

Brokendown

Liam Roberts

Hail lashed against the windows of the pub, battering against the glass like bebe pellets, briefly silencing the tables of post-grads drinking themselves into a giddy state of forgetfulness. Roger looked up from his crossword, around at the students, hoping to catch a glimpse of one of them, anyone, with something to smile about. No one looked his way, and he turned to the barmaid.

“Hell of a storm, Teresa!” he said, scratching his forearm, his grey eyebrows arched.

“Got that right, Roger,” she nodded with her face away from him, and she turned the music up. It was blues night at the George, and an old Clarence Williams song competed with the noise of the maelstrom outside. Roger turned back to his crossword, glancing at his pint glass, nearly empty. He frowned and pulled a cigarette out from his shirt pocket.

The front door opened, its bell tinkling madly, the wind howling angrily at the cozy collection of regulars inside. Roger turned to see a girl shutting the door with both her arms, pushing it hard, even after it had closed, claiming victory against the storm. She waited a moment before turning around to face the rest of the pub, alive with the drink-fueled chatter of dozens of students, the odd professor amongst them, and a background lullaby of the blues.

Roger caught her glance for just a moment. She had peroxide blonde hair, a black woolen coat and black boots. Her auburn eyes revealed a depth that defied her youth: suspicion, reluctance, exhaustion. Roger turned quickly back to his crossword, adjusted his bifocals, gripped his biro, and pursed his lips in feigned concentration.

“Hiya dear, what can I get you?” Teresa asked the girl.

The girl, pulling her wet hair behind her head, studied the bottles stood along the back shelf for a moment.

“I'll have... a whisky. A scotch whisky, please. With some ice.”

“Glenfiddich okay?”

“Yes. Fine.” And she sat at the bar beside Roger, hanging her coat on the hook beneath the bar.

A crowd of students roared in laughter to each other at a booth by the window. The girl looked into her drink, holding it up in the light, studying the golden rainbows inside the glass. Roger bapped his pen on the newspaper, took a drag on his cigarette, glancing at her sidelong. “Listen, what do you think forgiven could mean?” he asked. “Eight letters. Second letter 'a'.”

She looked towards him, slowly, then down at the crossword, “I'm sorry,” she laughed. “I don't know. I am terrible at these. My English.”

Roger nodded. “Where are you from? France?”

She turned back to her drink, turning the glass in her hands. “I'm from Russia.”

“Russia?” Roger exclaimed. “No! Really? How did you get... to England?”

She closed her eyes and took a sip from her drink. “Have you been to Soviet Union?” she asked.

Roger rubbed his nose and adjusted his glasses. “Well, once, yes, I have! Leningrad, when I was a student here. To visit the Hermitage! Amazing place.”

She looked at him. “You were student here? At LSE?”

“Sure, once! International relations!” He laughed, turning his eyes towards the bar, gripping his denim knees. He could feel her studying him: his saggy, unshaven face, his worn leather jacket, his thin grey hair.

“It was a long time ago now,” he said.

“Now, you are professor?” she asked, tentatively. “I study international relations.”

Roger clenched his eyes shut. “No!” he said. “I’m no professor. You must know that!”

“Yes. I never saw you in the university.”

“Well, I’ve never seen you in the pub!”

She put her glass on the bar. “You come here often. Like all the rest.”

Roger blushed. “Well. Not often. I just like to be here, to talk to all you students about your dissertations and everything. When you’ll let me. Never let your dreams slip through your fingers, that’s what I always say.”

She laughed. “You were a student here when you were young. Now you are an advisor!” She took a long sip from her whisky, the ice cubes tinkling against each other, the sound of the hail outside subsiding.

Roger drained the last of his pint. “Things can change in life,” he said. “For good, or not.”

“Maybe, for you,” she shrugged. “But the machine doesn’t change. Big picture never changes.”

Roger wiped his scalp and sniffed. “That’s not true. Everything changes. All the time. All the time.” He sniffed again.

“Is that so.”

“Yes, it's so! Lookit - you, you're from Russia, fine. So? Lookit.” He put his cigarette out and pointed towards the window. “Outside this university, right out there on Kingsway, is the entrance to a great tunnel, eighty years old. You've seen it, with its gates locked up?”

She nodded. “What is that?”

“Used to be a tunnel for a tram that ran underground right down to Waterloo. Yes! Stations all the way down there. It was a big deal, I suppose, when they built it. They weren't building it for fun, were they? Imagine all those men building that great big thing, thinking it would last forever. You wouldn't do something like that unless you thought it was going to last forever. You'd never expect it to shut down, fall apart, completely just – you know. Shut down.”

“You're drunk,” she smiled.

“It's been closed now 15 years. 1952! I remember when it happened. But everything changes. Of course. Poof. Gone.” He fiddled with his empty glass, and smiled. “But things can change again.”

She grinned back. “And in 20 years, they will open it again, you think? Changing again.”

He laughed. “Absolutely! Changing again.”

She shook her head, and finished her drink. “I'm sorry. I should go. But, was nice meeting you.”

“Okay then, no worries. You take care.” Roger nodded, and turned to his crossword again.

She smiled, putting her coat on. "I hope you don't change too much," she said, and left to face the dying storm.