

Red Badge

By John Lemut

Clement sat at the bar facing rows of liquor bottles lining glass shelves down lit and up lit by small, delicate, hot-burning bulbs. The woman bartender who was sometimes allowed to get on stage and sing a song or two she wrote for her now-defunct indie rock band in what she thought of as her signature, slightly growly yet breathy voice served Clement another Jack and Coke.

She added the drink to the tab she was running for him in her head. Clement didn't look at her, but he did notice her. In the month that he had been coming to the club he caught her brief act a few times and one song in particular – he assumed it was called “Me Not You” because those were the words she most frequently repeated – he enjoyed. He didn't like it for the music or the lyrics. She kept her mouth close to the microphone when taking sharp, quick inhalations such that, even with the collective ruckus of the ambient noise in the bar that featured a less than adequate sound system, her inhalations were audible, seeping from the speakers. They made him think about what she would sound like while having sex.

The bartender would not be singing tonight. She only sang on weeknights when the crowd was thin and respectful. Tonight there was a DJ.

She liked the way his glass went untouched until he was ready to take a drink from it. He never ordered

a bottle of beer, but if he had, she knew he wouldn't fiddle with it. He wouldn't peel the label off with his fingernails. The glass she set down before him minutes ago still went untouched. The condensation accumulated naturally; perfect little semi-spheres sometimes broke away as demanded by gravity and rolled down the outside of the glass to be absorbed into the cocktail napkin. He drank at his own pace. The word in her mind for it was "deliberate."

Clement didn't know her name. They never introduced her before her performances. She just jumped on stage and started strumming a guitar and singing. He never asked her and she wouldn't volunteer it.

Clement saw Manny's approach through glycol smoke and strobe lights reflected in the mirrors behind the rows of liquor bottles lining glass shelves. Because Clement saw him in advance, he allowed Manny to clasp him on his shoulder without reacting. Manny slid onto the stool beside him. "Jack!" a clearly excited Manny nearly yelled at Clement. "Babe!" Manny did yell at the bartender. "I'll take a Lite!"

She angrily twisted the cap off a bottle. "Five fifty," she told Manny.

Clement pointed at himself almost apologetically and her expression softened. She re-totaled his tab while walking to serve the next customer.

Manny was in his early twenties although he unsuccessfully tried to act a couple years older. Clement's age was difficult for both Manny and the bartender to guess. Clement slept well and that helped his youthful appearance.

"Jack, remember that guy I told you about?"

Clement's eyeballs rolled to look up and to the left to feign the appearance of attempting to recall previous conversations with Manny about the Sandman.

“Remember I was telling you about *the Sandman?*” Manny prodded further, his voice dropped softer for the last two words. “Do you want to meet him?”

“Yeah,” Clement replied, now looking at Manny for the first time.

“He’s here. He’s over in the lounge.” Manny motioned to a corner of the club where a man sat alone on a low, black couch secured behind a perimeter of velvet rope. The Sandman was poking at a smart phone.

Clement couldn’t quite tell looking through the dance floor crowded with illegally admitted girls and club-dressed men-boys, haze, and the headache-inducing mélange of strobes and barely-on bar lighting, but even seated the Sandman looked tall (his knees were elevated above his hips), lean but muscular (his thin, form-fitting shirt gave that much away), and possibly part black or Latino (the lighting and dancers obscuring the clear view made racial profiling difficult).

“You know why they call him the Sandman, right?” Manny told Clement this every time he spoke of his “good friend” the Sandman. “...Because he puts people to sleep.”

They drank for a couple minutes, ordered another round from the bartender (Clement placed a hundred on the bar to settle his tab and leave more than a one hundred percent tip) and made their way across the dance floor – Manny a pinball in a machine and Clement a stream of water flowing between and around small crowds of girls dancing and boys barely swaying while attempting to look uninterested in general. The Sandman looked up as they approached and waved Manny into his one-man party.

Manny lightly took hold of Clement’s elbow to escort him inside the ropes. Clement glanced down at Manny’s hand and mentally counted a fast ten. The

bass-intense music was no less punishing in the lounge but Manny attempted an introduction of aliases. “Alex, this is that guy I told you about: Jack,” Manny said to the Sandman from a respectful distance.

“Jack,” Manny leaned in too close to Clement’s ear, “just call him ‘Alex.’” He then added unnecessarily: “It’s not his real name.”

The Sandman inclined his head slightly while eyeing Clement and then motioned for the two of them to join him. The Sandman was almost certainly half black, his forearms were a vascular roadmap, and his face was furrowed in an intimidating expression honed in a mirror. Manny sat in the not-quite-middle of the couch and Clement sat crowded against the armrest to Manny’s left.

Conversation was impossible so they drank with little talk. Clement could feel the Sandman’s frequent glances. Although Clement had finished looking the Sandman over before he sat down, Jack wouldn’t have been, so Clement occasionally mocked a surreptitious gaze in the Sandman’s direction, timing a few of them with the Sandman’s own looks at him so Clement could nervously look away and pretend to be more interested in watching a gyrating dancer’s ass than in sizing up the infamous Sandman.

They drank. Clement matched the Sandman’s pace, as did Manny. The bartender spied the note Clement wrote on the hundred – JUST COKE – and complied. After several rounds the Sandman informed Manny and Clement that they were coming back to his house.

* * * *

The Sandman told Manny to chauffeur Jack, and to follow him. The Sandman appeared to be trying to lose them on the way to his house, but even an over-the-

limit Manny could tail the white Monte Carlo with twenty-two inch rims.

Eventually the Sandman pulled into a driveway and Manny parked on the street in front of a ranch house. The Sandman was a resident of a well-kempt, fifty-year-old neighborhood. A tricycle would sit abandoned until the next morning in a neighbor's lawn near the front step. Porch lights were on but lamps inside homes were not. A couple second story windows on the block emitted a flickering blue hue.

The Sandman unlocked a dead bolt and then the knob lock and waved his visitors inside. Clement forced himself to lightly stumble over the threshold and then he wiped his feet on the mat inside the front hallway. The Sandman stepped through the door and something started beeping. Manny didn't react, but Clement swiveled his head in all directions, looking everywhere except from where he heard the sound emanating. The Sandman smiled as he entered a code on the alarm keypad attached to the wall above the light switches for the front porch and hallway.

"Relax," the Sandman said. "I had a guy who owed me for a job install a metal detector in the front door." The door jamb was obviously too deep and the metal detector was poorly hidden. The Sandman pulled a Glock 17 from his waistband to prove metal had been detected.

"Let's go in the kitchen," he said stuffing the Glock back in his pants.

The Sandman grabbed three beers from a beer-, Gatorade- and condiment-filled refrigerator. The Sandman sat at the kitchen table with his back to a peninsula counter, Manny's back was to a window, and Clement, across from the Sandman, had the rest of the house behind him.

The inside of the Sandman's home was fairly run-down. The linoleum floor in the kitchen was worn and

faded: once vibrant oranges and yellows had become an incestuously related dingy tan. The walls had scuff marks, dings, and nails with nothing hanging on them. The Sandman was not the ideal neighbor.

After another couple minutes of silence during which Clement looked anywhere except at the Sandman and picked at his bottle's label, the Sandman said, "Ask away, man. I know you want to."

Manny was enjoying Jack's uncharacteristic timidity. Clement had portrayed a bored, confidant, even mysterious figure to hook Manny's desire to impress.

"Manny said... uh, he said that you put people to sleep?"

The Sandman laughed too boisterously. "The name and the, you know, the catchphrase: they get me noticed by people who require my services. People talk, Jack, you know what I'm sayin'? They spread my name around like the clap."

"Where did you learn to... you know?"

"The military. 'Nuff said."

The Sandman was too stupid for SF. Clement deduced that the Army, possibly the Army Reserve was where the Sandman learned just enough to make a little career out of murdering for money.

"What do you charge?"

"Why, you got somebody you want offed?"

Clement's eyes darted to Manny. The Sandman saw it, took it for an unconscious reflex and laughed again. "Shit! I'll kill Manny for free." The Sandman smacked Manny on the shoulder, upended his bottle and then braced his palms on the table as a precursor to pushing himself to his feet. Clement innocently put a hand up and went to grab three more beers from the refrigerator.

"Look people in the eye," the Sandman advised. "The eyes tell you everything. When I take a job, I look

my client in the eye. When I kill someone, I look that mu'fucker in the eye first. When I meet someone like yourself, someone who wants to know about what I do because he ain't never got closer to nothing like it before, I look you in the eye.

"I already know everything I need to know about you."

"Like what?" Clement asked. He had not expected a statement like that.

"I can see you're scared. You're not scared of my Glock I showed you... you're scared of me. Manny told me you were cold. But you're not. You're trying to hide that you're scared of the things I can do.

"And you know what? You should be. It's okay. It's normal to be. Because I do bad things. I kill people I've never met, people I've never heard about, people I don't care about one way or the other. That's not what my momma had in mind for me when she raised me. That's not what my teachers thought I'd do when they taught me. That's not even what the Army had in mind when they trained me to fuckin' kill!

"...But I kill people and I do it good. And I get paid good for it. Fifteen g's."

Manny had certainly heard the speech in one form or another before, but his reactions were telegraphed to look shocked or possibly aroused to placate the Sandman's ego. Clement maintained a look of blank awe, which he found was surprisingly close to his actual reaction of unmoved neutrality. The Sandman's insight about Jack merely turned out to be an excuse to talk about himself – and Clement was mildly disappointed. The Sandman was worked up, though. His breathing was heavy, but he was enjoying talking shop and impressing and scaring some random dude.

“You got anymore questions?” This statement had thin layers of threat running through a genuine desire to field more queries and dazzle his guests.

Clement sipped at his beer. While doing so he tensed his arm muscles, forcing his hand to shake. A heavy minute passed before Clement asked, “Were you afraid when you killed for the first time?”

The Sandman picked at some crust that accumulated near his left eye’s inner tear duct. “I remember my first fuck real good. I don’t remember much about my first kill though. I don’t remember how many times I shot her and I don’t even remember what kind of gun I used, but I do remember how I felt, and it wasn’t scared. It was more like... I was controlling myself from outside my body. Now, I’m right there when I do it. I get excited about it. That’s closer to feeling scared than I was when I killed that first time.”

Clement interlaced his fingers and rested his hands on the table in front of him like an attentive grade school student. “Did you ever read *The Red Badge of Courage*?” he asked.

“I’m not really much of a reader,” the Sandman admitted with relish.

Clement smiled, no longer touching the bottle or its label. The Sandman did not take notice of any change, but Manny felt uneasy. “What about *Saving Private Ryan*? Have you seen that?”

“Oh, shit, yeah. That’s a bad ass movie. No brothers though, but *Miracle at St. Anna* wasn’t really action-packed, you know what I’m sayin’?”

“Remember the character of Upham?”

“The radio guy?”

“No, he was the translator.”

After a couple seconds of recall the Sandman slapped the table. “Oh! Shit, yeah. That little chicken shit mu’fucker!”

“Yes, that’s the one.”

“I would have shot him.”

“There’s a natural human reaction to war a fairly large percentage of soldiers experience. The first time a man is faced with a battle situation, he often freezes or runs. The military spends a lot of time and money trying to bypass those kinds of reactions to make a soldier’s reaction to his first battle one of aggression.

“Upham froze in the stairwell when his Jewish friend and that German were in that vicious hand-to-hand fight. Upham could hear his friend yelling for help, but he was frozen with fear, even though we all saw he could have walked in there and hit the German on the back of the head with his rifle’s stock. Instead he cowered and cried in the hallway as the German slowly sunk his bayonet into the Jew’s chest. Then the German came out into the hallway. Upham put his hands up from his cowering position and the German walked right past him; he didn’t even gauge Upham as a threat.”

“Pussy,” the Sandman interjected.

“Don’t interrupt,” Clement said coldly. The Sandman reflexively slumped down a little in his seat. Manny’s brain told him that something was different, like a wind shift forewarning the arrival of a swift-moving cold front.

“Later, when the Germans are being beaten and are surrendering, Upham finally stops cowering and a few Germans surrender to him. Upham stopped one of those surrendering Germans from being executed earlier in the film. Upham shot him. A lot of people saw *that* as another cowardly act, but I never did. I took it as Upham finally getting into the spirit of war, you understand? First he froze, as people tend to do. Once he got accustomed to the chaos and insanity of war, he became a true soldier.

“I know I was so scared I was frozen in fear for a minute when I killed for the first time.”

The kitchen table didn't have legs. It only had a single metal column that attached to the table top and the x-shaped feet. Clement's foot rested next to it. After what he told them sunk into the Sandman's head, as betrayed by his eyes, Clement forcefully pushed the table with his foot and arms to the right, cracking two of Manny's ribs and painfully pinning him, still seated in his chair, between the windowed wall and table. This burst of action also removed the obstacle between Clement and the Sandman.

Clement stepped forward with his left foot so he stood in the space the table had occupied less than a moment before. He continued applying pressure to the edge of the table with his hip so Manny could not escape. Clement pulled a ceramic diver's knife from a thin sheath nestled in the small of his back and sliced through the Sandman's left jugular with a single swipe of the blade. The Sandman, slow to react due to alcohol, shock and a sincere lack of skill, did not try to defend against the knife and only put his hand up after his pumping blood coated the wall, the curtains, the window and Manny.

Clement watched for a few spurts. He easily pushed the Sandman back into his seat when he futilely tried to stand. "That metal detector in the door is a pretty good idea. I might have to get one of those at my house," Clement said to the fading Sandman. He stabbed the Sandman in the other side of his neck and turned the blade like a key.

Sandman, real name Edward Jones, died gurgling, in fading pain, moments later.

Manny whimpered and continued trying to dislodge himself.

"Now in *The Red Badge of Courage* the main character, Henry, runs away from his first real battle," Clement told Manny, turning his attention from the Sandman. "He feels ashamed and hides from his

regiment. However, he goes on to fight in the next battle and does quite well.

“...You were going to run just now.”

“No! No, I swear to God. Please don’t kill me.” Manny’s pleas broke down into sobs which broke down into pain-laced coughing.

“I suppose I was only paid to kill the Sandman. Nobody cared enough to pay me to kill you.”

A sliver of hope flickered in Manny’s eyes. “How do I know if I let you go you won’t come back ready for the chaos and insanity of war?”

“I swear you’ll never see me again. Please, just let me go.”

Clement considered his options out loud: “On the one hand, I could use a ride back to my car. I’m not real familiar with this town and I noticed you don’t have GPS in your car. But on the other hand... I just don’t like you. Everything about you makes me want to kill you more.”

“Please, *God!*”

“And your begging is starting to get to me.”

“I’ll do anything!”

Clement set the knife on the table and placed his palms on either side of it. As he thought through what to do with Manny, he dug the balls of his feet into the floor and pushed against the table’s edge. Another rib snapped. “Okay! I’ve decided. I am going to kill you, but I’ll do it quickly. Then I’ll play in your blood for a little while and then I’ll drive your car back to the bar to get my car and then I’ll go home.”

The ceramic blade was very sharp so Manny didn’t feel very much and then Manny didn’t feel anything at all.

* * * * *

Clement found the club again after a few wrong turns and pulled Manny's Neon into the parking lot. He killed the lights and engine and got out of the cabin. As he walked away from the car he tossed the keys over his shoulder; they hit the hood, slid down its length and bounced off the bumper to the crumbling asphalt lot.

The bartender left the club by the service entrance at the back as Clement neared his rental. In her right fist she clenched her key ring with two keys sticking out between her fingers. Clement liked this.

He changed his course to intercept her. She was simultaneously excited and frightened to finally see him alone, in the dark. One of the bouncers banged the service door open. "Everything okay?"

Clement didn't look at the bouncer; he knew even his sidelong glance could compel violence. The bartender looked back at the bouncer and said with more than a touch of bitchiness, "I'm fine. *Night.*"

The bouncer threw his large hands up in the air and slammed the door shut.

She considered thanking him for the large tip, but decided against it. She neither wanted to bring up money nor find out what his note meant – if it even was his note. She recalled hearing that some obscene percentage of the hundred dollar bills in circulation had traces of cocaine on them. That note could have been written years ago, states away.

He considered asking her if she could see any blood on his hands in the low light. He washed up before he left Edward Jones' house, but tonight he saw red everywhere. Because she most certainly would ask, his internal conversation expanded, and he decided he would tell her that he had been dropped off by a friend who hit a deer with his car.

Instead neither spoke for some time. They stood closer than strangers would stand, farther apart than lovers would.

Finally Clement broke the silence: “I won’t be able to listen to you sing anymore.”

“Why is that?”

“I’ve been in town on business and tonight, or rather today, was my last day.”

“That’s too bad. You were a – I liked seeing you out there.” She sighed. “So, you’re leaving, when, tomorrow?”

“I’m not really on a clock. I simply leave town when my job is done.”

“What about coffee?”

“Coffee?”

“Yeah, buy me a cup of coffee.”

Clement considered something. “I know a place. Follow me?”

She nodded and walked to her car smiling sheepishly. Clement got in his rental. The rearview mirror was tilted so he couldn’t see himself. He adjusted the knife resting against the small of his back.

“Red Badge” was first published in 2011 by May December Publications in the anthology *Say Goodnight to the Bad Guy*, edited by TW Brown.