

Bar's a Funny Place

by H. W. Moss

Bar's a funny place, but it rarely makes me laugh.

Get to know someone, serve 'em drinks for years maybe, learn their life story, who's dead, who's alive in their family, if they have a family and the name of their dog or cat. Then one day you never see them again. Just gone, not there, don't come in any more and you never know why.

So when Anthony Angelo walked into Mario's Tap Room after five years' absence, all I could say was, "S'up Tone? Usual?" which kind of hid my surprise at seeing him missing his right arm and with a patch over his left eye. He also walked with a decided limp.

"Didn't think I'd still find you working here," he muttered with a tight lipped delivery I didn't remember from back then. He was tougher, leaner and in his voice the hint of a threat. "Thought you'd have another job by now. Higher class joint, maybe. Serving sushi and sake. Yah. Gimme a Hook."

I tried to look nonchalant as I wiped a glass and put it in the service rack. "Nope," I said. "Like it here. Meet all kinds, including you. Where you been Tony? You look like hell if you don't mind me saying. What happened?" I went over and pulled a pint. He didn't say a word until I set it on the counter in front of him.

He groused in his beer, stared at it long and hard with that one good eye, blew the foam over to one side, took a sip and looked me straight in the face. "If I told you I'd have ta kill ya."

I stepped back as quick as I could saying, “Whoa,” and almost bumped into the back bar. My reaction might have been a dead give away, but maybe not. It could simply mean I was not ready to put myself in harm’s way over some stupid comment, and Anthony Angelo was just the one to cause that harm even if he only had one arm.

“Don’t worry,” he grinned holding the rim of the glass up to his nose as if sighting down a rifle barrel, “Your secret’s safe with me.”

Which did not allay any of my sudden fear. Had this half-wit alkie figured it out or was he just making words come out his mouth to hear himself talk? Was he in my bar to fill a quota or was he accidentally hitting the right hot buttons? There was one way to find out, but I didn’t get a chance to deliver the first test question when a long, high pitched howl like a wolf braying at the moon came careening at us from the other end of the bar.

The only other patron in the place on a weekday afternoon was Slim who has stayed drunk since the day he rotated out of riding point on a LRP in the Mekong. Slim was not much of a witness, but neither was he a noisy drinker. His once black afro had grown snowy with age and he had not had it shaped in decades. Frankly, it looked like an explosion in a mattress factory. He usually kept his head down and drank quietly. Not today, not this afternoon. Something had him riled.

His first cry was followed by “Hooo! Hah!” which might have been a mispronunciation of “Ten-hut!” the way I heard it. The quiet was broken and I was suddenly on edge.

Tony took another sip of ale and smacked his lips, apparently unfazed by Slim’s outburst.

“Do I get the long story or the short version?” I persisted.

“Lost the arm and eye in the jungle on Frass where I been for the last few years.” He blew on his brew. I wiped another glass. I was not familiar with that particular battle zone. “Zigged when I should’a zagged. One blast caught me square in the back and the only thing the surgeon could do was cut it off here.” He wriggled his shoulder at me like he was waving his missing arm. “The eye fell out by itself.” He did that annoying blow sip, then said, “Supposed to grow back in about a lifetime.”

That clinched it, my suspicions were confirmed. There was no doubt he was a Supra because that’s the way they look at existence -- with the long view, the very long view. And I was certain he had an agenda.

I had to be careful. I did not know how much he knew and, although I had him with that remark, I didn’t want him to know I knew. After all, this was San Francisco where any supernatural could drop off the screen, take a vacation or just get out of the line of fire for a while. That’s why we were all here, hiding out, waiting until the time was right.

For me, the time would probably never be right again. I didn’t like wiping glasses and pulling taps, but I decided I liked it a whole lot better than getting shot at. Which is why I stayed behind the bar, any bar. Been working in one or another joint since 1851 when the town was wild, the gold rush was on and it seemed to me just the place to settle in for a little R&R. I stole a ship, took a powder and got a job. I’ve been moving around town for the last two centuries without glancing back. Until now, that is.

Tony, I now realized, had also been on the lam only I didn’t know it. And look what happened to him. He returned and got busted up and now he was here again only half whole, probably on assignment this time. But was I his assignment or was this still just an

accidental encounter? Stranger coincidences have occurred, though I couldn't tell you when or where.

Meanwhile, I had no idea that what was about to come strolling through the heavy red curtains shielding the front door from daylight on Haight Street would be my worst nightmare come true.

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Daniel wore a serene smile as he walked down the alley. He held his arm outstretched, index finger pointing away from his thumb with his other fingers curled inside his palm. A pigeon landed on the perch, cooed, remained with three-toed talons gripped tightly around the flesh like it was a piece of wood as Daniel moved the creature toward his face. There the bird nestled its head against his ear.

After a moment of apparently listening to the animal talk, Daniel said, "I agree." With a nod of his head he added, "That's what I thought about the food too."

Daniel held the bird to his ear once more, and then away. He said, "Why, how thoughtful. As a matter of fact, I could use a drink."

With these words the surrounding air beat with a hundred wings as a swarm made up of starlings, jays, sparrows, wrens, a dozen pigeons, an equal number of common murre and crow with a stray gull or two mixed in swooped down and deposited a small amount of liquid from each of their beaks into a recycled coffee cup held out by a pelican whose bill had been transformed into a platform for just the few seconds it took to fill the container. In an instant the cup threatened to overflow with cool water. Daniel reached for it and took a sip, then drained the entire vessel of its contents.

“Thank you. That was quite refreshing,” he said as he dropped the cup onto the asphalt. Twenty mice moved like a small ocean of gray toward the container which they instantly chewed into sawdust. Then the mice dispersed before an owl could leave its nearby perch and catch one.

The entire scene played out so quickly that Daniel’s stride barely slowed as he strolled along the back yard street. A number of dogs in the yards along the way sensed his presence and ran up to press their noses against fence slats panting, tongues lolling out, obviously ecstatic to be in his company.

Several raccoons that normally dwelt by day in the crawl spaces beneath these dogs’ owners’ homes walked the fences parodying and paralleling Daniel’s gait.

He turned a corner and left this entourage behind. Daniel headed toward the Panhandle on Shrader with a renewed sense of how right things were. However, all that was about to change because at the end of the block where Shrader intersected with upper Haight Street every nerve and every fiber of his body was assaulted by an overwhelming sense of how bad things could become.

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I caught a whiff before I saw the source. The odor filling the room was unpleasant, fulsome, foul and redolent of every dead creature, outhouse and meat packing plant I have ever unintentionally sniffed. And believe me, I have stumbled on my share of bad smells. At the same time it was chocolate caramel with vanilla and roses which made my mouth water.

I’d never seen this particular Supra cuz if I had, I’d remember. He was doing a good enough impression of a homeless person that he would fool most humans. But my

training won out and the question was answered before it could be asked. Then another question flowed into my conscious mind: What was he doing in Mario's?

About then the fireworks began. There was me, Angelo and this guy off the street and it looked like he's the one started it, although Tone might have been responsible. I can't say for sure. Me, I kept my distance as best as I could.

I heard Slim down at the other end of the bar shout, "Hooo! Hah!" again. Only this time he made it into one word and belched it out with a percussive ring that bounced off the walls in reverberating echo at least a dozen times. This meant he was awake, at least for the minute. No telling how long that would last or if he was paying attention to what was happening at the front end of the saloon. Like I said, Slim would not make a good witness if he saw you get hit by a taxi while walking across the street inside the crosswalk with the light green. He'd get some part of that wrong.

What I remember most was the sound before the furious explosion of light. Suddenly all hell broke loose and we were surrounded by the Gog and Magog on one side, a Demogorgon trying to gain control on the other while one of the Hydra waved her snake heads at us and every creature ever conceived of in the Devil's caldron and each of their opposites as envisioned by your mother as a chaste teenager taking First Communion flew around our heads like gnats overeating on the fourth day of an open casket wake.

A ball appeared in the air, almost perfectly round, reddish orange with black striations. It resembled a lopsided basketball, which is impossible unless it's an egg. And only baby Kraken came in such large packages. This one looked like it was about to hatch and I sure didn't want it imprinting on me as its momma.

I saw what was coming from a mile away but was powerless to do much about it. I was reminded of exactly why I was here behind a bar in 21st Century America instead of on the front lines of some unnamed planet in a galaxy no one had bothered to put on a star map because it was so small. I'm not a coward, just conscious of how dumb the whole thing is when you get two religious nuts from differing clans together in the same room. They were oil and water, ice and fire, sand and sea and they were not going to be friendly to one another and here I was caught in the middle.

The good news: If Angelo was after me, his attention was immediately diverted to his greater enemy. The bad news: If the homeless guy was not looking for a fight, he had found one.

The Gorgon tried to catch me in her gaze, but I knew the reflection trick. I ducked which revealed the back bar mirror, so she shot herself. Froze to stone instantly. One down. Great. That leaves a hundred more sylphs to contend with, and they weren't even the main event, just peripheral. I swatted at a few.

Angelo was incensed. Ol' Tone's one good eye turned fiery red. It burned like a hot ember, brighter than it had a right to glow which was probably a carry over of energy from the one he'd lost. His good arm moved in an arc and swung away from the beer on the counter toward the guy in the dirty cloak. As Angelo's arm moved it turned from flesh to plastasheen and I realized he was a tranny. Transformers are fierce fighters. I knew this because I had been up against a few before I went AWOL.

But the street person was fast on his feet. He leaped on top of a barstool and whipped the coat off his back. As his arms flew from the shabby sleeves the garment turned from patchwork to whole, from dull to bright and I realized it was the latest model

Shal'on suit, a complete version near as I could tell which would mean the wearer had a high priority rating. This particular Shal'on suit had chameleon qualities to make it look like something Goodwill discarded. The fakeout street person brought the material around over his head in a whirl that parried a jab from Angelo which would have taken the head off anyone with less modern body armament.

I was interrupted in these dispassionate observations at precisely that instant by a Griffin which flapped its wings in my face and slapped my nose with the pointy end of its tail. Griffins! Can you believe it? I thought they were exterminated in the Blasses Wars. And they always fought dirty. I think it has something to do with their tiny pointed heads.

My reflexes have always been quick which explains how I got out of a few of the scrapes I've been in. I caught the little green flying horn back toad by the tail and brought it down hard on the counter. I heard its back break and green brains began to ooze out of a crack in its cranium. My advice is: don't go into a fight unless you know you can win.

Slim's voice came at us again from the back of the room. His "Hooooo" became stretched out into an even longer vowel and when it took on a much deeper tonal range I realized one of these Supras must have thrown us into stasis. I hate it when that happens. Worse, it meant I had miscalculated. I had no idea anyone in the place had that in their arsenal. And I don't know about you, but coming out of stasis always gives me the worst hangover.

Stasis is not a weapon of last resort, but it's close to one of the biggest guns most Supras carry. You don't pull it out unless you have to because you tend to get glued inside just like your opponent. It's like swimming underwater in clear syrup only you can still breathe. Not that I really needed to. Slim was probably the only one in the bar with a

I still had not figured out who turned the field on when a strand of material as thin as a piece of string flew from Angelo's chest. His old Pendleton shirt had suddenly grown a few extra pockets and it was out of one of these the tethering strand grew.

I recognized it immediately as being made from the magic metal known as asiceton, but I don't think the kid did. The strand had a mind of its own as it circled itself around one wrist, danced over to the other where it looped once, twice, a third time around and then grow taunt. The loops tightened and the young man's thin arms were brought together with such force the palms slapped with a resounding thunder clap.

Asiceton is impervious to steel, fire and water. If you struck it with a sword or knife, the weapon shattered. Fire was absorbed by it without transferring any heat. And water is repelled by the magic metal which my cousin once swore kept her afloat in the Aegean for seven weeks without any effort whatsoever until a Phoenician trading vessel arrived to whose captain she had to make excuses for having survived so long without food, water or flotation device, near as he could tell.

But you could never trust Bern's stories to be accurate. She probably stole that one from a fourth century BCE urban legend.

Still, I knew asiceton when I saw it because it has this evanescent luster that is quite an unforgettable coloring. It's a living color, an animated color I've never seen a painter duplicate. But if Tone was wielding asiceton, we were all in for a bit of a shock.

The afternoon was fast turning into a celestial nightmare. Please, I wanted to appeal to all the gods who seemed to have become involved, no Centaurs. I don't get along with Centaurs, especially their women, not a-tall. Their hooves leave marks on my back.

Slim at that moment decided to let out another howl which, once again, ended with that staccato snare drum, "Hooo! Hah!" Except it was in real time which meant the stasis field was shut down and we could all stop floating. My feet hit the floor.

Was Slim waking up for real now or what? I spared a glance in his direction and was surprised to see him in motion, moving toward the two combatants with a strange leer on his face that could only have been dredged up from an ancient ancestry of warrior kings.

I wanted to stop him, to warn him he would be in way over his head and he should leave these two alone. Let them kill each other, which was hard enough to accomplish, or let one wrap the other into a tiny bit of earwax between thumb and forefinger and pinch the loser into another dimension. I've used that trick a couple times myself in similar circumstances when I gained the upper hand. After all, Slim had nothing but his bare knuckles to work with and was 35 years out of shape.

Tone and the street person were slamming spells into each other at a furious rate. Bright lights popped on and off with every twitch they made as they dodged and wriggled for advantage. The asiceton might hold his wrists together, but the kid could still deliver body blows to Angelo who was using up all his strength reeling in his prey in order to get close enough to deliver a final body tap. Every Supra knows that a touch can kill.

Slim approached the conflict seemingly oblivious to the variety of sylphs that had been called into the fray. Some buzzed around his white frizz of hair and became

Slim grabbed Tone's beer off the bar top where he had left it half full and splashed it over the street person's entire body. Then he grabbed Anthony Angelo by his good arm and pulled him around into a face-to-face position Tone could not avoid.

The asiceton flew apart, shattered into thousands of tiny pieces with the beer wash and the moldy odor of damp unwashed flesh assailed our nostrils.

Tony stood stock still with his mouth open facing Slim, astonished that anyone would dare come between him and his opponent.

Slim turned to the kid and said, "Get out before I kick you out." The street person grabbed his coat off the floor, turned around and fled the barroom. A crack of daylight shown in as the curtain parted for a second and he disappeared behind it.

Then Slim turned to Tony. "Sit down and shut up." Tony did so. Slim turned to me. "I threw his beer on the other guy. You buying him a new one?"

I nodded yes.

"Great. Do I get one, too?"

"Sure thing," I said and went over to the tap with the cheap stuff.

Things had returned to normal and I was secure in the knowledge that Tony was not after me. Turned out my secret was safe and Slim could go back to sleep.

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