

Jonas Laughter
Blue Bottle Flies
Short Story

The Phillies never closed. It was dark out, and as expected --- it was midnight: approaching one AM --- downtown was sleepy enough to avoid stifling the shine of the stars, stars that looked down upon the street corner with a gentle warmth; a blanket of soothing light to lull into comfort the few stragglers still about the town at such an hour. There was no sound except the diner's droning buzz of overworked lights, but otherwise, silence was the diner's trademark.

Inside The Phillies, there were three men and one woman. Brown, wooden stools were arranged around the stained, rustic counter. The worn stools each had scratches crawling up the supports. Behind the counter was an old man in a waiter's uniform, his balding head topped with a white cap that rested on his head off-center. His name was Otto.

In front of Otto, there was a man and a woman sitting beside each other (Roman and Mary) with two cups of coffee, no steam rising above the mugs. The woman was a redhead in a casual red top; with vivid lipstick to match. Beside her was a man, holding a cigarette. His face was decorated with intense eye-bags, drooping as if the skin were running from his eyes.

"Roman, I can finish your coffee if y'don't want to waste it." The woman said. Her voice was steady, it disregarded and resisted the air of silence prior.

"I appreciate it, Mary." Without looking away, Roman slid the mug towards her, to which she jumped and scrambled to stop it --- ironically so --- as the second she started scrambling, friction stopped it for her. Silence returned. The man behind the counter had no dishes to wash, so he wiped down the end of the counter. Mary looked at the movements of the rag, her eyes absent of expression. His movements were fluid, the rag acted as an extension of Otto's hand.

The quiet was torn by a man in a suit sitting at the end of the counter. "Are you two married? Only one of you's got a ring on your finger." His voice was rough and harsh --- it sounded as if he (at one point) attempted to eat gravel. While he spoke he was trying to scrub a stain out of his suit with his own saliva. Roman saw this and squinted slightly.

"Yes, we are!" Mary exclaimed. "Roman just lost his ring."

Her sentence was punctuated by a sigh from her husband, and then silence returned. It was a presence in the room. It sat on a stool like everyone else, killing its inhabitants with suffocating exhales. They were slowly wasting away, asphyxiating in the awkward clutch of agonizing apathy, an extension of apprehensive miscommunication... but as quick as it took over, Otto dismissed it.

"Anthony, I can give you a refill." His voice dripped from his lips and formed into a puddle of monotonous, weary slurry.

"Y'know I don't have any money." Anthony replied, adjusting his hat.

Roman raised an eyebrow.

“At this point, it might as well be free of charge. You’ve given me enough of your money,” Otto paused, and looked down at the counter, this time speaking quieter: “Or, in the past you did, at least.”

Anthony grinned, his rows of yellow teeth disturbed by the absence of his left canine tooth. “Well, if you insist.” His lips curved upwards, his chest raised as if it was holding down his laughter with a wall of arrogance. Silence returned, if not for a brief moment. Roman slashed it.

“You clearly have money.” Roman said. Anthony put his hand on his chest and faced him, the stains on his suit flaunted themselves, showing off a lack of dignity.

Mary’s eyes were trained on an empty glass in the back.

“And who are you to say that? You’re the one with clean clothes.” Anthony was swaying slightly as he spoke, his words oozed out.

“Well, that suit of yours. That’s tailored, and I know where you got it. It wasn’t cheap.”

Otto turned on the faucet, washing Mary’s empty mugs. The sound of running water caused the two men to speak louder.

“Money isn’t permanent. Believe it or not, it’s not in my power to have an infinite source of wealth. Not everyone’s that lucky, but I’m pretty sure you know that. Must’ve been bad luck to have lost that wedding ring.” Anthony’s words all connected into each other, harsh but slithery, and such a snake was quick to constrict.

Otto winced, but Mary was still staring at the glass.

“Money isn’t a matter of luck --- it’s about good, honest work --- it is nobody’s fault that you spent all your cash in a state of near-perpetual unemployment. Who would hire an impudent, unpunctual, self-destructive and unreliable drunk? I know I wouldn’t, I doubt even your highest efforts would be worth the costs of dragging you behind my feet; you’re not any better alive than dead -- you are laziness manifested into one cornerstone of incompetence.” Roman punctuated his sentence with his cigarette, pressing it onto the ashtray and twisting his fingers; Roman's eyes were aimed at Anthony, who was smiling like a toddler.

“Good, honest work?” Anthony rolled his eyes. “Where the hell do you think I get my money? I’m sure you’d understand if you were in my shoes, ‘sir.’” He glared at Roman, the S in sir hissing out into a low whistle. Before Anthony continued, Otto walked into a backroom, his eyes looking everywhere but at a person. “It’s funny how privileged you are. I need the money for alcohol, it’s not that I’m a drunk. You’d need it too if you was---” he cleared his throat and retched. “If you were doing the job I gotta do. Got mouths--a mouth to feed.”

“And what sort of job is that, are you a custodian? That’s the only job I could consider you being even remotely capable of doing. If so, consider using some cleaning products on that suit of yours --- it’s only another testament to your filth.”

“My filth? At least I’ve only married once.” Anthony’s grin was the widest it had been.

Roman opened his mouth to speak, but Mary interrupted.

“I have to go now.” Neither of the men processed what she said in the time it took her to walk out the door.

“Oh, peace and quiet huh?” Anthony grinned, his only remaining canine had a string of frothy spit to his bottom teeth that had a slight glint from the light... Roman looked into Anthony’s mouth and shuddered.

“It’s not like she was talking. What’s your point?”

“My point? My point is that she’s tired of you. She’s sick of you --- dare I say rightfully so --- what kind of husband are you? Losing wedding rings, disregarding her on a date---”

Roman shot back, interrupting Anthony. “It wasn’t a date.”

Anthony laughed in reply, it was full and coarse, causing his face to flush.

“What the hell do you find funny?” Roman's voice could cut sinew, but Anthony only continued his laugh, that which grew into cackling.

“Oh, life’s hysterical when you look. Might be hard with that fancy hat on your head. Does the shadow cover your eyes? Don’t want your wife to know you’re eying other people, hmm? Or maybe you’re insecure about your eye-bags? Do you think it makes you look more manly?”

Roman shot up out of his chair and put his hand next to his pocket.

“Oh yeah? Doesn’t seem like much of a fair fight now does it? Armed against a poor drunkard? You ‘nd your crutches, Roman, c’mon! I thought you were supposed to be a man.”

Roman's bottom lip was quivering as his fingers twitched by his hip.

“Worried God’s watching? Heard he takes this sorta thing into account. Luckily for me I’m not afraid of hell. What a freeing thought!” He was giggling, his eyes dilated in paradoxical mania, it was as if the alcohol had an opposite effect. The depressant was only acting as a catalyst for Anthony’s madness.

Roman took a step forward, the threatening gesture dampened by him shaking his head rapidly to deter a fly that landed on his face.

“Oh no! Here comes the manwhore! Good thing I’m a widower, isn’t it?”

Roman stopped looking at Anthony.

“Having her get tired of you must sting. I feel bad for her: she’s carrying the burnout of living aside a husband that doesn’t care a lick. Time and time again you’re alone. Ever thought about why? Everyone in our damn church knows it, you’ve remarried how many times now? Eight, nine times? You get hungry, can’t stand the empty feeling. But do you feel any better with a wife that can’t even look you in the eye? You prance into people’s lives with gifts and flowery language, and the minute the rush wears off you’re out --- dead inside --- and that poison, that bitterness inside you; it’s not limited to just you, it’s selflessly generous, and it festers in the blood of every bride you’ve kissed; you tear the soul and passion out of young women to sustain yourself, just to burn out even faster in the blizzard of your deliberate misery. It’s cold out there, isn’t it?”

Roman's arms dangled loosely by his sides, his face obscured by his hat as he looked down at the floor. He opened his mouth to speak.

“I---”

“Oh no, I’m not done.” Anthony leaned against the counter, his legs losing the fight against gravity and inebriation. His voice cracked as if it was trying to give out, but he conquered it and spoke with blunt force. “We used to be friends. I grew up beside you, but that means I know you. We all like to blame others. Blame our dads, blame our dead-end jobs, even blame our mothers and wives. But it’s *always* our fault. You did this to yourself as I did this to myself, you crawled out into your icy abyss and curled up in a pitiful fetal position, shivering not from the cold --- but from self-directed abhorrence --- that rage that fuels you to keep moving, that spiteful anger that keeps you going; I understand. I feel it too, that pull --- that’s what it is to be a man --- don’t try to pretend to be something you’re not. You inhibit yourself and harm others when you suffocate them with your matrimonial grip...that ring-shaped promise only cuts deeper into your already-mutilated soul.”

Roman was getting pale. He said not a word.

“What’s wrong huh? Something on your damn mind? The more you continue down this path the worse you’ll get, and you scold me for drinking. What a hypocrite! What good are you for when you make everyone miserable, not even Rev’s boy likes you, and that kid could make friends with the devil.”

During every pause, flies could be heard buzzing in the ambiance, the only other sound being that of the lights and the wind outside.

“You’re going to be alone. Forever. There’s no hope for a man like you, no rest for loveless waste like you. Every heart you’ve held in your hand turned to rot in front of your teary, pathetic eyes, and yet you still reached out for more. You’re stuck in a loop of ignoring the begging voice in your consciousness to turn back... but you never will, you’re far more at ease choking on the rot of your own wrongdoing than being even the slightest bit accountable, because you’re a *coward*. You’re a spineless coward. You don’t even answer to the voice in your head!”

Anthony was interrupted by the mechanical ringing of a rotary phone. Both men turned to look at it, and then at the backroom door. Otto did not step outside to answer it. When they restored eye contact, strings were between their eyes, drawing them both into leering at each other’s souls. Not even the ringing could fully drown out the flies, more and more filling the diner as the door was left open. When the phone stopped, Roman spoke.

“You’re no better.”

Anthony snickered. “Never said I was, did I?”

Roman sighed. “It could be insinuated.”

“Assumptive of you, Roman.”

“Perhaps.” Roman's voice trembled out into the atmosphere with tight vibrato before resonating itself into apprehensive oblivion.

“You’ve got nothing again.”

“She’ll come back.” Roman spoke with his words aimed at his own heart.

“What makes you say that? No one else has.”

“She’s desperate.”

“Like you?” Anthony taunted. That was all it took. With the eerie grace of blind rage Roman took out his switchblade and lurched forward, driving it with a wild swing towards Anthony’s neck. The drunk ducked under it and leapt forward, tackling Roman and pinning him down.

“What do you think you’ll get out of my death?” Anthony whispered, his shoulders rising and falling with intense magnitude. Roman flailed out from under Anthony and kicked him in the shin before he could get back up. Roman had then reversed the roles, pinning Anthony down with a knife in his right hand.

“Pathetic.” Anthony choked. Tears welled in Roman's eyes, his hand held up in hesitation. Anthony, didn’t sneer at Roman, but at the knife. It shook in Roman's trembling hands, the glint on the blade was flashing frantic morse code to no witnesses, the amalgamation of S.O.S signals sent to no one but the flies. In one motion, the hand of hubris tore through the throat of Anthony, silencing and stifling his language-daggers, the only weapon Anthony ever had. Roman closed the dirtied switchblade and dropped it beside the corpse, the sound of it landing on the floor was the prerequisite for silence. He got up and stared at his reflection in the window. There was not an ounce of life in that reflection, the paling skin on its face contoured its skull in such a way that it looked like its skeleton was trying to crawl out of his body.

And in just a few hours --- Roman had gone missing --- perhaps his skeleton succeeded. In the diner, it smelled of decay --- but the flies were already gone: silence returned, but The Phillies had closed.