

S.W. Campbell

Club 12-21

It was a squat cinderblock building on the street side edge of a weed filled lot. A crumbling stone edifice slowly eroding away under the hydraulic pressure of progress. They surveyed it as they approached. Tom the tall one, Tina with the hawkeyes, Zara with the dyed red hair, and Mickey with the nose. The tan paint of the structure was chipping away. A giant martini glass graced the side, along with a pronouncement promising both dancing and barbeque. Tina was walking fast, her excitement palpable. The rest were more reserved, but hustled to keep up.

The front door opened to a small room. A skinny shadow sat behind a pane of glass so thick it at least gave the appearance of being bulletproof. The glass was so scratched that it was impossible to see through to the other side.

“Five bucks,” said the muffled voice of the shadow.

Tina and Zara rummaged through their pockets. They didn’t have five bucks. They just had cards. Tom paid for both, dutifully pushing a twenty into the small slit like opening at the bottom of the glass. The shadow inside pushed back a five. Tom made Mickey pay for himself. By the other door was a fat man perched on a little stool. With a grunt he rose and wanded each with a handheld metal detector before waving them on through the next door. Tina was trembling. Zara gave the man a wink.

“I’d rather be frisked,” she said.

The man only grunted in reply. Tom and Mickey stood perfectly still when it was their turns, their legs spread wide and their arms outstretched.

“Like Jesus on the cross,” said Mickey.

The four friends laughed. The fat man only grunted and returned to his stool. Tom was unsure, but he was pretty sure the fat man rolled his eyes as the second door closed behind them.

It was dark through the second door, which shouldn't have been that surprising given that it was a windowless cinderblock building. It looked like any other place. A bar in the back, a dance floor in the front, and tables of various sizes scattered here and there. The place was mostly empty, just two people sitting at one of the tables, their faces lit ghoulishly by a single candle. Both looked up when the group walked in. They did not glance away. They just stared. It stopped Tom in his tracks, but none of the others noticed. They made their way to the bar with necks made of rubber. Tom followed dutifully, uneasy, but not willing to abandon the expedition.

The bartender was a tall woman with sinewy arms and a heavier than expected rack given her frame. She watched them approach, and by the time they arrived had apparently decided to be welcoming. Customers were customers. A toothy white smile lit up the darkness.

“What will you have?”

Vodka soda, IPA, and whiskey ginger. Tom ordered a PBR.

“We've got Rainier.”

Tom nodded that it would be fine. Tina paid to make up for the payment at the door. Mickey tapped Tom with his elbow and gestured towards the far end of the bar.

“Check that out.”

Tom looked over. Perched on the bar, leering at them, was a three foot tall monkey in an immaculate butler's suit, the whole shebang carved from a block of wood.

“That's fucking awesome.”

Tom nodded in mute agreement. Zara was chatting up the bartender.

“Pretty quiet in here.”

The bartender was leaning over the bar.

“You're just a bit early. Things will start to pick up pretty soon.”

Tom finished his Rainier and ordered another. Zara paid for it to make up for the door. The beer tasted a little off, they needed to clean their pipes, but it wasn't terrible. Besides, it helped him feel more relaxed.

The usuals started to pour in knots of ones, twos, and threes. They ranged from young to middle aged, clothed from casual to a more festive formal. One guy had on striped pants and a matching vest, the chunky lady on his arm in a bright red cocktail dress, but most of the rest wore jeans and t-shirts, looser fitting for the men and curvaceously tight for the women. The bartender flicked some switches behind the bar and multicolored lights began to move across the dance floor. An old chipped disco ball slowly began to spin.

Tom didn't like the way the people coming in kept looking at him and his friends, so he sat down in a stool and stared at the liquor bottles along the back wall. The others didn't seem to notice. They gaped at the world around them, bright eyed as young children at the aquarium. Tom looked too, he couldn't help himself, but he at least tried to keep it from being obvious. He finished his second beer and ordered himself a third. A thick waisted middle aged man in a white dress shirt sat down next to him without a word. Tom let himself relax. He was getting worked up over nothing. Everything was all right.

The music selection was a bit eclectic. Hip-hop, motown, pop, and funk, with a random rockabilly song thrown in here and there. Zara wanted to dance. She grabbed Tom by the arm and drug him out onto the empty floor. Tina and Mickey followed. They gyrated, jerking this way and that. Tom was a good dancer, his friends always told him so, but out on the floor he felt awkward. He could feel every eye in the place. They were watching. Someone hooted, most likely at the girls. Somebody else laughed. Mostly it was just the music and the general hum of numerous conversations in a cramped space. Tom willed himself to relax. It was all in his head. He closed his eyes and danced.

Tina brushed up against him for a moment. She was still trembling, but her eyes were bright in the flashing lights, a self-satisfied smile smugly creasing her lips. I've always wanted to come in here. That's what her face said, a silent mimic of the words that she had released back at the Vendetta. Zara and Mickey were dancing together, twirling and dipping, Mickey's face creased with concentration and Zara laughing in his arms. The beer in Tom's belly bubbled. His buzz wavered for a moment, but held firm. The song ended. Zara, Tina, and Mickey moved back towards the bar. Tom shifted his own course to find the bathroom. The monkey butler on the bar was still leering, its lips pulled back to show rows of giant teeth, a sneering false grin.

The bathroom was the same as the bathroom of any bar made out of cinderblocks. A couple urinals, a shitter without a door, a piss stained floor, and a fetid stench mixed with the harsh scent of cleaning agents. Tom did his business and left the brightly lit world of the bathroom behind. He stood by the door for a

moment, letting his eyes adjust. People were hooting and hollering. Two men were out on the dance floor, their white t-shirts hanging nearly to their knees, their limbs gyrating at what seemed impossible speeds. Tom started walking towards his friends.

A man rose from a stool and partially blocked his way. It was the man in the striped pants with the matching vest. His opened shirt was framed by a gold chain. His face was punctuated by a pointed beard. He looked like a stereotype of Sammy Davis Junior. A stereotype seemingly brought to life, but everyone in the place looked as though they were actors in some film directed by a director looking to fully meet expectations of an urban scene. The caricature leaned in close, his voice barely audible above the music.

“Do you all want....?”

The rest was lost in the din of the bar. Tom smiled in a friendly way and leaned in closer.

“Excuse me?”

The man put his mouth right up next to Tom’s ear. His words were slow and perfectly clipped at both ends.

“I said. Would you all like to get your pictures taken with us?”

The beer gurgled in Tom’s belly. The comfortable buzz slipped away. It took a moment for his brain to process the words. The smile remained stupidly plastered across his face.

“No thank you.”

Tom moved away. The man watched him go. Everyone watched him go. All eyes were on him, even the bartender’s. Tom dried his palms on his jeans. He felt himself fidget a bit as he always did when he was in front of an audience. The music was booming across the place. He leaned in close to Tina.

“We’ve got to go.”

Tina looked at him, surprise across her face. Zara and Mickey leaned in. Zara’s voice blared above the song.

“What’s going on?”

Tom raised his own voice to match.

“We’ve got to go.”

Zara looked confused.

“Why?”

Tom felt on the edge of panic. Couldn't they see? Couldn't they understand? He hadn't wanted to come. He had let himself get talked into it. A mistake. It had all been a stupid mistake.

"Just trust me."

Zara looked cross.

"No, tell us why the hell....."

"Just trust me."

Tom's voice was louder than he had meant it to be. People looked up, for a moment staring directly rather than just out of the corner of their eyes. Mickey licked his lips. He glanced around.

"I'm ready to go."

The girls closed their tabs and the group headed towards the door. Tom looked back as they pushed their way out. The dance floor was crowded. Figures rising up to fill it to the brim. The mocking false grin of the monkey butler was the last thing Tom saw before the door swung closed.

The fat man was scanning a couple coming in. They looked up with surprise at Tom and the group coming out. The fat man didn't say a word. Neither did the skinny shadow behind the scratched up glass. Outside, people were smoking, eyes and teeth bright in their faces. Tom could almost swear that he could read their minds. He politely apologized as he pushed his way past the throng, leading the way in the retreat the two blocks it took to get back to the Vendetta.

The bar was full of smiling faces framed by beards and glasses that flashed in the muted light. The entryway was clogged by houseplants magically transported from the childhoods of everyone inside. The group pushed through the crowd and stood about unsure for a second before a couple in matching flannels and Carhartt beanies abandoned a booth next to one of the big windows. A pale girl, her skin almost translucent, with dreads and her septum pierced came over to take their order. Vodka soda, IPA, and whiskey ginger. Tom ordered a PBR.

Zara leaned forward.

"I was having fun, why the hell did we have to leave?"

Tom willed the muscles in his shoulders to loosen, but they refused to comply.

"A guy asked me if we wanted to get our picture taken with him."

"So what?"

The pale girl brought back the drinks. Tom waited until she walked away.

“Think about it.”

Tina’s face was scrunched up in that way it did when she was thinking, her eyes locked on the drink in front of her. Mickey was staring at his own reflection in the window, pretending to see the wider world outside. Zara rolled her eyes.

“So one guy was an asshole. So what?”

Tom looked up at the purposefully exposed pipes, wires, and venting overhead.

“It wasn’t just the guy. They obviously didn’t want us there.”

“We weren’t bothering anybody.”

Tom looked back down at Zara. Her face was full of righteous defiance. He took a sip from the tallboy can in front of him.

“Jesus Zara, we were in their space.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Did you see anyone else that looked like us in there?”

“So I’m only allowed to go certain places?”

Tom rubbed his face with his hand and let out an audible sigh of frustration. Tina looked up, her voice was quiet.

“It felt fine to me. Just a place full of people.”

Tom looked to Mickey for help, but Mickey just kept pretending to look out the window. Zara blithely plunged her way forward.

“I’m Persian. I wouldn’t care if they came into a Persian place.”

Tom gritted his teeth. If Zara never mentioned she was Persian nobody would ever know. Tom thought about pointing this out, but decided to keep focus on the matter at hand. He took a breath in and let it out.

“Us being there wasn’t the problem.”

Zara rolled her eyes.

“Then what was the fucking problem?”

Tom took another drink from his beer. He could feel his temper starting to rise.

“Why the hell did we go there?”

It was louder than Tom meant it to be. Zara's volume rose to meet his.

"I went to have a beer and go dancing."

"Bullshit!"

Tom slapped his hand down on the table, rattling the drinks. Heads across the bar swung around to look. Tom took in another deep breath and let it out. He counted silently in his head. The heads swung away. Tina was looking at her drink again, her forehead creased with thought. Zara refused to stop.

"Then why was I there Tom? Huh? Why was I there?"

She was going to force him to say it. She was fucking going to force him to declare it out loud. He chewed on the insides of his cheeks. When he spoke, he kept his voice as calm and even as he could, only the barest hint of his anger forcing its way through.

"It was their space. It was their space and we acted like it was a fucking zoo."

The color drained out of Tina's face. Zara started laughing.

"Fuck Tom, you are so naive."

Tom slumped in his seat, exhausted. She didn't get it. She just didn't get it. Mickey turned his attention back to the group.

"I think I'm going to head home."

Tom rose to let him out. Tina looked up, a hint of guilt in her eyes.

"I think I'll head home too."

They all rose. For a moment there was a pause as payment was silently considered, but Tom ended it by putting some cash on the table that should more than cover it. Goodbyes were somber and subdued, the hugs quick and perfunctory. At the door they split up, Tom going up the street and the rest going down. Tom pushed his way past a few smokers and looked back. Zara was laughing, her arm intertwined with Tina's. Mickey was slightly ahead of them. Tom turned and started walking toward home, newly built structures of steel, concrete, and glass rising on either side.