

Wednesday Night Aliens

by Peter Wood

The old-timers at the Working Man's Club wear a sheen of indifference every Wednesday night.

Beneath the wafting, cresting mountains of burning cigarette smoke, the train-track rattle of dominoes chipping at the dark wood tables in the corner, the constant artillery assault of horse racing commentary and sputtering watered-down beer leaking from ancient plastic pumps, *we* are invisible. Barely worth a raised eyebrow or lull in conversation.

Even the razor-haired girl sucking a Chubba-Chup cherry-vanilla lollipop hardly raises a heartbeat.

Nah, they're too concerned with gulping down their fill, setting the world to rights and quelling petty arguments through swift-shifting, snaking crossword lines of spots and blanks.

The Closing time bell will toll soon enough, signalling an unsteady shamble back to wives, TVs and half-asleep smeary-eyed kiddies. Back to battles no domino counter could ever settle.

Until then, the floor, however sticky, is theirs.

And save for the blowsy banter of the 'ladies' behind the bar and the odd loose-cannon young wife entering, unwanted as laddered stockings and loud as any 100-proof market trader out on the razzle-dazzle, it's a man's world. The 'ladies' that do stray within these walls are all bestowed by the old-timers with graciousness and town-crier blarney. They are not the reason for being here. They are not on even the young thoroughbred's menu. This is just the starting gate, nothing more. There's no need for aftershave here, yet various *Brut*, *Old Spice* and other cheap knock-off colognes compete to fill the gap between beer breath, anxiety and the dust of work.

Early evening, the bar is like a sprinter preparing for the gun.

On your marks; pints poured, boxes of dominoes placed on tables...

Get set; glasses filled and set on counter tops, domino box lids unsheathed, blocks scattered and shared, newspapers opened, uncreased, then folded and double-folded, glasses adjusted and cursory "right who's first tonight then?"s.

Go. The first sip, the first 'ah', the first rectangular double spotted counter laid.

From then on it's hell for blather til the sad sound of the closing time bell and hopeless always hopeful queries about "one more for the road?"

"C'mon, the misses won't mind, lad, and if she do then send 'er roun' 'ere. I'll set 'er straight soon enough."

"Will you 'ell, she'll swaller you 'ole and spet you out."

"Aye, ain' tha' the truth, Tone, an' you know it an' all."

A rueful smile then a duck-neck dive into the remnants of the final jar of the night.

Monday through Saturday and there's no divergence from the usual routine. No time off for behaviour, good or bad. And not even the newly instigated Wednesday night *Poets & Pints* evening upstairs will change that.

Only Sundays are different. Sundays are family; Sundays are roasted meats, potatoes, *Paxo*-shaped bullets balls of stuffing and fresh-sharpened carving knives glinting and slashing through tender-cooked beef, lamb or pork - depending on 'specials' or what's in season - and salivating, never truly sated souls. Sundays are half hungover dream bleary eyes and a final recount of left-over memories from an almost wrung-out week.

Sundays are love. Sundays are family and nearly content conversation and smiles.

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In sci-fi films, when humanity meet an alien species it seems the whole of the planet stops what they're doing; they down tools, drop mugs, pause mid-sentence and meld into one huge ever-increasing fog of a crowd curious enough to take a gander at the new arrivals.

That won't happen here.

The old-timers will never be interrupted from their usual routine except, accidentally at the bar or coming in and out of the toilets. Even then, it'll only be the slightest stink of change.

This part of humanity is certain about one thing: this bar, this space, these plumes of cigarette fog and banter is *all* theirs. They'll share it like sharks and humans share the ocean - briefly but any longer and there's no guarantees of not getting eat or bit.

None of us Wednesday Night Aliens are dumb to the fact. Neither I, nor the dozen or so others that duck into the bar, secure beer, stale-sticky labelled soda water bottles and the odd-measured spirits then swerve up the rickety wood, uncarpeted, squelchy stairs really care though.

For the most part we're just grateful; happy in our slightly less dour and definitely less ironed-to-a-sharp-crease clothing, happy with our pens, notebooks, backpacks and satchels, voices that betray our origins as, *elsewhere*. We Wednesday Nighters are not aliens, exactly, but the old-timers quick raised eyebrows, brief as fizzy pop ring-pull putts, tell us we do not really belong.

Downstairs the unrolled *Racing Post* and red-tops are topped up with watered-down squelched out beer and ground-out banter.

Upstairs the booze'll thaw out icy nerves. The squelchy stair sound will tempt us to peel open our notebooks and scribbles of rhyme and verse.

Like downstairs, we have our own old-timers that hold conversations that newbies jump hoops to join. We may be alien downstairs, we may be poet upstairs but any which way you cut it, we are definitely alien to each other.

It's not my first time here, or second for that matter, but I know I'm not frequent enough to be labelled either 'regular' or 'old-timer'. Most first-timers come, watch, make tentative steps into the

fray - everyone has to lose their cherry sometime. Never been like that, myself, those size nines'll jump in hoping it is just a puddle and not an ocean.

Always though, the pulse quickens as people spill in, breathing boils inside like a kettle.

The room is long, squat, rectangular with several dark wood tables. By the walls are benches of the same wood bevelled, worn but still splinter-lethal. Other side of the tables are mismatched chairs that linger abandoned on a carpet garish and more suited to a 70s *Starsky and Hutch* casino shoot-out scene. In the centre, people, my alien poet people mill. This is our spoken-word stomping ground.

A brief call to order. Poets settle in their ringside seats. Some mutter lines of part-remembered rhymes beneath their breaths.

The razor haired girl with the Chubba-Chup lollipop sits on a ringside seat directly opposite me. She's not mingled or spoke to anyone, just seen a spot and slumped into it with the inevitability of changing seasons. She raises her eyes, dismissive to the proceedings. She knows, she knew the moment she slouched through the door in oversized ex-army jacket that every eye has turned. I see her quick glance at those beside her, at the stage space, then her eyes flit onto me. She gives a blink and you miss it smirk. Then, she yawns.

Already I feel something inside, though I don't know exactly what. I'm half-way to taken and nearly all the way to a half-decent dream for tonight.

Were she to stand on stage, belch, then leave, I might applaud. Whatever, she has my attention and she knows it, that's all I'm saying and I doubt I'm not the only one either.

Where a heartbeat should've been I feel a void; someone elbows me, sneers "it's rude to stare," as they sit adjusting an over-sized patchwork fabric bag with several silhouetted beetles on. I feel my heart re-start. Double-beat then catch up. Almost. Damage done. I feel needle pricks of sweat building below my scalp, throat drying.

See that razor-haired girl's spotted my glances. She smiles, but not at me. I'm sunk, and for all I know, as pulse builds, partly for my

turn in the ring and part because of her, every other alien in this room knows it.

No time like the present to show off and slay dragons whether self-made imaginary or real.

Maybe that's what makes us different to the old-timers below the stairs. See, I know they're thoughts about us. Not that I know them but I've heard it too many times before from those closer to me. I know their life-mantra:

"Why waste your time on what you can't mend, an' what's not there, or's just plain nothin'... Why dwell on what's broke? Hearts'll break sure as bones, jobs'll bruise and brand you certain as falls from horses.... Love and friendship'll be bought, sold, flipped and filleted through time with no real logic 'cept its own. That's life, boy... Black'll be black and white'll always stay white, that's something unchangable, immutable. Stick to those, son, the rest'll follow like clockwork... Keep your mind on solid ground and don't be wastin' time on tryin' to hold water in your hand."

* * *

And that, at some level's what we try and do. Sometimes small. Sometimes large.

The day I was born Irwin Levine and Larry Brown's *Tie A Yellow Ribbon Round The Old Oak Tree* was number one, both sides of The Pond. Simultaneously. I've heard it sung enough times to know the words. I've seen the reaction enough to know the effect they have on 'old-timers' closer to me. And believe me, my crowd are never ones for big shows of emotion. Yet I've seen pellets of tears flood like hail on windscreens. Those words carry plenty enough water that gets clawed away by age-grizzled hands and none of them downstairs'd be telling Brown or Levine to stop wasting their time on idiocy about fabric and over-grown foliage when 'that coal won't dig itself.'

Razor-haired girl sits in contempt like a hung-over judge on those stepping into the ring. When everyone claps she just stares ahead,

like she's zoned out on some TV programme. The only movement's her hand raising and lowering the part saliva mangled Chubba-Chup. Occasionally she'll twist the snow white stick to get a gander at the taste beneath the original flavour, then twizzle it again beneath her gums. We are Wednesday Night Aliens. She is all alien, to me. She shrugs lower within the jacket, swamping like mud.

Drag eyes away back to the floor. I've given up all pretence of pretending not to look at her. Her glance at me's already more direct and the game of look, look away, look back's as obvious as Peek-A-Boo to a two year old.

Pulse quickens. Heart thumps. Barely hear when my name is called, then a nudge from the sneery lady with the fabric beetle bag followed by an 'oh, yeah, right,' from me.

Hardly know I'm standing. Hardly know how I got here or managed to nudge legs between the gap made by the two tables. But I am I've materialised, somehow. Can hear my throat clearing, mouth guppying open and closed. Are words coming out? I'm here, but not. I'm now pacing the floor, glancing left, flicking my face right, mugging and mocking expression and spitting syllables.

No mic. None needed here. First piece done. A pause. Polite splash of applause. A nod, a smile then on to the next. Eyes fall too long on razor-haired girl. A glint of emotion shows in her, glass trapped in rock when the light catches it. An eyebrow slowly raises.

Then. Then...

Every single sound in the room is suddenly bleached from existence except a slow metronomic *tap, tap, tap*. At first it's like stilettos on concrete. Then it's as if the treble on the stereo's been turned up... and up... until...

What is that?

Can anyone else here it?

My brain has wandered off without me even having a say. It's cast its vote and decided what I'm doing is dull, dull, dull.

Anyway, '*what is that sound? What? What?*'

Turn my head away; try to quell noise but seen or unseen it has started building its nest in my brain. Concentrate. Concentrate! No, no joy.

Tap, tap, tap.

What the hell is...

Head swivels left again. Among the stoney-stares, arms folded and barely blinking brigade of sitters, there's only one movement I see. Razor-haired girl, mouth open like a squashed hoop, Chubba-Chup lollipop taps like a heartbeat against magnolia teeth. She smirks. She has won. The tap, tap, tap, stops and her mouth swallows the lollipop again.

Limping with some dumb predictable ad lib to the end, sweat sliding down my pits I take whatever applause the onlookers will share and I sneak in clear view back to my seat receiving a cold sneer from fabric beetle bag lady that shifts up with a huff.

Half time is called and all I can think of is beer, a cigarette, a breath of fresh air. Anyone who wants to say 'well done' or I liked so and so I give a quick nod to as I slip down the squelchy beer-spill sticky stairs.

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Below the stairs the *Racing Posts* have been marked, scribbled and annotated then folded and tucked snug into jackets by the second jar; the domino counters reboxed, lids slid closed and replaced behind the bar and other nooks; the sports on TV has turned from sweat-sheened thoroughbreds to boxing and footy. Some of the young'uns, this generation's thoroughbreds, have joined the fray, filled the vacuum formed by those old-guard that've left.

Like the gnarly-fisted from time gone by they form their own cliques, create their own table-top chatter of beer, casually puffed out fag smoke punctured with carefully detonated 'fucks' and 'e' never's'. The old-timers, that remain, whether through wifely special dispensation, routine or no place else worth going have retired to the comfy chairs in the corners or the street bar tables hovering up

roll-ups and Bennies like they're going out of fashion and creaking out laughter to some war story or other.

I nudge through the bar, squeeze between two of the young thoroughbreds, preening themselves prior to making house-calls to some bird's pad and haggling over who'll visit the bogs to stock up on johnnies before doing the dirty. They feel my weight before they see me. I'm just a dinghy knocking against a cruise liner. Still, one glances down at me, smirks, blurts out, "What you wan', titch, you ain' hardly legal, an' no way you're reaching the counter... Janie, don' serve this 'un."

Short-arse I may be but it doesn't take long for the message to get from hearing to understanding.

Not quick enough to return fire before Janie, billowy, mid-to-late forties and seemingly a century away from my age-spot in time, shoots back, "Leave 'im be lads. What'll it be, love?"

I answer, she turns away, starts pouring the pint.

The other thoroughbred eyes me, says "He's jus' messin' with you."

"I ain'." The first spits back.

"Whatever." Replied with palms raised in a signal of 'like I give a toss.' Truth be told, they're just warming up and they couldn't give a Four X about some short-arse as me.

Janie slips the pint across the counter, calls out the price. I pay with a note and wait for the change.

In the hideous silence between change being given and my exit from the room the first thoroughbred smiles, exposing a glinting gold tooth and parking-space wide gap of molars at the front, whispers, "Now you can fuck off."

* * *

No arguments there.

I scoop up the pint, slide out the gap the two thoroughbreds grudgingly gave. By the time I've reached the door, they've already returned to their haggling over who's round it is and more

importantly who's got enough coinage for the johnnie machine in the boys room.

At the door to the bar I think about heading back but the cloying ever-shifting smoke from ceaselessly sparked up and snubbed out ciggies means a quick breather'd be a good idea. I take a left to the street, instead of right and up the stairs.

Outside, there's an empty table. The weather might not be summer yet but it's warm enough to linger a while without a jacket and contracting hypothermia. Besides who'd nip out for a quick tab when you've got home comforts of warmth and pithy blather inside. No-one's yet making false coughing noises to create guilt in those indulging their personal poison. Only people out there are those sharing confidences too deep to get drowned out inside, those squaring up with fists the old and those just too strange, too lonely, too out of place to properly fit in when the group beer radar's been switched on... And me.

Sitting; drink and pack of ciggies on the table, adrenalin of the event just now and performance sits in my gut slowly washing away like the crud that silts in a bath's plughole. I close my eyes.

Then...

"This taken?"

"Nah." I say not looking up as a figure plops themselves opposite.

Table to head, I take in the new sitter, the chipped lip of the glass brimmed with cranberry coloured liquid, the part varnished beetle round fingernails on the hand that curls round the glass, edges of some tattoo sneaking from beneath the arm of an overlarge khaki coloured jacket. The zipper's not fully pulled up, allowing a glimpse of the skinny body beneath, scruffy round-neck T-shirt shows a preview of white bra below. Eyes travel to her face, eyes, large, grey as alien skin, glassy as fluid in a transparent lighter. Then up to black razor-cut hair short as tennis ball fur.

She leans back, lets out a sigh, "Dull. So dull." Her hand hovers over the pack of cigs on the table, swoops, pulls one out, replaces the pack, "Got a light? Can't find mine."

"Doubt you'd find much in that." Nodding at her jacket.

She laughs, "So give us a light then." Leaning her face towards me, tab now jammed between exposed rose-red stained teeth.

I hold the lighter to the tab, watch as she leans back, inhales and funnels the smoke out a nose that flares like a horse just back from a hack, "Ta..."

"'s alright." Lighting one myself, "What's dull?"

"This." Drink now in hand it sweeps panoramic round, "This. Down there you get boys braggin' over what they not yet done.."

"You heard?"

"Heard? Bloody Know 'em, their type... An' up there..."

"Yeah?"

"Know what you got up there."

"Go on."

"This place. Dull, so... Not stayin' tell you tha' much."

"Here?"

She coughs a laugh, then, "Nah, you dick. Here." Another sweep of the now half drunk cranberry liquid, "Dull so..."

"Dull?"

"Don't you think?" she pauses, a brief thought squirrels its way in her head, she smiles, then shrugs, "Whatever... Come 'ere."

"What?"

"Closer, want to tell you something."

I lean in across the table, she beckons 'further' with her finger, then as I get earlobe close, whispers, "Them boys in there, braggin' 'bout what they not yet done..."

I nod, can smell a combination of booze, tobacco and something that at least reminds me of terps wreathed round her, not exactly on her breath but close enough for all of it to almost be one. "You all talk too?" she goads.

Feel her hands contact on my chin before I notice it. Fingers clamp on it, pull til her mouth's covering mine quick and tight. Tongue pushes through my slow-understanding lips. I feel eyes widen in surprise, then nerve endings slacken as senses take over. Feel fingers drop the tab on the tarmac, hand swoop up again and round the back of her neck into a clinch. Can feel her shoulders

tighten, her elbows bracing against the table then push back so my hand slides away again like ice.

"Easy." She growls, pulling back wiping residue from her mouth with the back of her hand, then smirks, "Tha' all you got?"

Standing she flicks the ciggy cartwheeling and smouldering into the pavement, pushes the bar door open, re-enters.

Brain catches up a second or two after; there's only two thoughts, one, 'what's going on?' and two, 'follow her.'

* * *

Feet've caught on before the brain's done the simplest of calculations. Body passes through the door just as it slams.

She's in the velveteen green grey dim lit corridor, leaning against the stair's bannister, smiling, "Goin' up?"

"You?"

"Not bothered."

I'm about to reply when a hand, her hand tugs at the scruff of my shirt. I'm sailing through the open door of the toilet pass the egg-round leaking urinals with fur puce yellow disinfectant dice in them and into the cubicles.

One of the thoroughbreds from the bar's pulling out a tiny carton of johnnies from the machine. He glances my way briefly then goes back to shoving his hand into the metal slot to retrieve the change.

Lock snaps shut, her hands swamp me in an embrace. Her face draws closer to mine, her eyes growing massive, panoramic large to mine; forehead, eyebrows, eyes, nose block out everything; the grey speckled veneer of the door, the toilet paper dispenser tilting like a baseball cap, everything... Then, eyes open everything is out of focus, lips lock in watertight fit, tongues now warmed up an' ready to explore. They loiter inside each other. One hand free, I slip it between us, fingers searching for her jacket's zipper, locate it, pull it down. I hear the slow grating, sucking and 'hm'ing sounds, feel the zipper snap apart. Hand wanders beneath to her body.

Her palm's against my chest, pushes me back, lips break the seal. Mouths only millimetres apart, she whispers, "Nuh-hu," head slowly shakes, "Not yet."

"Ok." I whisper, then lean back in, gasping to taste her again.

Kissing continues again, her hand caressing the back of my neck; my hands hold her tight embrace above the fabric of her jacket. Sounds beyond the cubicle vanish; the constant pit-pit of dripping water from taps, the ebb and flow of music and banter from the bar and somewhere above me the slam of the door to the room above, meaning only one thing, second half's started... not that I feel overly fussed about it. Instead there's only grunted heavy breathing, twirling tickling tongues touching, twisting, tasting as they slide against each other. Feel her hot breath like luxury against my flesh. Seconds, minutes, barely know how long it lasts, are lost in the spiders web of a snog.

When it does end, when we pull away, prickles of sweat've formed below my hair, the skin feels sunburn red, exhausted, but unquashed.

"Get us a vod-black, love." She says, wiping her mouth on the sleeve of her jacket.

The lock snaps open again, she quick glances out the gap left then right, pushes me out the door. Like the aftermath of a rollercoaster ride, my feet are uncertain, leaden, take time to reacclimatise.

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Re-entering the bar I see the number of thoroughbreds has lessened. Maybe they're living up to their bragging or got too pissed to deliver or just had second thoughts on their house-calls.

Whatever. No gap to forge through this time at the bar. Same barmaid as before - Janie was it? - takes my order. She smiles at me, like she knows exactly just what's gone on. Round here maybe it's no worse than anything else that's moulded itself into the fabric of this building, what with lock-ins and whatnot.

I pay, scoop up the drinks, turn, half expecting razor-haired girl to have snuck in and snagged one of the empty comfy chairs. I glance round. No show there. I exit the bar to the outside tables. To where it all began. Again I'm expecting her to be squaring up onto the bench seat, turn and call out, "Got a tab mate, can't seem to find mine."

Nothing.

Place the drinks on the table, pull out my cigs and spark one up, half-hoping it'll be like a whistle to a well-trained dog. Glance left, up the road; nothing but phosphor orange street lamps marking its territory of tarmac and parked cars. Glance right, pretty much the same.

Except... Now too distant to quick-run and catch up with, I see a silhouetted figure clawing their way into a waiting car. The door slams oyster tight shut then spits away and round a corner.

Don't know if the silhouetted figure was her. Don't know if I'll ever see her again, or even what her name was. I do know that I downed her drink in one sticky-lipped swig and no-one complained or asked for a replacement. I do know it briefly brought back the taste of the kiss.

Drain half the beer in a single swig, then come to a decision.

I sneak back into the gap still left beside the beetle-bag lady and breathe deep. Feels like being back where I belong; like a prodigal returns home.

Words and verse cling in the air, like foam clings to glasses and applause stains the silence.

Down there, we are alien. Up here we are poet. The same but different.

But not different enough.

Like smoking in pubs, like pubs closing during the day, like Working Man's Clubs and those *Poets & Pints* evenings we were all alien. Those days even then were out of time, a bedtime story over-run but still had to inevitably end. No-one ever wants it, but deep down you knew it always would. We, all of us - the old-timers, the thoroughbreds, the Wednesday night aliens (who were really only

poets looking for somewhere to call home, however briefly) - were spiders hanging from the self-same thread, a tiny shred of twine that inevitably had to snap. Lost, forever, in wind-blown nothingness.

All gone. No stain. No mess.

For me, only the memory of two thoroughbreds haggling over who'd pay the johnnie machine that night remains.

And a sticky lingering snog.

