

Last Call

By Todd Robinson

I wait.

The bar is too clean, with its pristine oak tables and shiny brass fixtures. The people are too clean also. The 'dudes' all wear blue denim shirts with tan slacks. The 'chicks' are decked-out uniformly in trendy black dresses and bottle-blonde hairdos like the girl on T.V. Hair By Stepford. It's not easy being the pecan in the peanut gallery, surrounded by a hundred Brians. I never trust bars where you can't see the air hanging in front of your face. They're all like this now. I've become less a man without a country than a drunk without a bar.

The bartender checks my glass. I nod for another. She smiles, more for the tips than my charm. So far I've ordered four bourbons, but drank none. Despite my self-awareness regarding my alcoholism, not drinking is easier than you'd think. I'm working. It's a personal job, but I'm still working. You fuck up in my vocation, the boss doesn't humiliate you in front of the cute secretary you're trying to bang. Nope. I fuck up and I spend a few decades in a concrete cage. Or in a box for eternity.

The barmaid leans over when she pours to give me a better view of her already ridiculously public boobs. It's her game, and it's not a bad one. I'm just not in a boob mood. Never thought I'd say *that*

"Love your shirt," she says.

She'll remember the shirt more than my face. God is in the details. So is my freedom. "All shirts should have hula-girls somewhere on them." I smile my best harmless grin.

She giggles, takes the money and mouths a 'thank you' at me with a sexy pout. Probably made the frat boys drool in their pink martinis. I pour the liquor into the glass next to mine and sip my Coke. The night drags like church on Super Bowl Sunday. I wait some more.

I'd heard about Brian before I met him. Nothing good.

I walked into Dino's, an East Village bar that I haunt whenever Lady Luck's is closed. Andy, my partner and the Lady's owner, was in Jersey.

On 'bidness'.

Since most bars seemed content working faux blue-collar poser bullshit, Dino's was a throwback to a time when keeping a clean bar on Avenue A was considered hoity-toity.

Josh, the bartender, jumped when the door banged shut behind me. He chewed furiously on an unlit cigarette. He looked like somebody had his balls in a Foreman grill. I looked around. There was a couple sitting by the jukebox and one drunk swaying to the music

over his beer. Unless Janelle, Josh's pit-bull excuse for a wife was in the can, there was nothing distressing that I could see. Josh was six-two and sleeved in tattoos. Janelle's scarier.

"What's got your panties twisted?" I asked, sitting in my regular seat in the far corner, facing the door. I have a large number of regular barstools that face front across town.

"Hey, T.C. You seen Brian?"

"Nope. Don't think I know him. Should I?"

"Not unless you're looking to do a pound of candy a week." He rubbed a finger under his nose in an unmistakable gesture.

"So what you're saying is, I don't want to."

"Probably don't." He took a deep breath.

I wasn't sure if Josh didn't want to continue with the story or if he was waiting for me to toss bait, so I went fishing. Andy says I'm nosy. I say that I just adore a good bar yarn. "Why you wondering?"

Josh went into the story like he'd been holding his breath on it. "He was here last night drinking heavy. All night. Then he goes to the bathroom and comes out fresh as a daisy. At closing time, I had to peel him off the bar." Josh went to light the cigarette, then remembered that he couldn't anymore. At the rate he was gnawing on it, he would probably ingest enough tobacco to control his joneses. "He comes back a couple hours ago in the same clothes as yesterday,

coked off his nut, just yelling and knocking over glasses." He took a phantom drag. "I don't need this on a Sunday." As though he might require it on a Tuesday. "So I grab him. You know what the sonofabitch does?"

I shrugged.

"He pulls a knife. Says he's cutting anybody who touches him."

Having been witness to a few of Josh's customer problems, the next chapter usually found the bozo picking up his teeth. Josh keeps a Yaztremski Edition Louisville Slugger behind the bar for such emergencies. It would have been nice if he'd gone Yankees, but what are you gonna do? "Will he live?"

Josh threw his hands up. "I didn't do nothing. He's an accountant for the fuckin' mob."

Okay, now. I'd thought I'd heard them all. Every half-wit with a lick of Italian in his blood pulled that card. Sometimes, they weren't even Italian anymore. There's the Irish mob, the Chinatown Tongs and the Russian's in Queens who were giving the Westies a run for the title of most psychotic crew in New York history. Hell, I'd even come across a few Yakuza once or twice. They're easiest to spot. No pinky fingers.

Regardless, anybody who couldn't earn their own, say they're connected... or work for the mob... or grew up with yadda, yadda,

blah fuckin' blah. I knew the mob had better things to do than execute people over bar brawls. Law number-one of mob and mob associates: Nobody claims to be mob or a mob associate. Josh knew that too. He must have seen disappointment in my face.

"I know, I know," he said, "but an accountant? Who the hell would say they're a mob *accountant*?"

He had me there. I'd have to wait for Andy to get back into town. He's better acquainted with those guys. I just freelance.

One drink later, I had to walk. I hate stressed bartenders. Josh is good peeps, but his nerves were interfering with my drinking mojo.

I switched atmospheres and went to Zen to see Vic and Bertie. Zen ran on the trendy rail, but the jukebox was decent and nobody bothered you with unwanted conversation. Bertie was five feet of blue-haired smartass who drank too much while she bartended, but she reserved the only padded chair for me - in the far corner, of course, facing the door. Vic was a soft-spoken monster of a man who watched over Bertie until the bouncer arrived.

Since she wouldn't charge me for every other drink and on my birthday she bought me a hula-girl shirt, she was all right with me. Nobody but Andy and Bertie remembered. Problem was, she liked causing trouble with her mouth. She often got herself into fixes and

liked to see Vic get her out. She was just that kind of girl.

As I entered, Vic was talking to some guy dressed like a bad Gap ad.

Vic waved. "Hey T.C. Come meet a friend of mine. Brian, T.C."

I'm not sure who I'd been picturing, but it sure as hell wasn't that cat. Looking at him, I realized that I could have sat next to him a dozen times and never remembered. He belonged to the endless number of corporate drones that populated New York for the last decade and brave the East Village for kicks. I'm prejudiced against the type. I don't like people who visit my home and call it slumming.

He wore the grin of a man trying to sell a used Pinto. "Hey Big Guy. Nice to meetcha."

I also hate people who call me Big Guy. I scraped a smile across my face. "Hey."

"Whatcha drinkin'?"

"Jack."

He waved at Bertie like he was on the Market floor. "On me, Bertie."

"Thanks," I said.

"No problemo." He threw the salesman grin again. He was quickly becoming the walking embodiment of my pet peeves. So far

he hadn't smacked me on the shoulder or had his shirt label sticking out. Small favors. "So, what's T.C. stand for?"

"Thomas Jefferson." He wanted conversation. I didn't.

"Huh?"

"My mother couldn't spell."

He didn't get it.

Brian leaned close, whispering, "You party?"

Ah. A peeve I'd forgotten. People who use 'party' as a verb.

"Define party."

He opened his palm under the bar. A small glass vial sat there.

I glared at Vic. He looked away, sheepishly.

"Not my kind of party," I said with as much friendliness as I could muster, which was none at all. Brian didn't seem to notice or, frankly, give a shit.

"No problemo." He laughed like a sick hyena and smacked my shoulder.

I downed my drink. "Sorry guys. Gotta run." I took off before I wore away what was left of my teeth. I may be a drunken hypocrite, but I like to keep my vices safe and law-abiding, if possible.

As I walked behind them, I saw Brian's goddamn shirt tag sticking out.

Ten years back, Vic and Bertie were young St. Marks squatters. So green, they smelled like the inside of a Greyhound. They quickly connected to the wrong scene. I don't know if they were shooting junk before they got to New York or if it got hold of them upon arrival, but they were fighters. I could see it in them the same way I see my own reflection in the morning, when the hangover is sumo-wrestling against my alcoholism. Only I don't fight it.

I watched them clean up and get a semblance of a life together. When possible, I'd slip them a few bucks without letting them know. I was proud of them. A lot of the St. Marks junkies wind up O.D.ing on abandoned tenement floors.

I wondered why Vic was hanging out with that creep.

I hoped it wasn't what I thought.

I went to see if Andy had returned. He was opening Lady Luck's gate as I approached. After 'bidness', Andy would sometimes spend days in Atlantic City, blowing his earnings on poker and fat hookers. For reasons I never got, he didn't like women under 175 pounds. Andy could see my relief.

"Don't tell me you've been waiting out here all day," he said.

"Might as well, the afternoon I've had."

Andy checked his watch. "Hmm. Three o'clock and you're stone sober."

"Close enough."

We walked in together. Lady Luck had an old horseshoe bar, about 30 pictures of Sinatra for decoration and high windows sunlight only trickled down into drunken eyes. All that, and Andy allowed me to pick the records for his jukebox. Only box in Manhattan with Big Mama Thornton, that I knew of. Best of all, Andy would break my arm if I ever tried to pay. And I mean he would break my arm. In many places. But lovingly.

"How was Jersey?"

He shrugged. "Simple. You coulda done it."

"What's that mean?"

"I meant it was straightforward. Sheesh, you're sensitive when you're sober."

"What'd he do?"

"The guy?" He shrugged again. "He wasn't particular about who he stuck his dick into. Knew it too."

"Living dangerously, huh?"

Andy hit the light switches. "Used to."

My drink arrived before I noticed Andy making it. I never saw his hands move. Everyone thought Andy was just a skilled bartender.

That's not to say that he couldn't sling booze with the best, but I knew otherwise. Those hands had paid for the bar I was sitting at, and not due to his Mai-Tai recipe. He's sixty-six and faster than a man half that age. I know. I'm half that age.

I tasted my drink. "Andy, do you know any... accountants for the families?"

Andy stopped counting the register money. "Accountants?"

"Accountants."

He looked up and ran his fingers through his bone-white hair.

"Never heard of any, but I'd assume they have some. Why?"

"Some cokehead's wandering around saying he's one."

"Probably just a jerk who says it to get out of jams." He said, dismissively waving his hand at the idea.

"Figured that, but why the hell would he claim to be an accountant? That's what I can't get."

"Good point." Andy cracked an Amstel bottle with his hands and sipped. It wasn't the screw-top kind. "Name?"

"Brian. Don't have a last name. Preppy-looking fella."

"He a problem?" Despite Andy being like family, I got a chill at the question. What he really asked was 'does this person need to disappear'. By disappear, I mean die. And by die, I mean probably not in a very pleasant way.

"If he is what he says, he's certainly making a show of it. If he gets busted, well... He seemed soft."

In Andy's estimation, the worst a man could be was soft. Soft men would fold faster than Superman on laundry day to save their own asses. Soft men could kill you faster than bullets. Andy made a face like he'd just bitten a cockroach. "I'll make calls."

My train of thought derails when the jackass claps me on the back, making my drink slop over. He laughs at a joke that I wasn't listening to. I resist punching his larynx and fake a laugh instead. He orders us another round, takes a gulp and staggers off to the jukebox. One more Creed song and I swear to God... I dump my shot in his glass again.

"You done?" The bartender asks, pointing at the wings I'd ordered.

"All yours." When the wings came out, I offered the jackass one, trying to at least appear friendly. He sucked off the meat and dropped the spit-covered bone on the other wings. I've spent the rest of the night fighting the urge to pull his scrotum over his forehead.

A few days ago, I walked into Zen and saw a new girl bartending, reading Faulkner. College girl. Nobody reads Faulkner for

fun. She poured without taking her eyes off the page. "Where's Vic and Bertie?"

She looked up with an unusual amount of suspicion for somebody who doesn't know me. "You a friend?"

I got a chill at her tone. "Friend, customer. Take your pick."

"Then it'd be best if you talked to them." She went back to reading. Instinct told me Brian was involved. Can't tell you why. Instinct also told me it was bad. I trust my instincts.

I spent the afternoon trying to find them at all the other watering holes. I ended up at Lady Luck's, confused and aggravated as the sun set.

"What's wrong with you?" Andy asked. "You look like ten miles of cat shit."

"You seen Vic or Bertie?"

"Yeah, he came in looking for you. He seemed upset about something." Andy scratched his stubble. "Looked like he hadn't slept in a while. Circles under his eyes."

I wondered if his sleeplessness was chemically induced. "Did he leave a number?"

"Nope. Just asked if I'd seen you. I said, 'Nope'. Then he left."

Damn.

Things got complicated fast. When a waitress from Zen came into Lady Luck, I got the first of several accounts about the previous night's hubbub. I asked who else had seen it. She gave me names and I tracked them down. In the end, I got five different versions from five witnesses. It was like living in my own personal fucking *Rashomon*. The story that I've accepted, I pieced together from the consistencies in each account. Brian was one of them. A whole sack of shit had hit flown into a sack of fans.

No signs of Vic or Bertie. Amazing how you can see people nearly every day, spend hours together and never exchange numbers or addresses. I didn't even know their last names.

My patchwork story went as such: Brian got rowdy at closing time and Rich, Zen's manager, asked him to leave. Brian pulled his knife. Rich claimed that Brian put the knife to his face. The waitress said he just pulled it. Then said she didn't see a knife. Then wouldn't talk about it. I guess she'd heard the rumors and didn't want to be involved. One thing's certain. A knife got pulled. Threats were made.

Then Mookie, the bouncer, stepped in. Mookie bounced Brian into the wall, then bounced him off the concrete.

Good bouncer.

I guess Mookie didn't know about Brian's 'connections'.
Supposedly, Brian took a decent ass-whupping. I smiled every time

that part got mentioned. I wanted to buy Mookie a drink.

For some reason, Bertie turned on Mookie and Rich, hollering at them. Bertie's got problems, but I couldn't understand her defending that chucklehead. Or didn't want to understand.

Depending on whose story you believe, Mookie may or may not have shoved Bertie, then called her a name rhyming with 'runt'. It was possible. Lord knows, Bertie could be a runt. Bertie went home, and her version, whichever it was, got Vic stewing. That was when he came looking for me. Maybe he wanted me to get Mookie with him. Maybe he wanted me to get Brian with him. What I do know is that he wasn't looking to employ my services. Apart from Andy, as far as anybody knew, my money came from the lottery. Nobody questioned it. This was, after all, New York City.

Three days. I kept missing Vic and Bertie. A few people ran across them and all agreed that they looked like microwaved death. I started to wonder if I was being avoided. If somebody wants me, I'm easily found. By the same token, if somebody wants to avoid me, they know where I won't be.

Then Mookie was dead. Just when I thought that the situation had run out of both shit and fans. It was on the morning news and I almost choked on my bagel. Some kids playing in a garage found Mookie next to his car. He'd had the holy hell beaten out of him. He

wasn't D.O.A., but he was D.S.A. Dead Soon After. The cops said a skull fracture killed him. Whenever a body is found, why is it always kids who find it? That's always bothered me.

Brian suddenly jumped from minor irritation to legit problem. I didn't know who he did the books for, but I could only assume he was doing a bang-up job if they were willing to throw a hit his way. Hits aren't cheap, or given casually. It was the most trivial thing that I'd ever heard a hit put out for, and believe you me, I've seen a lot of people die over trivia. *If* it was a hit. Though I couldn't imagine Brian getting his hands dirty. He was too fond of talking big and making threats. No real violence had happened around him. Yet.

I hauled over to Lady Luck to see if Andy had anything. Like me, Andy was a creature of habit. He'd be there, drinking espresso and reading the paper with a bran muffin.

I needed some hair of the dog. Shit, I needed the whole Westminster Dog Show the way I felt.

The weight of the room hit me like an open-handed slap as I entered. Andy sat at the bar, working the crossword and chewing a bran muffin with a scowl. He hated the muffins, but at his age, he considered them half-breakfast, half-medicinal.

I smelled menthol as I walked in. Andy doesn't smoke, much less menthols. He glanced at me and then towards the back. Vic sat

alone in a booth.

I slid onto the opposite bench. Vic looked tired. As he brought the scotch to his lips, his hand trembled. It obviously wasn't the first one that day. His clothes looked wrinkled and dirty. We drank in funereal silence. Every time Vic tried to talk or even look at me, tears would well and the silence would stand. I didn't feel it was my place to ask the questions.

Instead, we just sat and quietly drank the city away. An hour passed. Vic had four more drinks, slipping deeper into himself with each sip.

Then Vic stood up unsteadily and whispered, "I didn't mean it."

Without looking up, I heard him stumble out the door.

"They're junked again," Andy said into the newspaper.

"How do you know that?"

"When we shook hands, I saw tracks on his wrist. If he's that far down...." He knew that I could finish the sentence without him having to. "She was here earlier. Kept scratching her forearms." The newspaper rustled.

I swallowed my anger. "The accountant?" The words were acidic in my mouth.

Rustle. "Him? Used to work for the Dohnaghy brothers in Yonkers." Andy lingered over 'used to'. "Full name's Brian King.

Mickey Dohnaghy seems to think the kid's a prick."

That was all I needed to hear.

They buried Mookie. Brian disappeared. I didn't waste my energy looking for him. I figured he would rear his head eventually. At which time, I would eagerly express my disapproval.

Only all hell broke loose first.

I found out when I showed up at Dino's yesterday. The bar looked like Detroit on a bad day. It was cemetery quiet and half as lively. Angie, the owner, stood behind the bar with a stunned expression.

"What the hell happened here?" I said incredulously. "Where's my stool?"

She answered with sobs. It took a lot of comforting and liquor to stifle her. Angie delicately hung on to her composure and her tequila when she talked.

"Vic and Bertie..." Tears streaked her face just mentioning their names. It was hard not to slap some calm into Angie. The urge disgusted me. My control was on a thin ledge. Lucky for us both, she was able to continue.

Vic and Bertie were at Dino's the night before. Somebody walked in and blasted Vic with a shotgun. He was probably dead before he hit the ground. I hope he was.

Two pieces of buckshot caught Bertie in the throat. She took a while. Bertie lay on the only clean floor on Avenue A, bleeding out while the ambulance got stuck in a pride parade. Seems like there's one every goddamn day in this town. I hope that whomever's it was, they're proud that a girl died. By the time paramedics arrived, the only person alive in the bar was Josh, who'd caught some glass in his face. He'd tried to stop Bertie's bleeding with his shirt without strangling her. It didn't matter.

Vic was in my barstool when the shotgun vaporized his chest, taking my stool with him.

Josh only caught a glimpse of the shooters. They were in ski masks.

The tally: Three people and the barstool that I'd spent years molding to my ass were dead. All tracing back to Brian, a big mouth who backed it up with a little knife.

He wasn't hard to track. His mouth cut a path like the runway lights at LaGuardia. Even in bars where his name wasn't known, his behavior was. He'd been kicked out of a few places and pulled his knife at one. The path led uptown. I followed.

As I moved north, I'd catch news reports. Even in a city as violent as New York, the Dino's Massacre (as it was called) was a sensational story. The media ate it up. The cops moved fast. Within

hours, a shotgun was found in a Chevy. The same Chevy witnesses saw leaving Dino's. By nightfall, the cops had Mookie's brothers in custody. Somewhere deep, I felt sorry for them. Amateurs.

So I wait. He gave me a look when I walked in, but without recognition. I bought him a round and fed him my shots. He almost got into a fight with a kid at the pool table. He reached into his pocket and I reached into mine. His knife didn't come out, so neither did my .45. That's okay. He'll pull it eventually. He always does. Everyone will see who pulled first.

I'll wait.