

Last Call

By Tom Casatelli

The big bartender's hands were raw. He pressed a napkin in his palm to blot dots of blood caused by opening beers two, three at a time for seven hours straight. He'd complained his bottle opener, stainless steel wrapped in duct tape, had slipped out of his pocket on the way to work.

"I had that opener thirteen years." He showed his hands. The fingers were swollen from handling ice, pounding the register's keys.

"I'm too old for this." He filled a tumbler with bourbon. "My back aches."

I finished my soda water with lime.

"Your beer cooler's three inches low."

"You don't say?" He reached for my glass, shook it. "No booze?"

"I'm working."

"Working? Where do I sign up?"

The bartender wrapped a bar rag around the neck of a beer and twisted.

"Make an exception?"

He placed the bottle in front of me, gazed at the barroom floor. It was a carpet of cocktail napkins, broken glass, empty bottles.

He shook his head. "Goddamn kids."

A gunmetal gray apron hung from his waist. It was vintage, made of stiff denim worn soft over time. His partner, Olga the Russian, wore no apron, barely wore a shirt.

"We don't get many old-timers in here," he said.

"Not many old-timers work weekends," I answered. "Where's the kid usually works?"

His blue eyes flashed a smile. "Tyler? Pretty Boy I call him. He's got a "callback" tomorrow, whatever the hell that means."

The bartender looked tired. "I don't work nights," he said. "You a regular? Never saw you before."

"Mind if I play the juke box?"

He motioned to the empty bar. "Don't think anybody'd mind."

I slipped a fiver in the slot and punched numbers for two Springsteen's, one Dean Martin, and three Sinatra's.

Bruce sang about cars. I sipped beer, a Hefeweizen. It was crisp despite cloudy yeast. It would be better on draught, I thought, a thick slice of orange on the rim maybe.

The bartender ignored me, wiped bottles with the rag. I stepped lightly to the front door and slid the bolt into place.

Olga strode from the bathroom. She liked to do her face while her partner cleaned.

"I count tip cup," Olga announced.

We watched her lift the brass spittoon from behind the stainless steel register. Sopping tips that had been left on the wet bar tumbled over the lip and came to rest on the counter. A waterlogged dollar stuck to the keys that lined the front of the register. Jewish typewriter the bartender had called it earlier in the night and I'd laughed.

He jerked a thumb at Olga. "They don't miss a trick, these ones."

We watched her stuff the bills into the spittoon, stretched our necks and watched her ass twitch to the leather and brass dining room where they counted tips. Her blond head disappeared as she settled into a deep, high-backed booth.

“Bartending School?” I asked.

He raised bushy eyebrows the same color as the apron.

“How’d you guess?” The barman emptied trays of limp fruit into a garbage can.

“You in the business?”

“Was.” I ran a finger down the sweating bottle’s label. “Long time ago.”

He topped off his bourbon then placed a glass in front of me.

“Have a proper drink with an old scoundrel?”

I let him pour three fingers.

He continued. “Was a time you worked your way up. I was a barback for two years after the service. Two years for Chrissakes. Used to be you humped cases of beer, tapped kegs, learned the business – learned people before they even thought about letting you behind the stick.”

“I feel your pain.” I brought the bourbon to my lips. “Smoky. Very nice.”

He stuck his nose in his glass and breathed deeply. “Back in the day, I drank beer all night.” He laughed. It was a mighty rumble from his belly. “Now I have a couple little pops throughout the night and one or two big pops while sugar tits back there counts the cup.”

He finished his drink, poured another. I placed a hand over my own. We didn’t speak, enjoyed the music.

“She’s robbing me blind.”

I drank beer, sipped bourbon.

“Getting too damn old for this.”

“Why don’t you count with her?”

“Can’t be bothered.”

I drained the bourbon, savored hints of caramel, imagined I could smell the burnt white-Kentucky oak barrels.

“It’s your money. You should be there.”

“If I go back there means I got to talk to her.”

He untied his apron, folded it into a neat square.

“I’ll tend bar. You hiring?”

He raised his eyebrows. “You got big giant titties under that sport coat?” He gulped his drink. “Only reason I still have a job is I own the damn place.”

I stood and moved towards the back booths.

“See a man about a horse?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

“Bathroom’s in the back.”

I knew the layout, knew the tiny Mexican wouldn’t be in to sweep and mop for eighteen minutes.

My loafers were calfskin. I slipped them off and moved through the napkins, careful of broken glass.

Olga didn’t see the blackjack. I caught her head before it hit the table.

Sliding into the booth, I studied the framed black and whites on the walls – all ballplayers, each with the face of a coal miner. I closed my eyes and smelled the barroom smell of Pine-Sol and stale beer, smelled a thousand barrooms.

Olga's lilac perfume tickled my nose.

I straightened the salt and pepper shakers. The bartender whistled and counted money, marked payouts. A half dozen wet bills checkered the table, each folded and standing on edge like so many birthday cards. I was surprised Olga knew to dry the bills this way.

I wedged the tip money into my jacket pocket. The music stopped and the bartender slammed the drawer shut. Tyler took his sweet time closing. The old timer should take no more than three minutes to wrap rubber bands around the stacks of twenties, fifties, and hundreds. Then he'd place them inside the cash box. I figured two minutes tops before he secured the box in the safe.

My breathing steadied. I waited.

Olga gurgled and I slid out of the booth.

The bartender bent, the cash box heavy in his hand. He reached for the cabinet door that hid the big safe. He saw me watching, saw me reach my left hand into my pocket. He stood stiffly.

Measuring the distance to the nightstick I'd seen leaning behind the bar, I waited for him to notice my bare feet.

I inched forward. He offered a nightcap.

I grinned. "Told you. I'm working, had too much already."

"Working." He shook his head. He clutched the metal box in his big hands.

"What is it you do exactly?"

I nodded towards the booth. "She asked for you."

"You on the job?"

I stared at the old barman. The bar was silent; the only sound the low hum of the beer cooler. His head tilted a fraction of an inch.

He studied my face and I thought he knew me. He opened his mouth to speak but didn't.

His eyes never left mine as he bent. The thick safe clacked shut.

Heavy knocking on the wooden front door rang through the bar. I slipped into my loafers and moved towards the sound. The old bartender watched, then followed. I imagined the nightstick clutched in his big fist. I wanted to tell him about the scrap of paper Olga kept every night, the one she marked her skims on.

I reached in my left pocket.

"Hey," he said and I closed my eyes. I turned to face him. "Never got your name."

He thrust out his hand. The air in my lungs slid out between my teeth. I allowed him to engulf my free hand with his own.

Olga moaned and the bartender craned his neck towards the sound.

I gripped him tighter, pulled him towards me slightly.

The knocking became pounding.

"Never got your name, either," I said.

"Clancy, James Clancy."

My left hand hung by my side. I watched his eyes drop, watched the color drain from his face. He had a good face. Like the ballplayers.

I released my grip and unlocked the door.

Cold air blasted my face. The tiny Mexican stepped aside, pop-eyed. Two cabs idled at the curb, both drivers fast asleep. The gray revolver, the same gray as the bartender's apron, felt cold and heavy as I stepped into the night. An empty bus ground through dirty slush and coughed smoke in my face as I crossed the street. I walked towards the subway, towards an after hours club in the East Village.

Standing the wet money up like that, that was something. I loved the little half moon puddles the drying bills left.

Clancy must have taught her that trick.

Tom Casatelli is a 39 year old highly decorated, retired NYC Fireman who has worked in some of New York City's busiest firehouses. A popular Brooklyn bartender for over twenty years, Tom started writing shortly after dawn on September 12th, 2008 and has stopped twice--once to get married, once for coffee. He is currently working on a memoir based on his struggles with alcohol, sex, pills, and violence after surviving both collapses of the World Trade Center. Tom's first short story was published in the Park Slope Reader in the fall of 2009.