

The Heat

by Chris Cefalu

I don't know how Jeff found me at the rooming house. He must have seen me on the street and just followed me in there. He came into my little room and sat down on the bed. He was breathing heavy and making little hacking noises in the back of his throat. It was a couple flights up from the street. As soon as he got his breath a little bit he lit a cigarette and I opened the window.

It struck me how bad he smelled, and I wondered if I had smelled that bad before. I figured I probably had. I sat in the chair opposite him. It was a small room and our knees were only a couple of feet apart.

"So, you did it, eh?" He shook his head like he was sad. "Got the cure and all."

I shrugged. I didn't want to be all high and mighty about it. Anyway I knew it was no use trying to explain it to him. I remembered what I used to think of people like me, back when I was people like Jeff.

"Well, good for you," he said. He didn't sound like he meant it, but I was surprised that he said it at all. It wasn't like Jeff to be polite just for the sake of it.

I said hesitantly, "Yeah, it feels pretty good. I feel good, you know. My memory's coming back. My lungs are better. All sorts of stuff. It's funny how much stuff gets better when you quit." Then I shut up because I didn't want him to think I was pushing anything on him.

He was nodding but I looked at his eyes and I could tell that he was disappointed.

"Well, I just wanted to look in on you," he said finally, getting up.

"Hey, come by anytime," I said, getting up too. It was a little awkward. We shook hands and I could smell the whiskey on him, under the other smells. I figured he was on a bender, had got ahold of a few bucks somehow and was missing his old drinking partner. I was bracing myself to say no to him if he offered me something, but he never did.

"Maybe I'll check it out myself," he said when he was in the hallway. He was fidgeting around with his cigarette and lighter and not looking at me.

"Yeah?" I said.

"Yeah, maybe," he said. "Well, see you."

Then he left and I went to a meeting. Just seeing him had made me want a drink, although I was

pretty sure I would have said no if he'd offered. But I went to a meeting anyway.

The next time I saw Jeff was when I was doing deliveries. Johnny Raspberry saw that I was trying and he took a liking to me I guess, because he gave me a job, and he hardly ever did that for the guys he rented rooms to. Johnny had a little cafe with a few pool tables on Gayoso Street in downtown Memphis, and he had a few rooms above it that he rented out cheap to guys like me who couldn't afford much. The rooms were hot and small and filled with bugs, but they beat the street, especially during the winter.

For the deliveries I used an old bicycle that used to belong to one of Johnny's kids who was now grown up. I carried the food in a pack on my back. Summer hadn't come for real yet, but I was always soaking wet by the end of the shift. I spent most of my time running fish sandwiches around to the old folks who lived in the pension buildings around Vance Street. The first few days I was just glad to have a job. But then it started getting hard and boring and I knew I would have to find something better soon.

I saw Jeff once when I was crossing Handy Park on the bicycle, heading back to the cafe after a delivery. He was sitting on a bench in the sun and his eyes were closed. I watched him as I pedaled along. For a minute I had this crazy idea that he was dead but then I saw him open his eyes and reach inside his coat

for a cigarette. Then I hurried away before he could see me. I kept thinking about him all that day though, the way he'd looked there on the bench: sad. Like an old bum.

It was through one of my deliveries that I ended up getting out from under Johnny's kindness. I had struck up a kind of friendliness with one of the old ladies I ran sandwiches up to and somehow we got around to my living conditions. Mrs. Walters was a nice old broad in her eighties, sharp as a tack and no family around her that I could see. She needed someone to manage the building she owned over on Union. It was a big warehouse-type place carved up into rooms that she rented out. I would live there rent-free, in a two-room apartment up in the front of the building, and "keep an eye on the riff-raff in back", as she put it. Collect rent and do little repairs and so forth. It was one more thing that just fell in my lap. So, just like that, I became a slumlord. I quit Johnny that night. I told him about the new job and he was glad for me.

"Moving on up, eh?" he said. Johnny was a good guy and I apologized again for quitting. But he told me to knock off that noise, that he didn't blame me at all, it sounded like a sweet deal. It would be easy to find another delivery boy, that was no problem for him.

"There's always bodies waiting to be put to use." That was one of his sayings. And I guess he was right.

The clientele at the warehouse wasn't much of a step up from the boys over at Johnny's place. They were a rough bunch: drunks, drifters, day laborers, disability cases. And they were used to having the run of the place, with no live-in manager breathing down their necks every day. It wasn't an easy situation to step into. Plus, the whole place was right next door to Ray's Late-Night Liquor, a spot I had frequented myself on many occasions. When I told my sponsor about my new setup, he just shook his head and said I was setting myself up to relapse.

"You're putting yourself in a high-stress situation here," he told me.

"I don't know any other kind," I said. And I was halfway joking, but the truth is, I couldn't exactly picture what the ideal situation would be for me. I'd never given much thought to any "career". I had just drifted from thing to thing. This just seemed like the next thing. And it beat deliveries. That was about as far as I could think it through.

"Your trouble is, you don't think you're worth more than this," my sponsor said. "You're still thinking like a drunk, still acting like nothing matters."

All I could do was shrug. He was probably right, but I didn't know where to go with it from there.

My sponsor had 11 years of sobriety under his belt, and he'd had a hell of a battle with the bottle before he got clean. He was a big guy with a beard and eyes that seemed to bore right through you. He was also a very serious guy, and he always seemed disappointed with me. I had the idea that he thought I was smarter than I really was.

The heat wave came after I'd been at the warehouse a month or so. It really laid the city out flat. It felt like all of Memphis just ground to a halt. We had triple figures every day for two weeks straight, up there around 112, 114 degrees. At night it barely got down to 95. After awhile it felt like the air was suffocating you, like there was nowhere to hide. The feeble little AC units that everyone had jammed in their windows starting breaking down, and there was a nine-day wait to get anyone to come out and fix them. The old people started dropping. Every day a few more of them were found dead in their cheap little pension-and-food-stamp apartments, like the ones I'd run sandwiches up to. I checked in on Mrs. Walters and she was okay, but she was pretty shaken up. One of the little old guys she was friends with in the building had missed a tea appointment or something with her, and she had gone down to give him hell about it and found him dead in his rocking chair, giving off a pretty strong

smell. Apparently he'd been there for several days. He didn't have any family.

"No one worried about Mr. Jones," she told me. "He fought in the war, you know that?"

She wiped her wrinkled old forehead with a cool washcloth and closed her eyes.

"There was no one left to remember him. He was just kind of fading away," she said. "It happens to lots of people."

The heat stretched on. People stayed off the streets and took it slow. There was nothing to do but wait it out.

Things were bad around the warehouse. I had an AC unit in my window, but the guys in the back had nothing. Some of them didn't even have a fan. And those rooms were poorly insulated to start with – cheap plywood walls that someone had thrown up to chop the place into rentable units. The two cheapest rooms didn't even have a window and they were hardly bigger than a phone booth. I'd sit there sweating away in my front room, looking out the window, and I'd see my tenants coming down the sidewalk. They'd be walking slow, keeping in the shade as much as possible, that little brown paper bag swinging along almost nonchalantly at their sides, their mouths hanging open and their faces pale and tired-looking.

At the door they would pause and fumble with their keys and it seemed to me that they took a deep

breath before entering, as if gulping one last mouthful of oxygen before heading once more into those airless ratholes in back. And I thought, it shouldn't be like that going home, having to brace yourself for it. But there was nothing I could do about it. I was only a couple of goofs away from those rooms in the back myself, and to be honest, it scared me. I'd had a taste of the comfortable life now. At least that's how I thought of it. I was living okay, putting a little bit aside each week – a very little bit, but that was still more than I'd managed to do in quite awhile. I had my own rooms and my own food and my own bed, and I had a little bit of responsibility. Maybe that was the part I was hooked on most: the idea that someone trusted me to watch out for the place. I felt myself growing accustomed to this situation and that made me nervous, because it would be that much harder when I finally lost the gig. It wasn't that I was *planning* to mess up or anything. It was just that there was no reason to think that this would be any less temporary than anything else.

Jeff showed up right around this time. He came in and sat down in my chair by the window. I sat on the bed and watched him checking out the room, trying to look casual as he did it. It probably seemed like a big step up from wherever he was crashing, which was most likely outdoors, judging from the look and smell of him.

He claimed to be sober. He said he'd done it cold turkey, without a program or anything. He said he never would have believed he could do it, not for more than a few days anyway, but here he was about to celebrate a month clean, and what did you know about that?

He said it was hard at first, but it was getting easier now, although it was a drag being on the street, but he guessed I remembered well enough without him going into it.

I guess I chose to believe him because it seemed to require less of me than not believing him would have. I told him I didn't have any rooms free just now or I'd sure let him have one at a damn good discount, and he said he was thinking maybe I could use some help managing the place, and he could just crash on the floor for awhile until he got a bankroll up, or until one of the rooms opened up in back.

So Jeff moved in and he stayed clean, near as I could tell. I tried to emphasize this fact to my sponsor, but he wasn't having any of it. He wanted me out of that warehouse and away from people like Jeff. He was on me anyway because I'd been missing meetings lately. I tried to explain that I had responsibilities now, but he just waved his hand at me like I hadn't said anything at all.

The heat slackened for a day, then resumed, full force. That one day of let-up almost made it worse

when it came back. I came home the next day and found several of my tenants huddled on the stoop out front, passing a bottle around and mopping themselves, waiting for the sun to go down. Directly overhead was the AC unit in my front window, jutting out over the sidewalk and churning away, making one heck of a racket. I shouted hello over the noise but they just looked at me with empty eyes. I had that same feeling that I'd had with my sponsor: like I wasn't there. I was getting pretty tired of disappointing people if you want to know the truth.

Jeff was a different story. He'd known me before, how I'd been then. I tried to remember what it had been that had got Jeff and me partnered up to begin with, but all I could remember was that we both liked Thunderbird wine, and he could be counted on not to rob you when you passed out. On the street that's more than just something. Anyway, he seemed content with things as they were. He was friendly with the guys in back as well. He'd disappear back there for awhile and when he returned he'd be glazed with sweat, his clothes soaked clean through.

"Hot as a mother back there," he'd say, but he wouldn't say it accusingly or anything. Little by little though, Jeff started taking over some of the little maintenance chores around the place. The guys would come to him when a light bulb burned out or someone's window was jammed. I just sat up front and

collected rent, which I then passed on to Mrs. Walters. It got so I hardly ever even went back there, where the rooms were.

Once I was looking around for a stepstool and I headed back to the community kitchen the guys all shared, thinking I might have left it there. As I walked into the kitchen all the conversation stopped suddenly, just like one of those Westerns where a guy walks into the wrong bar.

"Um... hey man," said Jeff finally, from where he was sitting at the kitchen table, playing cards with a gaunt, gray-haired old dude whose name I didn't even remember. Bugs raced up and down the walls and the heat was unbelievable, like a coffin.

The old man didn't say anything. He just stared at me with beads of sweat glistening in the gray hairs of a droopy old handlebar mustache.

"Just looking for something," I said apologetically. Then I got out of there without even checking for the stepladder. When I got back to my room I was feeling antsy and irritable and watching TV just made it worse. I kept thinking about the old guy in the kitchen. He wasn't particularly noteworthy - just another in a long line of tired, defeated-looking old men who shuffled in and out of the rooms in back. They nipped at their little poor-boys of wine, or their half-pints of gin and they drew tiny little checks from the government. They were everywhere in downtown

Memphis. It occurred to me that if there weren't so many of these sad old men around, I'd probably be out of a job, which would mean *I'd* be out there. *I'd* be the sad old man. But there'd be just one of me, instead of hundreds of them. These were the kind of thoughts I was having.

That night I dreamed I was in hell. I wasn't particularly religious and I'd always had a little trouble with the whole "higher power" part of AA. But this dream was something else, and it had nothing to do with God or the devil or any of that stuff. I was wandering through a giant warehouse, looking for a door. The warehouse was a lot like the warehouse I actually lived in, only much larger. And for some reason I kept getting lost. All I wanted to do was get outside, to get some fresh air.

I kept turning down hallways and trying more doors. But every door opened to some shitty little room with a bed and a cracked mirror and a bare bulb swinging from the ceiling. There were men in the rooms too, old men with rheumy eyes and big red drunkard noses and wasted, skinny little bodies. The bodies were barely there, almost like stick figure bodies, but their heads were huge and they swiveled slowly at me with sneering looks.

"What do you think you're looking for?" they seemed to be saying.

I kept apologizing, saying I was just trying to find the exit, and they kept sneering at me, and it went on like that for what seemed like a long time. I went down hallway after hallway, trying door after door and I kept losing track of which hallway I'd already tried because they all looked the same.

Meanwhile it was growing hotter in this dream warehouse, and I kept feeling like I was going to scream or go crazy if I didn't get some fresh air soon. It was like the air was getting thicker and fouler, like I was being smothered to death. I coughed and gagged and kept trying doors, until I opened one and Jeff was sitting there on the bed smoking a cigarette.

I was glad to see him because I figured he'd know the way out, but he just looked at me curiously as I sputtered and stammered at him. I was really upset by now. I kept waiting for him to respond, to help me, but he just leaned back and blew some smoke in my face. It was obvious he wasn't taking my problem very seriously. The smoke was filling the room now and I was struggling to see his face through the haze. I couldn't even see the door to get out of the room anymore.

Then I woke up and the smoke was still there, and Jeff's face was there too, yelling at me to get up, to get the hell out of there. I could smell the liquor on his breath, even with the smoke choking my nostrils.

"Come on, man!" he screamed at me, throwing my covers off and half-carrying me out of the room.

We stumbled into the hallway and it was full of smoke, and it must have been two hundred degrees in there. I had never felt heat like that. It was like something from another world. We made it down the stairs and burst out onto the sidewalk where all the rest of the tenants were standing in their bathrobes and shorts and undershirts, scratching their asses and watching the place burn.

I could hear the sirens way off in the distance, but no one had arrived yet. Our neighborhood wasn't a big priority with Memphis's finest. We were lucky they were coming at all.

After I caught my breath I walked over to the tenants and we all started talking together, trying to figure out what had happened. Everyone was excited. People were driving by on Union Avenue and turning their heads to stare at us. We must have been a pretty ragged-looking bunch, standing out there on the street in the middle of the night in our underwear, smoking cigarettes in front of a burning building.

A big purple Cadillac screeched to a stop in front of us and Ray flew out from behind the wheel and vanished into his liquor store. We were starting to feel a little bad for him - it was the man's livelihood after all, and truthfully I was starting to wonder if he was going to figure this was somehow *my* fault. But he

came out just a minute or two later, his broad black face grinning from ear to ear and a large paper sack under his arm.

"Damn, it ain't even warm in there," he said. "But there's hope yet. Like to get me some of that insurance money and get *gone*, you dig? Whoever fell asleep smokin' up there in your pad done me a big favor. I thought about lightin' a match myself plenty of times. Yessir." He cast a worried eye up the street. "Long as those engines don't get here and ruin everything."

Ray opened up his sack and then a fifth of good vodka was making the rounds, and everybody was *really* in a good mood. It was a strange giddy kind of feeling that we all seemed to have that night. Like kids who are suddenly told that school is closed that day.

I stood there watching my job and my home go up in flames and none of it really surprised me at all. I actually was starting to feel a little bit relieved. Except one thing was bothering me and finally I figured out what it was.

"Where's the old guy?" I said.

"What old guy?" said Jeff. His face was red, his eyes were glassy with vodka and he smelled like burnt hair.

"That old guy. The one in the back. You know, that old dude you were playing cards with. I don't see him anywhere."

At the thought of the old man, I was starting to get agitated again. My calm good feeling was trickling away. Everyone was staring at me like they couldn't understand what I was saying.

"Someone's got to get him out of there," I said hesitantly. "Right?"

Everyone looked at Jeff. He was stroking his stubbly chin and staring thoughtfully at the flames licking out of what used to be my bedroom.

"Man, ain't no one going back in there now," he said finally. "If he ain't out, he's probably dead. No use getting more people killed to fish one old man out."

Everyone was nodding with great relief.

"Hell," said Jeff. "He was probably the one who started the damn thing. Smoking in bed, the dumb old fucker."

Heads were nodding all around us. Everyone was in agreement.

Ray dug into his sack and came out with another bottle and a handful of cheap cigars. The men were as animated as I'd ever seen them. They were jiving with each other, lighting cigars and telling lies about other daring escapes they'd been involved in. Now and then they would glance up at the building, shake their heads and laugh. The sirens were a little closer now, but they still seemed to be many blocks away.

A wave of dizziness hit me all of a sudden and I doubled over, pressing both hands to the sides of my head.

"Hey man, you inhaled a lot of smoke up in there," said Jeff. "Just sit on down and take it easy. Ain't nothing we can do now but wait."

"Yeah," I said.

Then there was a huge clap, like a thunderbolt hitting the pavement right there in the middle of us. I felt a sharp sting in my shin, and when I reached down to feel what had bit me I came up with a tiny metal screw, which had been embedded in my flesh a good half inch. There was shrapnel everywhere, hunks of metal and plastic splattered across the pavement outward from where my AC unit had hit the sidewalk just beneath the window. It was dumb luck that no one was standing under there just then. I walked over and gave what was left of my AC a kick with my shoe. Up above in the window all I could see was flame and black smoke. Jeff was right. There was nobody alive in there anymore.

When the bottle came around the next time I grabbed it and took a shot, feeling the heat as it spread all down my throat and into my chest and then outward, warming all of me, even places that I hadn't been aware of. It was so good, the way that first drink always is when you've been dry for awhile. It was like magic. And when the cops and the firemen finally

showed, Jeff had to deal with them. I just sat over by the side and no one paid any attention to me.

Everything felt right now. Like it couldn't be any other way. I thought of all the worrying and fretting I'd been doing lately, and the way I'd been living, like a scared little squirrel trying to store up nuts for the winter. I looked down at the bottle in my hand, and I looked up at the burning building, and it seemed that I had lived this moment a thousand times before. It felt absolutely comfortable, like I belonged there, and I felt a great relief cover me like a blanket because I didn't have to *try* anymore, and that was pretty much the last I remember.

Except I remember when they brought the old guy out. I never saw his face because he was covered with a white sheet that was stained black from the fumes. There were two paramedics wheeling the stretcher and their faces were also coated with soot and grime. They were grunting along, hustling the gurney over to the ambulance and I remember when they lifted the stretcher into the back, the sheet slipped off a little and I saw a hand flop out and I could tell by the way they stuffed the hand back in that he was dead, and they weren't worrying about him any more.