

OUZO NIGHT (rev. 2017)

by John Jordan-Cascade

The doorbell chimes a malicious sound; the foreboding sound of things to come. Martin Jeffrey Corbett leaps up from his black naugahyde couch where he fell asleep watching TV. He crosses the blue carpet of his immaculate apartment to grab the brass doorknob. His living room smells like the stale air of an old Woolworth's: plastic and polyester with a splatter of drugs and cosmetics and cheap hamburgers. Corbett reeks of too much Old Spice aftershave and the 70s, or worse, the selfish, confused 80s, though in most of his thoughts he thinks of himself as 'right as rain,' as his father used to say.

He twists the doorknob and pulls the door open in one effortless motion. Jade stands there waiting for him patiently with an anguished intensity painted across her face. The woman with the legs of a Goddess and a mind far sharper than Martin's greets him with crazy, desperate, piercing eyes and a twitch on one side of her mouth. It's a look he's never seen before.

"You're late, girl!" he says with a bit of a drunken slur.

Jade does not wait for his usual 'just jivin' ya, sweets.' Instead she pulls out a shiny little .38 pistol from her fashion model's dark brown wool coat and fires it in Corbett's gut.

Corbett's back a couple of years in downtown Chicago. Rush Street, blues capitol of the Midwest. It's a cool summer night after a brief chorus of rain. The neon nightclub lights sparkle on the wet asphalt; red and deep blue. And now inside Cody's Jazz Club. Dark, smoky, raucous laughter and chatter, jumping glint of light outside, clinking glasses. Some unknown jazz singer breaking out her lousy imitation of Billie Holiday, but Corbett thinks, 'hey, at least she's trying, right?' He sees this woman, first from behind, then she saunters over in front of him as he sits calmly at a little round table by himself. He sucks down a tall Harvey Wallbanger and marvels, 'God! This chick's got some class the way she's moving in that Givenchy or some other goddamn French designer's dress!' As she passes him he sees just appearances: blonde hair, brown eyes, maybe early thirties, well-dressed fashion model maybe, but Oh Dear Lord, he gazed into her heart and soul through those big, brown eyes! He always noticed eyes first. Lust attack as bad as he's ever had it. No hope for recovery. Corbett holds on for dear life. With his left fist glued to his drink, he orders another with a slightly shaky right hand. Givenchy returns to her barstool and her drink. He gets up, pushing past the dread of rejection and wades through the crowded, smoky bar to sit next to her. His stomach is kicking and screaming in resistance.

"What're you drinking there, sweets?" Corbett asks, fully expecting another 'Get lost, creep!' Perhaps the third this evening.

"Just your standard Margarita. I love the taste of watermelons," she says in a raspy, unsteady voice. "But I'm ready for something different. You buying, handsome?"

Corbett feels like his heart is on the verge of stopping. He's astonished. She must be drunk--affecting her eyesight maybe? His heart screams 'Shit, man! Go ahead without me!'

“Sure, what’ll it be then, sweets!” Wait, I know what you might like—a classy dame like you. How ‘bout a Manhattan?” He thinks he’s a modern-day version of Humphrey Bogart, only better looking. He’s tugging nervously on the gold chain around his neck. She notices his bravado and just smiles to herself, ever so slightly.

She looks into his eyes and smiles, “Are you serious? That’s heresy! We’re in Chicago! I’d never get a Manhattan! Where’s your loyalty?”

Corbett smiles back, his eyes wide in delight. This girl’s got some spunk.

“Next thing you’ll tell me, you’re a damn Mets fan!” She raises her voice over the din.

Corbett laughs out loud. “Ah-ha! No **WAY!** Cubs all the way, baby doll. This is the year: World Series time!”

“No. I’m in need of something strong. Let’s do a couple shots of ouzo. You game, sweets?” a little bit of sarcasm added for Corbett’s term of endearment.

“Some **what-zo?**” Corbett asks incredulous.

“It’s called OUZO—stuff from Greece. Tastes like licorice turpentine, only smoother. You’ll love it. First one to pass out pays the tab, OK?”

“Whoa! It’s gonna be you—and...” He wants to add, ‘and how can you pay the tab if you’re **passed out?**’ but he decides better. Why spoil the moment with logic? The party that’s just getting started.

Corbett takes her hand and they walk her over to his little brown and black table, never really taking her challenge seriously. She’s too beautiful to be sitting next to him. She tells him her name is Jade and she’s a model for the McKibben and Adams Agency on Michigan Avenue. Her boyfriend was a cop but was killed in a robbery shootout a year ago today. They down another liquid licorice turpentine together, laughing and relaxing in each other’s company. As the jazz singer sings her final song of the set and the crowd slowly begins to thin, he has to ask what you’re not supposed to ask on a first date.

“You ever thought about getting married and maybe having children?” Corbett feels like he’s starring in a high wire act, while doing his best Alan Alda imitation of the sensitive, polite guy he used to make fun of in college.

“Well lucky me, if I’d been married to Jeff, I’d be a widow now, wouldn’t I...”

“Martin.” He finishes what he knows she wanted to say.

She laughs out loud. “Dodged that bullet, huh, Martin?”

“Your boyfriend was Jeff? That’s my middle name, Jeffrey!”

Jade stands up to attention, more than a little dizzy, and raises her shot glass high in the air above her head. "Well I'll be damned! Here's to ya, Martin Jeffrey!" She downs the rest of her ouzo, puts the glass down, takes his head in her palms and plants a kiss on his forehead.

"So what about little kiddies?" he reminds her of the question.

Jade sits down and looks at him for what seems like a long while, playing with a curl in her flowing hair. "No, not for me! When I think about them, which is seldom...the thought of birth just does not appeal."

"You mean giving birth..."

"What?"

"You mean the thought of giving birth doesn't appeal to you."

A befuddled look crosses her face. "That doesn't make sense, **YOU** can't even *give* birth, Jeffrey!"

He laughs.

She looks at her empty glass and frowns deeply. "So what about you? Ever think about getting married?"

With a subtle smirk he plays with his empty shot glass. He can hardly believe the game is falling in his favor. She is so very lovely and so out of his league. Yet, she is so sweet, asking him all the right questions to tug at his heart. Maybe she can play his game even better than he does. He dismisses the thought as cynical.

"Ah, marriage...that dreaded prison! No...no, right now it's not in the cards. Not really my cup of tea. But you never know, if the right woman comes along...It's kinda too bad, 'cause I really love kids." The words drip from his lips like poisoned wine.

He looks at her with stoned and lying eyes, but the bar is dark and she has had too much to drink. In her lonely fog she sees only a sweet man. 'Maybe he's looking for connection,' she thinks. She looks to him and smiles the warmest smile she can muster.

Now Corbett's in Jade's bedroom. The two of them are in Jade's bed with their rumpled clothes still on under her sweet-smelling covers. They are holding each other tight and crying. Even as she's crying he notices her sensuous lips, yet Corbett does not want to make love with her this night. He only wants her arms around him. Jade cries a soft, moaning, shuddering cry for her beloved Jeffrey she will never see again and for the stranger named Jeffrey curled at her breast, whom she has chosen as a poor substitute. Corbett cries a deep, stuttering, childish cry. His eyes pop open, amazed at the realization: it is the first time he has cried in his adult life and he doesn't recall what thought started it, but he can't stop. It's the sharp crack of ouzo that has broken down his walls, he thinks, but he's glad for the release and he feels safe in this sweet woman's arms. His mind flashes on the hope that they will stay together. She might be "good for him," though he never really understood the phrase. He continues to sob--after

the reflective pause—for all the rebuffs and lonely aches he pretended did not hurt and for the hazy, drunken sex with perfume-stained women he did not care about.

Corbett breathes in the shattering explosion of the gun and feels the bullet rip through his abdomen and out the back near his right kidney. Am I going to die? The impact knocks him back suddenly, his flailing body trips and stumbles over his carpet now stained with artistic splatters of deep red. He crashes against the wood frame of his couch, more blood staining the leather. Shards of thick, bleeding glass rip through his stomach. He looks down and does not see them. His spine, legs and arms burn with pain. Corbett's brain floods with a shotgun blast of thoughts: How? Why am I back here? Didn't know she had a gun! Again the wretched sting of 'WHY?' clogs his throat but he cannot utter a sound. He feels the blood streaming down the inside of his pants, over his crotch and his left thigh. It paints a red river delta on his underwear. The question WHY? jumps on Corbett's chest and claws on his windpipe like talons from an eagle. The pain of not knowing the answer does not leave him—it makes him gasp for air.

Finally, Jade steps towards him slowly, the .38 at her thigh, gripped tight. He has waited an eternity for her to speak. He struggles to focus through his pain. She speaks with terse bitterness with tears in her eyes.

"Why? You sick son of a bitch. Why did you rape my baby sister? She was only fourteen, still so innocent."

Those words exploded in Corbett's brain, tear through the whirling images, the Mardi Gras confusion of the moment. 'What the **fuck** is she talking about?' The shout is just in his mind. The question struggles against the buzzing shudder in his cranium—the sound of fear attacking him.

"Goddammit! Put the fucking gun away. I...don't know what you're *talking* about," he gasps weakly.

Another series of needles start to jab Corbett in his back and legs. He writhes on the floor, holding his blood-soaked gut and moans.

"I *swear* to you, Jade! I never **touch**ed her!"

"You're lying!" she screams, seething in anger, but a moment of doubt dances across her face. "It's something you'd do, isn't it?"

Corbett is shaking his head violently. Jade raises the gun and points it at his grimaced face. His eyes are shut and he's hissing like a wounded snake trying to give birth to the words that will stop her.

And Corbett's back two months ago in Jade's bedroom with her younger sister, Mallory. It's the afternoon before Christmas eve. It's cold, but quiet with freshly fallen snow blanketing the neighborhood. It is the only time of year when Corbett's intense pursuits are calm enough to consider the innocent, selfless love he imagined Christ had in mind when He was around. It's a time of year when his long-neglected guilt demands from him a token \$10 gesture toward some children's hunger relief

agency. And now, in the face of his reverent composure stands a sensuous young woman—only a girl really—scantily covered in a white terry cotton bathrobe that she is holding tight against her, causing it to be lifted up far enough to reveal most of her thighs. She is a beautiful sight for Corbett: a vision of forbidden love: long, silken brown hair brushed back against her shoulders, smooth, milk-white skin. She has deep dark red lipstick, applied perfectly. She has the face of an angel and the body of a woman certainly older than fourteen. Corbett is reminded of Audrey Hepburn in some old movie he saw once...Breakfast at something-or-other. He is standing close to the door and she is near the bed.

“You called me to come—uh, to see you? Ah, so what’s up, Mallory?” he wavers ever-so-slightly from the weight of his desire.

“Is my sister still away at her modeling job?”

“Yeah, she is. Got called in early this morning—last minute kind of thing for some skiing promotion gig. She’ll be back in time for dinner I think.”

“Good! I wanted some time alone with you.” A long pause between them as they look at each other.

“Do you find me attractive, Martin?”

Corbett is scared and excited at the same time. He sighs. ‘Oh hell yes I do, Mallory,’ he wants to say, but he clenches his fist hard instead. “Uh, your sister would just *kill us both*, sweetheart.”

Mallory lets her robe drop to the floor and begins to walk toward Corbett.

“Uh, Mal, sweetie...I think you been watching too much Dynasty, hun.” He backs away, searching for the doorknob with his right hand, trying to keep his eyes on her face, but glancing at her thin, shapely body.

She steps closer as she speaks. “I want you...do you want to get naked with me?” She has the most perfectly practiced demure with just the right amount of head tilt, slight smile and slow blink. Now she’s standing close to him, almost touching his body. She reaches up and strokes his temples gently. Martin begins to relax and finds his left arm wrapping around her waist, caressing her soft skin. She throws her arms around his neck and kisses him passionately. At first he doesn’t resist and feels kinda sleazy—no completely sleazy...and something else...completely natural. He wasn’t used to feeling both at once. He takes a step back, pulling her arms off. He looks at her sternly, but says nothing. That brief gesture is enough to piss her off. His fate was sealed.

He’s back again in his living room, on the floor, holding his gut tight with both blood-soaked hands—shocked that it’s his blood running down his arms and on to the carpet. He turns his head to see Jade holding her shiny .38 pistol again, but closer to his head, pointing it right between his eyes. She’s growling something to herself in anger, but he can’t make it out. It’s just the stench of gunpowder and Jade’s face twisted by hatred, a deep shadow across one side of it.

He flashes back to a moment sitting in his kitchen and his fondest time of day: mornings before 8 am. He is just sipping on his second cup of coffee and enjoying the cool morning air as it blows the smell of rhododendron's blossoming in the nearby park. It is the time of day before people start commuting and before he had to rush out the door to join the madness of modern life. It's the sweetest moment—filled with the promise of a new day. 'Maybe something will change today,' he used to think to himself. He could almost taste the delight of that promise.

But then he's back in his apartment, the life draining out of him far too quickly. A deep black swirl is tightening all around him. His body is suddenly filled with the heaviness of an end to mornings like that. An end to the idea of promise. And worse—no more chances for redemption. For these reasons alone, his heart just breaks. Finally he stops fighting and embraces the darkness.