

LONERS

a short story collection by

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Alley Night

The way down felt hard and long for Jonathan Schlichting, though in truth the spiral took little less than a year.

First he had the loss of his job to contend with. His blown judgment call on the all-important Contreras portfolio was likely to cause a few problems for his old firm, but he never expected to find himself out on the street because of the blunder and unable to land another position. Next, there was the series of personal investments that had turned sour, leaving him all but broke. Then the decampment of his wife: Jonathan should have seen it coming, but in his preoccupation with his deteriorating professional and business affairs, he simply hadn't been paying enough attention. When he discovered to boot that Daria had been carrying on an affair behind his back with one of his friends, he felt nothing less than bludgeoned by the betrayal. As if that weren't enough, there was the forfeiture of his South Cove luxury apartment, an airy penthouse commanding an impressive view of the Statue of Liberty.

Just when he thought nothing else could happen, there was to be one final blow: his mother's illness -- lung cancer, the result of a lifetime of cigarette smoking, with a dire prognosis. Miriam Schlichting was the one person in Jonathan's life (especially since his

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father had passed away when he was just seven) who'd never wavered in her infatuation with him and his vaunted potentials, and the imminent loss of her was nearly too much for him to bear.

In the end it wasn't just that Miriam needed his help now that she was forced to endure the ugly rigors of chemotherapy, that she was alone, and that she was confronting the finish line of her race; it was also that Manhattan no longer wanted him. And so Jonathan had nowhere else to go but back to the row house on Jackson Street in River City. Somehow he never thought he'd end up back where he started, in gloomy, depressing, blue-collar New Jersey, but the events of the past year were enough to convince him that life *could* change for the worst -- and that it could do so in a hurry.

What came as the biggest surprise to Jonathan Schlicting at a certain point in his tribulations was how thoroughly disinclined he was to extricate himself from his fix. The fight had drained out of him altogether. What did it matter if he was a flop? Whether or not he rebounded from his misfortunes? It didn't take much to see that fame or obscurity, success or failure, didn't count for much when the final curtain descended on a person's life, because rich or poor, great or puny, young or old, we were all going to end up in the same place.

Life on Jackson Street quickly degenerated into a gray parade of empty time. The TV burred its inanities twenty-four hours a day. While sitting in front of it, Jonathan could hear the annoying shouts of the punks who milled about on the street corner, wasting their lives -- like him now -- doing nothing. He accompanied his mother to the hospital for her cancer treatments, but the gruesome experience and its nauseating aftermath only served to deflate him more.

It was Miriam who suggested that he could do with

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psychiatric counseling.

“That’s why they’re in practice, Jon -- to help people pull through. I think you could use a little help.”

He was slightly insulted, but since he cared for his mother he paid her lip service. Shrinks were so completely *passee*. Nowadays it was all mystical herbs and expensive pharmaceuticals -- which he didn’t happen to believe in either. Nevertheless, out of a sense of curiosity, he contacted the local public mental health clinic and set an appointment to see a Doctor Richard Gonzalez for a minimal fee.

The first several minutes of the session were especially unproductive, since Jonathan felt no desire to actually *say* anything. Doctor Gonzalez crooked his forefinger beneath his moustache and peered at him from behind his glasses.

“It’s all right to be quiet, Jonathan, that means something too...but you might find it helpful to try and communicate at least a little of what your life is like right now...and, hopefully, we can figure out how to help you.”

God, how utterly banal! As banal as the mustard-colored walls and the dented metal desk between them. Jonathan smiled cynically. He struggled to recount what had happened to him, but his words, the hollow sound of his own voice, seemed painfully inadequate.

“How can I explain it....Okay, maybe this will help. The other day I decided to draw up kind of a ledger: reasons to live, reasons to die. I thought it over, very hard...and I couldn’t come up with a single reason why I should stay alive.”

Doctor Gonzalez nodded sagely, then shifted in his chair, somewhat uneasily it seemed to his patient.

“I can certainly empathize with your pain. But let’s think

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about it here -- wasn't your life fulfilling at one time? Before the terrible stuff happened? Couldn't you truthfully say that?"

Jonathan made the effort to think back. It seemed like such a long time ago, another incarnation, and it was all so meaningless now: Making money. The acquisition of stuff. Trying to outdo the next guy. He had been far from the best at those things, but equally far from the worst. He was just an average guy who'd learned early in life to work hard, to overachieve, to please others, to pursue some elusive, ill-defined goal -- and he'd never quite known what the phantom goal was behind the outer trappings. In the process, he'd lost the capacity to know what he felt about anything.

Jonathan gazed into space, and out of the corner of his eye noticed Doctor Gonzalez's coarse brow furrow with impotence when the silence again dragged on for too long. The session meandered from here to there without ever arriving anywhere meaningful. No, this shrink wasn't going to be the answer.

There was nothing left for Jonathan but to make a decision: he would slip away -- *permanently*. When he first returned to live with his mother, he generously assumed that he would see her through to the end of her ordeal -- it couldn't be long in coming -- but now he changed his mind.

It was a fine night in early June, the afterglow of the setting sun still shimmering outside the window, when Jonathan lay on the narrow mattress in his childhood bedroom cradling the vial of tranquilizers that he planned on swallowing and then drifting off into eternal sleep. He pushed on the cap with the heel of his palm and twisted. After shaking out a field of the tiny oblong tablets, he weighed them in his hand. *Light as a feather but strong enough to kill a horse.*

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Just as he was about to push them into his mouth, he hesitated, thinking of Miriam. Did he really want his mother finding him choked to death on his own vomit in the morning? Why cause the poor woman the unnecessary anguish of having to discover his stiff carcass? Seeing that her precious son had died by his own hand in the place where he was born was likely to kill her on the spot.

He was going to have to come up with another method, one that would make his demise appear as if it hadn't been his responsibility, so that at the very least Miriam would never have to know a trace of guilt over it.

In the mild, late spring evenings he set out on long, solitary treks through the streets of the city, but without direction or destination. With his unshaven face, sunken eyes and rumpled clothes it was as if he'd degenerated into a homeless zombie, as lifeless as a wooden bench at a bus stop or one of the cold, glowering street lamps that seemed to stretch out to infinity along the gritty boulevards. Sometimes he wondered if perhaps he already *was* dead, but the next morning he would open his eyes with disappointment to find himself still among the living.

Until one night, without realizing it at first, Jonathan Schlicting stumbled onto the solution he was looking for.

“Hey -- *maricon*....”

He happened to be trudging past a boarded-up movie theater in a seedy pocket of the downtown district when he heard that baiting voice.

He turned. There, in the mouth of the alley that bisected the block, stood a half-dozen toughs in basketball shirts and baggy jeans, a few smoking joints, others brandishing beer cans. One of them, a tall kid with a wispy beard, yelled at Jonathan again, this

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time something he couldn't decipher -- another vile insult, no doubt.

Like a lightbulb illuminating the black inside of a cave, there was a flash in Jonathan's brain. He suddenly recalled reading about a recent sadistic mugging in this section, a beating which had resulted in the death, from a fractured skull and hemorrhaging brain, of the victim. The police reached the conclusion that the motive had been robbery, but the perpetrators hadn't been apprehended. Certain alleys of River City, the article concluded, should be considered unsafe.

"Got a little change for me, faggot?"

Jonathan made straight for the gang, who fell silent as they watched him, a blank astonishment replacing the malevolence in their eyes. If they thought he was going to run, they were sorely mistaken! It was *they* who were going to do *his* bidding.

When he got closer, the hooligans burst into mocking laughter.

"Check out this fool! Believe this shit?"

"Si! Si! Ha ha *ha!*"

"*I kill this motherfucker!*"

From out of nowhere a River City patrol car rolled up. The cop in the shotgun seat lowered his window.

"What's going on here?"

Jonathan shrugged. The punks scattered like cockroaches out of a nest. Jonathan crossed the street, picking up his pace in the direction of home.

He was disappointed, but not dejected, by the cops' rude interruption of his brainstorm. No, it might take a while, but now his course was fixed....

Every night thereafter was "alley night." Jonathan would

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shower, shave, and don his finest suit, to be used as a lure. Before heading out to the street, Miriam called to him from her chair in front of the TV.

“Not going out on a date, are you?”

“No, Ma.”

“Too bad for you.”

“Just going for a walk, like I do every night.”

“All dressed up?”

“It makes me feel better, Ma...”

He would nod wistfully, knowing it might well be the last time he would ever set eyes on the mystified woman. Since River City was crisscrossed length and width by cobblestone alleys, it was a simple task to map out a route that would take him into the toughest, most forbidding corners, where he would wander for hours. Jonathan grew so bored, so pessimistic, so complacent in his pursuit of death that he nearly failed to notice that he was being followed by a pair of shadows in Harriman’s Alley one evening two weeks later...

Finally the tat-tat-tat of heavy soles made Jonathan look over his shoulder. For the first time in months his heart beat faster. *Beautiful*, he thought as the hulking silhouettes seemed to gain on him. He slowed down in order to allow them to catch up. Then he began to deliberately rummage in his pockets, as if he were searching for his keys -- or nervously checking his valuables.

Within seconds they were at his heels. Like a pit viper Jonathan could sense them, feel them breathing down his neck. A thrill raced up his spine.

Suddenly a vicious blow landed on the point of his right shoulder, driving him to the sweaty stones beneath his feet.

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The two men grunted like animals as they kicked him. “*Where’s your stash, cocksucker?*”

Before Jonathan could even reach for his wallet, he was being booted again.

The pain in his side was excruciating from where he’d caught a rock-hard toe. Warm blood -- his own -- had spurting across his face and begun seeping between his open lips. The thugs succeeded in tearing his wallet out of his trousers pocket. From his prostrate position on the ground Jonathan watched as they huddled over it.

“Ain’t fuckin’ *nuttin’* in here!” The leather piece was flung into the darkness where it made a dull slap.

“You miserable shit! I’m gonna cut your throat out, you little puddle of slime!”

All along, for weeks, months, Jonathan Schlicting had desired nothing but to get his miserable self offed...but now, peering down the barrel of his final moments on earth, something long missing, some atavistic urge, burst into new life inside him. It was the instinct for self-preservation, certainly, but it was something else too.

A flash in the darkness. One of the demons was about to charge him with a knife. Reflexively Jonathan sprang onto his haunches to defend himself, and in that uncomplicated gesture he was filled with the rage to live. All the years of ease and comfort and ambivalence -- as well as the recent months of despair -- melted away in a single instant of translucence.

The blade was in his face. Jonathan rolled away and scrambled to his feet. The second assailant lunged at him just as he was grabbing for a crunched trash can that was at rest against the door of a garage. In the nick of time Jonathan got hold of the lid and swung it with all of his might, striking the knife-carrier in the face.

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“My eye! He knocked out my eeeeyyyyyee!”

Jonathan was in ecstasy. Bleating in agony, his attacker clutched at his head.

A nearby window flew open with a thwack.

“Hey, you goddamn trash! Shut up out there before I call the cops!”

The one who’d tossed Jonathan’s wallet was frozen in his tracks. “Up, Manny, *up!* -- let’s *beat* it!”

But Manny was on his back, in pain, writhing like an overturned tortoise. Jonathan caught a glimpse of the silvery blade on the stones a few feet away. He made a move for it. Manny’s partner cursed.

“I’m tellin’ you -- I’m callin’ the cops if you don’t cut the racket out there!”

“Be my guest!” shouted Jonathan boldly as he squeezed the knife handle. “I got somebody here I’d like them to meet!”

--- END OF SAMPLE ---

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