

David saw him first and hissed because of the uniform, David who hated policemen but who would nonetheless become one, would *die* one, long after that night. We were huddled together in a line, shoulder to leather-jacketed shoulder, drawing smoke into our young lungs and stamping our chained boots against the cold. The sign above us read “Golden Theater” and “Midnight Showing,” but it had never been lit in any of our memories, all such places shut by the authorities in our parents’ time. The alcove of the closed picture house was our shaded gathering place, and the streetlights that hadn’t been snuffed out by the anger of poor people cast only intermittent light along the block.

When the man came closer, we saw that he wasn’t a policeman at all. His uniform was something else altogether, something epauletted and braided and polished here and there to a high shine. He made us think of the illustrations from playing cards. The King of Clubs, some of us thought, or the Jack of Coins.

He was walking slowly, stutter-stepping, pausing to peer up at the signs above the storefronts. Once, he shook the handle of a locked bodega, fool, and of course it bit him. He made a sound like a curse but it was no word we recognized. His injured fingers were in his mouth when he crossed in front of our alcove, but before we could decide what to do about him, if anything, he spun on one high heel and dropped into a crouch facing us, hands upright before him like he meant to fight.

David’s sister Leslie was the only girl among us in those early days, used to deference from the rest and demanding respect with David to back her up. She sauntered out to where light fell crosswise in front of the smashed glass of the ticket booth and said, “Fancy outfit.”

The man, and he *was* a man, some age over forty probably, but not lined in the face, shook his head once, hard, like he was just coming up from under water. “I understand you,” he

said, which was a rare thing to hear under any circumstances and certainly not what we had expected him to say. We were used to being feared or ignored, not “understood.”

If our Les was taken aback she didn't show it, proud girl, just took a long draw of smoke and then streamed it straight out at the stranger. A look of annoyance flashed across his pale features and he waved a hand back and forth before his face.

David went to stand beside his sister and opened his jacket so the stranger could see the steel at his belt. The man shrugged and said, “I'm lost, I think. I don't know this neighborhood.”

We all laughed. If he had known the neighborhood, *we* would have known *him*.

To our surprise, he laughed along with us. For all that it sounded like bells, his laughter held the same desperate edge as ours.

He wouldn't smoke with us, not even when Les offered him something exotic in black paper and gold foil that smelled of the high holidays and would have cost more than any of us carried if she'd paid for it instead of pinched it. He wanted to talk, he said. He was trying to figure something out and hinted that whatever it was, it was wider and wilder than anything we knew.

“This is the Northside. Maybe you cut through the park and got turned around.” That was Justin, our redhead, the only one of us who could imagine someone cutting through the forbidden park.

The stranger shook his head. “I don't remember a park. I only remember streets. It was raining, hard. Has it been raining here?”

It was the tail end of a dry winter, and we'd seen nothing out of the sky but rare flurries of dirty snow for months. Rain would clean the streets of their cold grime when it came, but it was weeks coming yet.

David was still suspicious, puffing his chest out cock-of-the-walk, shadowing his sister close as she stared down the man with an open, curious gaze. David was not the only one of us troubled by her interest—since when was she so even and unwavering about anybody besides herself?

“Why don't you just go on, then?” asked David. “We don't aim to help you.”

But it was clear he didn't speak for his sister in this. She put an absentminded hand on his shoulder and said, “What about a name? You remember that much, don't you?”

The stranger's face brightened and he seemed to be about to answer, but then he shut his mouth, his whole face closing up in a furrow of brows and a purse of lips. “I was going to say it,” he said. “My tongue knew the answer and I was going to say my name just then.”

This didn't trouble Les as much as it did the rest of us. “I'm going to call you Jack, then,” she said, and even though it sounded right to us because his visage and raiment were so like the card, the man just nodded, unsure.

“These streets are empty,” he said, gesturing out at the avenue.

We shrugged. It was late at night, late in winter, and we were used to being alone.

“Where I'm from, the streets . . . *teem*. The crowds take your breath.”

We knew about breathlessness. It came at the end of hard chases through the alleys, policemen or rivals on our heels. It didn't have anything to do with crowds.

Fiery Justin said, “You have to be from the other side of the park, then. People don't gather like that here.”

The stranger narrowed his eyes and gestured, taking us all in as his answer.

“We’re not a crowd,” said Les, and that was true back then, when we were only half a dozen.

The man shrugged, and some shaft of light managed to bounce off one of the gold buttons beneath his throat, limning his face from beneath, highlighting sharp cheekbones but shadowing hooded eyes. We never did see what color those eyes were.

“You’re a gathering at least,” he said, and we were surprised how satisfied his saying that made us feel. It changed something in our attitudes, even David’s, because it was David who said, “We should take him to the Oil Room.”

The Oil Room was the only bar that would let us in. It was a warren of basement rooms off a side street full of boarded-up windows and two or three ministries that worked against one another to attract faithful into their congregations from among our parents and oldest siblings. We hated the street but we loved the Oil Room.

We strutted down the steps and pushed through the scarred metal door into dim light. No smoking in the Oil Room, so we twisted embers into the drain just outside and pocketed stubs for later. It’s an odd bar that bans smoking, but we’d been banned ourselves from all the others in the neighborhood for infractions that usually had to do with protecting Les from something she didn’t want to be protected from.

Old Olivia was behind the bar, seated on her high stool and looking out at the empty tables. We’d never seen her anywhere else, just like we’d never seen the tables full.

The old woman wore an eyeshade and a shawl gathered up by an enormous white owl brooch. Its eyes were dull green stones that matched the dull green of Old Olivia’s own.

With the stranger, we took up every stool at the short bar. Old Olivia looked at him as she clambered down from her seat and began working the taps. She didn't ask for orders because she knew from experience that we couldn't afford what we wanted, but would happily drink the cheapest, vilest stuff she could pour.

She set clay mugs in front of all of us except the stranger, then stood in front of him, waiting.

Les had taken the stool beside his. She took a drink of lukewarm beer, and said, "That's Jack." She took another drink and said, "That's Old Olivia."

The stranger was staring at Old Olivia's broach. "I dreamed about a white owl," he said.

Old Olivia shrugged. "Common-enough dream," she said. "You want the same swill as this bunch?"

He didn't answer right away. He seemed to be struggling with something. "It seems . . . dangerous," he finally said, "to accept everything that's offered."

Old Olivia shrugged again, and started back to her stool.

"Wait," said the man. "Is there milk?"

Old Olivia slowly turned around. She took off her eyeshade and bent to lay it carefully beneath the bar, then straightened and looked at the stranger.

"You say your name is Jack?" she asked.

"No," he answered. "No, I don't say that."

Then she turned her back on him and gestured slowly, the wave of her hand taking in all the dusty bottles lined up on the mirror-backed shelves behind the bar. When she spoke, her voice was even lower than we were used to, and she spoke with such a rhythm that more than one of us tapped a thumb against our mugs in time.

“I’ve cattle’s milk,” she said, “and milk of goats. I’ve milk of grains like rice and beans, and milk disguised as other things, like butter and cheese, is it one of these you want?”

The stranger had not nodded along with us. He sought out Old Olivia’s eyes in the reflection behind the bottles and shook his head. “No, none of these,” he said, after a broken moment, and we all drank.

Old Olivia said, “I’m not trying to capture you, my lord,” and motioned him to the end of the bar.

The man Les called Jack huddled with the old woman, and beside her lined and rounded features he looked so sharp and smooth. We took turns going up to the street to smoke, and kept drinking while they talked to each other in low tones. Snatches of their conversation drifted to us. We heard them say “realms” and “liberty” and “a long, long time.” We saw them turn to stare at us, contemplation on both their faces.

Justin had been up top and came back down the steps, stumbling a little when he pushed the door open. “There’s policemen up there,” he said, a cloud of smoke escaping with his words. “More than one. More than are usually together.” Justin, most fearless of us, counter of foes.

And then they followed him in, not just a policeman, but a detective, whiskered like they always are and flanked by a pair of black-goggled patrol officers, whips coiled at their belts. The detective shouldered past Justin and took his spot at the bar, while the other two crossed their arms and stood on either side of the door like they were guarding it.

The detective took off his slouched cap and laid it on the bar top. He leaned forward to look up and down the row of us on either side of him, lingering over Les but studiously avoiding the end of the bar, where the stranger sat, now not talking with Old Olivia any longer but looking down at his hands.

Old Olivia hobbled down to the detective, pausing long enough to reach up overhead for a short, clear glass. She set this before the detective and, without looking behind her, reached back and picked up a bottle. We had quieted down so much that we could all hear the faint noise of the cork being pulled. The sound of the amber liquid being poured reminded us of the rush of spring rain through a gutter pipe.

“How’d you know my order, old woman?” asked the detective, his voice a surprising high tenor. “Never darkened the door of this establishment that I remember.”

“No,” said Old Olivia. “No, I would remember if you’d been here. It’s just that you all drink the same thing.”

The detective’s answering smile wasn’t pretty.

He took a long drink and said, “Quite a crowd in here for so late at night.”

We expected Old Olivia to shrug in answer, but instead, the stranger spoke from the end of the bar. “Is that how policing is done in this neighborhood? Drinks on the job and veiled questions?”

All of us but David took in sudden sharp breaths. David laughed aloud.

“*Veiled,*” said the detective, ignoring David. “Now, that’s an interesting word. Veils *conceal*. Sometimes they’re *pierced*.”

Old Olivia reached over and very deliberately knocked the detective’s drink on its side. The strong smell of it wafted up and down the bar as the liquid flowed out into a pool that only missed being perfectly round because the detective reached out and dragged his gloved fingertips through it.

“Sometimes they’re lifted, too,” said the stranger. He stood up and moved to the center of the room. Along the bar, the rest of us were as choreographed as dancers, even the detective, as we slowly spun to face him.

He asked, “How does this work, then? Do I go with you to some headquarters?”

Old Olivia hissed, “You shouldn’t go with them at all,” and we could only agree. We believed—we *knew*—that the attention of a detective was never fair, never *warranted*. We had older brothers, some of us, who had been last seen in the company of detectives.

“There’s got to be a charge for them to take you away,” said Les, and she looked at David for confirmation. David had more experience with policemen than the rest of us together.

The detective smiled his ugly smile again. “How about trespass for a charge?” he asked. “How about corruption? How about *sedition*?”

The stranger had listened to Les carefully, though. “Trespass where? Corruption of whom? Sedition against what?” A thoughtful look, and then, “I really want to know.”

The detective spun back to the bar and took off his gloves. He pulled workings from inside his long coat and made up a thick, black smoke. He lit it with a sulfur match struck against his thumbnail, which he then drowned in the pool of liquor on the bar. Old Olivia watched all this but didn’t point to the sign forbidding smoking. Instead, she busied herself poking through a wooden box of bar games and puzzles that she kept below the bottles.

The detective snapped his fingers at one of the patrol officers and said, “I’ve a report here.” The goggled policeman hurried over and produced a sheaf of onionskin sheets. “I’ve a report here of a man coming out of the north entrance of the park, *stumbling* out it says. Dressed peculiarly.” He looked up at the stranger. “The park is closed. *Trespass*,” he said. Then he

pointed at all of us one by one, even back over his shoulder to where Justin sat at one of the tables. "*Corruption.*"

The stranger blinked, and began to speak, but Old Olivia stood up then and tossed something onto the bar in front of David. A deck of playing cards in their blue and silver checked box. "This lot has long been corrupted, according to you and yours," she told the detective. "And as for sedition, I've been threatened with that charge myself enough times to know it's just another word for different." She pointed at the cards and said to David, "Take them." David hesitated so long that Les leaned over and took the box instead.

The detective abruptly stood, sniffed his fingers, and pointed at Old Olivia. "You . . ." he said, and then made an odd sighing sound and folded neatly to the floor. The two patrol officers rushed to his side and Old Olivia shouted at us, "Get him to the park! He's come here for a reason, even if it's still coming back to him! There's no telling what the courts will do to him if they find him out!"

And then it was a mad rush, because the policeman who wasn't chafing the detective's wrists was uncoiling his whip and putting his whistle to his lips. David knocked the man down and stepped on the clay whistle, and we went wild with cheers at the crunch it made beneath his boot. We rushed around the stranger like water around a rock, but then he wasn't a rock but something lighter, something we could pick up and bear away with us as we boiled through the door and up the stairs and out into the streets, howling and calling and leaping, laughing at our pursuers in the oldest game we knew.

The policemen had numbers and the use of their call boxes at the major intersections to coordinate their work with one another. We had speed and our knowledge of the back alleys and

cut-throughs and even rooftops in our flight to the park. None of us had ever been caught before, so why should it be any different that night?

But it *was* different. The numbers of the policemen were greater than we'd ever seen, and for the first time they dared the yards and alleys, for the first time they worked their way up the fire escapes to the roofs, spreading out and calling to one another in jargon we couldn't decode. The last we ever saw of Justin was on the roofs, when he rounded a spinning vent and then screamed, hands to his throat where a whip wrapped around.

We had to keep running.

The stranger kept pace, no matter how fast we went or what twists our route took. He leaped with the strongest of us, ran with the swiftest, sneaked with the quietest. And when we stood looking down at the park, three stories up and a million miles away, he even laughed with us at the number of policemen who surrounded it.

"That's what I meant by crowds," he told us. "That's what I meant by *teeming*."

We were hidden from the view of those below, and had shaken off those behind, at least for the time being. The time being *past* time to separate ourselves from this man, at least to David's way of thinking.

"That's the park," he spat. He'd been closer to Justin than most of us. "That's where the detective said you came from and where Old Olivia said to take you back. We should never have been mixed up with any of this."

The stranger nodded gravely. "You're right. You should all go. But before you do, young lady . . ." He held out his hand, and Les put the blue and silver box in it.

He lifted the lid and set it aside, took the deck in one hand, and fanned the cards like a magician. It was a standard deck of playing cards, technically illegal but such as could be found

in all the bars and most of the households of the Northside. We could see the four suits in the dim light of the gray dawn that was creeping up on us. Hearts and Ships, Clubs and Coins.

He turned his wrist and the faces of the cards were hidden from us. He held up the fanned deck to David. "Choose," he said, and when David didn't, the man didn't argue when Les leaned forward and took a card from the precise middle of the deck.

She turned it over where we could see that it was the one we expected. The Jack of Coins. Our grandparents called that one the Rebel when they played behind drawn curtains.

"I see now," said the stranger. "I remember why I came. I understand."

We didn't yet, and protested.

"It's not me that's lost," he said. "It's you." Somehow, him pointing with his chin took in all of us, and all the Northside and its people, and all the other neighborhoods, and even the policemen. "Come on. I'll show you the way."

And we all followed him, even David, as he clambered down the fire escape to the street that ran alongside the park. By the time we reached the bottom, the crowd of policemen who waited for us numbered in the dozens.

The stranger paused before he put his foot on the topmost rung of the last ladder down. He took a card from the deck in his hand and his wrist flicked forward. The card sailed down and through the crowd, and stuck edge in to the asphalt like a razor. The policemen took a step back, then another as a second card sailed down. Then a third went, and a fourth, then the whole deck was flying through the air, pushing the policemen back and marking a path in two lines straight across the street to the north entrance of the park.

We trailed him across the way, and hesitated at the entrance. It had been closed all our lives.

“There’s everything to be afraid of,” he said.

All of us but David followed him in.

In, but not through.

The stranger cast one glance over his shoulder as we skirted a tree line and said, “Now you’re found.” He stepped sideways into the trees and out of this world as far as we could ever tell. Perhaps he will return. Perhaps he’s gone to yours.

We have lived in the park down through all the long years since, sortieing out across the Northside, chasing policemen, and reshaping the way of things. We were seditionists after all.

Not all of us lived from that night to this, but there are more of us now, and our ranks will ever grow, until we are as numberless as worlds.



Copyright (C) 2013 by Christopher Rowe

Art copyright (C) 2013 by Red Nose Studio