil," Buddy says. "You got it made. I don't know what the hell you've got to complain

about.”

“Just being a working man you always got something to complain about,” Phil replies. “Don’t matter where you go, they treat you like shit. Same for you like it is for anyone.”

Buddy finishes his drink in one long swallow. “But I tell you, Phil, I’d rather be a working man than laying around all day at home like this lazy bum.”

He points with his thumb at Drake. Drake notices it but just sits there staring down at his glass, which he is surprised to see is now empty.

“You gonna take that sitting down?” Phil asks, a little surprised.

Drake doesn’t answer. Buddy spits down at Drake’s shoes. “Fucking welfare case,” he hisses.

“Listen fellows,” Phil says, trying to lighten the mood with a broad smile. “I can see that things haven’t been so friendly between you two. Let me buy you both a drink.”

No one objects. Not even Drake, although he wants to go home. The last thing he wants is another drink, but he’s too tired to get up and leave. Phil orders another round.

They drink all night. Phil does most of the talking. He’s been just about every place and has a story for each one of them.

“You sure get around,” Drake says. The alcohol has numbed him and he has forgotten about his nausea.

“I wouldn’t give it up for the world,” Phil replies. “Even if the company treats me like crap.”

“Yeah,” Drake says in drunken admiration. “I wouldn’t mind having a job like that. Get to see things and meet people, not have to be stuck behind a machine all day.”

“You’re nothing but a lazy-ass,” Buddy slurs. These are the first words he’s said in a while. For most of the night, he’d been kicking back in his chair sulking in silence. He’s had more to drink than Phil and Drake combined.

“Hey, Buddy,” Phil says. “You’re still pissed off at Drake and I’ll bet you can’t even remember what for!”

“Damn if I can’t. Like I said, he’s a lazy sonuvabitch.”

“It’s not like he quit his job. He was fired for Christ’s sake. Don’t you have any sympathy?”

“Hell no. Not for that bastard.”

“He’s just drunk,” Drake says. “Don’t worry, he’ll get over it.”

Buddy sneers. When the bar girl comes over to say that the bar is closing, Buddy empties his wallet on the table and tells her to take whatever is needed to cover the bill. Drake notices that she helps herself to an overly generous tip as well, but he doesn’t say anything. It isn’t his money after all and Buddy is too drunk to care. Phil doesn’t offer to pay a dime, in spite of his repeated offers throughout the night to buy everyone a drink.

Once outside, Drake suddenly feels chilled again. Morning is coming but it’s still dark and the streetlights haven’t been turned off yet. Phil leaves in a hurry, explaining that he needs to get some shut-eye before making a haul later that day.

“It’s Sunday,” he says. “But like I said, I do whatever they tell me to.”

With Phil gone, Buddy and Drake are alone together on the street. They start walking back toward Drake’s place. Along the way they pass by a construction site that’s been marked off with wooden stakes and a rope. Buddy can’t walk straight and keeps stumbling into the rope.

“Hey, Buddy,” Drake says. “What’s been the matter with you tonight? I mean, just because I think you ought to start doing things for yourself once in a while, all of a sudden you get so goddamned hostile and stay pissed off the whole night. What gives?”

“I gotta take a leak,” Buddy says.

He stops by the fence and waters one of the stakes.

“It’s not me,” Buddy says. “It’s you. You...you’re the one who’s got a problem. You just don’t give a shit about anything anymore. Nothing matters. You don’t have anything going for you now. Absolutely nothing.”

Buddy zips up his pants and stands there swaying from side to side.

“Like tonight,” he continues. “I could have insulted you all night and you wouldn’t have even raised a finger against me. Hell, Drake! No real man is going to take shit like that, even from a friend. You’re no man. You’re nothing but a cockroach.”

Drake pauses for a moment and then says firmly but without anger, “Buddy, why don’t you just mind your own business for a change? Maybe I don’t care one fucking bit about anything anymore,

but why the hell should I? Provoke me all you want, but when it comes right down to it, you're no more of a man than me. So what if you've got a job? You're just as fucked up as I am."

"The hell I am," Buddy cries. He reaches down for one of the stakes demarcating the construction site, slips off the rope, and pulls the stake out of the ground.

"Bastard!" he shouts, hurling the stake hard at Drake. The spike hits Drake squarely on the chest, then falls to the pavement. Drake winces in pain.

Buddy staggers down the street away from Drake, cursing under his breath. Drake just stands there, his shirt torn and his chest bleeding. The nausea is beginning to return as the effect of the alcohol wears off.

The sun isn't up yet but the sky is already turning gray. Drake wants to get home and be back in his coffin before dawn if he can.