

A little gift of liquid

John McMahon

Walking uphill from Queens Boulevard, the seven train shuddering above me grinds its way from Manhattan towards the vast Asian neighborhoods to the east.

Christmas Eve 2002, I tried to enjoy it; I tried to get into the season. I went to the *Courtyard* which was teaming with Queens Irish diaspora packed pink cheek to meaty jowl; drinking deeply, smoking furiously. The owner, a balding overweight ex-cop with a heavy hand at pouring drinks, put on a buffet of Mexican food from the taco van that parks on the Boulevard in front of the bar every night from six to midnight. People in the neighborhood swear by the taco van. It's authentic, cheap and the food goes well with heavy drinking.

I tried but I couldn't manage Christmas cheer. It was snowing in the streets but it was raining in my heart. My life had been trashed by an Italian criminal stereotype and I had been called home from a tropical island to deal with the wreckage.

The dark street and icy wind blew through my thin clothes making the place seem even darker, more bitter, more inhospitable than it was. An old man trod ahead of me, hunched over in a peasants coat from the old world against the cold. I was in line behind him at the liquor store. A silent line of single men with cheap bottles clenched in hard hands. Immigrants; alone on Christmas Eve. Men too poor to pay for bar drinks, men who would go back to their shared rooms over cheap Colombian restaurants and all night laundromats along Green Point Avenue and get silently drunk, this night being no exception.

And I counted myself among them. I felt like an immigrant, an outsider; I was as alone as they. The city held nothing for me after seven months living like an island native in a bamboo hut, wearing just a piece of cloth around my waist, bathing in the gentle blue sea day after day. What was this dark, cold, hard city compared to that?

I would have still been there. Never would have come back if I had known what was waiting for me. If I knew that there was nothing left. If I had known there wasn't so much as a change of shirt. If I had known the savage little gangster had killed my dog and shit canned everything I owned I would have stayed put, would have just waited life out on that white stretch of sand.

I remember the old mans face. The old man walking ahead of me. I remember his eyes, like opals pounded into his skull with a three dollar hammer. Brilliant blue, surrounded by a scummy white meringue, hooded and draped with chaffed, pink layers of tender looking skin. A thin froth of white bristle covered his face. I remember he licked his lips a number of times as he waited to be handed his bottle wrapped in a brown paper bag.

I was two people behind him at the liquor store. When I finished the temporary job I had taken for the day I thought I would be up for the celebratory din of the bar; but I only lasted one drink before it was too much. Too much fake cheer, too much expectation, too much thanks in the room. I had nothing to celebrate, expected nothing to change and had only myself to thank for it.

I worked those temporary jobs when I wasn't in the King's county court building seeking some recognition of my rights. Wanting to see my criminal land lord prosecuted for his egregious violations of every kind of law, including his own parole; but nothing

would come of it. I was laughed at, shuffled from office to office, mired in paper work, milked of money I didn't have while he would never show at a hearing. Never be sought; never have a warrant issued for his arrest, never be accosted.

This was to be expected. This was the law in New York City, they would never bother a 'made man' for something as petty as five class A felonies, but I had nothing better to do with my time. I had no job, no apartment, no books. I had burnt every bridge that would flame before I left, so I pressed on.

The side walk is glazed over in places with black ice. Invisible to the eye, but every few steps there is a bone jarring jerk as my foot slides frictionless out from beneath me and I am reminded of how tenuous my grip on existence is.

Without an address, without money, with no tax return and no phone number I could just slip here on the ice into the dark and disappear from the knowing world.

It's not far to the apartment my sister lent me while she was at her condo on the beach. Lent me rent free with the verbal rider that 'it shouldn't be too long, should it?'

No it shouldn't honey, just enough time to get me out of here and back to that lovely sand spit.

At the time that's all I wanted. To get back to the island I had been wasting time on before. I didn't know then that it was its own horrible microcosm of bigots, thieves and jealousy. In my mind it was still the opposite of the dim uphill street I was climbing.

The old man is slow going. I'm nearly caught up to him without walking with any purpose.

My life here is finished. I know that as easily as I know that the cold is tearing away at my clothes. The fabric wasn't made to withstand this kind of treatment and either was I.

I was making plans to return to the sun saturated place that I had been at. The only problem was of course money. I wanted a vast amount, needed a small bundle, and had none. This was my life; no money to accomplish the necessary. And this was as necessary as blood.

I was caught in the greedy grip of my own thoughts when the old man went down. I saw his legs kick out from under him. I saw the black flag of his coat swell in the wind but I didn't realize he was down until I nearly stepped on him.

He was tangled up in a heap, mummified in yards of black fabric. He wasn't moving under there but there was a low audible groan coming from within.

'Are you all right old feller?'

I called down to him. Circling the heap. The moan continued and then slowly the fabric moved, and arched. I reached down and felt around until I found something I could support, a shoulder, an elbow? Under his veil the old man found his feet and slowly righted himself pushing his head out from the folds. I held him by the lapels of his coat; I could feel his body shaking against the cold or maybe in fear. When he was upright and stable he slowly opened the front of his coat and looked down at his worn plaid work shirt beneath, soaked from navel to neck.

I thought he had pissed himself some how, miraculously soaking his shirt but not his pants. That made no sense. He continued to stare at his wet front, holding the skirts of his coat open, flapping in the cold wind like the tattered wings of an enfeebled bat.

Slowly he looked up to me, those crystal blue eyes squinting away tears. His mouth made a gumming movement, a toothless chew at the raw air. I mistook his desperate look of loss as one of embarrassment until he reached into his side pocket and pulled out the soaked bag, wrinkled and torn. Shards of glass fell from the corners that had burst with the fall. The wind changed and I smelled the sharp, strong tang of the whiskey that had saturated his shirt. Silent tears dripped from his chin, mixing with the booze on his neck.

He held the bag in both hands, tearing it open and letting the remains of the bottle fall to the frozen sidewalk as if there might still be a shot left somewhere in the brown pulp.

It was a cheap liter of domestic blended whiskey, probably no more than fifteen dollars. The glass was thin, if it had been a more expensive brand it wouldn't have broken and this fact was an insult topped on to the injury the old man was feeling so deeply. I knew from the stricken look on his face that he couldn't replace it. That, that burst bottle represented his holiday; his solitary cheer.

He let the last slivers of glass slip between his fingers; the ragged brown paper bag infused with whiskey lay flat and tangled in his hands. He stared down past it to the sidewalk where the spilled drink temporarily showed against the ice in a ring, marking the spot where his body had collapsed.

There wasn't much to say. We were both going back to empty apartments; mine much more luxurious than his for sure. We were both going to be alone for the next few days until work called us into the streets again. But I still had my bottle of BushMills plus my sister's home bar and his cheer was seeping away into the dark ice.

The last thing the old man expected was for me to slip him my bag. There could be no circumstances where he would have given up his own. But as he stood there transfixed by the golden ring of frosting liquid that's just what I did. Took him by both hands, now almost as icy as the sidewalk, pushed my liter into his damp inner pocket, closed the coat around his thin chest and walked him over the hump and down the other side to the intersection at 39th street.

It was as surprising to me as it was to him. I felt no generosity in me. All that was mine had been stolen or destroyed by a greedy thug who had enough to pay off the city's judges and bent cops. The Christmas season meant nothing to me; I didn't give two shits for benevolence or humanity. But something in that old man's odd blue eyes reached me, something about his loss touched me where a thousand starving Sudanese babies couldn't. This old man's plight became personal to me, I needed to help him.

This was something I could remember once I had put in enough temporary days of labor to get out of the dark, cold streets and back to my bright strand of white sand. Maybe I could flog off all of the loss and think about him sitting in his shabby room smiling his crooked old smile in thanks, the admiration he would have had for me on that quiet cold night.

When we reached the corner I stood him in the dip of the sidewalk meaning to watch him cross safely. But when he should have moved forward he turned to me instead and took my hand between his. His fingers were thin with age, his hands heavily veined and still frozen. He mumbled something, I couldn't make it out so leaned in closer and with the timing of a cat he thrust his face towards mine and kissed me passing his tongue briefly across my lips. Astonished, I backed away; confused, embarrassed, enraged.

Before I could put any distance between us I heard his hollow voice call out in awkward English 'can't you join me for a little drink', and then he snickered wildly.

I did make it back to that white sanded paradise, but of course it wasn't. I have been wandering since then because whenever I think about returning to settle in the beast that is New York City I remember the stunning blue eyes of that twisted old man and how he burned me at every angle.