1955

"Ground Level Appointment"

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The cocktail lounge was cool compared to the heat outside, and the tinkle of glasses and quiet laughter was soothing. It smelled of bourbon and scotch and women's perfume, all cool and easy. No blaring juke box, just soft lilting music coming from nowhere in particular. Harry liked it. He settled his rotund figure on the leathered covered cushion of a bar stool.

"Your order sir? May I have your order?"

The practiced smile of the little bartender flickered below a thin mustache.

"Uumm, give me a... scotch and water—better make that a double."

Harry could really use the drink. Better get some gum though. Can't be too careful when you're dealing with a man like JC. You never know. He could have a prejudice against drinking. Harry folded his hands, his elbows resting on the bar. It wasn't like dealing with Thomas and Co. He had been in six times without a tumble. But they were nothing compared to JC's outfit. Something like this comes along once in a lifetime. It was now or never.

He could see his head and shoulders over the shelf of oddly shaped bottles before the mirror. A fluorescent light above the bar made his round face seem pale. The darkness behind him reflected as an empty void, accentuating and contrasting his image. He took off his panama hat and laid it on the bar. Millie had thought the plaid hat band very poor taste, but he liked it. It made him feel young. He checked his image for any signs of untidiness. It had been years since he had had any dandruff, but he still liked to check. One of the advantages of growing old, he always said. It was one of their standing jokes.

Funny how it happened. Millie hadn't told him much about JC. Just that they had gone to school together and that JC had once had a crush on her. From the expressions on her face he guessed that JC must have been quite a boy. But something had happened between them, and JC had gone on to build his dad's business into one of the biggest and best in the country. He was even made trustee of his school. Millie had married Harry.
Harry took another puff on his cigarette and put it in the ashtray. The thin wire of smoke arched upward and curled into a silver cylinder, and then was blown away.

It wasn’t that he was a failure. No, he had done all right. But nothing big. Nothing that made people sit up and take notice. He was just Harry Smith, who lives down the block and who drives last year’s model.

The bartender brought his drink, and he threw a dollar on the bar, carelessly, not even looking at the bartender.

“Thank you, sir.”

His collar ends had turned up, and stuck out of his coat. He tucked them in, rolling the edge with his finger. Like a fool he had forgotten the stays.

It was getting so he didn’t have a decent shirt anymore. Have to get a few new ones. Probably get a couple for his birthday. Jean and John would chip in together, and buy him some shirts. They always bought him just what he needed. They’d discuss it for a long time, and then go to their mother for advice. Millie would know exactly what he needed, and would cheerfully discourage any of the wilder ideas. Harry smiled. What was it Millie said they wanted to buy him two years ago? A four year subscription to *Country Gentleman*. He could see the postman delivering *Country Gentleman* to their two-flat on 3rd Avenue. The year before that it was a set of monogrammed shoe-trees that Jeannie had seen in a shop on Michigan Boulevard.

He smiled, but the reflection of his teeth was crooked, and he closed his mouth. Got to be careful about that wide grin, he thought. Can’t be too grinny.

He was sorry now, that he had been against Millie going to that homecoming celebration. They couldn’t afford it, he had said, and besides, it was just silly sentimentalism. But it had meant a lot to her, and the kids had been getting on her nerves, so they had that the Christmas savings money and off she had gone. She had even bought a silly little hat that sat on the back of her head, and that could hardly be seen from the front. The new dress that she got wasn’t fancy, but it had a simplicity that she said was the height of fashion.

She was just like a kid, and when she got on the train, she said later, she had felt like the freshman girl, who, years before, had kissed mommy and daddy goodbye and had gone off to her first big adventure. Harry liked the feeling of seeing her young again. He was glad that he had let her go.

When she came back she hadn’t told him exactly what had gone on out there in Granville. She told him of the parades and floats, and went on for hours about how old all her classmates seemed. But it had taken her a couple of days before she had mentioned JC. And then just casually. They had been talking, she said, and she had just happened to mention that Harry was a salesman. JC seemed interested. “Why doesn’t he drop in and see me? I just might have something.”

She had said it casually, her head bent over her knitting. And then she had gone on and chatted about Aunt Martha in the same tone of voice. Good old Millie.

He gulped his drink, and immediately wanted another. There was still some time. He raised a finger toward the bartender who glided over to him. The mustache quivered as he said, “Another one just like it.”

Harry stuffed his cigarette out and checked his image in the mirror again. It was cool in here, and his silver-rimmed glasses didn’t slip down his nose. He had always thought it funny that his nose should sweat. It was a source of constant irritation to him. Nothing looked less efficient than glasses low on the bridge of your nose. He took them off, and in the mirror he could see the indentation they made between his eyes. He gently massaged the small of his nose with his thumb and index finger. Bringing his other hand up, he rubbed the loose flesh under his eyes. They were large, and gave his face strength. They seemed to be on the verge of smiling, but never quite made it. A little pale, he thought. Been too busy fixing up the flat to do any golfing. After this I’ll have to get out more often.

Suddenly he was conscious of a face next to his in the mirror, looking at him. The face was dark in spite of the pale light, and served to set off a long thin nose. Their eyes parted, and the face moved down a couple of stools. Its owner, a little man with squinty eyes and round shoulders, sat down on the stool. His dress was very conservative, a shoulderless coat of dark tweed, with a dark little tie and a vest. Harry had seen that face before.

The little man ordered a Tom Collins. He was staring out into space. Harry didn’t particularly want to speak, but he knew him from somewhere . . .

“Say, pardon me.”

“Yes?” The little man looked up. The expression in his eyes was quizzical, searching.
“Don’t we know each other from somewhere?”

His eyes narrowed.

“Yes . . . I think so. I was thinking the same thing.”

“Lived in the city long?”

“No, no. As a matter of fact, I was just passing through. Have a few hours between planes.”

He lifted his glass and sipped his drink.

“I just can’t place you. How about the . . . school! State, ’31.”

“Of course, good old State.”

They stood and shook hands.

“Good old Sammy. How are you?”

The corners of Sammy’s mouth went up, exposing his well-formed teeth.

“Harry. Harry Smith!”

Sammy stepped back, looking Harry over from head to toe.

“You’re really looking good.”

They stared at each other, chuckling spasmodically.

“C’mon, let’s have a drink.”

Harry slid his drink over and they sat down. There was a self-conscious pause.

“Never would have known you, Sammy. Gosh, you look dignified.”

Sammy laughed.

“Oh, yeh. I’ve been doing all right. Still plugging along in engineering. On my way to the west coast now. Consulting on a project out there.”

“Consulting, eh? Sounds big.”

Harry motioned to the bartender, and ordered two more drinks.

“And all this time I thought you were in business.”

“I did try business for a while, but it wasn’t for me. Engineering’s a better deal.” Sam chuckled. “I’ve done all right. But c’mon, what about you. Where do you get off sitting in a highbrow lounge this time of day?”

Harry shrugged. “I’m in sales. Just on my way to see a customer up in his office.”

“Who’s the customer?”

“JC Nordell.”

Sammy’s thin eyebrows arched.

“You mean the JC Nordell of Nordell Products?”

“Yeh, that’s him.”

“Very good, very good. Nice to know people like Nordell.”

“Well, you know, business brings you in contact with a lot of people, and you make friends where you find ’em.” Or Millie does, he thought.

Sammy fondled his empty glass, his ringed hands catching the moisture.

“I—I know what you mean.”

His hands were tanned, and the nails had the grooming of regular manacuring.

“It seems as though most of my friends are either engineers or work with engineers.”

He took a drink.

“Of course, there are my wife’s friends, but they’re all a bunch of psuedos.”

Harry was a little high, but he didn’t care. He felt good. He felt confident. A couple of cloves and he’d be all right. But time was running out. He’d have to leave in a few minutes.

“Hey,” Sammy suddenly said, “What about your family? You ever get a woman to marry you?”

Harry took out his picture of Millie and, holding it on the edges, handed it to Sam. Holding it at arm’s length, he stared at it.

“Wow, she’s a looker.”

Harry was proud. Millie had kept herself up. Not like some wives who got fat and sloppy after 35. He could almost see her walking into the lounge right now. It was a good idea of hers to meet him after his talk with JC and have a cocktail and then dinner somewhere. The kids could take care of themselves, now, and it was good for her to get out. Lord knows she’d worked hard enough the past few years. Harry smiled as Sammie raved on about Millie. He’d choose that little booth in the corner, and the two of them would sit there in the darkness, listening to the tinkle of glasses and the soft piano played by that colored fellow. The one with the big smile whose picture was outside. And he’ll tell her how he sat there before seeing JC. Tell her how he had thought about her and the things he could do for her, now that his break had come.

She wouldn’t say anything, but inside she would about burst. He smiled again in anticipation. He’d throw a ten spot on the table, and let the waitress take what she wanted, and he wouldn’t even bother to keep track himself. And as they left he would leave what was left there, and when Millie reminded him, he’d just pat her gently, and wink.

“Name is Millie,” he said, “she’s going to meet me here at six. You’ll have to meet her.”

“Did she graduate from State a year after us?”

“No, she’s a graduate of Denison. One of those little schools in Ohio. You remember her. I had her down for a couple of dances.”

Sammy bit his lip and stared off into space. The bartender
eased their ashtray off the bar, emptied it, cleaned it, and then smoothly replaced it.

“Oh, yes, that short blonde you were so crazy about. Well, what do you know.”

“We got married about two years after I graduated . . .”

Sammie handed the picture back.

“You’ll never guess who I ended up with. Remember Cynthia Hadell?”

“She was a tall redhead, her old man loaded to the gills?”

“That’s her.”

He took a black morrocco bill-fold from his coat pocket, and with a flourish presented Harry with a picture of a matronly, well-groomed woman just starting to push middle age. On either side of her were two scared teenagers. Harry whistled.

“Good old Cynthia. She’s still looking good.”

Sammie laughed. “She was a good catch. Still wonder why she ever married me. Guess she had faith in me. She knew I’d be a big success.”

He stretched his thin lips across his face in a toothless grin. His eyes had a tired queer look. He was looking straight ahead, but Harry could see his image peering over the row of bottles.

“It has been rather nice. Her mother’s a bitch, but her old man is tolerable.”

Harry wrapped his hand around his glass and took a stiff swallow. The glass was clammy and cold, and he unconsciously wiped his hand on his pants.

“Those are my two kids.”

Harry glanced at the picture again.

“I’ve got two children myself. A boy and a girl.”

He produced their picture and shoved it to Sam.

“Girl’s Jean and the boy’s John. Really smart kids.”

“Hey, the girl looks like Millie.”

Harry beamed.

“Sure does. She graduates from high school next spring. Going to send her to Denison like her mother.”

Sam looked at him.

“Nothing but the best, eh? That school isn’t the cheapest in the world.”

Harry laughed.

“We don’t worry about that. She’s going and that’s all.”

At least we don’t worry anymore, he thought. JC’s signature is going to take care of everything. He felt a little funny about going up to see JC. Have to get going pretty soon, though.

Sammie also sneered. “Follow in her mother’s footsteps, eh? God, I wish mine weren’t so much like their mother. It gives me the creeps.”

Harry could remember that first day when Jeannie came down wearing her hair like Millie always does. He was a pretty proud guy.

The music was louder now, and Harry was starting to get warm. They were near the kitchen door, and whenever it swung open, the rattle of dishes and babble of sharp voices drifted out with the smell of food.

“So sale’s paying off, eh?”

“Yeh,” Harry said, “it has its ups and downs, but it’s pretty good.”

“Never had you figured for the salesman type, Harry. It’s funny how we turned out. You never know, do you?”

“I guess not. Remember how we were going to set the world on fire? Pretty cocky bunch of guys.”

Sammie smiled with his mouth, but his eyes were still serious.

“Yeh, you were going to be a teacher and I was going to be one of the biggest men in the country. Funny how you never know what to expect.”

“What happened, Sam? How come you switched?”

Sammie looked at his glass.

“Things just didn’t turn out, that’s all. And Cynthia was on my neck. Finally gave in and her father put me through engineering school. Took me in the firm after graduation. What happened to you?”

Harry took another gulp of his drink.

“I just couldn’t see living on canned spaghetti for three more years while I got my Ph.D. The kids came early, and hell, I wanted to really set them up. You can’t make any money teaching. Millie wanted to put me through by working, but I couldn’t see that.

Sam traced a design with the water that had formed on the bar.

“I’ve been an engineer now, for 27 years. It’s not a bad deal. Drop in at one of our jobs, make sure that the boys aren’t just sitting around, and then go home. Actually it’s a soft touch. But I’m thinking of retiring one of these days. We’ve got a home on the Cape. It’d be nice to sit back and relax.”

“But what about your firm? You can’t let that go.”

Sam smiled a tired smile.

“Oh, they’ll get along. My brother-in-law can handle things. He thinks he owns the place anyway.”

Harry and Millie had often dreamt about retiring to a little farm somewhere. Everyone had the same dream, but to them it was special.

“I guess it would be nice. Just you and the wife and the kids, eh?”

“It’s hard to say. Cynthia likes it down in Florida. Stays down there most of the year. Plays with all her friends down at Miami. I don’t care, though. Hell, it’s been a good deal. And I don’t know if I don’t prefer it this way.” The gin was starting to get him, and a faint flush had risen to his cheeks.
“The kids are away at school, of course, but there’s a lot to do on the Cape.”

“Oh?”

“There’s golf and my sports car, imported, a real beaut, and then I subscribe to several journals, and like to take my time reading them.”

He winked and poked Harry with his elbow.

“And don’t think it gets lonely down there. The neighbors are awful friendly. Ha, Ha.”

Harry gave forth with a strained laugh.

It’s a good life, Harry. A little consulting now and then. Or dinner with the father-in-law. The rest of my time is my own. Hell, it really is a good deal. You’ll have to get away from your ball and chain and come up for a week or two.”

They both were silent, staring at their glasses. Sammy glanced at his watch.

“Jeez, I’ve got to catch that plane.”

He stood up.

“Well, Har, it’s been good.”

“Yeh, Sammy, it has. It’s been nice talking to you. Good luck to you. And listen, drop in next time you’re in town. I’d like you to meet them family.”

“The same to you, Har. Say hello to your buddy JC for me when you see him. Ha, Ha.”

He strode off in short confident steps. Harry hadn’t noticed how little he actually was. From the back he seemed to be twenty years older.

Harry glanced at his watch. He had an hour until Millie would show. Better hurry, he thought. But he didn’t move. A rivulet of sweat washed down his glass, leaving a line in the frosty condensation, and joined the puddle on the bar. The bartender was shaking a cocktail, the quick beat of the swishing contents contrasted and spoiled the rhythm of the song that came from somewhere, rebounded about the room, and then was gone. It was a pleasant tune. From some light opera. Harry took out a cigarette, fondled it, and finally put it to his lips.

He stared into his reflection in the dark puddle on the bar. Millie would understand if he didn’t see JC. She always did understand. They could get along. The state manager had told him just the other day that he liked Harry’s work. And he hadn’t been in to see Thomas for a month. He just might be ready to bite. And then there was Harris of Acme. He could call Thomas up tomorrow and invite him to lunch. Take him to that place on Washington Boulevard. The old guy likes German food. Better wear his darkest suit, though. The one with a vest.

He felt in his shirt pocket for matches. He could hardly wait for Millie to show up. That little booth was still vacant. It’d be good to sit alone, again. He could see Millie now. She’d say that he was stubborn, but she’d smile. And she’d take his hand. We’ll

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make out all right, she’d say. Wait and see. They would have dinner, but they wouldn’t say much. Except she’d probably wonder if the kids were all right.

And after dinner they’d sit there and listen to music. But not too long, because he had to get a good night’s sleep if he was going to see Thomas tomorrow. And then, before they left, she’d tell him she was really proud of him, and that she understood.

Harry smiled. He’d throw that ten spot that he had planned to use for the fights on the table, and let the waitress take what she wanted. And he wouldn’t keep track himself.

He lit his cigarette, and watched the match burn itself out.

And when they left he would leave what was left there. When Millie reminded him, he’d just pat her gently and wink.