Dillinger

Polly laughed and clasped her hands every time she came to the end of one of her bland anecdotes. Ana Cumpanas didn’t laugh but she knew that Polly was too far gone in love with the man to care about the truth of his violent life. Polly could get what she deserved and Ana Cumpanas would get what she deserved, a judicial pardon allowing her to tear up the deportation papers.

“John ate two ice-creams,” said Polly and here came that tinkly laugh again. “I could hardly finish mine, it was a sundae, with so much of this fudge sauce, which was delicious but my goodness”- she patted the stomach beneath a long blue skirt which looked like satin - “I was ready to burst, but he gobbled down two. I said ‘You’ll explode!’ and he said he was full for now but he would have a steak later when he was hungry again. And he did. Though I didn’t have dinner with him, he had dinner with some of his business associates.”

More laughter trailed the story and Ana nodded and thought about the business associates. She had seen them just once, by chance, when she was running to catch a train. They had been gathered outside an office with their hats all worn the same way, pulled low so that their eyes- especially John’s dark and intense but meaningless eyes- peered into daylight. She wouldn’t have thought of these men as business men. Not as thugs, perhaps, but somewhere between the two types and nearer to thugs because there was more of violence about them than business. John might well have seen her. She suspected that he was very observant, seeing without seeming to look, but he made no greeting and she was glad of that. She had felt nervous, even though she hadn’t thought about reporting him at that point. Since then she had met him a number of times, but always with Polly and he had been plausible as the man who shared ice-cream and adolescent love talk and stupid laughter with her.

“Shall we go?” said Polly, twirling around so that her skirt came up above her knees. She was pretty, that was all, not characterful. Whereas John was definitely characterful, even when he dallied with Polly, and possibly handsome in a way which was more masculine than Ana preferred.

“Fine,” said Ana.

“You look nice. That’s a striking dress.”

It was an orange dress with white panels down the sides. It didn’t compete with Polly’s expensive skirt, probably satin, probably bought by John. Ana’s dress was striking, but not pretty. It didn’t need to be pretty it just needed to be recognised, so ‘striking’ was right.

They walked out of the apartment block and down to North Lincoln Avenue. It was a warm evening with no breeze and Polly walked slowly, holding Ana lightly by the arm and pointing out stores and coffee houses and restaurants.

“That’s where he had the steak. He told me that was where he usually goes with his business associates. They have a backroom and the steaks are really good.” She looked at the menu in the window for a while. “That’s a good price for a steak. Not cheap at all, but a good price. Sometimes you can pay really *absurd* money for a steak.”

“Do you eat steak?” said Ana, in a manner which was lighter and kinder than she felt. “You usually only have such small portions.”

“I don’t Ana, no. I don’t often eat steak. But I tend to look at the prices on a menu. I know I shouldn’t really. But I do.”

They walked on, Polly smiling at everything and everyone, holding up her face to the late sun.

“Here we are,” said Ana, when they came to the Biograph Theatre.

“Oh look at it. I love it. Don’t you?”

“Yes,” said Ana.

And in fact she did. The wide lobby and the glazed terra-cotta and especially the grand staircase inside. She thought it was a wonderful place. She liked all movie theatres, more than any other buildings. This was where she had met Polly and it was what had brought them together. Their tastes in movies were not the same but they shared the joy of going into the big theatres which were so much more luxurious than anywhere else, even when the movie itself was no good. Tonight’s movie had Clark Gable in it, which was good for Polly, and it was about gangsters, which was good for Ana and probably for John too.

“There’s John!” said Polly.

She waved joyously, though he was only twenty yards away. He looked up and Ana felt sure that he had already noticed them really. He came across, with the grin which was wide but showed no teeth and which made his nostrils flare.

“Darling.” He kissed Polly on the cheek as she looked heavenwards. “Ana.” He smiled at her too. There was nothing malicious in the smile but she was nervous.

John bought tickets and they went into the lobby.

“Ice-cream?” said John.

Polly shrieked with laughter.

“What?”

“Oh I was telling Ana, just a while ago, about you and the sundaes. You remember? When you ate two.”

“Right. Well, I like sundaes. And if you’re hungry, why not have two?” He grinned again and now his small, straight teeth did show and it looked as if he was talking about something much more criminal than eating sundaes. “Why not? If you’ve got the money.”

He bought an expensive ice-cream for each of them without asking what they wanted. Ana would have been irritated but it was a trivial matter and anyway she liked what he had chosen. She was surprised that she felt so hungry and was actually looking forward to it.

The movie was a disappointment. Ana didn’t concentrate and she was aware of John and Polly, holding hands, whispering to each other occasionally. John was watching the film and looked as though he was enjoying it but his expression never changed. Whether the scene was meant to be emotive or tense or just filling in the story, he sat there, quite straight-backed and respectable, with the more or less agreeable smile. The music bounced between the walls of the theatre and the dialogue was loud even when the moments were tender. Ana tried to lose herself within the loudness and amongst the huge figures on the screen, but she couldn’t and she held the fingers of her left hand in a clump with her stronger right. She squeezed and felt like she was holding her breath until the movie ended.

They watched the credits and then John said:

“Okay. Let’s get out of here.”

The shock which Ana had been waiting for arrived and she was shaking when she stood up. She was glad that the other two were still so wrapped up in each other because she was sure that her body was betraying her fear in a dozen ways. It was still quite dark in the theatre so she hoped that she could hide the bright panic in her eyes.

Their progress to the exit and then back to the lobby felt so slow that it might have been choreographed. John walking in his confident but oddly graceful way, as much like a dancer as a boxer, Polly holding his arm so tightly that she was nearly hanging off of him. They went out of the theatre and Ana smoothed down her orange dress. Purvis would be looking out for the orange dress and she tried to make it stand out, though she knew that smoothing it down would make no difference at all. Polly had said it was striking. Thank God for that. Thank God it was a striking dress. Ana was breathing deeply now and she could feel the movement of her heart.

Purvis was standing across North Lincoln Avenue with at least a dozen other FBI men. Ana couldn’t believe that they looked so conspicuous, in their dark suits and their hats and some of them even in sunglasses at such an hour, it was as stupid as the movie she had just seen. It was stupid, that was all she could think. The street, the whole city, seemed to shrink and now this was the only scene taking place, with all the energy of the world, all the fear and excitement and importance concentrated here. She moved to the left.

“Watch out!” she said to Polly. She had planned to say that. Polly was supposed to think that Ana had just happened to see the FBI men earlier than everyone else.

Polly stumbled away from John, who shook her off his arm anyway. Maybe it was a final act of grand chivalry or maybe he was preparing to defend himself. Purvis was the one who fired, straight at John’s heart and then as John swivelled around, twirling rather like Polly had twirled less than two hours earlier in the satin dress- Ana was sure that it was satin now, John would have bought it for her and he wouldn’t buy anything fake- Purvis shot him through the back of the neck and the bullet went straight through and out from underneath his eye. Ana looked, fascinated for a moment by a bullet going clean through the head, and then Polly screamed and everything turned to chaos.

The FBI men came forward and surrounded John who was as still as the figures on the posters. It could have been a publicity event for one of the movies. He lay on the ground face down with blood coming from his head, though Ana was sure that it was the first shot which had killed him, just by the way his body had jerked and stiffened as if he had been electrocuted. All around them people shoved their way past each other to get a look. Ana tried to keep Polly away but she rushed forward with such hysterical strength that it took three of the men who worked at the theatre to restrain her. Then the police arrived and almost at the same time, the press. Purvis from the FBI flashed his badge and spoke to the police but they kept talking to him as if they didn’t trust him or didn’t want to appear to follow his orders. The men from the press buzzed around and asked everyone if they had seen anything and made rapid pages of notes in their ring-bound pads. Ana pretended to be too distressed to be able to talk but they kept coming because someone had identified her as one of the women with John.

“I don’t know,” she said to every question. “I don’t know. He was just shot.”

She hoped that Purvis wouldn’t speak to her. He had said he wouldn’t, but she hoped that he wouldn’t even try to murmur anything. The crowd was almost like a mob now. There was no sense of a fugitive brought to justice. John’s status as an outlaw hero was being confirmed with every new person who arrived, with every camera shot. She even saw a few people dip handkerchiefs in the blood before the police herded them away.

Finally barriers were put up and the crowd began to disperse. Polly was being sedated and someone was going to take her to hospital. Purvis looked over at Ana and she gave no acknowledgement. She knew that she had to go to a government office the next day, the address of which she had memorised and not written down, and then they could start on the administration to get the deportation charge dropped, though something in the way he looked at her, something in the way the whole business had been handled, told her that she had almost certainly been duped and that she would be leaving the country anyway. Finally she walked away, still shaking and quite exhausted now, looking out for journalists who might be waiting to force a quote out of her. She looked back at John, who they had left lying there for a long time, allowing anyone to take his picture. She could only see the side of his face but the expression looked exactly the same as it had in the theatre, as if he had got over the shock of being shot and was now unperturbed by anything.

He was there for anyone to photograph, to characterise, to imagine as their friend or outlaw brother. The adoration had started. She was the woman in the orange dress, the third member of the party, already caught in dozens of photographs. The idol was dead and the people had dipped their handkerchiefs in his blood.