

“The End of the Line”

A short-story by: Mary Margaret Park

Matt’s having a bad day. His life is rotten, washed out, down the drain.

My boss; that jerk...

He hurries along the downtown corridor. He passes storefront after storefront; the few that don’t have ‘going out of business’ signs plastered across them have an unused feel; their window displays faded and dusty.

He pauses in front of two buildings; the space between them is a mess of tumbled bricks; a hole, the size of a wrecking ball sits in the middle. A train wails in the distance; a forlorn, echoing omen.

He swings into a non-descript building across the street.

The second floor windows are broken, shuttered with rusted metal `grates. The front window reads: “End of The Line Bar & Grill” -- It’s dark inside. The bar and several booths dim recesses; the patrons lost in diffuse shadows. There’s an old 50’s tune pouring out of the jukebox. Matt expects to see women wearing poodle skirts and bobby socks drifting out of the shadows. He chuckles then plops down in a nearby booth.

A beefy waitress approaches the table; her bleached blond hair and neon make-up startles the darkness.

“Get you something?” she asks, extracting a pen from behind her ear.

“A beer...shot of whiskey on the side.”

She appraises him, shaking her head in a tisk-tisk gesture, “I’ll see what I can do.”

She heads away, trailing the swish of nylon behind her. While waiting, Matt ponders the day.

My boss; can’t give a guy a break.

He’s shaken from his thoughts when a man slides into the booth and sits across from him.

...“Names Collins; believe me, I know how you feel. Wife and kid go hungry, the down trodden keep getting kicked in the teeth. I say give a guy a break, ya’ know?”

Surprised, Matt nods his head. The man extracts a roll of quarters and a shot glass from his coat pocket; placing both on the table. The stranger tosses a quarter neatly into the shot glass; it makes a high pitched clinging sound before settling into the bottom.

”Makes you wonder doesn’t it? I mean, you bust your hump working and trying to get ahead, and no one understands or appreciates you.”

Another quarter tumbles seamlessly through the air into the glass. Matt nods in agreement, feeling weary, drained. The stranger tosses another coin into the glass, leaning closer.

“The question of course is how tired? Too tired to walk out of the door every morning, or too tired to live?”

The man crinkles his brows, “Either way, it seems you’ve got a decision to make. I’ve seen a lot of guys come and go through here, thing is...it never does get any easier, ya’ know?”

Matt glances across the street; the space between the two buildings is a mess of tumbled bricks; a hole, the size of a wrecking ball sits in the middle. A train wails in the distance; a forlorn, echoing omen.

The waitress returns, jarring Matt back to the present. She glances at the man beside him, “You again...anyway, the boss said we’re out of beer and whiskey.”

“What kind of joint is this, no beer, no whiskey? Can’t a guy get a little relief?”

The waitress turns to Collins, “What do you think, is this one a lost cause or what?”

Matt feels like an outsider; left out and clueless.

“I just need a drink to calm my nerves is all; surely you’ve got something that’ll give me a spot of relief, surely?”

He glances quickly at Collins then back at the waitress, hopeful. She places her hand on her hip, the slab of her arm inching into Matt’s personal space. He presses his back further into the booth, trying to escape her distance.

“Mr. Douglas, you’ve arrived at the end of the line, we’ve got relief, it works every time and it’s permanent.”

Collin’s tosses another quarter; it sails through the air in a perfect arc, landing once more perfectly into the glass.

Collins glances across the street. The space between the two buildings is a mess of tumbled bricks; a hole, the size of a wrecking ball sits in the middle. Matt’s reached the end of the line, he clutches his chest; then falls to the ground; the foot steps of his assailant receding. A train wails in the distance; a forlorn, echoing omen.

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