

TWO PENCE FOR PASSAGE

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Fear is what woke him, but it was guilt that got him out of bed. George had kept the same routine he had for years. A cold shower to shake off sleep followed by a shave, but as he picked up his razor he looked at the stubble just now sprouting on his face. There was more grey in his beard. His hair still had the dark luster of his youth, but those flecks of grey aged him. With practiced hands he sharpened the razor on an old strip of leather he kept by the sink. He left his face smooth and ran a comb through his hair. He got dressed and walked out of the apartment into late afternoon sun.

Street vendors were hawking goods and the smell rising from the food stalls did its best to cover up the smell of piss in the streets. He started walking without thinking. The jumble of noise around him resembled language, but one foreign to him. He could hear the newlyweds arguing over the din of the streets. The laundresses were gossiping as they often did during their breaks, usually over who was sleeping with whom. He walked by the men too old to work. Every day they sat at the same café patio, playing backgammon and drinking Turkish coffee.

“Come now George indulge us with your company,” they called to him.

He waved, but kept walking.

He had walked the same road every day for the past ten years. He stopped halfway across the bridge leading to the industrial heart of the city. The sky was black with smoke billowing from smokestacks, factories burning coal to fuel their machines. He had worked in a factory making shoes for most of his adult life, yet now he stood a derelict. Rent was due soon and without the factory, he would be on the street. He crossed his arms and leaned on the stone railing of the bridge. George stared at the water flowing under it.

“Water’s mighty cold this time of year,” said a man to his right. The man was older than George by a couple of decades. He was round in the middle with a bulbous nose, but had the hands of a workman. The plain trousers and black woolen coat he wore looked tailored, but for a younger thinner man. Wisps of grey hair poked out from under a matching black flat cap. He held a brown paper bag towards George. “Pistachio?”

“No thanks.”

“More for us then,” he said popping a shelled nut into his mouth. He sucked on it for a bit before spitting the shell into the river below. They

stood at the edge of the bridge, George looking at the water and the pistachio man looking into the distance.

“What’s a man like you doing here in the midday?”

“Fishing,” George said.

“Hard to catch a fish in these waters, especially without a pole,” he popped another pistachio into his mouth. “Sides, everything’s dead,” he tossed a thumb toward the factories “Run off kills’em.”

“Is that so? Guess this was pointless from the start.”

“Could be,” he spat another shell into the water, “or could just be you’re not a fisherman.”

The factory whistles screamed the workday’s close. Men and women walked over the bridge away from looming smokestacks into the light of the setting sun and to their homes. They laughed and talked amongst themselves, passing by the two watchers as if they were statues decorating the bridge.

George felt the cold gaze of the old man on him.

“What?” He asked looking at the pistachio man.

“Why are you here?”

“I enjoy the smell of soot and rotten fish,” he said.

The old man sucked thoughtfully at his latest salty victim, “Let me ask you something.”

“Mhmm.”

“You heading to work?”

George let out a sigh.

“Going home then?”

“Not sure about that.”

The old man set down his bag of nuts and leaned on the railing, facing George fixing his pale blue eyes to George’s brown ones. The way his eyes seemed to look through him made his skin crawl.

“I’ve asked you three questions that have been answered truly as I see it. Ask me three in return, such is fair,” the old man said. The air was still, the sun had sunk beneath the rows of apartments leaving a twisted mixture of gaslights and the remaining rays of twilight peeking through them. All was silent except for the water flowing under the bridge.

“Okay then...what do you do for work?”

The man let out a soft chuckle showing the ghost of a smile only briefly, “My grandfather was a ferryman, two pence would get you down river in those days he would say. My father was a farmer. Me, I don’t really know what I would call myself, a vagabond I guess. I go where my work takes me.”

“Odd. I figure you would be a farmer like your father.”

“He didn’t own any land, just the tools of his trade,” he said as he pulled gloves from a coat pocket and slipped them on, “Reap and sow, reap and sow.”

George suddenly felt the cold, his clothes feeling too thin to keep it at bay. He tucked his arms around his body, his breath came out as a cloud. The old man just stared at him like a butcher looks at a pig. Sizing him up and sharpening his knives for the first cut. There was no one on else on the bridge. It was only him and the old man in the darkening night.

“You’ve got two more,” the old man said.

George looked down into the water. Shapes swam just beneath the surface, hungry shadows waiting for their next meal.

“Ask,” he said.

“I don’t have any questions.”

“All you are is questions. Ask.”

“I’m going to die,” George said.

“All men die. Ask,” The old man said.

George gripped the railing of the bridge, cold sweat running down his face. He wanted to run home, he wanted to lay down in bed, he wanted to get up the next morning and take a cold shower and have a bitter shave. He wanted to hear the women gossip and watch the old men drink their coffee and play backgammon.

“Did they suffer?” he stammered out.

“Immensely,” the old man said softly.

“It wasn’t my fault,” George said grabbing the old man by the lapels, “The foreman told me to lock the doors. He told me they would abandon their work or steal the goods, you have to understand...it...it wasn’t my fault, I was doing what I was told.”

George’s hands dropped to his sides, “You see that don’t you?”

“I saw everything, George.”

The air rushed past him as he plummeted to the dark waters below. He saw the old man looking at him over the rail. The cold waters embraced him.

The old men drank their Turkish coffee and watched their neighbors busy themselves with work they had given up long ago.

“Did you see the paper today?” said the mustached one.

“Aye, damn shame,” said the bald one as he sipped his coffee.

“Sole survivor of factory fire found dead.”

“Tragic, heard he leapt off the bridge around quitting time.”

“Guess he punched out early,” he said fidgeting with his mustache as they set the board for another round.

“Mind if I play?” said the new comer, he wore simple clothes and a dark woolen coat and matching cap.

“Why George, aren’t you a sight for sore eyes. Come and sit a while,” The mustached man said as he finished setting the pieces. George pulled up a chair setting himself up across from the old man.

“Playing white?” The old man asked taking a sip of the rapidly cooling drink.

“You can’t win forever.”

“Same wager as always then?”

George affixed his cold gaze on him.

“I haven’t lost to you yet and don’t think today will be the day either.”

They rolled dice to see who went first.