

Puerto del Sol



You and the Night and the Music

Porter Fox

I was there the night the surgeon sang my father in half. It was the night before Christmas Eve. When my father woke, the surgeon pinched his nurse and danced a jig around the breathing machine. He was wearing a Santa hat. The nurse had on a red scarf. When the orderlies arrived to clean up the mess, the surgeon kissed her on the neck and skipped backwards out of the room. My father raised his eyebrows. A scar ran from his bellybutton to the back of his neck. They said they had to go in from behind.

Want to see it? the nurse asked. See what? he growled. The tumor, she said. She held up a glass vial and rattled it back and forth. Give me the fucking thing, my father said, I'm going to wear it around my neck.

We left him alone that night. Visiting hours ended and the staff went home. I found the nurse in the lobby. She was standing in front of a tree with fake presents under it. The room was almost full. More patients stumbled in. There might have been a war outside for all I knew. I asked her if she wanted to get a drink and we walked across the street to a restaurant. My father and I had eaten there after they first diagnosed the tumor. The booths and tables were all white. We'd ordered tuna melts and talked about fishing.

The place was wall-to-wall with bankers when the nurse and I walked in. I ordered two Manhattans and looked for a seat. The drink made me feel better so I ordered another round. Then I got two for the couple sitting next to us. The nurse asked where I was from. I told her the name of a lot of places and she smiled and touched my leg. The juke box played something I recognized and I took her hand and led her to the dance floor.

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She had great moves. The rest of the bar watched as we spun around the room. She led me through a few songs and we sat down again. I bought another round and the couple next to us raised their glasses. The juke box played another hit and we all sang along. When it was over, the woman I'd bought the drinks for lifted my arm in the air and yelled, Who is this guy? My friend! the man said and dragged us outside.

When we passed the hospital, I took everyone inside to see the tree. It was quiet in the lobby. Bright. The couple looked nervous. The woman picked up a present, giggled and handed it to the man. He shook it back and forth and shrugged. The woman started to cry. Then the nurse, too. The people sitting in the room looked at us like we were about to torch the place.

I followed everyone out and they wished me Merry Christmas before driving off in a cab. I walked around the block. There wasn't any snow on the ground. The street was deserted. The restaurant had closed. Everyone was asleep. It didn't seem like Christmas anymore. It was like someone had torn those days out of the calendar.

Doors

Porter Fox

The library is closed. We've come too early. A crowd of thirty huddles under the eaves. It's pouring. The doors are locked. Golden figures are engraved in the wall: the Greeks, a farmer, politicians.

Our shoulders touch. A mother, a janitor, the police. There's a retarded boy who won't stop talking. He's concerned about the rain. He needs a book. His jacket is soaked through.

The books inside are stacked on pressboard shelves. The floors are waxed. The front desk is the size of a grand piano. A man stands by it, holding a flashlight. He taps it against his leg measuring out a tune. Then he flips it one rotation and catches it.

Raindrops hit our cheeks. They swoop through the eaves like hornets. We wince and huddle closer together. A woman hides under her newspaper. Big headlines about Kosovo. An entire village has gone missing. Peacekeepers found half-eaten breakfasts. School uniforms laid out on beds. Civilians are fleeing by the thousand. Governments are reconsidering involvement. Macedonia has closed its border. The Russians want to build a wall.

It's five after the hour. More people crowd in and under. It's like a refugee camp outside the library. Long-lost friends, secret handshakes. The cop eyes the newcomers. The guard won't release the doors. We watch him through the glass and wonder what they do in there at night.

The wind blows the rain sideways. It's been blowing all month. Spring has been holding us hostage. My apartment windows shake. The fire escape rattles. I've stocked the cupboards with canned foods. I have a supply of magazines. The wind hammers all day, eases at night. There's a

Doors

glow under the neighbor's door late, reading I guess. The news is a sci-fi serial these days.

I walked in the wind last night for something to do. I had to run home after two blocks. The storm shrieked through the trees. Street signs began to bend. Magazine tear-out cards sliced through the air. The wind caught my jacket from behind.

It's ten after. The doors are supposed to open on the hour. The rain is really coming down. The big wind will be here soon. There's talk of comment cards. Or dousing the building with gasoline. A good old-fashioned book burning would open some doors. We could build a barricade around the reference desk. Wake up the mayor. Get the National Guard reading.

The security guard flips his flashlight once more and approaches the door. He pulls a ring of keys from his jacket pocket. The woman with the newspaper folds it and tucks it under her arm. The crowd pushes forward. The guard sorts through the ring. He finds the key and looks at us. We turn our backs to the wind. See? the retarded boy says. This is why I hate the rain, see? The guard puts the key to the door. He pauses again and watches. The cop. The woman. An old man in a gray jacket with rain-speckled glasses.