

A Night at the Plywood Palace

by Brett Garcia Rose

You are leaning against a concrete wall staring at a girl with blonde-black hair who may or may not be good-looking. The wall is somewhere downtown, you think, and the girl, who is beginning to look vaguely familiar, may not even be a girl at all. Then again, she may be your boss's assistant, or the coffee girl at Starbucks. All is not clear.

Throbbing hip-hop beats fuel the tunnel rats boring through your head. You do not dance; it is too much for you. Beginners dance. You stand. Hunters do not announce their arrival, but wait patiently, surveying, testing the air, collecting sounds and scents, arranging vibrations, setting traps.

You vaguely remember arriving with friends, a scouting party of dubious quality. Likely they are progressing in similar fashion, dragging bottles and glasses through the murk, or attending to horizontal refreshments in one of the many unisex bathrooms. One will start a fight, another, get laid, two or three will voyage elsewhere. This is your life...false energy, waning youth, no substance.

Throughout the course of the night your senses have slowly declared their independence. They stand meekly in a dusty corner of your dwindling consciousness, holding court, whispering, intending to wait out the henchmen who have pulled up chairs and assumed control. You sway back and forth in passive contemplation, remembering fondly your days of parachute pants and gold chains and simple, warm beer. It is not the alcohol, or the drugs...you are convinced...the enemy must be the lights. There are too many of them. Thousands. They are designed to disorient, creating fleeting apparitions no matter how fast you rotate your gaze.

You are tempted to believe that the girl is beautiful, that you have found something of value in the slag. You are nearly convinced she is sizing you up, staring back longingly, but you are more apt to admit that she is just staring in general. Most of the time you cannot actually see her, but you know she is there. The henchmen reassure you with frustrating regularity, discussing courses, charting, plotting, calculating.

You, a mere passenger, it seems, watch for her through a narrowing tunnel of thick glass, slightly off-center, swirling in a confusing display of shadows. The lights keep flashing on and off, on and off. Colors blister the smoke-filled air like floating fireworks. You focus harder, your gaze a cascading drill boring through the fog. Her eyes never move. There's a little voice inside your head that you do not recognize, telling you not to trust your power of vision.

A loud, fat girl is standing next to you saying something about condom machines. Asking if they have them in the men's room as well. She has a green, frothy drink in each hand and she smells like wet parmesan cheese. You don't know if she is talking to you, to herself, or to some other unspecified person, but she keeps losing her balance and spilling her drinks on your feet. The little henchmen in your head continue muscling their controls, murmuring incoherent work tunes and delirious litanies, navigating obstacles and meticulously recording dangerous objects.

A quick glance at your watch loosens your footing, costing you self-esteem, yardage, untold miles.

When you turn your head to look at her the bright red blur of a cigarette soars past your cheek and sizzles in your hair. The smell nearly destroys you, tunneling through the evening debris into your nerve center, where discarded thoughts lay strewn about like rotting seaweed. The henchmen hastily reassemble their ranks, dusting coveralls and righting chairs in dramatic frustration. No one notices except the fat girl. She is laughing hysterically now, her face contorting into a grotesque configuration of creases and zits. Like pale pizza, only less symmetrical. You stare for a moment longer, imagining her skin melting from her face and dripping onto a white

paper plate. She sucks on her straw and stares at you like a demon infant. You poke a foot into the crowd and bulldoze a path to the bar. Another drink will bring you around, you think. You will be at peace, righted, renewed.

You need to be at work soon.

Ten minutes later you have secured a prime slot at the bar, anchored via elbow amidst a shirtless, mostly gay crowd. They size you up like the Chinese merchants on Fulton Street, discarding tired looking octopi and sea cucumbers, miniature fingers frantically digging through the ice. Somewhere there is a young, tasty fish to be had.

You stand there for several long minutes, trying to look desperate and delivering a top-rate performance. Hundreds of the glistening shirtless converge around you, nuzzling violently, pinning you to the bar. They swell and contract like jellyfish. They all strike you as somewhat familiar, yet you can't seem to place any of them. All are kindred tonight. All are looking to you.

A paranoid haze sets in. You are certain they are talking about you, asking one another why you haven't run over to say hello, instead of standing at the bar like an overage drunk. They see you as mean, selfish, arrogant. A vague dread wells in your stomach. Gaining momentum. The henchmen smirk silently, shaking their little heads in dismissal.

Meat-packing district. That's it. You are in a former slaughterhouse surrounded by ghosts. Shirtless, hairless, brainless, bovine ghosts. You try to remember which arm holds your watch without looking. If you can resolve that, you will be alright.

You hear her voice behind you. The fat girl has tracked you with surprising proficiency. You are paralyzed. The henchmen signal full alert, splashing through your neural pathways, activating alarms. Brainwaves freeze in mid flight. Eyes and ears recede into your head, which seems to be shrinking at an alarming rate.

Somehow, your parts keep their place and you turn to smile. Not at her, just in general. She is holding her green drinks up to the light now, trying to determine which is fuller. Or emptier.

Sunglasses, you think. You forgot your fucking sunglasses again.

Just as she is about to breathe on you again and fart out her garbled dialogue, the bartender comes back, setting drink, change, and stomach on bar. He has a beard of brown steel wool and is even fatter than the fat girl. You want to introduce them. You imagine them forming an unbreakable bond between his beard and her pimple grease. For some reason this makes you happy. Deliriously so. You have a drink. She has a boy.

Not surprisingly, the fat girl is quite agreeable to being ignored. So you ignore her. Your sonar is still seeking....pinging weakly. The girl with the blonde/black hair has just gone from interesting to attractive, bordering on desirable, even. Beautiful. That's it. She is a warm, soft rescue from the hairless, shirtless mob. She is staring at the wall where you are no longer standing. As you stumble into the crowd, the fat girl dissolves into the smoke.

You elbow your way violently back to your wall, where someone else has moved into your footprints. The henchmen confirm readiness. You feel good. After a few long minutes of squirming and nuzzling you secure a leaning post her line of sight. She is staring at you again. You think.

You determine that your watch is on your right hand, weighing several pounds at the least. You need to cut it loose, gain a few knots, increase maneuverability.

You need sleep.

You begin to poke your head around in different directions, searching for imaginary friends, but you check yourself instantly. Nervous habit. The situation calls for a mood, a cigarette, another drink. You give her a dark, thoughtful stare. So much meaning, *substance*, in a single glance. A subtle, contained energy permeates through your eyes, lasering the target for the impatient henchmen.

When she doesn't respond, you hold gracefully for a few seconds and then recover with dignity. It must be the lights countering your efforts. Thoughts race up and down, back and forth, sloshing around your head in a furious centrifuge, but none seem to

collect. The urge to sit down is overwhelming. Your imaginary friends must be here somewhere. Your eyes follow a thick cylinder of smoke out to the horizon, where the tops of heads merge with the plywood ceiling.

You need sunglasses.

Minutes whiz by precariously. You begin to agitate, rapidly fanning and flexing your digits to dissipate energy, to cool down. The expanse of floor rolling out from underneath her toes stretches before you like a giant, glistening spider web. You are becoming vaguely aware of a band of drooling perverts, roaring and howling, waving their limbs in drunken fury, growing impatient for your imminent demise and their chance for the prize. Your velocity is mysteriously increasing. The henchmen bang a voodoo beat inside your ears, shaking your vision. You must act. You look back to see her stirring a fluorescent pink drink. She is ready.

A white light blazes above your head. It is time. You are smiling broadly now, expansively even. The droolies are cheering you on. She is looking at you as if your face is exploding. Any moment now she is going to start tapping people on the shoulder and pointing at you. Who is that man? What is he doing here? You feel something snap beyond your eyebrows as your head begins its habitual orbit and your eyes blindly scan the spotlight blur. You cannot find your imaginary friends anywhere. You will have to imagine them.

The girl with the blonde-black hair does not accept smiles. She stares her cold, empty stare, mentally shrinking you down to ashtray size and torturing you with a Virginia Slim. The droolies howl in delight, twisting and somersaulting to the music like rubber monkeys in a macabre rhythm. You look around for a fire escape.

Sustained movement is necessary to maintain your slippery state of consciousness. The weight of your watch stretches your arm to knuckle-dragging proportions. You uncrease your lips and quickly stick your teeth back into your face, losing precious ground. The droolies hurl themselves against the plywood wall one by one, splattering and disappearing in violent throes of laughter. You

outrun your footprints and lunge into a mass of sweat and Prada. You don't bother looking back, but you imagine a masking-tape replica of yourself banging its two dimensional head against the wall of faux concrete pillars, dragging an enormous, bloody watch.

Your legs can't keep up with the rest of your body. You are skiing down a hill and you keep picking up speed. The henchmen wrench and twist furiously at the controls of your mind. You are afraid that if you fall down you will never get up again. Trees keep slamming into you, momentarily slowing your descent. You are flying now, taking down shirtless bodies in twos and threes. Others are chasing you and yelling and throwing glasses and bottles at you. Everyone else is standing still in the slaughter lines, staring dumbly. You are moving, though you're not sure where. Something is always in front of you, making you jab your poles into a chair or table and change directions. You slam into another tree.

Swirling lights hover above your head like an electric storm cloud. You are in the middle of what appears to be a prehistoric, hillbilly dance floor. Everyone is moving horizontally somehow, as if floating. You find a wall to lie down against and focus your eyes on an orange light. You no longer hear any music. You are lying down at the bottom of a dark, green, filthy pool, holding your breath and looking up at the sun.

You awaken to a cold sidewalk and a bone chill. Your clothes are wet. Enormous, yellow taxis glide by silently like beluga whales. Your head is leaning against a wide, prickly tree trunk. You look up to see that it is connected to the fat girl.

Seconds later you are on your feet, mumbling something incoherent to the girl, in a language foreign to both you and her. She is still standing somehow, but a steady strand of thick, green drool hangs limply from her lower lip. You hope you didn't kiss her. You hope she wasn't the blonde girl.

It takes longer than anticipated to navigate the yellow whales and various Calvin-clad street huggers to reach the proper side of the street — the side that will eventually lead to your own bed. As you scale the opposite curb, the lights and sounds instantaneously

converge to a fading center behind you. Somehow, the silence is even more disturbing. You feel the steady thump of raindrops on your skull and know, at the very least, that your head is above water.

The sidewalk ahead is deserted except for two stick figures that may or may not be a couple. As they approach, they giggle ferociously and fall into each other, going to great lengths to avoid imaginary craters in the sidewalk. You rub your wrist slowly, wondering why you forgot your watch. The yellow whales mourn staccatos to the rising sun.

Somewhere you have sunglasses. So many pockets to check. So hard to remember the sequence. The henchmen seemed to have perished; tattered bodies flushed out with the vomit and left for the whales. The sun rises at an alarming rate, painting vicious, orange squares in front of every step. You walk slowly, with great care and concentration.

It is very late.

