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A Turn Of The Paige

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Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"A god-awful Springsteen song was playing on the CD jukebox as Harrison Conrad sat drinking his beer. His shoulder-length hair was tied back in a ponytail and a week's worth of stubble had accumulated on his face. His subtle good looks had given way to a look of exhaustion and fatigue. He was scanning the headlines of the newspaper when the door to the bar opened and in walked a slightly graying but youthful-looking man. He sat down at the bar a few feet from Harrison and ordered a drink. Noticing something on the man's face, Harrison politely pointed it out."

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A Turn of the Paige
by
Eric Evans

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"Excuse me, but you have a smudge or something on your cheek."

"Oh," the man said, wiping his face, "thanks for telling me."

"It's white face. I'm a clown at the circus."

Harrison seemed interested. "Oh really? It must be a great job."

"Well, it's got its ups and downs. Let me buy you a drink?"

"Sure. Would you believe me if I told you that I just came from an AA meeting?" Harrison asked.

The man ordered the drinks, then turned and said, "Not really. You seem quite..."

"And you seem to have a rather firm grasp of the obvious, Mr. Mr., ... I'm sorry, but I didn't get your name. I'm Harrison Conrad," he said, offering his hand.

"Mitchell Downing," the man replied, taking Harrison's hand. "But in the circus, I'm Wally the Wonder Clown. Mind if I ask a question?"

"Sure."

"If you just came from an AA meeting, then what the hell are you doing here?"

"Trying to forgive my wife, Paige," Harrison said—slurred, actually. "She left me last week."

"Hey, I'm sorry I asked, really."

"No, it's OK," Harrison replied. "She led me for a lawyer. You believe that? A goddamn lawyer. I hate lawyers," he said, raising his voice.

Mitchell calmed Harrison down and took him to a table near the back of the bar for a little privacy. He ordered a few more drinks and went to select something on the jukebox. James Taylor sounded soothing right now, he thought, as he pressed the number for "Fire and Rain."

"So, Harrison, did your wife say why she left?"

"No. Just a 'Dear John' letter. Eight-and-a-half years. I gave her eight-and-a-half years just to get a damn generic lease letter. She didn't have the common courtesy to talk to me about it. At least she signed it 'with love'," Harrison said sarcastically, his greenish-blue eyes aglow with hurt and anger. "Maybe it was drinking," he continued, "maybe she just got bored. Who the hell knows? Maybe it was all his money. I mean, I know I don't make millions as a musician, but we were happy. At least, I thought we were."

All the time that Harrison had been talking, Mitchell had been preoccupied. After a while, he said, "Harrison, I've been ordering. Do you want to get away from here for a while? It might do you some good."

"Why? What are you getting at?"

"Well, why don't you come down to the circus tomorrow and talk to my boss about a job. You get to travel around, the pay's pretty decent and it'll get you away from here for a while. I'll leave the number with you. Any problems getting there, call me."

On his way out, Mitchell settled his bill with the bartender. He went another drink over to Harrison and left. After many more drinks, Harrison staggered out to his car with Mitchell's number on a napkin in his pocket.

II

"Get the hell out of my way you goddamn mutt!" Harrison screamed at the dog as he stumbled in the door. He went to the refrigerator and got out a beer. And another. And another. And another. It had been a long day, and Harrison was even more drunk than before. Eventually, he went to bed and slept the alcohol off.

Harrison called Mitchell's boss the next day and joined the circus. To the millions of circus-goers, he was now known as the Happy Clown. As Harry, he was loved by them and became one of the more popular acts in the show. In time, Mitchell was proven right. They visited quite a few places, the money was pretty good, eventually. Paige slipped further and further, but not entirely, from Harrison's mind. One night, the show was in Boston. The place was sold-out, as most of the shows were. On his way to the center of the ring, Harrison happened to see Paige in the stands with her sister and her nephew. All three were cheering at the announcing of Harry the Happy Clown. He didn't disappoint them. He put on his best show. Harrison watched only Paige's reaction, shutting out the thousands of other spectators. She laughed harder than she'd ever seen her laugh before. It was a personal victory to him. She had hurt him badly, but he was strong enough to keep his life together and make himself, as well as thousands of others, including Paige, happy.

Afterwards, Mitchell saw Harrison backstage and congratulated him on a good show.

"You were hysterical tonight. I've never seen you so funny before. Good job."

"Thanks. I felt good out there tonight. I was really pleased with it..." Harrison trailed off, his attention obviously distracted.

"Pleased with what?" asked Mitchell.

"My wife," said an exasperated Harrison. "She left me last week."

"Pleased with your wife? You're not making any sense."

"No, no. I just saw my wife walk by. I still miss her. Maybe I should go talk to her."

"I wouldn't, Harrison," warned Mitchell. "She left you, remember? If she wants to talk to you, she'll find you."

"But..."

"No buts. You're happier now, aren't you? Don't ruin it. Come on, let's go get a drink."

III

Eventually, Harrison left the circus. It was the anonymity that made him leave. If I can entertain people this well as a clown, he thought, I should at least get credit for it. It was this thinking that led Harrison back to his music. He happened to be doing some shows in England when he decided to visit a small bookstore. He'd been meaning to add to his collection of original copies by all of the Lost Generation authors. Hemingway was his favorite. Harrison was looking through a pile of dusty novels when a voice behind him offered his assistance.

"Is there anything I can help you with, sir?"

"Yes. I'm looking for a Hemingway novel. Do you have Men Without Women?" Harrison asked as he turned and stood there stunned.
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III

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"Yes, I'm looking for a Hemingway novel. Do you have Men Without Women?" Harrison asked as he turned and stood there stunned.

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It was Paige.

"What are you doing here?" Harrison asked her, obviously surprised.

"After I left you, Kevin..." "The lawyer?"

"Yes," she explained. "Anyway, after I left you, Kevin and I split up. It was the biggest mistake of my life. Well, actually, the second biggest," she said, as a subtle, intoxicating smile graced her face. She continued. "After I left him, I decided to find myself. I really hate that phrase, but it fits. Now it's your turn. What are you doing here?"

"Touring."

"Really?" she said, surprised.

"Yeah, really. After you left, I met this guy from the circus. He was a clown and asked me if I wanted to join the circus with him. So I did and became Happy the Happy Clown."

Harrison waited for her reaction.

"You're Harry? I saw you in Boston a few years ago."

"I know."

"Yes. I need to speak to Mr. McKenzie, please. He's in charge of the circus that's in town."

"I'm sorry sir, but the circus left town two days ago."

"Are you sure?" he demanded.

"Yes."

Harrison let the receiver drop. He stared off out the window at nothing in particular for what seemed like hours. Finally, with a sense of calmness that he'd had since Paige, he picked up the phone and dialed. "Can I help you?" a woman's voice asked.

"Yes. I need to speak to Mr. McKenzie, please. He's in charge of the circus that's in town."

"I'm sorry sir, but the circus left town two days ago."

"Are you sure?" he demanded.

"Yes."

Harrison let the receiver drop. He stared out of the window at nothing in particular for what seemed like hours. Finally, with a sense of calmness that he'd had since Paige, he turned on the radio and closed his eyes, listening to the low, steady hum of the car. He turned the radio on and closed his eyes, listening to the low, steady hum of the car. He turned the radio on and closed his eyes, listening to the low, steady hum of the car.

Harrison was unaware that it had rained while he was at Paige's. The roads were slippery, but Harrison was in too good a mood to take any particular notice of it. Before he knew what happened, Harrison had lost control of the car and ran head-first into a very large tree. He was pinned between the seat and steering wheel and had gone unconscious.

IV

"But what? Who's there?" Harrison mumbled as he looked around his room, groggy and bleary-eyed. No one was there. It was just the final effects of the alcohol on his mind. Harrison slowly got up from the floor, holding on to the bedroom for support. As he made his way to the bathroom, he noticed all of the empty beer cans and alcohol bottles littered around the house. Christ, he thought, how much have I had to drink. I feel awful.

As Harrison looked in the mirror, it hit him: his life was a mess. The only woman he'd ever cared about enough to open up to had just up and left him. After almost three years of sobriety, he'd been drunk for a week straight and had no plans to stop. Suddenly, something caught his eye: the napkin that Mitchell had given him in the bar a few nights earlier. What the hell, he thought. It was a damn good dream. Maybe I will join the circus and just maybe... his thoughts trailed off. He picked up the phone and dialed, "Can I help you?" a woman's voice asked.

"Yes. I need to speak to Mr. McKenzie, please. He's in charge of the circus that's in town."

"I'm sorry sir, but the circus left town two days ago."

"Are you sure?" he demanded.

"Yes."

Harrison watched her as she wrote out the receipt. Jesus, he thought, she still looks incredible. She returned a few minutes later with the book. Harrison reached for his wallet, but Paige protested. "No. It's my treat."

"I knew."

"Okay, but dinner is my treat."

Harrison watched her as she wrote out the receipt. Jesus, he thought, still looks incredible. She was just as attractive as she'd been when they met in college. Her eyes were as green as ever and her hair was a delicious shade of auburn-red. She hadn't lost her figure and her perfume still drove him crazy. What he found attractive, though, was the almost invisible freckles that covered her nose and cheeks. He'd always loved them and always would. To him, she was perfection.

"The lawyer?"

"I know."

"Yes."

"Yes, I need to speak to Mr. McKenzie, please. He's in charge of the circus that's in town."

"I'm sorry sir, but the circus left town two days ago."

"Are you sure?" he demanded.

"Yes."

Harrison mentioned the time, the car, and the strains of the music. Noticing the late time, Paige said that she had to get up early for work, but invited Harrison to stay. He declined, saying that he had obligations of his own, but they set a time and place to meet for lunch. Harrison dressed, kissed Paige goodbye and left, smiling like he hadn't smiled in years.
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"You're Harry? I saw you in Boston a few years ago."

"I know. I saw you in the stands. You seemed to enjoy the show."

"I did."

"Anyway," he continued, "I left the circus after a while and decided to take up my music again. No more circus. Now it's just me and my guitar."

After a brief silence, Paige said, "Wait a minute. I'll see if we have that book you want." She returned a few minutes later with the book. Harrison reached for his wallet, but Paige protested. "No. It's my treat."

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Paige handed him the book, the receipt and her address and phone number. "Is thirty okay for you for dinner?"

"Fine. I'll see you then. Bye."

He waved, got into the car and drove off, smiling the entire time.

Dinner went perfectly. They talked and laughed and talked some more and decided to try things again.

"Well, what now?" Harrison asked after dinner.

Paige looked at him and said, "Let's go back to my apartment for a drink," her eyes saying much more than her mouth.

They got to the apartment and each had a drink. A Hitchcock movie was on television, giving them a good reason to get closer.

After the movie ended, Paige turned and gave Harrison a kiss so gently that he wasn't sure if they had actually kissed or not.

She quickly reassured him. She slowly led him to her bedroom where they made love. Not a normal kind of love, if their lovemaking had a color, it would have been a brilliant, blinding red, the kind of red seen when nothing else can be seen.

After they had finished, they stayed there for quite some time, discussing their plans for their new found future. Noticing the late time, Paige said that she had to get up early for work, but invited Harrison to stay. He declined, saying that he had obligations of his own, but they set a time and place to meet for lunch. Harrison dressed, kissed Paige goodbye and left, smiling like he hadn't smiled in years.