

The Boom, the Bar and the Bathroom

The fat drunkard strolled back into the bar from the bathroom, sat on his stool and looked up. Startled, he leaned across the bar and peered at the barman. "You're not Small Tom."

The barman put down the grimy glass with its even filthier cleaning rag and stared at the drunkard. He paused for a moment, then spoke. "No shit mate. I'm Greg." "Then what're you doing in Tom's place like that?" "Mate, this is *my* bar. Who the hell is Tom? And where did you come from?" The drunkard's face hardened. "Small Tom's the owner. My mate. Where is he?"

The barman's face shifted. First it morphed to show curiosity. Then it showed off confusion. Finally it resumed its impassive look - the one fashioned from many years of dealing with drunks. "Listen mate. *I* own this bar. I have done so since I had it rebuilt. Small Tom doesn't exist - you're just smashed." The drunkard's eyes popped with rage, and he began to spit back: "I am not bloody pissed. I'm only on my fift..." Realisation dawned bright in his eyes. "You bastards!" He wheezed excitedly. "You bloody, hilarious, cruel bastards!" The barman adopted the quizzical look like he was born to it. "What I have I done to deserve being called a 'bastard'?" The drunkard replied: "Pranked me well and good is what." "And on my birthday too" he muttered. He swiveled to face the rest of the almost empty room. "You can come out now Tom! Lenny! Jim! Smithy! - I've twigged; there's no need to keep this up."

The barman looked at the haggard and stringy man at the other end of the bar. "Jonesy." The man lifted his head from the counter top. "Yeah." "Do you know who this Small Tom is?" Jonesy paused, looked at the ceiling, then briefly met eyes with the drunkard and barman before returning his focus to the half drunk pint in his reach. "Never 'eard of him." The drunkard's triumphant grin slipped off his face to the floor, in mirror of the journey his bulk made many years earlier- off his chest and straight to his stomach. He swiveled back to face the barman. "You're not serious, are you? Do you really not know Small Tom?" His uncertainty made him a grave man. The barman picked up the browned glass mug with its ancient rag and started rubbing it again, this time with a thoughtful expression. "Now that I think of it... - I met a bloke called Tom who was in the business, but he was a great big bugger, I doubt anyone's ever called him small." Hope reignited the life in the drunkard's face. "That might be him. He was - *is* - a big bloke, at least 6 foot 4 tall and half as much wide. We used to call him Big Tom, but then one day an even *bigger* guy came in and so we had to call him Small Tom. Come to think of it, Big Tom was a regular after that."

The drunkard looked around.

The bar was completely empty.

"Wait a sec, where are the rest of the guys? Crooked Jim never leaves his spot until at least two in the morning." The drunkard waved his arm at an empty corner booth with a worn pine table and cracked leather seats. "Seventh Lenny's always bringing his girls here 'coz he

doesn't want his wife to see". He looked at an empty nook in front of a window with drawn black curtains. "And even Doubtful Smithy's not nursing his educational regrets with a cold one or fifteen." His gaze hovered over a seat further down the bar. His brow creased, the shadow of a memory danced just beyond his reach. "No. They weren't in their normal spots tonight. They were somewhere else..." He looked around. "Hang on." The drunkard said as he realised. "Where'd that mate of yours - Jonesy - go?". He twisted to face the stool where the haggard man had sat. It wasn't even creased. The pint was gone too. He rotated back to face the barman.

There was no-one there.

A door set in the side of the room opened to the sound of flushing. The barman returned to his place and continued rubbing the glass. "What was that you were saying?" He looked down the bar. "Oh, Jonesy left." A thought visibly ran through his head, leaving behind a roiling, pitching bubble of anger in his eyes. "That damned cheap bastard. He said he was going to pay his tab tonight." His now slightly furious gaze then returned to the drunkard, who was sitting so still and was wearing an expression so blank that, combined with his pale skin, made him look as though he was a cheap impression of Dover - by an artist who had never seen the place. "What the hell have you done with all my mates?" the drunkard asked, voice dangerously low. The barman's eyes briefly showed a flash of fear before his equanimous blinds of stone were once again, drawn. "I have no idea what you're talking about. I met Tom briefly a couple years ago; he bought me a beer in a bar on the south side of town, we played some cards and had a chat about being barmen. That was the last I saw of him - I moved to Dunedin the day after." The drunkard pondered on this for a moment, then replied: "What about the rest of the gang? Jim, Lenny, Smithy and Tom. Where'd they go?" The barman paused, the spark of a memory flying by having enraptured him. "Jim, Lenny, Smithy... and Tom. Is that what you said? Hang on, I might have something..." He reached under the bar and pulled out a tin box. He opened it and pulled out some knick-knacks: dice, feathers, coupons and several dirty pictures of a blonde woman all were placed on the counter top. "If I remember correctly..." He said, reaching for the last item in the box. "There was a newspaper article on them." He pulled out and lightly blew on the crinkled sheet of paper. Despite years of being stored, a headline shone bright in bold letters:

FIVE DEAD IN GAS EXPLOSION

The article read:

Police investigating the gas explosion in Tom's Tavern early yesterday morning have released a preliminary statement to the public regarding the incident. It is believed so far the the five had been celebrating the 47th birthday of their compatriot, one Bernard McGowess; when the explosion occurred. CCTV footage before the incident shows four of the five men (confirmed by family to be Tom McGuire, James Bellowdorn, Lenny Matinee and Frank Smith) cheering and buying the fifth (McGowess) several rounds of beer. It is believed that the gas was ignited when the four (believed to be seriously inebriated at this point) pulled out a birthday cake from behind the bar and proceeded to strike a match in

order to light the candles (all of this being done in response to McGowess leaving to use the bathroom). Police are asking the public for any information regarding the location and state of McGowess, as he was found to be missing from the scene.

The drunkard stared at the article. The barman stared at the drunkard. The eyes of the four dead men stared lifelessly from the paper.

The barman dropped the glass. The rag followed the shards to the floor soon after. "I always believed in ghosts you know." The barman said, his voice quivering, his confident demeanour completely shattered. "That's why I did the bar up like how it used to be. It was a relatively small job the builders said, once I bought the place. They reckoned they could restore it to exactly how it was, for pretty cheap too." He stared at the floor. "I figured the ghosts would want that." The light of real fear shone through his eyes, his stony blinds truly torn beyond repair. Bernard looked at the barman. "That never happened. The fellas are still alive - they... they."

He copied the barman and stared at the floor.

After a minute of silence, Bernard stood up and walked to the bathroom. Once inside, he paused for a moment, allowing an idea to brew in his mind. The idea sloshed as he turned towards the door. He walked over to it and pulled the handle.

The bathroom door opened and the four men at the bar cursed - Bern was never that quick in the shitter. The barman fumbled for the matches - they hadn't yet lit the cake. "Stop!" Bern's voice bellowed from the doorway. "If you light that bastard, we'll *all* die!" The four men stared at him, the match still unlit in the barman's hand, the frosted supermarket cake still dark. "Can't you smell it? Tom you fool - your bloody cheap gas fitting's failed ya. That blasted LNG honks from here. You shouldn't have drank that shit you love, the smell's far too strong."