

Entrance Fee

Written by

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**INT. BAR - NIGHT**

Dark and sociable. Glasses CLINK. Chatter floats. Into this inner sanctum, a door swings open....

Revealing ERIC TALBOT (30s). Corporate dress. College look.

A BOUNCER at the entrance thrusts out a palm: stop. He chats to Eric (MOS). Whatever's said can't be heard about the din.

Eric cranes his neck past the Bouncer's thick shoulder. He's looking for... someone. Target found.

He slaps a tenner into the Bouncer's palm. The man-mountain steps aside, waves him in.

Eric shoulders past revelers to a table. KEVIN SANGER (30s, also in a suit) sits alone... except for TWO BEERS.

Talbot grabs a chair. One pint. Sits down, sniffs the brew.

ERIC

Not an IPA. You remembered. Thank God!

KEVIN

(grins)

Thank ME, actually. Though he does work in mysterious ways through his flock. Really, I should thank you for showing up. Waste not, want not - but if I had to drink *both* of these, I'd be sleeping in my car. And explaining it to Wendy for months!

ERIC

You never told me there'd be an entrance fee.

KEVIN

Happy Hour. So sue me. I'm no regular. Who knew?

Kevin eyes his friend, a gentle reproach.

KEVIN

What took you so long, Eric? You're late. Even with this - investment - I was tempted to take off.

ERIC

Eh. Motorist with a flat tire. I helped her out.

(MORE)

ERIC (cont'd)  
I know, I know; I should've called.  
But my hands were full. Look!

Eric flashes dirty palms. Kevin hands him a napkin, as Talbot sips his brew.

KEVIN  
On the house. And consider the first round on me. Good deeds *deserve* rewards. Half an hour ago, I thought you'd maybe cancelled. Because of the terror alert, that is.

Eric spit takes.

ERIC  
Excuse me. What?!?

KEVIN  
You didn't hear? Someone called in a threat for this neighborhood.

Talbot jumps up. Kevin waves at him.

KEVIN  
For heck's sake, sit down. You just got here! Just in case, I asked the waitress. She says they checked the place before opening. Look around. Does anyone here look like a terrorist? I prayed, too. We'll be just fine.

ERIC  
(sits back down)  
How does *praying* help? Does God issue holy bullet proof armor now?

KEVIN  
How many times are we gonna have this conversation? It was fun in college, but what more is there to say? Atheist or not, you can't live your life in fear. Sometimes, you just have to have faith.

He beckons a WAITRESS for refills. She obliges, departs. Eric shoots his friend a sarcastic look.

ERIC  
Uh, faith isn't ALWAYS a good thing. Terrorists often have that, too.

KEVIN

Not the RIGHT kind! And aren't you even the least bit curious why I asked you here tonight?

KEVIN

I thought: to catch up on old times? We both work hard, and need a break.

KEVIN

No rest for the wicked. But for us-

The two toast.

KEVIN

There's a charity I'm fundraising through my church. Any chance I can convince you to pass around the plate at work?

ERIC

Uh, HR might frown on that.

KEVIN

C'mon! You can spin it as secular. It's food for poor kids downtown.

ERIC

Fine. You twisted my arm. And a few heart strings. It's a deal.

The two sip in silence. Eric looks around.

ERIC

Hey, Mr. Happily Married; if I happen to meet a pretty girl tonight, would you object if I ditched you awhile?

KEVIN

Again? But who's counting? Sure.

Eric's eyes drift to a table. There's a light under it. BLINKING. He grabs Kevin's arm - points.

ERIC

What does that look like to you?

KEVIN

(eyes widening)

Oh my God-

The device EXPLODES. Blackout. Screams. Then complete silence. Until...

**INT. PLAIN WHITE ROOM**

Eric jumps from his chair, screams.

ERIC  
Holy fuck. Is that a bomb?!?

He looks around. The scenery's changed. A LOT.

A shell shocked Kevin sits in a chair to his right, close enough to touch.

A wooden desk looms before them. Nothing on it - except for a JOURNAL and QUILL INK PEN. A gold chair glints behind it.

Kevin and Eric lock bewildered eyes.

ERIC  
Are you seeing what I'm seeing?

KEVIN  
I think so? Maybe not?

Kevin also stands up, pats his chest. Finds no injuries.

ERIC  
I swear, that thing exploded.

KEVIN  
But if it did - are we dead?

ERIC  
Or I'm hallucinating. That's a likely explanation, too.

BZZZZTT! A small, bespectacled man (PETER) in accountant's clothes phases through the white wall.

He whisks non-existent dust off the desk. SCRAPES the desk's gold chair back, sits down. And regards the two silently. Magnified through glasses, his eyes blink.

ERIC  
OK. That's "hallucination" evidence right there.

PETER  
You may be seated.

Peter's voice resonates: dignified, though a touch nasal. Kevin and Eric exchange looks.

ERIC

That's a rather existential comment,  
don't you think? We MAY be standing,  
too.

PETER

I understand humor is often needed to  
cope in times like these. But I will  
ask just one more time. Gentleman...  
(an Army bark)

Sit!

Kevin and Eric drop down, shocked. Wait like school kids for  
Peter's next command.

Peter picks up the pen and draws two columns on a journal  
page. SCRITCH-SCRITCH. Labeled "Eric" and "Kevin".

The two friends lean forward, read.

KEVIN

You know our names.

PETER

So we may be formally introduced, you  
can call me Peter. Pete, to friends.

KEVIN

SAINT Peter. Duh, of course!

He reaches out, pokes Eric. Grins.

KEVIN

After all this time, I win!

ERIC

Win what? The biggest non-sequitur of  
the night award?

KEVIN

Remember that bet we made Sophomore  
year? You said "Pascal's Wager" -  
and I quote - "Wasn't worth the  
semantics it was scribbled on". And  
that if you ever found out there WAS  
a God, you'd acknowledge it. So fork  
over \$50 bucks. Pay up!

(beat)

Unless you plan to renege?

He wiggles fingers at Eric. Shoots him a warning look.

KEVIN

Which isn't something I'd recommend doing here.

Eric searches his pockets. Turns up nothing.

ERIC

Huh. I had sixty when I walked into the bar. After I gave the Bouncer his bribe.

PETER

Money is immaterial in this place. You can't take it with you. Literally. Only you and modest clothes make the trip. Everything else... just dissolves.

ERIC

I know, I know: Camels going through the eyes of a needle, and all that jazz. I get the drift. Listen, I'm still not sure this isn't all a dream. But if not - take the "W", Kev. You win.

Kevin gloats good naturedly. Boo-yahs.

ERIC

What's next on the agenda, SAINT Peter? You gonna give us a tour of heaven now?

Peter scribbles notes under each man's column - letters in some bizarre code.

ERIC

Not English? What gives?

PETER

(sighs)

You mortals; all so self-absorbed. From all the centuries and cultures past, you assume it's YOUR language we prefer?

Peter puts down the pen. The CLICK echoes around the room.

PETER

And no - tours aren't automatic. Entry must be earned first. Which requires you both answer a few questions. Back on Earth, one might call this... a pop quiz.

ERIC  
You're giving us an *interview*?

Peter nods.

KEVIN  
(chuckles)  
And you were worried about the wrath  
of *corporate* HR!

ERIC  
But if you're really St. Peter, who  
needs questions? You can see for  
yourself what's in our hearts!

KEVIN  
Eric, not now. Please don't start!  
Peter... uh, Pete. Please forgive my  
friend. He's what you'd call a knee-  
jerk skeptic. Sometimes he doesn't  
know when to-  
(hisses to Eric)  
Shut up!

PETER  
It's just a formality. Some key  
clarifications, if you don't mind?

Kevin smooths his hair, straightens his tie.

KEVIN  
I'm an open book. You'll soon find  
Eric is, too.

Peter clears his throat. Points to each man as he speaks.

PETER  
Good. Let's confirm denominations  
first. You, Kevin, are a Christian

KEVIN  
A devout one. Yes. All my life!

PETER  
And Eric, you are Atheist? Or is that  
Agnostic? The way you folks play with  
definitions, sometimes it's difficult  
to keep that straight.

ERIC  
You'll know if I lie. So.  
(deep breath)  
An Atheist. Uh, sorry?



KEVIN

I'll vouch for Kevin, if that helps.  
He's been a bit - misguided. But he's  
been a good man, too.

(shoots Eric a look)

MOST of the time.

PETER

Yes, that aligns with my intel.  
Speaking of: that motorist you  
assisted tonight?

Eric's eyes widen.

ERIC

The woman in the Fiat?

PETER

That's the one. Why did you help her?

ERIC

(stammers)

Uh, I can't say I didn't think she  
wasn't attractive. Seriously, if  
you'd seen her...

PETER

Up here? We see all.

ERIC

Then you know, those legs went on for  
miles! When I was driving past,  
that's the first thing that caught my  
eye.

PETER

But was that your motive for  
stopping? Just to - as the kids say -  
'hit her up'?

ERIC

No, it totally wasn't! She was  
stranded. And Lord knows... I mean, I  
know that sucks. Helping her out was  
the right thing to do!

PETER

Good answer.

Peter smiles, writes code under Eric's column.

KEVIN

Now, Kevin - about that charity  
drive...

KEVIN

For the poor children! I'm so glad you brought that up. It's got so much potential for good. I've been working on it a whole week!

Peter fixes Kevin with an innocent, blank look:

PETER

What prompted you to fund raise?

KEVIN

Er, literally? My minister asked me to? Please tell me this wasn't a trick question.

PETER

There are no "tricks" here. Only honesty. You're saying it wasn't personal inspiration, ignited by witnessing the impoverished children's plight?

Kevin hangs his head. Whispers.

KEVIN

No. But I *do* think it's a good cause.

PETER

Fair enough. I'll grant you HALF a point. Now, onto the topic of sinning.

ERIC

(sighs)

That's where I'm literally fuc-

KEVIN

Don't curse! You'll get us both in trouble!

PETER

Let me clarify: I'm interested in the "big picture". Not superficial little actions here or there.

ERIC

Superficial? For instance...

PETER

Imbibing. Smoking.  
(MORE)

PETER (cont'd)

(winks)

Fraternizing with the gentler sex, in a bar or elsewhere. We can let such frivolities slide.

KEVIN

(chokes)

Wait a gosh darned second. That stuff's allowed?

PETER

Eric, have you ever hurt someone you shouldn't?

ERIC

Uh, I *did* once break my girlfriend's heart. But I apologized after five years! One night, when I was really drunk.

PETER

But assault, emotional abuse. Serious transgressions of that sort?

ERIC

Nah. I'm really a 'live and let live' kinda guy. Which worked out fine.

(beat)

'Til now.

PETER

Kevin - what do you have to confess?

Kevin's still processing the "carnal sins allowed" shocker. He looks up sharply, pouts:

KEVIN

Hey, I'm clean as a whistle. Except for fraternizing with my wife, Wendy. My understanding is that's fine...

Peter scribbles down equal points! Setting down his pen, he interlaces fingers like he's praying. Focuses on Kevin.

PETER

Now for the BIG question. Have you ever doubted my boss's existence?

KEVIN

Never! Not in a million years! Relative to my lifespan, that is.

PETER

Not even a moment? A tiny twinge?

Kevin makes a frantic 'cross my heart' gesture.

KEVIN

Not once. Scout and Christian's honor, your Honor! I mean, Saint!

PETER

And Eric: did you ever operate on faith in a few desperate moments? A foxhole, perhaps?

ERIC

No. Though in retrospect, I sorta wish I did.

PETER

(sighs)

Then it appears I have no choice. Eric, you're in. Kevin, you'll have to go.

KEVIN

WHAT?!?

Kevin leaps to his feet, shocked. Eric rises, too. Confused.

ERIC

What is this, a mirror-heaven universe? Switching the rules for opposite day at work?

PETER

No, this has *always* been the test. A mite tricky, but that's what tests are for. Giving you the answers ahead of time defeats the purpose. We have to put you through your paces and just observe how everything pans out.

(to Kevin)

Heaven requires people do good *inherently*. Not out of punishment, or some urge to obey. We also want people who question and think for themselves. That's the entrance fee. If the Big Guy wanted robots, then what's free will good for?

He extends a hand. In the journal, Eric's name GLOWS. Kevin's turns gray - like a hyperlink that's been used.

PETER

My condolence about your friend. But shall we start the tour?

Eric starts to reach out - recoils.

ERIC

No. If Kevin's not coming with, I'm out.

KEVIN

Eric, save yourself. Don't screw this up!

Eric crosses his arms, adamant.

ERIC

Peter, you can see in my heart I'm dead serious.

(beat)

Pardon the pun. But Kevin's a really great guy - and would've been one without or without that... uh, religious stuff. It's not fair to penalize him for believing you!

Peter thinks it over. Scribbles in the journal. Now BOTH names glow.

PETER

Eric, you make a great point and drive a hard bargain. More than a few individuals we've since-

(cough)

Let go. So we'll let your friend in. Strictly as a favor to you. No more delay, about that tour...

KEVIN

Not so fast. Kevin's family, too.

PETER

Don't push your luck, Mr. Ogles-Stranded-Drivers. But consider them a package deal. Now that's settled - shall we go?

From somewhere, a celestial choir sings. Peter holds out hands to BOTH men. The three walk toward a now PULSING wall.

ERIC

Uh, where'd the soundtrack come from?

PETER

That's for the lobby. Wait'll you get inside. We've got some fabulous rock and jazz icons as residents...

They phase through the wall, vanish. An unseen Kevin coughs.

KEVIN

Peter, can I ask just one question?

PETER

Yes. Of course, my son.

KEVIN

Why do bad things happen to good people? I prayed - and I'm thrilled it didn't hurt. But we both just got blown to bits by a bomb.

PETER

(sighs)

That one's above my pay grade. When you get to know him, you'll have to ask the man upstairs...

FINAL FADE OUT: