

GRIZZLY BEAR LODGE

BY HENRY HARTMAN

The snowstorm outside swirled in a mass of white winds and shrill howls, where lonely lights glittered from lost houses and distant mountains lorded as spectral shadows. Beyond the tall windows of the Grizzly Bear Lodge Hotel I watched a silhouette trudge against the wind. I took a small careful sip of my hot chocolate and let the warm milky taste lie on my tongue like some do with fine wines. I do not care for alcohol, nor coffee, nor even soda, and in any circumstances in which I'm expected to drink any of them I choose water or nothing at all. I only truly enjoy one drink, and the Lodge offers it for free in its lobby.

Outside, another man in thick furs ran with the storm behind him, and when the two were about to meet the newcomer pulled what I presumed to be an axe from the gloom and sunk it in the chest of the other. The wind dulled any yelling, but the man fell quick, and from his body the killer wrenched out the axe and brought it back down again in a great arch. And he did it again. And then he ran away.

I swirled a little coffee stick around in the little paper coffee cup, and took another sip of the cocoa within. Strange, isn't it?

The clerk, a girl barely out of college, sat close by, and I had half a mind to tell her about the incident, but I didn't care enough to move from the window. I could feel some of the cold from outside, which made it all the more comforting to drink the hot chocolate.

I watched the crumpled form of the man for some time (and emptied nearly all of my drink) before at last the man began to move again. When he finally got up, I watched him stumble towards the door.

A little waft of snow fluttered in followed by the man in a black coat torn by two great gashes. His pale face was cleaved nearly in two—one eye hung precariously at the edge of the socket, while the other searched the lobby.

The clerk looked up, took a still breath, and bolted away. I heard her footsteps fall away down the length of the hall, and the noise of a billiards game cease and start again as she passed

them by. The dead man looked at me, confused.

“What’s happening?” he asked.

I stepped away from the window, and pointed to the gore over his face and chest. “It appears you’ve died, sir. That axe got you pretty good. Saw it all. Very sorry.”

He touched his face with a still hand, and watched the blood fall from his black glove. “I’m dead?”

“Appears so.”

I noticed he no longer blinked, nor breathed, nor shook from the cold. He put his head down. “What... But— Is that it?”

“What’s it?”

“Death. This is it?”

“Seems so. Never died myself, so I can’t be sure.”

His eyes darted around the room in search of an answer, and he tried again to speak but only babbling nonsense escaped his lips. There were no tears, but he seemed so small and so confused I finally took pity on him, and held out the last of my hot chocolate. “Here. Have this.”

He took it tenderly, and sought permission in a glance of the eyes before lifting it to his nose. He sniffed, and his face softened. His first sip was small, but soon he threw back his torn head and downed the rest of it. And as the last drops of the sweet nectar flowed down his churning throat, I went to the coffee machine. There I ignored the many little pictures of many little coffees—the black bubbling mixtures of rancid swill—and as I slipped a cup beneath the nozzle, let cocoa flow with steam and delicious smells.

I prepared two, and led the dead man to the fireplace, where great soft sofas lay nearby. When we sat down, I handed him his drink. The blood and flesh of his face glowed in the haze of the fire, and he stared down at the cocoa with blank emotion. He held it, but did nothing with it.

I already regretted sitting by the fire with him. The

sweaty heat from the hearth sank into my flesh and sickened me to the point I couldn't drink a drop of the hot chocolate. After sitting with him for some time, I took off my outer coat, and unzipped my inner one. I felt naked. I savored every chill bite of wind—each whisper of cold air soothed and grounded me and called me back to the window. I assumed he would be most comfortable by the warmth of the fire. Most are. But his stare remained empty, his hot chocolate undrunk.

Just as my fingers churned the edge of the armrest with more and more frustration, and sweating grew more uncomfortable, he asked, "Why didn't you run?"

My anger broke. "What? Why would I have run? You're no threat to me."

His lack of expression remained unchanged. "I'm dead. You're supposed to run. Be scared. You're supposed to be scared or grieve for me or hate me."

I looked back into the dance of the fire. "Why would I do any of that? Because I'm supposed to? I don't feel anything for you, cadaver. I just met you, and frankly, I'm already sick of you.

Maybe you should be running from me."

He rose, and sipped his hot chocolate as he walked down the hall, steam curling around him.

The wind outside laughed, the billiards game continued, and I found I didn't have the strength to get up. I put the drink to my lips, sipped, and quickly tore it away. I know I prepared it correctly, but the hot chocolate tasted like sand. No sweet warmth and no savory flavor. I didn't want to drink hot chocolate anymore.