

Forty Winks and a Nod

by H. W. Moss

The four met for drinks at a bar on Gansevoort Street, a trendy place in Manhattan's meat packing district. Red tapestries covered the walls, red carpets the floor, all the celeb photos on the walls had red horns on their foreheads. The last three digits of the bar's telephone number was 666, so it seemed appropriate to tell the story.

The waitress served them and departed. David stirred his Scotch rocks with a finger, licked the digit of liquor and held it in the air to command attention. He began telling the tale:

“As Jerome lay in bed unable to make the plunge into Morpheus' arms, he felt the whisper of a breath on his face and heard someone ask, ‘What's the matter, got insomnia again?’

“The voice was deep and luxurious and, above all, strong. Yet the owner of these powerful vocal cords was lost in the darkness. Jerome's eyes widened large as dinner plates, but he searched in vain for the source of the words. It was as if they came from inside his head, not from outside.”

Bobby listened, but looked bored; he was an artist. He also attended meetings, so he sipped coffee, plain. Bobby's wife, Rhoda, was transfixed with the tale. She had Slavic roots which explained everything including why she drank pepper Vodka.

Alees, David's younger sister, had heard the story from a variety of angles over the years and now listened only for the altered state from which David chose to tell it. She sipped red wine as she leaned on an elbow in her red vinyl bench seat.

“Ever been unable to fall sleep? I mean, really can’t? Way early in the morning and you’re lying there. You can’t tell an insomniac he won’t get to sleep. Same as being seasick. You can’t tell a guy who’s seasick he isn’t going to die. Me, I count. Not sheep or anything. Just count. Numbers. As high as I can go until next morning I wake up and say, uh, yah, I got to three hunderd or some such. So the voice says: ‘Here’s the deal. Any time you want to fall asleep, just go from one to ten. Before you reach the tenth number, boom, you’re asleep. All I want is your soul, your wife’s soul and I need all your children’s souls.’”

“Lawyer joke,” Bobby butted in. “I heard this as a lawyer joke. Only the Devil says in exchange for all these souls, the lawyer will win every case from now on. Lawyer asks, ‘What’s the catch?’”

“Deeper than that, Bob-eeee. Jerome lying in bed says, ‘Ten numbers, I count ten consecutive numbers, I fall asleep. That’s the deal?’”

‘That’s the deal,’ the voice answered.”

Inside walnut frames, Bobby’s eyes strayed around the room in his elusive, inattentive style. He had a studio in Spanish Harlem and a gallery that showed his work, which explained everything.

“Jerome asks: ‘What I never understood was why you bother. Why would you want my soul in the first place? Or any other person’s soul? Don’t you have enough?’

“Devil says, ‘I’ll never have enough. And deals like this cinch things up, if you get my meaning. You’ll probably come to me in the end anyway, but now I don’t have to think about it any more.’

“‘I count, that’s it? But before I get through ten numbers, I’m asleep?’

“‘You’ll be asleep. Okay? That’s the deal.’ The voice goes away. Jerome says inside his head, ‘Twenty. Twenty-one. Twenty-two. . .’”

Silence ensued. Rhoda looked quizzical, her brow knit. At last she let out a gasp of air. “Oh. I get it.”

“Well, I don’t,” Bobby said.

Al simply sat there without a clearly defined expression on her face.

“Never mind,” David said and sipped from his drink.

#