

## FICTION

### Lunch Break

#### The Man of the Hour

What happens when the roads of time get crossed? The travelers lost in a twilight zone like world? What becomes of the man who simply isn't in the right place in *his* time? When his existence is tortured by a happiness that rests in the desired reality of another life? And what, exactly, is fate?

In the life of one young man named Toby, these dilemmas offer themselves up for examination. We, as onlookers, are invited in the sweet and sour world Toby lives in, and we meet strangely with strangers, in even stranger places. And we learn, for one man, what, exactly, fate is.

#### In the office

Toby's watch announced with its electronic bugle the arrival of 11:40 a.m. Time for lunch. He gave his chair a scoot away from his desk. Not far enough though to give his gordo gut room to get out. His desk creaked with the pressure of his girth when he slipped out of his seat.

He grabbed his coat and grabbed his hat and remembered that first day when his Boss, with flushed cheeks that hung over his jawbone and did the shimmy shimmy shake, let him go early. He said one noon, in a twangy and bassy voice that filled the room, "Hey, m'boy, you're free to go. There's a great Italian place down on 14th and Boulevard. Bellomo's, can't be beat!" Toby heard the too-good-to-be-true news, looked at his watch, then looked at the Reall's clock above the Boss's office door, then looked at his Boss. "Go ahead kid, I bet you're

starving, and anyway, our kind's gotta stick together!" He gave a slap with jolly grunto to his bulging belly. Toby almost cracked the mold of his constantly solemn mug then. But his urge to smile vanished, and he lowered his gaze sheepishly, thinking he didn't really mind not seeing his feet.

The Boss winked at Toby and went back into his office, and Toby was out.

### Walking

Toby made his wide way through the not as crowded at noon crowd up to 14th. He heard muzak emanating from the Aristocrat when a young man with a Navy pea coat and white scarf hanging out of his pocket opened the front door for his girl, wet flakes melting into her cheeks. Toby caught a measure and a half, he estimated, before the door swung shut, slammed by cold gusts. The measure and a half turned into a sweet slow swinging ditty that Toby remembered from piano lessons, the remaining remnants of ragged incomplete boyhood memories. Now he played it again, in his head, with full orchestration. He once played it for his girl, sitting side by side on the bench, snow cold outside. That was when he still had all his fingers.

He sometimes imagined they all were there again, twiddling, tapping, drumming, dancing- it seemed to him that he knew so much more back then. He had so much more back then. He had himself, knew himself well enough to be alone, and he wasn't so lonely then. Toby frowned and buried his eyebrows in his green eyes as he tried to make an answer pop out of thin air like a rabbit out of a hat and figure out why he was so lonely now. He felt sympathetic to that man who had become himself. He didn't feel sorry for himself, though, he imagined he had a

girl to eat lunch with.

### **At Bellomo's**

Toby sipped his hot chocolate. It had just been brought to him and he was diving with everything he had into the white foam. He loved that.

He put his cup down with a shiver when a piercing breath of airy ice shot through the opened front door. In with it a woman of another time who had platinum hair and herself to share, floated in too. She stood at the entrance in the brief prelude to infinity and spoke to the hostess while scanning the room for something, someone. Smiling, she made the place pretty. The door swung shut, an instant too late, the building shivered.

Toby was taking another dip in sweet dark milk when Gloria spoke.

"Excuse me, Toby?" He looked up wondering who knew his name. "It's Toby, isn't it? The hostess told me. I'm Gloria," she put a delicate hand out. Toby took it and swallowed it up in his grip. He couldn't find anything to say. Gloria did. "Um, apparently, the bar is full and there's a luncheon in the other room and the only other seat left, they said, is this one." Toby glanced around the room and didn't recall the lunch rush that had summoned multitudes and had Bellomo's bursting at the seams. Every seat was filled, every waiter thrilled. Every seat but the one opposite from Toby in his two-person booth and every waiter but the gal standing behind Toby, notepad in hand, pen in ear.

"Please," Toby said, "you're more than welcome."

Gloria bubbled up at once. "Thank you, thanks so much," she said in a tone that was reserved for only those moments that called for warmth, sincerity. Toby thought she sang smooth, soft, full of volume and dynamic but always soothing. He loved that.

It reminded him of another song.  
I'll build a stairway to paradise,  
with a new Step ev'ry day!  
I'm going to get there at any price;  
Stand aside, I'm on my way!

It was Ira Gweshwin that Gloria sounded  
like, Toby was sure.

He loved that.

He wished he could reach out and lay his  
hand on her cheek and twist and stroke silky strands of  
deep auburn. Instead, he kept his paws resting in front of  
him, like he revered Gloria as the God-send she had to be,  
his lunch date. To touch her would transform her beauty  
into the cold mortal flesh like Toby wore, and he was sure  
she wasn't mortal. He imagined Gloria would put her hand  
over his, not covering half of it, and move their fist to the  
table, her hand on top of his.

When the food was served, they sat and ate, and it  
had been the first time in a long time that Toby ate lunch  
with somebody. "Strange," he thought, "a lunch date, just  
like I would've imagined it." He smiled.

Afterwards, Toby was obliged and paid for Gloria,  
and they still sat. "Toby," Gloria asked her lunch date, "let  
me tell you, " she paused, licked her lips, not seductively,  
but tastefully, like she was savoring the wet remnants of hot  
chocolate, "that your kindness is only exceeded by your  
good looks." She smiled with her lips together, making a  
slit under a thin nose under two sparkling eyes that sang to  
him and made him believe that through that behind her,  
within her, in front of him, a radiance waited to be  
revealed, and Toby imagined he could feel that light--life.

Toby looked into her eyes, intricately divine, and he  
thought he saw another world. Sparkle floated behind her

crystal windows. The kindest green Toby thought he had ever seen invited him. Toby looked into her eyes and he thought she wanted him - somehow, somewhere.

All this bliss, and Toby was not sure what to do. If only she would ask him - anything. To hear her tender voice invite him with a sound that was more of a heralding was what kept Toby's senses impaired. He listened with his whole soul and heart, intensely waiting, and smiling. He forgot what he saw and felt, and tasted only eagerness and patience, so he only knew what he heard. Toby had never heard so much. He heard music that shot out of speakers, and he liked the way it sounded. He heard doors whoosh and slam and clinking glasses and chuckles and boring conversation that made him think he had more to say than anybody. He heard a world that he wasn't conscious of before. He felt like a part of it.

Then he looked some more and thought he was just wishing and dreaming, and he felt silly and even sillier when he couldn't take his eyes away from Gloria's. And sitting there, no words were shared.

Toby couldn't tear his gaze or straighten his grin and he stared and Gloria stared and Toby imagined. What if?

Toby loved that.

### **At Home**

Hearing the clinking of keys and the turn of the lock, Winner's ears perked up, his head following and his eyes opened after he had already pounced off the arm chair's headrest and leaped onto the stool that was to the left of the doorway. Toby opened it and Winner sprang, trusting to be caught. Toby obliged, kicked the door shut with his heel,

tossed his keys and wallet on the stool Winner gave up and gently smooched the wet nose of his pussy and listened to her purr.

Toby slipped his shoes off and went to his chair. He fell backwards and made the chair go creakclickclaprock when he pulled the wooden handle on the side signaling steel rods to jerk into place reclining the chair, Toby, and Winner.

Toby scanned the dark and picked up the remote and pressed on. Electricity surged through the small flat and bowled through empty lanes and exploded into the stereo. The red light faded on and made a projection on Toby's glasses, the red, lining the silver stems and running laps round his lenses. He closed his eyes, pressed the play button and a blue rhapsody of horns sang of Toby's wishes. Familiar notes encircled him and the reunion made Toby want to love.

He listened. He sat in the dark. He loved these times, but only imagined them with people, and lasting into the warm bright morn and further into the heavy coolness of night. He wanted to start a new life and never remember these times, when he wasn't alive. He wanted to be racing over steaming asphalt, blindly into the sun, and trusting he'd arrive in one piece to the city of lights and jive and jazz.

He remembered when he was younger and could play and be happy. Then before another thought crossed his mind, a key was turned in time with horns and pots and Toby forgot and was engulfed by a wish and only knew what he heard.

And he was playing. He was happy.

### Smitty

"Hey kid," Smitty peeked through the back door of the back room of The Hall, "Where ya headed? Got a minute?" Toby had worked late at Reall's and had been walking home with his eyes on the ground until now. He was a man shivering, hanging out of an alley door, his shirt convulsing in the wind. He looked up with interest at the man's pool stick that was holding the door open. "Well, ah, what's up?"

"Well, tell ya what, the name's Smitty-call-me-the-man-from-New-York-City and I'll buy your dinner if you can help me out of a jam and give me a partner, play stick, Toby?"

Toby didn't realize Smitty called him by his name until he had walked up to the front doors of The Hall and even then, Toby didn't think anything of it. He actually liked;the way Smitty had said it, "Tow-bee" like it actually belonged in the company of a "Smitty-call-me-the-man-from-New-Your-City." Toby appreciated that and didn't give it another thought and opened the front door of The Hall. The front room was dark. The back room was darker. Past the bar and dining room and hostess podium, the pool tables glowed green. Only the light from the jukebox and the lamps hanging above the tables offered a chance to see. At the jukebox Toby saw Smitty. His black slacks blended into the dark and his blacker shoes that had even blacker laces that ran through the seven holes on the opposite sides reflected the lamps and twirling fans that shook and creaked and didn't seem to do much but look cool on Smitty's shoe. He wore a white tank under a white dress shirt that was buttoned half way and hung perfectly on the small man. He had a pack of cigarettes in his shirt pocket

that weighed heavy and blue chalk marks on his rolled up sleeve. Smitty motioned for Toby to come back.

The Hall smelled like tobacco and belched beer. It smelled like a hard day's work. It smelled like an easy day's work for a strong stomach. Smoke stung the smoker's eyes when it floated from the cigarette and found nowhere to go, a cloud hanging low.

It all tasted, for most, much the same. Maybe someone would indulge in the salty crunch of a pretzel or the oily snap of a peanut, but mostly, it all tasted the same. For Toby, it tasted like whiskey. Warm, off the rocks, stronger than ever swill that made Toby feel swell. He had thrown back seven in the 90 minutes he had been there. Smitty had succeeded in getting him drunk and loose and showered him in compliments like, after the two cats declined a rematch with Toby and Smitty, he had said, "Toby, I'll be damned if you just don't look like the man with the plan and that's b-baad!" That was the first thing Toby laughed at, and Toby had laughed through the night ever since.

Toby sucked up every drink and every minute and listened to every word that was said and could only hope the next instant he wouldn't go deaf. Smitty watched with sincere understanding and after Toby kept living every second like it was his last, Smitty clued him in.

"Yo, Bro, ya got all night, right?" Toby didn't nod, just grinned. "Yeah, right, so grab a seat and offer your lap and I'm gonna grab a game of 9-Ball - five a piece, can you believe that?" Smitty spoke with his hand to his mouth like it was a secret and snickered and looked back over his shoulder at his next game. "That poor kid, thinks he's for

real! Tell you something more, Tobe, we just might be eating like kings nine balls from now! Betcha like the sound of that!"

Toby agreed and wished him luck and said, "Smitty, how 'bout some coins for the jukebox?" Smitty reached into his pocket and dropped into Toby's palm the change. The silver clinked in his huge hand, his treasured bowl. A new thing Toby then learned, all you had to do, was ask. He stepped to the box and slid the coins on in and made his selection "The A Train." Dancing back to his seat Toby felt a surge, and fell back while the room spun, Toby's mind, faster. Suddenly alive and suddenly a comedian in the merry drunkenness of the moment, Toby shouted to his buddy, "Smitty, if I don't keep movin, all these pretty girls are gonna be groovin - all over me!" He blushed and when Smitty turned to respond, Toby looked comfortable to him.

"Tell you what, kid, you play your cards right and they'll never stop groovin round you!"

Toby figured Smitty knew what he was talking about. "I wonder what my hand is?" Toby thought. He imagined he had four of a kind.

### **At Home?**

When Toby lay his head down to sleep that drunken night, he closed his eyes and he felt the room twirling. When the jazz came on, he closed his eyes and the room stopped spinning and started dancing. Toby started dancing too and dreamt.

Simple, sincere, desired, was the image that overcame him. An image of a man who knows himself well enough to know how to dance with another is what Toby dreamed of. He dreamt he could dance with Gloria. He imagined that his life was a rehearsal, and for one night

he put on the show. He saw the stage. The curtains blue velvet. And then the lights went up. Toby mingled and snapped up drinks before the big show. He saw people smiling and they were all smiling because of him and he thought it must have been Heaven. He felt friends slap him on his back and only his soul would tremor and release into the night and all that Toby saw made him feel happy.

A kind man sharp in his tux and manner, tapped Toby on the shoulder and ushered him towards the main floor. Through the pulsing crowd the two men stepped lively, Toby close on the heels, and the man then said, "Here's your chance." The two stopped at a hallway and then there was only Toby. In his dream, he saw the man in the tux turn into a shadow and disappear into the multitudes. He looked down the hallway and saw a door. Plain, naked, closed, Toby thought it was picture perfect, deep brown and sharply formed. The gold handle shining. He took one step and was one step closer to the door when in the next instant he heard a slam and then silence. He felt eyes on him, eager, inviting. Toby saw in front of him, through the fog of what he knew was real, his savior. He saw the keys to success and a bench to ride in on. Toby thought he was in Heaven. He took a deep sigh, clenched and relaxed his fists of magic fingers, and had a seat at the piano.

### **Out the Office**

Toby finished the 69 cent cappuccino that he got on his way to work. He tossed it into the trash can on his way through the mirror doors. He swung one door open and swiveled his other arm carrying his brief case and holding the cappuccino he got the his Boss. His Boss appreciated it.

"Toby, many thanks m'boy, a kind soul is hard to find," his boss leaned close to Toby and said out of the side

of his mouth, "believe me, kid, I've looked!" He looked at Toby serious for an instant and then jerked his hand to his mouth and snickered and Toby chuckled too. His Boss straightened and walked back to his office. He tasted the cappuccino and with foam on his lips said, "mmmm mmmm" and "Toby, you have just made my day. You just holler if there's anything I can do for you." Toby smiled back at his Boss and was waiting for him to break into laughter so Toby could join him, but his Boss only smiled back at him and was sincere. He went into his office taking the lid off the cup and gulping the mocha down.

Toby sat back and thought he had the best Boss around. With that realization, he put his head down and began his day at work. It wasn't until lunch break that he took his fingers from the keyboard and sighed a deep breath. His Boss opened his door as Toby was exhaling.

"So, Toby, where we eating today? Say, you do look good, what'd you do last night?" Toby was used to conversation by now and relished his opportunity.

"Dancin, Boss. I went dancin."

"You don't say kid?"

"Had a time, boy did I have a time. Looked good too, sharp."

"No kiddin? So who was your girl? She looked good too I bet!"

"Oh, shout, Boss, I didn't *really* go. I was just dreaming, you know."

"Wow, kid, you lost me. Did you go or no?"

"Boss, I was just dreaming! Just telling you my dream, what I did last night was dream."

"Oh, I got you, so you didn't *really* go dancin'?"

Toby answered questionably and strangely felt quite a bit quicker than his Boss. The feeling didn't last for long.

"No, I didn't, it was only *imaginary*."

"And that means what?"

"It means --"

"That's right, Toby, it means that last night I was sitting at home too and just dreaming, you know imagined myself sitting with a gorgeous gal, squeezing her tight in a booth made for two. We were down at Sam's, and I imagined us sharing steaming cocoa and a big heaping bowl. We were sharing some of that sweet vanilla ice cream and Sam's sweeter chocolate sauce.

"I imagined that, and so I grabbed my wife and told her we were going for a ride, and I'll tell ya Toby, m'boy, I never imagined anything sweeter."

Toby wasn't sure what to say and his Boss didn't ask him to say a thing. He stepped closer and reached into Toby's front shirt pocket. He took out a pack of Lucky's. Toby didn't quite believe it. He didn't smoke and certainly never had any Lucky's. The Boss slapped them on the palm of his hand and the smack didn't make Toby flinch. He ran the plastic strip round the pack and tore something silver and made a cigarette jump out of the pack. He reached into his pants and snapped a Zippo and he was lit and he tossed the Lucky's to Toby and he caught them in his resting hands.

"Hey, why don't you come with me to lunch? We got plenty and we'd love to have you." Toby's Boss smiled, winked and turned and danced over to his door. His feet made soft heavy thumps on the carpet. He slid up to his door, opened it, and said, "Your call - Toby, you're all aces." He danced through the door, and Toby watched it shut and he didn't hear his Boss anymore.

He heard the roar of gatherings of people. Women and men and boys and girls. He heard a voice that rang like Ira Gershwin's and pool balls being cracked and the scuff of the chalk. He heard ivory being tickled to death and horns

playing for their lives and he heard a voice sweet and close and he heard his name.

His watch announced with its electronic bugle the arrival of 11:40 a.m. Time for lunch.

*Nick Reading*