

At the Bar

by Alicia Gifford

On the Nightly News a pedophile in an orange jumpsuit does a sashay of shame in front of a wolf pack of cameras and satellite feeds that surround the downtown courthouse. At the bar, a woman with big blonde hair and a rhinestone manicure says off with his head. A muscular man in a tight black t-shirt says child molesters should be shot. The man in the tight black t-shirt has sideburns and a silver earring. He hates that his hair is beginning to thin. The big-haired blonde woman's got fifteen years on him. She stares at his pecs and slowly fans herself with a wet napkin.

The man with the madras shirt and permanent press khakis sips his Corona. He's had urges all his life but has never acted on them. He understands the temptation. The way it rationalizes in your head. The man in the madras shirt can't imagine dying without knowing what it's like. The family that moved in across the street has a daughter. Fourth grade. She's beautiful.

The big-haired blonde woman orders another pink drink and the tight black t-shirt eats peanuts, one at a time. In a red vinyl booth a cell phone rings and a man in a sports coat and loosened tie answers it and says, hi honey, and then he says that he just got an emergency consultation and will grab something to eat at the hospital. Don't wait up, he says. He clicks the phone shut and then he drives his tongue down the throat of the Asian woman smashed up against him. She wears blue scrubs and white running shoes. They're drinking gin rickeys. The man in the sports coat crams handfuls of peanuts in his mouth between make-outs. The Asian woman's eight-year-old son is home alone watching *The Simpsons* on Fox and eating a banana.

In the corner a tall, dark-haired man with finely arched eyebrows and a trim mustache mutters into his vodka and flutters his fingers. When he asks for a drink he says WAD-KA. He arrived in the United States two weeks ago and he is a werewolf.

Sometimes the big-haired blonde woman feels life is passing her by. Her doctor told her she has a fibroid tumor the size of a tennis ball and that she needs an operation. When they asked her who to notify in case of an emergency she didn't have an answer. The big-haired blonde woman raises guppies in her apartment. The tight black t-shirt man sips bourbon from a shot glass. It's the first drink he's had in four years, two months and one day. Yesterday the girl he's been seeing told him she didn't want to see him anymore. He's been seeing her for three months and nineteen days. She told him he's too old for her. The girl he's been seeing is twenty. She has:

- Braces
- A nose ring
- A long narrow torso
- A great big mandolin ass.

He loves her ass. He could live in her ass. The girl likes anal sex. She works as a carhop on roller skates. He's got fifteen years on her.

The man in the madras shirt is a city planner with a Masters Degree in civil engineering. His wife teaches elementary school. They have two children and they are sons. He had a deep, sick hope that they might have girls. He loves his boys. He likes pain pills. Right now he's drinking to escape his urges because the urges are like bats in his hair. The little girl across the street. Has gotten to him. The beer makes the urges worse, stronger. He fantasizes about what he'd like to do. He owns a gun.

The bartender has a degree in anthropology. He's jumpy, waiting for his dealer to show up. The dealer will have a beer and will slip him an envelope. The dealer will mind the bar a few minutes while the bartender goes to the bathroom to shoot up.

The black tight t-shirt man feels the kick of the booze. It kicks him off the raft and into whitewater. He orders another bourbon and puts it down, 1, 2, 3. He thinks of the girl on her roller skates, taking orders for hamburgers, the serious way she writes it down, the way she reads it back. American? Cheddar? Or Jack. He thinks of the moonbeams of her ass, the shit smell when he does her that way. He orders another bourbon, neat. The big-haired blonde woman stares

at him. She knows she's losing her looks. The man in the sports coat takes his loose tie off and stuffs it into his pocket. He goes over to the jukebox and throws in some quarters. Frank Sinatra sings "The Way You Look Tonight". He pulls the Asian woman up by the hand and they slow dance, him swaying her side-to-side like a metronome. The bartender's dealer comes and goes. The bartender mutes the TV and then he slips on a pair of sunglasses. He watches the bar people with arms folded and listens to Frank. He waits for the tab of acid to kick in, the Bonus Jack his dealer threw in for a Drambuie rocks. He feels good. He feels mellow. The bar is his Petrie dish and he studies bar culture. Profiles in ethnology. That's what he tells his mother who mortgaged her house to pay for college. The muscled man in the tight black t-shirt notices the big-haired blonde staring. She tells him he looks sad as Christ on the cross. She says she's got two good ears and a head full of nothing if he wants to talk. He tells her to mind her own beeswax.

The werewolf is from Salekhard in the Siberian tundra and he is getting restless. He's grimacing and stretching his chin toward the ceiling. The name of the bar is the Dirty Duck. He orders another WAD-KA even though he knows it's a bad idea. His skin itches. He sniffs the air. One of the women is menstruating.

The muscular man in the tight black t-shirt tells the big-haired woman he's sorry. He says he's got a lot on his mind. It isn't just the girl's ass. She has merry eyes—the only way to say it—and freckles. Her smile is an ear-to-ear tin grill in the cherry popsicle of her lips and when she tucks her long brown hair behind her ear he wants to protect her from everything. The guy with the sports coat is rotating his hips round and round against the Asian woman like she's a hula-hoop. She wraps her leg around him and they're tongue-locked, swirling, a dreidel of lust. Get a room, the tight black t-shirt says. He orders another bourbon from the bartender who is leaning on the bar grinning, his head lolling as he sings to Neil Diamond. The foreign man at the end of the bar looks at the ceiling like he's howling at the moon and the tight black t-shirt man thinks he's creepy and wants to punch him.

The Asian woman worries about her son. She is very, very aroused but she has her period and doesn't want to have sex. She is very drunk. She called her son to say she had to work half a double shift and would be home later. At home, her son watches *Werewolves of London* on cable and now he's terrified. He crawls under the kitchen table and shuts his eyes to the rising moon, red as a drop of blood from all the smoke.

Winds howl through the canyons. The fire rages in the surrounding hills and everyone in the bar can smell it. On TV a woman reporter with slick copper lips speaks earnestly into the camera with her hair in flames. A fireman pours water on her head and she continues to deliver the news with wet singed hair stuck to her face and eyes dilated with excitement. Her wet blouse and bra show her nipples like she's naked. The TV remains mute, and now a Foreigner song is playing and the man in the sports coat is fingering the Asian woman, who has passed out.

The bartender has never realized the greatness of Foreigner. He cries a little. He wants to know what love is. The big-haired blonde woman is tired and wants to go home. She wants to change her life, maybe sell the nail shop and go on a cruise to Mexico. She has gas and can't wait to expel it. She too, wants to know what love is. She is impulsive and asks the man in the tight black t-shirt if he'd like to go home with her. He's impulsive too. Sure, he says. Why not, he thinks.

In the corner the werewolf flutters his fingers, sips WAD-KA and growls softly. The bartender looks at the beautiful kaleidoscope of liquor bottles and bar glasses. Form follows function. Artifacts of the bar culture. The man in the madras shirt decides to kidnap the neighbor girl and fulfill all his fantasies. He will drug her with his pain pills so she won't remember what he does to her. Then he will shoot himself. In the head. He will aim up from the soft palate, a win-win situation. He feels happy, and then he thinks of his sons. His wife. He doesn't really want to die. He orders another beer.

The man in the sports coat tries to wake the Asian woman up. His cell phone rings and he answers. I'll be there in twenty minutes, he says to the caller. He tells the caller to get a chest x-ray, CBC and

electrolytes stat. Type and cross for two units, he says, and start an IV. He tells the Asian woman he has to go but she remains passed out in the booth. He slaps some bills on the table and leaves. The hills are in flames and helicopters buzz the skies. Ashes cover the street and the moon is huge. The werewolf finishes his vodka and staggers to the bathroom. The bartender wipes the oak bar top and beholds the miracle of wood. He looks up and sees bats swirling around the head of the man in the madras shirt. It's good acid. The tight black t-shirt man pulls out his wallet and pays his bill. The big-haired blonde is stunned that he's coming home with her and now regrets asking. She's always regretting her impulses. From the bathroom comes a long, horrible howl. The man in the madras shirt thinks it sounds like a wolf.

The big-haired blonde woman and the black tight t-shirt man walk out into the smoky night. She walks behind him, slowly, quietly and steadily farting. The winds disperse it. In the booth, the Asian woman stirs.

And then the werewolf emerges from the bathroom in full metal lupine:

- Three inch canine teeth
- A thick coat of gray fur
- Massive muscles
- Paws with claws

The bartender sees the werewolf at the exact moment that he peaks on the acid. He laughs with big open-mouthed HA-HA-HAs. He laughs so hard he bends over and exhales the vital capacity of both lungs until he is breathless. He continues to laugh noiselessly, and then he is sobbing sharp, broken sounds that come with each heave of his shoulders. The man in the madras shirt and khaki pants tries to tiptoe out of the bar but the werewolf sees him and leaps across the length of the room in one motion. He sinks his great canines into the madras shirt man's neck and rips free the white-ringed cartilage of the man's trachea, which whistles like a simmering tea kettle with the man's rapid, desperate breathing. The werewolf then tears a huge steak from the man's left flank. The man knows he is dying and

he's glad. It's better this way. For everyone. Win-win. He takes his last few breaths through the stump of his trachea, which is more like a snorkel now. He snorkeled in Maui once, and he loved it.

The bartender is now curled tightly in the fetal position on the floor behind the bar. On the TV all that is visible are flames, bathing the room in orange light. The bartender whimpers, eyes closed. The Asian woman cries out but remains passed out in the booth. At home, her son also curls in the fetal position, terrified even more now by the flaming embers flying by the windows like meteors. He wets his pants. He sucks his thumb. He wants his mother.

Outside the bar, flames surround the big-haired blond woman and the well-muscled man in the tight black t-shirt. They climb into her car and pray for a miracle. He tells her about the big-assed girl and she talks about her guppies. Gently and roughly, they make love, and she farts twice.

The werewolf eats the madras shirt man's liver, heart, spleen, some lung, both kidneys and a few bites of pancreas. The meal helps sober him up. He wipes his mouth with the madras shirt. He sniffs the air and despite the strong odors of blood, alcohol and smoke, he smells the menstruating woman. He follows the scent and finds her. He gathers her into his arms and lopes off with her into the flaming night.

The bartender is still curled in the fetal position but he is having an out-of-body experience so he's also soaring through galaxies, whooshing down black holes and coming out the other side covered with strings. The universe is his trampoline and he is omnipresent. He looks down upon his body in the Dirty Duck and sees that the bar has caught fire. He compresses the storm whose lightning caused the fire in the first place and squeezes out a drenching-quenching rain that brings the entire conflagration to a hissing halt. Firemen scratch their heads and high-five each other. In the emergency room a patient complains that his doctor is drunk. The girl with the mandolin ass gets up to pee for the third time in two hours. She has a fetus in the fetal position inside her uterus and she has many decisions to make, including whether to get her chin pierced. Taking

great bounding leaps, the werewolf carries the passed out Asian woman to her apartment, first dodging flames, then through a torrent of rain. He uses the key in her purse to let himself in. He lays her gently on the sofa and sniffs the air. He smells:

- A child
- Urine
- Fear
- Poi

He remembers his mother, her tender ministrations. The boy, still curled on the kitchen floor, hears the door. Mama, he calls out. He gets up and sees his mother on the sofa. He hears the front door click shut. He crawls on top of his mother and she raises her hand to stroke his head. She smells like a drunk wet dog, but he is safe. The werewolf lopes back to the bar. He digs a hole behind the Duck, chucking the soft mud between his legs. He goes in and takes the bloody corpse in his jaws and shakes it. He drags it out to the hole and buries it. He licks the blood and guts off the barroom floor with his great, pink tongue. He runs to the hills, and howls. He too, would like to know what love is.

The big-haired blonde woman invites the man in the tight black t-shirt home for breakfast and he agrees. He wants to stop aching. She hopes he'll be someone she could contact. In case of emergency. They drive through the sodden, sooty streets and they get along fine. Dawn breaks and the bartender arises from the floor. He calls his mother and tells her he needs help. He says he needs to get to rehab. She is sleepy but understands her boy is in trouble. She tells him she will take the next plane to get him. The big-assed girl wakes up again, this time with cramps, and she goes to the bathroom. This time she miscarries. One less decision to make. She looks at her chin in the mirror and pictures a silver stud there. When he was a kid the muscular man in the tight black t-shirt used to have guppies. He looks at them now, fancy-tailed and graceful. Carefree. He eats scrambled eggs. He drinks coffee. For a minute, he feels all right.

end

