

## **Dusk, Warmly**

*By Marshall Honorof*

He rubs his eyes. The sun is in Rick's eyes again. The red-orange glow has followed him from seat to seat as he moved down the bar. A napkin sticks to the bottom of his scotch on the rocks – all rocks, no scotch now.

The bar starts to fill up: a man in a business suit with a loosened tie. A young couple, laughing and sipping colorful drinks with bright red straws. A bartender who doesn't say much, but gets all the drinks right. College boy. Degree in mixology.

Rick contemplates his hands again. He can't see much with the glare. They look clean in the dim overhead bar lights and the waning daylight. There's no reason why they shouldn't be.

"How's your ice taste?" The bartender leans over Rick and reaches for the glass. He doesn't look like much, with an absolutely deadpan expression and a day or two's worth of stubble.

Rick swipes what's left of his drink away before the bartender can claim it. "I ain't done yet."

"Not yet, no," the bartender agrees, and looks out the window, wiping at his forehead even though the air conditioning is on. "Hot enough for you?"

"I've seen hotter." Rick grasps his glass and waits for the warmth of his hand to melt the ice. He can wait a long time.

The carpet was red. Rick grinned slightly and took his shoes off. The door to the apartment was unlocked – no reason to shut people out in the middle of the afternoon.

Mr. Evans had always been a trusting man. Rick had not known Mr. Evans, never met him. But he knew his face, and he knew his address. That was enough.

The living room was empty. A faucet dripped in the darkened kitchen. Only the door leading to the bedroom was closed. Rick surveyed his surroundings, made his preparations, and knocked on the door.

No response. Rick, in a full suit and tie, realized that the air conditioning was off, and he mopped his forehead with his wool sleeve. He knocked again, with the same result.

When he opened the door, he smelled copper. He didn't see anything at first, but the blinds were closed, and the carpet was red. Mr. Evans lay in bed, his eyes perpetually staring at the ceiling. This was a pose that Mr. Evans would hold for a long, long time.

Rick spun around and drew a small firearm, but he was alone. No other people, no dog, no woman. The metal grip felt cold in his hand, but that, too, soon gave in to physics and felt warm and leaden.

He made his way back outside. A woman with a cart of laundry hummed to herself as she took up a good deal of sidewalk space. A man with a nametag, "Jed," smoked a cigarette in the shade of a sickly tree. Two teenagers with black plastic bags made their way out of a comic book shop and chatted. No one looked menacing.

Not even Rick.

It's not dark just yet, but the sun has retreated behind a row of two-story, stucco-fronted buildings. Rick gropes for a carton of cigarettes in his back pocket, but reconsiders. He can't go outside. It won't cool down at night. It never does.

He gazes into his scotch, defeated. The bartender has sold him another one; he bought it, no complaints. It was only one more drink. It might not help, but it couldn't hurt.

Rick feels a hand clamp down on his back. "Good to see you here," the voice says. The man's breath smells stale and musty, his hand sweaty. Rick looks down at his own hands again. They feel conspicuously clean.

The man plops down next to Rick. The barstool shouldn't even be holding this guy up. He's heavysset – not that fat, but heavy, with a huge frame. He wears a suit and tie, like Rick's, but his ensemble is brown. He holds a wide-brimmed hat at his side and catches perspiration with his palm before it hits the bar.

"What do you need?" the bartender asks, sweeping his way down towards Rick and his new buddy.

"Just Rick, actually," the man replies. "I won't keep him long."

The bartender shrugs and moves back to other customers. An older gentleman wants an Absolut with lime. The gentleman's movements are slow, exaggerated. He speaks with purpose and experience. He revels in being alive without even knowing it.

"Don't you want to know what went down?" the man asks Rick. Rick doesn't pay any attention and watches the ice melt in his scotch.

The man reaches for Rick's shoulder, but Rick tenses up. The man's hand finds his way down to Rick's elbow, and grips it loosely at first, tightening as he speaks. "We ought to take a walk, you and me. I wanna explain something to you."

“Get lost,” Rick says. Rick turns and looks at the man for the first time. Flabby face, sweaty, teeth yellowed from smoking. Not very handsome. Not very much of a threat. Not usually.

The man grits his teeth and tries to smile, but can't. With his hand on Rick's elbow, he manages to pull Rick up so that they stand side-by-side, like old friends. “Don't you want to get to know me?” the man asks, taking a step towards the door. Rick follows, not wanting to fall over. “I feel like I know you so well already.”

Through the bar's window, the sky darkens and a haze descends over the street. A few blocks away, a train hisses to a halt in the station. The number of cars driving by increases. All of their windows are shut.

The man inches closer and closer to the door, talking to Rick the whole way. Only the bartender notices the two men nearing the doorway.

“Generally, you have to pay before you can leave,” the bartender says, picking up Rick's still-full glass.

“His bag's still there,” the man says, pointing to Rick's small black backpack next to the seat. This satisfies the bartender, who puts down the scotch and turns away.

The man pulls Rick closer to him and puts his other hand on the door. “Ready to head out?” the man asks.

Rick looks at the man, breathing heavily. Beads of sweat run down his eyes like tears. His face looks like it was carved out of stone.

Rick shakes his head. “I ain't going outside,” he says. “It's too hot. It's too goddamn hot.”