

Barys Paulau

Word count: 943

16-61 Chapaeva Street, Gomel, 246031, Belarus

+375256840312

baryspaulau@gmail.com

*The Age of Disappearing*

by Barys Paulau

She sat at the corner table in a bar called *The Last Honest Place*, which was neither honest nor last. It was the kind of establishment where the lighting forgave everything and the drinks were priced for people who needed to forget the price of everything else.

I watched her from the doorway. The way she held her glass. The way her eyes moved across the room without landing anywhere. She was the kind of woman who made men in expensive suits forget their wives' names. I was wearing a suit that had been expensive three marriages ago.

"Five minutes," I said to the bartender, a man who looked like he'd been poured into his job. "Tell me something true about her."

He wiped a glass that was already clean. "She's been coming here six months. Never leaves with anyone. Always pays cash. One night, a man bought her a drink and tried to follow her home."

"And?"

"He followed her to the subway. She turned around and said, 'I can find my own way to ruin, thank you.' He never came back."

I took the glass from him, the one that had served as his excuse for idle hands. "Give me two of whatever she's having."

He laughed. "She's drinking water."

"Then I'll have what the man who doesn't want to be here is having."

It was a good line. The kind of line that made women smile in movies. She didn't smile. She looked at me the way you look at a painting you've seen too many times.

"Does that line ever work?" she asked.

"When I don't mean it."

I sat down without being invited. This was the part I was good at—the part where the suit did the work and the words did the rest. I had read somewhere that confidence was just the memory of having gotten away with something. I had gotten away with everything.

"You know what I love about this city?" I asked.

"Please don't say the way the light hits the buildings."

"The way the light hits the buildings."

She almost smiled. Almost. It was the small victory I lived for. The one that opened doors to other things.

"Men think women are puzzles," she said. "They think if they find the right word, the right gesture, the right drink, the door will open. But women aren't puzzles. We're houses. We choose who we let in."

"Are you letting me in?"

"No."

"Is that because I wear a suit that's too tight and tell jokes that fall flat?"

"It's because you're asking the wrong question."

I looked at her then, really looked. Past the face, past the way she held herself like she was guarding something. There was something in her eyes that I recognized. It was the same thing I saw in my mirror every morning, looking back at me with an expression I couldn't name but knew by heart.

"What's the right question?"

She put down her glass. The water was still full. She'd been holding it like she needed something to do with her hands while waiting for a thing she couldn't name.

"The right question is," she said, "what are you really looking for? Because it's not me. You don't know me. You don't want to know me. You've already decided what this is. You're already planning how to leave."

I opened my mouth. For once, nothing came out.

"I've been the answer to that question before," she continued. "The thing men hunt. The night they write about in journals they'll never show anyone. The story they tell their friends in which they're the hero. But I'm not doing that anymore. I'm not someone else's story tonight."

We sat in silence. The bar noise faded. The bartender had turned away, giving us the illusion of privacy.

"You know what I think?" I said finally.

"That you're about to say something you think is profound."

"I think the city is full of people who are already gone. We're just waiting for our bodies to catch up."

Her eyes shifted. For the first time, she really looked at me. Not through me. Not past me. At me.

"Where did you go?" she asked.

"To my own funeral, probably. I'm still waiting for my body to show up."

She stood up. The gesture was final. It was the exit I'd seen a hundred times, the door closing on a hundred different faces.

"Not every night needs a destination," she said. "Not every conversation needs to lead somewhere. Some things are just... what they are."

She left a ten-dollar bill on the table. For the water she didn't drink. For the conversation she didn't want.

I sat there for a long time. The bartender returned, this time with something that looked like whiskey.

"On the house," he said. "From her."

I looked at the glass. The liquid was dark and still. "What did she say?"

He shrugged. "She said you look like a man who's been looking for the wrong thing so long he forgot where he hid the right one."

I drank the whiskey. It tasted like loneliness with a splash of something that could have been hope.

Outside, the city was disappearing into its own lights. The buildings shimmered like the worn-out promises of a man who'd made too many. Somewhere, a woman was walking away from a bar called *The Last Honest Place*, a woman who had already gone somewhere real and was just waiting for her body to arrive.

I think we were heading in the same direction.

I just didn't know if I'd ever get there.

THE END