The Last Inn on the Road

Roger Zelazny, Dannie Plachta

Father Bob flicked a quick Sign of the Cross with the point of his switchblade and dropped into a crouch. He stared up the alleyway, his leather jacket tight across his shoulders. There was a faint flash of metal not more than six feet away.

“Who is it?” he demanded.

A fleet of motorcycles crackled down the adjacent street. He waited for their lights to outline his adversary.

But the bikes belonged to the Red Holy Rollers from Saint Bob’s, and they always rode blacked-out.

“Who is it?” he asked again, after the silence had returned.

“Sister Cameo. That is you, Father?”

“Blessed be the Holy Name of Jesus,” he intoned, snapping his blade closed.

“Blessed be the Holy Name,” she agreed, and another blade snicked shut within the darkness.

“Praise be that I got here when I did, Sister. That sounded like the Rollers going by.”

“I’d say so, Father. Full strength.”

She touched the priest’s arm.

“But come. It isn’t far.”

“Just to be on the safe side, Sister, we’d better spread some broken glass. You get the far end of the alley and I’ll get this one.”

He moved toward the nearer street.

“It’s in the center of the block,” she whispered, before they parted.

Father Bob spent five minutes smashing empty beer bottles on the rough pavement. All the street lights had been shot out. In fact, Father Bob had never seen a lighted one. Nevertheless, there was a certain amount of light tumbling from a large neon sign: buy our junk, it urged. Below it, smaller letters spelled out the familiar slogan: acid, horse, seeds, and li. take tea and see.

He was about to return to the safety of the alley and its darkness when he noticed the dog. Its long dark tail rippled in the wind as it trotted toward him. Small, yet for some strange reason unafraid, it came up to him. Its tongue hung out over its side teeth as though it were laughing, and its ears were long and ragged. He patted its head and was vaguely pleased when it followed him back up the alley.

“This is it, Father,” whispered the nun when they met again. “We’re home.”

Rusted hinges grated, and Father Bob felt her hand on his arm.

“Don’t fall over anything, Bob. It’s a mess in here.”

He heard the dog patter in after them. The ancient door creaked again and clicked at their backs.

“It’s an old garage,” she told him. “The house in front is completely wrecked. I covered our only window with tar paper.”

Then she rummaged for a dark moment and a match scratched, flashing yellow pain into his eyes. “Make yourself at home.”

It was, he observed after a moment, a compact indoor junkyard, an attic and cellar that had somehow gotten together for money, not love.

“A wreck room,” he muttered, and the girl giggled.

She lit a votive candle and the room was drenched in the bloodlight of its glass container. Twisted shadows from a hundred shipwrecked homes filled the walls, the floor, the ceiling.

“I think we’d best put it out as soon as we’re settled,” she suggested. Her black leather jacket and stretch pants became a reddish bronze in the candlelight, and he glanced furtively at his own clothing. The dog nipped at Sister Cameo’s boots. “Here,” she said, lifting it in her arms, “I think I can fix you up for the night.” She found an empty beer case, removed the partitions, and placed the dog gently within it. “...but I won’t have you sleeping on any of these dirty rags!”

There was a slight movement in the corner of the garage, and two cats glided forth to peer in at the dog. They leaned and watched without moving. “One happy family,” smiled the priest, and the man and the woman knelt on the cold concrete, joining together in prayer.

Sister Cameo extinguished her candle, and they went to bed, the dog making faint noises, half-snore, half-growl, behind them.

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They looked like stars and they were among the stars. They moved with seeming slowness, yet somehow they passed quickly.

“We are near,” said Amar.

“The star guides us well,” replied Borin.

“Still, we shan’t arrive in time,” said Calat.

The three points of light arced across another hundred parsecs.

“Perhaps. Perhaps not. But it’s our only chance to see,” said Amar.

“Their star nears the apex,” observed Borin.

“We cannot stay long,” Calat noted.

The three points crossed another dark gap.

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Right there on Saint Bob’s parking lot, in the middle, the Red Holy Rollers parked their bikes. They parked them and they slept there, resting their heads upon the polished chrome of the handlebars. None of them were really tired, having slept most of the day. But they were a legend around town. They slept on their bikes, it was told. So don’t kill a good thing. They stayed in the lot until eleven o’clock, passed another ten minutes debating where to go. Finally, they roared off to the Junk Yard, three blocks away...

The place was spinning when they hit it. They knew it would be, and it revved up when they moved into action. The in-drink that night was Old Krupnik on the rocks, for God’s sake, and they uncorked it, learned to live with it.

Some old broad in a topless ski suit swivelled it over and asked would anyone care to move around the floor, so Tiny Tim the Big Man called her hand, took it, yanked her into service. They swung to the strings twisted and the skins thumping; the Molesters’ “Old Rugged Cross Writhe” it was, and everybody did, making with the outstretched arms bit. But Tiny Tim, he got a thumb in the right eye and that was it for indoor exercise.

After the debacle that ensued, they were all of them about seven handlebars to the wind when it fell upon them like damn let’s go Of-the-Cloth hunting. Real big this went, up and over like a pregnant pole-vaulter, and...

They cut at 11:47. One more round of Old Krupdammitnik...

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Crawling in the deep shadows, darkness all about them, yet able to see, the three moved down the alien roadway.

“A strange world...” said Amar.

“Like no other,” Borin agreed.

“Perhaps it will be for the best” ⁠—Calat.

They skittered and churned, boffed and scaffonted, then paused.

“I am weary of my burden” ⁠—Amar.

“There is so little time...” ⁠—Borin.

“The stars! I fear we must miss our chance to see!” ⁠—Calat.

“Yes! We must leave our prizes! Make haste!” ⁠—Borin.

They moved on, up, out, their tears falling upon the stones.

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Father Bob was awakened by a creaking noise. He listened, tense, motionless, to the sound of the dog’s breathing. Could someone have entered the garage without awakening the animal? Regretting the sound, he snapped open his switchblade.

“Father. It’s me.”

“What’re you doing, Sister?”

“I heard a noise outside. I waited awhile before checking.”

“Someone prowling?”

“I don’t really know, but when I went out I stumbled over...these.”

She lit a match, spreading the flame to the candle.

He inspected the three items in the ruddy light.

“Very strange,” he admitted. “Perhaps we overlooked them when we entered.”

“Perhaps,” she said.

The priest held one of the objects near the candle.

“It’s a concave disk, with little projections all over...Beautiful!” he decided, “whatever it is.”

“Here’s a metal box, covered with some kind of spongy stuff,” said the man.

The last item was a wire band with an attached oval of what seemed a shiny plastic substance. Impulsively, she took the band and gently forced it over the head of the awakened puppy, who had been sniffing at it.

“Pretty doggie...” she said, fondling its ears.

“Let the little fellow sleep on the spongy thing,” said the priest, and the girl lifted the dog as Father Bob placed the makeshift cushion in the beer case.

“I took a bottle of milk tonight, God forgive me,” said the nun, her blush invisible in the red light. “We can put some in this odd dish for the dog and the cats and drink the rest ourselves. I was saving it for breakfast. What is that smell?”

The dog came out of the beer case again, to splash with his pink tongue at the milk as she poured it. The cats only sat and watched. Their tongues smoothed their whiskers, but they did not draw near.

As Sister Cameo was about to place the dog back in the box, both garage doors banged open. She reached for her switchblade and cried out.

Father Bob froze, his right hand at his belt, as an empty beer bottle struck against his forehead. He swayed for a moment, then fell back against an old washing machine. Slashing furiously, the nun went down with a length of chain around her thighs.

“I’m cut!” roared Tiny Tim. “Thirty-eight years a Roller and never a scratch! Now I get it from a broad!” His sobs were inaudible above the screams when they nailed the nun and the priest to the garage doors. “It was the glass at the end of the alley tipped us off !” he taunted them, feeling better for it.

The old men stayed to hear the screaming and whimpering for the minute or two that it lasted. Then they stamped out and returned to their bikes, parked up the block.

The dog looked at the unconscious figures on the doors. He licked his paws in the bloody candlelight. He sniffed at the overturned dish. The plastic and metal jangled together below his neck, and he paused to glance back into the mangled beer case. There was a strange smell about the place...

A vague curtain of colored light forming in the midnight sky shifted, was gone, before the dog entered the shadows of the alley. Briefly then, he paused, but only to aim a single, short howl at the moon before it vanished behind a cloud; and then he passed the darting neon, going up the street, off the street, by the street and into the night beyond, his gift a choking collar around his puppy throat.

Notes

This violent, post-apocalyptic Nativity scene precedes Zelazny’s collaboration with Philip K. Dick on Deus Irae and may have influenced that novel. This is one of two collaborations with Dannie Plachta, to whom Lord of Light is dedicated. Plachta (listed as Danny in other sources) published about a dozen short stories in science fiction magazines between 1965 and 1970, but there is little other information available about him.

A cameo is a bit part in a drama played by a distinguished actor or celebrity; it is also a medallion with a person’s profile cut in raised relief. A votive candle is lit in prayer. The names of the three wise men in this story do not correspond to the names of the Magi in the Bible. Krupnik is a sweet vodka made in Lithuania.