

The Dive People

Avram Davidson

Edward Peterson moved restlessly in the bed, troubled by bad dreams, fatigue, and swift-approaching wakefulness. His mind insisted on his recognizing certain things he would sooner forget: that he had left Jinny to take up with Bran and left Bran to take up with Pauli. And with this last of the names coming up bubble-like and bursting at the surface of his mind, his body straightened out with a single convulsive kick and all at once he was awake and sitting up, sweating and trembling and sickened with fright. He knew now what he had done. It was no dream after all.

What Peterson had done was to take the sharp knife in his hand, reach out for the soft throat of someone he knew well, and draw the knife across from ear to ear.

He knew that he had done this and that it was a hideous thing and that it could not be happening to him though he knew it was.

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They had been living in a fetid tenement to the south of Cooper Union, not one that still had a faint flavor of an honored past, but one that had been built to be a tenement, a five-story hovel which could never attain to dignity if it endured a thousand years. Of course, it was a question now if it would endure a thousand days, if it would not collapse inside its own filthy integument before the cannibal city fell upon it and destroyed it.

"Chili con carne for supper," Pauli said. As if he couldn't smell it, along with every other meal ever cooked on that greasy stove. Peterson looked around the single room of the place, feeling his feet burning in the shoes, wondering vaguely where he could sit down. Even the broken chair was piled high—his old shirts, torn ones which the Chinese laundryman had said wouldn't process; Pauli was going to mend them so they could be washed and he could have some clean spares. She wouldn't wash them, no, but she would mend them. One of these days—As for the sofa, it had been weeks since that had been available for sitting.

Pauli passed into the kitchen, took the lid off the pot. He wrinkled his nose, opened his mouth. What was the use?

Q. That's not your chili con carne, is it?

A. Oh, you know mine is no good.

That was quite true. Nothing she cooked was any good, because she never took any pains. But bad as her chili was, it was still better than the horrid cheap stuff she got in cans; and he had told her so. Again and again and again. So why do it now? Once or twice he had asked, wearily, why she didn't just boil a pot of potatoes. "You can boil them in their jackets," he said, "you don't even have to peel them." And she said, Yes, but she'd have to wash them.

"Is there any vermouth, Pauli?"

"No. But that's all right, there's no gin, either."

"I've got a half pint here."

"Where can you get half pints of gin in New York State?"

"It's lemon-flavored—that makes it legal, for some ungodly reason. Mixer?"

"There's nothing. Except that Chianti."

"Gimme."

"Oh, Ed, it'll taste awful."

"Who the hell cares about the taste? Where's the Chianti?"

But, of course, she didn't know where it was, nor—once he'd found it (in the closet, concealed by a pile of her things so carelessly hung up that they'd fallen down)—did she know where there was a clean glass. It turned out that there wasn't any clean glass. He washed one and she appropriated it while he was opening the gin, so he washed another for himself.

The Chianti did taste awful.

He had been on his feet all that afternoon, saving taxifare, delivery service, postage, literary agent's fees. At least he said he was saving the agent's ten per cent, but he knew he'd simply run through all the worthwhile literary agents in town and there was no one left who would advance him a cent until he paid back all the advances of the past year and a half. And one, Tom Thompson, wanted to know when Ed was "going to show some signs of straightening himself out." As if the mere fact that Ed was on his feet, seeing people, writing again—as if that wasn't the best sign of all that he had straightened himself out.

As compared to the too-long stretch when he was rarely sober, dunning for advances or loans and, when not getting them, living on Pauli's meager alimony. That is, not exactly alimony: a sum of money sent regularly by a Petty Officer Second Class who believed he was the father of Pauli's little girl. Pauli, who knew better, had told her mother she'd been married to the sailor, and had sent the kid to her.

And then, even harder to bear—because it was so near the truth—the agent said, "I don't call this writing, Ed. It's a scissors and paste job. They all are. What you've got here, you're cannibalizing your old material. No good market would take it, and I don't bother with the others."

Well, so the hell with Tom Thompson.

The whole afternoon had resulted only in a \$30 sale to that crook, Joe Mulgar, who gave \$5 in cash and the promise to pay the rest sometime after publication. Hence the pint of gin (lemon-flavored). The piece had netted Ed \$300 the first time he sold it, five years ago.

Five years ago was just before he had married Jinny. Had he started his drinking and loafing and playing around because Jinny was the way she was, or was Jinny the way she was because of his drinking and loafing and carrying on? It was hard to say; Ed just didn't know. She had never cheated, like Lynn (Lynn was before Jinny), he was sure of that. Nor would she ever fight back the way Bran had, nor yield the way Pauli yielded. Jinny had always stayed so calm and cool. It was infuriating. She never tried to conquer him, she never even tried to conquer him.

"I'm leaving." That was all he had said to Jinny.

"I'll be here when you come back." That was all Jinny had said. Not even "if."

"When." Well, he never would go back. Why had she said it? What did she want with him, if she could go on without him? Pauli, with all her faults—

Pauli!

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Ed swung his feet over the side of the bed, cracking his heels on the floor. It wasn't a bed, actually but a pad, a mattress set up on box springs. He'd been on and off a thousand of them. Only it had been a regular bed, not a pad, in their apartment.

And now he realized that he'd known from the first moment of his awakening that he wasn't in their apartment. His eyes hurt and his head throbbed and he felt his heart beating in terror. Beside the pad was an up-ended orange crate, its top encrusted with dirty cigarette butts. The pad was in an alcove blocked off by a torn screen, and somewhere someone was taking a shower and whistling off-key. On the floor alongside was a pile of clothes. His.

Hangovers are funny only to those who have never really suffered from them. As he bent, half fainting, half retching, over his clothes, it was nothing so slight as a splitting headache that Ed Peterson felt, but a condition in which every cell in his body seemed at war with every other cell, and all his parts seemed loathsome to him. Closing his eyes, feeling that they would otherwise burst from their sockets, he got into his clothes. He had to get out of the apartment before whoever-it-was got out of the shower.

He had killed a human being—instinctively he raised his hands: there was no blood, unless that dark whatever-it-was, half on and half under the rough loose cuticle of one finger... And on his clothes? Was that spot there—and the one next to it—were they blood? Or the Chianti of the night before? Ed didn't

know. He had no memory of the latter part of last evening.

In the subway station, sitting on the hard wooden bench (first he'd tried to thrust a nickel into the turnstile, then—recalling vaguely that the fare had been raised—he had found a dime and pressed that into the slot, and finally took both coins to the change booth and been given a token) he remembered that he did not even recall the location of the house he had just left. So far as he knew, he had never been in the place before, but he knew well enough what sort of a place it was: a dive.

Who was it that had been so scornful of "dive people"? Jinny? No, Jinny was never scornful of anyone—at least, not openly. Pauli? (Ah, God, Pauli!) They had met in a dive—"Riverside Dive" it had been called—a huge apartment tenanted jointly (or so it seemed) by several hundred harmless young men, mostly science-fiction fans, with half a dozen bathrooms and two score beds.

Yes, Pauli, curling her over-red lips and saying, "Divepeople!" Pauli. Few of the dives, to be sure, were on the level of the one overlooking the River. Some were converted (or unconverted) lofts, some out-and-out slums; some made a faltering effort at achieving the more abundant life via the co-op method, with typewritten menus and duty rosters on the kitchen bulletin board(WEDNESDAY: Breakfast: Doreen and Jack. Cleanup: Dickie), and a membership of students or artists or other pursuers of beautiful dreams. And other dives were sort of pipeless opium dens, not—to be sure—scenes of orgies, but places for the restless and roaming to fall back on for a pad and a pancake if there weren't any orgies going for the moment. But they all had something in common—the same air of insubstantiality, of wary waitfulness, the presence of those who had turned their backs upon the past and their faces half away from the future—the unsuccessfully educated, the believers in nothing...

Not even looking to see where the train was going, Ed crept in and sank down in a corner. The man nearest him finished hisDaily News and tossed it on the seat, thus by subway law making it public domain; Ed picked it up. Gory auto wreck on page one, European infamy on page two, society scandal on page three, page four the latest teenage gang fight, page five and further on the "news" dwindled to tiny paragraphs buried in advertising and syndication. Nothing there that meant anything to him. It was a late edition. If the body hadn't been found by press time it couldn't be in any well-frequented place. Or—was it true that the police sometimes didn't announce the finding right away? Waiting for the killer to—

To what?What killer? Edward Peterson? Absurd, he was no killer. He'd been no cuckold, either, but he had been cuckolded nonetheless by Lynn, his wife-before-Jinny. Strange, it hadn't occurred to him to kill then, although custom almost licensed it. Why had he killed this time?

The empty space next to him was suddenly filled and a pamphlet was thrust into his slack hands. "Brother, you look like an intelligent man," said a stranger (who didn't) to him. "Leave me tell you of something which you won't find it in no newspapers. Booze they'll advertise, yes, and filthy tobacco, and motion pitchers dealing with murder, sex, and other dreadful subjects; the churches are all a them c'rupt, brother—" Ed got up abruptly and walked into the next car.

Booze...murder, sex... corrupt... He and Pauli had finished the gin and this had loosened her sufficiently to admit she had some money stashed away somewhere (but none of it had been forthcoming for him when he had set out on his rounds earlier in the day) and they had bought some more liquor and listened to the radio and smoked and talked and danced a while... nothing that should have ended in murder. But then nothing should ever end in murder... He leaned his head on his arm and tried to think. What had happened after that?

They had danced... had they gone out anywhere? Bought more to drink? He couldn't think. All that

came to him was the sound of her breathing in the dark. He felt the softness of her throat, felt the pulse beating, took up the sharp knife—

The knife! What knife? Where had he found it? There wasn't a sharp knife in the apartment; bread came ready-sliced and they ate so much out of cans that only seldom did the lack of a knife occur to them, and nothing was ever done about it. Had he picked up a sharp knife somewhere else? Had they wound up in someone else's place? If the last, it must have been an apartment where the regular tenants were away, or—No, it didn't follow. The regular tenant (he? she? they?) may have gone out, leaving them to sleep. That would mean a separate room. And whom did they know well enough to descend on suddenly—people who had a separate room? Could there have been another room, temporarily vacant, in the dive in which he'd awakened? A dive with which Pauli was familiar and he was not? Would he have gone to sleep in the same place he'd committed murder? If he was drunk enough to kill—

The train stopped more abruptly than usual. 86th Street. Automatically he got off, then tried to remember why. Who lived near this station? There was only one person near here they knew. Margaret Thorpe. Massive Maggie, with her short-cut hair and her tailored suits and (it was said, but not to her face, her rack of briar pipes and her bar-bells). She had a guest room; they might have come up to her place, because Mag was known to be a good supplier of whiskey... Halfway up the stairs out of the station, Ed stopped. Yes, and suppose they had gone there? And suppose it had happened there?

Should he call Maggie and try to read her voice for guarded nuances, try to discern the men in uniform, the men in plain clothes, behind the subdued roughness of her voice? No, he didn't dare, any more than he dared return to their own apartment. Because if he did—and if he did find Pauli there on the bed with her throat cut from ear to ear—he knew he would run out, screaming his terror aloud.

What would he do then? Run for it? Where? And with what?

Still standing on the subway steps, he groped in his pockets. TWO one-dollar bills and some change. He might run as far as East Orange on that. The only thing to do was for the condemned man to eat a hearty breakfast and then seek out the executioners.

Ed Peterson started up the steps.

Why had he done it?

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Q. Why did you murder her?

A. I don't know.

Q. You must have had some reason.

A. Each man kills the thing he loves.

Q. But, did you really love her?

A. Yes—I—no. No, I hated her. She was a slut and a slattern and the misery of my daily life and I now see that I blamed her for all my misery.

Q. Why was that?

A. If she had given me the right kind of love I might have been strong enough, instead of weak.

Q. Where did you run to while I was taking a shower?

What! "Yes, you, Ed—snap out of the daydream! I came out of the shower and no Ed. Why—"

Somewhere, he knew, he had met the young man in the open shirt, some time before last night (and when and where last night? and why the invitation to skip out in the dive?) he had met this young man with the bulldog pipe.

"Well, never mind," said Bulldog, "Where are you headed for? The Great Dicie Taylor Exhibit, I suppose." And not waiting for an answer, (after a ritual gurgle of his pipe) he swept on. "Yep, Dicie's Mama has come out of the West and is treating Daughter to an art show as an act of contrition for not wanting her to leave La Harpe, Illinois. Everybody's there! And why not? Free drinks, free eats—oh, Mama's doing it up in real style—who knows how many years' interest on corn-and-hog mortgages are going into this show? Come on, let's fly!" He had taken Ed by the arm.

Where had he met Bulldog? At what coffee-and-crackers fest in Chelsea? Or in whatcasa de cappucino in the Village? Perhaps in another dive than the one he had awakened in, or at some antic conventicle of the Libertarian League, perhaps in cruising for women between Bran and Pauli, not caring in the least if the state never withered away... Now he felt weak and hungry; thirsty, too. Food and drink, yes...

He had let Bulldog pull him along without protest or comment.

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The din and smoke finally made an impression on him after a few canapes and a few drinks. If he turned his head he might see Dicie Taylor (whoevershe was) and her American Gothic mother, but he had no interest in doing so. He stood there, gazing with a dull look at a green nude in whose pelvic structure lay strange mysteries, though of real interest only to an anatomist. And then he heard a laugh—

"Ah, Pauli, Pauli," said a deep, male voice. Slowly, very slowly, Ed Peterson turned his head. There was Pauli, holding hands with a giant of a young man: fresh country face and coal-black hair. She saw Ed and raised her eyebrows.

"Well, I don't know whereyou went after we parted last night. I went up to Massive Maggie's—and guess who I met coming in, lives in the same house? Freddy, here. Never did get to Maggie's," she murmured; and then, as if anything were needed to make her meaning clear, she lifted her new friend's huge hand to her over-red lips and kissed it. Freddy, with an air of awkward ceremony, brushed his mouth against her hair, looking at Peterson with a mixture of wariness, defiance, excitement, and delight.

The smoke grew into a mist and the din to a roar. Then all came into focus again. It had only been a drunken dream, a nightmare out of Poe!

"I'm glad, Pauli!" Ed had said, and he had meant it.

"That's not very gallant of you," she pouted. "But thanks for not making any fuss. Of course, you know

the apartment's in my name..."

"That's all right."

She frowned slightly. "But where will you go?"

For only a breath he hesitated. "Why, I think I'll go back to Jinny," he had said.

"Jinny? Well—yes, she said she'd be waiting for you, didn't she?"

Freddy, determined to do the right thing but wanting at the same time to make the new status definitely quo, said, "Have a drink before you leave."

"Thanks, but I don't think I'll have any more." No more boozing, no more catting, no more scissors-and-paste. An end to decay and dishonor!

She blew him a kiss. "Bye-bye."

All but singing aloud, he left the gallery on dancing feet and hailed a taxi to take him to his wife—to his faithful, patient wife, his only love. He gave all the money to the driver and ran into the outer hall, his finger finding the bell at once, his ear rejoicing in the sound of the buzzer. An elderly woman came down the hall, known to him by sight only, a tenant of the building; and she stopped short as Ed Peterson stepped into the elevator.

They were there in the apartment, waiting for him, not excited but mildly expectant, mildly gratified. "Here's Mr. Peterson now," one of them said. And took him by the arm a trifle diffidently and led him to the bedroom where Jinny was waiting for him as she had promised, calm and cool as always, lying on the bed with her throat cut from ear to ear.