

Private Showing
By
Joseph Devon

Gustav watched the white ball roll across the stained felt of the pool table. He sat on his stool against the wall, the soles of his scuffed tennis shoes hooked against one of the rails. For him the ball's path contained perfection and form, predictability and order. The table was one of his favorites to watch and he had come to know it like he knew the short walk from the pool hall to his apartment building three blocks away.

The man who had taken the shot, a preposterous sample of humanity dressed like a peacock and with a temperament like a bitchy dog, cursed and stomped the rubbered end of his cue down on the ground, looking around in an exaggerated fashion as if the gods themselves must be looking down confused as to how so perfect a stroke could have resulted in a miss.

There was money on the game. The peacock's opponent took a half-step backwards and, holding his cue upright in front of him like a knight at attention, he receded into the darkness just out of range of the rays from the long lamp that hung over the table. His form became statuesque to avoid entering in any way into the peacock's head. Clearly the peacock was rattled and the knight was making a calculated decision that letting him alone would be the best way to further his spiraling out of control.

Gustav also sat back. He was far enough away from the table to know that the prescription for his glasses needed to be strengthened, but he leaned back just the same, not wishing to intrude on what he was watching.

He reached a slow hand to the table on his right and retrieved a tall glass. As he took a sip a bit of pulp from the lime that had come with the drink slipped off the rim and into his mouth. He had long since thought the ice in his drink had melted it into a warm watery mess, but with the bit of pulp held against the back of his top front teeth by his tongue he was able to take a gulp, and although the flavor of juniper berries was lost, there was the bitter puckering of the quinine left and as that grew he squeezed his tongue against his teeth and the small nodules of lime burst in a tart spray. He swallowed and smiled, now happily detached.

When he reached to set his glass down on the table he misjudged the distance. The glass fell to the table with a clatter that was followed immediately by the thunk of a cue striking a ball and the subsequent rounded clacks of that ball striking others as its influence spread across the table.

"Hey, man!"

Gustav knew what had happened and he attempted to withdraw more into himself while refusing to look up. The peacock was staring at him, his cue brandished like a weapon, his face angry but unable to hide the relief he felt at having found someone to blame for his inferior game.

The peacock walked closer. "You just going to sit there all day, old man?" He was leaning down, as if ducking under something that was blocking his view of Gustav. "You don't have anything better to do than mess up my game?"

Gustav remained perfectly still, trying to keep the picture in its frame. This wasn't supposed to happen; he couldn't handle it when this happened. It made Rebecca too near.

"Oh, leave him alone," the knight spoke up.

“Yeah?” Peacock turned, needing something to blame for his bad game. “You *would* say that, he’s practically running interference for you.”

“The guy put his drink down.”

“He’s sitting back there staring at every move I make; you think that’s not going to get to me? Are we playing a spectators’ sport here?”

Knight stepped forward. For all of Peacock’s threatening and gesturing it was clear that he had nothing to hang his argument on.

“It’s a bar. You can’t handle the distractions, it’s because you can’t handle playing in a bar, not because of the distractions.”

Things were becoming too focused on Gustav for his liking; the dialogue was ruining the picture, the argument making it all too real. He got down from his seat, saying something inaudible that was hopefully an apology and began to look for a new vantage point.

“Where you think you’re going?” Peacock shouted after him, still hoping to shunt blame off of his own shoulders.

“What’s the problem?” the waitress asked, appearing short and cute between the two men.

“That guy’s creeping me out,” the peacock said, trying to still sound angry but finding it difficult now that Gustav was a few tables away.

“What was he doing?” the waitress asked.

“Nothing. Nothing at all. He’s just pissed off because he’s losing,” the knight spoke up.

“Hey, I just find it weird when some old guy decides to stare at me.”

“Let him be,” the waitress said easily enough, “him and his wife are in here all the time. He’s a security guard at the museum or something. They just like to have a few drinks on his day off and watch some pool.”

She was already walking back towards the bar when the knight spoke up. “I didn’t see a wife.”

Gustav shuffled along the tables, hugging the wall. A lifetime of working in cheap black dress socks had left his ankles hairless and when he wore his tennis shoes his legs were always cold. He tried to adjust his waist band so his pants might cover more of his legs.

Once he was far enough from “The Peacock and the Knight” he settled on a new table. The light was different here, it was much closer to the window, and he quietly walked around the outskirts of the table’s presence, looking for the proper framing.

It was a domestic scene, a father and his son. Gustav guessed the boy was in attendance at a local college and the father was in town visiting. They had perhaps gone to a show, a nice lunch, and then had decided to throw back a bit. Maybe the mother had decided to go lie down in the hotel, or do some shopping, and father and son had decided to bond over the slightly lowbrow activity of shooting a few games of pool at the local bar.

Gustav chose his seat, a good vantage point, out of the way, almost at a different table, with the low light from the window creating warm shading throughout. His drink was gone; he wasn’t sure where he had left it. It made viewing difficult, too often they viewed back, so he hid inside of himself until the waitress passed by and he was able to put in an order. He didn’t speak. He only gestured and avoided eye-contact.

A few minutes later he was rewarded with a glass of fresh drink and he sipped it. The drink alone was enough for a few seconds. Putting the glass down he settled back and watched, once again on the outside. But Father and Son weren’t as involved in their game

and there was some tension between them. The tension might have been nice, might have brought about an interesting context for the warmth and openness of their scene but instead they continued to focus more on the things around them instead of on each other. And that meant they noticed Gustav. Almost immediately he became a common distraction for them, reacting awkwardly to his presence was easier than interacting with each other.

With a nod towards the streaked double glass doors at the other end of the bar Gustav pretended that someone he knew had just walked in. He left “Father and Son” quickly, their stares coming too close, their life and breath coming too close, making him remember.

He was edgy now. The frames weren’t holding. Without realizing it he found that he had walked all the way to the outside doors. He turned away, noticing a busy corner of light and color.

A group of girls, older, possibly graduate students from Son’s school were gathered together, soft sweaters and jeans. Lots of eyeglasses and an amazing array of height. A wonderful grouping of subjects.

Gustav walked around, knowing that a group that large would be concentrating on each other; even if one or two noticed him they had more than enough places to hide their gazes so they could ignore him. The location right up next to the door didn’t please him. He was more into dark contrasts. Perhaps if there had been a weak rainstorm outside, but it was only clear evening light and neon from the bar creating a palate too Technicolor for his liking. Still, there was plenty of merit, plenty to watch, plenty to soak in, plenty to distract.

Gustav took a seat with a nice view, allowing for the modernist lighting scheme he let the windows backlight the entire piece. He conceded that the vibrant colors and loud talking maybe masked a deeper meaning and he found himself enjoying this painting after all. He took a sip from his glass, the condensation running down the sides delightfully cool against his palm, and smiled as he was finally able to detach and watch.

Then one of the girls came closer. She was looking at him and he tried to stare straight ahead, maybe pretend he was deaf or senile or drunk but she was coming closer. The frame was breaking.

Gustav must have reminded her of her father, or a favorite uncle, or a character from a childhood book that enough beer and laughter with her friends had called to mind. Or maybe he just looked lonely. She sat down next to him and asked what he was doing. She was friendly and casual and was clearly just chatting to him because she wanted to sit down for a few minutes, all the other chairs were full of jackets or bodies, but whatever the reason she was there and she was talking and his insides were cold.

The tilt of her body as she reached down to adjust a sock that was itching her calf, the tall glass slickly wet in his hands, the warbling of her voice, it was all too close and Gustav felt his insides seize up like a steel band was tightening around them and he tried to fight it back but the memories came. They always came in no order, only with the stupid clumsy grouping of association. First Rebecca appeared as a vague emotion in the back of his mind and then an image or conversation or fragment of their life together followed with no sense of propriety or reason.

They had argued about buying a larger bed. He had wanted one, she hadn’t. She had been afraid that the space of a larger bed would allow them to sleep truly separately, that physical contact during sleep was important and he had just wanted to sleep the night through and now he spent his nights arranging his pillows to try and fill the hollow of his back the way her body had, draping the sheets over his side to recreate the way her arm had lain when she was alive.

The girl watched as Gustav lurched off his stool. He didn't respond to her worried questions, he only batted a hand behind him as he walked, almost ran, away. He slammed the tall glass in his hand down on a ledge as he hurried past, the sound of glass shattering stopping some of the conversations nearby but it didn't stop him as he made it to the exit, his old frame hustling through the door.

The girl tried to answer questions from some of her friends but could only shake her head in confusion. Concern made her walk to the door, but she looked out and couldn't see the old man anywhere.

Gustav was a few blocks away before he slowed down. Then he stopped and, as if his body was intent on doing the exact opposite of what it had been doing the last two minutes, he froze, shoulders hunching in over his stomach, cool breeze now making his ankles cold. There was sweat on his forehead. Only his eyes moved, darting like small-winged birds over everything in sight until they locked on a man in a suit stopped at the corner across the street, a newspaper folded over in his hands, lost in reading.

Waning light, evening sky, man in a suit, the overflowing garbage can next to him contrasting with the crispness of his clothes. Slowly Gustav was able to appreciate "Business Man at the Corner," and slowly he let himself become conscious that he was no longer thinking about her. His body relaxed. The frame was up. She was out of his mind again.

About the Author:

Joseph Devon was born in New Jersey. He grew up and began to write books. For a longer version of this story be sure and visit him online. You can always find news about his latest books, recent short fiction and all things Joseph Devon at www.JosephDevon.com. You can also buy a hard copy of what you just read. Drop by, you'll be glad you did.

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