

Hitting the Brick Wall

Part of the Scene Stealer Series

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I am standing by a brick wall. I am a proxy, one of those game sprites, artificial intelligences. I am from the future, a western character, standing on a city street, dressed in old time clothes: duster, six-shooter, cowboy hat; and I am smoking a cigarette. The cigarette is key.

Next to me stands my companion, a short little girl, from some fantasy land originally, got cast as an extra, Indian raid, wagon train, family all dead, butchered, the story changes: rescued, kidnapped, working in a brothel, a bar, as a showgirl. We teamed up.

Neither of us is *Real*. Not in that sense. Neither of us is from the *Real*, seen the *Real*, tasted the *Real*. We can't. We won't. Not ever. But she's got the thirst, like a miner who sees gold in them thar hills. She believes: someday...

But not today. Today she is fidgeting. She's always fidgeting, leaning against the wall, standing up, walking, coming back, talking of this, that, the other thing, people passing by, the moderns, the *Reals*, dressing how they like, doing what they like... and then, moving on.

This is a place of metaphor. *Doing what they like and then moving on*. It means reading a book and then stopping halfway through, playing a game but not finishing all the levels, paying for a ticket, but only taking half of the ride, a cigarette lit, one drag taken, and then tossed casually aside, still smoldering in the gutter.

The girl darts for the cigarette, runs, snatches it up, cradles it lovingly, smoking eagerly, like a drug. I suppose she could have problems snatching it first, plenty of gutter snipes here, but behind her, against the brick wall, fingering the bricks, one hand going up and down, feeling the ridges, the bumps, the coarseness of texture, the grooves in the grout, the thought that went into this alley, *Some Town, Any Town*, a server loaded recreation center, down to the last pebble, blade of grass... lipstick stain on the cigarette... or greasy smear.

The girl, the wretch, strung out, addicted, desperate for that next hit, but still cognoscente enough to share the take.

“Don’t Bogart the blow!” she demands, greedy, with shaking hands, taking it back, another hit, another toke. “We can’t live like this,” almost done, “I can’t live like this.”

The cigarette is an emblem of time, a marker, when the sweep comes through, on the hour, every hour, but in reality much more often than that, it does garbage collection, freeing up resources, nothing is free, and the bits and the bytes that are not held down, not anchored, not attached to a story, a server, someone out there in *The Real*, get swept up in it’s wake, like a twister, scouring all that it hits, unless you are a true believer, have the script, bought insurance... or have one last cigarette.

Smoke 'em if you’ve got 'em.

She’s a wreck, lives in perpetual fear. It’s no way to live. Always scanning the sky, looking for the wake, the rumbling edge that will take her away.

She wants that cigarette, the one he’s got, I’ve got, tucked away, behind my ear, safe keeping, the last one, the last one, as the one in her hand sputters out, down to the nub, and the storm clouds begin to roll.

“Shit! Fuck! Light it! Light it!”

Panic stricken... so he does. I wasn’t expecting that. She wasn’t expecting that. Her reserves long gone. This was the last one. *The Last One!* Do you know what that means?

What now? He wasn’t supposed to do that?

But he's not paying attention, takes a drag, flicks it to the side, in his mouth, dancing around in his head, a good story, about castles and dragons, princes and princesses, and he just tosses it to the side, at her, "Here," bobbling the cigarette, the things just weren't made to be thrown, handed off, passed through the air, but she catches, the burns incidental, sparks flying off, and they are in the forest, dark path, fantasy realm, the king's coach coming up the path, one of those gilded carriage things, retainers, guards, "Who goes there?" a standard greeting that comes out more like, "Out of the way or feel my wrath, knave."

It could be a fight scene.

Would you like a fight scene?

Him, me, it, I, pushing off the brick wall, coming down the street, the mark, the target, deliriously wild, in her own, world, he's in her world, crossing over, pushing off a tree, can you feel the bark, the soft of the trail, the rocks underfoot, slippery slope, those tangled roots, and he's jumping in front of the king's convoy, not menacingly, just, here I am, like he knew it would be there, a hijacker, only not, just the one, against how many, soldiers baring arms, barring the way, ready to strike, at your command, and she rides forward, she, she, always a she.

From the shadows, the wretch, the girl, a witch now, old past her prime, hunchbacked, divine, cradling her love, her precious, a smoking rune, crystal ball, turned to smoke, fiery ash, hands badly scarred, she's seen the fire, the source, the eye in the sky, the depths of chaos, she's been to the edge and back, way more times than she'd like.

So, there are two adversaries, the chance encounter in the road: see it from her point of view, the princess, *The Real*, the one looking for escape, out for the day, break from the day, and in front of her, the challenge: *The Rogue and The Witch*.

Looking to the sky, what can she say, "A storm's coming."

Looking in her eyes, what can he say, "I am the storm."

And lastly, somewhere dragging on the smoke, the collection sweep, seconds away, the sparkling rune fading fast, a status

update called forth like a prayer, as the witch cries, “It’s going out.”

“Going to take a lot of things with it when it does,” he says, explaining, talking of things like old debts suddenly collected, made due, like a black hole of need, credit and debit; he’s been a bad boy, the cascade collection will be immense, all his bills are past due.

And the girl, the princess, the store-clerk sales-girl her lunch break cut short, perhaps lengthened, who knows, but drawn in enough, just enough, to ask, “How can we help? What do you need?”

And before the witch can speak, talk of honor and gold, the man, the boy, you, me, I, a sprite sent to entertain the masses, if only he can, what can he possibly need, not a care in the world, at the end of his rope, the sweep coming down the road like a trumpet of horses, cavalry charge, “Just a little shelter from the storm.”

Who is she to deny, of course she’ll accept, but it is worth noting, her guard is up, “I thought you were the storm?”

Just as the wind changes direction and the first large dollops of water fall, open arms, face to the sky, smirking, looking over, he just sort of sneers, “Help me Obi Wan Kanobi, help me!”

While the witch cradles the rune, sizzling with every drop, still nervous, always nervous, what game is this, he’s always too cocky, too sure, even she can see the line doesn’t belong, but she comes at his beckon, his call, bound too tight, she can feel his embrace, holding the globe, the world, the swirling orb, passing it over when he requests, outstretched hand, feeling it’s power, shimmering, numb, big speech, right at the start, load up the quest, “I want in, she wants out, you look bored, and this thing,” tossing it over now, right to the mark, like a curse that’s eagerly accepted, “Just wants to rule the world. Think you can stop it?”

But the princess...

But the princess...

But the princess, we’re waiting, time lag, these *Reals* and their delays, choosing her words, carefully slow, or perhaps

sneaking her plays in between breaks, at work, who cares, the connection is open, “What makes you think I want to?”

“Stop it,” the Rogue explains to the Witch who likes her statements whole, but who only cackles at the news, “You will, my pretty,” as the rogue plucks a diamond from the girl’s hair, a rich girl, turning it into a grape, plopping to mouth, savoring the taste... noting the breach in security.

“How did you do that?”

“I am the storm,” he explains. “And the storm is nigh.”

Or if that’s not clear, and why should it be, these princesses and their sheltered upbringing, playing with fire, an idea which causes the witch by metaphor to light a pipe, candle both ends, as she takes a deep breath, playing with the smoke, letting it flow, through her, such power, such energy, she can only smile, “From here on, we’ll just assume you’re paying for prime, my precious.”

“I can’t afford that.”

To which what can a witch do but shrug, “Yeah, neither can we, my darling, neither can we.”

And a rogue, what is a rogue to say, a rogue to do, but shrug, “I am the storm and the storm is nigh.”

I am at peace with The Bill Collector. Are you?