Brick Walls

by Foster Trecost

1. The Waiting

Madeline was late. Long past the point of being fashionable, she closed in on insolence, but Alan would wait as long as her absence asked. He checked his watch and felt for the small box in his coat pocket. Still there.

"Sir?" An abundance of starch, in both clothes and character, had arrived. "Perhaps you'll be dining alone this evening?"

"Perhaps," said Alan, attempting an aristocratic air. "And perhaps…*not*," he added, aware his attempt had failed. *Sometimes I wish we'd never met…*

2. How They Met

"She's staring at you."

"I doubt it," said Alan, but she was. "What does she want?"

"Go find out."

"But what do I say?"

"You want *me* to go?"

"No," said Alan, fixed on the eyes that were fixed on him. He crossed the bar. "My name's Alan."

She took a long draw from her cocktail and said. "I know who you are. I'm Madeline."

3. Brick Walls

"Please, sir," said the waiter, "do tell me when you would like to order."

Why tonight? thought Alan. He again checked his watch and felt for the small box in his coat pocket. Still there. *Because she knows I'll wait, that's why*.

He turned toward the bar, full with those waiting for a table. Brick walls absorbed the light, rendering the restaurant dim; he wondered why it was so popular. *Probably because they put Chez in the name*.

4. The Fight

"But it's only for two days, darling," said Madeline.

It was much more than that. "But *he's* going to be there," said Alan. "Him!"

Her lips tightened and Alan erupted: "What is this?"

"Just what are you asking?" asked Madeline.

"It's simple," said Alan. "I don't trust you."

Momentum built and it felt good, but it would not last. She took it away with: "Can you really expect me to love only you?"

5. Relinquishment

"Sir?" The starch had returned.

"Yes?"

"I'm going to have to ask you to order or relinquish the table."

Alan wished he could smile, grasp the waiter's hand. "Are you sure?" he would ask. The waiter, feeling the bill, would say, "Please, sir, take your time." But Alan was not that type. He checked his watch and felt again for the tiny box in his coat pocket. Still there. At that moment, he wished it were not. He rose and retreated to the bar. *How could I let this happen*?

6. How It Happened

The phone on his desk rang. "Darling, how are you?" asked Madeline. Without waiting for an answer, she said, "I'm having a dreadful time. Most dreadful. I wish I'd stayed home."

"What happened? Are you okay?"

"Oh, yes, I'm fine, but miserable, really. I feel horrible for saying those things to you. Just horrible."

And he believed her. "Then come home. Come home right away."

"Oh darling, I wish I could. I'll be back tomorrow. Dinner?"

"Yes, dinner."

"Chez Helene?"

Alan detested the *Chez* restaurants, all of them. With a hidden cringe, he said, "Yes, Eight?"

"Perfect, darling. I'll see you at eight."

7. Jubilation

The first scotch quenched his thirst and the second was sipped. The third almost let him forget, but the effects of all three focused his thoughts on Madeline.

"Sir, are you waiting for a table?" asked the barkeep.

"The table I'm waiting for is five foot four with red hair."

"Excuse me, sir?"

"What is this place?" Alan flailed his arms, stood and lost his balance. "Chez Helene? What kind of a name is that? Who names a restaurant *Chez Helene*?"

The bartender studied Alan and replied, "Sir, to find the answer to *that* question, perhaps you should try asking someone in *that* restaurant."

Alan sobered. "What?"

"Chez Helene - it's across town. You're in Chez Louise."

It was nine-thirty. Alan felt for the small box in his coat pocket. Still there. He then broadened a smile that could be mistaken for nothing other than what it was: jubilation. He gripped both hands onto the bartender's shoulders, leaned forward and kissed him on the forehead. "Thank you," he said. "Thank you very much. I almost made a terrible mistake."

He left and took the long way home. He imagined Madeline waiting for *him*, and laughed all the way.

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