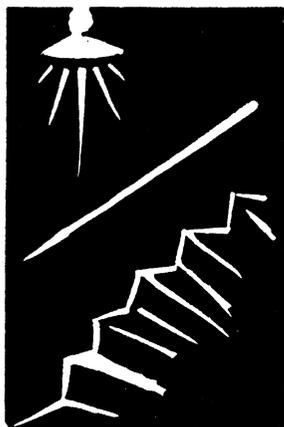


Big-Time

Terrance
Hallagan



JOHN saw Mike sitting there in the lobby waiting. He had never seen Mike in anything but greasy overalls before. But putting a blue suit on Mike was like putting dancing shoes on a cripple.

“Hi, kid,” Mike hollered when he saw him; “you’re late.”

“Not much,” John called back as he came across the lobby. He never liked it when Mike called him kid. Mike was only three years older. But Mike went right on doing it and John never said anything. Half the men at work called him kid. John was standing beside him now. “Cripes, I’m only ten minutes late. Busses don’t always run when you want them to.”

“Forget it, kid.” Mike stood up. He was stocky with great shoulders—looked like he would stand up for his rights and had lots of rights. “Better yet, what do you say we go have a drink and both forget it?”

“Sure,” John said, following Mike to the bar room. He wasn’t so sure. Then he thought, “Hell, I’m old enough; sure, hell yes, I can drink with all of . . .” Hard as John tried he couldn’t forget that he was in the Chamberlain. His dad had often talked of the Chamberlain. He used to tell Mom he was going to live there, just to tease her. It had always been the symbol of filth and drunkenness to him. He used to say he had never been there and would boast that he never would. He was there now. Did he come just to meet Mike or because he thought it was bad? He hoped his dad wouldn’t like it. Well, his dad would never know. He wanted him to know, but did his dad care? “I don’t give a damn if he don’t,” John thought, so violently that it startled him.

"Go ahead," Mike said, holding the door to the dirty crowded barroom. "I'm right after you." The smoke fog inside smelled of beer, cigarettes, and whiskey. "There's Chuck and Jim." Mike pointed to one of the booths on the north wall. "Let's go over with them."

"Yuh," John said, still not feeling quite right about it. Then he saw her. She was sitting at a table all alone. She looked cool and clean though the place was hot and dirty. Like a water lily in a slimy green pond. She was wearing a white dress painted with big purple flowers. The hem cut right across her knees . . . nice legs. She was beautiful, he thought; her black hair, her dark eyes against white skin . . . a black scar that looked like a little smudge of soot on her forehead. One hand clutched a glass of brandy and soda that she wasn't drinking, but . . .

"Want another drink, John?" Chuck asked.

"I'm a working man now, not daddy's little boy." He looked at Chuck and met his questioning eyes. He didn't want another drink. But he was a man. He could take it. "Hell yes," John said. "Do you think I'm quittin' already? Why they haven't enough liquor in this whole damn town for me even to get a buzz on."

Chuck flagged the over-worked waitress by holding up four fingers, and she hurried back with more glasses.

"By God, I'm paying for these," John said.

"I ordered them," Chuck said. "I'll pay for them. You paid for the last ones."

"So what!" John came back as the haggard waitress waited. "I don't care who ordered them. Who's drinking them?" He stood up and shoved the last five of yesterday's pay at the waitress who seemed glad the argument was over.

"You shoulda let me," Chuck added, glad to put the money back into his pocket.

"Go to hell," John said. "I'm running this. Let's drink to the damn plant. That it busts along with all the bastards that run it." The drink went down hard for John; only pride kept him from choking. It tasted awful and burned. He wondered if he could stand another one. "Damn, that's good liquor," he said.

He hadn't sworn till a week ago; now he was swearing all the time. It sounded big. By hell, he was big. He was making his own money. He had told his old man off. What if his old man did own the company? Hell, his old man didn't give him enough money to buy cigarettes. The old devil. The old devil was crazy—

he'd told John that he'd be back in a week. That then he would know the value of money and a good home. Cripes, it was over a week now. Hell, his dad wasn't going to run his life like he run his company, his mother, and his sister. He'd make and spend his own money. He'd have fun, get drunk. Get drunk every damn night, by hell. He was almost eighteen.

"I hope all the bastards that run it go broke," he repeated, aiming at his old man. Why in hell did he have to be his old man?

"Let's all get drunk," Jim said, which was quite a bit for Jim. He hardly ever spoke. He always ate his lunch at work off in a corner by himself.

"That's all you ever do, Jim," Mike said. "What the hell. Don't you ever want to amount to something?"

"I'd rather get drunk," Jim answered dumbly.

"How in the hell can you be so dumb, Jim?" Mike said, staring directly at him. His lower lip curled a little as if he were rolling a dead pig over with his foot.

John looked over at Jim, but Jim was so deeply engrossed in his drinking that he hadn't even heard. "Maybe I'd be like Jim," John thought, "when I'm thirty-five. Maybe I'll just work and drink." He didn't want to be like that. He just wanted to have fun. "Let's get drunk," he said.

"Cripes, kid." Mike looked as if he were going to say something more.

He didn't, so John jerked, "By God, I'm going to get drunk," and looked at Mike.

"Better take it easy. You gotta be on the press tomorrow."

"Christ again," John complained. "That bastard thinks I'm a nigger or something. What's wrong with Casey? Why doesn't he do that?"

"I don't know. That's what Joe said he was going to do."

"I ought to tell him to take those presses and shove them. I'm going to get drunk; I can run them anyhow." John noticed Mike looking at him. "What the hell, Mike, you think I can't?"

"No," Mike put in, not too convincingly; "I didn't say that, did I?"

"Guess I will have fun every night," John said to himself below the froth of voices and the ripple of the juke box. But he couldn't get home out of his mind. They would all be at home now. Mom would be sitting by the radio crocheting. Ellen

would be half-lying on the davenport with a magazine, reading, listening to the radio, and talking to Mom. Probably not knowing what was going on in any of them. His old man. Damn it anyhow, the old devil would be reading the paper. The dictator. "Christ, it's funny we don't all have to heil him," John thought. "Just because he owns that company he knows everything. Infallible. Never made a mistake in his life. Ok, so he started from the bottom; now he's one of the richest men in Meredith." Mom was different. She always went up and put him to bed and kissed him goodnight. He used to tell her he was too old. "You're not too old to be kissed, son," she'd say. Maybe she hated his dad too. Maybe she just stayed with the old man for him and Ellen. John would have liked to think that. He didn't. He could hear his mother . . . "You'd better go to bed, Ellen; eight o'clock comes pretty early in the morning." . . .

"What's the matter, kid?" Mike said.

John was pulled back into the bar-room. "I was just thinking." My god, was he homesick? No, just a headache. Anyone could have a headache.

"Mmm, a little dolly?"

John shook his head yes. That was the easy way out. Lots of men dreamed about girls.

"Yup, you're that kind. Some little wench just wraps you around her little finger. Don't let 'em fool you, kid. All women are bums. All they want is your money, your liquor, or a good time. Forget 'em. Take a new one every night. That's the way. There isn't a woman alive that could get me going. One night, that's enough. I could stand another drink. How about it, kid? Going to lay off?"

"Hell, no. I'll run those presses tomorrow and by damn I'll drink tonight." John slapped more money on the table. Mike shoved John's money back and paid for them. John didn't argue with Mike. Mike wasn't the arguing kind. John hadn't finished the last one; he didn't know how he could.

"Look at sugar!" Mike said, suddenly noticing the girl with the scar. "Look at the sugar;" he snapped his fingers.

"Oh, how I could do with that in a dark alley on a long lonesome night!" Chuck said, shutting his eyes. "Those hips . . ."

"She's a pretty one," Jim said—Jim who never looked at a girl sober, hardly ever even when he was drunk.

"She's not bad here," Chuck said, slapping his chest.

“What’s wrong with you, kid? Tied up so tight you can’t even look, or don’t you like?”

“You’re damn right I do. I’m going to take her home.”

“Hell, you’d be afraid to hold a door for her,” Chuck said.

“Like hell,” John said half mad. He slid out of the edge of the booth. “I ought to sock him,” he thought, looking at Chuck. “I’m going over there, and if I don’t come back take my drinks, Jim. Oh hell, take ’em anyway, Jim—they’ll get warm. I’ll get some fresh ones.” John stood up.

Chuck gave a long low whistle. John glared at him, saying all kinds of nasty things with his eyes, but not speaking.

“At least I don’t have to drink those drinks,” he thought. “They would have killed me.” What if she would turn him down. Maybe she had overheard him. She wouldn’t even look up. He wanted to lay his head on her shoulder. He wanted to tell her everything. But he didn’t want sympathy. He could take it! He was big; he was tough.

“Give her my regards,” Chuck said. “Kiss her once for me.” He whistled with his eyes closed.

“Go on, glamor boy,” Mike put in.

John wished they would leave him alone as he started to walk to her table. “Maybe she won’t like my looks. Maybe she’s waiting for someone.” His knees shook. He hoped they didn’t show. He cleared his throat and tried to smile, wanting to look worldly and blase. John felt very meek. “Good evening,” he stammered.

She flashed up with a quick automatic smile but didn’t speak, so he went on. “Would you mind terribly much if I sit down? Would you?”

“Would it do me any good?” she said coldly, sipping her brandy. She drank like she either hated the stuff or wanted it to last forever.

Though her eyes were cold, they melted him. He was like a snowman running down into his shoes. “You think I’m a kid, don’t you?”

“Oh no.” Her voice dripped sarcasm.

“How old do you think I am?”

She might have said ten. “Maybe twenty-two?” She clicked on the smile.

John beamed. He wondered if he did look that old. “How did you know?”

“Men are my specialty,” she said in clear business-like tones.

"I never miss." Blandly she went on: "Do you have a cigarette on you?"

"Sure." Then like a puppy he added, "They're Raleighs." He had forgotten about home. He was big-time again.

"Don't matter"—tossing her hair a little and tapping the cigarette on the rough table top. "It sure is hell what we have to put up with these days, isn't it? Light?"

John struck a match quickly and shook it in front of her cigarette. She took his hand to steady it and puffed on the cigarette. The touch of her skin did something to him as their hands lowered to the table, even though she held his hand as if she didn't know it or couldn't feel it. He still clutched the dead match between his thumb and finger. "It's something to be out with something *real* after all those kids I've been running around with at home."

"You're pretty," he said. Maybe she was beautiful, but he had never called anyone beautiful and he hated to use the word.

"Yes, I know," she said dryly, shifting herself on the chair in a bored fashion. "At least so everyone tells me."

"Want another drink?"

"No, thanks; I can't finish this one." She laid the cigarette down and the smoke curled up gracefully. She turned on her smile again. "I hate to leave this den of iniquity, but I'm tired. I'm going home. I'll have to say goodnight."

He couldn't let her leave. He had to be with her. Somehow he summoned all his strength. "Can I take you home?"

"Sorry, sweetheart," she said, standing up. He looked hurt. "On second thought maybe it would be better. But can we leave now?"

"Oh yes! But where do you live?" He felt like Napoleon now—he'd won a great battle. John wondered what Chuck would think when they went past.

"918 South Court Street," she answered him, slipping her arm in his as they walked towards the door. "My name is Annette, if you are wondering."

He hadn't been wondering—it'd never occurred to him she might have a name. John threw his shoulders back, feeling bigger than he ever had before. He didn't realize how ridiculous they must look. He didn't realize—and evidently she didn't care.

"Don't do anything I wouldn't do," Chuck said as they passed the booth.

"See you tomorrow."

"Thanks for the drinks."

"Goodnight," John said with a kind of a wave and caught Chuck's wink. He could feel his face grow red; he hated to have people wink. His face grew redder and he couldn't stop it. He pushed Annette through the door as he heard Chuck say, "He'll never make it tomorrow." "The hell I won't. I'll be there first. Cripes, with all the liquor he's been drinking maybe he won't be there. Hell, I can do twice as much as Chuck anyhow, any day of the week." . . . "Sorry, Annette, I didn't intend to shove you."

"That's all right. I should have a handle on me. When you leave, you leave."

They moved away from the door out from under the neon sign that flashed on and off "Chamberlain Bar," then walked to the corner. She was still clinging to his arm. "Are you going to call a cab?" she asked. "Or do we have to ride those terrible streetcars?"

"I'm going to call a cab," he said, though he hadn't intended to. He didn't have much money now, and he didn't get paid till Friday. He whistled at a cab, watched it stop.

"Crawl in, buddy. Hurry up; I shouldn't even pick you up. I got to get another guy in five minutes—where to?"

"918 South Court."

"That will be ninety cents; pay me now so it won't take any time."

John handed him a dollar. "Keep it," he said.

"Nope, can't do that"—but the man did.

Annette crossed her arms and sat back in the seat. John wanted very much to put his arms around her, but he didn't, and they rode silently through the dark streets. John looked out of the window. He hardly knew this part of town. These were the slums of Meredith that his dad wanted to tear down. No, his dad wanted to burn them. John suddenly wondered what they would do with the people. It really didn't matter much to him. These people don't amount to much, he thought, dressed in rags and dirty. Let them burn with the houses. Let his dad burn too. Maybe they could start the fire with his dad. "She is beautiful," he thought, looking at Annette again; "I wish she lived somewhere else."

The cab pulled to a stop. "You'll have to get yourselves out—

I did you quite a favor already taking you out here—thanks, mister.”

“Well, up those stairs . . .”—Annette pointed to an old set of outside steps.

Suddenly John wished he wasn't there. He wished he had never gone to the Chamberlain. “Maybe she thinks I'm like Chuck. I wish she were with Chuck.” His bigness fell with every step until he wished he were a little kid home in bed. “Why did I ever have to grow up?” He did the things other people did. They were bad for other people. “But it's different when I do them. I'm not bad. If I get drunk, it's just to show people I don't want to do it.”

She took his arm again on the stairs. “Watch that step; it's almost broken.” When he didn't answer, she said, “Here's my key,” fishing in her purse and finding it.

He fumbled it into the lock. He couldn't go in. He thought, “I can't cross the threshold.” He wished the door wouldn't open, and he looked at Annette. She was beautiful. “If I could only tell her how I feel. If I could only tell her how awful my dad is. How I left home to show him. How I can make my own living.” The door unlocked and swung open.

Annette reached around it quickly and clicked the light switch. There was her living-room. Better furnished than he had expected, though he noticed the linoleum rug on the floor was almost worn through. The curtains and chairs were clean and nice-looking. Then his eye caught the plaster dummies—the kind you see at carnivals. John hated them; they seemed cheap. “Why does she have to have those on the dresser and why couldn't she put those stockings in the drawer?”

“Well, does it suit you?” she said. “I like it.”

“Yes,” he said because he thought he had to say yes.

“Well, are you going in or do I have to coax you!” She started to step in and he took her arm—held her back.

“Wait . . .” Her forehead wrinkled and her eyes looked puzzled. “Just a minute. I want to talk to you.”

“Well, talk.”

His mind raced over everything. There was so much he wanted to say. It seemed as if his thoughts were an endless chain and he couldn't find a break. “I don't know where to start.”

“I can't start you!”

“I want you to listen.” Now maybe he was pleading. He didn't

know; he wasn't sure. But he needed to tell someone how heroic he'd been. How well he'd fought for so long. "I left home over a week ago," he began.

"Well, so what? I've been away from home twenty-four years. I never had a home. I'm not weeping on your shoulder."

That was different, John thought. He'd had a real home. A real mother. If it wasn't for his dad . . . "Dad . . ." he stopped.

The girl wrenched from his grasp. "What do I care about your dad? Did you put me to all this trouble just to come out here and weep all over me?"

It hurt John that she should talk like that. "She can't mean it. She doesn't know what I am. Someday she'll wish . . ."

"Of all the people I've known! You damn kid . . ." She stepped into the room, kicked off a shoe. John was standing dumbly in the doorway. "Christ, go home to momma!" She slammed the door.

John turned away slowly—thought of the bridge. He'd jump off. He'd show her. Write a note to make her sorry for what she'd done. He could imagine himself drowning—but he wouldn't do it. He had a headache. "This hole she's living in, who does she think she is?" He turned. He was going to walk past home, not go in. Just look at the house, and he wanted to walk. A long walk. Then Mom. "I better go home; she probably needs me. Maybe it's my duty . . . I should put up with Dad for Mom. Look at all she's done for me . . ."

He was walking fast, almost running . . .



AND WHY NOT

love . . . which needs some outward physical form of pain in which to express itself . . .



leering, loose-lipped laugh which left a slight smudged film on whatever it touched . . .



in the field the cornstalks stand and draw their paper shrouds around their broken necks . . .



the numbing-out, the sieving back of life in sleep . . .



theory is a cold bed-mate, particularly when it bears someone else's laundry mark.