

THIS TIME

By J.D. Smith

No matter what a guy wants to tell himself when he's trying to work his way out of a tight spot or beat a rap or if he's simply tired of thinking, some things just don't happen on their own. Guns don't just go off without a finger on the trigger or at least a bump from a clumsy hand. Twenty-five large in gambling debts, with your kneecaps for collateral, doesn't come up unless you wrap your hands around a pair of dice or a few cards now and then. And you just don't find yourself waking up in a doorway in a strange town with your wallet cleaned out and your tie still knotted while stray cats walk by with their noses in the air and rats with hard little gangster eyes try to size you up as danger or food.

There generally has to be a reason.

This time wasn't much different. I'd just unloaded a stolen Grand Am's trunk-load of unregistered pieces. I'd filed off the registration numbers myself and thrown in a Chinese AK that hadn't been switched over to full automatic. There was no point in getting caught carrying if the local law enforcement pulled me over for being not so local. Besides, I'm a regular guy. Throwing in the extra iron didn't cost me much. That model nearly does grow on trees, and this

business, like any other, is all about building relationships. And now my gas mileage would improve. In exchange for a hundred pounds or so of pieces I had gotten a cigar box of unmarked and unnumbered bills out of sequence, none crisp, none counterfeit - don't ask me how I know - and none larger than a double sawbuck. I wasn't about to draw attention to myself by being a big

spender. Still, a man has to celebrate his good fortune when he can, and unwind a little from all his hard work.

The opportunity presented itself in the form of a side-street bar between a tattoo parlor called Sluggo's and a Chinese carry-out named Four Happiness - one more than usual. The name of the bar escapes me. It wasn't hard to find a parking spot, even though the street was narrow, and finding a place at the bar wasn't any harder. I had no competition, unless you counted the jar of pickled eggs and the rack of chips by the sink. There was a pair of hunched-over characters playing dominoes at a dark back table, but they weren't exactly looking to give me the bum's rush. They were busy babysitting a bottle of corn. Not a bad idea, at that. This might not be the kind of place to end the night, but I could start it here and maybe get some tips on what to do next.

While looking over another rack half-filled with bags of pretzels and nuts I ordered a shot of rail bourbon and a draft of something that was as cold as it needed to be. I've seen men get beat down or worse for ordering

a fancy drink in a place where they'd just showed up for the first time and probably didn't belong. My drinks came quick, in glasses that were at least half-clean, and when I looked up to order a snack I decided I might have to stay around for a while.

The barmaid didn't look like she belonged there, either. Something in her eyes told me that she'd seen enough to be on the north side of thirty, if not by much, and they weren't hard, like the dark marbles in the heads of the men I'd just done business with. Her face hadn't picked up the lines that come from three packs a day and five hours of sleep a night, and the color of her hair, pulled up but a little loosely, could have come from somewhere besides a bottle. Not really blonde, not quite brunette, but her own brand that picked up the light from the beer signs and the mirror. Her clothes, of course, weren't much, just the black polyester slacks and white blouse that come close enough to a uniform in that kind of place. Not that I would have had them any other way, or had her wear any more of them. The slacks clung to her like a welcome hand, and in a couple of spots splashed by water the blouse hinted at its ample contents and, well, even now, after everything that happened, some details are just too good to share. She was generous in other ways, too. She treated me like a regular customer, or one she wanted to be a regular: two drinks paid, one on the house. I had to go a second time around that block to make sure she hadn't just slipped up.

By then, of course, she started to look even better. Not even the ring on her finger was bothering me. I usually don't chase married women; you never know whose husband might be a customer of mine, but she looked like she wanted to be chased. She stayed close to my end of the bar and kept tossing her head back while giving me the fish-eye, and she leaned low and close when she gave me a fresh drink. She went so far as to tell me her name, something kind of exotic-sounding that didn't go with her looks, and when I called her bluff on it she showed her driver's license, which hadn't even been stapled for a traffic ticket. A looker and a solid citizen to boot, who said her husband was out of town. Maybe I should have balanced out the hooch with some of those nuts, but sometimes you just have to go with the flow. What was I going to say? "Excuse me, I can't handle my liquor. Why don't you put some cashews on my tab to soak up the extra booze?" That's just how a tough guy would put it.

By drink seven or eight the dirty bottles behind the bar were glowing like some of the jewels I fence now and then - amber, green and red - or like the lights on a traffic signal I wouldn't need to worry about for a while. And I was pretty well lit from the inside, too.

I wasn't used to somebody besides me pouring an honest drink. All this was good enough, but I knew I was on a roll when I took a quick look at the back of the barroom and saw that the domino players were gone. Maybe they were off to find an all-night chiropractor. They could be laying down for the dirt nap, for all I cared. There were only the two of us left, and it didn't look

like either of us had an eight o'clock tee-time at the country club. The barmaid walked over to the front door and locked it, maybe to keep the stragglers out, maybe so I could watch her walk. Then she turned over the sign on the door so that the rest of the world read "Closed" and I saw "Open." I could have sworn she pointed at the word before coming back to the bar. The beer-company clock that hung on the wall behind her like a greasy full moon said 2 a.m., which meant about 1:45 in real time.

"Want anything else before I close your tab?" she asked.

"I think I've drunk my fill," I said. "I'd better square up and leave."

"I'd better let you pay," she said. "But you don't have to leave."

This was turning out to be the best day of all time, or at least since I stepped out of the joint after finishing up a five-spot for B and E. Sometimes you just get a streak of luck and have to ride it out. But I had to be sure and make sure the liquor wasn't doing the thinking. "How's that?" I asked.

"Well, why don't you come upstairs and have a nightcap? On me."

If I had wanted any more of a sign I would have needed it written in neon, with foot-high letters. "You know," I said, "I think that just might work." I just wasn't sure of the details.

We went through a doorway by the back table, and she let me go up the stairs first so she could break my fall, if it came to that after all the drinks. "There's no point in you slipping here and suing me for it. How would I explain that to the man of the house?" She raised her eyebrows with meaning, meaning she knew what came next.

I was about as steady as a man could expect to feel at closing time, though. I'd been slipped a mickey or two before the Feds cracked down on the main ingredient, and this didn't feel like that I'd taken a quick slide down a greased slope to somewhere black. Everything looked jake, and I was expecting to feel even better before long. I followed her directions and took a left turn down the hall, then turned on the light in what turned out to be the bedroom. No red velvet or fancy curtains, no overstuffed chairs, nothing that looked, you could say, professional, only a place where somebody would go to bed, alone if they had to. I found a bottle and rocks glasses on the dresser and didn't bother looking for ice. At this hour there was no point in pretending to look sophisticated. While I waited for her to change, preferably into nothing but earrings, I poured us each a few fingers of something single-malt and old enough to vote. I took a belt of my glass, letting the peat and smoke slide down, and held onto her glass so that I could hand it to her when she came in. It was the least I could do.

A faucet turned on and shut off down the hall as I took another slug. Sometimes you get the luck. I didn't have to wait much longer, but when she came in she was still dressed.

And she wasn't alone.

Next to her was one of the domino players. At about six-two, if he'd taken his shoes off, he stood a lot straighter than he sat, and he was as solid as a

side of beef.

"I thought your husband was out of town," I said.

"Well," she answered, "that's not my husband."

I heard a stirring behind the bed, and there was no time to step away. My arms were pinned to my back by another side of beef. The glasses turned upside down on the way to the floor, and the carpet started to drink up good Scotch. Before getting jerked straight I was able to turn my neck around just long enough to see who'd gotten the drop on me. In a movie the credits would have listed him as Hunched-Over Domino Player Two.

The barmaid raised her eyebrows again, and she flashed a smile as bright as a switchblade. "That's my husband."

Hunched-Over Domino Player One crossed the room in two steps as he pulled out a blackjack the way most people pull out a wallet. My crystal ball had been broken a while ago, but I could tell where this was heading. He steadied my head with his free hand. With the other he drew back the sap and rapped the thumbnail-sized corner of bone behind my ear. The push was a little different this time, but the slope was still greased, and it was a quick slide to somewhere black.

J.D. Smith's second collection of poems, **Settling for Beauty**, has just been published by Cherry Grove Collections (www.cherry-grove.com). Buy it and nobody gets hurt. His fiction is forthcoming in The Mammoth Book of Best New Erotica. Smith writes and thugs in DC.