

Something Out of Place

by

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Justin always hated this time of the night. His Mama made him go inside to where people were, but he preferred to wait outside and get them as they left. It was less intrusive that way, for the people hated his interruption. Sometimes someone would yell, occasionally a bartender would threaten him, but mostly people would look down at him, then look away. Their expression conveyed all they needed to say and it was aided only infrequently by a dismissive wave. Either act was his sign to move on and he never waited for another.

He would hear their comments as he left. Sometimes they whispered, usually they didn't. "I can't believe they allow that in here. It's probably stolen. He'll only use it for drug money." Justin hated these comments for many reasons, though mostly because he knew they were, in some part and parcel, true. But this didn't matter to him, not in the logic of his world. He didn't believe that their truth, partial or otherwise, made it right for people to say.

His Mama waited outside anxiously for as long as it took him to do his business. She waited and paced outside the door talking to herself in a demi-hymn mantra. Sometimes it would take him a good while and she knew this was good for business. Some people had conversations with him and sometimes afterwards these people paid extra or let him keep the change. His Mama always encouraged him to talk. "You talk to 'em Justin baby. You take as long as it takes. You go ahead and you talk to 'em." But Justin never knew what to say. Most times he only smiled, looked down at his shuffling feet and answered their questions succinctly, in the fewest words possible. He wanted it to be over fast.

At least tonight was an M&M night, he thought. These nights were better. Tonight he had the peanuts and this was better still. He did best on the M&M Peanut nights, certainly better than the Plain nights and much better than the Milk Chocolate with Almond nights. People knew M&Ms. Everyone knew M&Ms. Justin figured they knew M&Ms the whole world over, but no one knew the Milk chocolate bar. "It's just like a Hershey Bar man. It's the same thing. With almonds." Still it was a tough sell. No one knew the wrapper and it looked fake to people and despite his desire to believe otherwise, it looked fake to Justin too.

The route was always the same at this time of night, his Mama's memory was good about this. They started at Christopher and moved north on Hudson until the cardboard box was finished. Most times it took six or seven places until they were through, sometimes four or five more than that. If they finished Hudson and still had some candy left, his Mama took them to Greenwich Street and the places there. They had never had to go past Greenwich.

All the places had different names, but they all seemed the same to him. The Blind Tiger, Chumley's, The White Horse Tavern, Tavern on Jane. Dark and smoky, wooden, glowing from the inside out. He heard laughter and shouting and talk, fast talk. Many words he didn't understand, others he wasn't allowed to say, but knew their meaning. He knew them from the people here, from these warm people who glowed themselves when they spoke. He knew them from the school yard and from his Mama and Mama's boyfriend, Rufus. They spoke them often when they sat after dinner in the one bedroom apartment Justin and his Mama shared in BedSty. His Mama got mad when he spoke these words himself and this didn't seem to fair to Justin, but then again so many things didn't.

At each new place, the routine was much the same. Mama implored and prodded him to do better. "Justin baby, you talk to them. You talk to them Justin. Yes Mama. Yes, I will." He said it without feeling, without even thinking of the words tumbling through his mouth as if they had no meaning to him, to his life and the task ahead. It wasn't that he hated his Mama. No, he loved his Mama true. He just hated this time of night and he didn't believe in the need, the absolute need for this.

Into Bar and Books, into the Cowgirl Hall of Fame, into the White Horse Tavern, he carried his worn out Sunkist Tuna cardboard box. The box would start full with twenty-four individual cartons of M&M Peanuts and each carton cargoed approximately 50 M&Ms. Justin had counted them one night, four different boxes to be sure, then putting the candies back licking tight the flap. He wanted to know what he was selling, what these people were buying. Deep down though, instinctually he knew he wasn't selling simply candy and that these people weren't buying the M&Ms because they were hungry. They could get them cheaper just about anywhere else. Something more was happening even if he didn't grasp exactly what it was. It was

something unclean, tainted in some way, but he figured that was the way the world was. There wasn't any use in complaining.

Justin had multiplied it out, the boxes and the M&Ms, and knew he started out with one thousand two hundred individual M&Ms. As he would sell the cartons, in his mind he would reduce the sold candies from the total M&Ms he was carrying, one thousand one hundred and fifty, one thousand one hundred and so on. He was always good at math in school and had been the first in his class to get through all the times tables in the fourth grade. He received a gold pencil from his math teacher, Ms. Johnson, for it and he kept it in his back pocket for luck on these nights. With the point still unsharpened, half of the pencil grew out of the pocket and up his back underneath his fastidiously tucked-in shirt.

He had two lines that worked best. "Hey mister, do you want to support our school? Hey mister, buy the lady some candy." Usually he sold one or two before a bartender noticed him and tossed him out. Two boxes here, three boxes there at two dollars a piece. He would come bounding out of the bar, the cash from the sale waving in his hand. "Here Mama here. It was a good one Mama." He'd hand her four or six dollars. She would count the money unhurriedly, one dollar at a time. Separate, deliberate without ever looking at him as she spoke. "Yes baby yes. You keep talking to them baby. You keep talking to them. Can we go now Mama? Please? Can we go home now? Not yet baby. Not yet." She would put the money deep in her pockets testing their capacious depths for security, her eyes darting fitfully, already searching for the next place. "Only a few more places baby. Only a few more."

He never knew where the money went, but he had suspicions. Justin learned often it was best sometimes to let suspicions just be suspicions. Sometimes too much knowledge was not a good thing. Like where the money went and where the boxes came from, he didn't know for sure. He didn't want to. But once a week, his Mama had a new one and Rufus had always been by the night before. His Mama and he would go out that next night.

Justin didn't like Rufus much. He never paid Justin any respect, or his Mama any either. He drank too much and when he got real drunk, Justin would hear them as he lie awake in bed.

There was always lots of screaming, mostly from his Mama, then a door would slam and there would be silence, a sharp, brittle stillness that would draw Justin to the bedroom door. Then quietly, hushed, he would hear the low, faint sound of crying. There was nothing Justin could do, but someday, someday Rufus would get his. It was just the way the world worked and as he stood angrily listening to his Mama lachrymose in the other room, Justin believed that eventually everybody got theirs and someday Rufus would get his.

Coming out of the Barrow Street Ale House, his Mama waited outside with a frenetic smile, pacing. “Tell me Justin. Tell me baby. Sorry Mama, only one. Okay baby. That’s okay.” She peeled the two dollars so distinctly in her hand picking at the edges to make sure more weren’t hiding behind as they moved slowly up Hudson Street towards the Meat packing district.

Justin always imagined he could smell the Meat Packing district early. He liked the smell. It meant he was near the end, so he tried to smell it, to suck it in, inhaling fully with soul-deep suspirations as they neared. Sometimes he could actually perceive it, other times he just thought he did. He always envisioned the ward as the abattoir it once was, but had not been for many years. He pictured the cows and calves, the chickens and turkeys. He pictured the slaughter, the many killings that had once happened there. Big, bald white men, their hands sticky from the blood, wielding axes, long-sticked and sharpened hard against the edge of a shrinking brick. He saw the head of the weapon, its shape, its contours so befitting of its purpose. He saw the blanched men working long days falling animals, coming down violent on frenzied, suspecting prey, the beasts sinking, their weight pounding heavy against the brown, liquid floor. He saw butchery and carnage, heads and limbs strewn across the flooring mixing with the dirt. At first in the morning, before dawn light at first kill, the men’s hands were red from the quarry, but then, as the day wore on, they faded, evanescing into a putty gray with the mounting victims. Justin imagined the blood cascading out the doors, down the steps, onto the sidewalks, down 14th Street, absorbing into the bustle, under the cars, around the cobblestones leaving a stench of animal and death and putrescence he could sense all the way here down on 11th Street, down on Jane. It always meant he was getting close, getting closer. “Can we go home now Mama? Can we go? Not yet baby. Not yet.”

They moved up Hudson Street to where it splits with 8th Avenue. Tonight they stayed on Eighth. There were better places on Eighth, but sometimes his Mama had a feeling. “I just have a feeling baby.” Justin was always amazed at how these words, tripping out as often as they did, could dictate a change in so many facets of his life: their route, her boyfriend, his lunch money come lottery day. So on those nights they would continue up Hudson and if they didn’t finish there, they would go back around on 8th Avenue until they did. In spite of her best premonition and his solemn hope, they had always had to.

His Mama stopped them in front of the Corner Bistro, its red neon sign breaking painful relief with the night. A shimmering burn, fuzzy cool against the shadowy backdrop of evening. There was a big bay window running nearly the length of the bar on the left side. His Mama could see the crowd and she thought they looked like a good one. Justin looked where she looked and tried to see what she saw. The bay window seemed a portal into another world like the confines of a menagerie with inside the bar the animal’s cage and he and his Mama in the visitors pen outside. “Now you go in there baby and you talk to ‘em. You just talk to ‘em, baby. Yes Mama I will Mama.” She tread feverishly past the end of the bay window as Justin moved gradually towards the door.

The smoke of a stale cigar reached him first, then the noise, loud and murmuring in his ears. He stepped in cautiously so as to not attract immediate attention. It was best when people didn’t see him coming, when he just appeared at their side as if from nowhere the moment before. This way people didn’t have a chance to prepare their excuses and their mounting embarrassment had a better shot at overwhelming their chary nature.

Just inside the door, he stopped to survey the scene. There was a row of four tables against the left wall, overcrowded with people eating hamburgers, drinking and shouting loudly to be heard above the music. Right and center, the bar was filled with people. Tall people standing and drinking, men and women, some close, others at a distance. In the far end of the establishment was the kitchen and a back room with many tables. That was where his best shot was, but most times he never made it that far before the bartender or the bouncer told him to scam or beat it or shove. As he finished scanning the bar from left to right, his head turned and faced upwards to

slender man in glasses who stood next to him eyeing him quizzically. Justin didn't speak for a moment. There was something about the way the man was looking at him, with a sense of compassion or forbearance that bewildered him. Finally, Justin began in an unsure, fibrous voice, "You want some M&Ms?" The man paused a moment to reflect wanly then shook his head slightly. "No. Thanks though. That's all right." They nodded in unison and began another long moment of silence. Justin couldn't hold his glance so he turned away, but he knew the man was still watching him carefully, looking at his clothes, his shirt, his shoes even, developing a mental photograph. "It's okay. Go ahead in." They both nodded half embarrassed, then Justin resolutely parted from the man forcing his way imperceptibly into the throng.

"Hey mister, buy the lady some candy. Oh look Charlie, he's selling candy. How much kid? It's for my school uniforms. *How much?! One for two dollars, two for \$3.50. Jesus, what a rip! I can get that across the street for sixty-five cents. Oh, c'mon Charlie, buy one—for me.*" The man took out his wallet and gave Justin two battered singles. "Thanks Mister. We're going to the state championships this year. Yeah, right. Nice try." He turned his back on the boy thrusting the yellow packet towards the woman. "Here. You eat 'em." Eight hundred and fifty left.

Justin moved in the direction of the tables and jammed himself between two. The patrons were crammed in, ten or twelve to the area, but there was only seats for eight. "Want to buy some candy? Support my school." One table didn't even answer. After initially turning their heads upon hearing his voice, they turned back almost as quickly resuming their conversation without missing a beat. "How much?" A query from the table to his right. "Two dollars for one, \$3.50 for two. Too much. I'll give you a buck for two? No way man. Two bucks for the one. Get the fuck out of here!" Justin moved on without a word and headed for a bunch of guys talking in a circle. The husky unshaven one turned down as he noticed Justin. "What're you selling, drugs? M&Ms. You steal 'em? Nah man, they're for my school. Yeah, sure they are." The guy turned back around to his group, winking impishly to ensure all his boys were in on the joke.

Justin moved on slowly towards the back room by the jukebox which separated the two rooms. The bartender was busy at the other end of the bar and he didn't see the bouncer anywhere. He

remembered then it was Monday night and that Mondays were slow and the bouncer didn't work on Mondays. He thought tonight he had a shot. If he didn't want to be seen, he was going to have to make a quick dash into the back room. He hid his small frame behind two large drunks leaning up against the bar there. As he stood low beneath them timing his move, hiding from the bartender in their towering, he saw it lying there next to the jukebox. He wasn't sure what it was at first. Something just caught his attention, something out of place. But then his eyes focused on it and he knew. He looked around to see if anyone else saw it, but no one moved as if they did. No one was paying attention to it or to him. He got nervous looking at it, lying small and flat, cropped in the corner. Cold sweat came over him as he searched the people's faces for recognition. He looked back again at the bartender who was still at the other end of the bar with his foot hoisted on a garbage pail, his elbow on his knee, talking fast with his hands.

Justin's hands began to sweat. He wiped them to no avail on his blackened blue jeans. His mind was racing in more directions than his REM eyes were darting. He would learn later in life that decisions like this are made in an instant. They came without warning and passed faster than they came. The *whats* and the *whys* and the *hows* seemed so difficult at that age. If asked, he would have said that he expected them to get easier as he got older. How little he really knew.

The door opened then with a bang as two beautiful blonde women entered the bar laughing stridently. Everyone turned to see them, not only the men. They were that perfect Manhattan concoction of beauty, stupidity and offense. Everyone had to notice them, had to look at them for a flash. Now was his chance. He knew it. *It's now!*, he thought a moment, still hesitating. *Now! It's now!*, his head screamed. *It's now!*

In one swift movement as if choreographed in 8/8 time, Justin shifted the cardboard box tucked under his right arm to the same place under his left, bent forward with two fluid steps, crouched low besides the back left corner of the jukebox and snatched up the folded, pale \$50 bill that was concealed behind its impassive back leg. In the next advance as if in one continuous assault, he jammed the bill into his pocket while still crouching low. His head swiveled quickly in all directions to gauge any detection. The entire effort was smooth and seamless and unnoticed by

all. He frowned faintly before moving, knowing it wasn't time yet to be happy or proud or afraid.

As he began to rise he heard a snap, crisp and thorough, from just behind him. It was followed by a slight tinkle against the ground. He knew immediately the pencil was broken, but he reached behind him anyway ostensibly to grab the severed half. Only the eraser part still remained in his jeans pocket. He stood resolutely with a look of anguish across his face and as he reached full upright, M&M boxes began to fall out of the Sunkist box like summer hail against a barren landscape. Two at first, then a third and a fourth and one more before he realized, came to his senses and could right the box holding the remaining six. The rectangular cartons bashed against the dirty, timber floor in muted thuds and Maraca sounds and skidded in all directions. The sound to him screamed as sirens on a rare still night in town. He knew right then he shouldn't have, he just shouldn't have, but it was done. He bent hurriedly to pick up the boxes grabbing two or three at a time with his free hand, dropping to his knees to get them all as fast as possible before being discovered. As he kneeled the cardboard box dropped from underneath his arm and the six remaining cartons in the box fell to the floor. Now he clutched for them frantically, reaching for more and more cartons, throwing them firmly into the cardboard box.

“Hey dammit! What'd I tell you? You can't sell them in here! But I uh, I was just—C'mon now, let's go. But I—I said let's go!” All the bar turned from the blondes to this tableaux. Justin stood frozen to his spot cemented with fear. “I mean now!” Justin shuffled a step forward, bent to pick up the last two remaining boxes off the floor and placed them softly into the cardboard box. Before the bartender could go again, he ambled towards the door with his head directed downward. It seemed to him as if the whole world was watching as heads turned and bodies shifted on stools. White faces all, some round and squat, others thin and long. As Justin looked up to check his direction with the door, his eyes fell concentrated on the same slender man by the door. The man's stare bore through him now. Justin looked down again to avoid his glare. *He knew. He seen it all. He's been watching all along. This is going to be it!* Out the bay window past the man's right shoulder, Justin saw his Mama pacing hugely outside. The man turned to where Justin was looking and saw his Mama marching back and forth in the

street, a marionette heeding its string. He turned back to face Justin at the instant he reached him. Something made Justin stop and look at the man. He seemed sixty feet tall, gigantic with Justin skulking lowly beneath that height. Justin knew his time had come. He could feel the fifty dollar bill burning white hot in his pocket.

“That’s your Mother, isn’t it? Yes.” A long pause greeted his laconic reply. Justin put his hand in his pocket and played with the bill. Maybe this was the last time he would hold it, he thought, and he wanted to remember its touch, the feel of money like that, its texture, its coarseness. The man looked out the bay window towards his Mama again who could not see Justin standing where he was. “You’ve been in here a long time. Your Mother’ll be wondering.” Justin didn’t dare move, he didn’t think to breathe. The bartender howled one more time from the other end of the bar. “I said, let’s go!” Justin turned to the bellow to make sure it was for him and was oddly comforted when he knew it was and knew this moment to be finite. Then the slender man reached into his pocket and pulled out two dollar bills, change on his ordered ale, and handed them to Justin who instinctively began to reach into the cardboard box. Eight hundred. The man put out his hand, touching Justin above the elbow, “Why don’t you buy yourself one—for when you get home later tonight.” Justin nodded with bemusement, his eyes searching the man for a reason and after a time of not finding one, proffered meekly “Thank you,” then hustled his way out the door before the bartender relaunched his invective. Indeed when the salvo actually came it wasn’t directed at Justin and the rejoinder carried as equal a tone of irritation as the question had. “What’d the hell ya do that for?! What the fuck’s it to you?!” This probably ended the conversation, Justin couldn’t tell. He was already out the door before he could hear another word.

“Oh Justin baby, that was a long one honey. That was a long one. Did you do good? You was talking to them baby. Just like I told you.” Without a word Justin handed his Mama the money. She began to count it rapaciously, one bill at a time, licking her finger tips then peeling each between her touch. There were four single bills in total. “Yes honey yes. That’s it. That’s two more boxes baby.” She counted them twice right outside the door in plain view of the bay window. Justin wished they would move on before she did, but his Mama couldn’t wait. Justin looked up at the bar and peered in through the window. Inside he could see the slender man

looking out. He was watching them, his Mama and Justin, as she counted the money. Justin could feel the sickness, an admixture of regret, shame and guilt, rising in his stomach. He could also feel the white hot burn in his pocket.

“It’s even better than that Mama.” She didn’t look up from her counting as he spoke though Justin waited for her gaze. “It’s even better. Yes baby yes.” Still, his Mama didn’t look up. “A man bought one without taking it Mama. He said he bought one for me. Really Justin, really.” She counted a third time now, listening to him only by registering the pauses that broke the stream of his words. “Yes Mama. That’s even better. That’s like selling two Mama. That’s the same as selling two because we can sell it again.” Justin slide his left hand back into his pant pocket and felt for the green paper, sliding the two folds up and down between his thumb and forefinger. “Yes baby yes. That why I took so long Mama. I was talking to him. Talking to him so well, he gave me money and didn’t even take one. That’s like selling two Mama. Yes baby yes.”

As he closed his fist tightly around the bill in his pocket, he started to speak again, but his Mama had already begun to move on up the street still counting the four singles, now for a fourth time. Justin started to follow behind slowly. At mid-street, he started to speak again, but stopped, fighting down what was ascending in his conscience and instead turned back towards the bar and the bay window. He turned back to look inside, but the man wasn’t looking at him anymore. He had turned inwards and was facing the television set against the far wall. Justin’s left hand, still in his pocket, keep fingering with the money. The edges had begun to curl from the insistence of his pincers. As he stared at the bay window, Justin thought about the man and about the money. He paused a moment longer, then he reached into his back pocket pulling out the remaining shard of the gold pencil and dropped it in the street. He stared at it lying there, shinning brightly against the asphalt. It stuck out so limpidly, the gold contrasting with the blacktop. He smiled faintly for a moment. Then he ran across the street to catch up with his Mama, who was talking wildly and continuing to count the singles as she walked on towards the next bar.