

A Good Clean, a Harsh Clean

By Brian Martinez

Between a factory which makes plastic things, odds and ends like dolls eyes and adult toys, and a slaughterhouse, a kosher one, meaning a man at peace with God comes there early each morning to approve of how the men are killing, I found a bar, a hole-in-the-wall. It didn't have a name, just weak neon tubes in the windows that spelled out words like "beer" and "cold", at least one of them a lie. So I went in. I figured that way when she asked me where I'd been, and I said "Nowhere", it would be the truth, and it would show on my face and the questions would stop.

It was the kind of place, you know it, where a light bulb burns out and they figure, shit, one less drain on the electric bill. There were corners you couldn't even see into. Pushed up to the bar were four wooden stools, the first wet with something, so I took the second and when I did duct tape crinkled under my ass. In the jukebox there was a 45 spinning. Some guy crying about not knowing where his woman was sleeping that night, and all I could think was, Jesus, it's so much worse to know.

The bartender came to life and trickled over, a nice enough-looking guy with a lazy eye asking me what I wanted. "Gin," I told him, "and don't go sneaking top shelf shit on me."

As he went to find the bottle I took my hand off the bar, realizing it smelled like bleach. My hand, not the bar. I've always hated the way it dries me out, the skin puckers in like not just water but the life has been sucked out of me, leaving it cracked and throbbing. Though I have to admit the smell isn't bad. It's the smell of a clean slate, a clear conscience.

Someone to my left cleared his throat and you got the impression he had cancer; something nasty had woken up in his neck and was tearing it apart, putting blood in his spittle, which, by the way, is a word I hate. Probably why I use it so much. I turned to see an old man pulling himself out of the dark, shaking to his feet up from a chair at a table I couldn't see, yellow eyes pointed at me, worn down teeth propping up a mouth gravity was winning against.

"How do," he asked. I nodded to him because it was all I could think to say.

The bartender arrived with my gin just in time, spilling a little when he poured, which I tried not to hold against him. He noticed the old man and called out to be careful, not to fall in his establishment

and break a hip or what have you. The way the lids tightened around his good eye made it sound like a joke.

"Shut your yapper and pour another, and I'll pay for the both," the old man said, his breath obvious.

I shook my head. "Thanks, though."

"Listen, friend, anyone who puts a foot in this sunuvabitch's hole obviously needs a drink bad enough, and I'd enjoy the opportunity to buy it for you."

The bartender poured a gin in reply. I shifted as the old man put two hands infested with blue and black veins on the stool to my left, preparing himself for the task of climbing up. He'd been a strong man once judging by his voice and his shoes, but now he was looking at that barstool like he was standing at base camp. "I'm not stopping at one is the problem," I tried. He laughed a little and it seemed like it hurt him. He looked up at me.

"I'll get the first. After that you're on your own. There's just no fightin' it, I'll have you know."

"Well then thanks, I guess."

"Don't bother, we're Even Steven if you just help me up this fucking thing. I'm telling you they're makin' them taller all the time, every year, taller, and for what? Hm?"

The bartender slid the second drink to the hilt and said, "Would you stop with that?" He threw me a look, sucking air between his teeth and dismissing the old man and everything he'd said, ever said, with a lazy wave of his rag. I leaned over and grabbed the old man's arm. Felt how cold it was.

"Not like that you ape, unless you're aiming to break it!" The jaundice in his eyes caught flame. He regarded me in loathing tones, a sudden snap of intent. I held it there, his arm, and my tongue, telling myself he deserved a free pass, just one, considering he'd bought me a drink just seconds before.

"I'd have to get to know you better before I decide what to break," I told him.

He eyed the gin. "Well, here's your chance then, isn't it."

The bartender chuckled to himself, busy dusting bottles. I let go and got to my feet.

Standing behind his hunch I could see the old man's spine through his sweater. It stuck up like a range of old, wind-worn mountains that stretched from his collar to his belt, and I wasn't sure where to put my hands, not out of some idiot's need for appropriateness because, let's be honest, he'd become sexless years before I met him, but because it all looked way too brittle. Might as well ask me to push a

bag of glass onto the roof.

"Here we go," I said, more to myself, putting a hand on either side of his waist. As small as it was to look at it was actually even smaller to touch, the corduroys, baggy on his pelvis, pushing in under my grip until they hit bone. I lifted him up and he couldn't have weighed more than seventy pounds. It all went easily enough, except maybe for some ugly straining on his part.

"You got paws bigger than some bears I've met," he said, settling in.

"Which is it then?"

"Hmm?"

I recaptured my seat and grabbed my gin. "A minute ago I was an ape, now I'm a bear."

"Well. A lot can happen in a minute, don't you think?"

"Suppose." I took a pull and it tasted right, like always. I watched my fingers flex around the thick glass.

"I used to have hands like yours, believe it or not. Somewhere along the way I lost track of them. Let them..." he trailed off. "Now if I so much as get a weed in the yard I need my grandson to come pull it out." He sipped his drink and said, "Shit. Now you think I'm some lonely bastard who buys a stranger a drink so he can complain about his lot."

"I'm not that perceptive about these things."

He breathed into his glass, a long, lungish thing, and it took me a bit to realize he was laughing. The bartender glanced over to make sure it wasn't a death rattle. "You're very good," the old man pointed a strange fingernail at me. "You play the oaf but that's not you at all, is it?" I tossed back the rest of my drink until cubes hit teeth. Then I waved for another. The bartender did his job and the old man was still on his second sip. "You would've fit right in with the Gentlesin's Club," he said, "bastard like yourself, they'd have made you a member for sure."

I grabbed a swig, phrased like a question.

"It was a men's organization of sorts, glorious shit-starters hell-bent on anarchy. Beautiful men in our own right. Used to get dressed up in our best tuxedos and chew peyote. We liked to say, 'If it's not right, we'll wrong it.' See, we understood what all the greats have- that you can do more damage in shined shoes than you can in stompers."

He went on like that as I finished my second and ordered a third. We sat drinking for a bit listening

to a television try its hardest. Eventually I said, "What line of work's your son in?" He looked up slowly from his glass. "He must be busy if it's worth skipping over him and bothering the grandson for help around the house."

"You think so?"

I shrugged.

"And you're supposed to be the 'not perceptive one'." He moved his head around, mocking me. He slid his glass around on the bar and watched the way the puddles moved. "Didn't mean that. It's just, sickness took that boy a long time ago. Sometimes I get a stick up the ass about it."

"Understandable."

"The only phone number I got left is my grandson's. Now don't get me wrong, he's sort of an asshole, but at least he picks up. Speaks to a man's character if he can pick up a phone fully knowing I'm on the other side of it."

"Cheers to that." The bartender came over and topped us off. "In fact I'd say Malcolm qualifies for fucking sainthood for putting up with your sour routine all these years."

"Nobody asked you," the old man mumbled.

All of a sudden all that gin in my gut felt like it was weighing me down, ready to fall out my ass like a wet diamond. I pretended to take another slug but instead let it burn at my lips because it bought me some time, kept things casual. "His name's Malcolm?" after I'd counted to ten.

"Unfortunately. It's no wonder he fancies himself some sort of poet with a name like that. But what else can we do but grow into our names? Like goddamn potted plants."

I looked at my hands, wondering if he could smell the bleach on them.

Malcolm Greenstone was dead. I knew that because no one could live through what I'd done to him.

"I can't do booze," the old man said. "I spent twenty years pickled in the stuff but my stomach just can't take it anymore." The more I looked at him the more I saw Malcolm. The chin. The nose. The way they'd looked before I got to them. "I'm switching to beer, you want the rest of this?"

"You've given me enough."

"Don't go pussy on me, just take the damn drink. If it's not you it's the sink, and I think just enough of you to give you first shot."

I pulled the glass over and my hand came close to his, nearly touching it. His hands were impossibly dry. Malcolm's were not. He called for a beer while I worked with what I had.

"What line of work are you in then?" He was playing with the veins in his hands, pushing them around under the surface.

"I'm between jobs at the moment."

"Of course. Only two men drink that way- the heartbroken and the unemployed."

The bartender brought a beer; shitty, domestic stuff you could see right through. He said, "Women are like jobs and jobs are like women. What do they call that? Interchangeable? You put on your best suit at the start but by the end you can't be bothered."

The old man took the beer. "A big guy like you could find a new one in no time."

"Which are we talking about," the bartender asked.

I said, "You're not making this easier."

"Don't imagine I could."

The bartender finished wiping the bottles off and moved to the wood, taking a thin layer of greasy dust up with his damp rag. Then he took out a spray can of lemon cleaner from under the counter and set to filling the air with a choking citrus as fake and constant as the people you find on boardwalks.

"What's that gonna do," the old man asked. "Nothing but a squirt of piss. This place is filthy. It needs a good clean, a harsh clean, with real chemicals like, like..."

"Bleach," I said.

"Did you know that shit kills HIV? Doctors are out of their minds looking for a cure and it's right under their noses. 'Course you can't go injecting people with bleach, but I'm sure they can figure something out, you know they can, just have to be willing to break some eggs."

I pictured Malcolm's white basin sink and a spiral of pink swirling around and around and down the drain, and in my hand the jug I'd brought from the car, spreading it around, covering my hands when the sink was done.

"Listen, the bartender said, "shut up. Neither of you knows a thing about running a business. You think customers will stick around if the place reeks of noxious fumes?"

"What the...noxious fumes?"

"Yeah. Noxious fumes."

"You really think that's a problem? Look around, you have no customers!" The old man turned.

"You wouldn't mind the smell, right?" I shook my head. "See? If you're gonna clean a place at least do it right. It's called being thorough, and people appreciate it."

I stood and walked along the bar, past the stools and to the door with a sign that read 'men', not that there was a second one for women. When I reached for the handle I missed, re-aimed and found it, and I wondered if it was the gin screwing me up or everything else. Then I went in.

The bathroom was small, dim, a toilet and a sink and a fluorescent strip in the ceiling with one tube working, the other a faint, purple pulse with a voice like cicadas. As I pissed I could still hear the old man talking out there, arguing, giving his opinion. He never stopped. He had a gift for words which he'd passed down to his grandson, though it hadn't worked out as well for him. Words get people into trouble. Especially ones that rhyme. I tried not to think about it, then I flushed. When I came back the old man had the bar phone to his ear, the cord stretched across the bartender's workspace and over the counter. He seemed annoyed.

"He's not answering," he said, handing it back. "How the hell am I supposed to get home?"

The bartender hung up with his finger and waited for a dial tone. "I'll call you a taxi."

"Are you crazy? I can't afford that!"

"You're drunk, even if you had a car you couldn't drive it. Hell, I'll pay for it if it gets you out of my sight."

I sat again, noticing my drink was gone. I realized it looked done but the ice holds onto some.

"Problem," I asked and he sunk down.

"No, no. He lives a few blocks away, I'll walk, see what's going on. He falls asleep in front of the TV sometimes. Lazy idiot."

The bartender said, "It's none of my business but you probably shouldn't be walking that far at your age."

I threw some bills on the counter. "Don't worry. I'll take him."

It took ten minutes of cursing and two minutes of struggle. After half the block was leaning out their windows with their necks stretched as far as they'd stretch, the old man was finally sitting in the passenger seat. I walked around the pickup and got in, found him talking to himself about how the same assholes who make the cars must make the barstools, too.

"Why do people think they need to drive goddamn tanks? You, I get it, you can't fit in no sedan lookin' like you look. But I'm telling you, nothing scares me more than a soccer mom behind the wheel of a Plexiglas Panzer, while her kids are jumpin' around pullin' at her bra straps." He put up a fight with the seatbelt until he realized he didn't care.

"I use this for work. It holds a hell of a lot of tools." Duffel bags and handsaws, mostly. I pulled away from the bar knowing I could never go back there no matter how bad a jones I got for shitty gin. I wasn't about to come down with nostalgia over it.

"You know where you're heading?"

"The bartender filled me in."

"He's got a name, you know. It's Andy. I think. And I didn't hear him do anything of the sort."

The old man was sharp. Sharp for an old man. "Twenty-two Holland Street, fifth floor," I said. It was an easy enough address to remember. Especially when it shows up on an envelope hidden at the bottom of your woman's shoe closet.

"That's it, alright," he said, squinting at the sun.

We passed a cop dicking around by his squad car, meaning we'd have to drive all the way to the building for sure, no stops. A few minutes later and we were there. It was one of those hotels people check into and end up living in until they can't pay anymore or someone smells something coming through the wall. I hadn't expected to ever go back there but there I was, just a few hours after I'd left. Just shows you, you never know where a chore might take you. I helped the old man back down to the ground and we went inside.

The same puffy-eyed kid was behind the window in the lobby with headphones plugging up his ears. Flyers were hanging around his head advertising girls with limbs twisted in uncomfortable poses, laying between red phone numbers. I recognized one of them. She'd had a good body but a total lack of dedication. I tried to sneak the old man past but the kid noticed and looked up from his book, taking his headphones out.

"Hey...you're back," he said. He seemed to live in slow-motion, like his button got stuck.

"Don't know what you mean. Just bringing my friend here upstairs."

"No. Yeah. You were here already, before."

"Afraid not, kid, I'm not even from around here." I attempted a smile.

"What? No-"

"How many times," the old man blurted, "how many times have I told you to stop smoking that shit?"

The kid looked at me, then back at the old man. "A couple," he admitted.

"You only remember a couple but I tell you every goddamn time I come. By all means, chew and snort whatever you need to, but lay off the smoke. It's destroying your ability to be a helpful dipshit instead of just a plain ol' nitwit dipshit." He went on walking, leaving the kid to his headphones and book and confusion and embarrassment and just a little suspicion. Our eyes met until they didn't.

The hallway still stunk like it was someone's job to throw up in it. I had expected to see a clock where a guy punched in and got to work, but instead there was an elevator and next to that a dinged-up wheelchair. I'd seen it before, wondered who it belonged to. The old man was already lowering himself into it, again with ugly sounds. Then he leaned back to slap blindly at the call button. I came over and pressed it, asked him if he was stealing someone's chair.

"No, no, it's mine. Malcolm leaves it for when I come over." There was a ping and then the elevator opened. I wheeled him in and shoved myself in, too. It was small and I could feel it complain as the door slid closed and as it did the old man said, "That idiot at the front is always trying to throw this thing out, but every time he does Malcolm takes it right back. I tell you, sometimes it's good to have an asshole on your side."

I pressed for the fifth floor. "Have you thought about what happens when he's not here?"

"If. If he's not here. Christ, try to be positive about things."

"I'm pretty positive."

Searching his pants pockets in clumsy stabs, he chuckled. "Friend, pretty and positive are two things you certainly are not." He pulled out his hand to reveal a rusty key with a yellow twist tie looped through the hole. He held it up, showed it to me, victorious. "Don't worry, you're not stuck with me."

When the elevator hit the fifth it dipped down as if right at the finish line it had given up and was

ready to snap from its cable and tumble all the way back down the shaft. There was a hesitation, a real quiet one. Then the five light pinged and the door opened and I wheeled the old man out. I could almost hear the thing sigh as my feet came off it.

We rolled to Five-Fourteen and the old man pushed up in the chair to knock on the door. When there was no answer he did it again, this time with angry shouting. Then he used the key. "Don't know where this boy disappears to," he mumbled as the door swung in.

"Maybe he's at the beach."

It was a cheap shot, even if he didn't know it. I pushed him inside and locked the door behind me.

"I'll be damned."

The old man stopped, scanned the room. I waited to hear what he'd say next, made sure not to give up my position, my angle. Finally he said, "He actually cleaned."

That's the problem with erasing, a place has to be pristine to let you get away with spot-cleaning. Otherwise you have to keep going as far as it makes sense, until you leave no line where it's clean on one side and dirty on the other. Some places, with all the work I put into them, I've had half a mind to send the landlord a bill. That's why most guys will tell you to bring the whole mess to a second spot, something you can control, something unrelated, outside a cop's eye. You hear it a lot in prison, which in my eyes makes it worthless advice. Myself, I make house calls. Find them where they sleep.

The old man wheeled into the living room. He strained against the carpet, going around the craters, the ones that showed where every piece of furniture had sat in the place going back a decade. I glanced around like it was all new to me. The art posters, so proud of being up their own asses, the used appliances I was sure some fashionable store had labeled vintage to jack up the price by forty bucks. Somehow these things came together to make a man she chose over me. His touch, his everything. I didn't understand the math.

"Anything to drink in this place," I asked.

"Jesus, you're still thirsty?" He was parked three feet from the TV screen, banging the remote against his thigh bone. "There's usually a beer in the fridge. Grab me the closest thing to seltzer you find."

I took the green dish towel that hung from the oven handle and used it to open the fridge, then did the same to grab the one can of seltzer in the middle of Malcolm's pussy beer. I didn't want a drink anyway just the chance to offer the old man one. I popped the tab on the way over, before he saw.

"Get out of the way, would you? Trying to watch the race." He craned left, right, left again to see around me. All it did was make him look like a bird, maybe a chicken, something they keep in a cage until its time. I held out the can and he reached for it, then I pulled it away.

"You didn't answer me," I said. He settled back down.

"What would he do, join the circus?"

I said nothing.

"Look I'd be as screwed as screwed can be. Is that what you want to hear? Shit, you're the only other guy helping me out and I just met you an hour ago. If that's not the saddest thing I can think of, then, well, I don't know what sadness is."

I handed him the seltzer, promised I'd help the best I could. Then I sat on the couch and watched him drink it. His eyes were intense as they traced the race cars in their screaming paths. Every so often he took another sip and it would ripple down his neck.

"The wife used to drink this," he said without breaking his stare. "Me, I could never stand the stuff. I don't know why I keep drinking it, guess I got accustomed." He seemed weighed down, his eyes having trouble following the action on-screen. "Does it seem purple in here to you," he asked after a while. His words ran together, mixing like cold cubes in a warm glass.

"I think so."

"Damn kid keeps the purple too high. Waste of money if you ask me." He'd barely finished the sentence when his head slumped down and his fingers let go of the can. It fell to the carpet and glug-glug-glugged into it until I bent down and grabbed it up, put it to the side, most of the seltzer still inside along with the pill. I'd have to remember to bring it with me.

I pushed my fingers to the loose skin of his neck and felt the weak pulse, felt it go slower. And slower. And slower until I felt nothing at all anymore. When it was done I wheeled him to the bathroom, put him in the tub and took him apart.

Some guys throw up at this part. Others cry. It doesn't really matter what you do, the bleach takes care of it.

Picture a man finds a poem. It's about love, about a woman, about a love for a woman stronger than acid, older than the mountains, all that shit. The kind that can't be waved off. The woman is supposed to read the poem, but the woman doesn't read it her man does. Picture what happens to the poet when the man who reads it isn't a good man. Is paid to be who he is by men worse than him but without the gut for it.

Picture what a man like that would do for free.

I ducked out the back. The bag was easy to carry, couldn't be more than seventy pounds. As I felt the weight of it going up and into the back of the pickup, I realized it was the nicest thing I'd ever done for someone. No matter. I went to the ocean, then I left town.

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