



Moonshine

Bernie Mojzes

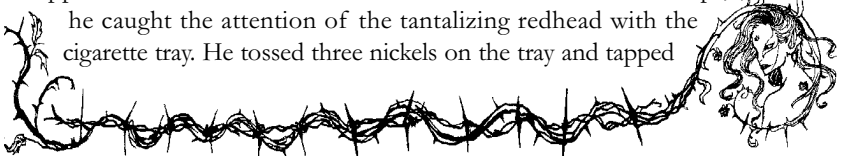
IN THIS ROOM, PROHIBITION WAS SUSPENDED. BOOZE FLOWED LIKE the music at Pogo & Bud's: hot and sultry, drums and bass laying down the groove as the piano tinkled like ice on glass, saxophone splashing across the bar and into darkened corners. Bryn Mawr debs in feathers and fringe danced with nattily dressed negroes from the city. Tobacco and marijuana mingled in the hot June air, blown around by lazy fans.

Tom Marich leaned back against the bar with closed eyes, letting the music wash over him, fingers tapping echoes of the melody against his whiskey glass. He wasn't the only regular attracted more by the music than the speakeasy's other offerings. Young musicians who pushed the boundaries wouldn't find work at respectable venues like the Dunbar. Bud McGarritty made a point of booking some of the most innovative jazzmen in the country.

"It's what makes having *that*," McGarritty had said to Tom once, glancing toward an unmarked door at the back of the room, "bearable."

Through that door and down a corridor was another world, one of men with haunted eyes, and sometimes girls in giggling pairs or threesomes. Tom had been there once, enticed by a pale slip of a girl whose name he'd never known. He'd paid a man for passage to a place where something akin to heaven awaited. The opium was sweet as nectar, the sex sweeter, but one look at the wasted men, too lost in dream and decay to appreciate the willing flesh around them, made him swear to stick to jazz and whiskey.

Tom chain-smoked through the set, watching the flappers dance as he sipped his drink. When his last smoke threatened to burn his lips, he caught the attention of the tantalizing redhead with the cigarette tray. He tossed three nickels on the tray and tapped



a cigarette out of the pack of Lucky Strikes, smiling as the girl leaned forward with a lighter. She grinned and winked at him.

“My name’s Mary,” she tossed over her shoulder as she walked away.

After the set, Tom waved his empty glass at McGarritty, but the bartender was down at the end of the bar in distracted conversation with a small man that Tom had never seen before. Tom reassessed—there wasn’t even a hint of stubble on the boy’s face as he looked up innocently at McGarritty’s scowl. His oversized jacket and pants made him seem even skinnier than he probably was. Tom drew his bar stool closer for a listen...and for a place at the front of the queue once McGarritty was pouring again.

“That ain’t the way things’re done,” McGarritty was saying. “In this world there’s rules; even a punk like you knows it’s bad for your health to go making side deals.”

The kid took off his hat. Fine brown hair fell to his shoulder.

Tom blinked in surprise. All thoughts of the Lucky Strikes girl vanished.

“Mr. McGarritty,” the kid said in a woman’s low alto, the words falling like music from his—her—lips, “I’m not asking you to do anything on any side at all. I’d simply like you to sample my wares. I believe that with the endorsement of a fine businessman such as yourself, and perhaps some of your more discriminating customers, I shall be able make the arrangements necessary for a long and lucrative partnership for all those concerned.”

There was something slightly alien in her voice: the accent of a girl who had come to America in early childhood. Tom struggled to place it. A first-generation Serb growing up in a neighborhood of immigrants, he had experience with accents, but this one eluded him with a familiarity that lingered just out of reach.

McGarritty hesitated. “I dunno....”

Tom set his empty glass on the bar between McGarritty and the girl. She jumped, just slightly, surprised by the sudden intrusion.

“I’ll try it,” he said with a playful smile, “if you’ll join me. Hell, right about now, seems like it’s the only way to get a drink around here.” The last he directed to McGarritty, though his eyes never left her face.

“Excellent,” she said, pulling a tall, thin bottle from inside her jacket. The liquor that poured from the dark green glass was a translucent, milky white that glowed in the dimly lit bar.

“Is that Absinthe?” Tom asked.

She smiled. “Not quite, though it’s quite potent in its own way. We call it Moonshine. That’s what gives it that glow. I’m told that it’s also a pun. This recipe has been in my family for a long time, and it’s time to share it with the world. So, here I am.” She raised her glass and clinked it against Tom’s. “To world domination,” she said, and her eyes glittered.

There was a mild burn, the licorice-gummy anise almost masking the bitter bite of wormwood that gave Absinthe its distinctive properties. Tom smiled knowingly, then his eyes widened in surprise. A secondary flavor washed the anise from his mouth with a harsh burn reminiscent of *Slivovica*, the strong plum brandy his father used to distill in his basement. But there was something else, something