

Vincent

Eric contented himself with watching the steady barrage of rain fall unceremoniously from a dark sky into the empty street outside as he took another sip from the slow-steaming cup in front of him. The night outside seemed almost black as the coffee, and twice as bitter he mused, as his weary eyes observed a scraggy-looking dog worrying at a large bag of rubbish across the street from the diner. He thought for a moment that there might have been a shoe sticking out through the bottom of that bag, but without the benefit of more light he couldn't be sure. To be honest, it might well be that there was a foot inside that shoe as well. This was the kind of neighbourhood people only visited at night if they wanted to dispose of something quietly; be it a body, incriminating evidence or a guilty conscious. Despite this, Eric liked it down here in the slums and came here often.

At this time of night, the all-night diner was always deserted. Just him and the same familiar blonde waitress who worked here most nights; a not unattractive teenager named Kate (sadly young enough to be his daughter), who he had learned was currently holding down three separate jobs in an effort to pay her way through college. No other customers ever graced these tables this long after midnight. The quiet helped him think. Helped him get things straight in his head and try and forget about the past, which

in the long run was best for all concerned. He had been a different person back then, and had no wish to share his coffee with old ghosts.

Outside, the rain had grown heavier and in the stillness of the diner, Eric listened to the mournful pitter-patter as it bounced off nearby tin roofs and drained away into tired guttering. It seemed a lonely sound to him as he stirred a second large spoonful of sugar into his coffee; despair was the sound of rain falling on a deserted street. Yeah, he kind of liked that sentiment he decided with a wry smile, staring thoughtfully into his cup. The sharp tinkle of the door roused him from his thoughts and Eric glanced up to see a familiar face entering the diner.

Ian was still young enough to be described as boyish, and clad in the same moderately expensive suit he always wore to work in the city. This evening however, his usually smartly tailored attire hung loose and dishevelled about his shoulders as he skittered nervously across the restaurant and sat down at the table opposite Eric. He appeared fidgety and distracted as his eyes briefly met Eric's gaze before immediately flicking away again in a display of obvious restlessness. His sharply tailored suit had blood on it, stained deep into both lapels and his shirt too from the look of it.

'So what happened to Vincent?' asked Eric.

Ian's eyes momentarily ceased fidgeting uncomfortably in their sockets and he looked up and registered Eric, as if seeing him for the first time.

'What makes you ask about Vincent?' His voice was sharp-edged and irritable, stretched taut in his throat, and Eric surmised he would have to play this carefully.

'Well, when you turn up at my usual table at four in the morning, caked in a layer of blood and shit and looking like something real bad has evidently just gone down, I figure it's not outside the realm of plausibility to suspect that Vincent may have been involved.'

Eric's tone was calm and measured as he reclined into his plastic chair, affecting an air of easy repose as he scrutinised his companion closely. The waitress appeared at their table and Ian ordered a solitary cup of coffee.

'So why don't you tell me what happened?' Eric ventured, attempting to kick-start the conversation as he watched Ian's hands beat a nervous tremolo against the table top.

'It wasn't my fault' Ian blurted out, the words almost tripping over each other in their eagerness to be heard.

'I'm not looking to blame anyone son' Eric said, hoping that he sounded reassuring. 'I'm just trying to get a handle on things here.' The younger man was obviously scared out of his wits and Eric reached out towards Ian's shaking hands, seeking to make a

connection. But his visitor instinctively withdrew them into a ball and ceased the incessant percussion of his nerves.

'And it wasn't Vincent's fault neither,' Ian announced abruptly, 'before you go making any assumptions or nothing.'

'Wouldn't even think of it' Eric smiled diplomatically.

Ian's face wrenched with evident indecision, as if he was deciding as to whether to confide in the older man.

'It's just that... he gets so crazy sometimes, you know?'

Eric merely nodded, not wanting to derail his friend's train of thought.

'He's been away so long you see, and when he came back, he just wanted everything to be like it was.' Ian's voice was taking on a whining quality and elevating slightly as he talked.

'Loving wife, two kids and a dog, that's all he wanted man, that's all the guy ever wanted.'

Ian's muttering was coming fast and disjointed, and Eric was starting to get a real bad feeling about this.

'So see Vincent, he pulls up on the drive and he's wanting to walk in that door, arms open wide with that million dollar grin of his and scoop those two kids up in his arms' Ian continued. 'Kiss his wife like it's Christmas and settle himself down for meatloaf and potato salad man.'

Ian's voice was rattling like a loose hinge now and he almost giggled these last words, wide-eyed and staring. Eric felt slow

horror beginning to dawn on him as he slowly echoed the words back; 'Meatloaf and potato salad, right.'

Ian leaned forward in his chair, bobbing excitedly up and down like a spinning top as he spoke.

'...and of course it ain't like that man. Not any more. It ain't like that all!'

'It's ok Ian, you just relax son and tell Uncle Eric all about it.' This shit had the potential to go south any minute he realised.

'...cos that front door don't look the same as it once did to Vincent now, no sirree, not at all...'

Eric figured that the best place to find a weapon in the diner was under the cash register. Danny, the proprietor was probably the kind of guy who might well stash a twelve-gauge down there in case of trouble.

'...and he has hold of the handle and when it don't turn like its supposed to, he realises that Alice has gone and changed the damn locks on him!'

Alice was Ian's ex-wife of two years, having divorced the guy, citing irreconcilable differences. Pretty young thing of twenty-five, and Eric had always kinda liked the girl's homely attitude to life the few times he'd met her back then.

'So he starts pounding and banging on that door like a man possessed...' Ian giggled like an excited child.

His voice was rising in both pitch and volume as he yammered on and if it hadn't been for the fact that they were dangerously alone in the diner, people would have been turning round in their stalls to stare by now. As it was, the attractive teenage waitress who had brought Eric his coffee was the only other person in the building, currently out of earshot in the kitchens.

'...and he's yelling like blue murder for Alice to come down and let him in...'

Eric wasn't as fast as he used to be and he found himself wondering if he could make it to the counter in time if it came to it.

'...or he'll huff and he'll puff and he'll blow that fucking door right off its hinges man!'

He could not, dare not, take his eyes off the madman blossoming in front of him. Ian was spitting his words out now, as if somehow fed by infectious rage.

'But she won't come down so Vincent, he fetches the tyre iron from the car see and he...'

'Maybe it'd be best if I talk to Vincent myself' Eric interrupted, seeking to halt Ian's spiralling diatribe before he got any more carried away.

His friend paused mid-sentence and leaned back in his chair again, hesitant. A tiny voice piped up in Eric's head *'are you sure you know what you're doing with this shit?'* as he waited for Ian's response.

'Aw, I don't know if that's such a good idea Eric, he's sleeping right now'.

Ian glanced over his shoulder, as if making sure no-one was listening then leaned forward and whispered:

'I mean you know how cranky he can get sometimes when he's got a bee in his bonnet and all that.'

Eric saw the frightened doubt in Ian's eyes and found himself hoping to god that he did know what he was doing.

'Still Ian, it might well be best to hear it from someone a bit more...,'

He paused, searching for the right word so as not aggravate his friend's delicate sensibilities.

'...rational' he finished hopefully.

Ian regarded him thoughtfully for a moment.

'OK, but just so as we're clear; if he comes down here and you make him lose his temper and all hell breaks loose - for the record I said it was a bad idea talking to Vincent.'

All hell breaking loose was precisely what Eric was seeking to avoid, but he fixed Ian with his best winning smile and grinned.

'Duly noted.'

Across from him, Ian slouched down into the hard plastic back of his chair and closed his eyes. As Eric watched him, the boy's

head dropped onto his chest and he let out a low sigh that seemed to go on forever.

Eric's eyes nervously flicked towards the cash register, gauging the distance from his chair to the counter. As he did, a deep unsettling voice came slithering out from between Ian's lips.

'Now you wouldn't be thinking of going for that there shooter, would you Eric, old hoss?'

The man sitting opposite him opened his pale grey eyes and smiled predatorily at him. Straightening up in the chair, he rearranged the blood-stained tie around his neck and as he casually reached up and ran a steady hand through his mop of greasy hair, Eric knew that Ian was gone.

'Hello Vincent' he said quietly.

The face that had belonged to Ian up until a moment ago grinned and nodded slightly in recognition, but it was obvious that there was no love lost between them.

'How you doin' there hoss? Miss me much?' Vincent drawled in a resolutely southern accent.

He liked to tell people that he was from Louisiana, a swamp-boy born and bred. Eric knew different however. He knew that Vincent grew up in Tennessee but had left the state under a dark and murderous cloud at the age of twelve.

'Not really' he replied coldly.

At this, Vincent leant back his head and laughed a high-rolling chuckle that brought back the sour taste of bad memories in the back of Eric's throat. Bad things had happened in Tennessee he remembered, though he had tried for so long to forget. Real bad things.

The waitress returned with the coffee Ian had ordered and Vincent's eyes hungrily poured over the tight wiggle of her ass in the skirt she wore as she turned and returned to the kitchen, a brief smile of pleasure playing across his lips.

'Where's Alice?' asked Eric pointedly.

'Oh, she's around' Vincent replied coyly, that same smile lingering on his face. Eric swallowed audibly.

'What have you done Vincent? What have you gone and fucking done, you bastard?'

His sudden courage (or stupidity, he had now begun to realise) surprised him. The calm grey sea in Vincent's eyes became choppy for a moment, betraying dangerous undercurrents concealed beneath, and then narrowed into slits.

'Now that just ain't friendly hoss. Here we are, just too old buddies shooting the breeze, and you have to go and be all uppity with me like that.'

'Damn it Vincent, I mean it!' Eric yelled.

He slammed his fist down on the table, making the coffee cups chatter like loose teeth. Vincent's arm darted out like a startled

cobra and grabbed Eric by the wrist, twisting it. He yanked the older man hard across the table so that their faces were inches apart and growled threateningly under his breath. Then his face suddenly softened again.

‘Eric, Eric, Eric’ he tutted softly, shaking his head in mock disappointment. ‘What have I told you time and again about manners?’

Eric’s wrist felt like it would shatter any second and right now, he wished he was on the other side of that cash register, reaching for the gun he still hoped was there. Gritting his teeth against the sharp and almost unbearable pain being inflicted upon him, he grimaced.

‘Manners mak’eth the man’ he spat in answer, with some vitriol.

Vincent raised his other hand and gently patted Eric’s cheek.

‘Good boy’ he crooned, reaching into his inside jacket pocket. ‘See, if you gets to thinking about forgetting your manners again, then I’m gonna have to cut ya.’

The flick of the switchblade was like a flash-bulb in the dimness of the diner and Eric flinched as he felt the cold metal of the three-inch blade pressed up against his cheek. There was dried blood on it he saw, and already he knew it was Alice’s.

For a moment, nothing moved in the diner as they stared at each other, and then the door to the kitchen banged loudly open

again signalling the waitress's return. Vincent quickly slammed Eric back across the booth and secreted the knife away in his jacket, just as the young girl appeared beside them.

'You fellas want anything to eat to go with those coffees?' she enquired in a friendly voice.

Vincent looked up at the girl and winked mischievously.

'Well I sure wouldn't mind a slice of that pecan pie special you got planted on that there counter sugar.'

'Sure thing' she replied with a smile and turned to lean over the counter, reaching for a plate.

Vincent ogled the briefly exposed flesh of her slender thighs and grinned across at Eric.

'Now that looks like a real nice piece of pie, don't it?' he said with a sly wink.

Eric felt sickened as he cradled his injured wrist, trying to ignore the excruciating burning sensation now steadily crawling up his arm like ants.

'There you are hon' offered the waitress, placing a rather generous portion of pie in front of Vincent. 'Is there anything else sir?'

'How about a fork, sugar?' Vincent replied with intentional slowness.

'Excuse me?' exclaimed the waitress indignantly, fooled by the unfamiliar accent.

Vincent's wide grin was all teeth as he pointed past her to the jug of cutlery on the counter.

'You know? A fork, for the pie.'

'Oh, I'm sorry' replied the girl, realisation dawning on her face. 'I thought you said... well, I guess when it's late like this I just struggle to concentrate sometimes. It's like all the thoughts in my head get jumbled up or something, you know?'

The predatory smile widened yet further on Vincent's face.

'I bet if we were to cut the top off of that pretty sweet head of yours, all those thoughts would come tumbling out higgledy-piggledy,' he said, toying with her.

The waitress giggled at this, though something about the way Vincent had said it seemed to unsettle her and she turned away as if to head back to the kitchen.

It was the chance Eric had been desperately waiting for and as the waitress moved past him, he leapt up from his seat and shoved her back at Vincent, watching her stumble backwards into his lap, spilling hot coffee over the both of them. Vincent roared in fury as Eric raced for the counter, vaulting over it in one deft move.

The crash of cutlery and the sound of the waitress's cry followed by a dull thud signalled that Vincent was on his feet and coming at Eric fast. Reaching beneath the cash register, he located a sliver of hope as he felt his hand curl around the butt of a

shotgun, and then Vincent was on him; sailing headfirst across the counter to catch him squarely in the chest and knocking them both to the ground.

The shotgun flew from his grasp and Eric felt Vincent's powerful hands slip around his throat as he tried to crawl away.

'Now you done it hoss. Now you gone and fucking done it!' Vincent screamed as he began to squeeze the life out of Eric.

'Vincent don't take no misbehaving on his watch. That's just not the way we do things hoss!' he bellowed as he straddled Eric's chest, digging his nails deeper into the older man's neck till he drew blood.

Eric felt his world starting to go black as he fought for air.

Instinctively he beat his fists against Vincent's chest, but the younger man's grip did not slacken in the slightest as he stared down at Eric with a wild storm of hatred raging in his eyes.

'YOU HAD YOUR CHANCE HOSS! YOU HAD IT AND YOU FUCKIN' BLEW IT!' he screamed. 'NOW I'M GONNA HAVE TO CUT YA, LIKE I CUT THAT WHORE ALICE!'

The knife. As he felt himself slipping into the impenetrable darkness of unconsciousness, some long ago buried switch clicked inside Eric's mind and his hand instinctively darted into Vincent's jacket pocket, grasping for the switchblade. Realising what was happening, Vincent loosed his grip from around Eric's neck and moved to stop him, but he was too late. As Vincent reached for the

knife, it flicked open and he felt the blade being driven with brute force through his outstretched palm by the older man.

'You bastard Eric!' he howled in anguish as blood erupted from the wound. 'You fucking Yankee bastard, look what you did to my hand.'

Pushing Vincent back onto the floor and scrambling to his knees, the man that had been Eric before his mind snapped, loomed over Vincent's prostrate and cowering form like a tombstone.

'The name's Leon, shit-for-brains' he thundered angrily at his victim before yanking the knife from the other man's palm and then jamming it straight into Vincent's eye-socket right up to the hilt, 'and don't you fucking forget it!'