

Back in those days, I used to have the nose for this stuff. Not to mention the stomach. It got ripe on that scene.

I never met them behind Rattle. But I met enough of their type to know they wouldn't be all that; all that they might think they was. They'd be liquored up more often than not, no doubt. There'd be a tall one with a set of teeth on him would bite right through you and smile as he did it. And there'd be a smaller one – might be fat, might not be – probably glasses. Probably a pervert. Either way, they'd have high ideas about what they were doing. Ideas about the pulps, the rags. They'd talk shit about how this or that line in "Howl" was about them, about knowing Girodias or Laughlin. Or about smoking kif with Manguel, dropping acid with Moorcock. Selling a car to Ballard. All of it bullshit, more or less. Sure, they'd be canny enough to get by, but there'd be no trusting them. No, it was the rags for me, not the people.

There was always those as wouldn't wipe their ass with the pulps; eyes would glide right over them at the news stand, same way as they didn't see those handling for change. These are them as bought their smokes in boxes, from stores. Me, I was always one as would get their rags and their fags at the same stop. Same reasoning as you never buy your food from a place as has no beer to wash it down.

Rattle was never one of those you found on the stands though.



I don't imagine I ever would have picked the thing up had it not been for certain circumstances. Circumstances that began with a sap to the back of the head, as in my experience, circumstances are apt to.

I'd been minding my own business with a little bourbon in one of those nice little booths they got in the nice filthy little dive down in the basement under my office building. I'd been reading a Dashiell Hammett novel, matching drinks for chapters, nice and peaceful. Right around chapter nine, just as my reading was getting into rhythm, I catch a look from this dame floating out of the place on barely three yards of finely tapered legs. It was a nice look. A look that was only a little filthier than the barman's towel. I put Mr Hammett down on the table with the pages spread, but gently so as not to crack the spine, and followed those legs into the grey outside. I got as far as inhaling the first smell of the street, which reminded me why I'd taken the smell of the bar inside for preference, before the jack hit and the curtains dropped, yielding to that familiar surge of adrenaline and iron which vanished into distant memory as quickly as they had sprung.

When I came to, my chin was stuck with caked blood to my collar and there was a volcano calmly erupting in my head. I was in a small drab office not unlike my own small drab office, with some nice morning light coming through the minuscule window not unlike the nice morning light that sometimes tries to creep through my own minuscule window. I was seated in an office chair, one of the fancy kind with all four legs, my hands tied to the arm rests. On the desk in front of me were a scattering of printed papers and a stack of bound journals.



The knotwork 'round my wrists was real fine. Not the shanks and weaves they teach cub scouts and hnavvies, though I knew a few sailors that could hitch this kind too.

Their interrogation went as you'd guess. The establishing shot has a hard light on my face burrowing the wrinkles into chiarascuro lines. The piss-thin glow of a street light somehow carves the slats of a venetian blind into buckeye gulleys of shadow across the wall. The quiet one is by the door, all muscle under a cheap suit, and with a nose been broken more times than he could count on his remaining fingers. The wise-cracking one was up close, breathing his rotten cavities and barely-comprehensible argot direct into my ears. Me telling them I got butkis to give them. His fist on my jaw giving a sound like smacking a turgid cauliflower.

They got nothing out of me but a slash of blood as thick as a rat's tail onto the desk. I got nothing but the nasty colophon from that stack of journals branded onto my retinas -- and a nasty headache to match. We galloped our smart asses back and forth 'til we all had someplace else to be. Anyways, for once I wasn't being cute when I said I didn't know what they were getting at.

A swelling lip is usually enough to get me interested in someone else's business. Throw in that pair of legs from the bar, and it was starting to look like I had some thinking to do.



Twenty minutes of wriggling my hand around got me a raw wrist and enough room to slip free of the knotwork. I tore off a couple of pages from the top of a stack on the desk and wiped, as far as I was able, the caked blood off my lips and chin, then I freed my other hand and got up from the chair. My legs liked being useful again, so I allowed them to take me outside and round the corner to a breakfast joint. I drank coffee and ate eggs and took inventory. I had a sore head, cheek, a warning-off, check, a vanishing dame who liked to play the colourful fly in a sport-fishing setup I didn't much enjoy, check. I had plenty, the one thing I didn't have was a client.

I sipped cold coffee and shot the waitress a dirty look; down and outs need refills just like anyone else. I had a little money in the bank, but not much, and the bills I had coming due would wipe that out in no time. Clients were a drag, but they did pay the bills. I didn't like the prospects of getting paid for my troubles for the line I was on. I could go back to the bar and milk the bartender a little; you don't pull a snatch like that without the sharpes behind the bar noticing a thing or two. Or I could run down the address of the office and see if I could find out who was behind the front -- whatever was going on it wasn't the kind of thing you put out among the good citizens of the working public, so the publication bit was sure to be a sham.

The waitress arrived with more coffee, some of which she got in the cup, most of which she sloshed onto the formica. I shot her another look and made a mental note not to leave a tip, then chastised myself for the thought and went back to examining my prospects. After chewing over the angles for a while I reached into my jacket pocket for the Hammett. It wasn't there, no doubt it was doing an excellent job as a coaster for



some shmuck's watery beer back at the bar. Instead, I brought out a handful of bloodied pages of the damned journal. Parts of the type were too badly smeared over but the first paragraph had escaped near enough intact, and I read:

Back in those days, I used to have the nose for this stuff. Not to mention the stomach...

Those were different days, and my stomach was fighting on all fronts to cope with the foul eggs and bitter coffee. I screwed the papers up and jammed them back into my pocket, stood up, paid and tipped the waitress.



I headed back to the office, to see what might be waiting for me, other than bills and a sour odour.

The dead rats ain't so unusual in this place, but they don't so often waste their last gasps on nailing themselves to my desk, so I figured someone had been visiting. Other than the rat, it was difficult to tell if they'd disturbed anything. I pulled the rusty iron out of its eye-hole with a pair of rustier pliers left by Calvino the dentist, the previous incumbent of the office. Shuffled the thing into the wastepaper and -- out of respect -- poured a good measure of scotch.

"You don't gonna offer a lady a drink?"

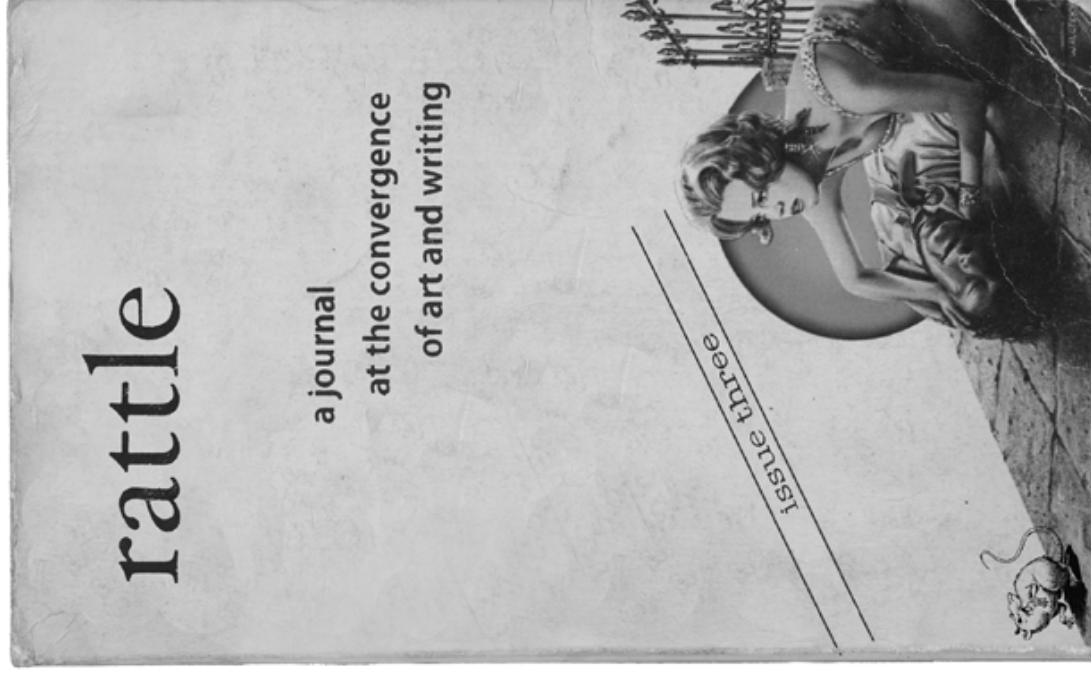
I turned to the doorway, where her silhouette leaned like a hot-water bottle on a pedestal. Those legs again.

The quiver in her voice told me she wanted out of what she'd got herself into, and the dab-shaped bruises either side of her songbird throat told me she wanted revenge. I poured us both a scotch, lit cigarettes. A few hours later, I had the shadow of a smile and a client.



The story the songbird told me had followed some pretty well trodden lines. She was an aspiring writer who had moved to the big city to feel the shudders all those people make when they run around as they do. She'd taken a job as receptionist at a firm of accountants to pay the bills while spending as much time as she could on writing. Every week she sent off fat manilla envelopes containing stories to the publishers, first major, then minor and finally the utterly obscure. And every week the fat envelopes came back with a riff on the classic old number of 'thanks but no thanks'.

Finally one of those envelopes came back with a different tune. An 'independent journal' had agreed to publish a couple of her stories. It didn't have a large circulation, in fact it was a rather niche rag, but the songbird was happy just to have her first break. She wrote back and forth with the editors for a couple of weeks, going over some of the suggestions they had made and minor grammatical adjustments they felt were needed. After these had been resolved the editors had suggested they all meet for a coffee at one



of the diners downtown.

Over meatloaf and coffee the editors and the songbird had become acquainted. They had discussed the current state of writing and of art, and had generally put the world to rights. After the last dregs of coffee were drained they had moved onto drinks at the bar around the corner. Here the editors had charmed and wooed the songbird with their belief in collaborative editorial attitudes and the subtle charms of textual nuance. Somehow the fine talk of commas and diacritics, of paragraph breaks and narrative thrust, moved onto the fascinating subject of double entry book keeping -- its own grammatical idiosyncrasies and the various ways in which it might, in enlightened artistic hands, yield to a vision beyond merely recording the flow of data.

All of this silver tongued smoothness, in combination with plenty of bottom shelf whisky, led to a giddy sense of hope for her fledgling artistic career in the still optimistic thoughts of the songbird. By the time the editors had abruptly stood up and announced an urgent need for their beauty sleep, and then swiftly disappeared in a rush of cheap cigar smoke and an unpaid bar tab, the songbird had agreed to perpetrate several serious acts of accounting fraud in the name of the great project.



So one thing leads to another.

It wasn't that they were crooks that she minded. After all, she'd moved to the city looking for the underbelly of life, chasing after a slurp on the muddy dregs of the real.

What really gets you, in the end, is that the city is lonely. And if paying a few bar tabs can pull you out of that hole for a few hours and get you in print to boot, well, she said. Well.

And she couldn't deny the frisson of her quiet subversion. Ratcheting out those accounts on an old Malry adding machine; falsifying the world of penpushers to get herself deeper into something more real.

But she'd felt herself hardening in their company. At first, she embraced the coarseness of the bars, the gravelling of her voice from the whisky and smoke, the tough skin where the occasional pick-me-up needle had slipped in.

What really got her was the horse. The time the three of them stumbled out of a dive bar to see the animal fallen in the road, still tied to its cart, exhausted, dragged down by the city. The other two start to laughing, wisecracking about glue and the steaks they serve downtown. Angry, staccato words bubble out of her -- Poor. Old. Tired. -- but somehow her complaints come out as a joke, and she finds herself laughing with them, and they stumble on into the dark together.

The next morning is the first time she tries to get out; the last time she tells them that to their faces. Before long she's been turfed out of her day job, and is behind on the rent. They front her enough cash to get the landlord off her back, but every day she's wriggling herself deeper onto the hook.



She tells me all this over coffee and cigarettes, her hands fluttering, but her voice steady, bitter as the coffee and enveloping as the smoke.



Eventually her story comes around to our first meeting, to our eyes meeting across the unremarkable squalor of Dave's Dive, three floors beneath where we now sat. By this point, she confessed, she'd already repeated a dangerous pattern several times over. She'd swear to herself that she was getting out, would find someone to pour out her soul to and entrust into helping her slip her two nasty moorings. These hero types either slithered back into their true forms once morning came around, sometimes taking money from her purse before they split, sometimes not, or else they ended up on the end of a beating from one of the various hacks the editors kept around for just such an occasion. They had a whole roster of deadbeats and villains they used for these jobs, each as strange and unpleasant as the work the editors published to keep them leashed.

As usual, my luck was first rate. I had been made for exactly what I was -- a cut rate dick on a low financial ebb -- by both the songbird and the editors' goons who had followed her. The second her fine-coloured wings caught my attention my card was marked. The difference between me and the other guys who had been warned off was that the girl had waited outside until the crooks slipped out, all guilts and re-enacted punches, and had gone in to make sure I was still with the living. When she had assured herself I was still breathing she checked my wallet to see who I was. She found my detective's license and three crumpled business cards and looked my address up in the phonebook. By the time my breakfast was down and I'd made it back to the office she had already arrived, and helped herself to the bourbon and smokes from my desk.



She hummed gently under her breath, sotto voce, the old refrain "... so where do we go now, but nowhere?" Nowhere sounds about right to me. What else do you call what's out there past where the city runs out? Out there where the dust can rise and keep on rising with just the rain to bring it down. Where the dogs run and only sharpen their teeth on carrion, and only howl at the pin-pricked blackness.

If you two Rattle assholes are reading this, then you've already figured we're gone. There's still a little of that bourbon -- bottom drawer on the left, help yourselves. It's filed under H for History, for go to Hell. Under N for Never, as in you ain't Never finding us. Under F for Fuck you. For fade to black.



A note from the editors:

Don't count on it, dick; never is a long time to keep writing yourself out of the story. Keep watching your back.

Editorial

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