

# The Heartfelt Bartender

A chilly morning breeze sweeps across the street. I walk towards the church, towering above the town centre. On my way, I buy some sunflowers at the *Daffodil & Dandelion*. "I hope these will keep you warm," I murmur to myself as I turn the corner.

I stand in front of the church, looking up at its massive spire piercing the sky. I can only image what it's like to live next to it. It dwarfs everything surrounding it, blocking out most of the light. My eyes drift downward again. I walk around the church and find myself at the entrance to the graveyard. I greet a woman as she passes me by on her way out. As I walk amidst the stone altars and tablets, my mind drifts off to better times, long past.

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It was mid-August in the summer of 1957. Temperatures were dropping and perpetual rain plagued the countryside, foreboding the early arrival of autumn that year. I opened the pub at noon, although I didn't expect any customers due to the rain. At least not before dusk would shed its twilight on the streets. With little else to do I decided to start cleaning the place.

To my surprise though, a visitor entered the pub around two o'clock. I was cleaning the tables when the shop bell rang. Before me stood a man wearing a black coat and bowler hat. He held an umbrella in his right hand which, judging from his dry coat, had successfully shielded him from the downpour.

"Good afternoon Sir. Welcome to *The Heartfelt*."

"A good afternoon indeed!" said the man. "I'd like a whisky please."

"But of course. Please, have a seat."

I prepared the whisky while the man busied himself with hanging his coat and umbrella on the coat rack near the door. Then he walked to the bar and sat down in front of me.

"That'll be one quid and nine pence Sir," I said, as I put his whisky on the counter.

He handed me the money and took a quick sip of the whisky. Seemingly satisfied with its quality, the man held the glass against the light before putting it back down.

"So, what brings you here at this time of day?"

The man lifted his head and smiled.

"Business," he said.

Not surprising given his attire. But with so few companies at the edge of town, visitors like him were not exactly common.

"Out here?" I asked.

"Yes. There is a small factory about two miles west from here."

I knew the place. Some of the factory's employees were regulars at the pub. But this man was clearly no factory worker.

"So what's your business there? You don't seem like the type for the conveyor belt."

"Oh no," he laughed. "I visited the factory this morning on behalf of my employer. We sold them some new equipment that is safer and more efficient than what they're using right now."

"Good to hear. Their employees keep me in business. I wouldn't want anything happening to them."

The man laughed again.

"Don't worry," he said, while raising his glass. "I got you covered."

He downed half the whisky in one go, then put the glass back on the counter. A brief silence followed.

"So," I said, in an attempt to restart the conversation. "Already done for the day?"

"Yes, I just had to wrap up the deal at the factory. I have the rest of the day off, with a wedding to attend at the local church later today. My cousin is getting married to 'the man of her dreams'. Her words, not mine."

"Congratulations."

"Thank you," said the man, before throwing back the remainder of the whisky.

"Truth is, it's been a long time coming. Those two have been together for a long time now. We've just been waiting for them to tie the knot."

"Well, we are glad to have you. But are you sure you should be here then?"

The man waves his hand dismissively.

"It is fine. The deal didn't take nearly as long as expected, so I've got some time to kill anyway."

He ordered another whisky and we talked for about half an hour before he went on his way again.

"Oh, right," he said, as he opened the door. "I would like to buy some lilies for my cousin. It's her favourite flower. Any idea where I can find a flower shop?"

"You should come across one if you follow the main road to the church. The *Daffodil & Dandelion*. Huge sign, can't miss it."

"Thanks."

The man gave a friendly nod and stepped through the door. Under the overhang he opened his trusty umbrella. Then he started marching forward, into the downpour.

After the man left I resumed cleaning the pub and busied myself with other chores for the rest of the afternoon. It wasn't until early evening before the shop bell rang once more. Three men entered the pub, drenched.

"Good evening gentlemen," I said. "Rough weather."

They were employees at the factory nearby and regulars at the pub. We were familiar enough to be on a first name basis.

"Evening Alan," said Fred while he hung his coat. "No, it sure ain't pretty outside."

Ben and George also hung theirs, but skipped the greetings. Although not unusual by itself, I could feel something was amiss.

"So what will it be this evening?" I said.

"The usual," said Fred.

I looked at the other two and they nodded. I prepared their beers while the trio seated themselves at the bar. I glanced over while I filled their glasses. Their eyes were downcast and they seemed exhausted. Must have had a rough day.

I served them their beers while they laid their payment on the counter. They wasted no time emptying their glasses.

"Is something the matter?" I said. "You all seem quite drained today."

Ben looked up.

"I'll tell you what the matter is. Those bastards are firing us," he shouted.

"The factory is firing you?" I said, taken aback by Ben's sudden outburst.

"Yes, those assholes are just throwing us on the streets!" One minute they are slaving you at the conveyor belt and the next they are putting you on the cutting board! Out of a job by the end of September!"

"Calm down Ben," said Fred.

"Calm down? How can you expect me to be calm when we're getting sacked? I can't believe you're acting like it's someone else's problem!"

"There is no helping it," said Fred. "The machines aren't exactly safe. I understand the company's decision to replace them with an automated system."

"Aren't safe?!" shouted Ben, as he rose from his chair. "That is bullshit and you know it. There hasn't been a single accident at the belt in years. The only reason why they're replacing the machines is so that they have less of us to pay at the end of the month!"

"That's not true Ben," said Fred. "Accidents at the conveyor belt can be devastating. I've seen it ruin lives. I don't want to see it happen again."

"Oh, I see. So that is why you've been working the conveyor belt all this time! Now that makes a lot of bloody sense Fred!" said Ben.

Fred was clearly getting agitated.

"Look Ben, if the conveyor belt can be made safer, I'm all for it. Yes we will need to find work elsewhere, but at least nobody is losing an arm."

George decided to intervene.

"Guys, please stop this. We've all had a shitty day, but fighting over this isn't going to make things better."

Ben and Frederick looked at each other with vexation.

"Forget it," said Ben. "I'm going home."

He left his half empty glass on the counter and walked to the coat rack. He grabbed his coat and opened the door. Before he left the bar, he turned around to us and said: "You're a damn hypocrite Fred. You deserve getting fired." And with those words, Ben disappeared into the rainy night.

A painful silence followed in the pub.

In an attempt to lighten the mood I tried to reassure Fred.

"Don't worry Fred, he's just angry. Don't take it personal."

"Yeah..." says Fred.

It was plain as day that Ben's words had hit home.

The mood in the pub remained heavy. Fred and George still ordered a few beers, but every attempt at conversation quickly died down. After his third beer, Fred stood up.

"I really think I should go now," he said. "I shouldn't keep my family waiting any longer. I still need to tell my wife as well."

"Right," said George. "Good luck. I'll see you at work."

"You're not going yet?"

"No, I think I'll stay a little longer."

"Alright then," said Fred as he put on his coat. "See you George, Alan."

He lifted his hand to wave us goodbye and left the pub.

With everyone else gone, my attention shifted to George who was working on his fifth beer by now. George had never been a very outspoken person, but he had been very quiet this evening. Even by his standards. Losing his job must have hit him really hard.

"Hey George," I hesitated. "I understand that it must be rough for you, but I don't think drinking away your worries like this is a good idea. Shouldn't you be heading home soon?"

A bitter grin appeared on George's face.

"That isn't it Alan. The reason I'm here is exactly because I don't want to be home right now."

That caught me by surprise.

"What do you mean?"

There was a brief pause as George stared blankly at the counter.

"You know I live next to the church right?"

"Yes," I said, somewhat confused.

"There is a wedding being held there right now."

A long silence followed.

"The girl I love is getting married."

I stared at him, speechless.

I wanted to say something, but I felt a lump form in my throat instead. I don't know what I could have said anyway.

"I don't want to be there right now," said George, voice cracking. "I wouldn't be able to handle it."

The rain clattered against the windows. The sound of water echoed through the otherwise silent pub. Tears were streaming down his face. George's expression warped by the bottled up emotions that came pouring out.

"I've loved her for so long. But I wasn't the one who could make her happy. Instead, all I did was get in the way."

He broke down.

The sound of the rain outside had become faint background noise. All I could hear now was the weeping of the man in front of me, grieving over his lost love.

It took a while for George to calm down. I tried to encourage him. I told him he was a great and kind guy and that everything would turn out all right. But I know that it hardly mattered. I was not the person he wanted to hear that from. I could give him what he truly needed.

Once he had calmed down, I took two glasses from the cupboard and a whisky bottle from the shelf. I filled both glasses and added some ice cubes.

"Here, it's on the house," I said, as I shoved one glass towards him.

George looked up, his eyes still red and face stained in tears.

I gave him a faint smile, upon which he took the glass.

As our glasses clinked I chanted: "To better times."

Years later I saw George again. He was taking shelter under the overhang of *The Heartfelt* when I arrived to open up the place. I invited him in, which he happily accepted.

From what he told me, it seems that the years had not been kind to him. He never managed to find new love or work after he lost his job at the factory. He was eventually forced out of his house and has been wandering the streets ever since. He had tried seeking help, including from his long unrequited love, but to no avail.

Out of pity, I let George spend the night in the pub. So he could at least have a warm night and a roof over his head. But when I arrived at the pub the next morning, I found one of the windows smashed and the register stripped of cash. I cursed at the time, but later realised how far this cruel world has driven him into a corner. He had little choice if he wanted to survive.

In the end, the world took everything from him. In the winter of the following year, George was found in the snow, his frozen hands clasped together. It may just have been to keep himself warm, but to me it seemed like his final prayer to god. He now lies at the graveyard next to the church. Next to the place he once called home.

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I stand in front of George's grave.

"Hello George. It's been a while."

My eyes drift across the tablet, eventually fixing themselves on the date. *24 January 1961.*

"Winter is a lot milder than last year George."

I shake my head. What good does it do him now?

"Fred and Ben are doing alright," I say. "They've patched up and are visiting the bar together again. I've heard they are doing fine at their new jobs too."

I kneel next to the grave.

“I brought you some sunflowers to keep you warm.”

I lay down the flowers next to the bouquet of lilies already on the grave. I smile sombrely.

“I hope you had a nice chat with her.”

For a while I sit there motionless, hand touching the grave, thoughts fleeting. I feel a small splash of water on my hand. Drops of rain surround me, slowly growing more numerous.

“George, there is always someone out there in the rain. If there is no one to shield them, they will simply be swept away. It may not always help, but someone has to be there to listen. To pour their drinks, while they pour out their hearts.”

I get up, fold open my umbrella and look at the grave one last time.

“I gotta go George. It’s time to open the pub.”