

Lester's Boots
by Eric Cecil

They were ropers, black, and Lester squinted as he polished them. He sat at the topmost step of a wooden staircase, his figure bent over its edge, his hands working a purple rag around the points of his toes. Hard and unfettered light slanted in from a window above. It met the slick hide of the boots in a spired aureole. It was difficult to look at them, and his brow beaded sweat as he did.

He wiped his forehead with the back of a thin wrist and dipped the rag into a tin of polish. The polish was thick, dull, tarred, and he rubbed its paste into the tops and sides of each boot, occasionally pausing to inspect his work. He paused a moment longer when he heard a radio thrumming tentatively on the first floor. The radio meant the man who lived there would be leaving for work soon. And that meant it was later than usual, which told Lester he should be leaving soon, too.

He brushed the toes again, then cradled the cleft backs and buffed them from behind. The flat polish gradually gave way to a deep and reflective sheen. The light shone brilliantly there, running high and smooth in the burnished leather, and Lester turned away again, listening. Late morning, he told himself. Maybe early afternoon. He still had time to bathe and change into clean clothes. He'd just skip the restaurant and go directly to the bar down the street instead.

A door opened downstairs, followed by footsteps and the sound of another door opening and closing at the front of the building. Lester stood and walked to his own door, steadied himself in its shadow, and removed his boots. He stared at them admiringly, then let himself into his room.

He threw away the purple rag. He wrenched a knob in the sink. The hot water came slowly. He held his hands in it, picking at the black under his nails with a sliver of beryl soap.

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Lester hadn't noticed the couple before the bartender served them. He'd been the only patron there for the last few hours, and he'd spent much of that time idly watching pedestrians walk by the dusty windows. The sky had resigned itself to the pastels of dusk when he finished his fourth beer and turned to the bar. A woman stood there. She was paying for herself and a man. Lester hadn't seen either of them arrive, but there they were. Company.

She was maybe five feet tall. She wasn't much to look at. Lester found her short and plain. The man was taller by a head. He had one of those puckered-up faces, all chin and brow, but still feminine and mother-loved, like he had a guarded secret of no real importance. Lester had known men like him before. He didn't like the looks of him.

He didn't like his clothes, either. The man wore an ill-fitting blue t-shirt, worn jeans. And sandals. Instead of shoes or boots, he wore sandals of soft brown leather, of coffee-colored straps with silver buckles, corked soles. They covered feet that were shock-white, long, lean. Hairless. A feminine choice in footwear, Lester thought, for feminine feet. And his woman is buying him a drink. Lester told himself that he'd never let a woman buy him a drink like that.

It'd been a long time since one had offered anyway. He couldn't say how long. Time had gotten away from him. He could only say that, aside from brief and necessary exchanges, he'd barely spoken to anyone in town. He couldn't recall the last conversation of depth and consequence he'd had. He wasn't even sure when he'd last spoken to a woman.

Then he recalled, as he continued to examine the couple before him with a glazed, passive interest, the one from some weeks back.

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She was a saleswoman. She dressed in such a way that suggested youth, but her face gave away her age. So did her hair. It was black, and it was brindled with streaks of gray, pulled in a loose ponytail of curls behind her head. She tightened and banded it as she looked at Lester, sizing him up from the counter. How do they feel? she asked with disinterest.

They slip at the heel, he said. He glowered at an upturned floor mirror. I think they might be a little big.

They're supposed to slip at the heel. All those kinds of boots do.

Sure, he said. He told her that if it was all the same, though, he would like to try another pair. Maybe a similar design in a tighter fit.

She pushed an errant shock of black and gray behind an ear. Then she excused herself and walked to the back wall, where a white door showed in its redbrick facade. He trailed her heels with steady eyes, sliding his gaze up to a slim black skirt that covered a small, round behind. She walked through the door and disappeared into what he supposed was a storeroom.

Lester glanced at the upturned floor mirror again. The boots reflected the overhead track lighting in fleeting glints and looked especially bright. Shiny. He stepped forward once, then backward twice. The heels slipped a second time, and he frowned.

He was still frowning when she returned with a large box under her arm. She sat primly on a wooden bench, and Lester followed her lead, sinking into a rigid plastic chair across from her. As

she unpacked the new boots, he dislodged his feet from the larger pair and pushed them aside. He put his hands on his knees and leaned forward.

You sell a lot of these? he asked.

No, she said. Not really.

Then they must not be very popular.

I guess not.

He smirked. They any good?

They could be. We just haven't sold many as long as I've been here.

She dropped a handful of tissue paper into an open box on the floor and handed him the left boot of the new pair. He maneuvered a black sock into its opening.

And how long have you worked here? he asked.

A while. Four or five months.

You like it?

It's fine, she said.

I guess a job's a job.

I guess. Her eyes lit on his face. How about you? she asked.

How about what? He grabbed at the black leather straps double-stitched to either side and eased into the piping. His foot, finding the insole, slammed into the tiled flooring with a sudden thud.

Your job, I mean. Do you work?

Lester crossed his left leg over his right and pointed the toe upward. The toe was severe and acute, and a thick rubber trim, as hard and obstinate as oak, lined its outer sole. He ran a hand across it, glancing over its deepset embroidery, then gripped the pointed toe until his knuckles ran white. She watched with curiosity as he pulled his hand back about one and a half feet, then swiftly smacked the tip with his palm.

I get by, he said.

She laughed. You must, if you're in the market for new boots.

They're ropers, Lester said.

She corrected herself. Ropers.

He stood, asking if there was tax. She told him there was.

Even if I pay cash? he asked.

Even then, yes.

Lester nodded. He stepped backward two paces, limping on his right black sock, and pivoted to face the door. The tile beneath his left heel ground vulgarly.

They're not very quiet, are they? she said.

No, he said.

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He'd nearly forgotten about the couple when he noticed them at the bar again. The woman had just finished paying for another round. Lester saw the man in the sandals grab her by the bend in her arm and guide her to a table. It was a different table than before. This one was in a corner even darker than the others. As they walked to it, the man, his eyes low but animated, said something. She said nothing. They sat.

Lester returned his eyes to the window. It was almost entirely dark outside now. The sky's lavender had finished unfurling onto the street. It hid around corners of buildings and beyond distant intersections hosting fallow lamps. Black bruised and muted what remained. There was little activity outside. It looked like a quiet night.

And aside from the inaudible mumbling in the corner, it was just as quiet inside. It was slow and silent everywhere, Lester thought, and had been for a while now. There hadn't been many leads. He would be moving on soon.

For the hell of it, he sipped his beer and resumed watching the couple. They were engrossed in a hushed conversation at their table, but even in the pallid stillness of the bar, he couldn't hear any of it. He could just barely sense the man's low murmur. He strained to listen. Nothing. He suddenly lost interest and abandoned the idea of listening at all.

He stood and carried his drink to the jukebox at the wall opposite their table. The boots felt good. They were broken in, finally, and they'd loosened. The heels still slipped a little when he walked, even in this smaller pair, but his footfalls were louder than they'd ever been, even more strident

and forceful than they'd been up the stairs of his apartment building when he returned there that first evening. He pleased himself by imagining that by this evening, his steps in the bar were fierce enough to sound out the depths of the basement below. He pictured them rattling hundreds of bottles of beer and liquor, vibrating sturdy metal kegs, sending vermin scurrying madly into areas unreachable by men and women.

He took his time at the jukebox, slowly discovering quarters hidden deep within his pockets. The man and the woman had stopped talking. They didn't bother to look at Lester. Nor they did they bother to look at each other. But the woman's posture, with her elbows stuck to the table and her hands over her temples, told Lester all he needed to know. They were fighting. And as if to confirm it, the woman sullenly traced her finger through a moist ring left by a glass on their table.

Lester inserted the quarters into the jukebox. Nothing happened. He scowled and flattened his palm against its side, smacking it with droll insistence. The sound was jarring in the hushed room. His beer dribbled onto the floor.

He slurred a curse under his breath, then walked to the counter, where he called over to an inexpressive bartender. Sir, he said. The jukebox. And the bartender told Lester that he didn't play the jukebox during happy hour.

Because I like to keep it peaceful in here, he said curtly.

There was music playing when I walked in.

And there isn't now.

Right, Lester conceded. He smiled agreeably. I'd like another one of these, then. He slid the glass across the counter, and the bartender left and quickly returned with another beer. Lester unfolded a few bills from his wallet, adding, almost as an afterthought: Can I ask you a question?

The bartender looked at him.

I don't mean to bother you, Lester said. I'm supposed to meet someone here. It could be that he's running late, but I haven't seen him. Just curious if you might have.

The face behind the counter twisted in confusion. Seen who now?

Just a friend of mine.

A friend of yours. The bartender nodded ironically and rubbed two hands, red and wet, on a white towel. I've seen exactly three people in here today, he said. Let me count them for you. He

pointed just over Lester's shoulder. One, he said, singling out the woman. She didn't hear him. Neither did the man beside her. The bartender pointed to him next: Two. Then he leveled a finger at Lester's chest and said, Three. He crossed his arms.

A slow day, Lester said. I understand. He paused a moment and sipped his beer. What if I described my friend to you? he asked. Maybe then you could tell me if you've seen him.

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He lifted his right foot, now wearing the left's twin, and looked at the tread. The soles were ridged, were waffled in diamond shapes at ball of foot and hump of heel. The heel was just as solid in this pair, he noticed, made of the same hard, durable material as the design of the wider boots.

He turned again. Both heels scraped coarsely on the tile. They were resonant and loud. She stood, watching.

They fit, said Lester.

And they look good, she said.

They fit, alright. He cocked his head to examine them. But can I ask you something?

Sure.

It's a strange question.

She laughed. I can't promise I can answer it, but go ahead.

Do you have anything that might be louder?

Louder? she asked.

Heavier, I guess you could say. In a similar design.

She removed the band from her ponytail, shaking out her curls. Gray or not, Lester liked the curls. He admired them for a moment, then checked himself.

We had some steel-toed boots before, she said, pulling the hair tighter, back behind her head. She deftly rolled the band over it once more. Lester observed with attentive eyes. He traced the curve of her hand to the inside of her elbow, saw its contours bow into her arm, then bend into the elegance of her neck. He snapped back to attention and heard her say, But I think we're out of them. In your size, at least.

He waved his hand. That's OK. I'm not looking for boots like that. I need something with a pointed toe.

She walked to the wall display of men's shoes, a network of ecru slats running horizontally from the front windows to the back of the store. In the spaces between, there extended small slabs of clear plastic. These held samples of oxfords, sneakers, brogues, loafers. She pointed to them. As far as I know, she said, everything we have is here.

Nothing, then.

She offered to check in the storeroom. To see if there's anything else back there, she said.

Lester told her that would be very kind.

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The bartender gave him a black look and told him that he didn't know a man who matched such a description. That could be anyone, he said. I just serve them.

Lester nodded agreeably. Sure, he said. Just thought I'd ask.

There's a phone over there. You can call him.

I don't have his number.

The bartender sighed and rubbed his right eye with a heavy forearm. He lowered his head toward the table behind Lester. I know he's here a lot, he said dismissively. Ask him.

Lester swiveled in place, his eyes working through the dim lights, and faced the couple. They still hadn't noticed the conversation now included them. The woman, as it appeared to Lester, didn't seem to notice anything beyond the table. Her eyes were turned down, and her face looked sour and simpering. If a judge were to call the fight now, he thought, she would be the loser.

He ambled to the doorway, where a small wire stand held a mess of free papers. He took one of those, then took another sip of his beer, then took a new seat in the half-moon of a black leather booth. It was just behind the couple's table. He dropped into it.

He couldn't see the man's face from his new vantage, so he studied the back of his head. The man wore a gray knit cap with plenty of slack left in its top. It covered an abundance of long blond-brown hair. There wasn't much to see there, but beyond the cap and the hair, Lester had a clear view of the woman's face. Of her eyes. They were blue, or blue-green, and lined. The lines grabbed at the eyes like wires. Sometimes the wires tightened, and sometimes they slackened,

and the eyes widened, playing against creases scoring her forehead. Deeper folds tugged at the corners of her lips.

The man's ears moved arrhythmically under the hem of his knit cap. He continued speaking, but Lester still couldn't hear a word of it. He could only sense a vague and gentle murmur, could only see its weight on the woman's face. She looked to be terribly burdened by it. She had no concern for Lester's staring.

He returned to his first glimpse of the man's face, puckered and self-assured, and his feet, lithe and embellished with blue veins. He could see neither of those now. He could only imagine them.

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The saleswoman had left the door to the storeroom open. The ceilings there were high, free of the tiles and blue-white lights that compressed the front room. It was a large, cold, gray space, but its walls were impossibly hived with colorful boxes. The boxes were stacked on drab iron shelves that towered above the doorway. The slant of the door obscured much of Lester's view, but he could still see the lower shelves, some of their contents, a couple hanging lamps. And he could see the saleswoman.

He tried not to look at her directly. But he noticed that the open space diminished her, and in the confusion of inventory, she seemed much shorter. The room's size looked geometrically impossible, too, given the dimensions of the sales floor and the general stature of the building. Lester wondered how the building contained it all. He also wondered if the back room contained a coworker.

The woman called to him: We have another pair with stitched piping here. In your size, I think.

What color? he shouted.

Burgundy.

No, he said, thanks. Anything else?

He paced as he awaited her reply. The boots clapped against the tile in the front room. He stopped just astride the door, through which he saw her guide and wheel a metal ladder into position. He turned to face the front windows. His vague silhouette shadowed against the black of night outside.

She called out to him again, but he couldn't hear what she said. He answered anyway: Find something?

Maybe, she said. You wear brown?

Lester took laborious and muffled steps across a woolen rug and stopped at his silhouette. He heard her scale the ladder. Its wheels needed to be oiled. He approached the floor-to-ceiling panes of the window, first angling himself to the left, then to the right. Fingerprints and smudges besotted the glass. Beyond them, there were no pedestrians. Street traffic was scant. A long, old car sailed by. After that, nothing.

She continued calling to him from the storeroom. Brown? she hollered a second time, over her shoulder.

Not my color.

She pulled from the depths of a shelf and ducked under one of its heavy beams to see Lester standing in the doorway. You surprised me.

Lester saw her force a solicitous smile, then scale back down the ladder, holding its side with her right hand. In the other, absentmindedly, she held the box of brown boots. She blew a stray hair off her forehead with her bottom lip as he told her that he had another favor to ask.

Confused, she held the box before her and said, Sure.

I'm looking for someone.

Someone who works here?

No, Lester said. He doesn't work here. He swallowed and closed his eyes. When he opened them, he exhaled and spoke again. He's an old friend of mine who lives in this neighborhood. I can't seem to find him anywhere.

Her eyes searched the flat gray of the floor, then scanned beyond his shoulder to the luminescence of the front room. Well, she said, I don't know many people around here. I haven't lived here long. I mean, like I told you, I moved here six months ago. She gestured to the high tin ceiling and the colorful boxes and said, This was the first job I could find.

Right, he said.

What's your friend's name?

Tent.

That's an interesting name, she said cautiously. Is that his first name?

It's what he goes by, Lester said. He felt the light of the sales floor behind him, tracing his outline as he spoke. It's important that I find him. Or anyone who knows where to find him.

We're closing soon, she said. She pointed to the front room with her chin. I'll be out there with some other pairs in a moment. You can wait up there.

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Lester pretended to read the paper for so long that he eventually grew bored enough to do it. He kept an ear tuned to the man's ongoing voice all the while. He could make out little of what was said, and what he heard was of no consequence. What he read in the paper was just as trivial, and as the beer worked in him, as the man's declarations buzzed like so many lazy flies in the still warmth of the bar, Lester struggled with an inert and glossy fatigue. He just needed an opening. He steeled himself and waited for it.

It came moments later, when the man eventually stood, carrying two empty glasses from his table to the bar. Lester eyed him and hurried to finish his own drink. He caught another glimpse of the woman as he did. The shine of tears bothered her face, and the small, defiant mouth was bent in anger. It was a familiar sight to him. He'd seen it before. He recalled other female faces he'd known, saw a pair of matronly eyes, heard a soft but stern voice firing at him directly. He wheeled, then, through a number of images: delicate noses rounded and creased by laughter, brows bedeviled by anger, painted lips open and sucking or simply wide with breath, exhaling ecstasies or inhaling yawns. Or yelling.

These were fleeting, complicated thoughts that belonged to another Lester. This Lester no longer had use for them. He found the woman pathetic. He rose in disgust and walked to the bar.

There, he stood next to the man, removing his billfold. The man was already holding his wallet in a precise and dainty hand.

Want another? the bartender asked. Lester signaled that he did. When he saw the bartender pouring three full pints, he said, And I'll get that round, too.

The bartender didn't acknowledge him. He merely took Lester's money and returned his change without a word, then leaned on a back counter, fussing with a toothpick. But the man next to him stared. Lester had grabbed his attention. The man studied him now, puzzled and querulous.

Lester saw the face again, and clearly this time. The long blond-brown hair framed a firm, dark brow, and a small nose turned up over a stern mouth, set low and deep between a pair of sharp and hollowed cheeks. The eyes were hooded but bright with self-satisfaction, still dewed and eager from the argument at the table.

The eyes searched him. He was suspicious, Lester saw, even as he nodded his thanks.

Thought I'd get one for you and your lady, Lester said.

Obliged, the man returned. His voice, which Lester now heard unhampered, was forced, was distinct with exaggeration. It was too big for the mouth.

Cheers, the mouth said now.

Cheers, Lester responded.

They tapped pints and drank. The man went quickly with his. He drained nearly half of it in one pull. His eyes pinned Lester above the rim of his glass.

Haven't seen you around here before, he began. He folded his wallet and slid it into a back pocket.

No, said Lester, you wouldn't've. I'm just visiting.

Where from?

Up north.

Whereabouts?

Lester named an unincorporated township about 150 miles removed from the city. The man smiled with a wan and arrogant look of understanding. So what are you doing here? he said.

I'm here to find a friend.

A friend.

That's right.

The man sipped his beer again and said, He live around here?

Near here, Lester answered. The gentleman I'm looking for lives farther east. He pointed to a far wall, indicating an area beyond the bar.

The man laughed. If he lives over there, then he's no gentleman.

Well, Lester said, feigning a chuckle, that may be, but whatever the case, he lives on the East Side.

What street?

That's the problem. I don't know his address.

You came all the way from up north, the man said, and you don't know where he lives?

This is a surprise visit. I haven't seen him in years.

The man, still laughing, leaned against the bar. Sounds like he'll be surprised, if you can find him.

It's a little silly, Lester admitted. I'll give you that. He softened his face in mock humility. Hey, he asked, do you live around here?

I don't, the man said. His laughter fell into a rash sigh. But I have business here, sometimes.

Y'know, I think my friend might, too. I wonder if you know him.

What's his name?

Tent.

The smile quickly fell from the man's face. His eyes narrowed, and his lips once again pursed into an impertinent scowl. Can't help you there, he said. Never heard of him. He flashed a subtle glance over Lester's shoulder. Lester knew that he'd looked at the woman. Though he couldn't see her, he imagined she'd returned the man's glance with a pleading and desperate stare.

Does she know him? Lester ventured.

The man's eyes returned to him sharply. What? he said.

I wondered if she might know him.

I doubt it.

And you, Lester said. You don't either.

I'm afraid not.

Might I ask her if she does?

I'm sure she doesn't. And if you don't mind, the man said haughtily, we're in the middle of something.

He thanked Lester for the drinks, and in a silence thick with tension, he grabbed the other pint from the bar and turned to leave.

Lester tried another tack. Well, he said, suppose I described my friend to you. Could you tell me if you've seen him?

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That doesn't sound like anyone I know, the woman said.

Lester stared at her long enough to see through her. She shifted uncomfortably in place. He leaned against the jamb of the door and crossed the boots, one over the other.

It could be someone your friends know, he said.

I barely know anyone here. I told you.

His eyes narrowed. A car honked plaintively outside. Still looking at the woman, he cocked his head to the side, as if listening. She spoke again.

You can wait up there. I'll be out with another pair in a moment.

Lester ignored her. He lives near the East Side, he said. Do you know anyone who lives near the East Side?

I just work here.

He nodded.

Will you please wait up front now? she asked.

He explained Tent's appearance a second time. She shook her head. A few curls worked free and bobbed with it. Lester didn't look at the curls. He looked directly into her eyes. They were unblinking. Worried. She said, Listen, I don't know anybody named Tent. She began to say something else, simultaneously attempting to walk past Lester. He stood upright and spread his feet against the door.

Where might a man, he began. He trailed off, then resumed: Where might a man such as I've described find a drink on the East Side?

I'd like to get by, she said. She made a stronger, more forceful attempt to pass him, and here Lester extended his arm around the box, which she held to her chest, and very easily guided her

away from the door. The box fell with a hollow thud. She backed away, her hands spread defensively before her. We're closed, she said. We're closing now. You have to leave.

He walked toward her instead.

He took slow, measured steps. The ropers were loud and heavy on the flat gray floor of the storeroom. They made large and ungainly sounds that rose in pointed crescendos, spiking over the concrete, clattering off the high tin ceilings. The sound pleased Lester. And he could see, for all the better, that it terrified the woman. She glided past the shelves as if a shadow, her hands still outstretched before her. We're closed, she repeated. And then she turned and ran.

Her heels tacked around a corner. A few boxes fell in her wake. Lester kicked one out of his way. It caved with an obscene pop.

He knew it would be this way with Tent, too, when he finally found him. Tent would hear the boots long before he'd even see Lester. The boots would slap and scrape in awful sounds underneath him, announcing his arrival from a great distance. They would thunder and pound in resigned meter, the space between each echo a lifetime for Tent. A hell. Lester could see Tent awaiting him. Could hear his beating heart. Could be the predator teasing fear from prey. The same fear he teased from this woman now, as she cowered in a corner, as she removed another box from another shelf and heaved it at Lester, Lester dodging it and swatting it aside with ease. He could nearly smell the fear over the tanned and cured leather, above the chemical effluvium of rubber. Just as he would detect it over the stink of beer and bourbon and low perfume in whichever seamy bar Tent liked. Tent's fear would urge Lester on, and Lester might finally turn a corner, as he did now, he might turn a corner into a backroom of a bar, one filled with cheap drunks and tawdry whores, and then Tent would see him. Lester would savor the flash of recognition on his face. He would savor every moment of it.

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He'd start with the feet. He saw them now, vulnerable and sandaled in the aisle. The man's legs were extended under the table, and the feet were crossed demurely, were rubbing in subtle, snakelike movements, one slinking against the other as the man continued his soft monologue. They were his weakest point. It would be easy enough. Lester would approach the table unnoticed while the couple argued. No, Lester thought. Maybe he'd stomp toward them, his breath sharp and heavy through his nose, his boots pounding against the broad tiles of the barroom. Or maybe he'd casually approach their table with a warm smile and say, Excuse me. What is it. Just one more question. I told you, I don't know him. That may be, but I haven't asked her yet. We're in the middle of something here. Just one question. Fuck off. And here

Lester would apologize and turn to leave, but then he would return to address the man again and say, Hey, one more thing. Or, I'm sorry. Or he might say nothing at all.

And then the feet.

There were a number of ways it could be done. Lester pored over the options, replaying some of the more brutal images, slowing the cruelest or most barbaric of them into snapshots and stills. He pictured himself above the man, now floored, now folded and vulnerable, an arm raised in weak defense as he begged: Leave me. Leave me alone. It would be important to get him alone. The bartender. He might call the cops. And the woman. A woman who stays with a man like that, thought Lester, is the same kind of woman who would fight for him. Lester pitied her. He hated them both.

He glanced at her from the elbow of the counter, where he remained standing. The man still had her ear, still talked incessantly. Always talking, Lester told himself, until I have a question. He stared at the back of the man's head. Not much had changed there. But the woman. For the first time that evening, she looked at Lester. And as the man's ears moved under the knit cap, Lester knew what the mouth told her: Don't look over there. That man is looking for Tent. And he expected that plans for a hasty and discreet exit would follow.

He also expected they would finish their pints in short order, and they did. Then they both stood. The woman looped a red purse over her arm and gave Lester a parting glance. This time, she saw him, and he saw her, and their eyes met in a strained and loaded intercession.

She looked, much to Lester's pleasure, frightened.

The man didn't look at Lester at all. He attempted to guide her by the bend in her arm again. She jerked from his grasp and walked ahead, his knit cap and blue shirt trailing as they left the bar.

Lester stared into his drink, pretending not to notice their departure. He silently counted to fifty.

And then he left, too.

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The night had lost much of its heat. It was cool and humid, and a subtle wind bluffed under a ceiling of low, fast-moving clouds. The air pricked at the hairs on Lester's arms and neck. He walked with reserve, softening his steps, subduing the otherwise grotesque sound of his boots. He would be saving the real steps for the right moment. Until then, he padded carefully.

And he watched the couple. The streetlights played off the man's full hair, nearly bronzed in the glow. His stocking cap bobbed well above the shorter woman's head. She walked just slightly

before him. Lester trailed a sizable distance behind them. When they approached an intersection and crossed against the light, he waited, pretending to abide by the signal. He looked on as they made it to the end of the next block. Since they were the only other pedestrians, he had no fear of losing them. He had no fear at all.

He felt nothing but excitement, anticipation. For the couple, in all their haste and recklessness, were heading east. And when their direction of travel occurred to Lester, he realized, he knew: they were taking him directly to Tent. Despite himself, he smiled.

They stopped again. So did Lester. He melted against the side of the nearest building, a closed delicatessen, and stepped back into a darkened and recessed doorway. He leaned around its corner and peered down the street.

They'd paused in front of a nondescript walk-up. Lester counted the vertical windows and saw two above street level. Three floors. He watched as the man glanced down the street and motioned to the woman. Lester heard the sound of her voice for the first time. It was sharp, clipped, timorous. She raised it in exasperation, pointing at the man, shaking her head. Then she glanced in Lester's direction.

He pulled deeper into the shadow and flattened himself against the door. He was sure he hadn't been seen. But better to be safe. He waited. He stared at the building across the street. Another three-floor walkup. Its ground floor framed a large tinted window advertising, in painstakingly designed letters, the services of a lawyer. The lawyer could divorce Lester for \$139, tax included. Lester closed his eyes.

The woman ceased yelling. The man, in his level tone, resumed. Then the intervals of silence became apparent, elongating some parts of the conversation, perforating others.

When the silence gave way to the inner thrum of the city's East Side, Lester counted again. Twenty-five. He left the shadow of the doorway and narrowed his eyes down the street.

The man was alone, walking east again.

Lester turned his attention to the black windows of the building the couple had argued in front of just moments before. He saw a window on the third floor suddenly illumine with the muted yellow tones of a lamp. It was on the left side of the building.

He would come back to it.

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He pursued the man for several blocks before he was noticed.

It had been a careless mistake. It was an unmarked car, a black sedan. A cab. Its horn sounded in a short hiccup as it passed Lester. The driver slowed and leaned over, looking at him expectantly, and the knit cap, well over a block away, had suddenly turned in their direction. Lester waved the driver off. The driver shrugged and sped away, but the man remained, staring.

Lester cursed. Spotted.

The man continued on. He still affected a casual appearance, with his hands in his pockets and his shoulders wide and high. But when he noticed Lester's hunched figure again some two or three blocks later, he lowered his head and broke into a light jog.

Lester expected him to sidle into the doorway of a store or an apartment building, but all the surrounding shops looked to be closed and secured, and the dwellings in the blocks behind had no place in those ahead. In the street before them, there were only vast and boxlike warehouses, devised of concrete, devoid of windows. Solid, impenetrable.

The man had nowhere to go.

He ran.

Lester kept on him. He took wider steps, and heavier besides. His strides were loud now, coarse, and his jaw worked as he imagined himself from the man's perspective: a relentless, stalking figure, shadowed and ominous, its boots flashing like feral eyes under desultory lights. In Lester's mind, his appearance was terrifying, and there was no question that the man was afraid.

It didn't even matter how fast he was going. Lester was certain to catch him soon.

The knit cap fell, and moments later, Lester stepped over it, noting obliquely that they were approaching a public park. He charged past a shuttered slaughterhouse. Its alkaline stench burned his nose and turned his stomach. But he kept walking, and the man kept running.

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They soon broke through the street to the park's main entrance. Lester saw a wide auroral lawn marked by a series of ornamented colonnades, by round white pillars circling its boundary. Staged and theatrical lighting made those pillars tall alabaster spires reaching into the sky. The man's arms and legs worked toward them with a fury. Welts of perspiration darkened his light blue shirt.

There were pedestrians. Several of them. They were the first Lester had seen since nightfall. Some milled along a promenade, talking and laughing around a grassy, well-lit arcade. Others

ascended a covered staircase from below, streaming toward a main road in the distance. The pedestrians and the stairs, Lester thought, had both seemingly appeared from nowhere. And then it occurred to him: the train. The subway had just released a crowd of passengers.

The man blundered toward the station. He scrambled onto the stairs, pushing toward the crowd's center. It very quickly pushed back. Two men met his jostling with rough jabs and elbows. He slipped around them and leaned into a young woman, who turned and swung at him with a small purse. Its weight crashed into his neck, his shoulders. He shoved her aside, squeezing between her bosom and the back of a stocky teenager, and thrust deeper into the mob.

Lester dodged a stream of oncoming commuters and ducked behind a nearby column. He watched his target stumble through the gauntlet and trip onto the platform below. The crowd then swelled, filtering around him, blocking his immediate view.

He waited for a slight break in their ranks. A series of identical-looking businessmen in long coats filed past, and Lester pushed off the column and slid through them, brushing against a shorter woman in a large hat. She shot him a dirty look, but he was already gone, dropping heavily down the stairs.

By the time he hit the last step, he'd lost sight of the blond-brown hair. He could see nothing but the faces of the thinning crowd: hard, indignant eyes and knitted brows, mouths open, teeth bared, tongues wagging in protest. These sights dizzied Lester, confused him. He thought of other faces he'd seen screaming and scoring abuse in the days behind. But those were gone, and these soon left, too, up the stairs and into the park above.

The platform, finally, lay empty. Only one figure remained there. Lester leered at him.

The man's slight chest heaved. Perspiration soaked entirely through his shirt. His hair lay flat and wet against his high forehead. Lester scanned his feet again. With surprise, he saw that somewhere, somehow, the man had lost his sandals. He was barefoot.

The bare feet moved to the end of the platform. Lester's eyes narrowed.

It happened quickly. He lunged to grab the blue shirt, reached for a hand or an arm or the hair, but it was too late. The man's lithe figure landed near the tracks below, where Lester saw him roll on his haunches and find his feet. The long hair swept and fell to his neck, and he pumped his legs, trailing a spray of gravel over a girder. He skipped elegantly upon the crossties, kicking from plank to plank.

And again, he ran.

Lester stood, fixed in place. He searched inside himself for a plan, a course of action. But as he observed the man scampering down the tracks, he found no answers. Just anger. Anger, and darkness.

The man, meanwhile, found his own darkness. His was a shadow of a hole in the near distance: a black tunnel into which the tracks, the gravel, the station seemed to taper and disappear.

And as Lester looked on, the man disappeared with it.

Lester screamed. He bunched his fists into tight and stony anchors, swung them at the fetid air. He walked to the end of the platform. His boots slabbed a dark and heavy basalt against the painted yellow edge. The toes hung like precarious daggers. Below them, gravel pooled into harmless mounds, built into slight and scaly humps upon which the coppered rails lengthened. Lester followed them with narrowed eyes, stopping at the tunnel's arch. There was nothing to see there.

He frowned into the nothing. He frowned so hard that it hurt his face.

Cautiously, he lowered himself to it.

Its entrance looked much larger from between the tracks. It dwarfed him, in fact, and he felt a dim futility as he regarded its size. The height itself was nothing to fear, but when he stared into its maw, its darkness stirred a sullen and humbling disquiet within him.

And its darkness was total. All color broke at its penumbra. All lines abated to fragments and dots. It was black inside, and only black. Even sound seemed to end in the shade of its boundary. As Lester strained, he could hear a faint and incontinent dripping, but little else.

He walked to it. The ropers drubbed piles of stippled shale. The station lights very quickly began to fade behind him. He paused to listen for the man's progress, hoping to catch his gasps, maybe the shuffling of gravel. Only a faraway trickle burbled in response. As he continued on, the arched ceiling closed in overhead, and another sound, grisly and pounding, met his path, jarring him to stillness. When he stopped, so did the noise.

A smile pinned his face. His laughter rang throughout the passage. Of course, he thought. The boots.

He forged ahead, the ropers reporting in their slow, bucketed thuds. The sound was formidable against the thick tunnel walls, and it was altogether mountainous against the high curved ceiling. This is it, he told himself. The way it will be. The lights behind winked, as if in final recognition. Then they waved him away. Those ahead were elusive, blurry, but they beckoned nonetheless,

teasing a slight path forward. Just as Lester, he now thought to himself, Just as I will tease the fear from Tent. But Tent was nowhere near. And the lights were too far, a station away. And so, Lester knew, was the man he had followed.

He was too agile, too fast. Lester couldn't see him. He could see very little in the lights, so greasy and unkind. The walls were dim. Were wet. Cold. He felt them. Felt the rails curving. Felt his teeth grinding. The wall elbowing left. The light finally going. The darkness, full and upon him. He nudged over a tie and onto the rocks. The water grew louder. Its smell neared. It was rancid, uric, and he coughed. Gagged. The gravel scraped. The boots scraped back. He scratched at the walls, found a crack with his nails. Clammy air whistled through it. Steps sprung from all sides. Slow, even. Measured. Loud. He turned. Felt a girder. A rail. A shin barking. A boot sliding. A knee. He sought earth. Felt concrete. Found more gravel instead. Skinned palms stung wet. The knee dragged. Foot ached. The head found the wall. The air went slippery, acrid, and the fear eased toward him. He reached for its end.