

The Lady of the Lounge

by William Mingin

I shouldn't've asked Terry to go to the bar, but who knew two guys out for a beer would meet a man-eating lounge singer?

The Apple Orchard sits on an empty stretch of road where there was an orchard maybe sixty years ago, a rambling building in sparsely wooded fields, with the low-slung Apple Orchard Inn, a no-tell motel, maybe fifty yards away. In late October, in upstate New York, the fields were cold and wind-swept, the trees leaf-bare.

Her voice was just right for a lounge singer, clear higher up, with a soft plaintiveness on the off edge of a tone, smoky and intimate on the lower notes. Never too loud, sometimes so soft you'd swear she was whispering to you. When we came in, she was singing an oldie, "Gimme a Kiss," to a piano accompaniment. First time I'd ever heard it done slow, like a long embrace, especially at the stomp, where she repeated the chorus in a languorous, accented rhythm:

"Come in the mornin',
Stay till it's late,
Never stop cuddlin',
And don't hesitate—
Cause you got the power
To put me in bliss—
Gimme a kiss."

She was in her late twenties, about five-six, hair a shade off auburn, thick, wavy, down below her shoulders; powdery white skin. She moved sinuously to the music, like she was painted on something that rippled. The tight sheath of her dress, so dark a purple it was almost black, accentuated her hair and pale complexion. She looked straight ahead as she sang, into a distance only she could see, with a sad longing laced with desire.

Watching her, I felt the mingled regret and itch you

feel when you remember bedding a lost love. Terry's reaction wasn't as nuanced, but he's ten years younger than me. He looked like someone had tapped him between the eyes with a ball peen hammer. He was breathing through his mouth.

Terry's fiancée, Mary Lynn, is girl-next-door pretty, squeezably-soft and feathery-blond. But when you stood next to her, you could hear plans whirring in her head: house, yard, fence, kids; his whole career laid out, salary increases, savings, what dull patch of warmth they'd retire to. I think she had names picked out for the grandchildren.

Terry sat close to the stage, which was no bigger than two dining room tables. I followed. The singer had gone from "Gimme a Kiss" to "I Close My Eyes (And There You Are)," more up-tempo, but in a minor key:

"I see you in all my thoughts and I dream about you—
How else can I ever live without you?
You left me all alone, but I'm not lonely—
My one and only—
I close my eyes and there you are—"

There was a lot of applause for a small joint just outside the middle of nowhere, and not a few wolf whistles. Terry's made me clutch at my ear. She half-smiled at the whistles, bowed once, and went off.

Terry rushed over to accost her. I couldn't hear what they were saying, but saw her coy smile, the tilt of her head, the way she batted her eyes. She was a stranger in a car offering candy; and she was the candy.

As they headed off, Terry turned back and gave me The Look—the look your buddy gives you that says "How about this?" and warns you not to follow. He's your ride? Settle in for a while. The Look is sacred.

I figured what Mary Lynn didn't know wouldn't hurt her. I'm not proud of that.