

Burgundy Grass

The glass was half empty no matter how much she poured. I took a long look at the two drinks before me till they became one. I threw it back because of what I felt and the hope I wouldn't feel it anymore. The taste of whiskey used to tie my balls to a train, but now water packs more of a punch. I let my cigarette roll off my fingertips, knowing I got a pack of burgundy grass to smoke anytime my lungs felt the fire.

"Another?" she asked, the bottle gliding to my side to help the two empty seats keep me company. I nodded, letting my head move up and down her figure. I didn't order another because I wanted a drink; I ordered another because I wanted her. I wanted to touch her as if she wanted me to. Like I was someone special in her life that she wouldn't give up for anything in the world.

She left me to go make nice with a kid her age, and I fired up another cigarette. The jukebox played the blues and I fit the mood. I kept my eyes low so people couldn't see me seeing them—something I'd learned quick in the big house. Worked plenty good keeping people in check—so good I scared myself. But I didn't mind much that I didn't recognize who I was anymore. I didn't have anything to live for, let alone miss, now that I had changed.

Headlights exploded through the cracks of the blinds, leaving a prison bar shadow that traced the walls. I tried to shake the image out of my head—feeling it rattle around but stay where it was all the same. The lights died and the sound of the car that had pulled up vanished. I turned my head to the side so I'd have first view of whoever came through the door. My nerves couldn't stay still, so I threw back another to try and deliver the kill. By the time I opened my eyes, the stranger was a guest.

Tall fella with boulder shoulders and a long grey coat. He was rimming the end of a cigar that smelled better than anything I'd ever smelled before. He walked past me, not even noticing I was there. The waitress gladly showed him to a seat, and I could see the lad she'd been flirting with turn red with envy. I turned slowly back toward the counter and let my mind relax for the first time in a long time.

I got out this morning. I had years, I'd sooner forget, to think about what I was locked up for—that and whether or not I wanted to take it any further when I was let go. But now that the opportunity was here; now that I was free, nothing seemed as simple as it was when I'd planned it. I kept telling myself all a man has is his pride. But it's hard to stay proud behind bars. If I did what I told myself I was gonna do, I'd spend the rest

of my days running. But from what I heard, there ain't much living to be done after you've become comfortable in prison—released or not.

The fella threw the last bit of his cigar into an ash tray on his way to the washroom and I contemplated taking it to smoke later. The bar lingered with the taste of everyone in it, but it smelled sweet since he arrived. I wondered how much he had in his pockets and if there were another cigar. I thought about how secure he looked and how stupid he was. A quick knife before he got in his car and everything he'd worked for could be mine. I'd seen it a thousand times... I took another drink to shut myself up before I forgot where I was and did something stupid.

It's odd—I didn't remember seeing people for what they were worth until after I'd been in jail. I didn't imagine killing a man for his watch, or stealing when others weren't looking. Jail made me the criminal I'd been locked up for being.

I reached across the counter and took the bottle since the bartender was now busy trying to secure her elder years. The young lad left, his confidence shattered by her quick turn of favor. Now there were only the three of us left in the bar, but, fortunately, nobody paid me any mind. Being invisible felt good—no one looking to take or break what little I had left. I reached into my pocket and fished out the last of the cash I had on me when I got sentenced. I tossed it onto the counter and took one final drink for the road. I'd made my decision.

Continued in The Collection: Volume One
