

My year in Chicago had been a gold-dusted dream I didn't know I had—a secret wish gilding the world, passed on the streets, in the look in the eyes of folks

My last day in the city
Charlie, old man Troy
place dead-earring
Her name was
“Good night,



THE
PRINTERS'
BALL

A CELEBRATION
OF PRINT

JULY 20, 2006, 8PM & ON
DOUBLE DOOR, 1572 N MILWAUKEE
CHICAGO



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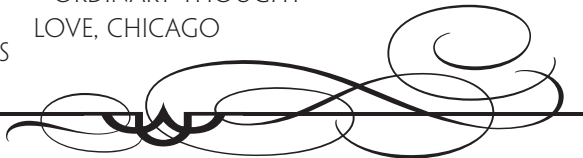
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My year in Chicago had been a gold-plated dream I didn't know I had—a secret wish gilding the muddle of the ho-hum: that long-away look in the eyes of folks passed on the street. It's vacant, steely, inapproachable.

My last day in the city, I strolled down to meet my closest companions Billy and Elsa, Charlie, old man Trey Olden as well, at the Two-Way for a last round only to find the place dead-empty but for the old lady who manned the taps when Charlie was off shift. Her name was Rudy—strange enough, I guess, though she had a pet name for me too. “Good night, boy wonder,” she said, already pouring a beer when I sat down.

“How ‘bout a shot of Beam, too,” I said, then: “Rudy, what’s your real name anyway?” “Willemina,” she said.

I conjured the little girl in her, or tried to, a reckoning complete with little bronze-cast baby shoes and everything. “Then Rudy it is,” I said. I knocked back the shot and had another. As I waited I told her the story of my lost father, the short version that included only his disappearance and apparent death, the sad initial reason for my Chicago sojourn. “I had no idea,” she muttered. It seemed so long ago, now.

Thirty minutes passed and I wondered what we'd got out of our time—I remembered fondly a Friday at this Greek joint downtown. Pegasus, it was called, and we were all fresh off work at five and I don't even remember how it happened—likely Billy said he knew a place, and that was that—but we ended up all hunched over the bar mulling over the finer points of a flyer, in progress for my first show. Billy had some line illustrations he did of the Shining Man, of me, thick marker lines jutting off said Man's form, a cartoon freeway receding in linear perspective to the top of his head. Elsa sketched TRAFFIC in bold script with a Sharpie across the top and Trey Olden produced the photo he'd taken of me in my silver suit out on the expressway, framing its placement on the page with his thumb and index finger. We must've talked for hours about paper types and a screen printer Billy knew and we were doing it, this, however small it was, which is not to say Billy didn't lament his sore knees, the daily woe of the bike messenger, or Elsa her typist's back, Trey his—this isn't me, we all said, but whatever was we guessed we'd not know but for these short few moments at work, a unit—not to say even that we didn't go on and do the thing that kept us regular and get trashed on the hospitality of the Greek men behind the winged horse's bar.

I called for another shot and when Rudy came over with it I knocked it back. “Willemina,” I said, “what the hell gets you through? You know, the day and all that.”

“It's just work,” she said, smiling. She liked her name. “It ain't nothing,” she said.

An old guy—a regular—walked in and, as Rudy moved to pour him a beer, he stopped by the jukebox and dropped a few quarters into it. A song from another era arose, a simple slacker-pop riff over an ever more simple, shuffling drumbeat. More than 30 years old, the song, but its particular style and impressionistic poetry had accompanied me these many months around the city, really. All over town in the new century, if it was on the juke old women and little boys alike seemed to flip to it before anything else. Every bartender or DJ in the city played it, too, if happen there wasn't a box around. You know the one. “Planet Queen,” by T-Rex, it's got it all, really. Space aliens in flying saucers, dreams of daughters—that chorus: absolutely ecstatic. “Love is what you want.” Man, I knocked back my beer now as the vocal soared through the dumpy little place, waving to Rudy for another. She poured it. “Yeah,” I said, nodding. “Thanks, Willemina.” She laughed.

I'd spent weeks here wasting time with the boys—Billy and Charlie and Trey, others—hour atop hour whiled away as the real thing, the winged beast to take our collars in its mouth and carry us on to happy times, might have been right under our noses, I guess, right there with us, alongside the griping and moaning about the jobs and the lack of so many things. I mean... Right then, the door flung open and in walked Billy, hair all curly

and wild with the wind, followed by the whole crew, Elsa with a little miniDV camera to her eye, Charlie, Trey Olden hobbling along behind them. Charlie removed the red aluminum tiara he'd taken to wearing and put it on my head. "Happy Birthday," he said.

"You're not giving me this thing," I said. It was handed down from his brother, the now-legendary Artichoke Heart, via Billy when A.H. was gunned down a couple years ago.

"You're right," Charlie said. "It ain't Christmas." And he took it back, but not before I'd caught my reflection in the mirror on the back bar, the sculpted fire-engine red flames of the tiara a veritable halo over my head. But I thought for a second that he was wrong: it might well have been Christmas, cause I had it here with the lot of them, love—if it's just the truth, like somebody wrote long ago. They were it for me. And before it all went sour with sorrow, as it most certainly would by the end of the night, as it so often did, depressingly, on my way to the foul bathroom I dropped some change into the juke. By the time I was done in the john that chorus had reared its head and electrified the air and Billy and Elsa were dancing on the bar, Trey nodding along with Charlie on stools just below the pair. Rudy—Willemina—she held an empty glass in each hand over her head and was swaying drunkenly behind the taps, her eyes closed. Elsa aimed her camera at Rudy as the both of them danced.

I smiled, felt like I might cry, maybe. I tapped my foot a bit, then decided to leave them to their bliss for the moment. I wandered into the night outside for a smoke, a little fresh air to keep the burning brighter. A hooker wobbled up on a pair of disastrously thin heels. "You know how to get to..." she began, but I didn't catch the rest of it. The bass rattled the Two-Way's windows at my back, and buoyed by its weight I flew—a great wind, a mythic beast—disappearing into the night.

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