



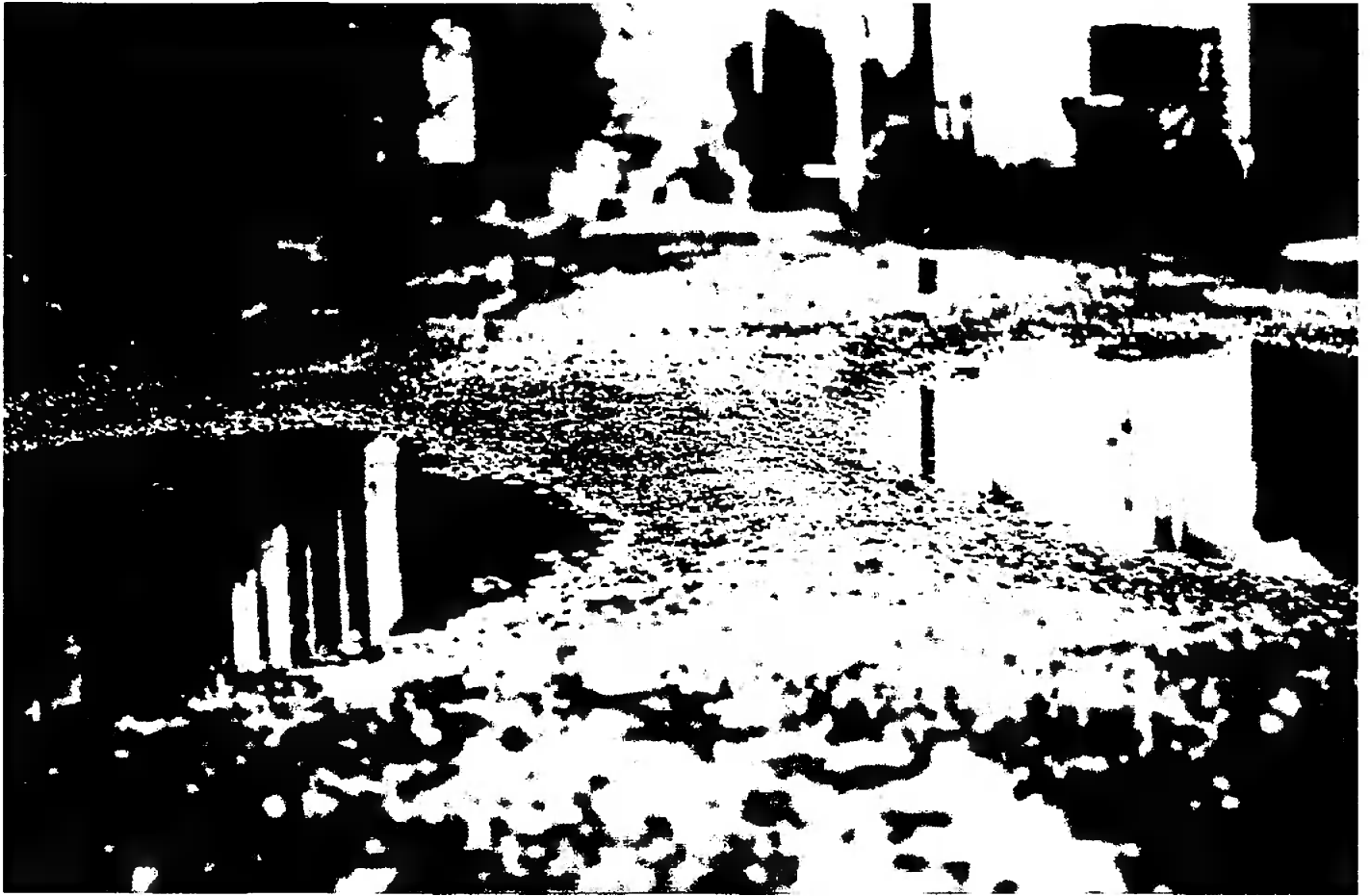
# STORGY<sup>®</sup>

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## **FICTION: Alone in Hells Kitchen by Norbert Kovacs**





In the pub, the two friends sat at a table beside the window. The passers-by on Broadway could have come right by them and seen every detail of how they ate. Brian, the heavier friend, had chosen that they sit there though his companion Jason had hoped for a table in the less occupied room upstairs. Between large bites from his sandwich, Brian was telling Jason about a walk he had taken earlier that week with their friends, Alan, Rachel, and Marie. Brian was a large, kind, young man with thick brown, bushy hair. His encouraging voice made people enjoy his company. Jason listened politely to him while pecking at his food. Jason was thin with short, blonde hair, a beige-tone face, and thin lips. When talking with anyone, he listened much more than he spoke. As he listened to his friend at the table, he imagined he should pay more attention to Brian. Brian, he considered, was a respectable and friendly guy after all. Jason had come tonight dressed with that in mind, his grey

and red turtleneck sweater, formal white shirt, and khaki pants a favorite style of Brian's. Jason knew if he had come alone that he would have dressed looser.

"We went Broadway from Columbus Circle to 50<sup>th</sup> Street then through Rockefeller Center," Brian told him over his plate. "We saw all those skyscrapers and statues. A hundred other college folk were out also. Too bad you didn't join us."

"I wish I could have, but I had to study." Jason did not want to tell Brian that he had stayed in his room to write. Jason wrote in his journal whenever he fell into a sad mood. His long pages of that day, earnest and somber, were not a theme that would interest his companion he thought.

"Well, our group enjoyed the walk. Made for a real nice time."

"Good."

"Really, you should have been there for the shops. We went to this toy place where Alan pretended this plush bear said these ridiculous things. 'Pinch me, squeeze me.'" Brian laughed, scrunching his nose. "It was so funny."

Jason smiled. He hoped to make his friend happy.

"Then we went down Broadway looking into windows in some other places. At this store that sells shirts, Rachel got one with a crazy looking cat. Alan took a photo of her wearing it and put it on Facebook."

"I'll have to check it out."

“Wait, I almost forgot: Alan told us about this cool vinyl record in the window at this music seller. The cover showed that artist, Lyle Abrams, in a boat on a blue lake. Alan said Abrams picked that cover because his family came from a town full of blue lakes. He loved the sunsets on the water. Alan knows strange things like that about music.”

“Interesting kind of fact.”

“You don’t sound enthusiastic over it.”

“No, I am.” Jason raised his lips as if he had meant to smile.

Brian studied him. “You know, I’ve wondered why you stay so quiet with us. There isn’t something troubling you?”

“No.”

“You seem uptight with us, though.”

“I’m more quiet than most people. That’s all.”

“You’re very quiet. We wish you talked more. You should feel okay among us.”

“I am okay with you and the others. Who said I dislike anyone?” Jason thought if he chose to be with Brian and his friends that meant he had an interest in them.

“If you are so interested, you could come with our group to more places.”

“I’ll try. I’ll try and go.”

“Good... Here, did I tell you? Jenny Christian might join us when we visit the High Line.”

Jason remembered meeting Jenny with Brian and the group last month at a café near his dorm. Jason had thought her good looking with her dark hair and slim figure, attractive with her smile and happy voice. When Jenny sat down at their table, Jason listened as she went into her role leading the university’s pep club, the dances she went to with her sorority; she seemed a popular person on campus. Jason had felt, all the same, that he was not right for someone like her. He was too reserved, stuck in reflection, Jenny too open, easy natured.

“We met her in Rockefeller Center today,” Brian said. “Marie and Jenny kept talking. Marie is helping with a fundraiser of Jenny’s. Jenny told her she would go to the dinner Marie’s club is holding. ‘I’d love to meet your friends,’ she said like she was real excited. When we made to leave, she asked to come with us the next time we’re out. Don’t you think it’d be good? I remember how you talked with Jenny at the café.”

“I didn’t that much.”

“Perhaps more than you admit.” Brian had stretched to make the claim. Jason’s face lost some of its color but he kept attending to his companion.

“I bet you could get to like Jenny,” Brian continued. “She has everything a guy wants. She’s good looking, friendly. And what makes her really right for you is that she’s patient with less outgoing guys. Marie told me.”

Jason drew flat the line of his mouth. He did not appreciate being told he needed patience. He knew he was more reserved than the rest of their group, but he did not believe it a problem.

“I think she’s the girl for you.” Brian said, studying him.

“I don’t know. I can’t be everything with all people. I might not be what she really wants.”

“You should give Jenny a chance. You might find her worthwhile. If you try with her, you might become different.”

Jason lifted his eyes. “Different?”

“You’d be more open, live a little.” Brian made the idea sound a proper goal for him. Brian said it with a smug expression that upset Jason. Jason felt that he should not pretend he liked Jenny to please anyone. He did not welcome the idea Brian hoped to change him. Did Brian like him really if he wished that he “become different”? Was he to change his style because Brian asked it outright? No, Jason decided for the first time. No, I shouldn’t.

“I’m sorry but I don’t think I’ll be good with Jenny.”

“Oh? Now why?”

Jason felt why he would not was none of Brian’s business. He simply did not feel he should. Brian should not press him over it either, he believed with a kind of certainty. He felt a new distaste over Brian and balked at the idea of staying with him. He said it then: “I can’t be with you or the rest of the group anymore.”

“What does that mean?”

Jason dug some money from his pocket and threw it on the table. “I think that covers the meal. I’m going.” He sped alone from the pub.

Jason walked Broadway toward Times Square. Thousands walked the streets about him. Shoppers moved past with their full bags, professionals marched by in expensive outfits. Friends chatting, leaning on each other's arm, gestured with their hands. Jason saw happiness and even self-importance in their movement. What is this supposed to be for me?, he thought. These people are excited over Broadway shows and sights, their busy lives. Brian made a deal of walking among them; he hoped I would also. But Brian, all of them, the people here, can any of them mean anything for me? With all these lights and sounds, all the empty flash? It has no depth. I don't feel real in this place. He walked ignoring the billboards, screens, and electronic bulletin boards that lit up Times Square.

Soon, Jason heard a person call out near him. He turned and saw a teenage girl waving towards the crowd. A second girl emerged and came towards her; near Jason, the two hugged. The girls were friends obviously; they had re-discovered each other in the crowd and were happy to be together. Jason remembered Brian and his friends and thought of his unease with them. He walked, aiming to forget the girls.

Jason tried not to notice the passers-by anymore. However, more than once, he saw things he could not avoid. By a theater, he strode past a young man and woman kissing, their mouths pressed passionately. The man had his arm about the woman's shoulder and leaned so that his face hid hers. Jason studied the pair and thought he did not even love Jenny.

As he neared 42<sup>nd</sup> Street, Jason discovered a college-aged woman take a picture of a billboard, a giant ad featuring a model beside the name of a mascara. Jason thought the billboard ordinary enough though it may have excited the young woman. The model in the ad was glamorous with a beautiful, light complexion and dark eyes. The college woman

might have considered the billboard a piece of art. But Jason studied the seductive look of the model, a tool to win money, and became more disaffected than earlier.

Jason turned at 42<sup>nd</sup> Street and went west. He walked by glassy skyscrapers that shone and towered over him and left the crowds of shoppers, theatergoers, and tourists. He came to lower, older buildings of brick and slate and fewer people. The light and glare of Times Square had died behind him. He had reached Hell's Kitchen, the Manhattan neighborhood whose streets he had learned by walking them at night these last few months. He stared down drab, dirty alleys lined with garbage cans. A few, dim lights showed in the small apartment buildings. The one or two cars that passed went silently. He felt loose and free but did not know where to go.

Jason drew near an old apartment building by 11<sup>th</sup> Avenue and stopped. Saxophone music came to him from an apartment overhead. He looked up and saw the man playing the music on the fire escape by the third story. He was about thirty with a shaved head and wore a white T-shirt and blue jeans. His eyes held shut tightly as he concentrated on his performance. Jason stopped on the dark sidewalk and listened. The man's music came low and deep; it sounded a great struggle to perform. The man halted, pausing often, before he made his instrument give forth his note. After several blue chords, he delivered a long, sharp wail on his saxophone that stabbed far into the night. The sound was empty, sad, and forlorn right until it faded.

Jason thought it strange to hear the soft, fine, next part of the music. The wail had been full of pain; the new line of music seemed to rise, to build toward something. The man made the saxophone go fluid and hardly paused to stop. His music became smooth, the lines of it lengthening. Once, the man hedged as he came to a new part in the piece before



letting the music flow cool and light. Yes, Jason thought, listening, he was unsure what to do. Just like I am.

The musician next played several hitting, blue toned chords. He held each of these back cautiously before letting them burst in the air. He ended them on an almost resentful blast of the saxophone. The man's performance quieted; his music flowed and stopped in packets, even and composed. After a minute of playing so, the man delivered a long, stream of lonesome sound that seemed to stretch forever. In its steady, cool chords, the faithfully kept, somber mood, the music revealed a kind of pain that asked for a serious listener. Jason held still, listening.

As the piece continued, the somber emotion it implied was clear and Jason understood it all in its neat, even, and sad steps. The music made him feel how it was to be by yourself, he realized. He thought of quiet and solitude as he listened. A sad, low blue chord sounded from the saxophone and the music stopped. The musician had ended his piece and stood surveying the dark, quiet rooftops beyond him. Jason understood the man would not play again.

Jason continued quietly down the vacant street. What would it be like to turn what I've gone through into something like that man did with his music?, he asked himself. To make it beautiful, real. Jason knew he had faced lonesomeness many times. He had since he was fourteen. When he befriended people, he had doubted himself, sure he never really had managed right, however everyone else said. He struggled to understand his classmates, struck with their anxieties and desires to be liked and respected that seemed like but also not like his own. He considered he might make these challenges a theme for his writing. He was a good writer he knew. Perhaps I should write a poem, he thought. I might write a poem about how being alone is for me.

As he walked through Hell's Kitchen, Jason surveyed his dark, subdued surroundings. He studied the brick building at the street corner near him. The three-story structure housed either apartments or a business. Jason felt a pang as he considered the place. The night had stolen the color of its old, tired bricks. The windows had become black panes that gave no clue of the interior. The front door appeared a deep, faded green, its wood worn and cracked. In the alley by the building, shadows showed very dark and cold. This place and the night, Jason thought, they are names for loneliness. For the people who walk by without a partner. He considered if the scene might give him words for his poem.

Jason walked and studied the street. Its length had become free of traffic and midnight dark. The street light dropped an arid, electric white at the road's edges. The cool air was still, unbroken by the day's noise. The silence seemed to stretch past the block. A sense of emptiness awakened in Jason, the scene telling him of it in a thousand words. My idea of the world is as big as this place, he thought. He considered everything this might mean and fell quiet, intent on the flat, dark street. He walked and heard his footsteps on the pavement, sharp and clear.

Up the block, Jason slowed in his pace. A glossy-haired, young woman about his age was advancing down the sidewalk toward him. She had dressed for the night in a thick sweater, long jeans, and tall boots. Jason was suddenly self-conscious. He kept to the side of the walk, giving the woman the quickest of surveys. She saw that he looked and returned a face that told her dislike of it. The young woman passed finally on her way. Jason was left by himself and could have gone. However, he held still, studying the pavement long before he did. Yes, I can see it so clearly now, he thought. I am alone among people. I have seen a world that is often cold and broken. I have felt it so in every sense of failure. In some way I cannot escape, I am apart at bottom. But perhaps everyone else is too. We all may be however close we get to anyone. This self of

mine, its boundaries, its edges, is how I must come to understand this world, to know all it has, to celebrate it. In the end, I might never know anything truer.



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