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WHO THEY WERE

Nathan Knapp

The bar faced the street. On the backside of the bar stood a wooden fence, and in between the fence and the drinking establishment’s windowless back wall there was a narrow space. That’s where they were screwing.

They were screwing with their mouths open, heaving in the night air. The man’s pants sagged around his knees, and his naked ass glistened in the gray moonlight. The woman’s skirt was hiked around her waist, and her tits bobbed back and forth with the couple’s motion, hanging low out of her red V-neck blouse. The man’s hand cupped one of her breasts like a rock climber seeking a steady grip with which to hoist himself up.

In the brown dirt parking lot next to the narrow space behind the bar lay a crumpled pair of cream-colored red polka-dot panties—hers.

* 

Across the dirt lot, where dull green bottle fragments strewn amongst the dust glinted in the gray streetlight, on the third floor of the apartment building that stood above the bar, two young men named Billy and Jack were screwing, belly to back, for the second time that night, with a slow and steady pleasure.

While they screwed they talked. At first while they talked, they talked about how they were screwing—we’re screwing—and about how much they were enjoying it; about how they might even screw again later, for a third time; how they might even spend the rest of their lives like this, screwing on into eternity, forever and ever, amen.

They were both preachers’ sons. They had met at a pastors’ convention they’d dutifully attended with their fathers, back when they were both fourteen. Suddenly, in the pool at the hotel where they were staying, neck-deep in the bottom-lit water, they knew something about each other without even saying anything, knew something about each other that neither of them had ever told a soul before.
And now here they were, screwing in the apartment on the third floor above the bar, for the second time that night.

*

When Hector emerged from the bar he heard the sounds of the couple in the narrow space behind the bar’s back wall. As he walked across the lot he saw the red polka dot panties crumpled on the brown dirt lot.

He picked the panties up. They were soft, painfully soft, and still warm. He heard the sounds again, and, knowing the sounds for what they were, stood motionless. Hector, at twenty-one, had never screwed or been screwed by anyone, and, as he heard the sounds and held the panties in his hand he felt a fine, delicate pain in his chest.

The pain amused him. He looked around for the source of the sound—unn, unn, oooh—but saw nothing.

He wondered if he was imagining the sounds. Back in the bar he’d had one more drink than he’d meant to, which was two more drinks than he could afford. The sounds ceased, and the pain in his chest sharpened. All he could hear was the sound of rock music from inside the bar.

*Hey,* said a man’s voice from the dark.

A man and a woman stepped out of the narrow space between the bar’s back wall and the fence.

*Hi,* Hector said.

*I don’t believe those belong to you,* said the man, in a gruff tone of voice that reminded Hector of his father. He wore a gray golf shirt with a miniature elk over the left breast.

Behind the man’s left shoulder the woman grinned. She was very pretty, dressed in a deep red blouse and black skirt with a low neckline.

*No,* Hector said. *They don’t belong to me at all.*

*They’re mine,* said the woman, still grinning.
Hand em over, said the man, reaching out his hand.

Hector handed the red polka-dot panties over to the man, and the man handed them to the woman, who thanked him.

She said, I lost track of these, didn’t I. And then, matter-of-factly, she bent over and slid them over her high heels and up her thighs, right there in front of the man and Hector. He saw her pubic hair, something he’d never seen on a live woman. His heart whumped in his chest.

Have a good night, the man said.

You too, Hector said.

* 

Far from the narrow space behind the bar, far from where Hector now walked alone down the adjacent street with his heart only now beginning to calm a little, far from the third floor apartment where Billy and Jack lay tangled atop the rough sheets on Billy’s bed, in another bedroom in another town on the opposite side of the state lay Billy’s father and mother, naked together for the first time in years. Sweat covered their skin. In the dark the mother’s face was the color of ashes. Billy’s father was still trying to get his wind back.

For a long time they lay quiet in the dark. It had been such a long time since they’d done this sort of thing that they were unpracticed in what to do or say, post-coitus. They had both been who they were for many years, many decades; it was very hard to be anything else. Who they were did not have much to say to each other, anymore.

In the dark she heard him reach for the television remote. She knew the sound of him reaching for the remote better than she knew her own heartbeat—a soft scuffing, a grunting as he reached over his own belly.

Don’t, she said. Not yet.

Why not.

How long has it been, Frank?
How long has what been, he said.

They were quiet again. There was enough light in the room that she could just make out the picture frames on the wall, the frames which held photos of her and her husband, and of her son, Billy, who no longer spoke with either of them. The light came in through the doorway, where a nightlight glowed. The light had always made her feel more alone with herself than even pure darkness would.

The sound of the radio traveled up the stairs from the kitchen, left on from when she’d done the dishes earlier, something by Debussy—Clair de Lune. In her twenties she had known the piece by heart, but that was a long time ago, before she had become the preacher’s wife. Before she’d had the son who would leave home.

The television exploded with light, and its staccato noise replaced the faint sound that she had heard, the sound of the moon, alone in the night sky.

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Nathan Knapp’s writing has appeared in Frequencies, Parcel, Word Riot, The McNeese Review, Vol. 1 Brooklyn, and other publications. An MFA candidate at Oklahoma State University, he edits The Collapsar, and lives in Stillwater, Oklahoma.