

Portrait of a Man

By A.B.Gorrell

I never understood why they always kept it so cold. Were they trying to *preserve* something? Sort of funny, really, when you get down to it. People always pretending things haven't changed, that they're just as you left them.

I stepped back and blinked into the gray sunlight that filtered through one of the etched windows. I slowly rubbed away the goose bumps on my arms and stifled a yawn. An old man, with skin like parchment paper, stood before us, lying to our faces.

"...Will be sorely missed...too young...life full of possibilities..."

Bullshit. Goldman was thirty, fat, and liked to feel up the thighs of the poor waitresses at Ginny's. And I loved him for it.

Somewhere there was a woman quietly sobbing. She softly choked into a handkerchief and sniffled pointedly. I wondered if it was Goldman's wife. Or maybe one of his mistresses.

You'd never guess Goldman graduated cum laude from Duke. Among his circle, it was a fact he was ashamed of. Maybe it detracted from his fierceness. In his business, it was important to be respected. Or maybe he didn't want to offend anyone with his superiority. He was also very considerate.

And Lord, was he sharp. With him, everyday dealings had evolved into an art form. He had developed a reputation as an honest, hard-working man. Dealing with him was like dealing with a sales clerk at Sears in the fifties: he was upfront and precise. He often told you what he wanted and how he was going to get it. And somehow you always agreed.

I wished for a smoke. The warm, smooth air would fill my throat and lungs with comfort. I coughed at the stale dust I was inhaling instead. A shot of espresso would be nice, too. My body ached for chemical relief.

Someone new was at the podium. An old woman this time. Strange, Goldman usually associated with men and women at least ten years younger. Where were all these cronies coming from? She elegantly dabbed at the corners of her eyes with a tissue and whispered something about the value of men generally and the merit of Goldman particularly. I smiled, doubting anyone would actually miss him. Who misses an overbearing loudmouth only out for himself?

He never went to church. He refused charity. I don't think he believed in any kind of God. He and I were alike in so many ways. In the fifteen years I had known him, Goldman and I only disagreed about one thing.

"She would be perfect," he told me. "She's all good and ready, too. Do you know what an *asset* she would be?"

"Forget it."

"I'm not asking for permission," he said. "I'm being nice enough to let you know in advance."

"And I'm letting *you* know. I am not joking. End of discussion."

"Fuck you, man."

He went ahead and took her. First, she was his personal companion at the parties. She was a personification of lust and beauty, and I imagine she helped solidify a lot of

important negotiations. Having her next to him, Goldman was a man of unimaginable prestige.

And then he began sending her out. With a baggie of cocaine in her bra, she left into unknown homes and businesses for Goldman. Sometimes she brought back more women, but most of the time she returned with cash and new contacts. She was a deal-sealer, a sort of final signature between Goldman and someone else.

The very idea of Goldman prostituting her did not make me uneasy. Rather, it was the change he put into her that was cause for concern. She became powerful and manipulative, something I simply would not allow.

She began to smile with all of her teeth, and snicker at other women. She knew she was prettier than they, that she was the favorite. She wore too much makeup and jewelry that was too expensive. Someone I once loved transformed into a malicious snake in a matter of months.

And so I slapped her when it pleased me. I slit her tires for spite. I think once I stabbed her in calf, though I can't be sure. But the only consequence of my actions was that she seemed to fall in love with him. Unacceptable.

"Do you know what's going on?" I had asked him one day while we were at his home.

He calmly took a sip of his bourbon and waggled his bushy eyebrows at me. "About what?"

His nonchalance grated against my insides, leaving me chafed and raw. I wanted to punch him in the nose. I wanted to squash his face down until it was flat and wet with blood. I did nothing. "Do you know what's going on between you and Liza?"

"Oh. Should there be something going on?" His apathy was too much, so I did something. I pulled a Ruger revolver from underneath my shirt and shot him in the throat. It's a girl's gun, I know - but it was the first one I could find in the house. Probably belonged to another one of his ladies. Or maybe it was Liza's.

His hands instinctively flew toward his neck. He looked at me with disappointment, and then his eyes rolled upward and would not focus on anything.

That was four days ago. I wondered where she was now. I surveyed the crowd and spotted her straight black hair underneath a short, pale pink ribbon. She was ahead and to my right. I moved to sit next to her.

My sister turned to glare at me. I knew then that she resented me. I was alive and Goldman was dead and she supposed it was all my fault.

I guess things really haven't changed, then.

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