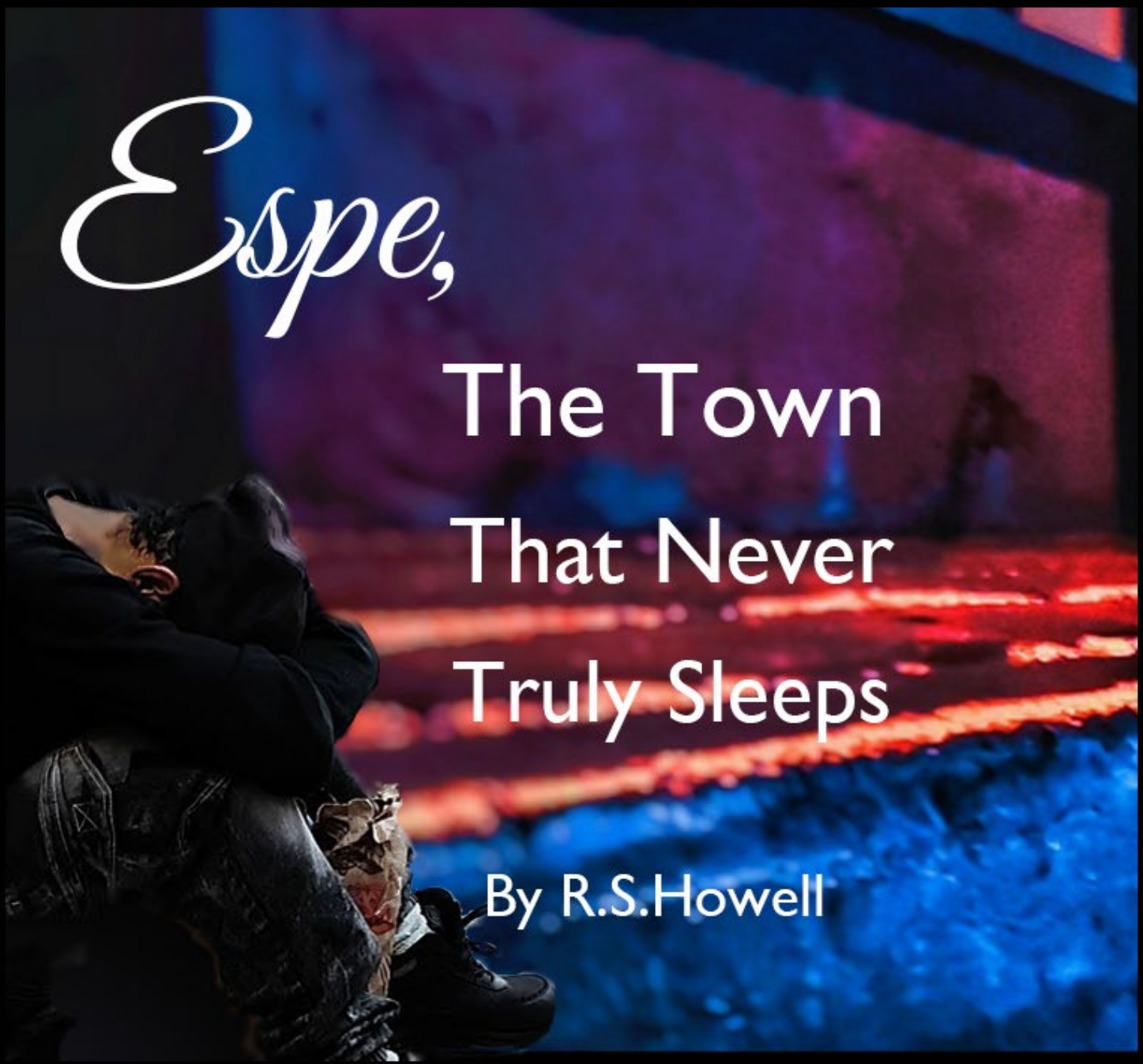
Espe,
The Town
That Never
Truly Sleeps
By R.S.Howell

Espe, The Town That Never Truly Sleeps

This short story about addiction introduces young Evan.

Parodying a line of a brilliant Kevin Ayre song (Voice From The Bottom of a Well), “He didn’t move here, he just fell.”

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Espe, The Town That Never Truly Sleeps

Part 1, of 4

In the bright, money-luring sector of Espe, night draws in.

Ranks of custom, gaudy street lamps flicker on like fake moons.

The lamp's cold, white-silver light snakes through a maze of hallowed pathways, threading vein-like through a commercial heart.

Moths are the first visitors to be ensnared by this trickster town, which never truly sleeps. Peeling away from shadowed retreats, they circle the globes in confused throes like tiny wannabe Marco Polo's, desperate to reach uncharted lands.

Throughout the maze, the nightly ritual of closing shutters and blinds grumbles and clatters, marking the end of trade. The gladdening rattles compete with jingling keys on jangled rings, clinking together like glasses in a 'cheers mate' moment. Hands eager to throw off work snap chunky padlocks in place. All along these commercial byways, a diverse choir of exhausted workers sing their gladdened,
"Good nights". Or expressive arms semaphore their largely insincere, although not all, unrehearsed but beautiful a cappella, "See you Monday".

For some, a Saturday night means dancing and drinking. Maybe a curry, or a spin around the ice rink? One or two love-struck pairs, reluctant to return to troublesome homes, hang back in doorways for long hugs in their secret, shadowy lairs.

Respecting the lover's privacy, the town turns away.

For a few moments, other than their urgent, but soft, breathy fumblings, the maze falls quiet and shakes away the fumes and echoes of the dwindling traffic. Then, as if awaking anew, this part of town utters a long, drawn-out, sumptuously meaty yawn. Donning a sparkly dress of neon lights, liberally dowsed with the perfumes of arousing food and coffee, it lays tantalising trails along the streets, ensnaring the innocent and old hands alike.

At the other end of town, close to Espe's Norman St Agnes Church, the cherry bomb end, as some call it, there are no welcoming signs. In the old decaying sector of Scuttler's Corner, Evan, the first of the town's less avant-garde voodoo-dreaming night dwellers, slips out unseen from his daytime hiding place.

Just like the confused moths circling their globes, he heads for the light, while avoiding it. Quickly and skilfully, he blends with the confusing pools of despondent shadows thrown by those darkened shops. On better days, he might smile; they loiter like pickpockets, reckoning their gains. With hunched shoulders and lowered head, he quickly passes those buildings still ablaze. Always careful to avoid the mean, sickly yellow, almost jaundiced street lights, he seeks the traders skulking between those buildings.

As the evening progresses, other desperadoes converge to muddle around with heads down and faces deeply etched with the agonies of withdrawal. Never together, but close, they search furtively and urgently like body snatchers in graveyards to unearth the sellers of merchandise they yearn for.

Adorned in an addict's pale, with shaking hands and blotchy skin, Evan takes his position outside the meeting hole for the tribe MacHeads. The burger bar is his

spot. It is his place in a self-made non-partisan destiny. Or was it self-made? Far beyond thinking about fate, he lowers down onto the cold pavement alone. Yet not. He is joined by people with eyes too ready to turn away from life's rejects. As they hurriedly pass by, some, with cold tones or a politician's grimace, will moan. "Urgh! Not more disgusting zombies. When will they stop infesting the streets, we pay for!"

He has heard it all, many times, but he'll not give up his rhyme. Be this a burger bar or a store selling wine, this is his spot, come rain, come shine. His connection to all he holds divine.

Espe, Part 2

To the more fortunate, Evan is a reject, one to ignore or to be bullied, but despite their spite, he has a companion. Well, two, really. Both of them he constantly thinks about and yearns for in equal fervour. Both dwell within his core, both pull at him, in their different yet similar ways, and together they control his life. But one offers him something extra for it dwells within his heart. It is the essence of the one, if they could, who would fill him with the wonderful musical poetry of love gifted by a devoted soul. That one he fondly calls Mother.

Sitting at his spot, he sees her sometimes at the back of the crowd waiting at the roadside to cross. She is there but not with them. From her place, she neither waves hello or goodbye. Nor does she leave, yet, neither does she stay. Her time is the blink of an eye, watering to cry.

She stands at the back staring with darkened eyes, filled with a sad, silent acceptance of her fate and her son's lifestyle. Those who might notice may well wonder, what does she see in her unblinking blankness? Not so for Evan. To him, her eyes glisten with a mother's devotion. Caught in their glow, he yearns to reach out and pull her close, to adore again the etched lines and soft puffiness beneath those soft, conker brown eyes.

"They have grown that way," she once told a younger Evan, "to underline the love my heart holds for you, my dearest darling son. As did the lines on my forehead, and so will the grey in my hair when it comes. Together they will sing of my love for you. And, just you wait, my son," she laughed. "They will grow into a choir whose song will cheer heaven itself when you bring my grandchildren for a visit."

With love and hope, Evan occasionally waves to her, but she never waves back. Nevertheless, he waits in a web of trepidation, longing, and love, for the traffic lights to change and for her to come. But when the hordes of wildebeest pedestrians rush across, she never joins them. Nor does she come alone. She merely stands staring mournfully at her much-loved child, a child wrenched from her breast she can't help. A child trapped by that second companion who does not care to let him be.

While the MacHeads' uncaring of Evan's breaking heart flock to their church and enter in a flow of banter, his heart calls loudly, while silently mouthing the words.

"Mama Mary. Mama Mary. Come to me, Mama Mary."

"To others, those words of yours," she once explained with laughter. "Are my slave names, child. But not when you say them, my son. I know you mean Mambo, your magical charm, your healer. And I will always be your Mambo."

For a while, she had another pair of names too, Slave Wife, although she refused to bow to them, and young Evan loyally took her side. She was certainly no man's slave. A person such as my mother, with her loving heart, should never be that. A victim, yes, sadly, he learnt young, and a beaten wife for a while. Proudly, that boy watched his mother refusing to be a man's slave. Other than a willing one to her darling, adorable Evan. The boy she lovingly piggy-backed, come rain, come shine, to school and home again.

He lives now, mourning for the loss of a oneness he shared with her, nuzzled against her shoulders, with arms loosely thrown around her neck and legs gently gripping her sides. Safely, he nestled in the small of her back, that wonderful, comfortable, natural curvature which he, as a young boy, fitted into so snugly.

Being borne effortlessly along the pavement by her, and with her, was a joy, that joy he mourns for now.

Espe, Part 3

Within the ancient breeze, other than the horrors of pollution, many secrets lie. As it comes to lick the tears from his face, it passes a shared secret back. Again, he feels the motion and rhythm of his mother's swaying hips. With pricking eyes, his steps follow the muscle memory of his once metronomic, gentle rise and fall to her strong, long, easy, lazy-loping, almost dreamy strides. He once thought that being carried on her back was better than any spin on a carousel, unless she was there riding beside him and laughing along with his fright and thrills. Sadly, though, he was never allowed to complete the fairground experience by eating candyfloss while she carried him around. "It'll stick to my hair, boy," she laughed. "And it's bad for your teeth," she scolded. Some theories, especially for Evan, begged to be tested, and he tried. "Oh, but mama…mama, my mambo."

"Don't you be trying that nonsense on me, boy," she laughed, while hitching him ever higher until he was almost sitting on her strong shoulders. From those giddy heights, he laughed back. "You will say yes one day, Mama, I know you will."

She never did, and now it is too late.

He still seeks candyfloss, but a different kind, a type that will not stick to hair, but heavily and indelibly it does stick to both their spirits.

As a boy, riding upon her back on the way to school, they would pass the very bank of shops he sits by now. Pride would fill his heart to bursting whenever he caught the reflection in the large picture-glass windows of her beautiful, changeless, calm face. Her always settled, forever contented expression clearly said

to him. “This is all I want from my life, to be with this boy, my joy, my heart, my everything.”

He felt the same way about her, too. So, how could this litmus-paper lad not smile as he soaked up her warmth and goodness? He did, glowing like a prince amongst fireflies while imagining the honks and hoots from passing cars was the street’s symphony saluting the vision of loveliness that was his mother.

In the cold evening air, beneath the glaring light spilling through the burger bar window, he very nearly smiled at the memory. But as always, the rushing traffic, desperate to populate the next metre of empty tarmac, was a startling reminder of her broken death. Of her spilt blood. Her gore, which in the crush had covered his school uniform, even though somehow, she managed to throw her beloved son clear. Then, of being left alone, scarred, marred and broken.

His smile as the memory rose was crushed before it could properly start.

Beneath those new layers of tarmac he stares at from his spot, and hidden from all eyes but his, lay the bloody spores of her passing along with an infill of gore. Regardless of any new covering layers, it always rises to the fore. They are the traces that his darling mother was once here. As are those minuscule particles of flesh he believes were forced into the fine joints of the metal bumper that pulverised her. As they were forced, too, into the red school jumper, he wore then and still possesses. He will not give it up. It is his connection to her, the one he held tightly to his heart as he sat in the hospital crying for her, and on through the ensuing years. He cannot bear to be parted from it. Whenever he moves, it is the last thing he packs and the first item unpacked. Along with his dried boyhood tears, it bears the scars and pains and the tortured memory of her murder.

Years on, that drunk driver is not finished with him either. In his mind, the memory of that murderous act reverses over her body, as if the driver is seeking to destroy her again. Or the life of the young one he missed. The young one whose tiny arms tried to fend off his mother's murderer, her death. The little one who hears those screams, both hers and his, which never die. If anything, they grow ever louder and more virulent. Daily, he begs the screams to go, leave, cease, or at least quieten down. Let me breathe. But the bullying memories refuse. The more he grovels, the harder they come, beating and willing him to self-destruct.

Espe, Part 4, of 4

As a lonely orphan, he wandered those same streets, crying, "Won't somebody help me be rid of this pain?" Ignored by most, one day, a voice from an alleyway answered his plea.

"I hear ya, mate. Try this… it'll help, and it's cheap. We understand ya pain, mate. And you can ave this first pipe on me. I'll even set it up for ya. And I'll always be 'ere when you want more."

So now Evan waits at his spot with his past blunted by depression, destitution, hopelessness, bleeding gums, loose teeth and induced desires. His present bites sharply into his guts. Sometimes, as an unbearable ache. Or temporarily, the pain leaves to lie at his feet in a pool of colourless bile.

Thoughts of death sit alongside, but he does not dwell with them. It is not for him to ponder the irony that the only difference between death and life is a need for oxygen. Although even that, as he sits near the wayside, wreathed in fumes, is turning into a luxury. He doesn't complain, for who would bother to listen? He is not even able to persuade passers-by to drop the price of a coffee.

Hungry, but not caring, or daring to think about it, he rots by the window, believing he is fit for nothing because others tell him. Or they have gladly, wickedly, fed the myth that addicts are worthless spongers and wasters. But not so Evan. Although, yes, for some, sadly, that may be true, especially if their problems are ignored.

Haunted by their closely guarded stories, victims drag their chains of unbearable pain around. Several times, daily, just as Evan does, they seek the acidic, unscrupulous places hidden from the sunlight in every city, town and village. The places where the drug-fuelled, moral, ethical, legal and social corruption degrades this beleaguered green skein. This so-called changeless, privileged isle, which dances still to the songs of class and slavery. The land we collectively and some fondly call Britain. Whatever this land be, it is not the beloved isle of the artistic, music-loving, storytelling, family-protecting, freedom-preserving Celts.

Across the country, withered friends of Evan daily give up pieces of their lives to those redeemers who, for a quick profit, convert deadly poisons found beneath the sinks of many homes. Poisons that, when smoked, will burn noses and throats, and turn lungs, stomachs and livers into pulp. Alternatively, turn the victims into a living menhir without memories or identities. Petrified zombies, social eyesores, fit only to be ridiculed, robbed, beaten, abused, arrested or carted off in a bag. While the powerful look on, refusing to take the blame or to care enough to wonder why, beyond cursing the loss of a slave.

Through the grace of God and watched over by his loving mother, Evan is counted amongst the living, but still groans. “Please help me escape into the realms of the forgetting.”

While we, the disgusted, turn away when he starts to cry.

Or sneer at others, “We hope you blimming die!”

Or pass their unmarked graves without a sigh.