

The drummer boy

Autor(en): **Anthony, Alan**

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as though of its own will, across the firmness of his leg, grasping the firm flesh beneath the whiteness of his trousers.

«Wait.» He whispered, his own breath as short and fierce now as my own. His hands fumbled awkwardly with the cloth.

There were no other cars on the road. I drew the car to the side, bringing it to a stop. Beside me, he lay against the door, his body straining eagerly toward me. I stared fixedly at him, suddenly unable to move my frozen hands.

«Hey, what's the matter?» He asked, his voice anxious. He reached for my hand, and as he did so, I suddenly regained my senses. My hand avoided his, fumbling on the seat beside me, for the gun. He rose in the seat, moving toward me, and at the same moment, I fired.

He stopped, in mid-air it seemed, and for a moment he stared down at me with the horror of realization; then, like a deflated balloon, he crumpled and fell backward against the door.

I reached beyond him, opening the door, and he fell from the car, rolling into the ditch. Slamming the door, I put the car into gear and started off again, leaving him quickly behind. This time I was done with him, it was over. At least, I thought so.

That was the second time. How many times have I seen him since? In what guises? Under what names? How many times have I killed him? I no longer remember. Each time I think that it is finished, free of him—but he is clever. Always, at some time when I least expect it, he comes again. Once, to be certain, I used a knife, and . . . but it doesn't matter; for here he is—and in a dinner jacket, this time.

Ah, he has seen my glance—he smiles again, and nods. And I nod back. I wonder—what shall his name be this time . . . and . . . what should mine be?

The Drummer Boy

By Alan Anthony

I must hear a drum. I must find a bar with a drummer. I'll go there and sit in a darkened corner and sip Bourbon and water while I listen to the drums and think of Mark. I've never heard Mark play his drums. In fact, I've never paid much attention to drums before. But Mark is a drummer, and drums have become synonymous with him. I'll probably never see Mark again. I'll probably never hear him play his drums. So I'll have to imagine him beating those in the bar.

Right now, the memory of Mark is dominating my days. I know I must forget him, and in a little while I shall. At least, soon the memory of him won't hurt. But before I dull my senses to him I must hear those drums. I must feel close to him once more, and this is the only way I know to do it. I met Mark a week ago. He stopped for me in his car in Hollywood when I was hitch-hiking home to the beach from a play. We hadn't gone very far into conversation when we reached Sunset Strip,

and the brilliant night view of lower Los Angeles came into sight. The lights below were colorful, but they were lightly veiled by a dusky hue, which gave the sight the quality of an Old Master painting.

«That view is like a treasure chest of jewels,» I said.

«Or like a big birthday cake,» he added. «It is even more spectacular from the hills above the Strip,» he continued. «From there you can see all the way to the beach, where the lights trail into the ocean.»

«That must really be wonderful. I've never been up in those hills,» I told him.

«I live up there,» he said. «I have the view from my terrace. If you're in no hurry you can come up and see it.»

«All right. I'm in no hurry,» I replied.

We approached the middle of the Strip, and turned off onto a road winding high into the Hollywood Hills. At what seemed to be the top we stopped, and entered his ultra modern apartment. The walls and ceiling were of light polished oak, and the ceiling slanted toward the front where there was a sliding glass door opening onto the terrace. I immediately walked toward the door, and Mark slid it back and we went outside. There was the sight! There was Los Angeles in all her majesty—a valley full of gleaming jewels spread on a carpet of black velvet. The sight was overpowering. Mark didn't say very much until, «It's cold out here,» and we went inside.

«Would you like a drink?» he asked, walking toward a large red liquor cabinet.

«Okay.» — «What do you want?» — «Oh, anything.» — He looked at me askingly. — «Do you have Bourbon?» — He nodded. — «Bourbon is all right.» — «Bourbon and water?» — «That's okay.»

He mixed the drink, going behind a screen to get some ice cubes, and handed it to me on the couch where I was sitting.

«Do you want to take off your coat?» he asked.

«Might as well,» I said, and unbuttoned my shabby, green, once elegant jacket. He helped me off with it.

I sipped the drink. I lit a cigarette and offered him one, but he refused. He wasn't drinking either. «I'm way ahead of you,» he said. «I've already had four martinis tonight.»

I noticed a set of drums in the corner. I went over to them and picked up the sticks and rapped on the large drum. «Do you play the drums?» I asked.

«Don't hit it so hard. There are people next door.»

«I'm sorry.»

«Yes, I'm a drummer. Do you play an instrument?»

«No. I paint. I've been doing some sketches of the shoreline at Palos Verdes lately. Where do you drum?»

«For NBC. I play in an orchestra for several television programs.»

«My name is Bruce Morgan,» I said, laying the sticks down. «What's yours?» — «Mark.» — «Mark what?» — «Mark Antonini.» — «That

sounds Italian.» — «It is.» — «Are you Italian?» — «My parents were. Why?» He seemed upset that I was asking the question.

«There's no reason. I have nothing against Italians.»

«Well, what kind of name is Morgan?» he asked, somewhat defensively.

«English. You have an artistic name,» I added. — «How old are you?» I asked. — «How old do you think?» — »Twenty-five.» — «I'm twenty-six. How old are you?» — «Twenty.» — Are you a student, Bruce?» — «Yes, I got to college in Westwood.»

We were strangers, knowing so very little about each other. But slowly, as we talked, the strangeness vanished. A circle enclosed us, and we were the only persons in the circle. We became one unit of life. But then the circle dissolved, and we moved back into the population of the world. We became two separate entities, and then strangers again.

«I'm tired,» he said. «I could go to sleep right now.»

«So could I,» I replied.

«I wish we both could, but there are people coming here in the morning, and it would take explaining if they found you here.»

«So you're going to throw me out,» I said a tone half in fun, half in earnest. I didn't know what to think.

«No, I'm not throwing you out,» he said seriously. «I'll drive you down to the light at La Cienega and you can get a ride from there.»

«It's past two o'clock. I'll never get a ride at this hour,» I said. «Beyond Beverly Hills there aren't even any cars on the road.»

«Well, if you can't get a ride I suppose I'll have to drive you home. I wouldn't want you to walk.» He sounded perturbed.

Here we stood—strangers again. Gone was the closeness of the circle.

«Will you give me some Bourbon?» I asked.

«Sure.» He sounded as though he was more than glad to give me the drink.

I went to the glass door to take a last look at the dazzling view. I slid back the door and walked onto the terrace. I noticed the full moon. I felt a close attachment to it, closer now than I felt to Mark. That moon had shone upon the circle, and it hadn't changed. Suddenly I found Mark standing quietly behind me, holding my jacket. I turned around and went inside, and he closed the door.

«We have better start if we are going to travel,» he said, handing me my jacket. «Your drink is on the table,» he added in a soft tone.

I gulped down the drink in two swallows while he stood at the door, and then we left. The drive down the hill was quiet. Finally he said, «Why did you come all the way to California to go to college?»

«Because I wanted to leave the Midwest, and this is as far as I could go,» I told him.

We pased La Cienega, and he didn't mention my getting out and trying to get a ride.

«You'll be back home in forty minutes,» I told him. «Beside, we'll have time to talk to each other. Or don't you want to talk?»

He replied with a small laugh.

I was trying to make him want to drive me home. It is ten miles to the beach from Sunset Strip, but the open, deserted road didn't frighten me. What frightened me was that we two had shut ourselves from the world in a unit, and he was now taking this detached attitude.

I tried to be light and engage him in conversation, but he didn't seem to want to be engaged, so I stopped. He wasn't angry or sullen, but he didn't venture any comments of his own.

So there was silence.

«You won't be able to guess how long it took me to drive this car to Boston last month?» he broke the silence. He was aware of the loud silence and was making an effort to be amiable.

He drove the car there in four days.

He loosened up and we kept a half-friendly, half-formal conversation rolling. Then he casually mentioned a person he was «close to,» and I immediately knew the score: why he was acting like he was; why he was keeping a fence between us.

«What would the person say if he knew you were with me tonight?» I asked.

«I think he would be upset. But I don't feel guilty. He is peculiar in his own way.»

I felt the greatest jealousy for that «close» person than I have ever felt for anyone, I think. And I admired Mark for his fashion of loyalty. But deep and gnawing was the hollowness inside of me!

We arrived at the beach and stopped in front of my rooming house.

«I'm glad I met you,» I said.

«So am I,» he replied.

I held out my hand and he clasped it.

«You know where I live if you ever want to find me,» I said.

«I'll look for you here,» he said, absentmindedly.

«Goodbye, Mark.» I shut the car door. I don't recall his saying good-bye, but I'm sure he did.

He drove away and I went to my room. That parting was our final crossroads, I'm sure. He will return to the «close» one, and perhaps even make up to him in some way for his meeting with me. He will have to make up if he wants to ease his guilt. He must feel a little guilty, because he did leave a portion of himself with me. Else why would I be tormented so?

But this torment will end when I go to hear the drummer. I'll sip the Bourbon and close my eyes, and allow Mark's presence to come near me one more time. As the beating of the drums marches through the room, I'll hear him saying the view of the city looks like a birthday cake. I'll feel the beauty of the moonlit night as we stood on the terrace. I'll see the profile of his fine, classic face against the night as he drove me home. With the rhythm of the drums I'll remember and feel the music and rhythm of our meeting.

Then when the drummer stops, I'll leave forever my darkened corner, and Mark.

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