The Little Restaurant Across the Street

By W. Wistar Robinson '26

T had just finished raising as night began to come. He was looking for a little restaurant across the street when the mud puddle at his feet. He was standing on the curb, his hat pulled down over his eyes, the collar of his coat raised about his ears, smacking a cigarette. Thin whisks of bluish smoke emitted at intervals from his nostrils, and at intervals he spat disgustedly and dependently into the puddle. Where he spat, circles formed on the surface of the puddle, growing ever larger and larger like the jaws of a huge beast—jaws that open in a yawning—and the reflection of the lights of the restaurant across the street, so now clearly reflected in the puddle, became bluer as each ripple broke upon their way. It was a large puddle and very shallow, full with a thick mixture of black mud surrounding it on all sides, and the water was dirty yellow. Hansen, who was black and dirty from the oil from some passing automobile. Now like the world of crime, this puddle—stirred by every occurrence from without and reflecting everything from the world above.

He took a final puff of his cigarette and cast it away. By chance it happened to fall in the puddle and there was no longer the reflection of the lights of the restaurant across the street. The cigarette hissed one last defiant hiss and began to sink into the black oily mire of the street until, when had been written white paper, pure and sweet, there was a beautiful, angry, water-soaked cylinder, bursting its sides as the poisons within began to swell. The puddle calmed down, and again the lights reflected across the restaurant took up its steady reflection. There was no longer the reflection of the puddle, pure, sweet, being, but with a little poisons in its deepest heart, cast into a sump, puddle, swamped and diluted by the light and the lights of the restaurant across the street, final hiss, as a cigarette intercepts the reflection of the lights of the restaurant across the street. You entered the restaurant across the street.

When you had money enough to pay for all, or had not a cent for yourself, you had five cents for a meal, which was all too seldom. I fear, by a door at one side. On your left you passed through a window through which a bright beam of light poured itself out into the night, was a counter on which were placed all cigarettes, and along the opposite wall was ranged a larger, more barren counter from which, having obtained the necessary and greasy knife and fork, you ate. The girl sat there puffing her cigarette and watched the door. James, having been smoked to a sop, had shuffled off to get more coffee, when the door opened and two men entered. One was tall and lean, and the other was short and sturdy and was bundled up in a fur coat many sizes too large for him. In the strong light they stood, leaning, for the room as if to custom their eyes to the brilliancy of the place. When Hansen raised his eye from their conversation he watched and waited. Hansen looked up, surprised, glanced at the door that night, discarding dinner, and Josy was sleeping about the restaurant, was that there were no one at the tables; the others at the counter, for it was long past seven o'clock.

She smiled at Hansen occasionally when he chanced to look her way, and always she puffed at her cigarette and watched the door. James, having been smoked to a sop, had shuffled off to get more coffee, when the door opened and two men entered. One was tall and lean, and the other was short and sturdy and was bundled up in a fur coat many sizes too large for him. In the strong light they stood, leaning, for the room as if to custom their eyes to the brilliancy of the place. When Hansen raised his eye from their conversation he watched and waited. Hansen looked up, surprised, glanced at the door that night, discarding dinner, and Josy was sleeping about the restaurant, was that there were no one at the tables; the others at the counter, for it was long past seven o'clock.

The lights seemed to flare more brilliantly for a moment, and the little restaurant across the street reverberated from the sharp report. When Hansen had finished, her hands on the counter, he saw a face on the form writhing in a pool of blood in the middle of the floor, and a smackingrevolver lying on a dirty table in the corner. Then Hansen went toward the door, to the form upon the floor, close to the pool of blood, stood the girl, her cigarette dangling from her hand. Beside her stood the thin man, white as a sheet. The girl smiled, and the man crossed his hand and led him out. He followed her as a man in a trance, and no one there interfered. They, like Hansen, knew.

Along a country road a big car tore at break-neck speed. The roar of the exhaust, reporting the perfect condition of the huge motor in front, rose and fell as the road twisted and turned before the driver.

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