

## THE STORE THING

My shoes are wet.

A black sedan limousine pulls up alongside the partially flooded curb, and my shoes are wet.

I get in.

“Hey, kid,” the driver hollers over his shoulder, “why you waiting out in the rain? I was gonna honk when I pulled up.”

“I didn’t know.”

We drive off. It’s not long before the driver, a loud strong-jawed man in a wool cap named Mack, starts pressuring me to tell personal stories about women.

“I don’t really have any,” I say, placing my hat on the empty seat next to me to dry, then wiping my glasses on my wrinkled shirt.

Unfazed, Mack starts reciting his own personal stories about women. The car smells like stale cigarettes.

I listen to Mack’s rather forward tales for a few minutes before I start to tune him out, giving favor to the sharp raindrops pummeling the roof of the car.

It’s been pouring like this all day, with the same hearty deluge covering the entire city, the skyscrapers to the shanty towns, as if shining all of Chicago with the same European brand of shoe polish.

I look down and am reminded that my tuxedo shoes could use some polish, too.

The car rumbles along an increasingly busy avenue in the shadows of Downtown’s numerous great towers as those who have managed to retain their jobs head home for a warm supper.

Mack turns the limousine toward the Loop, and we move past a dense Hooverville populated by hundreds of hard-time casualties. I see a man in a wet, yellowed shirt and tie wandering among the makeshift streets that better resemble a junkyard than neighborhood.

My seat is comfortable but my shoes are wet; I imagine what it would be like to live like this man.

*I eat my supper out of a used can of beans. I’m hungry, so I am aggressive the first time I dig my spoon into the container of ambiguous meat. My first bite includes a scrape of yesterday’s meal’s crust that had lingered on the side of the can. My famine subsides.*

*After dinner, I wash my clothes for tomorrow in a stray bucket that I will use for bathing in the morning. My clothes won't really get clean, but the ritual is symbolic, and will remove any overwhelming odor.*

*I retire early to my shack to be met by insomniac encouragement from erratically-passing trains. Accepting cognizance, I sit atop an old milk crate in my "front yard" that has been defined by three rusted metal headboards staked into the loose dirt. A lethargic rendition of "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" whistles through my chapped lips as I grapple to appreciate the spirited beauty of my colony of discarded wood, brick, and sheet metal.*

"Check out the bubs on that dish!"

My sentience re-focuses, and I spot an attractive brunette in a white dress who is visibly lacking the proper undergarments. She is walking against our flow of traffic and has momentarily distracted Mack from the light as it turns green.

The car behind us honks—once at Mack, then twice at the woman—and we continue driving.

"I wonder if that was one of Amy's new girls," says Mack. "She's always finding these new dishes—Eric, you wouldn't believe ..."

"I bet."

"You don't have a girl, right?"

I don't say anything.

"You give her a few days, Amy can get you anything you want," he nods excitedly to himself. "And I mean *anything*."

I smile politely. "That sounds great."

The woman has such a crippled scowl upon her face—even in these times, I wonder what must happen to someone to get that way ... I clench my jaw and squint my eyes in semi-conscious mimicry.

We stop suddenly, and my hat slides off the seat with a gentle *whisp* against the cream leather. Mack curses the driver in front of him, and my grimace softens.

We drive a further into the Loop, and each passing block is more saturated with offices, theaters, stores, and fine dining than the last. Eventually, Mack turns onto Adams Street and pulls to the curb in front of one of several towering buildings. He honks the horn five or six times, smirking and nodding at me as he draws the glare of several nearby pedestrians.

*They're staring at me.*

The young doorman runs toward us, signaling for Mack to quiet down. Mack rolls down the passenger side window and asks for "Philo Olin." The doorman nods, and scampers into the building.

"We're a little early," says Mack before cursing another driver who doesn't like where he has parked the limo.

The doorman returns a few moments later accompanying an unimposing man with thin-wired glasses and neatly coiffed white hair. I slide over. The doorman opens the door to the limo, and the old man climbs in.

“Afternoon, Mr. Olin!” exclaims Mack into the rearview mirror. “Another prosperous day in the shoveling business?”

“It was fine,” says Philo, pausing before adding, “thanks for asking.” He is concentrating on adjusting his coat while settling into his seat when the floor sloshes beneath his feet. He stops and scowls. “Why is the floor all wet?”

“Oh, the rain,” I say, pointing to my scuffed and sodden shoes. Philo frowns.

I should be embarrassed by such a first impression—they really are the most awful loafers.

“My father’s, actually,” I add.

Philo turns toward me with widened steely blue eyes. “You’re wearing shoes over a year old?” he astonishes. “We’ll get you a new pair for the party.”

*New shoes are nice.*

“Mack,” says Philo, sitting back, “you know where we’re going, right? John told you?”

Mack smirks.

“Yeah,” he says, “Boss told me the deal. You sure you want to do this whole store thing, though? I’m telling you, if you talk to my girl, Amy ...”

Philo stares out the window.

“...they may not be the high society type,” Mack continues, “but they make up for what they lack with what they lick!”

My co-passenger doesn’t immediately respond. Mack grins anyway.

“Let’s just stick with John’s recommendation,” he finally says, “the Marshall Field’s on State.”

“Alright,” shrugs Mack, muttering to himself, “we’ll stick to the plan. You like the plan? I like the plan ...”

Though only a few blocks from the store, the cold December rain that has fallen all afternoon has slicked up the roads, and combined with the usual five o’clock Friday traffic, we find our roadside progress greatly impeded. This plays in Mack’s favor, though, as it provides ample time to tell us about Amy’s newest Russian import. Neither Philo nor I are listening much, but at least Mack fills the silence.

Philo seems too preoccupied for conversation, and I’ve never been one for small talk. Still, I search for something to say, but I can’t get “*Tell me about the wildest bird you got nookie from*” out of my head.

*Damn you, Mack.*

“Did you phone your mother about us meeting, Eric?” asks Philo as we stop at our third red light.

Mack looks up in case Philo is talking to him, then carries on with his own conversation: “I asked John how could he be mad if he couldn’t tell the difference ...”

“Oh, no, I hadn’t,” I say.

*As if I could afford such frivolities.*

“She looked well at the funeral—I’m sure your father would have been proud to see her there. Our teammates meant the world to him ... me as well. Of course, I don’t blame you for not making the trip home,” he says before lowering his voice. “She told me about your job, Eric—terrible what they did to you. Uproot you from Cincinnati, then let you go once you’re here ... classless.”

I wince for show. If I put any more meaningful thought toward my old employer Bert & Horner’s disloyalty I’m likely to *snap*—

“We’re here,” says Mack, gesturing toward the impressive store entrance adorned with festoons atop its towering granite columns.

“Give us a once around the block,” says Philo. “Doing odd jobs and living off an unsteady income is no life for a capable young man, Eric.”

*I see my mother’s told him everything.*

“But that’s what tonight’s about—a new beginning. Don’t feel pressure about making friends with everyone, just put yourself out there and have fun.”

I nod.

“A lot of irresponsible twits in the Havens Club, to be frank,” he grumbles, “but some are good people.”

“I’m just thankful for the invite.”

“Absolutely,” says Philo vigorously as we approach Marshall Field’s front entrance for the second time.

“Am I stopping or going around again?” asks Mack, as he swats at another perturbed driver who darts around our slowing limo.

“Keep going,” says Philo, glancing from the window back to me.

“You should have called me months ago,” he continues. “That’s what your father would have advised, I’m sure of it.”

“Perhaps,” I concede. “He wasn’t much for advice, though.”

“Nonsense, Eric, your father was a Cincinnati football player—he helped me and I helped him, even after college,” Philo asserts. “That’s what teammates do. I’m sure he would’ve done anything to help you out of your predicament . . . given our circumstances, that’s why I’m here.”

I have no idea if my father would have wanted me to call his “friend in Chicago.” I had only heard Philo Olin’s name a handful of occasions growing up, and the only time since my father passed over a year ago was a few weeks back when my mother wrote to tell me she had spoken to Philo at another teammate’s funeral.

“Unfortunately, the board has us in a hiring freeze at the moment,” admits Philo, momentarily distracted by the window again. “I’m afraid I may have used the last of my personal hires, but I’ll think of something for you.”

“Thank you, Mr. Olin, but I don’t want to be a burden.”

“Stop?” pipes Mack.

“Yes, we can stop now,” says Philo.

The limo breaks hard in front of the bustling storefront. A menagerie of men and women of all ages swarm in every direction at the feet of the wreathed entrance to Marshall Field’s, bumping into each other and the absurd amount of wrapped parcels they carry.

“It’s no burden at all.”

Mack grins at me in the rearview mirror and I relent polite reciprocation while I try to figure the cause of elation.

“Now, Eric, would you ask that sales girl what time the store closes?” says Philo, gesturing toward a plain-looking young woman who has just walked out of the store. She is wearing a light green uniform with a white collar and skirt that sags carelessly from her exhausted posture. “It’s almost six now.”

“Of course,” I agree, quickly exiting the car. If Philo can even get me a lead on another job—and with rent due in a week, I certainly could use it—I would kiss the girl if he asked.

Stepping from the car onto the edge of the hectic sidewalk, it takes me a second to re-locate the sales girl who, of course, is now walking away from me. “Excuse me!” I shout pathetically, trying to catch up, but getting held back by an aggressive row of particularly broad-shouldered Christmas shoppers.

Just as I squeeze through the gluttonous blockade, there is a sudden tapping on my shoulder. “Maybe I can help you,” says a cool voice from behind.

I swing around and find myself staring into the fluttering brown eyes of a comely strawberry blond woman with perfectly even red lipstick. She wears a similar green uniform as the first girl, though nothing about it sags. I puff out what little chest I have and straighten my glasses.

“Actually,” she says, “maybe you can help me.”

I don't know what to say. I quickly wipe my face to discretely make sure my mouth isn't gaping.

"Is that your car?" she says, looking past me toward the limo.

I follow her gaze and see Philo and Mack staring back at me with encouragement. I turn back to her and nod.

"You see, the air is damp and chilled, and I fear I will catch a cold if I have to walk to the taxi stand," recites the woman miserably. "Could I bother you for a ride?"

"I ..."

I really don't know what to say. Of course, I want to say "yes" to this beautiful young woman, but it's not my car. It's not even Philo's—it's his friend John's, another stranger. We were just supposed to take it to the party ... but I also need new shoes ... and I'm supposed to be learning store hours.

"What time does the store close?" I blurt gracelessly.

"Pardon?" the woman laughs.

It doesn't matter. Before I can respond, the red-headed sales girl is climbing into the back of the limo—no one objects. I take a quick deep breath and follow her lead.

"Oh! The floor is so wet!" she shrieks.

"Attaboy, kid!" hollers Mack, and I close the door behind me.