

notion sparked like inspiration—a cup of tea with marmalade and a baking powder biscuit in some quiet corner. He stopped at the *WHITE LUNCH cafeteria*, an establishment that advertised its hospitality with typical city gaudiness: floating above the entrance was an immense yellow neon cup and saucer from which rose strands of white neon steam that flashed bright and then subsided into long periods of dullness. Who could deny its tout's pitch? “When in Rome, I guess,” Winston muttered. He walked through the double doors.

The hotel's beer parlour was cavernous, but as familiar as any he'd experienced in the Valley—lustrous panels of wood punctuated with mirrors and low lights, the dull murmur of talk, stains, laughter, tobacco, yeasty swill, clatter. Winston knew that he could become a teetotaler with no effort; drink was a social glue for which he'd found little use. He supposed that working men in their Sunday finest had been streaming into this basement to purchase their amber-coloured ticket to bonhomie and oblivion since the days of gas lighting and horse-drawn wagons. Spent years and replenished barrels: as cyclical and enduring as the seasons.

He stood at the entrance and peered into the murky room. At a nearby table, a broad-shouldered man pointed two fingers at his companion sitting directly opposite. Menace was unmistakable in the gesture. Another typical

sight, Winston noted. He walked toward an empty stool at the bar and sat at the polished oak counter. As he waited for a harried bartender's "Yes, sir, what'll it be?" Winston grimaced for a moment with discomfort. Out of habit, he'd run the nail of his index finger along a seam in the wood. This reflex test for cleanliness had dredged up a tarry paste that was in fact nothing except accumulated soil from who could say how long ago. He rubbed his fingernail on the side of the stool's mushroom cap cushion. In the mirror he could see that no terrible row had broken out and that the two pals had resumed their drunk-loud banter. In this murky light, he observed, his silhouette was indistinct, one strand in the vast fabric of the crowd.

Ordering a glass of beer, he wondered what gremlin had whispered in his ear to convince him that a drink in a basement filled with men would be a pleasant way to pass the evening. Alberta told him now and again, "Go out and make yourself some friends, it'll do you a world of good," and whenever he went to one of the Bend's watering holes, he returned home in a sour mood, vowing to never again heed Alberta's sibylline advice. She had no idea. The men's easy talk—of sport, work, weather—eluded him. Nor did its slow-witted nods of agreement and platitudinous conclusions truly interest him. Time and again, he concluded that for him such superficial fraternity could serve no valuable purpose. Watching the bartender speedily towel dry a tray of beer steins, Winston calculated that one glass would not take long to finish.

"Hello, sailor. Are you new to port?" The man on the

neighbouring stool leaned toward Winston like a straw-stuffed scarecrow. He smelled bracing if sweet from after-shave.

“I’m from the Valley.” Winston remained wary and impassive, catching the man’s muted reflection. He hadn’t anticipated conversation.

“Surely you have a name?”

“Wilson.”

“Richard Williamson. But if you’re so inclined, call me Dickie like everyone else.” The man swiveled to shake Winston’s hand. He smiled: “That’s quite a fetching get-up, Mr. Wilson. Is that what they’re wearing out in the Valley these days?”

Winston thought to upbraid the stranger for his cheeky innuendo. Turning to address him, he saw a newborn bird for an instant, a hatchling cheeping with hunger, fear, and panic, its eyes blind though calculating. He studied the translucent expanse of Dickie’s forehead and noticed shadowy veins. The man appeared delicate and vulnerable, someone with a skull that could be as easily crushed as an egg. Yet Dickie acted any way but frail. He’d have a peacock strut, Winston was sure of it. The uniform sombre suits of the tavern-goers stood in sharp contrast to Dickie’s camel coat and radiant silk tie. The man kept his hair—corn silk pale, fine, and thinning—slick with pomade and combed straight back. His eyebrows had been thinned into graceful arches. The man was strange but harmless. Trying to place him, Winston decided that Dickie was dapper, like a preening and silly though possibly malevolent English aristocrat in a

Waugh novel, a creature with station and refinement, if no money. He'd have quite the collection of stories, Winston guessed, and not one about sports or weather.

The conversation between the two men progressed with a sporadic rhythm. Dickie asked elaborate questions laced in suggestion. Winston offered terse answers, occasionally wondering with mild alarm whether Dickie was some kind of con man who planned to bilk him. He pictured his wallet and smiled at the minute pay-off it would give to any misguided swindler. When silence loomed Dickie grabbed for fresh topics—his favourite cocktail, the criminal past of the burly waiter carrying the beer tray, his fondness for sunny Doris Day. He apologized for being *chatty* and yet made no obvious effort to stop. From time to time Winston thought about saying he was tired and needed to return to his hotel room. The man's determination won him over.

“Are you a friend of the Queen?”

“Am I a monarchist?”

“No, that's not exactly what I mean.”

There were moments when Winston was reminded of the podiatrist with the jokes in his voice. The nervous man's puzzling speech ran in different directions, making one declaration while insinuating that there were other matters that *could not be made public*, as though Dickie were an anxious spy or an underworld kingpin in some hard-boiled novel with a lurid cover. Trying not to stare at the man's remarkable features, Winston let his eyes wander the room, booming and festive now with sodden conversations. Snatches of song burst from a distant table. He briefly considered that

Dickie might be soft in the head, an example of that odd breed of men who sit at bus depots and café counters and in barbershops and ramble on about nearly anything to anyone within listening range.

After smoothing down his hair with his palms—a completely unnecessary gesture since not a strand had broken free—Dickie made a sudden announcement: “I’ve got a sight you *do not* want to miss. C’mon.” He raised and lowered his eyebrows in quick succession, jokingly and yet persuasive.

Winston hesitated. He could feel the pull of curiosity as well as the force of routine: there was a novel waiting to be read in his hotel room, but it wasn’t going to stand up and walk out the door if he didn’t make time for it that very night. Besides, the room held no other promise. He could not recall the last time he’d met a complete stranger. Certainly no one in years—if ever at all—had asked him to take a walk in the middle of the night to an unknown destination. The thought that he might be shanghaied bubbled up and burst. Dickie could not be a criminal; the idea was laughable. Besides, what use would they have for a librarian with soft hands? Winston told himself that briny ocean air would be a bracing tonic, and marveled at his sudden somewhat-may attitude. His mother might be right about getting out and making acquaintances. Perhaps the only trouble had been the Bend’s pool of farmers and loggers.

They hurried along one busy street and then another, Winston a head taller yet hurrying to keep up with Dickie’s determined stride. After the first two turns, Winston snort-

ed, knowing he was lost; he had no idea if they were heading toward the Pacific or the Atlantic. Now the bet tipped in Alberta's favour, Winston thought.

At eight p.m., the Bend would have already turned in for the night. The city's neon whirl of nightlife exhilarated Winston, though he noticed that the flow of traffic eased considerably as they walked further from the beer parlour. Their footfalls echoed. Past the squat russet block of the Woodward's department store—from a distance its electric **W** rotated silently in the black sky—the city was older and frugally lit. As Winston grew accustomed to the stillness he began to taste the saltwater air instead of the sooty gasoline fumes that poured from cars.

Here, the compact brick buildings were not proud and had little apparent vitality to attract respectable businesses. Winston imagined their rents would be modest, enticing to shady pawnshops and struggling family enterprises. The silent men they passed looked as though they were moving toward no place in particular. Vagrants. With a spinning hand gesture, Dickie indicated that they should pick up their pace.

Dickie proceeded to talk and talk, now effusive and gesturing crazily about any subject. To Winston, the sheer volume of his revelation was incredible. He'd learned more from this man in five minutes than he'd ever heard from Mr. Reynolds, who'd been the principal of the Bend's high school for over a decade. The outpouring was indiscriminate, promiscuous, manic. Dickie lead Winston through the many facets of working in the men's department at the

Hudson's Bay Company department store. His voice became particularly intense when he talked about those customers who treated shop clerks like servants—*I mean, who do they think they are?*—and those nameless others who freely granted themselves *five finger discounts*. And he gossiped mercilessly about the other men and women employees and even revealed the cloak and dagger troubles *upstairs in Management*.

Closer now to Winston, he confided that certain *pervy* customers would try on suits and then make lewd motions while being measured. In a barrage of squints and raised brows and popped eyes, he said there are ways to determine when a man is not wearing proper undergarments. Dickie was obviously at home in this warehouse of salacious details. Winston decided he would have to be careful about what moments from his life he would share with this odd man.

After the career peccadilloes, Dickie diverted the gush of thoughts homeward.

His pets, twin Pomeranians—“the exact colour of cedar chips,” he said, and later, “a hellish hue, I swear to God. Right now they’re gnawing on the legs of my chesterfield, *I just know it*”—were his pride and yet the very bane of his existence as well. He called them *his brats* and exclaimed more than once that they *need to be taught a lesson*. Their high-strung temperaments threatened to *drive him to Essondale*—and at this moment he shook imaginary iron bars and crossed his eyes as though he already had intimate knowledge of inmate life in that lunatic asylum. No white froth at the corner of his mouth appeared, but Winston would not

have been shocked if Dickie's fervor conjured some.

Caught off-guard by the performance, Winston did not know if laughter would be a response his acquaintance would welcome. Dickie described his collection of *objets*, telling his captive audience that such a collection is possible—providing that one is discerning enough—to gather on a modest salary: “You need to train your uncouth eye, that’s all.”

After Winston told Dickie, “You ought to write a newspaper column called ‘Just Ask Dickie.’ You should be making money off your ideas,” Dickie looked at him askance and retorted, “Are you making a joke?” His tone was cold, as though he’d been subject to a grave insult. Winston decided that Dickie craved attention, not the conversation of equals. He kept mum.

Dickie was describing his plans for a *grand tour* through Europe when he gestured around himself with a flourish and pronounced words that sounded like *Versailles of the Eastside* to Winston’s baffled ears. Winston saw nothing out the ordinary, and conjectured that Dickie might be scared and that his animated chatter was his peculiar variation on whistling in the graveyard; certainly the streets had grown emptier and noticeably unkempt. Dickie pointed to the street’s oyster shell fragment litter and said that it had been dropped there by gulls. “They’re as smart as dogs, you see,” was the vague explanation he gave.

Dickie announced that *at long last* they had reached their destination. The Port-Land was no different from the other past-their-prime storefronts on the quiet street. Unprepossessing, Winston thought to say, now there’s the

best word. He held his tongue. This man had made a special effort to show him a local sight, after all. And besides, the dull brick face might be just that. A front. Winston looked at its undistinguished proportions and weathered paint and predicted a future of broken windowpanes covered by boards and a perennial **For Sale** sign that proved magnetic to no one. Even the Belle-Vu, easily the rattiest tavern in the Bend, gave the Port-Land's forlorn air no competition. The brackish air was its natural complement.

Dickie had claimed he'd never guess their destination, and now Winston conjured a den of sluggish drug addicts. Ladies of the night seemed unlikely. What else could it be? Despite all the talk, Dickie hadn't given him the least peep of a clue. Was there any other possibility? Burlesque dancers? There had been news stories about police raids of narcotic distributors recently. When Alberta did not supply him with the gritty details, he'd read about them himself. That was as unlikely as being shanghaied. The Port-Land's secret identity was an exciting prospect, immensely more so than the absent elevator operator. Mother would love this story.

His eyes adjusted to a room aglow as if lit with dwarf jack-o'-lanterns. Winston sighed at the familiar bar decor—mirrors, wood, stains, the pungent residue of beer and cigarettes—and felt keen disappointment. There were no hoarse and colourful women and not even a single wayward reeling drunk, only quiet men at tables or at the bar bench. Though he had no clear picture how a *junkie* might act, he detected nothing suspicious. A wall of locomotive engine car pictures framed in heavy carved wood was the single

unusual element he could spot.

Dickie led him far from the doors to a murky corner near the back wall.

“*Dickie est arrivé,*” an arch voice announced.

“Mr. Wilson, may I introduce you to the gang? Clockwise from here”—he gestured with an open palm—“Ed Barnes, then Johnny Schmidt. Our last member is Pierre, though we call him La Contessa with utter respect.”

To Winston’s eye, Dickie’s *gang* closely resembled a motley crew. If the Port-Land was a front, these men gave no clue to its true purpose, looking neither extraordinary nor mysterious. Ed was a chubby drunk, anyone could see it, no doubt acting the foolish delinquent at parties with lamp shade props and off-colour jokes. He was unshaven and had a drinkhound’s bleary focus. Johnny reminded Winston of Dickie, ill at ease and fussy. He wore too many rings and had hair heavily laden with pomade. Oily charm and an easy smile, like Liberace in *Sincerely Yours*. Reminiscent of a Saturday matinee gangster, he was shifty-eyed, as though expecting policemen to burst through the doors with tommy-guns ablaze. Older than the other men and wearing a faded and disheveled suit, Pierre appeared to be dozing. The air about their table was thick with aftershave and cigarette smoke. Winston noticed that the table was strewn with glasses, cigarette packages, matchbooks, and ashtrays.