



Project Tempest - Last Call

Produced during ongoing creation of a new interactive IP.

Creative goals: establish a core emotional journey of memory and connection, leading into a horror space. Focus on human voice; this will be part of an audio piece.

My role: creative direction and writing.

Image credit: Dominik Zdenković.

Last Call

On the night of her hundredth birthday, with the central struggle of her life finally resolved, she took a last glorious walk down Cuba Street.

It was Wednesday evening in Wellington, New Zealand, and the place was hopping. Ombra and El Matador and Havana were a riot of noise and food aromas. Logan Brown's high oak doors sheltered the wealthy crowd. The Lighthouse Cinema was a hubbub. Clubs and bars and head shops and legalized brothels injected themselves straight into the city arteries.

She remembered when it was all tea rooms and english-style pubs, sandwiches and warm beer as far as the mind could smell. Nothing open after ten, ever. The interesting places, the bohemian haunts and lesbian clubs and speakeasies, had been tucked away in hidden corners like dirty underwear.

Now Cuba Street was tits out, balls out, and proud of it. A group of young people - were they teenagers? Twenties? Thirties? - sauntered past. She saw the lines of energy and sex and excitement between them: knew that the red-haired one fancied the tall one, but he was trying not to show his feelings for the curly-haired one, who was swinging off the arm of the butch one, who was going to toy with her like a cat.

They were past in a flash, chatting with that luscious energy that the young don't even know they have and the old miss so dearly. When you've made it through a century you can read people like signal flares. You can envy them too, like seeing someone read your favorite book for the first time.

All life is a love story, someone had once said. It just depends what and how you love. Maybe it had been her. That sounded like the type of thing she'd have said, once.

The wind was bitterly cold. She felt like paper. She hadn't been out at night in a long, long time. Her legs were doing all right but they could spring treachery on you at any time. She feared the indignity of falling, of having these gorgeous lively creatures around her show pity and concern. But her destination wasn't far, and she hoped to make it across the finish line.

The telegram had arrived that morning from the Queen:

I am so pleased to know that you are celebrating your one hundredth birthday. I send my congratulations and best wishes to you on such a special occasion.

She didn't know how this had happened. She hadn't applied for anything. It must be that Queens, like bumblebees, simply knew certain things.

Someone was staring at her. A girl in an outrageous rainbow-black outfit that she loved on sight.

I like your scarf, the girl said. Fooking styley.

It was a Laurence Duvee original that the man himself had given her. She smiled and moved on. A few more steps - she nearly fell but regained herself - and she reached Floriditas, her favorite restaurant.

She remembered an earthen cave, long ago. Meeting the love of her life.

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Georgia was working floor at Floriditas when the most ah-mazing old lady tottered in. She had blonde curly hair that must have been a wig, and was rocking some very retro-tastic clothes including a multicolored scarf thingie. She spoke in a whisper but obviously wanted a seat. Beaming charitably, Georgia led her to one of the booths on the left near the door.

Georgia didn't know it, but this was a customer she'd remember forever.

There was chatter through the restaurant - people checking their phones - something about a fire up on Mount Victoria. One of the houses burning.

Hi, darling, what can I get you? she asked the old woman. God she was ancient. And so tiny. It was a miracle she was able to get out at all. Her clothes were fab, though, and her lipstick and makeup immaculate. Almost like old-time cinema. Good on her, Georgia thought. Classic never goes out of style.

The old woman spoke but nothing came out. Frustrated, she tried again. Georgia leant over to hear better and an awful wave hit her. The old lady smelt horrible. An odour like cheap perfume gone wrong. It contrasted rudely with the rest of her elegance. For a moment Georgia felt as though something were crawling inside her nostrils and it scared her. She recoiled, shook her head, stopped herself sneezing.

A Four-Lane Topper, the old woman managed.

Four-Lane Topper? That's a drink? Georgia said. The woman nodded.

I'll be honest with you, I don't know that one, Georgia said. But we've got Manu on the bar, he's fantastic. I'll give it to him as a challenge.

The old woman smiled and nodded. Yes, there was definitely something wrong there, and now Georgia just wanted to escape.

Manu, being both a relentless flirt and a booze historian, knew the drink.

That's a classic, he said. From the thirties. Shitload of vermouth. I'll look it up and make one.

He winked. Georgia knew she was going to sleep with him again, she just wasn't sure how hard to make him work for it.

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The drink arrived. She nodded thanks. Took out her purse to pay but the beautiful young waitress - she really was a stunner, so tall and elegant, though she clearly had a weakness for rough flirts like the bartender - waved her off.

Not every night we get someone as magnificent as you in here, the girl said. Enjoy.

She nodded thanks, trying not to cry. It had been decades since anyone bought her a drink.

She remembered that cave again. How everything had shifted, and set her life on such an unexpected course. A hundred years. There'd been a time when she couldn't imagine being forty.

She took a single sip. Vermouth, perfect on her tongue. The bartender might be a scoundrel but he knew his stuff. Scoundrels often did.

She sat back and enjoyed the scene. Music in the air, a light jazz. Other people, so close and yet so far away. The world changed so much and never changed.

She wished, not for the first time, that she'd enjoyed more of it. If there was one bit of advice she had for all these glorious creatures, it would be to make the most of everything. To get out of bed with the sunrise each day and pursue every last flavor morsel the world had to offer. Time is not money: it doesn't reward a sensible savings plan.

She could feel, rather than see, the fire up on the hill that she'd left. The house in flames, doors locked. The regrets she had left there, the unadmitted secrets.

I send my congratulations, the Queen had said. Well right back at you, Lizzie. Good luck with that ridiculous family of yours.

It was time. Here, now, in this moment, it was time.

She took a napkin - napkins had changed so much, she realized, in their own way they were like cars or planes or dresses - and fished in her purse for her Waterman pen. Every movement felt stronger to her now. When marathon racers hit the last mile, she remembered hearing once, they got an unexpected burst of speed from their drained bodies.

She wrote on the napkin. A single thing. Much less than the Queen had needed.

She thought of the relationship she had left behind in the house up on the hill, and a single tear trickled out of her left eyelid. It wasn't a tear of sorrow. Not exactly. There were dark, black things in this world and beyond it. Part of the price of living here.

She folded the napkin, reached across - ooof it was such a distance - and dropped it on the table in the next booth over. Well out of the way.

She saw the waitress watching her.

She reached into her purse again. Brought out the matchbook. Took her drink and raised it high, above her neck, above her mouth, above her head, and tipped it, pouring it through her hair where it mixed with the paraffin she'd doused herself in earlier.

The waitress stared - couldn't believe it -

She struck a match. It didn't catch. One - two - a last burst of energy came through and the match caught -

The girl was moving towards her fast, yelling something unimaginably distant -

She put the match in her hair. It caught immediately. As the warmth spread over her on that final night in Wellington she caught a tiny glimpse of a rainbow and thought, very simply, bugger the niceties. This finish line is mine.

Colin Rowsell

colin@manonfire.org