

# Dark

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## Dark: One

The scene is a bar. A dark and gloomy bar. In summer this bar is nice and bright. It catches the sun and it becomes pleasantly warm. Some patrons shade inside, whilst others sit outside and enjoy the outstanding beer garden. In summer it is nice and bright. In summer this is the place to go. In the warm and pleasant days few places can compete. The light comes cascading through the windows, showering the entire inside creating a cultured and cool look. This bar excels in the summer months. This bar was built to exist in summer. It is a summer bar.

It is not summer.

The bar is located in the Northern Hemisphere and it is November. The lighting, which somehow looks cool and funky in summer, looks merely dingy and shady. In winter, in November, at two in the afternoon, with a great deal of cloud cover and the rain threatening outside, it looks drab and somehow unhealthy. In summer, at two in the afternoon, they need to have at least three staff on, just to cope. Here and now: there is one barman, and he is bored. He spends more time cleaning glasses than serving customers. If this bar is alive in summer then currently it is wheezing and claiming the world is going dark. Bars do not close in winter, but apart from Friday and Saturday evenings this bar might as well not open. At this moment there are two customers. Both are older men and both are hardened drinkers who come for solitude.

Several years ago the bar did food all year round. Then they realised they were just paying for a chef to sit around and do nothing. Now they serve only drink, supplied by a solitary bartender.

Occasionally some businessmen will find their way in. They will drink their drink and go. Any thoughts of food drained away by the dank atmosphere.

The bar is large, with a decent floor space. Stools line the partially mirrored walls. There are three distinct levels. In the busy times, a bar opens at the other end in a futile effort to keep pace. In the busy times one has to squeeze through the mass to find a place to stand and only the precious few have a seat. Currently it looks like an empty barn.

The décor is quirky. It has some old movie posters and old calendars. As with everything else, this looks great in summer and awful in winter.

The barman cleans his large and lonely counter. He wipes the whole length of the surface. Not because there is any need. It has hardly got dirty since he wiped it forty-five minutes ago. However, it relieves the boredom.

One of the drinkers walks up with an empty glass in hand.

"Refill Jim?" asks the barman.

"Why not?"

The barman smiles and takes the glass off the man.

"Same again?" he asks, just in case. The man answers with than a cursory nod.

"You know I'm convinced the world won't end."

"How do you know?"

"Because it's round."

"Oh dear, your attempt at humour again?"

"Well I try."

Both men smile.

The bartender hands the filled glass back. The man has the exact money counted out. The barman checks it more from custom than any need, and puts it in the till. The man walks back over to his paper in the shadows.

The barman wipes the bar where he put the drink down. Again, it is far from dirty. The glass did not even drip.

The bar has the policy of no television and no music. Another case where what is positive in summer becomes the opposite in winter. Sometimes the bar staff have a radio on low behind the counter in winter. Unfortunately, the batteries went two days ago and obviously the other shifts have not found the time or compunction to relieve the boredom either. The current barman is as guilty as any for not supplying new batteries. He even thinks he might have a couple at home, but he keeps forgetting to search once he gets back.

A man walks in. He is dressed reasonable smartly, but not excessively. He is not the usual businessman type. He looks more like a father, who has come in for an orange juice before picking up his child from school. This is the opinion of the barman, who tends to assess people when they walk in, well in winter anyway. Within seconds he evaluates the man is mid thirties, possibly, even forties. It is hard to tell. He has dark hair and a full

head of it. Definitely at least mid thirties though. Professional, his dress suggests. He is smart, but it is casual, not an interview or even a job where he has to wear a suit. He is dressed in a neat way, but own choice: casual shirt and coat coordinated trousers but not matching the brown shoes - not really going but not clashing too badly. Family man most likely, he looks like he has a family tucked up somewhere. He probably prefers wine rather than beer, red wine. If he does drink beer, that beer will probably be a real ale type. Spirit: Port, Brandy, Whisky (only single malt).

He is medium height and seems reasonably fit. The lack of gut possibly makes him look younger than his actual years. He wears a long coat, brown trousers, and shoes, also brown. He has a weary look on his face. It is only two in the afternoon. He looks as if he has had a hard day.

The man stands in the room midway between the door and the bar for a moment before walking over to the bar itself. He walks slowly and assuredly towards the bartender. There is the slight impression he is not completely convinced he wants to be here. This is common for this bar, in winter. As he approaches, the barman checks his client out again. He has never seen him before, not only a non-regular, but most likely never been in the bar before, not in this barman's shift anyway. A glance at the left hand, no ring. Not married. He checks the right hand just in case, again no ring. The barman is surprised. He believes the man looks the married type. He just looks like the kind of guy that would be married. Possibly divorced?

Strangely the closer the guy gets, the more unsure the barman is of his age. His face looks both old and young. He has lines on it putting him beyond his twenties, but this does not help. He is not young, that is about it. There are no signs of alcoholism, or boxing, but that doesn't add vastly more. The guy shifts a stool by the bar and sits on it. He looks to the barman. The barman guesses a soft drink or spirit. One or the other.

"Hello," says the barman.

"Hi,"

"So what can I get you?" t

The man scans the bottles behind the bar.

"Glen Kinkardine," he says and points to the appropriate bottle. One nil to the barman.

"Coming right up."

"You want water?"

"No straight."

"Not too early for the hard stuff, eh?" says the barman.

"It is never too early for the hard stuff," says the man.

"I abide by that principle as well. Ice?"

"No, thank you. Make it a double."

"A double?"

"Yes."

"You're the boss."

"Only in a perverted point of view."

"Sorry?"

"I'm certainly not the boss."

The man smiles. It looks like a smile that says - I have a hard luck story behind that last remark and I might be persuaded to share it with you."

"Everybody on that side of the bar is the boss, boss."

"So, give me my drink on the house."

"My boss, yes, but unfortunately you still rank lower than my other boss, Mister Brewery."

"I'm so disappointed," replies the man without a hint of professed disappointment.

"That's the way of the world, boss."

"I guess barmen that always say the right thing, are also the way of the world."

"It'd be nice to think so."

"To you, maybe."

The barman smiles and raises his eyebrows, as if to acknowledge the fact. The man gives another wry smile.

"You know, Mister Barperson. I used not to drink. In fact I have not drunk for quite a while."

"You've been off the booze? Is it wise to start again?"

“Oh, don’t worry. Don’t think I’m an ex-alcoholic or anything, or is it a recovering alcoholic? Well whatever it is, I’m not. I just didn’t drink. You know properly drink. I have had the odd glass of wine, or social toast, but it just seemed so irrelevant. I guess to a barperson that doesn’t make much sense.”

“Not at all, I can completely understand giving up drinking.”

“It was more I did not really want it. You know, I simply didn't see the point. I didn’t want to get drunk. I didn’t want to get even tipsy, so why bother? Why waste the money on an expensive beverage that I don’t even appreciate? I mean it's only that expensive because of the effects, eh?”

“Well the government tax it don’t they? Raises the price.”

“Exactly it’s a taxed drug and you basically pay for the effects. Well I didn't see the point. I didn't go teetotal or anything, I just stopped drinking.”

“So why're you drinking now? If you don’t mind me asking.”

“Ah, the point. The reason then.”

“Is there is a great big reason?”

“I have looked into the darkness. I have stared into the dark nothingness of futility.”

“Right, so the mother-in-law has come to stay.”

The man gives a chuckle at this. The bartender gives an acknowledged shrug.

“Something like that yes.”

“So come on, what is it? What’s this darkness?”

“Oh, nothing I want to talk about.”

“You have come to a bar, feeling depressed and you have started a conversation with a barman. The tradition is you tell me what's on your mind.”

“Well, maybe I will have to break with tradition.”

“Well it’s up to you. As I said, you’re the boss.”

“As you said.”

The barman wipes the counter again and quietly surveys the optics behind the bar. After a while, with the man still on the stool at the bar, he turns side on to the man.

“Heard any good jokes recently?” asks the barman.

“Jokes?” the man replies with a hint of amusement.

“Jokes or stories, I’m not fussy, anything really. There's a bit of a tradition of a joke with each drink, at least on my shift. You see it gets a little boring in here.” The barman gestures the whole place with his hand. The man turns around and looks at the almost empty bar.

“A bit deserted.”

“An understatement, it's dead. It’s always like this in winter. Have you never been here before?”

“No, never.” Two nil to the barman. “It picks up later in the year?”

“Well, after Easter it picks up. By July it gets hard to breathe in here.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“Hard to believe,” he says and looks at the bar again.

“Yes, it gets crazy. They should call it The ‘Jekyll and Hyde.’ I am either overworked or bored.”

“Maybe I have come to the right bar. A bar to match my mood.”

“Or exactly the wrong bar. If you're feeling a little depressed, then an empty gloomy bar might not be the best.”

“I don’t see why you're trying to turn away trade. Anyway, who says I'm depressed?”

“Oh, I think it was something to do with the comment about ‘gazing into the darkness’ and the ‘nothingness of futility’.”

“Oh that. I see your point. It does sound like I’m a little down.”

“Full scale depression more like.”

The man gives another small chuckle.

“Have you worked here long?” asks the man.

“For a while, yes. On and off, probably four and a half years. That’s quite a while I suppose. At least to me.”

“But not to a man of a hundred and twenty.”

"Well they don't tend to drink in here. At least not that I've seen. Although there are a couple that don't look far off. Why do you ask?"

"I'm just curious. I'm not that keen on talking about me. I thought I would try to talk about you. Relieve your boredom a little, let you talk about yourself. You look like the kind of person that has opinions and I'd imagine a very interesting life."

"Do I?"

"So your life is dull and you have no opinions?"

"Well, I wouldn't go that far," replies the barman.

"I bet you have already figured me out. You probably sussed me out within two minutes of my walking through the door." The barman gives a mixture of nod and shrug in response.

"OK, I'll return the favour. Let me work you out. You must be what mid twenties, maybe younger, although obviously not that much younger, since you have worked as a barman for four and a half years. You are local, or at least reasonably so and you work as a barman. How am I doing?"

"Terrible," says the barman, playing along.

"Oh?"

"I'm mid twenties, yes, twenty-five, in fact. So right on the button with that one, but that's easy. I'll tell you what I would hope to read off me. I live locally. I work in a bar, not a huge leap of inspiration there because I'm hardly likely to commute far, and my accent indicates I have not migrated here. I work out, which I hope is visible. I'm working in the afternoon, and so less likely to be a student, although, not completely ruled out but considering my age it gets less likely. Postgraduate students are less likely to work outside the university, especially in daytime. I wear no rings, so not married. Given my age this indicates, probably never been married. Family life? Well possible, but at a guess, no. Barman is unsociable."

The man nods.

"So, unmarried, probably without a young family. Local and probably not at university. However, I must do something, barman tends to supplement other jobs. Possibly acting, maybe a musician?"

"Maybe a writer or a poet?"

"Maybe. On cursory inspection without more information that's difficult to ascertain."

"I still know virtually nothing, apart from you are twenty-five and worked here for a few years."

"Yes, that's what you actually know, but there is a lot you can guess. A couple of carefully aimed questions should pretty much wrap me up."

"Does that mean I'm wrapped up?"

"You're a bit cagey."

"I guess I'm not your usual clientele."

"Not exactly, but you're not that different."

"I'm not sure that's a good thing," says the man. "So on that note, may I have another drink please mister barperson?" He hands the barman the empty glass.

"You sure?"

"I'm sure."

"You sure another double?"

"Another double, I'm sure."

"You're the boss."

"So you keep telling me."

"Comes with a joke."

"Does it have to?"

"Well I was going to tell you a joke about a broken pencil, but I can see there's obviously no point."

"Ouch."

"Everyone's a critic."

The man slowly sips at the glass, not as eager to drain it as before.

"Well, you know," says the barman, "if you want a quiet drink in a bar, then either you ironically should pick a bar with more people, or not sit at the bar itself. Otherwise, nosey bastards like myself are going to try to poke into your life. Perhaps deep down you want to talk about it?"

“Well, Michael, thank you for that insight. Maybe I do, and you never know, I might tell you a story or two.”

“Ah, you checked my name as soon as I used the till.”

The man raises his glass.

“So these stories of yours don't have happy endings?”

“Unlikely, I hate happy endings. They're so false. We die, that is the end. That is how stories should end. Happily ever after until they died, that's the truth. Happy ever after seems to say they live eternally in perpetual bliss. Now there is obvious bullshit.”

“Happily ever after? Fairytales involve happily ever after endings with couples. I suspect a woman is involved.”

“Still analyzing me?”

“If you don't tell me what else can I do?”

He looks at his drink.

“A woman is involved, many women I suppose are involved, but not as you might imagine.”

“Oh, now I'm intrigued.” The man gives a slight shrug.

“Let me tell you the story of a man who gambled his life away. When he couldn't get any more money he took it out on his wife and small child. At some point this twisted piece of filth realised that his wife had life insurance from her work. So one night he pushed her down some stairs. The inquest decided it was death by misadventure. Believe that? Death by misadventure that is what they said. It was hardly subtle, but he got away with it. The money came through and naturally he continued gambling. His daughter was four at this time. She interfered with his gambling, so he let her starve and cry. He would have let her die, but he had the great idea to top up the dwindling insurance money. He started abusing his daughter, taking pictures and selling the pictures. Some people pay lots of money for such pictures.

“On the day of her sixth birthday, worrying about being caught, and with life insurance on the girl, he threw her down some stairs. Broke her back. Then he set light to the house. He was right to be worried about being caught because there was the early stage of a police investigation. However, all the evidence in the house destroyed. They did find some pictures from somewhere. They could not prove it was him. They dragged the investigation on and eventually got proof that the house was involved. He told a story of mental illness, of deep depression. He even factored in the gambling addiction. He gave some story about a mysterious man who threatened him and manipulated his addiction. It was all bullshit, all just enough of an excuse. He even got the insurance money.

“The guy spent eighteen months in a hospital, being cared for and treated. He now walks the street, supposedly cured of his gambling addiction.

“The girl surprisingly survived. The burns and lack of oxygen left her damaged physically and mentally and of course there was the emotional shit already. They say she vomits if anyone hugs her.”

“That's not the nicest story in the world. The guy, I mean the gambling man, he's not, I mean...?”

“I am not the man, no. I would not be able to live with myself. He unfortunately can.”

“Did you know this guy?”

“I worked with him for a while before all the shit. We remained friends for a while. Not great friends, but we would have a few drinks every now and then. Maybe have dinner at his place. I even went to his wife's funeral. I shook his hand and told him I was sorry for what had happened. I remember he thanked me”

“It's not good is it?”

“There's a lot of darkness in this world. That was just one glimpse.”

“That's not nice. I can see how that screws you up. I think I'd be on the doubles too.”

“Oh, you misunderstand. I'm not on the doubles because of that. That is in the past. It's a terrible memory. I shudder when I think on it. Or at least I used to, even that seems to have faded these days but that's not why I am here drinking doubles.”

The barman, Michael, pulls a solemn face. The man seems more intent on looking into his glass than talking. So Michael shrugs and picks up a glass and cleans it.

## **Dark: Two**

After a while the man looks around and says, "Funny place to work here. It must drive you insane?"

"I get pretty bored, but it pays the bills."

"So are you a student then?"

"Student, me, no. Not unless you mean student of colour and beauty."

The man looks at him. He raises his eye browse to convey a sense of interest. "Explain," he adds.

"I'm an artist. Not hugely successful, but I'm an artist."

"What kind of artist?" asks the man.

"Well, a bit of this and that, mostly photographs and painting. I think I'd probably paint full time if I could, but photography manages to pay me a little. Anyway, I love photography as well. Although it's almost the opposite of painting."

"Is it?"

"You are not an artist?"

"No, I am a man at a derelict bar drinking double whiskeys."

"That doesn't make you not an artist. James Joyce and Hemmingway were partial to a tippie."

"Well, let's just say no then. I'm not an artist. I'm not even close. So how is photography opposite from painting? They seem very similar to me."

"Well you see painting is constructing. Putting your own feel into something. Making it how it appears to oneself. The only limitation is the imagination. However, photography is the instant, the capture of one instant in time. It is real, in the world. It might not look like how you saw it at all but it is the moment. Do you understand?"

"Not really, but I accept it's different."

"They're poles apart."

"Surely the opposite sides of the same coin?"

"Exactly, that's exactly what they are."

"Unfortunately your paintings don't sell?"

"Oh, some sell, but slowly. It takes a long time to paint. They sell for a bit, but nowhere near the right amount for the effort put in. Hopefully in time, I'll manage to get a bit of a reputation and start to sell for more and more regularly."

"I wish you luck."

"Well, the greatest artists usually struggle to sell. You know Van Go only sold one painting in his life."

"Who?"

"Van Go, you know, did the sunflowers, famous for layered brushstrokes."

"Van Go?"

"Van Go, yes."

"You mean van Gogh don't you? Vincent van Gogh, the Dutch postimpressionist painter."

"It is often pronounced Van Go!"

"Not often in Holland it isn't and I tend to go with how they pronounce the name?"

"Hey man, I was just saying. Sometimes that's how they say it, but I get what you mean. If I was the man I would want the people to pronounce my name correctly."

The bartender feels slightly aggrieved at being corrected in what is generally speaking, his subject.

"He committed suicide you know?" He says, thinking it is quite possibly one of the worst things he could say.

"I thought there was some debate on that," says the man and takes another sip of his drink.

One of the two men comes out from the shadows and walks over, pint glass in hand.

"Same again Jim?" asks the barman.

"Yes, the same again. Looks like I might not quite make it to the wife's sister's this afternoon after all."

"Are you going to be in trouble?"

"Most likely, but then again, when am I not."

The man looks over and sees the customer.

"All right mate?" says Jim.

"All right," says the man.

"There you go Jim," says the barman, passing over the drink.

"A question for you Jim. What followed the dinosaurs?"

"I don't know, what followed the dinosaurs?"

"Mostly their tails."

"It gets worse."

He exchanges the drink for a note. Michael opens the till and exchanges the note for other notes and coins. He hands it back to Jim who walks back into the shadows.

"Is it a joke with every drink?" asks the man.

"You don't like jokes?"

"I don't care," he replies and looks in the direction of Jim.

"Apparently he used to be a professor at some university. Physics of some kind it was," says the barman.

"Do you believe that?"

"I have no reason not to," says Michael.

"Seems a bit unlikely?"

"What, that a professor would like a good drink? It is not the stereotype that goes with professors?"

"No, I believe it is possible. It's just implausible that each bar seems to have its very own one."

"You cynic."

"I'm a realist."

"You see the glass half empty."

"Oh that old thing, tell me then, if there is a dribble in a glass, is that almost empty or just only a tiny bit full."

The barman smiles in reply.

"OK, I will tell you," says the man, "it's almost empty. The glass half full, is that optimism. Half full indicates being filled and has only been half filled. Half empty on the other hand implies that it was once full and half has been drunk. I like the story about it being drunk, how about you?"

"Nice point, but I still see the glass half full." The man looks to his drink. He appears not completely impressed by the barman's answer.

"A painter eh?" says the man.

"Yes, a painter. Full-time painter if I could wrangle it."

"A passion?" asks the man.

"Well, yes. I'm very passionate about it. Unfortunately it doesn't pay the bills and these bills must get paid. Some unreasonable people tend to get a tad shirty if bills stay unpaid."

"Unfortunately things we like very rarely pay the bills. It's one of life's sweet jokes. So what kind of things do you paint?"

"Oh, I paint anything and everything. I never limit myself to small criteria."

"Any style?"

"Exactly, any style. I play with the different styles. All are equally valid in my book."

"Sounds good, sounds like you know what you want. It must be good to be an artist."

"I think so. Do you have no desire to be an artist?"

"I don't think I have it in me."

"Everyone has it in them."

"They say everyone has a book in them. I tried writing a book once."

"I assume it wasn't quite up to your ambitions?" asks Michael.

"It was dark. Dark and not too good. I tried to get all the rubbish out that was in my head. I ended up writing rubbish. No, it was not good, it was nowhere near good, and then again, I suppose it was never meant to be. I think it was therapy rather than a serious stab at literature."

"Did you finish it?" asks the barman, but the man almost seems too wrapped up in his thoughts.

"Sorry?"

"Did you finish it and try and flog it?"

"No, no I never finished it. I lost the urge."

"Writers block?"



“More a case of I was just too sick of it to force myself to go on.”

“I used to read a lot,” says Michael, “but I’ve lost that. I tend to devote my energies to painting, and trying to earn a crust.”

“Reading is important. Something we should all do.”

“It’s not easy to find the time?”

“It’s one of the great things that make us more than just rutting beasts. We have the ability to read and we should.”

“I have never read a book that has changed my life. I have never read a book that I could not put down. I’ve never read a book where I can remember half the story a week after I read it. Don’t get me wrong, I believe books are good, maybe some are very good. I enjoy reading as much as the next man. However, in the grand scheme of things, are they important? Do they shape lives or change the world? They are just books.”

“Well, is anything really important?” asks the man.

“I think painting is.”

“Well surely you would say that?”

“The thing is, books are good. A good read is fun and enjoyable. Certainly value for money, but what I’m saying is that they’re never mind blowing. They never change your life. Another?” The man misses the initial meaning of ‘another,’ before Michael motions to his drink. The man looks at his glass. He sees it is empty.

“No, I will have a, eh, any recommendations?”

“What sort of things are you after?”

“Something different.”

“Beer?”

“I’m not really a beer drinker.”

Michael smiles.

“Then it’s different.”

“I suppose, OK what do you suggest?”

“This stuff’s quite nice,” says Michael pointing to a pump.

“OK, I’ll have a pint of that stuff.”

The barman lifts a glass.

“Why the change of heart?” He says as he starts to pour.

“About the drink?” The barman nods, “Oh, well they say, whoever they might be, they say that after two whiskeys the taste is lost, that you might as well drink blend.”

“I’ve heard that.” Michael puts the glass down. The man takes a sip and nods, looking at the glass. Then he notices an expectant look on the barman.

“Oh, is it time for a joke?”

“I was thinking more that it was time to pay.”

“Oh right,” says the man laughing and paying.

“You know,” says Michael, “as I was coming in to work today I saw this car mechanic shaking his head clearly upset, close to tears.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, it seems he was heading for a breakdown.”

“Was that a joke?”

“Man you’re a tough audience.”

“I’m laughing on the inside. Anyway the beer is here, weren’t we talking about art?”

“Books.”

“Oh yes, books. You say you don’t find reading that important.”

“Well, less important than you, but you’re a writer.”

“I’m not a writer. A failed book does not make a writer.”

“Despite the authorship attempt you are not a writer, or any form of artist?” says the barman and smiles.

“No I’ve nothing to say in words or pictures.”

“I believe everyone has something to say.”

“Did you like my story about the gambling man and his daughter?”

“Well, it was a little on the depressing side. Wasn’t it true?”

“I believe it is true. What makes you think my other stories are any less depressing? I doubt you want a catalogue of depression?”

“Part of the barman description is to listen to anything the customer says. That is partly why I’m here - a sort of cheap therapist.”

“It’s not to make money for the brewery then.”

“Oh I’m hurt.” The barman grabs his chest indicating mock pain in his heart. “How could you think such a thing?”

“Remember I’m a cynic.”

“I thought you explained yourself as not a cynic.”

“You said I failed.”

“I expressed a point of view.”

“Well let’s just say that when it comes to breweries and companies, I am pretty cynical.”

“Brewery sells beer, brewery good.”

“I vowed never to drink again once,” says the man.

“I vow that every time I wake up and my head hurts.”

“I meant it.”

“I always mean it.”

The man smiles briefly.

“I didn’t drink for eight years.”

“No, you got me there. I’m not even sure I’d that long a dry spell even in my youth.”

“I did not touch alcohol until I was seventeen, can you believe that?”

“What no alcohol at all?” says Michael.

“My father wasn’t keen. It was a sore point in our family.”

“Was he a drunk or a preacher? In my experience those so vehemently opposed to drink are one of the above?”

“No, my mother was killed by a drunk driver.”

“Oh, shit, sorry.”

“That’s OK, I brought it up. Talking about alcohol often brings that sorry episode to the fore. Didn’t you ask earlier if there was a reason for not drinking and I said no. Well I guess that was not exactly true. I guess the death of my mother was a big factor, albeit subconsciously.”

“Man, I’m sorry. Do you want to talk about it, because I can quite happily talk about the merits of Clint Eastwood films if you want?”

“It’s OK, like all my pain these days, I can hardly feel it. It’s just a murmur somewhere deep inside. It comes nowhere near breaking to the outside. No, that’s not true, it still hurts, and I feel it as I think on it. The pain, the anguish, it’s there, it is always there. It just gets a bit tangled.”

“Look man, Clint Eastwood films, honestly, I’m happy to talk about them.”

“She was killed by a drunk driver. Simple as that. No big deal, nothing in the overall scheme of things. Of course to me, at eleven, it tore me apart. It was worse than anything ever could be. However now, in context, compared to the suffering of the wars and skirmishes, disease and famine it’s nothing.”

“Eleven is young to go through that.”

“I think any age is young. The older you get the more you know them as people. The more they are real. It might not hurt in the same way, but it hurts just as much.”

“What happened to the guy, the driver?” Michael asks.

“Eight years, manslaughter, eight years. He might still be out there walking about right now. I should have seen then that revenge was not sweet. He went to prison. His family burst out crying in the stand. I hated him, hated them. I looked at them with cruel and unsympathetic eyes as their husband and father was led away from the court.”

“Drunk driving is just sick. It’s so unnecessary.”

“Most premature death is unnecessary. I hated him. I hated him for years. Maybe I have always hated him, until recently. The poor family was torn apart. He not only destroyed my family, but his own.”

“He probably only served a few years, parole and good behaviour. They can hardly serve anything really.”

“Even a year is a long time. A year of your life is a long and precious time. We have, what, a hundred of them, if we are lucky and we don’t get to enjoy anywhere near all of them. So one year is a long time. He was drunk, what good did sending him to prison do? If he was not a mess because of what he had done, then prison was not going to make him feel sad for anyone other than himself.”

“The guy killed your mother.”

“Yes, and I hated him for it, but what good did that do? What good did my hate or his incarceration do? It certainly did me no good and probably just screwed him up all the more.”

“I don’t get you, this guy kills your mother and you want him to walk free.”

“My mother died as a result of something he did. He did not mean it.”

“I don’t get it, I just don’t. He broke the law and killed your mother. He should be locked up, surely?”

“I suppose I kind of sympathise with him.”

“Are you saying you forgive him?”

“Forgiveness is difficult. To forgive requires strength that I’m not sure I have. I had my revenge, he was thrown into prison. He gained a criminal record and I imagine his family fell apart. I had revenge and it was hollow. There is nothing in revenge. Revenge does not help. It’s just a focus for hate and hate is negative.”

“No wonder your old man went off the drink.”

“Perhaps.”

“Perhaps? If my mother was killed by a drunk driver, I imagine I’d want nothing to do with drink,” says Michael.

“Would you give up this job?”

“Well, well I’m not sure, depends what happened.”

“You said you wanted nothing to do with drink. Working for a brewery qualifies, in my book, as something to do with it. You work for alcohol pushers. Anyway, can you honestly say you have never let someone drunk leave your bar when they were planning to drive?”

“Yes I can. I would never allow that.”

“Have you ever stopped someone?”

“Yes, I have taken keys off people, yes.”

“Well that’s good. Anyway, I need to go to the toilet.”

Michael nods. The man slips off the stool, looks round and looks back at Michael. He has a questioning look on his face.

“Ah right, yes, it is just up those two stairs and on the left.”

The man nods and walks where instructed.

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