

One Too Many

by H. W. Moss

Holding the glass up to the light and peering through the amber liquid, Cynthia thought she saw dust swirling in the bottom and said as much to her friend seated on the barstool next her.

“Unfiltered,” Cheryl replied. The crowded, noisy room nearly drowned out the terse response. “Trendy.” She swallowed a mouthful, “Believe it or not, supposed to be that way.”

Cynthia sniffed the rim, did not find the yeasty odor offensive. She tilted the drink toward her lips but paused before sipping and took one more close squint at the liquid’s surface. Where draught met glass was a thin thread of white foam.

Cynthia at last tasted the ale and a cold tingle of effervescence trilled down her throat with the reminiscence of champagne. A different kind of bubbly, she thought. Beer isn’t just for red-necks any more.

At the same time, Cheryl set her half-full pint on the counter and leaned back to take in the other patrons and their mutual surroundings. She watched fascinated as Cynthia went through her sniffing and squinting motions and smiled at the thought that her friend had never been in a brew pub.

In Southern California where Cynthia grew up there were bars and restaurants but nobody concocted their own beverages on the premises from scratch. Except maybe root beer stands. Would that be the same thing? She’d have to think about that.

“Really, Cyn, I wasn’t all that thrilled my first time either. It’s like sex: You gotta get into it slowly. Hey. Whatdya think of the guy with the wide tie?”

Cynthia followed where Cheryl’s eyes led, then took the first turn in their naming game. “I don’t think that’s quiet the same as big feet, big dick. He’s more like Mister Polar Bear.”

In mid-sip, Cheryl snorted a laugh into her glass. “Right. Cold and not very cuddly. Doesn’t clip his toenails and keeps out of the sun. Polar Beer. Got a gut on him. Not my type either.”

The fellow must have realized he was the object of their attention because he looked appraisingly in their direction. Both quickly averted their eyes.

It was Cynthia’s turn to pick someone out. Her eyes settled on a table across the room occupied by four men wearing similar dark suits.

“Quick, I’ve just spotted the Three Musketeers and D’Artagnan.”

“Really!? Where? Ooooh. Gotcha.” Cheryl was fast to follow a lead. “Real swordsmen. Think they carry daggers? Not allowed to count briefcases.”

“Checked at the door. No weapons inside the saloon.”

Cynthia took a big sip, set the glass down, leaned over and nudged her companion: “Q-tips at four o’clock,” she said surreptitiously. “Don’t let ’em see you. Probably can’t get it up.”

Abruptly, Cheryl changed the subject. “So tell me about HIM, Cyn. What’s he like? Is he a Polar Beer or dashing like our Musketeers over there?”

Cynthia took another gulp of her drink before she replied. “I really don’t know. Tonight’s our first date. Met him at work, third floor, he’s an analyst. The psychiatric kind, not computer. We’re getting together in, um. . . “ she did not wear a watch, so she grabbed Cheryl’s wrist, “an hour at Dante’s. For dinner. He says it’s a nice place, quiet, a few blocks from here. You been there? I haven’t.”

“Once with Manny. The Wharf Rat. Remember him? Expensive restaurants and cheap hotels. That was Manny’s style. The dipstick was married if you recall.”

Cynthia nodded. “I remember. Well, I hope Roy’s telling the truth he’s single. A nice guy. I call him Mister Nice because he’s so darn polite. Actually, I’ve been hoping he’d invite me out for weeks.”

“Tsk, tsk. You ought to learn not to play where you earn your pay. Not good to date guys in the office.”

“I know, but it’s not really the office. And I really really really wanted to go out with him. We’d see each other in the elevator and I knew he was just getting up the nerve to ask. Joan in bookkeeping said he talked about me to her once, but that was months ago. Anyway, he finally introduced himself last week and said he lives in the Richmond and doesn’t have a car so yesterday when he asked me to dinner I said sure, but let’s meet somewhere near the office and he suggested Dante’s.”

At that juncture in their conversation the bartender stepped up and said, “Pardon me ladies. Those two gentlemen at the table over there would like to buy you both a drink.”

Mildly amused, Cheryl looked in the direction indicated, saw two men with upraised glasses hailing and smiling. They had not yet been selected in the name game. Cheryl must have liked what she saw because she lifted her nearly empty container and finished it off with a nod.

Cynthia, meanwhile, had not turned her head and said in a low hiss, a scolding tone of voice: “Cheryl! You cannot do this to me! I have to be some place and I don’t want to get involved in a conversation with someone I don’t know. I don’t have time to talk to a couple of Bozos.”

Too late, the damage had been done and two dark beers appeared on the counter in front of them. The men at the table rose and advanced toward the bar. Cheryl giggled as one sidled up on her side and the other took a position next to Cynthia.

“They call it Swamp Water but it tastes like Tupelo honey,” the taller of the two said by way of introduction. “Me, I’m Ed Thompson. This here’s Jimmy, or James Moody if you prefer. And you ladies are named . . . ?”

The introductions progressed quickly into small talk and Cynthia had to admit she was having a good time. Ed did his best to show off a knowledge of brewing techniques and rather than ask what their sign was or who did what kind of work where, instead invited the bartender to bring samples of the various beers for everyone to taste.

“High octane in this ’un,” Ed said as he passed a glass containing something with a distinctly red tinge. “Not exactly jet fuel, but two of these and you oughta give up your car keys.”

Cynthia had lost all track of time as well as how many beers she tasted. Plus, in short order she could not distinguish one draught from another, was on the verge of asking what the big deal was with a micro brew when she saw the digital face of James Moody’s wristwatch.

“Omigod! I have ta go.” She frantically pulled at her coat on which she was sitting, lifted her butt and clawed the light jacket out from under. She draped it over one shoulder, made a grab for her purse and slid her feet unsteadily to the floor.

“Whoa, little girl. Where you gotta be so sudden?” Ed asked in that annoying drawl of his. She was certain it was fake.

“I’m sorry. Honestly, I have to be somewhere. Jeez, I’m half an hour late already.”

Cheryl was not pleased but defended her friend by interposing herself between Ed and Cynthia. “The girl has a date, fellas. Don’t fret. I’ll be back to keep you company soon as I help her into a cab. Just sit tight.” She motioned to the bartender who was within earshot: “Get us a taxi, will you?” He nodded, picked up a phone and tapped the keypad.

The women made a bee-line for the front door, Cheryl steadying Cynthia by holding her left elbow. “Hey. Listen. You okay? Taxi may be slow in coming. Busy Friday night. I could walk with you if you want. The restaurant’s close enough.”

On the front steps Cynthia stood tall, shook her body all over to test her balance, decided there was no need for alarm. She was slightly inebriated but certainly not drunk. That was one thing to be said for beer instead of vodka. You had to consume a lot and usually you got full before you got soused.

“No, that’s all right. I can make it on my own. Still plenty of light and the neighborhood’s safe. Unless that cab shows up right this instant, I’m hoofing it. You go back inside and make nice nice with Southern Comfort and his short shot-glass friend.”

“You’re certain? I don’t want you to think I’m abandoning you.”

Cynthia shook her head, stuck out her right hand which she pulled back into a hitchhiker’s thumb just as Cheryl reached out to shake it.

“Gotcha.” Cynthia turned to depart, then winked at Cheryl. “I had a great time. But don’t give them my number or tell ’em where I work.”

“Wouldn’t think of it. Enjoy your evening with Mister Nice.”

The walk would help sober her, Cynthia thought as she turned toward the intersection where the restaurant was located. She straightened her outfit as she made her way, dug out a compact and surveyed her makeup, mascara and lips. She paused once in the doorway of a closed shop where she used the window to add some tint. Breathing steady and regularly, by the time she arrived at the entrance to Dante’s she felt flushed but revived. She dreaded making up an excuse, but decided against total candor. She would not lie, exactly, planned to tell her date only as much of the truth as needed. Late because, um, was having a drink with a friend, totally lost track of time, yes, that’s it.

She took one deep breath and opened the door.

The interior of Dante's was small but comfortable, intimate but not crowded. It smelled delicious. She located her dinner date seated alone at a table with a bottle of wine in front of him. He looked up from the menu, smiled as he saw her coming toward him.

"I'm so sorry, Roy. Honestly I am. I stopped for a drink with a friend and we were so engrossed in conversation I just didn't keep track of the time. I hope you'll forgive me."

"Of course," he said as he rose and walked to her side of the table where he pulled back the chair and, in that gentlemanly manner she found so endearing, pushed it in for her when she sat. He took that opportunity to bend over and whispered in her ear: "You look lovely tonight. May I offer you a glass of white wine? A Chardonnay."

"Please." She was grateful for the compliment even if she thought it couldn't possibly be wholly true. Her self-deprecating musing was diverted when he filled the glass.

"I haven't ordered yet but the owner, who's the chef by the way, came over and explained tonight's specials. I think I'll have the salmon. It's poached in broth and covered with an almond and dill butter sauce. But, take your time choosing."

As she studied the menu, she sipped and, perhaps overly attentive, Ray immediately refilled her glass. He made mention of the restaurant's reputation and commented on the wine.

"It's as old as recorded history, you know. Biblical, even. Fermentation occurs naturally when airborne yeast lands on sugar-laden fruits, grains, vegetables even."

She said, "Oh, really" as if she found this tidbit interesting. By the time the hostess arrived to take their order, Cynthia had begun to feel the wine's effect which was definitely enhanced by the number of beers she consumed with Cheryl. Cynthia realized she had been drinking on an empty stomach and suddenly felt queasy.

“You’ll excuse me while I go to the ladies’ room?”

“Why, of course,” he said with a smile. “But it’s unisex so there’s only the one toilet. It’s downstairs through that doorway.” He nodded in the general direction because, she thought, he’s too polite to point. She shooed him back down into his chair when he started to rise with her.

“That’s okay. I’m a big girl,” she said coyly. “I’ll be right back.”

Steady, she intoned to herself. Place one foot in front of the other. Thaaaaat’s a girl. Cynthia’s stomach was starting to do cartwheels and she realized she really did have to get to that bathroom. Fast. That’s something NOT to be said for drinking beer instead of vodka, she thought as she took the short set of steps leading to the WC.

She relieved her bladder, flushed the toilet and was washing her hands when all the liquid inside her stomach decided it was time to depart. She knew the symptoms: she had the heaves.

Quickly she lifted the seat and bent over the open lid of the toilet, swept her hair back from her forehead as a stream of bile burst from her gut. She coughed, tried to breathe, tasted the sour sting of stomach juices in her throat. She sank to her knees as another spasm shook her and the last few ounces of winebeer were forced into the stinking pool of water. A fetid odor wafted up which stung her eyes.

Many seconds passed. She felt lousy. She hugged the commode with one hand while the other clutched the nearby sink for support. At last she found the strength to rise, cleared her throat and spat several times to get the foul taste out of her mouth.

She wiped her face with a towel, decided to get rid of the evidence and jiggled the handle to flush the toilet a second time. She realized the valve was stuck open and the tank would not fill. She had the presence of mind to lift the porcelain tank top which she gripped none too securely.

As she peered inside at the flapper and float, she lost her grip and dropped the heavy white weight directly onto the open mouth of the toilet bowl which made a glass smashing sound that reverberated throughout the small room.

The lid cracked into two equally symmetrical pieces. One half flopped with a splash inside the bowl and the other nearly landed on top of her open-toed shoe.

She bounced onto one foot, watched in horror as a large white piece of the bowl itself separated from the opening where seat meets base and flopped out and away from the edge of the toilet in slow motion roll. It fell with a ringing clatter on the tile floor alongside the lid.

Suddenly unfettered in its mundane course around the inside lip of the toilet bowl, water began to torrent onto the floor.

Cynthia was horrified. She did not know what to do and jumped back as water splashed her feet and poured freely onto the floor. She felt the doorknob stab her in the back, twisted it and opened the exit. She backed out of the room closing the restroom door behind her as quietly as possible. She was thankful no one was waiting to use the facilities.

With downcast eyes she retraced her steps up to the dining area. Head down, slightly stooped, she was humbled and suddenly very depressed. Cynthia realized with utter dismay her actions ruined not only the evening with Roy but the entire restaurant as well: there was no other wash room. From now on, wine and water tumblers could only sparingly be filled; every glass consumed would have to be held without relief; there could be no alleviation for overstuffed, distressed bowels; bulimic patrons could not purge.

The woman who ran the place glanced casually in her direction as Cynthia breasted the top step. Self-conscious, worried her dress might have wet spots, afraid to look anyone in the eye, Cynthia sought her chair.

Their dinners had been served. Roy sat with a full plate of food in front of him. He had not touched his fork, had deliberately waited until her return to begin. His main course had undoubtedly grown cold.

Cynthia's appetite was completely gone. Her features must have reflected the torment she endured because, as her date rose to his feet to greet her, concern washed over his face.

She waved him away, took her seat and was preparing some sort of explanation when a shriek echoed up from the tunnel leading to the single bathroom. The proprietor had discovered the toilet's destruction.

Cynthia folded her arms and lay her head on the table beside her full plate and began to sob uncontrollably.

An astonished Roy leaped to his feet and came around to her side where he began to comfort her. He held her shoulders which shook with her sobs.

"There, there. It's all right," he said. "Everything will be okay. Now, now. . ." his soothing voice trailed off. But she knew things would not be all right.

And they were not. That was the first time he ever touched her. And the last.

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