
WANT'S BRIDGE

A modern parable of a murderer's awakening.

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The illustration is "Cosmic Composition," by Paul Klee.

I make my way through a darkness of scratches and willow smells, hoping I look like I belong. The slope of the ravine is steep. I was here just last night, so I know what's at the bottom--a trickle of water now in the heat of September. Maybe there's still blood, too. I will head east toward the bridge, and there I'll find the homeless people if I look like I belong. The stakes are high. I sweat, and my heart squeezes up too close to my throat. I don't like it here. It's their ground, not mine. But that's my life. I'm always wishing I were somewhere else.

Ahead I see the orange sparkle of a campfire. Figures sit and lie near it, warming their hands, speaking in drowsy murmurs. One of my shoes, worn out but maybe not worn out enough, slips into the water. Splash! And the figures disappear, soundless as roaches. All but one. Not an auspicious beginning. I hold back a sigh.

The remaining individual, a woman wrapped in a filthy blanket, watches as I approach.

I stop some distance away and smile submissively. I wish I were a woman. Then I could look even less threatening. "Can I share the fire?" I ask.

"Got any food?" she says. "Because if you do, I could use some."

I search the pockets of the jacket I took from the church rummage and purposely rubbed in the muddy earth of the garden not an hour ago. I know the gun hides in one pocket; it's reassuring to touch it now. The other is empty. But in the hip pocket of the faded, threadbare trousers I discover two damp peppermints wrapped in cellophane. I hold them out to her, as I would hold sugar for a horse. It feels wrong. Nothing about me fits the disguise I'm wearing. Nothing! The small of my back tickles. It's sweat.

She grabs the candies speedily, darting toward me and away again almost before I realize it. "Thanks." She unwraps one and grins, showing a single tooth. She nods

toward the fireside. "Go ahead. Make yourself comfy."

I sit down cross-legged, proud of myself for not brushing at the ground first. "Where did the others go?" I ask.

She watches me keenly, amused. The fire does not reveal much about her. She has wild hair of some light color, perhaps white. Her skin is wrinkled, but I cannot say whether from age or exposure. I'm almost certain she's the one I'm looking for, the one they call Mary.

"They're scared," she says. "Whad'ya expect?"

I laugh, but it comes out wrong--hard and sharp instead of incredulous.

We sit in silence then. I ought to ask her why they're afraid, but I fear her answer. I hear her tooth clicking against the hard candy, and periodically, the whoosh of a car crossing the low bridge above us.

I clear my throat. "What's your name?"

"Ha!" she says. "You think you know it already, doncha?" I hear the peppermint break. She must have more than one tooth after all. "I'll give you something to call me. Shameless. You can call me Shameless."

I raise an eyebrow. "What kind of name is that?"

All traces of amusement evaporate from her face. Her eyes turn to slivers, and her chin jabs forward. She unwraps the remaining peppermint frenetically, watching me all the while.

"Real name, sonny boy. It's a real name. You think you know every goddamn thing, but you don't know jack shit. You don't even know your own name. You think it's Mike or Steve or Jerry or some stupid thing. Well it's not. It's Want. I never seen anybody who stank so much like Want in all my life. Is there anything in this world that you don't want?"

She palms the candy into her mouth and sucks it loudly, still glaring. My hand squirms in my pocket, clamps around the gun, which no longer feels reassuring, just depressingly familiar. She has a lot of nerve talking about the stink of want. I can smell her from where I sit, in spite of the wood smoke and the peppermint. She probably hasn't taken a bath in a year.

"Yes, there is something I don't want. I don't want to be here," I say, though I'm sure my biting wit is wasted on her.

She shrugs, and smiles again. "Ha! Then why are you? You sure as hell don't belong here. Who forced you to come? You're a real bad liar."

What should I tell her? That I'm here because God wants it? That isn't quite right, after all. I believe He wanted me to do the other things, but not this. On this matter,

He has remained silent. Maybe she has a point. I want, all right. I want God to make this easier for me, but He won't. Earning eternal happiness isn't easy, nor should it be.

That thought helps me make up my mind. I don't seem to have convinced her that I'm homeless, so what's the point in continuing to pretend? "Okay, okay. I just want to ask a few questions, that's all."

She pulls the rotting blanket around herself more tightly and nods as if to say Now we're getting somewhere.

"Somebody told me you saw the murders," I say.

"Yeah." She rocks gently toward the fire and back, her dark eyes continuously on my own. "I watched 'em. In a shameless way, you might say. Everybody knows."

The air in my lungs burns as it rushes out. The chirp of crickets in the nearby undergrowth becomes a chaos of noise. How much did she see?

So quickly that it startles me, she scuttles to my side and pushes her face up close to mine. Now I see it's not exposure; it's age that has caused the wrinkles. She must be ancient. "I could ask for a lot," she whispers. The peppermint overlays something else--an odd marshy scent I would never expect to come from a human mouth.

I cannot keep myself from pulling out the gun and crying, "Get away!"

But instead of moving back, she opens her lips in the cave-like grin. "What exactly do you think I have to lose? I have nothing, you see. Not even my shame. It doesn't matter what I have or don't have. Whatever it is or isn't, it's all I damn well want." She suddenly sounds quite different, and I realize with a start that she, too, has been pretending. Who is this woman?

I have a ready answer. She's a lunatic, probably schizophrenic. Nobody would believe anything she says, not a policeman, not a psychiatrist, certainly not a court of law. As a witness, she could be easily discredited. I take a breath. For a moment, relief makes me dizzy. Maybe I don't have to do what I fear after all. It was bad enough, the others, my wife and child here in the creek bed. They were a disappointment to me, and God helped with his advice. Still, it wasn't easy. If I have to do this one, too, I wish I could rest a while first. But there wouldn't be time. The police have already come to my house, eyeing me and asking courteous questions.

"I won't give you anything," I tell her.

She backs off a foot or two, gazing at me like a bird. She caresses the muzzle of the gun. "Of course not. It isn't in your nature to give. Your nature is all desire and seeking. I'm the one who'll do the giving."

She says it so seductively that for an awful moment I expect her to lie down and spread her legs. The idea is so revolting it makes me cringe.

She chuckles. It's an oddly pleasant laugh that makes me wonder what her life was like before this. She tucks something into my hand. It feels like a smooth stone, only it's warm and it makes me tingle. I try to drop it, but I can't. I try to cry out, but I can't. She grabs me by the collar and shoves me out from under the bridge, into the night beyond the fire. Her strength amazes me.

"How does the world look now, Mr. Want?" she whispers. She stands up to her full height, surprisingly tall, and waves an arm over her head. "The Sacred Present," she says. "See?" Above us, the stars are out. I hadn't noticed before. It's a clear autumn night, and they dance above us in mysterious arrangements far older than history. I can even see the Milky Way. I can't recall the last time I thought about stars.

"What do you smell? Hear? Feel?" she says.

I realize abruptly that pungent willow juxtaposes itself with tar and exhaust fumes from the bridge; I remember a car trip I took with my parents long ago, how we drove to a river and picnicked there, and my father taught me to fish. I have hated him so long. I thought I never could please him. But I had forgotten this moment, and others like it. The cricket noise I thought chaotic becomes a brilliant chorus joined by frogs and a distant mockingbird, its rhythms resonating with those of my own heart. A feeling rises in me, utterly foreign. Is this what it's like to be satisfied? I wonder. Am I happy now?

She's beside me again, wrenching the stone from my hand. The world flashes back to what I've always thought of as normal. Only now I see how I've lived. A stormy surf of pain rolls over me. More than pain. Agony. Suffering. I drop the gun, grab my head and cry out.

I hear her insistent whispering in my ear. "I saw the murders. I've seen them all. It's more than just you, you know. Creatures like you, they're everywhere. They prey on each other. All of you are consumed with want--this reward or that reward, you don't care who you hurt to get it. But once you have it, you always find an excuse to want more."

My eyes are squeezed tight, but in my mind I see her waltzing around me, leaning close to speak softly. "Sometimes you are men, sometimes women. Old or young, black, white, brown. All kinds. All with things in your pockets. Razors, knives, wires. Sometimes you even take lives with your own teeth. Keep wanting. The others can smell it, like dogs. Sooner or later one of them will find you, and the worst thing is, you'll be glad."

"No!" I scream.

Through bright sheets of pain I begin to understand. God said I'd be happy once they were gone. He didn't say it would only last a moment.

Sweet Jesus, what have I done? I writhe in the mud, trying to breathe between screams.

"Tell me what you want now!" she says.

"Bring them back! Oh, God. I'll do anything. Just bring them back."

"Such an intricate goddamned animal you are. Wrong! Guess again!"

"What do you mean?" I'm sobbing now.

"I can't bring them back. Nobody can, not even your lovely God. The dead are gone forever. Guess again!"

How can I go on? The suffering is too great. Beyond enduring. What has she done to me? What was that rock? I grab at the thought, shiny and slippery as the fish my father and I caught together.

"The stone! Give me the stinking stone. I want it!"

There it is, that pleasant chuckle again. "Why?"

I don't know how to say it. I want the pain to stop, but that's the smallest part. What are the words? I want to love. I want to be grateful. I want to see the stars and the moon and clouds every night until I die.

"Yes," she says.

I feel the cool, smooth stone in my palm again. Night air pours into my lungs, delicious, clean.

I sit up and look around. Shameless is gone, the fire transformed to orange coals. Strangest of all, my hand is empty.

I climb to my feet and take off running west through the shallow creek. The constellations turn above me, uncaring. I hear the mockingbird. I think of everything I had--the house and its tidy garden; the church filled with people I know; my wife, my child; all of it gone forever no matter how much I wish it back. A lance of sorrow pierces me.

Too late I desire all that I possessed. I run from the bridge and the fire and the bloody ravine behind me, praying I can learn to want what is left.

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