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Among the Stars
Jack Richards

"IF YOU ENTER SMELLING LIKE POT, YOU WILL BE REMOVED" reads a sticker posted on the door of the Crescent Lounge. Not long after I make my way over to a table and sit down, a comic named Tony, assuming that I am armed with an arsenal of jokes when spotting the loose leaf journal tucked under my hand, approaches me and asks if I’m looking to perform tonight. I inform him of my purpose here. Wearing a black sweater and diamond stud earrings, he flashes me a warm smile as he extends his hand out to me.

"Cool man, any press is good press I guess." There is but a couple to my left, a group of friends at a table to my right, and a few stragglers at the bar in attendance tonight. I become something of an eavesdropper, Lord forgive me, as I listen to the group of friends next to me. A man, blond, hefty, and wearing a shirt that resembles a Persian rug, seems to be the main character of a group that comprises himself and three heavily tattooed women. I overhear that he is a voice actor. I believe him. For the better part of the twenty minutes I sit waiting for the comics to come out, I hear him regale them with information about the Sourtoe Cocktail, a Dawson City delicacy. It isn’t a metaphor, the drink really contains a mummified human toe. His friends are unconvinced, so he raises his hands up to gesticulate against their doubt.

"No listen, you can’t actually eat the toe or they’ll kick you out, it’s just there to steep the drink, which still probably tastes terrible."

I see Tony outside on the patio to my left puffing on a joint, sign be damned. An ornate glass chandelier with narrowing, ascending layers like a wedding cake hangs above the tables. The walls are made of black brick, bars and wires are exposed on the ceiling, and lights are posted on rods as if the room were a movie set. A lottery machine looms temptingly in the corner. Tony takes his place on the stage. He starts off his set by welcoming everyone. As I come to find out he is both a comedian and the host of tonight’s open mic night.

"I’m hoping you all can be my friends tonight since I don’t have many. I smoke weed with my mom... when she was pregnant we used to drink together until she quit... I tell all my friends I went cold turkey while I was still in the oven." Tony walks off the stage amidst enthusiastic applause. The next comic takes his place on stage and singles me out almost immediately.

"What’s up, you doing some fucking homework?" Though I had already known that showing up in this fashion to a show in a small setting would likely seal my fate as a victim of the verbal jousts of crowd work, I was still taken off guard.

"Uh, well it’s an immersion essay, and like we have to go to an event or, umm, experience that's like ne—"
"OK, I already don't care," he says flatly. "Wow, what a nerd." I couldn't think of a more concise answer. Though I can feel my face growing slightly flushed, I laugh at the jokes to save face and show that I am a good sport. Towards the end of his set, he tells us he is in graduate school. "We're both nerds," he sympathizes while peering out at me from underneath the faded brim of a baseball cap. "Uhh, this is going badly, thank you guys!" He makes his way off the stage, high-fiving Tony as he goes. The next comic, Robert, is short and handsome, like an amalgam of various Hollywood actors, though not quite resembling any one in particular.

"My mom is like a bad pirate, she shares all of her booty." Laughter. "My dad is like God, I only see him once a week when he asks for money... he has diabetes... yea, he actually lost his leg climbing Mountain Dew. Uhh, alright, looks like you guys didn't like that one." He turns over the pages of his notepad, tilting his head and staring intently at it, then closes it, waves and smiles through pursed lips, and steps off the tiny stage. A brief and tepid applause ensues. After his set, I observe him having a tense and hurried talk on the phone while walking back and taking shots at the bar. The remaining comics are similarly raw and coarse in style. One of them admits he was arrested for robbing a drug dealer but protests that he didn't think it was "a crime to steal someone else's crime." He then proceeds to get honest about how boring life is after quitting drinking. The second to last comic jests at the recent loss of his father and finishes his set by casting aspersions on the size of Tony's manhood. The final comic takes the stage, clears his throat with a big HMHGMM, grips the mic stand, and sways back and forth around its axis.

"Fuck yo Daddy!" he exclaims. This seems to inspire no offense in the grieving comic, as I see his eyes light up and squint in delight behind the oversized wire frames of his glasses as a laugh erupts from him. Maybe he is laughing in the same way I was when targeted, or maybe the permission to not take the loss seriously is cathartic. Afterward, one of the men who was playing darts with his friend during the comedy portion of the night makes his way up to the stage to kick off karaoke for us. He gives a heartfelt and surprisingly skilled cover of a pop-metal heartbreak ballad. Hemorrhage by Fuel, I am told, across the whining crackle of the PA system. "What did you expect to find, was there something you left behind?" he croons.

As the song ends, I see three of the comedians moving toward the door. One of them punctuates their laughs with slaps on the others' shoulders, another reaches behind his ear to retrieve a stashed cigarette. They stand all huddled together in the little empty parking lot near the pizza parlor and dry cleaners that adjoin the crescent in the strip. A little afterparty of just each other, away from the bright lights and big venues of the distant inner city, not unlike the stars above that are content to shine below the moon.