

Bar Hopping
or
A Romantic Comedy in Nine Parts

by
Robert Boyczuk

I. THE OPENING OF OUR STORY IN WHICH WE FIND OURSELVES IN THE MIDST OF A CONVIVIAL COMPANY, BECOME ACQUAINTED WITH OUR HERO, AND ARE WITNESS TO HIS BUDDING DESIRE.

I watch her watching Stan.

The drafts are beginning to work their crawling magic, and Stan, who's a big Polish guy, laughs deeply, his gut shaking ho ho ho, now talking too fast while we listen too slow. Stan who started all this anyway, telling tales of the bars to come, pulling the map he has drawn and photocopied from the pocket of his huge, faded coveralls, smoothing it on the table, its corner drinking in a small pool of beer. Eyes up and down watching him, not just hers, nearly everyone's. Only a few familiar faces, looking mostly new to this, listening. Scuzzy, he says in the voice too loud, You ain't seen nothing yet! He tosses back another draft and bangs the empty glass down on the table, his seventh, and suddenly a tumbling jumble of everyone all at once talking, telling their own bad bar stories: this is too tame, too pathetic, a wimpy whiny pale imitation of a bar, a stop unworthy of our pub crawl, Stan the affable host having done it again, everyone laughing and drinking now, still uncertainly, not quite at ease yet, no that will happen two or three bars from now, but talking anyway, the button down office suits and starched

skirts beginning to melt away, the fluorescent corridors fading in dim smoky light, the knots coming undone beneath the sagging stained ceiling tiles, all of us working towards that moment of incoherent perfection.

She sits quietly, pulling lightly at her beer, listening while the stories wash around her like an ocean lapping at her ankles, one after another, tugging for an instant, before receding. She remains aloof, apart, her gaze distant and insoluble, her eyes shining as if she sees something past what is here. I do not know her, have never seen her before. But that is not so unusual. Not so unlikely, so improbable. It is a large office, and I am a small person, she is far down the table, and it is still too early to tell.

II. IN WHICH OUR HERO VISITS YET ANOTHER PUBLIC HOUSE AND CONDUCTS A PRIVATE CONVERSATION WITH HIS CLOSE FRIEND REGARDING THE DISPOSITION OF A CERTAIN YOUNG LADY'S AFFECTIONS.

Side by side we stand, Stan pissing forever, a steady golden stream that tells the tale of five bars of two beers each, a thrumming porcelain sound that never ends.

Who? he says.

In the jeans and suede jacket, I say. Lumberjack shirt that looks like it was taken out of the plastic bag this morning.

Michelle?

Yeah, I shrug. I guess so. Brown eyes, black hair.

Yeah, he says. Michelle. I think she works in marketing. Pretty sure anyway. He belches. She's cute.

Cute? I think, listening to the dull splattering of his urine and hard, miserly word cute, thinking, No, it is too small a term for her, all wrong, not generous enough. Michelle: loose-stranded hair piled atop a face round and fine featured; a short scattering of lines that radiate from the folded corners of eyes like pensive thoughts; skin that's warm, almost glowing, almost orange in these poorly lit interiors, a darker flush creeping high across high cheeks keeping pace with her beer; the smooth perfection of her throat as she bends head back to laughter, a softness I imagine brushing beneath my cheek, my lips, my tongue. Michelle.

Yeah, I say. She seeing anyone?

Don't think so. At least she didn't come with anyone, he says, and smile sighs. If I weren't married

!! I say.

He laughs. Don't worry.

But then my stream falters, dries up, his still thundering away, now reading on the wall an unsteady scrawl: 'Drunkenness shows the mind of a man, as a mirror reflects his person. Aeschines.' I clear my throat. Sure is cute, I say just to have something in my mouth, though it sounds stupid even to me, and walk, with the exaggerated care of too many beers, out the creaking plywood door.

III. A BRIEF INTERLUDE DURING WHICH OUR HERO REFLECTS ON THE NATURE OF TRUTH AND GOODNESS.

I love them: the Edgewater, the Drake, the Black Bull, the Duke of Cannaght, the Claremont, even the lowly Rex. Love them because they admit no lies, are too tired for the untruths of life, too dark for misunderstanding, too smoke filled for the mistaken belief of clear thought. Those who live here know what I mean: empty brief faces staring incuriously at the apparition we are before them, then sliding back into a beery contemplation of a line of endlessly rising bubbles. We do not belong, yet there is no resentment in their glances, only dull glassy-eyed resignation, as if they listen to a jackhammer thump thump thumping miles away. No, no lies here, no pretend smiles, only heavy brown panelling and a wall-eyed patron nodding off, waiters poised with another two drafts, trays filled with the cracked glass truth of beer.

And she is far too beautiful.

Michelle, I think thinking of her. Beautiful Michelle.

IV. WHEREIN OUR HERO BELIEVES HE MAKES HIS INTENTIONS REGARDING THE YOUNG LADY KNOWN TO HER THOUGH THEY ARE SCARCE VISIBLE TO THE NAKED EYE.

Piling into the next bar, scramble for seats, dragging of tables together to form a long snake of dissipation. New bar, though it hardly matters, same waiters, same middle-aged men wrapped in white shirt and black pants, change belts slung wide and low beneath broad belly rolls of flesh, lugging endless trays of watery draft. Same cosy wafting stale

warmness on this cool summer night, sign overhead, NO DRUG SELLING, and smudged glasses, a little chip in the lip of this one, just like the last bar. Sinking gratefully, at last, into hard wooden seat across and down from her. Playing it cool, talking to those I know, corner eyeing her, watching, always watching, hoping my desperation does not light up my eyes like a display window.

A toast! Stan shouts into the rhubarb of conversation, I loving him for it, that glorious son of a bitch, loving these times and bars like he does, their warm smoky uncaringness. To the regulars and the novices, he cries, of the Fourth Annual Queen Street Pubs Crawl!

Arms extend, glasses rise like chalices, clinks and sloshed beer fill the air, Stan the first to follow his own toast. And in the rush I catch her eye, and she half-smiles back, a reach and flat click of contact, even through this insulating distance, a jolt of electricity leaps across glass, bounds down my arm and smashes into my chest, heart catching like the grinding of gears, stutters as if to stop, coughs and returns to life, beating with a new rhythm of blood and need, when she half-smiles back.

Here's to those who wish us well,
and those who don't can go to hell,
for we are the men who've turned to vice,
gone-or-rheaa and syph-ill-ice,
we've had them all by Jesus Christ!
Gentlemen, the Queen!

Stan's words are a chorus in the background, oh wonderful well-worn words, heard a hundred times before. We are the self-same in this, Stan and I, we loving these tumbledown places with their warm beer glow, their silent quick waiters appearing to fill your emptiness without a sound, without a question, these beer-fueled, thought-stopping moments when anything, anything, seems possible.

V. A RESPITE IN THIS BRANNIGAN DURING WHICH A MOST FORTUNATE ENCOUNTER OCCURS.

A tug at my arm.

Come on, Stan hisses, walking at the back of the pack, me shuffling like a lonely slave down to the next bar, trapped by friends and fear and

distance from her, without the courage of adequate beer. Come on, he says again, dragging me off between lightless buildings, and out of her sight.

In the alley a spliff appears unannounced, cradled in fingers held low, the slow curl of its smoke drifting between our huddled bodies, a single tiny serpent's eye red glowing in the night. Away from her I feel like a drowning man who's just lost sight of land.

What? Stan says. What'd you say?

Nothing. Nothing.

Here, joint passed to me, and I drink it greedily, knowing I need its not-caring balance, thinking the next bar, yeah, I'll make my move then, pulling it as deep as it will go, letting it drive away my uncertainty and excuses, surrendering to its promise of things that will come, waiting for the first tightening of my scalp and shiver crawl along the flesh of my arms.

Tap on my shoulder, and suddenly I'm awake, still clutching the spliff between my fingers as I'm drifting off, and I hold it out, eyes still closed, saying Sorry.

Then, startling me, a soft brushing of finger tips whisper along the back of my hand like a light dusting of snow, from behind, not Stan, slipping the stick free, a delicate touch, not Stan's.

Open eyed, I stare at her. The line of her jaw, her cheek, are flawless brush strokes in this smoked stunned air as she leans into our three, calf and thigh pressed solid against mine, me not daring a move, impaled, backs like puzzle pieces locked against the world. Breast softly rising against my arm as she inhales deeply, eyes narrowed, pursing full lips I ache to touch. And she holds it. Impossibly long without movement, a statue of perfection knit of shadows. I hold my breath too, waiting, waiting. Exhaling at last, a dam bursts somewhere, all at once blood rushing through my head, my ears and beyond, me giddy and faltering in the cradle of darkness. She rubs against me like a cat, and I hardly notice the sigh (hers or mine?) venturing a small pressure, and she smiles, firm and not moving, like a promise, a pledge, a vow. She is a drug more potent than any I have known, and I inhale her through my eyes as she takes another toke, drawing in the dreamy darkness of the alley, the tendrils of her rushing into my lungs, my blood, my brain.

She passes the joint to Stan with a sudden, unexpected laugh that makes my heart lurch like a Mexican bus; she turns and her lips graze my cheek, a caress, the beat of a hummingbird's wings, and she is gone, a hole in the night.

Pressed in my open palm a folded piece of paper.

The joint has burned to the quick, and Stan fumbles in his pockets, finding the clip, attaching it and raising the roach to his lips, now drawing

the last life of it into his gullet, wreathing us with comfortable clouds of smoke, cheeks distended as he puffs, face lit in the tiny redness as the joint pulses like an angry eye, while I curl my hand carefully into a fist round this, our tenuous connection.

VI. A REFLECTION BY OUR HERO ON THE NATURE OF LOVE AND THE ROLE OF SPIRITS IN FORTIFYING COURAGE, STRENGTHENING SOCIAL POISE AND ENHANCING GRACE.

Oh the pangs of love and fear! But how, when, where? First another bar, first another beer. Soon, soon, I will speak to her, not just yet, savouring the simplicity of this wordless connection, the flawless silence that won't admit anything but purity of intention: without words there can be no lies. Chairs distant, she glances at me, but it is still too early, and I don't watch, feeling her eyes trailing after me in the cluttered clattering now of this staggering bar, while I, full of plans and notions, drink in silent fervour, clutching her crumpled slip of unread paper like a weighty charm, waiting for the perfect moment, waiting for my chance.

VII. A VISIT TO THE ESTEEMED ESTABLISHMENT OF THE DRAKE; OUR HERO SUFFERS A TEMPORARY SETBACK AND LEARNS THE EXACTING COST OF HESITATION.

He is too tall, as they always are, his clothes too clean, his poise too exact, wearing his not-belonging with pride. Behind him, stained red velvet wallpaper with scratches of black that look like the devil's head over and over, wrought iron fixtures holding burnt out bulbs, a country and western band floats, like an island, as he swings through a ring of pensioners in cowboy clothes, me sinking sullenly into my beer, lower and lower, the sounds of twanging lost love wash over me, me, (she smiled, she smiled, I know she did so long ago), watching a wagon wheel bolted to the wall that seems to spin spin spin ...

... and laughing, she spins past like a leaf on the tongue of the wind, twisting in faster circles her face flushed, in the arms of another, while drowning, I sink slowly into my drink, a lonely slip of paper hanging limply in my hand.

VIII. WHICH, AMONG OTHER THINGS,
ILLUSTRATES HOW OUR HERO MIGHT BENEFIT BY
HEEDING THE WORDS OF THE GREAT BARD: 'THIS
IS THE MONSTROSITY OF LOVE, LADY, THAT THE
WILL IS INFINITE AND THE EXECUTION
CONFINED.'

We never spoke so she never lied, will not lie with me but in the lies I wove. Too late in this growling alcoholic haze, Stan absorbed in passionate debate with his hat, while under the table lie scattered, bloated beer bodies, and I struggle to hold collapsing walls back, unthinking of her, no, instead considering the message of the table as if it means everything, the brown, peeling table top, its cool rings of beer, pitted and scratched with obscure pen-knife text, cratered with undecipherable cigarette burns, running fingers over this blistered landscape, real words humming round with their own obscure messages, not watching them through slitted snake eyes as they entangle, unwatching through bottom of my glass, they leaving hand in hand, I undrink the last drops, the motion of glass remembered by a wash of pissed-out colour, a cold unburning brush-stroked after image passing, while conversation washes round like a heaving river, carrying me along, lost in swirling cold, thinking someplace, somewhen, she stands on a stage reading poetry that makes no sense, her ragged paper soaking in a pool of beer before me, fibers growing heavy with amber liquid, thick wormy letters inching across the page: Buy me a beer?

IX. THE CONCLUSION OF OUR HISTORY IN WHICH
AN UNEXPECTED AND PROPITIOUS EVENT REUNITES
OUR YOUNG LOVERS AT THE FINAL ALE HOUSE; A
GREAT FEAST AND JOYOUS CELEBRATION ENSUES.

... glaring single moment of certainty, words large like semaphores: SHE. IS. GONE. Stumble-stepping down the street, slipping through another blurred door, shhhhhh, outside tires sighing on cement, head abuzz, drifting above the press, strange fearful shifting faces, to fill, there, at last, an empty space. Finger circles round old glass rings, sweat on wet, waiting, treading water, really, until the fist is softened by a single finger raised for the same

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