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The Only Bar In Hell

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The Only Bar In Hell

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"Every night the same scene is played. The men with goathorned heads gather in one dark corner, and the women with painted masks in another. They sit and drink and think their sordid thoughts, and never make a move to the opposite side of the room. There is a story that one of them tried to do it once. No one has ever tried again."

Cover Page Footnote

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The Only Bar in Hell

By Frank Interlichia

"It is the infliction of our miserable minds -- it is the scourge of atrocious but probably just destiny that no grief comes by itself. No, any great grief, though the grief itself may have gone leaves in its place a train of horrors, of misery, and despair."

Ford Madox Ford
The Good Soldier

Every night the same scene is played. The men with goat-horned heads gather in one dark corner, and the women with painted masks in another. They sit and drink and think their sordid thoughts, and never make a move to the opposite side of the room. There is a story that one of them tried to do it once. No one has ever tried again.

I suppose I've been sitting on this same bar stool for somewhere near three hundred years. I'm not really sure. There's no clock on the wall, and no calendar behind the bar. But I guess this is where I'll stay, because, even if I could leave, there's nowhere else to go.

Sitting to my left is the one-eyed merchant. Next to him, the old woman who reads the cards. They say she used to be the wisest woman in all Europe. Every night she does a reading for the merchant, on the side of his blind eye. He does not see, and she does not care. The drinks are free and the bar never runs dry. She kills her miserable success with straight gin.

I kill mine with sour mash whiskey. "Another shot here, barkeep."

Down the bar from the unseen seer are Hayward and Crownshaw, the artists. I've heard their only conversation a thousand times; I can hear it in my dreams:

--Yes, Ward, yes. It is finished. Not that I've put the words down or any of that rot. That's just the work of a technician. It's all up here, up here, where it really counts.

--Shaw, Shaw, Shaw. As soon as I get to my studio, I'm going to set down this verse that lives in my heart. It will raise this miserable world to its feet and set the all dancing.

--Well, let's have one for the Muse.

--And one for the road.

--The road, the road . . .

--Yes, as soon as we get home . . .

--Yes, as soon as we get home . . .

The conversation always lapses there . . . My attention wanders, my thoughts brew, and later -- always later -- I hear Crownshaw mutter, a little more drunkenly, "Yes, Ward, yes. It is finished . . ."

They both know they will never leave. None of us can. None of us except Wayland.

There are those who mutter that outside, Eliot Wayland is the Devil himself. That's absurd. The Devil doesn't ride a Harley. "Another whiskey, bartender." Yeah, Wayland is the only one who ever leaves. Every night he plays his little vignette -- every night, just like the rest of us. That's another reason why I figure he's not the Devil. The Devil's got no reason to punish himself. He's just doing his job.

After awhile, the whiskey doesn't burn anymore. They say you can get used to anything . . . they say . . .

Back to good old Wayland. He bursts in through the swinging doors, sending both sides crashing into the wall. He is covered with dust and sweat and hatred. His deep-set, black eyes challenge the room, and his huge arms and chest bulge from under his filthy denim vest. "Who was the toughest guy in this bar before I got here," he bellows. The music stops. The room is silent. Then comes a voice from one of the tables hidden in the darkness. "I guess that's me." And up stands skinny Roy to a burst of collective laughter. Head bowed and shoulders hunched forward, Roy shuffles shakily toward the mountainous creature blocking the door. There is laughter in good old Wayland's eyes . . . until Roy shoots a quick bony fist into the right one and follows with a knobby elbow into the left. Then all hell breaks loose. Somehow that knife always appears in Roy's hand, and there's always blood and cursing and screaming. So much screaming. And then there's always Roy, like a demented David, holding up the severed head of his Goliath for all to see.

A shotgun blast from behind the bar turns all eyes away from the grisly sight. "Show's over, folks," yells the bartender. "Drinks on the house!" And there's a crush to the bar, even though the drinks are always free. And soon everyone forgets what happened. They just forget. I turn to see what the gladiators are doing, and they're gone; no decapitated corpse, no blood, no Roy.

I turn to my right and ask Freddie the Judas where they went. Freddie doesn't answer, of course, because he has

no mouth. But he shrugs his shoulders. And he and I forget, like all the rest . . . like none of it ever happened.

“Another drink here!”

I wonder why I’m different. None of the others know where they are. It’s so awful; they just don’t see. But I’m cursed to see the uselessness, the waste, the absurdity. I try to tell them, but they never listen. I wonder what I did. I wonder why I’m here.

The place itself, I haven’t told you about the place. But perhaps I don’t have to; you’ve probably been there. The air is stagnant and filled with smoke; the music is everywhere. It screams from the walls and the floor and the ceiling. Chaotic, blaring music, distorted beyond recognition. The room is deathly dark and crowded – a crush of sweaty bodies rubbing obscenely against each other. Hungry eyes search and search again. Passion without a target.

I’m lucky. I have my seat at the bar, between silent Freddie and the one-eyed merchant. I wonder why I’m here.

I sit there, staring across the bar at the dusty cash register and a heart-shaped mirror that reflects an image of myself so much darker than the rest of the room. I look at myself for all eternity, and the whiskey takes hold. I never see any farther than that mirror. I can’t find a window. There are no windows here.

The merchant pulls a huge wad of money from his jacket pocket and begins counting the worn bills. They are pliant and soft as cloth from the old man’s constant fingerings. He tilts his head obscenely in the dimness to find the faded figures with his one eye. He mutters numbers to himself that no one cares about, and with a nod of contentedness, he concludes his lovemaking and replaces his worthless heart back in his jacket pocket. I’ve seen him do it a thousand times.

Why aren’t I drunk yet? “One more here!”

I lean my crooked body over the mahogany plain and listen to the chaos. I want to scream and cry and smash and destroy until they listen. “It’s insane,” I would cry out if I could. “Don’t you see!” It’s all so insane . . .

But I never cry out. “Another round for the bar. This one’s on me.” This one’s on me.

It sure is.

We all dance the Devil’s dance. Moving to his feverish pitch, faster and faster, frantically racing nowhere. There’s nowhere else to go.

I play my part too, but without the drama or the audience that skinny Roy gets. I’ve tried to stop it countless times, tried so desperately with this sour mash whiskey. But it doesn’t work; and I know that it won’t; and I



always try. The whole night I sit silently dreading the moment. And whoever’s pulling the strings plays a grotesque game with me. He waits for me to think I’ve won, to think I’ve escaped my fate with blessed drunken unconsciousness. He waits until I think victory is clasped securely in my hands, and then snatches it away. And I glance at the mirror, in that damned mirror . . . and I see her face.

It’s only there for a moment, if it’s ever really there at all. And the cry wells up in my throat, and the tears cloud the image. I clench my fists in impotent rage, and always, always, kill the memory by hurling a shot glass into the past, and shattering the mirror into a handful of dust. The noises of chaos drift in and out of a muddled skull.

-Yes, as soon as we get home . . .

-Yes, as soon as we get home . . .

And in my sleep
And in my sleep, between the chaos and the dread, there is always the sound of a baby’s cry . . .

The rest is always restless, and the waking bathed in cold sweat. And I start out of my dreamlessness to meet a horrified gaze in the same heart-shaped mirror behind the bar.