

The Club

by Matt Kang

We aren't in Wonderland, Doris. Hah!"

He has been saying equivalently meaningless things like this in increasing frequency all throughout the night.

"Yes, thanks for pointing out that distinction. Again." Isaiah's reply was hollow, barely able to puncture past the bastions of smoke wisping its ascension to the cigarette clouds in the ceiling. Grasping the cool, geometric shot glass, he gulped one down in a swift motion.

The name of the club was The Ending, a threadbare spot in the lower part of the city. It was in the part of town mostly inhabited by crack heads and women and men as women turning tricks in the streets by day. In the salted, mist-thick air that came from the bay, Isaiah remembered a lacquered sign swinging from a black pole, the title splashed crimson.

It received a transformation at the end of the work week, most certainly. Isaiah and his friend had to wait an hour to get in. They stood sandwiched between preening girls and men on edge, all ready to cast away their work-week inhibition like a used condom in a toilet bowl. Isaiah thought of the spawning grounds of the *Limulus polyphemus* (horseshoe crab); great boxy mounds on the seashore, their tapered spikes all pointing toward one ineffable purpose. He had never been to a club before, but his girlfriend of two years was on sabbatical in Milwaukee. Of course, it would be the one crazy friend he had to drag him here, the end of every week imploring him to "come with." He finally gave in. "We're gonna cheer you up, man," Derek breathed to him. There was a grisly, heavysset man in black at the door, his eyes piercing theirs as they approached him.

“Got any girls with you?” he said, the distant dance music and the low noise of the crowd inside audible.

“No, but you—you got some here, right? It's kinda why I came,” replied his friend vaguely, just wanting to join the scene. Isaiah's pale blue eyes parried the bouncer's glare.

He wasn't amused, but he shoved them a flyer about a DJ he never heard nor cared about and hammered them with an obscure stamp of something like half an eagle.

“Four drink minimum, smartasses. Have a good time,” he said, gesturing to the door.

They went in and received the expectant faceful of speedy dance music. Clean, synthetic, speedy dance music, that yelled “Move, dance—drum your fingers on the bar at least!” The club had a purple-black veneer, errant multicolored lights flailing over the surging crowd and dance floor. They approached the throng to a blaze of neon swirls. To Isaiah's left was a pack of girls huddled together, tall martinis in hand, skirts being readjusted, battle plans being formed, promises of not letting the other leave with the same asshole guy being planned. “*Move your body...*” blasted from the speakers in between every beat and the hooded DJ raised his hand limply in the air as he bounced up and down, scratching the turntables this way and that. They moved ahead into the crowd. After some walking, his friend stopped and locked eyes for a fleeting moment with a girl in a short blue dress and without hesitation started dancing with her. For a moment, his expression was almost serious. But it was hard to stay serious when the constant stream of bass thuds bought the euphoria in bulk.

“Get comfortable, bro! Let loose!” Derek said over his back.

“I need a drink; I'll catch up with you later, alright?”

Taking his friend's Casanovian thrusts as an acknowledgement, he moved across the floor and up to the second floor, coming to a stop at a marble-top bar. He sat down and looked up at the woman behind the bar.

"What can I get you?" she said, her attractive yet wizened face set against the angelic glow of the bottle rack.

"Two shots of Goose, please."

"Coming up, honey."

Derek waded his way over, sweaty and smiling. He got his own drinks and sat next to him. And this is where they were now, trading shots; the crazy friend bobbing his head up and down more vigorously with each one. Isaiah was experiencing the opposite effect. Even the stinging warmth of the Grey Goose wasn't fun without Lisa whispering into his ear, telling him stupid little confessions that he would recite to her in singsong the day after. And she would beat her small fists against his chest solemnly with a small grin, pleading halfheartedly for him to stop. Then sometimes she would—

"Dude, we should totally hook you up with a chick tonight. You must be blue as hell, seeing as how you're allowed not getting any from those college chicks you teach, right?"

Isaiah looked up at him with drunken annoyance.

"You know I'm with Lisa. Are you dumb? You know what—you know what, dude—you're right. I'm gonna go out there and just put two years with this girl in the *shitter* by sleeping with some club-skank that likes my shirt. Kay, man."

“Doesn't need to be a Herpes Monster, dude,” slurred Derek.

Isaiah laughed. “I'm good. But by all means, go ahead. I can catch a cab.”

He looked into the crowd now, wondering which guys would end up getting “lucky” tonight. The club seemed to suddenly have a vibe that emitted exactly what was coming off of Derek. This feeling, this overt sensuality, seemed to float around the place, intertwining with the swirls of pot and cigarette smoke. He saw a ponytailed girl in a backless auburn dress laugh at a guy's joke; her eye's telling him more than he needed to know. She gave a small involuntary touch to his chest as she smiled. He made a small gesture to the door. They moved out, smiling daggers at each other. Isaiah remembered seeing an old VHS of how lions courted, fierce and abrupt, a straightforward act that left no room for confusion. There were games to be had, no love to be taken—none wanted. Just the satisfaction. Out there it was like eating and drinking. *Swingers*, he thought to himself.

Then there were the meek faces, the ones that looked on at a girl, but were either too afraid to approach them or too afraid to be one of “those” guys—the kind of guy those girls before warned each other about. He could tell which would break, and which would silently sip their beer, nodding their heads like some obscure species of bird. Donning a purple silk suit and matching forty-dollar haircuts were all that stopped a pair of them from coming up to an unsuspecting girl and bouncing her between them.

He spotted a young man in a baby-blue shirt gripping at his bottle as the girl he was talking to walked away, her plastic smile fading as she turned. Was she so vain, or was he so gauche? From the bar he could see the internal fight within them, and the slow transformation of some. Isaiah remembered the feeling.

He was about to turn and make a snide remark about the shy-guys to Derek, but he was already gone. He looked into the crowd again, and like something out of Back-To-The-Future he saw the familiar lion dance, except the guy was Derek. There it was *again*: the same laugh, the same touch, and the same gesture. He was guessing the same result, too.

“Don't fuckin' believe it,” he breathed to himself. Record time for him, probably.

“Your friend—he left, huh?” said the cute bartender, smiling.

“It seems so,”

“Well...” she said slowly, her elbows resting on the counter as she leaned forward. *She smelled nice*, his brain warbled thickly. “Ain't it a shame. You know...I should ask you...”

“Yeah?” His heart was pulsing to the rhythm of the hard dance music. The alcohol sloshing within him kept any image of Lisa out of his head and put images of intense coitus there instead. He noticed a tattoo of a male Northern Cardinal peeking through a sleeve of her upper arm. Her words were velvet, even when she said—

“You paying for his tab?”

He laughed at himself and paid the bill for him and his ass of a friend (tipping generously) and ventured out into the midnight haze, hailing a cab home.

Isaiah immediately hopped into the shower. The night was draining and he sucked in the hot vapors, hoping it would clean out the ash and fumes undoubtedly toiling deep in his lungs. He let the spray of the jets wash over him completely.

He went to bed without dressing. Lying awake, he wondered if Derek and the backless-dress girl slept soundly, in their unknown beds with their unknown lovers. Isaiah lied there, staring at the infinitely blank ceiling. He then turned over, for fear of choking on his own vomit in his sleep.

