



The Night Flower

A Short Story by Anthony Aikman



The old man who sold lottery tickets at the city bus station moved slowly between the tables in the cafeteria. He didn't announce himself or thrust his tickets at anyone. He just waited a moment in case someone was interested and then moved on. From time to time people inspected his tickets and occasionally they bought them. But whether they did or didn't the old man seemed unperturbed. He was quiet and dignified, and his clothes - although shabby were clean and carefully mended. He walked with a pronounced limp. He had been selling his lottery tickets at the bus station longer than anyone who worked there could remember, but he kept to himself and none of the staff knew or cared where he came from or where he went to. This lack of information or concern about him was not even important to the old man-for when contemplating his own fortune- or lack of it, he knew for the sake of inner calm he must look at the world without envy and without self-pity. Sometimes, seeing helpless babies tottering among the tables no more sure-footed than himself, he even noted with a wry chuckle, 'we come into the world unsteady on our feet and usually leave it the same way'. But there were times when for all his fortitude he might feel more keenly the lack of purpose in his daily tasks, then indulgently his fingers grasped a small metal disc in his pocket and he sensed a quaint reassurance, a sentimental connection to his past. For he clutched a medal that many years before had been given to him by the former King. During the war at one decisive moment he had acted daringly and this changed the course of events. In the excitement of the unexpected victory his commander had proudly declared him a hero and mentioned him in dispatches. But the war was fifty years ago and everyone, including himself most of the time, had long forgot his small part in it. The intervening years had seen the brief rise and the long decline of his fortunes but he regarded the change in circumstances without bitterness, rather with an enduring patience first characterized by his forbearance with his war wound- the shattered leg that never healed. For, despite all the initial acclaim a medal will not buy meals or a shattered leg a wife in the rural village he had returned to. Unable to herd goats or work a plough he had inevitably drifted to the city. There was a choice of crippled war veterans like him; shining shoes or selling lottery tickets, but shoe shying required a footstool and carrying lottery tickets was lighter. And if someone had ever asked him if he did not miss his village he would have been equally philosophical, for although not a particularly religious man he chose to view the bus station as much a part of God's garden as the village square, with the same share of common humanity, simple acts of kindness or otherwise- perhaps more the latter as the people he met were invariably in a hurry or anxious or tired. Perhaps to them this old man clutching his lottery tickets represented hopes of a fortune and he did not deride their dreams. He too liked to dream, because his dreams were peopled by his old life, by the bustle and laughter of the village, by the boys he had once played with, climbing trees for fruit or birds' eggs, clambering over the rocky hills, and the women of the village scolding him one minute and hugging him the next. The days spent selling lottery tickets were only interludes between the nights when with his eyes safely closed his dreams rose like a benevolent tide to float him away. By day he was trapped within the limitations of his lame old body but at night when he returned to his shabby basement room he knew he would soon be set free. And he had one companion on the nights' journeys, there on the dingy window ledge rarely glimpsing the city sunshine and fouled by traffic fumes a few flowers struggled to survive in rusty tins and among the was one the old man treasured most-the night flowering lily, whose individual flowers bloomed for one night only and when, one by one, night after night they opened, a heady scent stole into the room so that even in deep sleep his worn features slipped into a smile as if somehow that guardian flower of the night knew that behind the old man's mask lay a boy again, laughing and playing in wind, rain and sun, teasing the village girls, diving into the pool below the waterfall, his body young and strong in the dappled sunlight shining through the plane trees, while the night flower continued to breath over him its secret message of hidden valleys and of timeless hills

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