Mr. Palshaw

English IV

Lunacy

 Cowboys, banditos, holy men, and all manner of undesirables were liable to mistake Marlowe for a stain on the map, and even those who knew of its existence were more likely than not to drink that knowledge away. What Marlowe lacked in size it also lacked in intrigue: a church, a general store, a barn, a boarding house, a saloon. These five structures were arranged like a grotesque hand, each finger radiating out of the palm like they were trying desperately to rip themselves free. Its citizens were much the same.

 Every poor bastard or broad in Marlowe wanted to strike it out on their own. Would-be prospectors, highwaymen, Lone Rangers, showgirls, snake oil salesman, pioneers, and pistoleros all found themselves in the hand of Marlowe caught, struggling to break free. Talk was big, drinks cheap, and whores cheaper. It was precisely this premium on entertainment and debauchery which made Mulryan’s Saloon the shining pile of shit that it was.

 Sturdy boards. Serviceable tables. Stiff drinks. Available women. Game tables. Broken piano. All the amenities one could hope for.

 A large painted sign was hung above the bat-wing doors into the saloon; the light of the full moon cast an arcane glow on its front. It read “Mulryan’s” in a simple font, with a crescent moon plainly painted beneath it. Entering the building--provided one had nothing better to do with their time; most didn’t--one was met with a barrage of sensation. Drunks roared laughter like hyenas on the hunt, an old man banged on a piano with mediocre skill and dimmed passion, serving girls went about their work, terrified, and an old bloodhound lounged behind the bar, staring up with apathetic love at Sean Mulryan.

 Sean took a deep breath in through his nose and inhaled liquor fumes.

 *Jesus wept, I’ll never get used to that fecking stench.*

 With nose wrinkled and head pounding, he slid a vase of flowers out from beneath the bar and placed them before him. He pushed his spectacles up higher onto his nose--they never quite fit right, did they?--and ran a smooth hand through his soft black hair. He wore plain clothes, yet took great pride in his appearance; he wore a clean work shirt, a plain black vest, blue jeans, and brown loafers which were, once upon a time, considered his dress shoes. His sleeves were rolled up to just below the elbow, as always, and on his left hand ring finger was a claddagh, its heart pointing toward his wrist. Inhaling yet another gulp of putrid air. He let his breath out in a heavy sigh and glared at the dying flowers.

 *Feck, I miss ye, Jamie.*

“You alright, hombre?”

 Sean’s gaze drifted up toward the voice; he knew who it was even before they locked eyes. A dull and resigned wave of familiarity melted over him like candle wax. He felt suffocated by the mundane way in which the man approached. Didn’t he know? And if he did know, how could he act like it was just another humdrum Marlowe night?

 “I’m fine, Jetro. Damn tings up’n died on me, Jesus Christ I didn’t know yer suppose tah water the damn tings!”

 Jethro and Sean let out great belly laughs, the former more genuine than the latter, as the barkeep poured his customer a drink. Jethro--not “Jetro” as Sean’s Irish brogue made it sound--was a fat man whose skin was tanned like leather. He wore rancher’s clothes: white linen shirt, leather vest, workman’s boots, and a bolo tie. He downed his whiskey and stroked his thick gray handlebar moustache, sliding his glass back toward Sean. He tapped on the bartop with two fingers and spat into a spittoon two yards away.

*I’m glad to see such staggering talent still exists.*

 Sean had no disdain for the man himself, but sure as hell harbored a healthy hatred of his habit of pickling himself stupid.

 *Money’s money.*

 Sean wrapped his hand around the bottle of whiskey on the bar and tilted it down toward the glass. His eyes remained on Jethro. After all these years of tending bar, he didn’t need to look down. Mulryan gripped the bottle tighter as the stench of its contents filled his nose. He squinted his eyes involuntarily, his forehead creasing like a wrinkled sheet of paper.

 “You sure you’re alrighty there, padre?”

 “Right as rain, how’s the family?”

 “Oh peachy! Mary’s healthy an’ happy, the kids are growin’ up faster than you can say stop, and the herd is great. Full as ever.” Jethro pounded his second drink. “ I think Peter, he’s my oldest, he’s ready to ask his girl to get hitched here one of these days.”

 “Tat’s good ta hear, brudter.”

 Sean didn’t wait for the conversation to continue. As Jethro brought his fingers down on the bartop yet again, Sean brought one fist, rage and sorrow clenched within, down on the rancher’s hand like a sledgehammer on a railroad spike. There was a sick snapping noise as knuckles bent the wrong way and bones cracked liked lightning. Jethro looked up in disbelief as an uncontained scream erupted from the space beneath his ‘stache. Sean stared back at him, his eyes a vacant plain stretching inward eternally.

\* \* \*

Jamie was behind his eyes, in his brain. Jamie filled his ears and pounded in his chest and burned his flesh with a mad, hating forlornness. He could taste his wife’s blood. He could smell the smoke in the air. . Far worse than the gunsmoke was the stench of whiskey; the smell drenched everything around him: his clothes, their sheets, their drapes, and the floorboards. It was everywhere. Everything.

Once again, he was back. His own personal hell, being forced to relive this moment over and over and over and over again. He was here in his sleep. He was here when awake. The two started to blur together now because no matter where he was or what he was doing, he was here. With Jamie and without Jamie, all at once.

\* \* \*

 “*Fuck you, you Mic bastard!”*

 Sean Mulryan snapped out of his fugue in an instant; the blatant racism of Jethro’s insult struck a match deep inside of the poor man, and a fuse was well on its way to the powder keg.

 “*Fuck you* and yer pretty fucking family!” Sean spat, attempting to make his accent understandable to the man in front of him. “I bet teh cow at home looks mighty fine bent over while yer out with the rest o’ the herd!”

With this Sean vaulted over the bar, his feet colliding with the whiskey bottle he had held a few moments earlier. It flew to the ground, shattering violently. The loud cracking noise was out of place in the now silent saloon. Every patron sat stock still in their seat--or lap, in the whores’ case--and gawked with wide eyes as Mulryan bolted toward Jethro. The Irishman grabbed his patron by the vest and brought his face in close.

 For a second, Sean thought better of beating the shit out of Jethro. After all, it wasn’t really the rancher that Sean hated, and he knew that. Unfortunately for the fat man, Sean also knew that it would feel amazing--now *this* was living! Never before in his life had Sean Mulryan, humble barkeep and amateur gardener, let himself go *wild*.

*Wild.*

The word flashed through his mind and there was no longer room for doubt. His brain was filled to the brim with a year--exactly, as of tonight--of pent up rage and despair. The bottle that contained Sean’s inner demons was cracking from the pressure inside.

He stared into his prey. Jethro was a full eight inches taller than Sean, yet still he whimpered and squealed like a rat in a cage. Sean’s arms were strong and deliberate in their movements, which made him the man to see when one needed a hug; there would be no hugs for Jethro. Now, Sean’s strong, commanding arms were vices.

“Th-this isn’t like you, pardner, c-come on now an’ what’d old Jethro ever do to you?”

“Ye took me feckin’ wife, you cunt! And now I’ll never get her back! Why the *fuck* do you get to go home to a family and I’m stuck mourning mine?”

“I don’t know a damn--”

The confused look on Jethro’s face was abruptly bashed off by a freighttrain fist. Blood spewed from his nose, painting his prized ‘stache a deep crimson rust. The rancher was never partial to blood (though he seemed fine with it when it came from Mary’s nose), and he screeched like a banshee when he tasted the copper in his mouth. His feet gave out beneath his gargantuan frame, and he stumbled backward and down onto a table. Patrons scattered, careful to retrieve their beers before the wrecking ball could smash them, and formed a ring around the two men. No one attempted to intervene.

Sean bore down on the man, propelling another bloody fist into the man’s face. And another. Sean’s right fist fired like a revolver, dishing out pain quickly and efficiently. Blood covered both of the mens’ clothing in droplets, mist and large smears. The sound of bone striking flesh became a wet slapping sound as thick gore padded each consecutive blow. A tiny blessing for Jethro, all things considered.

Sean felt his knuckles snap after a time, and screamed at the flare of sharp pain that moved up his hand. He cradled his fist in his left hand and fell to the ground beside the table. Jethro slid off onto the other side and began to crawl toward the wall-- away from his attacker.

It was at this time that the Irishman discovered tears streaming down his face. He buried his head in his bleeding hand, mixing his tears with the bloody mess. Red war paint now streaked across his face in broad strokes. He ran his fingers through his hair, slicking it back out of his eyes.

*Goin’ apeshit is one ting Sean, cryin’ like a fecking babby is anodder.*

“Get the fuck out o’ my bar!” Sean screamed.

The rubbernecking crowd stood stock still for only a moment before the crazed look in Mulryan’s eyes drove them away through the batwings, the back door, upstairs,--typically accompanied-- and even through an open window for some of the more adventurous cowpokes. Two farmhands who happened to know Jethro dragged him out through the saloon doors, careful not to make eye contact with the batshit Mic. They failed, and their exit was punctuated by a sharp *crack* as a thrown bottle shattered against the doorframe. A dark stain spread through the wood and streaked downward, as if drawn toward hell itself.

Sean Mulryan knew that the worst of his troubles were far from over that night. He couldn’t quite put his finger on why he felt that way--maybe because his hand was almost certainly broken--but he had a *feeling*. As he shuffled to the back room where he slept, he felt tendrils of mist spreading through his stomach, leaving emptiness and frost wherever they touched. There was pressure in his skull, as if some great kraken were wrapped around his very brain, constricting tighter and tighter until he was sure his eyes would burst out of their sockets. But they didn’t. And the anxious pain in his body motivated him on toward his bed.

The back room was part storage and part living space. The front part of the room was inhabited by boxes, crates, barrels, bags, ice boxes, sacks, and all manner of plain objects. Rags. Bottles. Brooms. Why his saloon needed four fucking brooms was unknown, even to Mulryan himself. Produce. Glasses, plates, bowls, forks, knives, spoons, ladles; the whole nine yards. A fine layer of dust entombed most of the knick-knacks, and it was unclear whether they would ever see the sun again.

After this saloon emporium section came the bedroom. A king-sized mattress dominated most of the space here, its pelts and pillows ornamenting an otherwise grubby bed. There was a nightstand flanking either side of this bed, standing guard in all their plain, oak glory. Each had a lantern, but only one was alight at the moment. Only the one had been lit at all during this past year, and that showed no sign of changing. Sean dropped onto his bed, clothes still stained with blood, and wept.

He wept well into the night, full moonlight the only witness to his vulnerable state. He bawled until his tears soaked the pillow, until his gut burned with pain, and until his eyes could bear no more. Then, he convulsed and shook on the bed, dry tears plaguing his eyes. He said only one word in the midst of his anguish: Jamie. No one answered to the name, as much as he wailed.

A cold draft floated through the room, snuffing the lantern like a boot snuffs a cockroach out of existence. Sean stirred at this, his miserable daze interrupted. He wiped his running nose the back of a red sleeve and rolled toward the lantern. He rose to a sitting position, feet now planted firmly on the ground beside the bed. Pulling out a drawer, Sean withdrew a box of matches and placed them next to the lamp. He closed the drawer with his knee and opened the box his his uninjured left hand. The box felt like a block of ice to Sean, and as he withdrew a match from within, a chill pervaded his body. Again, he felt the mist in his guts and the pressure in his head, though this time he felt intent behind it. Like something was meaning to make him squirm and writhe.

*Just light the match ye fuckin’ sissy.*

Resenting his own self-hate, he went to work complying with his own orders. The match shook in his hand, and as he struck it to the box, he felt blue fire licking at his entire body. He saw sapphire hairs burst from the match and engulf him in a web of inferno. He leapt back in pain and fear, shutting his eyes to block out the malignant light. When he opened them again everything was as it had been, match still in hand, feet planted firmly on the floorboards.

*Christ alive, Sean, you’re goin’ looney.*

He felt the cold seeping back into his bones and his fingertips began to throb.He struck the match again. Fire. The normal kind, now. He tilted the match to one side, and gazed into the dancing flames that began to eat at the rest of the match. He turned the knob of the lantern to make sure fuel was pumping. It was. He brought flame to gas and the lantern lit itself in a comfortingly normal *vvwhoosh*.

He drew the heat closer to himself and basked in its comfort. He glanced out his window and saw the full moon, glaring at him--into him. He shivered, despite the warmth in his lap. When he was satisfied, Sean replaced the lantern, and laid back down to rest his aching head.

As his head touched pillow, a horrendous scraping noise pierced the silence. It sounded like rusty metal cleaving into dry wood. The sound continued, a thousand skeletons clawing at his door. This image entered Sean’s mind and his heart sank into his balls. A whimper escaped his lips.

“*Oh God.*” He whispered.

The scraping grew louder. Closer. Panic erupted in Sean’s chest and he began to breathe quicker and quicker, greedily sucking in air as if it were his last chance. He bolted upright and scrambled backward on his bed, colliding solidly with the wall behind him. The soft plush of mattress conformed to his feet and legs, while the rigid wall behind him jutted into his back and shoulders. The scratching was almost to him now. He could hear it moving. It sounded like knife blades cutting a swath through chalkboards, getting ever closer and ever louder in his ears.

“Oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck,” Sean panted “what the fuck are yeh?”

The noise stopped abruptly. For an eternal moment there was only breathing. Two mouths breathing. Sean held his hand to his mouth and winced as throbbing pain pulsed through his crippled hand. Still, he held it there, as if their mingling breaths might mean his end. He held his breath in his lungs, not daring to let it escape into the room.

*Scrape.*

A black shape bolted toward Sean, leaping onto the bed. Fear overtook Sean’s body as he back into the wall, desperately wishing he could pass right through it or meld with it. If he was a wall, maybe he wouldn’t feel so empty all the time. The creature descended upon him; in the dim lamplight it was impossible to tell exactly where the beast ended and the shadows began. Sean raised him arms in front of his face, moaning and whimpering like a scared dog.

He felt something warm and wet brush his arm, leaving a sticky residue wherever it touched. He took an inquisitive breath in through his nose and noticed a familiar scent.

“Oh for fuck’s sake, Cuchulain!”

As he dropped his arms he saw the familiar brown eyes of his faithful bloodhound. The wrinkles in Cuchulain’s face were like deep rifts in the lamplight, and the flickering flame cast shadows which shifted and distorted the somewhat goofy visage of the dog. It tilted its head and began to pant, which quickly became a yawn. The dog set its head into Sean’s lap and nuzzled him comfortingly.

“Oh who’s a good lad? Yeh big lump, scared the God-loving shite outta me!”

Sean affectionately scratched Cuchulain’s ears and planted kisses on his long snout. The owner wrapped his arms around the dog and pulled him closer in, locking him in a warm embrace. Cuchulain excitedly licked Sean’s--still bloody--face. He laughed and flipped the dog onto its back, assaulting it with tummy rubs and scratching. Cuchulain’s tail wagged at a million miles an hour, wild elation in his bulging eyes.

“You’re my little buddy, aren’t yeh! What a good lad!”

Cuchulain barked his agreement.

They were lost in that moment for a while longer. Just a man and dog. There was no Marlowe. No Jethro. There was always Jamie, there was no avoiding her, but Sean’s typical dread longing was absent. He was more content. At peace. He knew he’d never be the same without her, nothing would be, but he still had Cuchulain. He was still alive. And there were still good moments Fewer and farther between over the past year, but happy times still existed. They were still a possibility at least, and that was enough to keep Sean Mulryan going.

As this revelation dawned on him, he fell asleep spooning Cuchulain. Sleep cam faster and more restfully than it had in a considerable number of months. Next to the two snoring figures sat the lamp, still lighting the room. With only the pale moon to observe, a small gust of cold air reduced the flame to smoke, and drifted toward Sean’s ear, seeming to whisper to him as he slept. A smile crept over his worn face as he sleepily replied:

“I love you, too.”