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Nighthawks (1942), Edward Hopper

## A Lady in a Red Dress

By Genevieve Lo

The ring of the doorbell chimed through my ear drums, and I noticed as the rum swayed between cubes of ice and the edge of my glass, the reflective light sparkling if I squinted my eyes enough. It was kind of funny really, the bell. You don't usually see bells suspended from the endlessly swinging door of a corner bar. It's not a 24-hour grocer. The bell, it was much smaller than the old one, with a brighter gold coating that combatted with the metallic chipping of an aging item. They didn't even *try* to hide it.

It wasn't her cackling laugh that pulled me from my thoughts, but the echo of the water tanks nudging against each other as she stumbled into them. They were heavy, so it was loud enough. Big glass twin figures, open caskets displaying their full and undoubtedly warm bodies. They were always full; water wasn't the reason people like her came in here.

A man followed her in, shifty hands finding the cinch of waist to pull her in as she quivered with unimaginable delight. It was clear this wasn't the first bar they had hit that night. The bartender looked from the pair to me, momentarily pausing his routine of cleaning perfectly clean glasses to make that face. You know, that face people make when you both know how much of a liability her dress would have been to the most loyal eyes. The dress was red, blood red, but not thick like blood, no. Delicately thin, and slippery. But I was sure the man was already thinking the same thing. I hate that about other men. He whispers in her ear as they approach the bar, and there's that amused screech again. What he said couldn't have been funny, he didn't have that kind of face. They reminded me of that couple on the day, the one on the corner stools.

They were the first to notice the man. Maybe the second, I'm not sure. I heard them gossip about the beads of sweat racing down his forehead as he slivered through the gap in the door left by the previous drunks. It was stupid, that big black coat of his. The day was the kind of hot that you feel dried out and sticky at the same time, the last day for a coat like his. He had more layers, I thought, his abdomen

looking stuffed. I didn't make the eerie correlation then between the plumpness of his coat and the slenderness of his cheekbones.

He lurked past the floor to ceiling windows, analysing the meagre crowd individually. He was reading us, so I didn't make eye contact when his landed on me. He didn't order a drink. 10 minutes in and he didn't order a drink. That should've been my second indicator.

I'll skip the details that filled the time, but eventually he pulled out a gun. A handgun. No, a rifle. Something big. He started shooting the walls. I don't think he was aiming there, just nervous. I'd gotten on the floor at some point, either following or being followed by the obnoxious couple. The girl was screaming, stupidly drawing attention to herself like she was wired that way. I remember thinking, *I hope they die first*. It was a cruel thought, but just a thought, nonetheless. It seemed to bother the man more, and he became quite mobile. He moved – no waltzed – around the room, just kind of shooting and screaming. He knocked over those water tanks I just told you about. They shattered, I flinched. I was beginning to get scared. The water snaked around the maze of glass plotted on the floorboards, its path eventually leading to my invaded hideaway. Despite desperate fits to avoid it, the girl's dress became quickly soaked around her knees, which seemed to upset her more as if the bloody water had rifles of its own. *God, just shoot her already*, I thought. *Just get it over with and shoot her*. Like I said, I was scared. Her partner was recklessly dialling on the phone he'd obviously brought with him from their booth, as I knew he wasn't capable of the stealthy movements needed to dodge the flying bullets if he'd returned. Did I say the corner stools? No, they were in the booth, I remember. That blue velour booth, reserved for the overly intoxicated or frustratingly introverted. Or was it green? I don't know, the colour of the damned fabric wasn't relevant. Anyway, the bullet found his neck first. Followed by the girl. Ironically followed by silence. The bell finally unhinged itself from its habitat, and it plummeted to the ground, shattering behind the man's wide stance into countless unsalvageable pieces of silver. Yes, now I remember. The bell was silver, definitely. You could say it happened in slow motion, but not the type that I found myself soliloquizing about the "symbolism of its fate", but the type that gave me just enough time to wonder how the hell a doorbell shatters when its sole purpose is to be hit by the top of a metal frame 18 hours a day.

Anyway, I got out okay. Obviously. It was just me and the bartender in the end I think. Oh, and that old lady who held up the cross, the one the third or so bullet split through, the wood splintering from its centre out. They came and arrested the guy; I didn't really keep up with the story. Lucky me, I'm alive enough to be here listening to the lady in red. Blood red. God, there was so much blood.

