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May B. Smith Composition Award

“Casablanca”

For the majority of my long bus ride to Bulgaria from Kosovo, I've been asleep, along with other soldiers beginning a three day pass. After rubbing my tired eyes, I move the window's privacy shade to the side. We've stopped in front of a large, nondescript building, having reached our destination. Two additional busloads are due hours later, so we're the fortunate first arrivals. Some of us can't wait to be immersed in local culture, while others simply seek to immerse themselves in alcohol and women, or other moral laxities. At this moment, I just want to stretch my legs and breathe some fresh air.

The Hotel Rodina has an Eastern European flair, one that American tourists might consider chic when they've consumed enough vodka. Its outer architecture is a shell of what it contains, like a drab brown egg, which upon being cracked reveals a bright yellow center. Moving from the outer hotel to the first floor lobby is like stepping from a communist bloc propaganda poster to a four-star executive-class playground. My eyes are greeted with a flash of dull plum carpet and 1970s-esque recessed lighting. Thick gold inlay stretches from floor to ceiling, and whatever can be polished to a high gloss sheen has been.

Guests lounging on beige and red sofas speak in subdued tones, as if passing on privileged information, though their social status is quickly lowered by an array of cheap polyester-blend suits. From a distance, these men give the appearance of Cohiba smoking kingpins, but as with most aspects of this city, first impressions can't be trusted.

A concierge wearing a uniform nearly matching the hue of the carpet approaches my bags, but I politely wave him off. Since I'm feeling groggy after the long trip in, the last thing I want to do is lag behind a slow luggage cart. Crammed into a claustrophobically tiny elevator

with three other people and falling between their conversation, I realize for the first time that I can't understand the locals, and that my language barrier will make this trip difficult. A middle-aged woman gestures toward my watch and I half smile.

“It's two o'clock.”

She stares, apparently expecting me to clarify. I look away, again checking my watch.

“Two. Two o'clock. I'm sorry, I only speak English.”

The elevator doors open, and I slip into an otherwise empty hallway, leaving the chatter behind. This space smells strongly of stale old smoke, decades' worth. Room 313 is what I'm after. What a horribly ominous number. Sliding my key card, I hear a slight click from the lock and step into the room.

A small crease of light filters through the curtains. I flick on the lamp and a slow, dull fade reveals nauseating details. The colors of the wallpaper, carpet, and bedcovers are obnoxious. Purple mixes with a soft blue and an off-yellow.

“Great, beds a foot off the ground. This furniture is minimalist gone awry,” I think to myself, “or the room is typically reserved for Asian businessmen.”

Pulling the curtains completely shut, I mumble, “Could be worse; could be Reno,” and carefully collapse into the shrunken bed.

Hearing the lock give, I stir. The clock reads 4:45, and when I sit up, the scent of tobacco hits me. Oddly, the room smells sweet, and I feel slightly refreshed.

His greeting is deafening.

“Wake up, Muthafucka! We’re going to eat, see the town. Get dressed!”

Moses is his name, or at least that’s what his immigration paperwork says. He’s Kenyan; he stands tall with thin and limber limbs. His dark eyes are bright and excited as he explores the room.

“Man, man, man! This place is pimp. They even have cable.”

I’m already heading toward the shower when he’s settled on watching MTV, though none of the songs sound familiar. Not much in this town is familiar. Wondering why items in this hotel are scaled down, even for a small guy like me, I step into the bathtub and turn on the faucet. It takes nearly ten minutes for the water to warm up, but by that time I’ve finished washing and step onto the cold tile floor.

“Hey, Moe, what do you feel like eating?” I shout.

“Food. I’m hungry. Let’s go!” he replies.

Exchanging a quarter of a month’s pay for 250 Bulgarian leva is simple; finding creative ways to spend the money is not. Pocketing enough for a night’s entertainment, we leave the hotel and find a cab. Between the two of us, we have cash for a trip around the city and back, with dinner and entertainment included.

“Are there any good restaurants around here?” I ask the driver, while Moe sings to himself in Kiswahili.

“This season, everything is closed. You should come during the summer.”

“Well, what would you recommend?” I respond.

“You like KFC or McDonalds? They’re always open.”

Through his thick accent I can tell that this man is growing restless.

“Drop us off at whichever is closer, please.”

The restaurant is the only familiar sight since we came into town; it glows inside with yellow florescent menu frames and shines with red vinyl booths. Moe isn’t happy about eating at McDonalds, especially since a “value meal” costs nearly 11 leva. After convincing him that we can eat quickly and explore the streets, he reveals a toothy grin, whiter than anything I’ve seen in the city. Approaching the counter, I feel rushed by the girl waiting impatiently behind the register.

“I’ll have the Big Mac meal, please, with a small fry and drink.”

Her nametag says Elena, and she’s beautiful in a way that causes my cheeks to burn. She stares for a moment before turning to her coworker, who shrugs. Looking back toward me, Elena says something I can’t understand, and I shrug my shoulders as well, staring back at her sheepishly.

“Uhh, I’ll have...”

Common sense takes over and I simply point to the paper menu sitting on the tray. After a quick nod, I hand over the strange currency and pocket the change. Moe orders next, pointing as well, taking up the same routine of nod, payment, change. We sit, make ourselves comfortable, and I unwrap my meal.

“What’n the fuck is this?” he accuses.

“It looks like mayonnaise,” I say.

Apparently, the fries in Bulgarian Mc Donald’s establishments come with packets of mayo as the main condiment. Quickly remedying the situation, I leave and return to the table with a half lev packet of catsup, provoking Moe’s white smile once again. The door opens and two young Americans, fellow soldiers, stumble in laughing.

“Damn, I’m hungry!” says the one wearing a Los Angeles Dodgers baseball cap, the bill tilted up and turned slightly to the left. He looks like a hip hop stereotype, undoubtedly a foreign sight for the restaurant staff.

“Mickey Dee’s; shit yeah!” his friend replies, dressed much the same.

Taking a booth next to us, the two discuss their evening’s exploits and reveal how drunk they planned on getting at the Hotel Rodina bar.

“Sorry for interrupting; we’re staying at the same hotel.” I mention, turning toward them.

“Ah, yeah? What branch you in?” he asks.

After small formalities, the four of us leave to walk the town, looking for whatever craziness is available to young American men in a strange and beautiful city. The sidewalk is packed with snow, but a small pathway has been plowed through and salted for foot traffic. Still, we four are having a difficult time walking without slipping. Surely this clumsiness would not impress the ladies, of whom we have seen very little thus far, other than the huddled, hurried variety seeking to escape the cold.

“This isn’t what I expected for a night out,” I complain.

“I wasn’t planning on freezing,” Moe responds.

Most of the shops have closed, and the Cultural Center won’t open until the following week. As the two hip hop twins want to drink at the hotel, while Moe and I are interested in finding warmth and sleep, we all decide to make our way back. I hail a cab, and as it passes without acknowledging my shouting “Taxi! Taxi!” another pulls up, though something seems strange. While the first cab that dropped us off was the traditional mustard yellow, this one is a matte grey, with a flickering checkered sign atop its roof. A well-dressed man wearing a leather coat rolls down the window.

“We’re going to the Hotel Rodina,” I say.

“Yes, Rodina, classy!” A cigarette dangles from his lips. “I take you.”

Just as I doze off, my head resting hard against the chilled glass of the taxi window, the driver starts a conversation with the hip hop twins. They discuss music, drinks, and women. I try to block them out and resume my nap, but it’s too late, I feel exhausted but can’t sleep.

“So you guys party tonight? Lots of drink? What you think of Sofia? *Nice* womens, eh?”

I sit up, supposing we’re nearing the hotel. Ten minutes out, I’d guess.

“Hey, you like girls?” the cabbie addresses me.

I’m not sure how to respond to this question. Is he assuming I’m gay?

“You know, nice girls. Pretty girls.”

“Sure,” I respond, turning toward the window.

“I know a place. Young girls. Clean girls. You want I should take you?” the cabbie is asking all of us now.

“Yeah, take us to the club! Let’s see some ladies!” the one in the tilted Dodger’s cap exclaims.

At this point I’m ready to object, slightly annoyed that I decided to share a cab. Moe looks over at me, pulls some currency from his pocket, and tells me that he has two days to spend it.

“We should hit the club, tonight only. How about it?” Moe’s eyes plead.

I scowl and gesture for him to put the money away, scolding his carelessness with my expression, warning him to be careful. He’s fortunate the cabbie didn’t see, otherwise we’d end up with an outrageous fare.

“Okay, if you want to go with them, we can go, but tomorrow, no last minute plans,” I tell Moe, my voice snapping.

Moe smiles a toothy grin as we take a detour. A few minutes of silent driving later, the lights of the city fade, and my gut tenses with worry. Clearly we’re not heading downtown, and if we are, the cabbie is stretching our fare. His cigarettes fill the car with a cloud of smoke that seems to separate us from him. Rounding a corner into a darkened residential neighborhood, we slow to a stop in front of a house. The cabbie puts the car in park and turns off the ignition, dabbing out the cherry of his cigarette.

“Okay. Inside you have girls. Lots of good time. No worries, I wait here.”

In the distance, a small one-story house blends into similar residences lining the block. The only differentiating characteristic is its sign, posted slightly above the front entrance. The lettering reads “Casablanca.” As Moe and the twins exit the car, I mention that I’m going to stay and that I’ll wait for them to return.

“You stay, I have to charge you fare. Go inside. You have good time and everything is okay. I wait here.”

Stepping from the cab, I follow the three who are already passing into the house, into “Casablanca.” The foyer, or living room (I can’t discern which because it’s so dark), veers suddenly to the left, where a heavy velvet curtain hangs in place. As we pass through, my eyes readjust to poor lighting, and my nostrils burn with a haze of cigarette smoke that turns the air grey. I anticipate being clubbed and robbed, possibly stabbed as well, and dragged outside into the cab that will whisk me away and dispose of my body in some obscure location. None of this happens, however. Rather, I find a semicircle of women, all of whom sit drinking, smoking, and chatting. They don’t seem to notice any of us.

We four sit awkwardly and wait for what seems like ten minutes. A stocky man appears from the right, the velvet curtain draping over his wide shoulders and falling back into place. He carries a tray of food; it looks like a party platter of lunch meats and cheeses. After placing it on a coffee table in front of the women, he approaches calmly and confidently.

“Okay. Every girl you see, 80 leva for one hour. You get two girls for 140 leva. You want more, let me know.”

The women continue to smoke and chat amongst themselves, gesturing toward one another and making surprised exclamations here and there. I imagine them to be talking of

important matters, much loftier than their chosen or forced profession. It's clear that we're not in a "club" and that there will be no dancing, save the paid, loveless horizontal style. I wonder how many of the women are prisoners in this house, but for some reason, none appear troubled by their surroundings. Maybe it's been too long, with one 'client' after another. They wear a mixture of rose-colored silk camisoles and black spandex leggings, lime green midriff tops and frayed denim capris. Brimming ashtrays are scattered across the tabletop, and the women hold thin cigarettes in a dainty, carefree fashion.

I choose not to participate. My first sexual encounter with a woman isn't going to be in a brothel. It surely isn't going to be on the clock and priced at \$64. And the health risk....

"Well, they *are* beautiful," I think.

Moe looks up grinning, turns toward me, and laughs.

"Oh man. Ohmanohman!" he exclaims.

So now it's two of us who won't be paying for the trained services of these 'willing' ladies. The twins choose their partners, one pointing toward a thin, dark-haired middle-aged woman who looks as though she could be his mother, and the other takes a young blonde who could easily pass for the prom queen at any American high school. The man standing near the velvet curtain is paid, and the twins disappear through two doors at the far end of the room. 'Their' women stand in a restroom and wash up, the door slightly ajar, revealing a pale flash of thigh and a set of sharply angled shoulders.

It's been nearly twenty minutes, and the pace of groaning and creaking, well-rehearsed orgasmic screaming, is winding down. I'm uncomfortable but can't help smirking under my

frustration, looking at my boots to hide the expression. Moe laughs aloud, which causes two of the women, otherwise occupied with dinner, to fiercely stare us down before losing interest. I want to call someone, to have a friend come rescue me after sharing the unbelievable story, but it's impossible from halfway around the world. I don't want to ride in the leather jacketed cabbie's car anymore. Now, the only person I can depend on is fidgeting with his hands and staring at the women sitting across from us.

“Don't judge,” he whispers while pulling an instamatic camera out of his coat pocket. “I just want to, to document. You know...art, with these ladies. Not sex.”

I don't believe him, but this just completes my night. And what an unpredictably shitty night it has been.

“Fine,” I moan. “I'm going to sit here though, and when you're finished, you and those assholes are paying the cab fare back. Hell, you're paying for my lunch tomorrow.”

For a brief moment, I look forward to a cold shower back at the Rodina and collapsing into my tiny bed.

Glancing over, Moe smiles, miles away in anticipation, his teeth by far the whitest of anything in the room.