

Into The Great Behind

by Kilean Kennedy

No more arguing about it. He's oldest and more experienced and owns the place, cleaned it up and stocked it with booze, signed the lease, the licenses. Name of the place stays, as is. So be it, says his younger brother Max, pinching silver cufflinks before massaging his gelled temples. Max is dapper, crisp, simmering through a rum-flavored hangover and squinting out a pair of eyes so webbed in red it's as if some powerful worry burst the front of his brain, drizzled blood over his vision. And unlike his meatier big brother, Max doesn't mind losing an argument, even with family. So Max shakes his head, plucks a book of matches, embossed with the name he can't stand, understand, from a freshly swabbed ashtray and steps out to the noonday shine.

Lila smells Max before she sees him. His pungent leathery odor evokes thoughts of a play, only one she's ever seen and it was fine enough aside from the cologne-sopped old wart in front of her, just an arm's length away, polluting, flooding her nostrils and her mouth with those man-perfume vapors. It's what she's thinking when Max sideswipes her, scudding her attaché over the grainy sidewalk, spilling papers. Lila curses and Max doesn't speak, just grabs the papers, shuffles them together and hands it all back to her and she's flat-out letting him have it now because *goddamn* she's on her way to a job interview and look what he's done to her résumé and cover letter all scuffed, trashed. No time left for this guy and his smell though, Lila has to scoot, and does, but not before reading the laminated card at his neck, checking his name. Refocusing, she reminds herself it's only a temp job and, if needed, she'll tell the interviewer about this, hope for a little empathy. Wasn't her fault. The guy, Max, is obviously drunk, twitchy and red-eyed, trying to mask his scent...but before any conversations about drunks she navigates the glutted sidewalk, crosses the street and spies the glassy building she's about to enter. She turns, sees Max still in front of that bar with the silly name. Wouldn't be a bad idea after this

Available online at «<http://fictionaut.com/stories/kilean-kennedy/into-the-great-behind>»

Copyright © 2009 Kilean Kennedy. All rights reserved.

interview, one drink, sort of blunt the edges. She's been good lately, three weeks since she's stayed up late, woken up fuzzy.

Bounding onward, Lila wedges past two boys, Harold and LS, heading in the opposite direction. Young boys really, not old enough to drive and looking confused here in the city. These two are unsettled at this woman that's just plowed by so one of them, Harold, boldest of the pair, mumbles a mediocre slander and the lady flips an over-the-shoulder bird, the social finger as Harold's grandpops calls it. As for Lila, she bolts on through the swaying doors, signs in at the security desk and wiggles into an elevator. Her worry about the interview has amplified, sure, but there's also the anodyne thought of that bar, drinks.

Downstairs, retreated from the street, Harold and LS (aka Little Shit) are fit for mishaps. LS watches a ropey slickster with rubbed eyes and fancy suit smalltalk a magazine vendor, buy a tin of breath mints. LS hears the vendor speak the guy's name and thinks it's cool: Max. And Max has a bucket's worth of gel in his hair. LS wonders could he make his own hair all smacked-back like that but decides nope, he'd just end up looking like a yokel from the sticks with a mess of jelly on his noggin and this is where Harold says that before they do anything, before they have to be back at the museum with the rest of their class, they need smokes. Harold's a thinker, authors their plans. Last week he swiped six encrusted cans of Stroh's from a faded cooler in his dad's garage. He and LS guzzled each one in a chigger-weed patch behind the school gym, slurping and thumbing a stack of purloined Penthouse Variations. The soured beers, more than half their own age, clobbered them both before inflicting an unnaturally cruel round of gut bombs, ending when LS groaned and vomited on Harold's leg and Harold responded by vomiting all over the Penthouse Variations — the duo in tears by that point, sniffing, puke-splattered, vowing to keep the whole shameful episode buried. Nevertheless, they've yapped about booze ever since. But today, here in the city, they need smokes. LS mentions that his big sister used to swap spit with a fellow named Timothy who works in an office around here. Says Timothy had a snaggle-

tooth, played in a band with dudes sporting lipstick. Harold doesn't remember anything about any Timothy. It's worthless knowledge unless LS knows where to find him, unless Timothy has smokes, or beers. Max, done chatting the vendor, slides on by into the building and the boys move out over the street.

Six floors up you can sometimes gauge the expressions of faces, if they're not aimed at the ground like the man in the suit there — and now the office manager, Timothy, thinks he recognizes the inky head cast downward. Believes it might belong to one of the men from sales, name of Max, always smells bathed in drugstore cologne, always with a hangover and speaking of...Timothy checks and sees he's worked straight through lunch, smoothes his chubby tie and imagines a gin and tonic with lemon, decides unless this next applicant is sporting an extra set of cankered lips somewhere on her skull he'll give her the job and knock off early, patronize that new bar down the street, one with the funny name. A drink is called for, several of them. It's to be expected considering for the first time in his life Timothy feels truly out, all the way out with a big fat gleaming O. His colleagues know, have known, and his neighbors, all his friends, and resultant a prolonged telephone conversation last night his mother knows, last parent still living and yes it would've been nice for his father to have heard but, much to his bemused shock, Timothy's mom said they'd been aware a long time, from back when he broke it off with that mouthy girl in high school, quit basketball and started a glam band (Spunk On The Snowman), which was, in fact, simply an excuse to doll up in gaudy outfits (even though his hetero band mates seemed just as excited if not more so by all the sequins and makeup). The band was momentary yet the memory of that girl, the picker of his flower who left him feeling like no more than a sorrowful husk, or naked stem as it were, she lives on, but not today. Soon as this interview ends it's the bar and then on home to tell his man, again, about the call to his mom. Two knocks and the door opens. Timothy sees bangs, war paint and a perm. Mercy. Hard to get past but no biggie. And her résumé, is that bird shit? Never mind, Timothy's pleasant to Lila and even though

she's stale and big-knuckled she knows this type of work, seems okay with late hours, a requirement Timothy stresses once more, after he's offered her the job, repeating that it's demanding work.

At this last bit Lila stifles a laugh. For one, Timothy has a noodle of a booger on his nose and below it — his front tooth: muddy, angled. She's about to enact a full-blown gawk when she sees the posters, mostly musicals but one she recognizes, the play, the piece she'd recall better if it weren't for the memory of that *cologne*. And yes, she agrees with Timothy, pursuing his monologue, yes it's challenging work and no she doesn't mind an office full of men it usually means less gossip, so she's telling him when, a few minutes later walking down the hallway, they see Max. Lila stops astride Max, close to mentioning her sodden résumé and cover letter but silenced when Timothy glances at her, flashes Max a sneer and points to his wristwatch. In the lobby of the place Timothy explains how certain people within the company, *like Max*, have weaknesses, how such weaknesses tug an entire organization to the ground, how abuse of anything is such a pitiful way to go but people need to help themselves. Lila can't believe she's hearing this from a man she's just met, a boss, telling her, outright, that Max is in trouble of some kind and for what? Drinking? Well, sorry about his luck he should learn to handle it. Lila scribbles the requisite forms and gets herself back down to the street, knowing she has an afternoon to herself and with the assurance of a new job she can splurge on a few drinks, knows the place to do it.

Back up those six flights, in the stall of a cubicle enlivened for the most part by a pulsing red button on his phone, Max unlocks a filing cabinet. He extracts a manila folder marked “follow-up leads” and opens it, biting his fist when he reads the date on the first page: almost a month ago today when this person called, requesting services, eager to spend. He ignored this call and it's the same with the entire thick sheaf of pages, all of them worth thousands of dollars to his employer. In the cabinet it goes, exchanged for a pint of bourbon he stuffs inside his jacket pocket just as his boss, along with that nosy office manager, materializes

behind his chair. Max feels his heart kick like it's loose, farty, slapping wetly beneath his sternum. His boss tells him to leave, his services, attitude and habits, are no longer needed. And next comes a swell of relief. Max isn't upset because this means no more lies, subversions. While he's in the elevator, surrounded and watched, he smiles, liberates the pint and glugs vigorously. Fastest ride down ever. Hair of the dog. How about the entire fucking hide off that pooch? Stretch the scruff over his three-button pin stripe WOOF! Another luxurious drink and he's outside, staring at the eighties throwback haircut and the pleather attaché just across the street, smiling into a cell phone with a warped antenna and good for her, no need for unpleasantries because there is, of course, the promise of nourishing bourbon and for a little while at least, until his mind loses its ability to form new memories and becomes a dark, bilious thing, he's happy, pleasantly recovered. Max sips and the woman fades, which is sort of sad, considering how friendly he suddenly feels.

Doesn't look friendly. It's that dude Max and he looks all jacked up, at least to Harold and LS as they loiter in front of the bar, both facing the street again after having turned so they wouldn't be seen by the crazy bitch that flipped them off earlier — she didn't seem to notice them. She was all smiles as she passed a few minutes ago, went inside. No, this guy with the shellacked dome looks kind of broken but so what. Harold stops Max and asks for a cigarette. Max denies him, but not harshly. Grinning and wet-mouthed, Max explains smoking is unhealthy and like masturbation it stunts a boy's growth, chars the lungs, gunks up all that young pink tissue and when he says the word *pink* it sounds creepy. The boys recoil but Max draws them back again, says he has something better and no matter what they cannot mention this place or where they got it and even though he shouldn't here it is — a pint of bourbon, half full. Max tells them not to abuse it, that hard liquor is just that, hard. The boys ignore him. Max seems to realize he's talking to himself and opens the heavy door to the bar, off the sidewalk without another empty word.

Come dusk it's a bustling evening in The Great Behind. Bar's second week and the owner's satisfied with the crowd. A tolerable mix: some business people, a few hardened oldies, couple or three college kids, factory workers, the peevish hipsters unable to stop worrying the jukebox. Only blight is Max, hunkered in a back booth with that hard-looking woman. They seemed to know each other, seemed tense until the booze set. Now the owner, the big brother, can't see the pair's faces although their movements say it's not words they're exchanging. He's about to run them off when someone orders a gin and tonic with lemon. Guy's name is Timothy and *great flames of sullied hell*, thinks the owner, that tooth, and that booger — be wise to yank both, pronto. The owner gestures to his nose and Timothy finally frees the pale nugget he's unknowingly showcased all day. Embarrassed or not, he prattles on, assuming the owner's listening, which he is but only by default proximity. Timothy says there was a cop down the street dragging a pair of boys around, both of them oddly familiar, both of them sickly green (later it'll come to him — he'll remember not green but pink faces from further back: Kool Aid-stained, younger, pudgier, and one was a little brother to the mouthy girlfriend long ago; they must've been visiting the city on a school trip and what a pair those two had been as tykes, always producing some grade of nit-witted panic, always on the run from some victimized adult). Timothy explains he saw them as he was coming out of his building — at a later hour, mind you, than he'd hoped. He fired someone today, didn't get the guy's security card and one maddening phone call created several more et cetera. The owner relinquishes the gin drink and Timothy guesses about the name of the place. No, the owner replies, looking at Max's booth, no he wasn't trying for *kitschy*, isn't referencing *protuberant hindquarters*. But this is the first customer asking what it means. So here goes: according to the owner, he's fought many years to get ahead (softening his voice because all of a sudden this isn't quite as profound when spoken aloud) and he's always struggled. Looking back, the behind is what got him ahead.

Timothy places his fingers around the cylinder of his glass and fills his mouth with a viscous chill instead of words. The owner waits but hears no critique on the name. His explanation dangles in the flat air.

Could be Max was right. But to hell with him, decides the owner. Place is packed, folks drinking, comfortable. It's a bar, nothing more.

He turns, yanks a towel from a ceramic tap and winds it to a coil, stepping out alongside the stools. Only a short walk from there to the booth in back. Not far at all, once he gets around all the people.

