

Just the Usual Crowd

By Anthony Botelho

One of those nights, huh?

I said one of those nights, huh?

Sorry to pry; it just looks like there's a lot on your mind. And typically when someone's sitting at the end of the bar—at *this* bar, this time of night—staring into their drink the way you are, well... that's usually a sign too.

Not to mention, it's rare to see a new face here. I mean, people walk by all the time—you can see 'em through the glass—but they hardly ever come in. Though... heh, to be fair, this doesn't exactly look like a 'good time place' from the outside.

But you know what? Forget it. Different topic: what are you drinking? Don't answer that though, let me guess. Something bad, real bad. You hate it.

Right? Ahhh, I thought so. And you know how? Because every drink at this bar is terrible—and let me just make sure the bartender's not listening... No, I don't see him. Heh, probably knockin' one out in the back. But yeah, everything here is shit.

Or... well, who knows? Maybe I'd like what you're drinking. And maybe you'd enjoy what that guy over there is having. But somehow, some way, when you order a drink here you always end up with something you hate.

Me, for example: sour beers. Can't stand 'em. Which is sad, because I used to like sours. But this one time, years ago, I don't know what happened or why, but I was just sipping on a sour one day and all of a sudden I thought to myself "huh, this tastes a little bit like vomit." Maybe that particular brew was a little heavier on the lactic acid. But whatever the reason, I thought that, then all of a sudden my brain makes that connection and it tells me 'this is vomit, this is bad, you hate this.' And try as I might, I never got over that mental association.

And yet... it seems, whenever I'm here at least, that no matter how much I know that I'm gonna hate it, I just can't seem to stop myself from ordering a sour. Maybe it's some misplaced hope; "this time it'll be better." But be careful, my friend: in this place it's the hope that'll kill you.

So here I sit, sipping on something I hate, wasting the night away. But, like I was saying before, it's nice when there's a new face. Changes things up. Most nights, it's just the usual crowd around here.

more hushed *Look at 'em.* A miserable looking bunch, don't you think? Not that they'll tell you about it. Not really as talkative as me, most of 'em.

Buuuut, I've learned a few things here and there. You know, we've all been coming here for years and after a while I can grind them down. Get through the armour, pick up a few tidbits. A few juicy details...

Let's take, uhhhh... *her* for example. Older lady, booth in the back by the radiator. Kinda... spaced out look, *if you know what I mean*.

Far as I could tell, she was always a bit of an outcast. Not many friends, didn't get out much. Probably the type who wasn't very popular in school either; though that part I'm just guessing.

No cats either, if that's where your mind might be wandering. In fact, I gather that she's not very fond of animals on the whole.

So, she doesn't like people; she doesn't like cats or dogs. I ask her, then, this one time, "what do you like?" And she looks up from whatever it is that she's drinking and hating, and gets this little glint in her eye. Looks back down at the table, down to one of those shitty little fake electric candles they've got everywhere these days.

And in a low voice—not really whispering; I think her voice is just quiet naturally, from underuse—she tells me "I like fire."

Spooky, right?

She goes on to tell me about how her old man used to take her camping, and her favourite part was always when night would come and they'd get a big campfire a rippin' and a roarin'. And she especially loved the part, you know after dinner, when they'd take all their garbage and, slowly, piece by piece, toss it into the pit and watch it all shrivel up and burn.

"Watching something ugly become beautiful in the fire," is the way she phrased it to me.

And she kept that love, that appreciation with her for the rest of her life. When other kids or teenagers would be going out to play ball or catch a movie, she'd be poking at a fire. Out in her backyard, or crouched down in front of the fireplace. And it didn't hamper things one bit when one night she fell asleep to the gentle crackles and flickers and the whole house went up. And what was left of her parents? Well, she made sure it was cremated with the utmost respect.

They even let her watch through the little quartz pane at the crematorium. You know, heh, for 'closure.'

Her reputation wasn't quite as unhampered, though. "Fire girl" they called her, and the young lady that'd once been seen as a harmless, odd duck was now a pariah. But none of that bothered her, long as she had a roof over her head and a nice, warm fireplace. Even if she had to "reactivate" a defunct one; send a little harmless smoke into her neighbour's places, or flush out any wild animals who'd taken up residence.

One day though, something did start to bother her. You see, she moved into a building next to this frat house—you know the type: historic house in the middle of the urban sprawl, probably near a local university. But she moves next to this frat and, well, it wasn't exactly a match made in heaven.

They were loud, they were noisy, they were *rude*. She'd make her way down to the outdoor pit this building had, only to find smashed beer bottles everywhere. Clearly tossed over the dividing fence the night.

And when she complained, hoh boy, did it get even worse. These frat boys, you see, now they knew that they were living next to *the* Fire Girl. The local boys, at least. And, well, one day the pranks just got out of hand. What they did is that they somehow found out which unit she was in, then they took the garden hose from their backyard and waited 'til prime "watchin the fire" time, and... well, you can imagine. Gave her an awful fright, and her fire that night? Pshhhhhhh. No chance gettin' that started again.

So, she of course responded in the only reasonable way. That same night, she grabbed a can of kerosene, broke into their basement, and...

Well she kind of petered off when she got to that part of the story. Told me it all gets kind of fuzzy after that. Only remembers that things didn't quite go the way they were supposed to.

Well, I certainly don't know. But it does remind me of this story I read in the news a few years back. You must have read it too, if you're the news reading sort. This terrible accident: a house full of students burned down in the middle of the night. And by the time the fire fighters could get there, it'd already spread to the apartment buildings on either side of it—old buildings, you know? 61 dead that night. Real tragedy.

But, well. Must have been some other place. I'm sure they'd've caught her if it was her. I mean there's no way, right?

Anyway, there she sits. Not even she's sure why she always comes back, night after night. Sipping on something awful, sitting by the radiator as if she's got this chill that she just can't shake. But hey, though unorthodox, hopefully she's lived a life she's proud of. Making ugly things beautiful.

And that's her story. I suppose I've piqued your interest at this point? I mean, I certainly do have a way of interjecting myself. Though it always seems to work out.

Heh... Where is that bartender? I could sure use another sour.

Anyway, let's not talk about me just yet. So many other specimens of oddity out tonight. Ohhh, I see you giving that fella the eye. Well yes, he certainly has a story.

Now him: he's definitely more of a people person. And much more of an animal person. 'Surrounded by animals since a young age,' he told me. And most important and beloved of those childhood companions was Kage.

Kage was this big ol' Rottweiler, he tells me. Wide at the shoulders, stocky and strong. Gentle as a lamb with him, but a fierce protector whether at home or out on the trail. And it was one such day, as he was taking Kage out for a little nature stroll, that he found out just how fierce that was.

They're out walking, and all of sudden this rabid coyote darts out from the bushes just a few dozen yards ahead of them. It's slavering and twitchy; probably hasn't eaten in days. And that fella—he was still a teenager when this happened—he just freezes. Tries to remember in vain what to do, correct course of action. But Kage? Before this guy even realizes he's frozen, Kage had run down the path full steam. He knocks that coyote down like it's an empty match box and goes straight for the throat. By the time he's got his senses about him again, Kage is nuzzling into his leg, snout covered in blood.

And at that moment, he got a different kind of jolt. Not fear, but a kind of *excitement*. Maybe it's a bit strange as a first reaction to that situation, but he thought "my dog did that. My dog, who I trained, who obeys *me*, is a killer."

Well... after that, maybe he wasn't so careful anymore about when he took Kage out on the trail. And maybe he took more than just a hint of glee when he'd let his dog off the chain, and see what it brought back in it's jaws.

Though after a while, the excitement of it all died down a bit. Rabbits, pheasants, foxes? No thrill there. No challenge. Kage needed a challenge. *He* needed a challenge.

Now, you might wonder how somebody who claims to love animals could justify dog fighting. Let alone participating themselves. But if you really think about it, you still love dogs. You just happen to love your dog a whole lot more than the other one.

And he and Kage, they had a hell of a run. They were on top of the local circuit for years. But of course, a dog gets old. And well... It's an unforgiving sport.

Of course, things only spiraled further from there. The next dog—the couple of dogs, really—that he got his hands on just didn't quite click with him in the same way. Maybe because he'd become preoccupied with looking for a contender, rather than having a beast whose ferocity was born out of loyalty and love. Also didn't that our friend there had become a bit of an... enthusiastic gambler, and with that and the stress, and the pressure... it doesn't always breed the best decision making.

And then one night, it all truly comes crashing down. This new dog—and I don't even think this new one had a name—was his last shot, really. He'd spent half the rent money buying the animal, and put the other half down on the bet. And well, new dog, not used to these things, maybe didn't know how to follow orders so well; it's a grisly end.

But our friend, he can't take that. He's practically rabid; twitching, slavering. Poor guy probably hasn't eaten in days. He calls the other trainer a cheat, and pulls a knife on him. But our friend, he's forgotten where he is. And before he can take one step forward, this big old dog just bowls him right over and...

Well, he petered off at that part of the story. Told me it all gets a little fuzzy.

But it all must have worked out, right? I mean he's here every night, practically. Scratching at that big ugly gash on his neck. Not minding one bit as the rats crawl under the table and nibble at his toes.

Hey, come on. What's with that look? I thought we were having fun here. Look, I think you knew what kind of bar this was when you saw the sign outside. No point in raising your nose now.

These are fine people here. The usual crowd, and you know that means? Loyal. Loyal to a struggling, local business. Even one where the bartender seems to really love his 20 minute breaks!

Heh. Ahhh, he can't help it. Has urges he needs to take care of. He used to be a politician, you know? Helped pass some real nasty morality laws, but then they found out he was a bit of hypocrite and his constituents hung him high. Or... maybe he did that to himself? Heh. You know what I'm saying? We all like to feel something, don't we? Anyway, now he's been put in charge of this place. Someone must have figured that the administrative experience would help.

And who else? Whooooo else? Maybe the truck-driver who just wanted a little bit of company on those long, cold roads? Or, oh, how about the pediatric nurse with *opinions*?

Or maybe...?

No. No, I know who you want to know about. You've been wondering since I slid up beside you, haven't you? Come on, there's no shame in it. I'm an intriguing person, I've always taken pride in it. People like talking to me, they let me in. Tell me about their life and their troubles.

And in my former line of work that was a damn good thing.

Here's what I would do, my "game" if you will: I'd drift into town and come to a bar like this one; small, local, quiet. And then I'd find someone behaving very much in the way that you've been behaving all night. Someone who looked like they had worries, troubles, and not a friend in the world they could tell about it. And along comes me, always ready to listen. I'm very good at listening, you know? Much better than I am at talking; though I'm not half bad at that either.

And inevitably, the night would go on, and on and on, and the bar would need to close up shop. "Hey, you know, I don't have an early day tomorrow, we could keep this going at your place?"

And ah, you know, that's when the real work would start. Takes a lot to get someone to tell you the important things you want to know. PIN codes, passwords, and the like. I mean it was work for both of us, but at least they always got to 'go on vacation' afterwards, heh.

And you know, nobody likes work, but everybody's got to find a way to make a living, yeah? Well after that, the acid bath...

My favourite part, because it's when all the moaning and sobbing would stop. I like listening to people, you know? The stories they have to tell. But when they just start crying, ugh I can't stand it. And the old acid in a bathtub trick made it all fade away.

Then I'd just coast for a few weeks. Live it up, as "them." Rack up the bills, put it all on the credit card. See if anything juicy came in the mail. It never did last forever, though. Even the loneliest people in the world have landlords or debt collectors who'll come a knockin'. And that's when it would be time to skip town, move on, and find a new friend.

It all seemed to be going so well, you know? I really don't remember what went wrong. Did I take a slip...? Maybe my knots weren't as tight that night, and they got a hand loose and yanked me down into the tub? I'm really not sure. It's all a little fuzzy.

Ahhh... I'm probably not remembering it right. But anyway, I rolled into this town soon after and started coming here. And though I don't much care for the place, it feels right being here every night. You know? It's nice to be a regular.

Heh...

And you know what's really funny? I used to spend my life taking over other people's lives, becoming them, and now? Well, look at me. I've got no face to speak of. It's just a blank canvas, like my features were washed away with acid.

Sure as hell can't tell you my name either, if I ever had one, nor anything about my past. No, all I know about myself is what I did to other people. And that I seemed to hate sour beers.

But enough about me. Me, me, me. Even though I bet you were curious.

No, I'll be honest, I slid on over here because I wanted to know a bit more about you. It's not everyday that we get a new face around here. People walk by, *sometimes they even take a peek through the glass*, but they never come in.

It's just one of those bars. Nobody comes in unless they belong. Like I've been saying all along: it's really just the usual crowd.

So come on. Tell me something. I really do love to listen.

Hey, come on. Don't clam up now. I've shared so much with you; all I'm asking for is just one little tidbit. Just... Come on! Let me...! Let me touch your face, come on, I just gotta know, what's your story?! Let me touch it!

Oh. Ohh... Oh ho ho hooooo. Oh I see. That's very interesting. And uh... heh, now I *really* want to know what you're drinking.