

As the bell over the door tinkled all eyes turned to watch the lone man totter towards the counter. He could not have been any more out of place, this little man with tufts of grey hair sticking haphazardly out of his liver spotted head. The dim lighting of the bar seemed to blind the man. Each step he took was so tentative, as if testing to make sure the ground was solid. The entire room watched as he approached the counter and watched the service man shook his head. This was not a bar, not in the normal sense of the word and this old man was looking to get drunk.

As the man peered around the room, noticing for the first time the stage tubed contraptions on the tables, the watchers were unashamed. Not a single person averted their eyes, in fact each one made sure that he made eye contact with the stranger. They did not get strangers her often, tucked in a little corner of New York City this hookah shop was for those who could not partake in the sin of alcohol. Occasionally they got an ambitious group from Columbia crossing the river to prove that they were worldly. But for the most part the world left well enough alone.

But as the old man stood there staring back at the brown skinned men partaking in their pleasure, everyone knew that this was no pleasure seeker. Nor was he a tourist. Nor lost. This old man was here for a reason. They could see it in his face. And his eyes. In his very soul. They all averted there eyes and continued their looping conversations. All except one.

A young man, little more than a boy really, left his peers and approached the old man. "Do you want to join us?" The boy gestured to the table where his friends sat laughing. As the old man hesitated the boy said, "Come on, they're great. Really." He offered an arm to help the man across the room. After the smallest of hesitations the man took it, leaning all of his inconsiderable weight on the boy.

In the boys arms the man felt light. Certainly lighter than the boy expected. His skin was brittle, almost as if the simple act of touching it would cause it to shatter into a million pieces. The man must be a lot older than the boy had thought. As he lowered the man into a chair the other boys around the table

grew quiet. They were unsure how to react to this stranger in their midst.

After a moment of silence the man spoke in a voice so quiet that, even though the entire bar was straining to hear it, he had to repeat himself to be heard. "Is this that marijuana stuff?" He pronounced every syllable of every word including mary-ja-wanna.

A couple of boys at the table chuckled but the boy who had helped the old man shot them a warning glare. "No grandfather," he said. "This is shisha."

"Never was," the old man murmured in his quiet tone.

"What's that grandfather?" The boy asked, leaning closer to the man.

"Never did have kids," the man said shaking his head. The few wisps of hair left on his balding pate seemed to float in the nonexistent breeze.

"Oh," said the boy. "I'm sorry?" There was another awkward moment. One of their tablemates broke the silence by erupting into coughs after taking too long of a pull. The old man seemed to perk up at the sight of the smoke. "Do you want to try?" Asked the boy. The man nodded.

The hose was passed to the old man but he seemed puzzled by the contraption. The boy leaned closer to explain the fire and the smoke, how to draw correctly, and when to let go. The old man sucked in little more than a mouthful of the thick smoke before exploding into his own coughing fit. Men around the room laughed. To them this stranger seemed no different from the others.

The boy patted the man on his back, not too hard in fear of breaking him in two, and waited out the coughs. When the man calmed down and had passed the hose on he let out a little whisper, "wow." He shook his head and a gentle grin grew across his face. "I understand why you like the stuff."

The boy smiled, "it certainly has its perks."

The hose was passed around the table in silence until it was the old man's turn again. He took another small hit and once again exploded into coughing. When he mellowed out he turned to the boy, "what do you do kid?"

The boy did not like to think of himself as a kid but was too polite to correct the man. "We're software engineers."

There was another pause as the man seemed to think this over. “Good job?”

“Very. We worked really hard to get to where we are.”

“Do you like it.”

The boy paused this time. “I like it because it helps my family.”

The man nodded. That seemed good enough for him. “Never was good with numbers.”

The boy smiled, “it’s not so much numbers as commands. Mostly I just tell a computer what to do and it follows me.”

“Never really good at that either.”

The boy thought about that for a second, “never good at what sir.”

“Following commands.”

“Where you in the army?” As soon as the question had come out of his mouth the boy knew that he had insulted the man. The man’s face puckered in anger as the blood drained from his face. “I’m sorry I didn’t mean —“

“I was not in the army. Would never have joined with those monsters. Not that they would have me...” The man reached down and started rolling up his sleeve. The boy wondered idyll whether the man was going to punch him. What do you do when an elder tries to hurt you? He was likely to break his fist. But as the sleeve crested the man’s bicep the boy saw something that made him shiver.

“Monsters like those don’t deserve to be followed.”

The boy stared at the numbers burned into the man’s flesh. He had heard stories, seen pictures, but none of that had seemed real. Here was the proof of true horrors. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. It’s starting again. These men in charge. Think they’re new. Think they’re smart. There’s nothing great about where this leads. This time I fear it will be me who is sorry.”

The boy and man stared at each other for a long time. Finally the man extended his hand, “name’s Abel.”

“Mohammad,” the boy said returning the hand shake.

“It’s been a pleasure Mohammad. If you ever need anything...” With that the old man got to his feet. As he left only one pair of eyes followed him. The others

might mistake him of another pleasure seeking tourist but Mohammad could see the purpose in the old man's stride.