

## Breaking

A story teller can weave a tale from anything, a few strands of thread and a lost coin, the solemn barking of a lone dog on a dark night, or a letter pushed through the wrong letter slot.

Sometimes spinning a tale requires more creativity than inspiration, and sometimes the story almost writes itself as it unfolds in front of you.

When I feel I need an excuse, I summon my internal Hemingway who allegedly said “Write drunk, edit sober.” On a bad day, (or a good one) I can extend that to “...and editing is really overrated.”

Part of the way (and really, beyond that, if I'm honest) to an epic writing session, I spot a couple coming in to my local. Actually, they didn't come in together, which is what caught my eye— he arrived first, chose a table, ordered a pint and sat pretending not to watch the door. It was quiet in the pub, a typical Sunday afternoon. The lone fellow looked at once comfortable and out of place in my slightly-shabby haunt. He was wearing jeans and a t-shirt, yet somehow gave the impression of being more comfortable in suit and tie. Perhaps not more comfortable.... perhaps, more inured. He was confident, easy in himself, relaxed, but clearly not completely at ease. I wondered if it was because he was self conscious about sitting alone. I considered wandering over to his table, swapping a few stories, asking him what sort of car he drove, what he did for a living,

the sorts of conversations men strike up easily over a beer. He didn't seem to be in search of some male bonding time, though. As the level in his pint dropped, quickly enough that I was a bit impressed, it became apparent he had something else on his mind.

And that's when I saw her, and I knew instantly what he had in mind.

She couldn't be described as "glorious", "radiant", or even, if I'm honest, "conventionally pretty". But she was captivating. She whirled into the bar, squinting after the outside brightness, looking a little rushed, a little breathless, a little flummoxed. I wondered if she'd sit at the bar, if I could strike up a conversation with her (although, even at my age, the ability to talk easily to an attractive woman is a skill that still mostly eludes me). She turned to face the bar and as her eyes adjusted to the interior, they revealed themselves, opening in a widely innocent fashion that belied her years. Oh, nothing on me, but definitely, despite the redefining of 50 as the new 40 which is the new 30, she was approaching middle age. But the way her eyes blinked as she looked around, the way her breath came a little rapidly, her stance a little hesitant, it was obvious her smooth exterior belied an inner, child-like agitation. Over her shoulder, I could see the earlier object of my curiosity rise up in his chair, and as if she could feel his eyes on her, she turned in that moment to face him.

A pause. A skip and then beat of the heart. Barely a lag at all, and yet in that span of time, a world, a lifetime, a story. And I wondered what it was.

Her boots tapped across the old wood floor, making me wonder how many pairs of feet had crossed that floor in a similarly excited gait. Yet.... and yet... an odd sort of excitement. I watched them greet each other, in a strange moment of intense emotion. But what was that emotion? I bet the Germans have a word for it— a mix of happiness, and melancholy, as if they were already saying goodbye before they even exchanged salutations.

I watched them over the next hour, and when they did, finally, say goodbye, it was as if they had shared a whole life over that wobbly table. From trotting to his table, then pulling back hesitantly, she was like a dancer—a not especially well-choreographed one, moving away when he moved forward, moving towards him just as he leaves that space, until finally they exchanged a chaste kiss on the cheek.

Their conversation was much the same—stilted one minute, rapid-fire the next. Her nervous giggles turning to wan smiles, then faded away completely. He, punctuating his words with nothing more than a steady and attentive gaze, controlling the conversation, raising a hand to gentle her when her tone grew strident, but not touching her. Other than the awkward kiss of greeting, he maintained space between them, even when she invaded his side of the table. There was as much intimacy in how they avoided touching as if they had clung to each other.

“Jack!? Another pint?”.

“Oh Donna! I was miles away there..... aye, put another one in there.”

I watched Donna, the weekend barmaid, expertly pull a pint to keep the first one company. She set it in front of me and we exchanged a comment about the weather, and about the sports game being broadcast on the bar tv and she refilled the peanut bowl in front of me.

And in that short span of time, the story at the far side of the bar was coming to a sudden end.

The woman (was she his wife? No... ex-wife?....no....Perhaps they were newly single and newly dating...but that didn't seem to fit either) suddenly sprang to her feet (with, admittedly, more verve and energy than her age and size would suggest possible). There was no mistaking her mood now, and no hesitancy as she revealed her ire with her table mate. Diverting her attention for a moment to her hand bag, she angrily pulled out a bill and slapped it on the table.

“Oh, hey, there is no need...” the man said softly (looking much less comfortable in his skin as he rose to talk to her).

“Oh, there is EVERY need,” she replied as loudly as is, perhaps, possible through clenched teeth, “I will pay for my own fucking wine.”

As quickly as she had come in earlier, she turned left even more rapidly, her boots tapping an angry staccato back across the floor. She didn't look back, and I didn't think she was going to, until she paused at the door, and turned to look over her shoulder.

It was in that farewell glance that I felt, rather than understood, the story. Expecting to see a mask of rage or anger, instead her face was a portrait, a near perfect representation of Grief. As if not only did she understand their relationship was over, she realized she had known it before she had even arrived at the pub an hour earlier.

Can you live a life in an hour? Oh, yeah... heck, I can live a life in the time it takes to down a pint. I wondered if I should offer to buy the man one.

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