

Cosa Nosferatu

ONE

“This is it,” said a man as he stepped out of a dark blue Nash. “Watch your step, it’s muddy here.”

“What?” said his companion, a tall woman with red hair. “Oh. Muddy. For a moment, I thought you said bloody.” She spoke with an accent. “What a waste that would be.”

The man smiled a quick, humorless smile in her direction. His eyes flashed yellow, like those of a cat. “Indeed. But look at all these vehicles, all on a rainy cold night. Twenty-fours a day, the Arrowhead has customers, isn’t that what I said?” He carefully avoided a large dark puddle.

“Although I’m sure things have slowed a bit since the big crash, eh?” he continued. “Still, somehow I don’t think the Arrowhead relies much on stockbrokers.”

The woman stepped gingerly to avoid her own black pool on the ground. Garish lights reflected from its dark surface.

The man wore a tweed jacket and slacks, she a tight fitting white blouse and black skirt. The man was tall and strikingly thin, with blonde hair that needed a trim. Neither wore an overcoat, although he did wield a large black umbrella against the cold rain. He fumbled with the umbrella at the door, transferring it to his left hand so he could open the door for the woman.

Once inside, they saw cigarette smoke forming a blue fog at the ceiling and heard slot machines clanking and dinging. Women in scanty lingerie sat next to men in coveralls and work boots. A few men in suits also sat at the bar, and there were several women clustered around each of them. The woman took all this in with an impassive face. The man seemed amused.

“Are these your...stockbarkers?”

“Stockbrokers,” he continued. “They ummm., they trade...shares of...stock...in companies...and the stock market recently...”

“I could not care less,” she replied curtly. “But I am not a total idiot about the modern world. Do not talk as if I were.”

“Yes. Yes, I know. Sorry. Well, even so, I imagine the steel mills and factories where these men work have been slow, and likely getting slower. The fate of those with strong backs and weak minds.”

“Men always seek such places,” she said coolly. She looked about the place, eyeing the women who hovered around the men. “Do you know what he looks like?”

“Yes, although it’s been a few years. Middle aged, Irish. Probably dressed like he’s going to the track, more than likely. You know ...dog racing? Or horses. Ummm...never mind.”

The woman smoothed a loose strand of her long red hair and sniffed. “What did you call him in the car?”

“Ah. The Boy Mayor of Burnham. He managed to get himself elected when he was in his twenties. That was years ago, though. This is a tiny town, but he’s turned it into something of a playground. For adult males, at least. It’s right on the border between Illinois and Indiana. In fact, this very establishment straddles that state line. It was a selling point, I am informed, when he approached Johnny Torrio about purchasing it, years ago.”

The couple found places at the bar. The woman surveyed the seat carefully before sitting, and ran an elegant hand across it to be sure.

“Torrio,” she said languidly. “He was the one before Capone, yes?”

“Exactly. Oh, a beer and a red wine please.” This last was addressed to a burly man behind the bar who had a rag draped over his left shoulder.

“And so this John Patton works for Capone now? Is that why you have dragged me out here?”

The man smiled. It was a nervous smile. “Well, works closely with him, at any rate. It’s a place to start, the best I can think of at the moment.”

“Wojchiechowski says this is a waste of time, that Capone will be of no use to us anyway.”

The man sniffed at his glass of beer and took a tiny sip. “He was an enemy of Capone’s for a long time, I think it still colors his judgment. No, Capone is the power in this whole region. More powerful than any politician.”

The woman moved her eyebrows slightly but said nothing. She tasted her wine, then made a face. “I need a real drink soon.”

“Mmmm, I know. It’s been too long,” replied her companion.

“I mean it,” she snapped. “And why do we even have to waste time like this? I could find out what we want with just a question, if I put my mind to it.”

She put a peculiar emphasis on that last part, and her companion seemed to understand.

“I know. But indulge me for just a while. I used to come here with a friend, I know the place. I know how well connected Patton is. A little patience, and we will be rewarded. If not, we can always fall back on your more direct approach.”

The woman made a face, but shrugged and kept silent.

Sipping a scotch, Johnny Patton walked around the Arrowhead and felt content.

“Busy day, eh, Mr. Mayor,” smiled the bartender--who was also his Chief of Police. Patton nodded and gave him a grimace.

“Damn needle beer. I hate making needle beer,” said Patton.

They had spent the day making needle beer out in the back, under a tent. Chicago was cracking down momentarily on Capone’s breweries, letting them produce only near beer. So Patton’s crew had spent the day skillfully draining out a third of a pail of the near stuff and then replacing it with a mixture of ginger ale and alcohol. The real skill came in pounding a new cork into the barrel that simultaneously pushed in the old one.

“We do what we gotta do, some days. To keep our little corner of the kingdom running.”

“Hey, Johnny,” said someone sitting at the slots. “What’s the word with Al—you heard anything from him yet?”

Patton squinted through the cigarette smoke. The man turned around, and Patton recognized the well-dressed figure. Jake Lindle.

“Lindle,” said Patton. “The poor man’s Horace Greeley. Am I gonna get quoted in the *Tribune* tomorrow? Who you workin’ for tonight?”

Lindle said nothing.

“You probably know more’n I do, Lindle. Far as I know, Al gets out on the seventeenth.”

Lindle sipped a beer. “Helluva thing, getting’ busted in a City a Brotherly Love.”

Patton snorted. “Capone set the whole thing up himself. Learned it from Torrio, lay low when there’s too much heat by getting yourself pinched for a minor beef.”

Lindle pulled the handle of the slot, but the reels gave him nothing.

“Yeah, but I bet he didn’t arrange for the judge to give him the max.”

Patton shrugged, and looked at his watch. Almost time for the band to come on.

“Where’s Mezzrow? Goddammit, send somebody to get those assholes over here. He better not be smoking that damn reefer again.”

Lindle wasn’t ready to let it go. “If you hear from him, lemme know, alright? It’s important.”

Patton waved him off.

“This guy acts like Capone owes *him* a favor,” he said to the bartender. He was about to say more when the band arrived, and distracted him from the reporter.

After the band had begun to get set up, a couple at the bar attracted his attention. He did not recognize either of them, which was not all that unusual. But having an attractive woman, a woman who was not an employee of the Arrowhead, sitting at

the bar, that was a bit unusual. A striking, tall redhead, Patton noted. This he did not like. Women who did not work for the establishment were often trouble. And the two seemed to be eyeing Patton a lot. The man pointed at Patton, then said something to the woman.

The man was tall and gaunt, with a pale complexion and eyes that looked like they wanted to bug out of his face. Patton wondered if he were a drug addict. He seemed well dressed, though, and Patton saw that he had a healthy bankroll when he paid for his beer. The guy seemed to be very curious though, taking a good long look around the place, which made Patton nervous.

“That guy at the bar. Next to the redhead. You know him?” Patton asked a waiter. “Not a regular. He some kinda bull? Not local, of course. But maybe a Fed? One of those guys working for that Norwegian guy---Ness?”

“Don’t look like a cop. More like a professor.”

“Whatever. Keep an eye on him. And the woman. Women are always trouble.”

Mayor Johnny Patton smiled and welcomed some regulars, but still kept a wary eye on the professor, who nursed his beer slowly and carefully, like he really didn’t care much for it. Patton couldn’t tell what the woman was drinking. Patton noticed that the professor seemed to be watching the other customers closely.

“I’m headin’ upstairs,” Patton said to the waiter. “Keep an eye on those two. Somehow, I don’t think he’s here for the broads.” Patton smiled. “With a dame like the redhead, though,” he added with a smirk, “who could blame him?”

Once up in his office, Patton sat down heavily at a desk, sighed, and lit a cigar. He looked through some papers that sat in piles on the desk. The sounds of giggling women and drunken men filtered through his door. Patton liked the sound. But it was interrupted by a soft knocking on that same door.

“Mayor? You wanted me to keep an eye on those two at the bar? The guy keeps askin’ for you. An’ the woman gives me the willies, somehow. I dunno. Don’t feel right. You wanna come down?”

Patton sighed and stubbed out his cigar. Once downstairs again, he saw the bartender motion for him. By now the band was in full swing, so Patton had to cup his hand behind his ear to catch the words.

“This woman is asking for you. The skinny guy is a little jumpy, but he definitely ain’t heat. I don’t think he’s really drinking that beer, though. And what’s a dame like that doin’ in here? Somethin’ fishy, you ask me.”

The bartender/police chief had good instincts about such things, so Patton started watching the couple more carefully again. The professor bought drinks for others freely, but sipped his beer carefully and with what seemed to be some disdain. Patton knew they didn’t serve the best stuff, it was the typical watered down stuff Capone pushed, but it wasn’t the worst swill, either. So what was up with this guy?

Johnny Patton was about to escort the two of them out, as he had pretty much made up his mind that the guy was undesirable, when the woman got up and walked over.

“Mr. Mayor, good evening. May I have a few words?” Patton eyed her silk blouse and a tight wool skirt, and smiled as he inhaled her perfume. In spite of his reservations about her companion, Patton motioned for her to sit.

“Have we met? You seem to know me, but I don’t recall having seen you before. And I think I would remember.”

“My friend knows you, slightly.”

Patton glanced again at the tall man. “I meet a lot of folks here. I don’t remember him, off the top of my head. And you, you would be...?”

She smiled. “Lucedio. Lamia Lucedio.”

Now it was Patton’s turn to smile. “What can I do for you, Miss Lucedio?”

The professor was watching from the bar. Patton could feel his eyes fixed on him, even as the woman’s smile and scent teased him.

“I hope you don’t think me too forward, but I was hoping you could pass along a message to Mr. Capone for me.”

“What, another one? I’m not Western Union.”

Her beautiful green eyes made it clear that she didn’t understand, but then she smiled again.

“Ah, yes, well...what with Mr. Capone currently being incarcerated, we really thought you would be someone who could handle an introduction. He is about to complete his brief exile from Chicago, or so I’m told.”

What was the woman getting at? She was gorgeous, and Patton was enjoying looking at her, but her questions made alarm bells ring in his head.

“I only know what I read in the papers, Ma’am. I don’t know Al Capone.”

Those amazing eyes turned pouty. “Please, Mayor Patton. Everyone knows you worked with Mr. Torrio, and now you work with Mr. Capone. Please, just give him this card, and ask him to get in touch when he has the time. I’m sure he will be busy catching up at first, but I think he really will want to talk with us. We did him quite a favor, after all. And we would like to do him another.”

“Okay, I’ll bite. What favor?”

“Well,” said another voice, “we gave Mr. Capone a Valentine’s Day present.”

The man from the bar had joined them. Patton had been so busy staring at the woman he hadn’t noticed the man walking up.

“Just tell him it was with our compliments, and that we’d like to talk,” the thin man continued. “We have in mind to solve other problems.”

“I don’t know that Al Capone has many problems he needs help with,” said Patton with a smile.

“We can help with problems he doesn’t even know about yet,” said the man.

“I think we’re done,” said Patton curtly. “I don’t know what you’re talkin’ about. I doubt *you* know what you’re talking about. But from what I read in the papers, Al Capone don’t need any help in solvin’ his problems.”

“Just give him the card,” smiled the woman, with that hypnotic smile. “He’ll want to talk with us.” She seemed to narrow her green eyes just slightly. “It’s in your

own interest to make this introduction. Vital. Do not fail me. Make sure he gets the card.”

Patton looked as if someone had just slapped him. His eyes widened. The he nodded, almost imperceptively. The woman took Patton’s hand in her own, closing his fingers around a black business card.

“Tell him it’s about business,” added the man. “We’re opening up an establishment, and would like to sell Mr. Capone’s products.” The woman shot him a harsh look, but said nothing to him.

“A pleasure to meet you, Mayor Patton,” whispered the woman. Her voice gave him shivers. He thought about having the guy escorted out and seeing if the woman might want to have a drink with him in his office. But then he looked into the thin man’s eyes.

Fucker has yellow eyes, realized Patton. It gave him the creeps.

Patton waved down a burly waiter. “Joey, this gentleman is just leaving. Make sure he finds his way out.”

The professor didn’t look happy, but he didn’t object as he was shown the door. The woman smiled and followed. But Patton shivered again, as a combination of arousal and fear swept over him. He was not sorry to see them leave, in spite of how attractive he had found the woman.

But the gaunt man gave his escort a funny look on the way out, and then the woman smiled at him and whispered something in his ear, and all three walked out the door into the rain. That struck Patton as odd, but he didn’t move. Not right away. He was distracted by a commotion at the bar. Someone apparently had just stood up and passed out right there, collapsing in a heap.

Another damn fool who can’t hold his liquor, thought Patton.

Distracted, he looked at the card. It was black, with what looked like the smudge of a red handprint on it, and a phone number.

He fingered the card and thought about tossing it in the trash. He didn’t, though. He wondered if this was some kind of weird variation of the Black Hand, some old

country deal connected to *Unione Siciliana* or something. He finally stuffed it into his pocket.

It was then he realized that something felt wrong. Joey should have been back already. Hell, he should never have gone out in the first place. He felt for his piece, tucked under his armpit, and headed out the door.

The rain hadn't let up. It was cold and windy and Patton cursed as he stepped into a puddle. The rain and mist made it a little difficult to see. There was no sign of the woman, the professor, or of Joey.

“Lovely night for a stroll.”

The sound of Lindle's voice made Patton jump.

“Christ, you asshole. Don't sneak up on me, unless you wanna be shot.”

“Sorry, Mr. Mayor. Don't shoot, I might be a voter.”

Patton swung around then, gun at the ready. Lindle had heard the noise, too, something like a man being startled awake, he thought.

Patton tried to hear where the noise had come from, but the band inside started playing “Thirty-Fifth and Calumet” and it was hard to hear anything else. Wet and cold, Patton stomped back to the Arrowhead. They didn't find Joey until several days later.

Cosa Nosferatu is available at

[Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)