

## **Red Lighting and Some Jazz**

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I find myself, as I step through the shaded door, suddenly in a world entirely different from the one I left behind outside.

Jazz, continuous jazz. And continuous chatter.

The people here are older than I. All have long since left their university years, though some are markedly older than others.

They are all very well-dressed. They have glasses of champagne. One might think it is some sort of celebration.

The lighting in here is so... strange. Strange and beautiful. And very red.

I make my way along the wall, avoiding the gathering of the crowd. I, quite obviously, do not belong here. I make my way to the deserted cafe. There is a man there sweeping the floor. I bypass the tables, not wanting to be urged to buy anything, though I believe the café may be closed.

I find a table in a hidden enclave. It is low, too low for comfort. The tabletop is stone, the legs metal painted black. There are two large portraits on the wall, and a dedicatory plaque in the middle. I read the names: something like Kurtfetter.

I read no more but pull out my assignment. Descartes: the First Meditation. I read.

The jazz never ceases—but for a moment to change pieces. The chatter takes no breaks.

A man and a woman come out of an elevator next to me. They are both well-dressed.

“So this is your hall?”

“Yup, and that’s us over there.”

They seem to speak of the gathering of people.

As the elevator doors (quite a golden amber color, very strong looking) close, I see within. The entire interior is padded in red, like some of the floors, and the floor number indicates five. I hadn’t realized this was the fifth floor. I recall climbing only one staircase?

I finish the Meditation and feel I must move to a more comfortable location. How this low table was hurting my back!

I step through what was, at some time, a gated (with a red, cloth barrier) entryway to a short staircase. The entire carpet here is red, even the stairs. I sit down on black leather seats and lean against a brick wall.

Still chatter. Still jazz.

The sweeping man comes just beyond the visual edge of the brick wall. He is sweeping near the railing. He looks down at me once. A strange feeling.

To my right are doors, two at each end of a curving, wooden wall. This seems to be an entrance to some auditorium or playhouse. But nobody in the crowd comes this way.

The walls near the café are all stone, almost marble-looking actually. They are white with some brown markings. Indeed, some seem to look like skulls—not of humans, but maybe something like foxes, demonic rabbits, some sort of extinct beast. I look away. I look back. They seem to stare eyelessly at the playhouse.

No!

For a moment they seemed to flash at me.

I quickly turn away again.

I pick up another book and attempt to read. It is another work of philosophy. But I cannot get that jazz out of my head.

Was that a child talking? Was that a young child?

I decide to try to find a quieter place.

I walk back up past the café and the amber elevator, and I find a staircase behind a glass door. I open it; it closes with a clank. The stairwell goes down beyond my sight.

What?

What floor am I on? The marker says “B.” I go down a few levels: more letters. They remind me of parking indicators in a parking garage.

I return to the hall. The jazz returns. I hadn’t realized how silent it was in the stairwell.

I go back near the playhouse. There is a red-carpeted staircase going to a lower level. But before I get a chance to look down it, a child comes running down the stairs, apparently from the direction of the crowd.

I hear a woman say, “Andrew, you can go down there but not in the theater.”

The child runs to a statue, the exact design of which I cannot make out.

Another child comes running down the stairs.

“Anna, be careful.”

They seem to run around with each other. The boy catches sight of me.

That look!

He resumes, just as abruptly, to play with the girl.

Then he sees me again.

He runs up by his mother.

The girl chases after him.

“Andrew, what are you doing? Andrew!”

Then she stops, just for a moment, as she notices me.

That look!

She, too, runs up to her mother.

Attempting to put this out of my mind, I resume my reading on the black leather chairs.

The chatter stops. A voice begins to speak. It is some sort of gathering, some sort of recognition.

The jazz continues, but quieter.

I try to keep reading but keep losing my focus.

Giving up, I walk back up the stairs. To my right, the crowd stands, alternating between rapt attention and applause, facing the speaker. I cannot see the speaker. But I do notice one face.

The boy.

His eyes are glaring at me.

I have never seen such a wicked stare before.

He tugs at his mother's dress.

"Mom, Mom. Look."

"Not now, Andrew. Listen to the speaker."

"But, that boy..."

At this, a few—just a few—of the adults break their attention and turn toward me.

Those looks!

The boy continues to glare.

I resume walking and walk straight out the door.

I am on a roof. There is grass and small trees planted in large gardens of stone. The sky is darkening in a golden-brown hue, something like coffee being poured out against light-blue glass. I didn't know it was so late!

Confused about where to go from this door (it was not the one I first entered), I come back inside.

The speaker is still going, but no more jazz. No, I hear piano, not recognizable classical piano, but something like the music of a harp. Then suddenly a dive down the keyboard. Then a return.

I sit down in the café, no longer fearful of being advertised to.

I remove my water from my bag and drink slowly.

Then, a voice behind me.

"You shouldn't be here, you know."

"What?" I barely swallow my mouthful of water.

"You shouldn't be here."

It's the sweeper. He looks... unmoved, really.

"I thought..."

"This isn't a good place for you to be."

"Why..."

“I would leave as soon as possible.”

“But...” I could not say more, as the man walked away.

I watch him enter a staff door. He speaks to a man with a large bundle of keys at his belt. The other man looks at me before shutting the door.

SLAM!

The door sends a resounding noise through the hall.

Several more—plus the first few (and the boy)—turn and glare at me.

They return, slowly, to the speaker. I return cautiously to my drink.

My heart is beating strongly. I notice the music has increased in intensity. I hear a... mandolin? No, something else...

I screw the lid back on my bottle and get up to throw it away.

When it hits the bottom of the garbage bag,

SOOOSH!

Another loud sound.

More turn toward me. One steps out of line and points.

But they all return.

I go back down to the black leather chair, hoping the crowd will move elsewhere so I can walk by.

I just had this *feeling*... that I should not walk near them.

I attempt to read again.

Frightening piano erupts from the stairway going down at my right. I breathe in an enormous breath.

Once again unable to read, I step down the stairs to look in on the pianist.

The door at the bottom of the stairs is black and white with a small, dark window.

I turn the handle; it creaks loudly.

Inside: a small octagonal room with a dark, wooden ceiling. There is a shiny black grand piano directly in the center. The pianist madly—but beautifully—maneuvers the keyboard. Then,

he looks at me.

I see no eyes. The face is a skull. A skull projecting from a tuxedo!

He—it—stands up and begins to walk toward me. My legs thaw, and I turn and throw myself back through the door. I quickly shut it behind me.

Jazz again.

And chatter—but louder, nearer.

I step up a few stairs.

The crowd is in front of the entrance to the theater.

Silence.

And they all turn to me.

A high, horrid wail pierces from the other side of the theater doors.

The crowd runs at me with demonic faces. I jump up the railing. Even the children come at me with the look of a murderer.

I stumble.

They are shattering their glasses, tearing their burdensome clothes, throwing each other out of the way. One grabs my leg and digs her fingernails in. I feel warm blood pour down into my shoe.

I kick away. I run.

The wailing never ceases. It rises in volume, in pitch. The crowd grows madder.

I run toward the doors through which I first entered. The first one I try is locked. And the second.

I see a man near the third. It is the other employee. He seems to be unlocking it. He opens it, but doesn't look at me.

I run through, and it shuts behind me.

And I fall off the roof.

I land on soft grass, only bruised. The building behind me is as it was when I entered it earlier in the day. The sky is bright again, though later in the afternoon. I brush myself off and walk away.