

Heaven

By Allen Gary Palmer

As I exhale, the sweet smoke enchants my tongue and nostrils.

A last sip of hot tea and sugar tempers my nagging cough.

The endless supply of Pickwick's only soothes, but my cough persists—

A souvenir of the sins and habits of my mortal life that I take with me on
this final journey through Purgatory.

The cold misty Dutch air gently sprays my face—comforting,

Matching the absence of heat no longer generated by my lifeless vessel,

But refreshing, waking my soul and spirit like climbing under the
covers of a bed made hurriedly during a long New England winter's
night for a quick necessary trip down the hall.

My coarse wool and suede jacket catches the brick doorpost as I try to
make a left out of the coffee shop.

The counterman, Peter, behind the bar, wishes me a safe journey as I leave
his lair.

The temporary restraint of the doorpost causes me to stumble into the empty Straat—

uncomfortably desolate on this Thursday afternoon when tourists, shop hands, and transients usually create a joyful bustle.

The cobblestone street—ancient in design,

Each brick so simple on its own, yet so formidably intricate in function,

With thousands of other foot soldiers each pass one-by-one under my feet

as I walk with purpose through the alleys and walkways,

which lead to the square. . .

My square.

Like a series of rivers and tributaries that flow to a large lake.

White-gray stone replaces the red cobblestone at the entrance of the

centrum,

As if to enhance the cool bright afternoon sunshine that bathes the empty

square.

My square.

Bounded by the old municipal building at the base—the new church next door, ironic that something a half millennium old is still considered “new.”

A marble obelisk beyond that,

“Dam,” I mutter under my breath.

Three old men sit around a card table in the middle of the square.

There is one empty seat.

My square.

The only apparent attendees at this unusually quiet place.

No people.

No pigeons.

No streetcars or taxicabs.

A leggy blonde with a cocktail tray stands at the corner of the table,

and tends to their every need.

Boisterous laughter, the only sound, fills the air, amplified by the absence of traffic of any kind, whether human or machine.

"Why," I wonder, "don't they invite the pretty lady to take the empty seat?"

Three separate billows of smoke rise from the card table where each old man sits.

One smoking a cigar.

One smoking a pipe.

One smoking a cigarette.

As I step closer, I notice that the old man with the cigar shuffles and reshuffles his deck of cards, laughing as he listens to the old man with the pipe spin yarn about his friend Adams' trip centuries ago to this very square.

My square.

As the old man with the cigarette cleans his smoke awaiting the guest for whom they hold the empty seat.

Apparently equal piles of chips sit before each of the old men,

And a fourth in front of the empty seat.

Nearer still, all four are familiar to me.

The leggy blonde, her curves as enticing as her giggle, golden locks, and lips so full and red.

A victim of success, excess, and an addictive public, unaware that its demands drained her of her life and soul.

A cocktail tray with a cold beer, new deck of cards, or the smoke of your choice.

Flirting with ghosts whom she would detest in mortal life, now their playful kitten, soft and sexy, a new challenge for both.

The old man with the pipe bespectacled in round lenses of his own design.

During his days revered as a great inventor amongst other titles.

His long brown hair falling from the sides of his bald head nearly to his shoulders.

The gout from which he suffered during his long life now seemingly cured.

His genius and humor still intact, had the others clinging to his every word.

The old man with the cigarette, a waterfall of his gray hair and beard falling to an endless sea of too much indulgence.

Also bespectacled in round glasses—through which he viewed his life until his not so unexpected death.

His guitar leans against his chair.

The return of his songbird voice, a voice which led a generation, adds a lyrical tone to the card game.

The crackling of that voice caused by his own demons gone after such a long rest.

The old man with the cigar—the same nickel brand cigars he suckled in
life—

Jammed into the left corner of his mouth, allowing him to simultaneously
smoke, laugh and talk.

His cap covering his aged bald head, which frames his round red face—his
perpetual three-day white stubble the rewards of a truly relaxed man.

Adding his laugh or his street-wise to the banter

Always shuffling and re-shuffling the deck of cards.

I reach the corner of the table, and the leggy blonde pulls aside my chair,
motioning me to my seat.

The old man with the cigarette tunes his guitar, while the old man with
the pipe refills and lights his smoke.

The old man with the cigar turns to me—my grandfather, like the
day before he passed—looks up,

“We’ve been expecting you.”

He goes on, “all in. What’s your game? Let’s play.”

And deals me in.

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