

Pulling a Shift

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When he came in the back door he was blind. It took a while for his pupils to dial down from daylight to the darkness of the bar. Jack stood in front of the door still wearing sunglasses, unknowingly in the orbit of two bikers playing pool. He must have been stunned, stupid or both, and in fairness he kind of was. He had no choice but to wait in surprise while a familiar bouquet greeted him: BO, wet cigarette butts, boozy garbage and microwave popcorn. The jukebox played "We're Not Gonna Take It." He was very much interested in getting a fucking beer, and would have, but for the whole being blind thing.

Soon he could partly make out the bikers, in time to move out of the way so the big one could set up for an impossible triple-combo bank. The guy's arm was like a big tattooed leg with a cooked ham where his bicep should be. Jack nodded a tight apology and started toward the source of the smells and sounds. Four red vinyl booths lined the wall next to the pool table; red checked picnic tablecloths pocked with cigarette burns covered the tables. A few fuzzy souls sat within the booths unresolved, flickering in and out in an atmosphere of candlelight and smoke. He almost bumped into a tall table as he fumbled toward the bar in real darkness.

To Jack it felt like the bar should open out the other way, like the main room should be off the south door of the pool room, not the west. But hey, what did he know, he'd seen the place many times but this was his first time inside. Jack had already started on an afternoon buzz; he'd planned on pulling a shift at his mainstay, a shitty little place called Doc's. Pulling a shift meant you came in when the bartender did and went home when she was off, drinking for eight hours. He'd had a couple of beers and a shot at Doc's. But after his hangover melted into an afternoon buzz and he could think straight for a moment, he realized he was not loved there. He'd grown tired of coming to the same fucking place anyway, and the same old place seemed pretty damned tired of him too.

So what the hell, life's short, or some shit. His drunkard's math worked like this: There were a thousand bars in this town, about one hundred within roaming range, of those twenty-five were decent, so why not mix it up? It's not like he owned Doc's, though he sure as shit had drunk enough to have bought the pool tables and the jukebox several times over. "See that pool table over there," he would joke, "I bought it. See that flat screen up there? Mine." It was one of his funnier things.

But today he found himself here, in a place he'd never been, a little hole in the wall that took its darkness seriously. Jack had driven past it for years. It was easy to miss it if you didn't know it was there, and even if you did you might not see it. The place was inconspicuous - set way back off the street all ramshackle, off-white and stuccoed. If Jack's mind wasn't muddy he might have realized he only noticed it when already drunk.

Through the doorway of the poolroom the bar opened up into another box-shaped room, housing a well made but thoroughly thrashed bar top. It was shaped like a curvaceous letter  and looked kind of like an inverted question mark or maybe the scarred ear of a wooden giant. In places it seemed to show signs of abuse by various manly tools: Here's where an axe took a chunk out, here a chain saw bite, over there is where someone hucked a throwing star ninja-style. Yup, he was getting' drunk.

The padded barstool croaked a greeting when he bellied up. Jack sat in the middle of the soft inward curve of the long side of the . He held onto the lip of the bar and stretched backward, cracking his back but somehow feeling more pain after he stretched. Figured.

He accidentally caught some of his reflection in the marbled glass behind dusty bottles. He quickly looked away. As a kid he would sometimes go to the bar with his pops when his mom had to pull a day shift. Once when little Jack was spinning furiously on his stool and making faces at himself in the mirror on each turn, his dad grabbed his arm and stopped him short. His pops leaned forward and in superstitious, reverent tones whispered that a man should always avoid his

reflection in a bar mirror. Jack looked away in honor of his pops, as he had done for years.

When Jack turned his head he saw a fat man, head planted on the bar, hands covering his noggin as if in drunken grief, sawing logs. On the short length of the bar an emaciated man vacantly gummed a summer teeth smile. *Whadda we got here, fuckin' Laurel and Hardy*, Jack thought, and was very impressed with his wit. He chortled into his chest, pulled out a soft pack of GPC's and put one in his mouth.

"Nurse – A lil' help. Oh nursie, wherever you may have roamed?" he said. He lit a smoke with the last match of a green pack advertising Radio Cab and tossed it in the glass ashtray one ashtray to his right. There was an ashtray in approximation to each stool, a kind of low-class table setting.

Still no one showed behind the bar. Jack didn't worry. "Running on Empty" might be playing on the box, but his tank was half full with booze. He was starting to feel fine.

He'd wait a while, give the place a chance. It had many of the appointments that made a good bar. First, it had wood paneling. It also had one a' them Warm Nut Huts, a little tiny house that's whole job was the heating and dispensing of nuts. Kept behind the bar for obvious reasons. And they had that badass circular Budweiser lamp with the eternally running Clydesdales, the hallmark of a class establishment. Plus three pool tables, darts, pinball and three kinds of beer on tap. As well as them little microwave pizzas he lived on.

But the clincher was the tarbender, and this one was MIA. So much depended on her. At once a hostess, surrogate girlfriend, nurse, prostitute, mommy, and shrink. He'd fallen for more than his share. It made sense, they gave him what he wanted, seemed to fill up his need. Through an act of drunken make-believe Jack convinced himself that these chicks really dug him. But his come-ons never seemed to work, sometimes he got the feeling he was being used. Once he overheard two barmaids chatting about him, and one said he was "Money in the bank for my next manicure."

Jack jumped a little when the sprung door on the women's bathroom slammed shut, announcing the appearance of a small, attractive woman. She was

wiry and had curly wheat-colored hair bunched in a ponytail on top of her head. It bounced theatrically with each of her jaunty steps. She flipped up the bar panel – it always reminded Jack of a drawbridge – and slammed it back down. Suddenly she stood before him. *Too bad*, she was a fader: Hot from a distance but not up close. She could be a methy 28 or a well-pickled 40.

“Startin’ to think it was fuckin’ self-serve,” Jack said and laughed. “You didn’t have to rush over here on *my* account.”

“I didn’t, I forgot I had one lit out here,” she raised a bony hand to show a burned down filter with ash like a cremated tootsie roll. A blurry blue skull had been tattooed on top of her wrist and later embellished to look like a bracelet. Amateur work, probably prison. She popped a 120 in her mouth and lit it with a clear orange lighter; the flame shot half a foot. She stamped the filter of the burned-down butt in the ashtray like she was driving a nail with her hand.

“Well that’s one way to make sure you don’t lose it . . .”

“Huh?”

“You know . . . don’t lose the bracelet, can’t, you know, cause . . .”

“Uh, oh yeah.” She looked absently at her wrist. “Ha.” She slammed her hands down on the bar and leaned forward a little, showing a little mottled cleavage Jack didn’t want, chattering her teeth as if cold.

“*Sooo*, what can I get you?”

“I’d like something to drink.”

“Yeah, I figured. Can you be a *smidge* more specific?”

“ I want a small pitcher ‘o swill and a shot of rot gut.”

“Look man, this ain’t the wild west. On draft we got Coors, we got Coors Light and we got Bud. We got tons of booze too. I know it’s a big decision, so I’m just going to head on back to the ladies room, when you’re ready just bang on the door.”

Spunky. He dug it.

“Pardon, just havin’ a little fun with you, sweets. I’ll have a pitcher of Bud and a shot a’ Jaeger, in a rocks glass with no rocks.”

She gave him a look and dashed away, from behind and with a little distance she looked good again. She had a tight little poop-chute. Just a matter of perspective.

The skin and bones specimen to his right chewed his cud and hummed some low tune, not the one on the speakers. His raised chin, jowls jutting out like marbles, floated lightly from side to side like a cork. He occasionally whispered a few words followed by a series of odd winks, first two right and then two left, and then two left and three right. Eyelid Morse code for the sacred order of toothless hummers. Occasionally he completed the circuit with finger snaps.

The Fader appeared before him again, springy and long necked like a jack-in-the-box. She carried a decent shot, a draft glass and a small pitcher that was full and sloshing. She adroitly lay down bar napkins, the pitcher, glass and shot and wiped the small spill with a flourish. On instinct he reached for the pitcher and poured, filling the glass perfectly. The glass sweated, and his pour had just enough head to give some body, with a little beer tear cascading down the glass.

He was pleased. "Oh- Ohhh! – Beer commercial!" he said proudly. This would have to impress the little barling.

"Ohh-kaaay -- good job. But the sad truth is, in this place we all have to pay. That'll be seven fifty."

He produced two crumpled fives from his pocket. If she were a little nicer and maybe flirtier he might sacrifice more than his standard one-dollar tip. He knew he should do it anyway to properly grease the new relationship, but he resented it. He had many thoughts on tipping, but mostly he hated how dive bar bitches acted like a tip was automatic, rather than recognizing that a tip was in return for good service. The way it worked in most dives, the tip was goddamn bribe. He decided to tip big – two fifty – all his change, and take the rest of the tips on a round-by-round basis.

She leaned over even further, scooped up the pocket origami, bounded away and rang up the sale. Did she have springs in her damn shoes? He downed the draft in one pull; it was only like seven ounces or something. He expertly refilled the glass, dissolved the foam with some grease from his nose and slammed the huge shot,

which he then slammed on the bar, trying to make his mark in the wood. He unleashed a Satanic burp just as she returned and laid down his change. The burp was so heavy it felt wet. Her jester's face was crowned by that exploding blonde pom-pom on top of her head. Her eyes showed crow's nests and too much eye shadow and her bright pink lipstick didn't conceal cracked lips. Her clown face scrunched up as she pretended to disapprove of the belch like a schoolmarm.

"Sorry darling," he said and slid the tip toward her. Her nails absently drummed on the bar. Her hand clamped over the cash.

"This is for you," he said. "I want to thank you for wiping my area." There was a pause and then she laughed a real laugh, unless she was really good. It felt nice. She palmed her offering.

A beat too late he asked: "Hey – what's yer name anyway?"

She'd already skittered away, all the way across the bar. She put the tip money in a reclaimed pickle jar and rang a little bell.

"Thanks," she said and started to wipe down the bar, working the bar rag in little circles around the passed out tramp, toward Jack. Must be his animal magnetism.

"You are most welcome. Now what does a person call you?"

"You can call me Jackie. My name is Jackie."

"Get the fuck out!"

"What?"

"Mine's Jack."

They considered each other for a moment, trying to divine the significance of their names in the wrinkles on each other's foreheads. At once the bar phone rang and the front door opened, framing three silhouettes in rays of spectral daylight. The unwelcomed, bursting light made everything appear in shades of smoke.

Jack took his draft and checked out the jukebox. Based on the other good dive bar amenities, he had a feeling it would be a good one. For Jack, a strict protocol existed concerning appropriate tunes for dive drinking. Music in a dive should be a known quantity, like the beers on tap: You got your Regular and your Light and if you don't like it there are a thousand other bars in town. Also no bar worth its

pretzels should have an Internet jukebox. Randoms willing to fork out cash should not have the power to subject good people to their shitty, artsy-fartsy music.

In a neighborhood bar he only wanted to hear hard rock, heavy metal, Southern rock and outlaw country. Depending on mood and how wet his cement was, he might also secretly enjoy some 80's tunes, but that was strictly on the D-Low.

Just as he'd hoped, the selection was mostly 70's rock, with a peppering of Willie & Waylon and Hank. Perfect. As he flipped through the CD's he could hear the sunny chatter of the new people. They were regulars, on the early cusp of happy hour. Jack had a flash of recognition with one of them when the three had burst through the door with all that brightness, but he must have been mistaken. Although now, staring at the jukebox, he caught the man's reflection in the glass and still had a strong sense he knew him. He thought somehow the person was a grownup version of a kid he'd palled around with in grade school. A kid named David Gerten, a person he hadn't thought of in thirty years. Jack dismissed it when he remembered David would be in his late forties, and this guy was in his early twenties.

Never mind, he had a killer set lined up: "La Grange," "Dirty Deeds," "Bob Wills is Still the King" and "Jailbreak," all for a buck. He was kind of on a roll. He walked back to his stool and casually glanced at the new group. They were animated and clearly gainfully employed. *Fuck em*. It wasn't Dave anyway, couldn't be. He wouldn't hang with a bunch of yuppie happy-hour amateurs. Davey was the kid who stole the ball from the rich kids at recess.

That said, he was himself excited about Happy Hour: First and foremost it meant cheap booze. It also might present the opportunity to pull a slumming secretary who shouldn't have had that third wine spritzer. But mostly he was psyched about the food. If this was the right kind of establishment, and all indications were that it was, he could hope for something delish of the greasy, meaty variety. Maybe some do-it-yourself tacos with filling, more Sloppy Joe than Machaca, or tiny hamburgers you could scarf with two fingers. A person could easily chomp down twenty, pretending to be a giant.

His stomach growled. He was a little snackier than he'd realized. It was 4:30, the eats were still a ways off, plenty of time to polish off another round to prime his appetite and stoke the liquid courage so he could charm the ladies. As far as chicks, worst-case he could probably bang Jackie when she got off at seven or eight, though he was holding out for something fresh off the street.

He filled the draft glass and drained it – it seemed to get smaller all the time. He filled it again and pushed the empty pitcher forward into the graduated gutter in the bar to signal a refill, though Jackie was yackin' with the bringers of light. Everybody in their little cubicle click laughed really hard after they chanted together like a little fuckin' cheerleader rap: "When you're lost/ and don't know where to go/Go to the bar/ the bar called Bardo!"

Jack made a loud strawberry and tried to flag Jackie. He then half whistled and waved with a smile and she looked down, nodded and made a gesture with her hand he couldn't interpret. He fingered an indent where someone had used the edge of the bar to open a bottle, driving the cap into the wood. There were people now, not just the pre-happy hour happy group but also other more day-drinker types on both sides. Maybe they'd crawled out of the booths or come in the back door.

Jackie materialized before him and wordlessly made a circular motion with her hand encompassing the pitcher, glass and empty shot.

"Yes, ma'am. 'Nother round for me. And two dollars in quarters, please."

"Be right back." And she was, in what seemed like five seconds. This time he produced his billfold, spun it around fast in his hand and produced a twenty. He creased it down the middle and stood it like a tent, again no way Jackie would not be impressed by his moves. He twirled his wallet again before sliding it back in his ass pocket. When she came back with his change and the quarters, he amazed himself by tipping two bucks. *Fuck it! He was rockin' it out!*

Jack grabbed his beer and the shot and even though it was a queer thing to do, he carefully put a napkin over the pitcher to save his spot. He sauntered over to the pinball game, doing a little recon. The game, Theater of Magic, was awesome. It had a magnetic magic box that you wanted to get your ball stuck to. Do it three times and the game gave you a multiball with like a zillion balls in play at once.

But the real reason he came over was to check out the two hot chicks who were playing darts near the game. He'd been attracted by the brunette's hair: when she threw her silken bob flipped in a pleasant way. The chicks laughed as he walked near them. He slid a quarter into the slot. It clanked against the other coins in the intestines of the game. He put two more in the slot, eyeing the chicks while doing so. They were in their late 20's - too young, and also probably out of his class, but fun to look at. The redhead had her back to him and was shooting. She was better at darts. He watched her throw and was impressed when she hit a soft bull. She turned around smiling and he was stricken with stray yearning.

She looked so much like Kathleen, but it couldn't be. Some kind of trick of light or the foggy buzz that was rolling into his mind. Kathleen. He hadn't thought of her in so long. But this girl *couldn't* be her.

A sad and vacant half-smile came over his face and Jack pushed the start button, as stunned and frozen by this young dopple as he'd been when he first walked into the darkness of this place, except now coursing through the shock was a thudding, gravitational pain.

The redhead was too old to be her daughter, couldn't be anyway. Might be a cousin or something, or probably just the wishful thinking of a lonely guy getting drunk by himself on a Tuesday afternoon. *Keep the eye on the ball and it'll be fine.* When the steely drained the third time he drained the shot that had balanced on the metal rim of the game. He walked back to his stool.

He poured the pitcher, downed most of the draft and filled the glass again, sliding the empty pitcher into the depression. It was rhythmic, like beating out a slow signal on a drum over the course of a night, like a ritual dance.

Now the bar was pretty full, a concoction of two parts irregular regulars, one part retirees and one part wage slaves from Box-Store-Land-Ville trying to shake off their cubicles. Despite how uncomfortable the crowd made him, he had to admit his jukebox selections sounded amazing.

Jackie was too busy to really talk but she did wink at him when she took away the two bucks he'd again tipped, even though he only got a pitcher. Had to slow down a bit, the happy hour food would help. The tunes and the anticipation of

free food, maybe all he would eat today, warmed him. *You know, life really could be sweet.*

Jackpot! The happy hour gods were smiling: nuclear hot wings and crock-pot chili with tortilla chips. The bar also put out some carrot and celery sticks with ranch for the pussies. He expertly heaped a tiny cocktail plate with an implausible tower of steaming orange chicken wings. He filled a flimsy styrofoam bowl with chili, dunking as many chips as he could into the bowl and then started toward his stool. As an afterthought and with a drunken flourish, he veered back to the table and carefully slid a couple of celery sticks into his Jenga pile of chicken as an absurd garnish. He gingerly walked to his seat as if on a tightrope. *He was hilarious.*

When he returned to his belly-up spot a big black guy was sitting to his left. The man was kind of not cool with his right elbow. Jack tried hard to work around the man by sliding back a foot, but couldn't reach his food. He swiveled and tried various ways of more or less cramping the style of the person to his right but eventually figured it out.

While he was chowing he stole a glance at the black guy's face and nearly choked on a bone. The guy was a dead ringer for Alvin, a kindly exterminator who Jack met as a child and hadn't thought of in forty years. Alvin used to come spray his childhood home and he developed a friendly rapport with Jack's family.

If he was honest Alvin was one of the first African-American people Jack had ever spoken to. Growing up there weren't many black people in town. He remembered absolute aspects of Alvin. Jack remembered joyous conversations and his booming voice and his tremendous phlegm-filled, infectious laugh. Jack even thought he remembered Alvin had played poker with his dad and his buddies a few times at the house. The guy next to him could not have looked more like him. Eerie.

Jack feigned trying to get Jackie's attention and stole another quick look. Everything told him it was Alvin, even though it couldn't be. Alvin would have to be in his seventies, or even older, most likely not alive, but this man was in his fifties and not at all grey. Like the Kathleen ringer playing darts, this man could not be Alvin, just as the David look-alike couldn't be his childhood friend.

Sometimes Jaeger fucked with him, but it usually just made him pissed off or wild, like climb a telephone pole wild. He hadn't smoked any dope yet. Maybe Jackie had slipped him a Roofie or spiked the drink with valium to get a better tip. He stood and walked his dirty foam dishes to the open garbage can near the food. He hadn't noticed before but by the folding table with the food was an aquarium full of swimming neon colored fish. Jack walked closer as he tapped the glass he noticed a little stone Buddha sat in the sand on the bottom. "Wonder what that ol' happy fat man thinks is goin' on with all them fishies," he said to no one and started to walk back to his seat.

As he did Jack checked out the guy that reminded him of David. His glance lingered too long and he and the man's eyes locked for a moment, not confrontationally but more of a confused communication, a searching. He sure as shit looked like David Gerten.

Time to lay off the sauce. He'd been more depressed lately, maybe that was it, maybe his mind was fucking with him. Jack had just turned forty-seven, the age his father had been when he kicked off, and this freaked him. Sometimes all the stuff he'd pushed down for twenty-five years with a river of booze caught up with him. Maybe that was what was happening. Whatever it was it needed to stop. He wasn't seeing specters of people from his past, he was getting drunk in a bar and his soaked brain was trying to make friends out of strangers. Don't all people seek out patterns – like seeing Jesus in a burnt tortilla? Must be what happened.

And then he remembered: It couldn't be David because *Dave had killed himself* a couple of years after high school. That cinched it, it couldn't be Dave cause Dave was D.E.A.D. dead, not at the end of the bar noshing on mini carrots and wearing a shiny yellow shirt.

He flagged down ol' clown girl and ordered a shot, and even though she had a good pour – a nurse with a broken wrist – he ordered a double and a pitch. *Fuck it*, he was off down the boozier anyway, and now he was disturbed. He fired up a smoke. Music swirled. His stomach protested the meeting of hot food and booze. He popped a Pepcid and told it to shut up. People swarmed, floated in and out of Jack's periphery like driftwood. He played more pinball and even threw darts in a league

game for a guy who had a broken arm. He threw an embarrassing game, at one point missing the board. He played more tunes, but by the time he got back to his stool he'd forgotten what he played, but he knew they rocked – was one of the songs “Whiskey River?”

The next song was “Boom Boom” by John Lee Hooker and he hazily remembered picking it. People were moving, even the squares from the high-rise hives. The black guy and his buddy, a dude with a flattop and a tat on his neck, were bobbing their heads in time. Jack loved people - *people were so real and cool.*

“Hey Jackie. Jackie O! Jack-in-the-box! What say we get a lil' attention on over heyy-ere!” She again communicated a hand signal that didn't translate. Unless it was that stupid ass “talk to the hand” thing from the 80's. After a while she materialized before him, a stone fox.

“Jackie, my namesake, the female me, where have you been all my nightlife? Can I get these good people, these good people over here on my left a round? On me, the male Jackie. And, and, and a shot for me?”

“I'm gonna serve them a round on your dime, hotshot, but no more shots for you hunny, you're a goner. I really should take that shot you got now but there's time to sober up and I got a cab on speed dial. Two Coors, guys?” The men nodded. Jack was feeling triumphant and connected.

When the beers arrived Jack paid with crumpled money he more or less threw on the bar. It felt glorious.

The Coors drinkers hoisted their bottles and Jack clinked the black man's bottle with his shot, maybe a little too hard, but the man just smiled.

“You're crazy man.” The man laughed. “I know you, right?”

“I'm Jack. Like that Jack-in-the-box Jackie but not, it's Jack!”

“Yeah, Jack. Been a while. Thanks for the beer.”

“You're certainly welcome. Hey – hey – can I ask you something? I've seen this place a buncha times but never came in here before.”

“Yeah . . .”

“I'm a lil' drunk right now and I can't remember the name.”

“The name of what.”

“Of the bar. Of *this* bar. Like some kinda glamorous old time movie star name, or somethin’, Right?”

“What - you want to know the name of this place?”

“Yeah, some kind of movie star, some blonde – Bridgette –“

“The name of this place is Bardo.”

“That’s it! Bardo! Bardo! The name of this place is Bardo! Okay I got that.

Now - you got to tell me, cause I want to know”

“Yes?”

“Do I know you, man? We know each other right?”

“I think so, we do don’t we?”

“I know you, right? What your name again?”

“I’ll tell you Jack, but I think you know. My name’s Alvin.”