



BAR SCENE

A One-Act Play

Brian Murphy

Man walks into a bar. He reacts to the ear-splitting music—The Village People, “Macho Man”—by blocking his ears and turning around as if being physically pushed back by the music. But, apparently desperate, he changes his mind, halts, and looks around.

There is no one else in the bar except the bartender. She is, like him, reasonably physically attractive and more toward the youthful end of middle-age than he is. She is absorbed in a book and happily half-dancing to the music. She did not hear him come in.

He walks up to her.

MAN. Excuse me? [He screams.] *Excuse me?*

WOMAN. Oh. [She looks up from the book and smiles.] Hi.

MAN. Can I use your phone?

WOMAN: What? Can't hear you!

MAN [screaming]. You have a pay phone?

SHE. What?

HE. Could you turn the music down?

SHE. What?

HE. The music! Could you turn it down?

SHE. Oh. Sure. [She reaches under the counter and the volume subsides . . . a little.]

HE. If you can actually call it music.

SHE [with a big smile]. What? You don't like The Village People?

HE. Decidedly not.

SHE. Oh. Maybe you're not gay.

HE. What?!

SHE. I was hoping to attract some gay customers.

HE. Uh, do you have a pay phone?

SHE. Pay phone? No. Parents took that out a long time ago. Way before they retired.

HE. Confound it. Car broke down. Just outside. My cell phone has no bars. Umm, would you mind turning that "music" down some more?

SHE. Sure. Customer's always right. [She turns it down.]

HE. I'm not a customer. I need a phone. I don't suppose you could let me use your cell, would you? I could pay you . . . whatever.

SHE [handing him her cell phone]. Here. Don't worry. On the house.

HE. Thanks.

SHE. What're you drinking?

HE. Ummm, don't think I have any cash.

SHE. Well, then, that'll be on the house too. What'll you have?

HE. Oh . . . well, that is *very* nice of you. Very considerate. I *could* use a drink. Umm . . . scotch?

SHE. Rocks?

HE. Yes, thank you. And just the smallest possible splash of water.

SHE [laughing]. Sure. Coming right up. Here. Make your call.

HE [checking a card from his wallet, dialing a number]. Triple A? Road service, please. 429. 047. 227314506 0. Yes, that's right. No, no, I'm quite safe. Let's see. [to HER:] Where am I?

SHE. Last Chance.

HE. *What?*

SHE. Last Chance Bar. 1145 Woodward, Berkley.

HE. The car is just outside a bar at 1145 Woodward, west side, south of Twelve Mile Road. What's that? No, no, as I say, I am quite safe—being taken good care of by a nice lady in a bar. No, I don't know what's wrong. Got it to the side of the road . . . it died . . . and I can't start it. No, it's got gas in it. That's not it. Might be the battery? Oh? Well, sure, yes, tell him to bring one with him. Yes, I can wait. [To HER:] She's checking something. [HE begins to tap his fingers to the beat of "Macho Man", catches himself, frowns, and stops. To the phone:] What? Oh, well, OK. Forty-five minutes? Well, I guess it'll *have* to be OK. Thank you. Oh? You need a phone number?

SHE. 313-288-9091.

HE [overlapping]. 313-288-9091. All right. Yes, that'll be fine. Thanks again. [Hands her the phone.] No more than forty-five minutes. She *says*.

SHE. Oh, they're pretty good about that. They'll be here. So, you're stuck here for forty-five minutes. Or less. Probably less.

Enjoy the scotch. And, listen, since you can't seem to stand the music . . . tell you what I'm gonna do: turn it right off. [She does so. Silence.]

HE. My *God*, thank you. I cannot tell you

SHE. Anything else? Some other music? [She points.] We even have a juke box.

HE [sipping the scotch]. Really? A juke box? Don't see too many of those any more. Going the way of pay phones.

SHE. Yeah, my parents left it here. Very retro. Even works.

HE [putting the drink down, curious, going over to the juke box—which could, for reasons of economy, be just out of sight]. Well look! Here's an appropriate song! [Coming back to the bar.] Ummm, you have any change?

SHE [laughing and handing him a couple of quarters]. You are one expensive date! But that's OK: I'm curious what song *you* think is "appropriate."

HE [goes back to the juke box where there is a clatter of coins; then comes the sound of Frank Sinatra singing "One for My Baby and One More for the Road."] See?

SHE [after listening a few moments, then over the music]. I do see. Yeah, sure. Well, it's not "a quarter to three." What bar stays open till a quarter to three?

HE. New York. In New York bars stay open till four.

SHE. Did not know that. [They listen. She wipes. He drinks.]

HE. Never been to the Apple?

SHE. What?

HE. The Big Apple: New York, New York, the city that never sleeps?

SHE. Nope. Hardly ever been out of this bar.

HE. Why is it called The Last Chance?

SHE. My parents bought the place from some guy who'd built it just before Prohibition, in the Twenties, I guess—when this was the boonies way out from Detroit; thus, Last Chance.

HE [nodding toward the music]. Always liked that rhyme—
“Buddy, you may not know it, but I'm a kinda poet.”

SHE. Actually, I do know this pretty well. I know *all* the songs on that juke box pretty well. And I agree with you: it *is* a great song.

HE. Is.

SHE. Wouldn't work, though, I don't think—though *nobody* knows whatever's going to work, not really.

HE. Sorry. Not getting your drift.

SHE. My parents bought this place just when it all got built up around here, and this was pretty much it for the bar scene, and so it became a really popular place for the new suburban locals.

HE. And then?

SHE. Talk about Nobody Knows! Then it became even *more* popular when mobs of young people would come in, and it turned into a really successful singles bar.

HE. Ah. And then?

SHE. Look around. What do you see?

HE. You and the ghostly image of Frank, Ol' Blue Eyes, hunched over the bar, cigarette in hand, pouring out his troubles, “drinking, my friend, to the end, of a brief episode.”

SHE. And you've noticed that it's late in the evening and you've noticed that “there's no one in the place except you and me”?

HE. Did.

SHE. And you would conclude . . . what?

HE. You play the music too loud?

SHE. Music too loud? That never stopped the singles! They loved it. The louder the better.

HE. Of course. So they couldn't hear what they were saying. Nothing like utter ignorance to spark a romance, or, to be more strictly accurate, a romance for her, or a night together, for him.

SHE. So?

HE. So?

SHE. So what happened? Where'd they all go? My parents decided to retire and move to Florida, and they handed me a good business; and here I am, driving it into the ground. Burying it. It's pretty well driven already. Not meaning to. Trying my damndest not to. Some nights I don't get one single customer.

HE. Like tonight, evidently.

SHE [laughing]. "Evidently." You're what they call well-spoken.

HE. Really? Is that what they call me?

SHE. Yeah. You talk good. Speak well. Enunciate and everything.

Now . . . tell me all about you.

HE. Rather not.

SHE. OK.

HE. Would be too much like that Frank Sinatra song.

SHE. Actually, I *would* guess that you're a kind of a poet.

HE. Oh?

SHE. You ever written any poems?

HE. Well . . . yes.

SHE. I thought so! Tell me one.

HE [after a pause]. All right. Here's one. It's titled "History."

SHE. Wow. Big subject. Please.

HE. "History:

"Is it bunk

"Or is it junk?

"That is the question.

"Are we sunk?

"Ker-plunk?

"Nay, I say:

"We are all but maggots

"Though some be faggots

"But all chew

"Till we're blue

"On the rotting carcass of

"History."

SHE [after a pause]. That last part doesn't rhyme.

HE. That's because that's the truth part.

SHE. "The rotting carcass of history?" "Maggots?" *That's* the truth? Wow. You ever published . . . like in a book?

HE [with an eloquent snort]: No!

SHE. Wow. What a sound! Why not?

HE. Wouldn't stoop.

SHE. Wouldn't stoop? Just recite your poems in bars, huh? Here, let me pay you for that one with another scotch.

HE. I thank you, Lady.

SHE. You are welcome, Sir.

HE. I feel like a *jongleur*.

SHE. Is that a drink?

HE. No. A *jongleur* is a medieval kind of guy. A poet. A singer. Would travel around and sing a song and maybe get paid for it or maybe get a drink or a meal or, were he to get lucky, both.

SHE. *Jongleur*. Sounds French.

HE. Is.

SHE. Thought so. I like it when I'm right.

HE. Everybody does. You know French?

SHE. Tried to teach myself. Got a book called *Teach Yourself French*. Worked my way through it. Finished it. Can sort of read kind of easy French. Watch French movies.

HE. Really? Where'd you go to school?

SHE. Here.

HE. Here?

SHE. Some kids were home-schooled, you know?

HE. Yes?

SHE. I was bar-schooled.

HE. Truly?

SHE. Really and truly. My parents were big on that kind of thing. They were anti-government before anti-government was the in-thing. So they filled out all the government forms—did they ever hate that!—and taught me at “home.” But they were always working in the bar, so I was pretty much raised right here in this bar.

HE. You ever see a movie called *One-Eyed Jacks*?

SHE. Ummm. Don't think so. Who's in it?

HE. Marlon Brando. Also directed it. Only movie he ever directed.

SHE. Oh. One I missed. Love Brando. [She makes a note on her laptop, which is on the bar next to her book.]

HE. You're like his character, Rio. He says, [in a Brando voice] "I ain't exactly what you'd call a high-bred gentleman. Only manners I ever learned was in a saloon." I've never met anyone in real life who was raised in a saloon.

SHE [laughing]. Well, you've met one now. It's made my education really, really spotty—filled with "quaint and curious lore."

HE. Poe!

SHE. Exactly! I went through a big Edgar Allan binge. Read everything.

HE. Right in this bar?

SHE. Right *at* this bar. So, that's the story of my life. What's yours?

HE. The story of my life?

SHE [glancing at a clock behind the bar]. We still have time before Triple A causes us to separate.

HE. Well, let's see. Born in Detroit.

SHE. The actual city?

HE. Yes, Ma'am. The actual city, south of the Eight Mile Road, Base Line Road. Got away from home as soon and as often as I could. New York, San Francisco: from sea to shining sea.

SHE. Oh. How come?

HE. How come? Because I wanted to see them!

SHE. No, I meant: why'd you want to get away from home?

HE [considering whether to say this]. Well My parents were drunks. When I was a kid, I'd come home from school and then watch my father be so drunk by 3 or 4 in the afternoon that he'd have to *crawl* up the stairs, then stagger to his bedroom where he could safely pass out. Every day. Welcome to my childhood.

SHE. Wow. Sorry.

HE. Hardly your fault.

SHE. That word "sorry" is such a bitch, isn't it? It means either "I apologize" or "I sympathize." That's the one I meant. Second meaning.

HE [taking a good look at her]. You're not too badly-spoken yourself.

SHE. Had a lot of time to read growing up. Very little TV: we never did the sports bar thing. Did get a video tape and then a DVD player, so I've watched like a ton of movies. And lately I've had no customers, so I have had a *lot* of time for books and movies and surfing the Net. I love the Internet. But back to the story of your life?

HE. All right. Pathetically little to tell, actually. Never had the kind of success you report proudly to your alumni magazine. High school. College.

SHE. College! Man, I always wanted to go to college! Where'd you go?

HE. Started at the University of Detroit, then Wayne State, finally got a degree at Michigan.

SHE. The University of Michigan? Ann Arbor! Wow. Big time.

HE [with another, but fainter, snort at her naïveté]. Then a Masters degree.

SHE. In what?

HE. English. English, American, and European literatures. African. Caribbean.

SHE. Wow.

HE. Started work on a PhD. Did all the course work. Took all the exams. Got a good job teaching at Dartmouth. *Very* good job. But I never finished my doctoral dissertation, and so I didn't get tenure; and so they let me go. I am what they call an ABD.

SHE. Meaning?

HE. All But Dissertation. And so there you have the story of my life—I am stuck, stuttering, like an old-fashioned broken record on your juke box. I'm too educated for most jobs and not educated enough—*credentialed*, I mean—for any teaching job that I'd actually want. Dartmouth spoiled me. But, in the final analysis, I'm not sure I actually *believe* in teaching. So here I am, in a bar, a kind of poet, a post-modern *jongleur*, cadging drinks off pretty girls. Sad, sad story.

SHE. Marriage? Anything like that?

HE. There was. I was busy finishing the marriage at the same time I was not finishing my PhD. Undoubtedly, there is a facile connection to be made there.

SHE. Sorry. In the sense of sympathize.

HE. Don't!

SHE. OK. Won't. So . . . what do you, like, *do*?

HE. Oh, after Dartmouth, various things. First, it was very hard work *not* finishing my PhD. And a terminally bad marriage is really a full-time job. Then worked in a book store until it got closed down. Now: well, nothing, really. After my parents drank themselves to death, I inherited a little money and their

house. So that's where I live. Every night I climb the very stairs whereupon my father executed his daily crawl. You know, I'm sorry I'm telling you all this. "Sorry" in the *third* sense: I regret.

SHE. Why?

HE. I don't know. When is that tow truck going to get here?

SHE [glancing at the clock again]. You still have quite a while. Another scotch?

HE. OK. But I'd better be careful that I don't conclude this somewhat frustrating evening by crawling up those stairs.

SHE. Why didn't you finish your doctoral whatchamacallit?

HE [enunciating elaborately]. Dissertation. Doctoral dissertation. Maybe I didn't finish it because it's got such a pretentious appellation.

SHE. You mean . . . because it's *called* a dissertation? You can't be serious.

HE. I'm not. Or I wasn't intending to. But sometimes you find yourself saying something that you meant to be funny, and what happens? A wee bit of truth slips out.

SHE. This would be like your not *stooping* to publish your poem in a book?

HE. I suppose it would. That is an interesting connection.

SHE. In college, did you feel like, well, like you were more intelligent than everybody else?

HE [attempting a laugh]. No, I didn't *feel* like it. I *knew* it!

SHE [wiping the bar]. Isn't there a famous joke kind of like that? In a Woody Allen movie? "I would never belong to a club that would have me as a member?"

HE. When is that damned tow truck going to get here?

SHE [checking the bar clock]. Well, you've gone from quite a while to a while.

HE. Let's go back to the story of your life.

SHE. OK. But, really, you've already heard it all. Bar-schooled. Bar tender. Bar owner. Bar deserted. Bar none.

HE. Marriage? Relationships?

SHE. I guess I was too busy serving the singles and seeing all of them get happily hooked up. Nope. I was in love once, but . . . didn't work out. Oh, I mean, of course, I have guys coming on to me. But they're almost always drunk . . . or smelly . . . or both. So it's just me and my bar and my books and my laptop.

HE. No plans?

SHE. Nope. Could try to sell the bar. Been thinking about that. Should, really.

HE. And then?

SHE. My favorite movie's *Casablanca*. You remember? Rick says, "I never make plans that far ahead." That's me.

HE. You're lucky.

SHE. *Am I?*

HE. Truly. "The world is all before you where to choose." Milton. You ever read Milton?

SHE. Not really. Well, sort of. I plowed my way through a book called *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. Two big fat volumes! I remember reading *about* Milton, being blind and all that, and I *tried Paradise Lost*, but, well, frankly, I thought it seemed kind of stupid. God in His Heaven seemed more like a pissed-off King in some big, guarded fortress. You're on my side, or else, buddy, you are damned. *God* damned. What's *that* all about?

HE. Some people think that Satan is actually the hero, the rebel.

SHE. Ummm, well, *that* certainly makes a difference! I'll have to think about that.

HE. Well, there it is: you sell the bar, and you'd be just like Adam and Eve at the end of the great epic poem: "the world was all before them where to choose."

SHE. Hmmm. Well, isn't the same thing true for you?

HE. Theoretically. At present, my practical choices seem to come down to walking or crawling up the stairs. I did that once.

SHE. What?

HE. Got drunk and crawled up the stairs.

SHE. Did that make you feel better about your father?

HE. No! Of course not. Why would it?

SHE. You know . . . walking a mile in somebody else's moccasins . . . in your case, crawling . . . get to understand them. Maybe your father didn't *want* to get drunk every day and crawl up the stairs right in front of his kid. Your crawl . . . it didn't give you any insight or sympathy or something like that?

HE [eloquent snort]. Don't need any feel-good pop psychology to explain it. I *know* why he drank.

SHE. Why?

HE. He was kidnapped.

SHE. Kidnapped!

HE. Yes, when he was a teenager. And his father wouldn't pay the ransom.

SHE. Couldn't?

HE. *Wouldn't.*

SHE. Was he—this would be your grandfather, right?—was he a rich person?

HE. Somewhat. He owned a couple of restaurants. Sort of high-profile. That's why he was targeted.

SHE. Then why didn't he pay the ransom?

HE. Cops said not to, said not paying wouldn't make any *statistical* difference about your chances for getting the kid back, and not paying would deter other would-be, aspirant, kidnapers.

SHE. He really trusted those statistics! So, he never did, your grandfather? He never paid the ransom?

HE. Nope.

SHE. How did your father get away? He must have, right? Otherwise, he wouldn't have ended crawling up the stairs.

HE. Accidentally. After he'd been there a week, the bad guys went out for a while. He kicked out a window. Somebody saw him at the window and called the cops. Something like that. It was all a little vague. Nobody talked about it very much—at all, actually. Nobody in my family ever talked about anything. Mean drunks, fun drunks: my family was a constellation of silent drunks.

SHE. Wow. Quite a story. Imagine how your father must have felt!

HE. I have.

SHE. How old was he when it happened?

HE. He was about 16.

SHE. Wow. He must have felt

HE. . . . that he was all alone and that nobody loved him.

SHE. Right!

HE. It is a realization from which you do not recover.

SHE. Jeez. Do *you* feel like that?

HE. I suppose I do, actually. Did not know that until, after exhausting many other forms of therapy, I tried Primal Scream Therapy.

SHE. Whoa. Tell me.

HE. Just what you'd think: you go deeper and deeper into yourself, your most basic feelings, your earliest memories of your childhood, and you get to the bottom and, when you see what's there, you scream.

SHE. What did you find there?

HE. That I am all alone and that nobody loves me.

SHE. Just what your father felt.

HE. I suppose so.

SHE. Question: when you wake up in the morning, do you feel happy?

HE [eloquent snort]. You have got to be kidding.

SHE. Ummm, why?

HE. Feel *happy*? Who's happy? Maybe a cow. Bovine: that's what happiness is. Doctor Johnson—you should put him on your reading list

SHE [whips open her laptop and taps a note]. Who? I'd sure like to read some of the stuff you have read. Now, who is this?

HE. Read an abridged version—the Modern Library edition is quite good—of *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, by James Boswell. Or just pull out your *Norton Anthology*. There'll be excerpts there. I allude to it because Johnson does such a good job on the idea

of happiness. If a bull could talk, Johnson said, that bull would say: “here am I in this field, with this grass, with this cow; what greater felicity can be imagined?” Humans, he meant, are a tad more complicated—much too complex for bovine happiness.

SHE. When’d write this?

HE. Eighteenth century.

SHE. Eighteenth century? 1700s. But wasn’t that when people were talking about life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness?

HE. You’ll note that to-be President Jefferson talked about the right to the *pursuit* of happiness, not to happiness itself. Happiness would be an unattainable ideal—except, of course, to a bull with some grass and a complaisant cow.

SHE. I don’t know. You got a right to pursue something that you’ll never get? Sounds like a royal right to *unhappiness*.

HE [finishing the scotch and with a smile to indicate a triumphant conclusion to this line of thought]. Yes! *That* is most assuredly a right that we all have.

SHE. Another scotch?

HE. Well, yes. Thanks. And this the last. Thank you.

SHE [pouring it into a fresh glass]. You are welcome, Sir.

HE. If you read Johnson

SHE. I will.

HE. . . . you will be saying “Sir,” quite frequently.

SHE. Do you ever make a wish?

HE [eloquent snort]. When I am unable to stop myself.

SHE. On Sundays, my parents always closed the bar so they could test me on what I’d learned during the week, and then we’d have an old-fashioned Sunday dinner, and it was usually

roast chicken. Between the end of the chicken and the serving of the apple or pumpkin pie would come the moment when my Mom would pick out the wishbone from the bird, dry it out, and two of us would make a wish and then, using our little fingers, we'd pull on the bone. Whoever got the larger piece of the wishbone, that wish would be granted. You ever do that?

HE. Actually, I do remember that, yes. Haven't thought of it in years. My mother actually stayed sober enough on some Sundays to make the big Sunday dinner. Now, it seems like something before the Punic Wars.

SHE. What was your wish? Did you have just one or was it different?

HE. I'm not sure. Haven't thought about this for years. One of my very few relatively happy memories, I guess. Different: I think I always had a different wish—depending upon whatever I wanted at the time. Books and CDs—recordings, I mean. I guess those were the only *things* I wanted. I was born a terminal English Major. A friend, Morgan by name, told me once that at the University of Detroit, where we were callow undergraduates, there was a conversation about me. Student Number One: "I wonder what his parents are like." Student Number Two: "He didn't have parents; he fell out of a library book." Actually, it's too bad that wasn't true. What about you? What was your wish?

SHE. It's kind of embarrassing.

HE. Really?

SHE. Yeah. I'd always wish that the other person got *his* wish.

HE. How altruistic!

SHE. That, plus: I was never disappointed.

HE. Very interesting. Altruism with a payback.

SHE. You're right. And, even when I was a little kid, I sort of knew that. I got to be all, you know, very virtuous to myself, and I never had any great expectations.

HE. That's another one.

SHE. What?

HE. *Great Expectations*, a novel by Dickens, Charles Dickens: it's another thing for you to read.

SHE [noting it on the laptop]. Thanks. I have read *Oliver Twist*.

HE. Like it?

SHE. Oh yeah. Very much. Besides, it always worked here.

HE. Pardon?

SHE. Some people would come up to the bar and hold out their glass and say with an English accent, "Please, Mum, can I have some more?" And I would know what they were talking about it. Soooo, about life

HE [with a laugh]. Life! Yes, here's to it! Nothing else quite like it, after all.

SHE. Sooo, you think that your life is pretty much what happens as a result of your relationship with your parents? That's it?

HE. Oh, I don't know! That's much too big a question . . . even over one's third scotch.

SHE. I've always wondered about that. I'm an only child who had, and still have, a perfectly fine relationship with my parents. Really. We all like each other. I guess that means: no story there. Somebody told me once that I had the happiness gene. At first I thought he meant I had some brand of *jeans*—you know like something you'd wear. He had to explain to me what genes were, and he insisted that I had this happiness gene. What about you?

HE. A happiness gene! Well, *if* I'd got this putative happiness gene, it was pretty much buried under the pain I felt in being the child of my particular parents.

SHE. And you can't, like, *think* your way out of that? Forgive? Or at least forget?

HE [pausing to drink a bit more of the scotch]. Not in this case.

SHE. It just seems so *unfair* that you have to suffer for something somebody else did, or didn't do, when you were a little kid.

HE. Oh! Has no one ever broken the news to you? Listen carefully now: life is not fair.

SHE. Well . . . yeah . . . I mean . . . I get it . . . but isn't there such a thing as karma? What goes around, comes around? "And in the end, the love you take is equal to the love you make"? *Obviously* there are tragedies you can't control: you get hit by a car or sent to a war and get wounded or killed, or you get sent to a concentration camp just because you're Jewish. . . .

HE. God, I am sick of the Holocaust.

SHE [after a long pause]. You know, you have succeeded in really shocking me.

HE. Good.

SHE [trying to say something]. Ummmm.

HE. Don't you ever get sick of it? All this bleating about anti-Semitism?

SHE. I

HE. Are you Jewish?

SHE. No.

HE. Well, then.

SHE. Well then what?

HE. Well then you too can be sick of it. Look what Israel does to the Palestinians! And it's always justified because of anti-Semitism. It's sickening. I think the creeps who kidnapped my father were what was left of the Purple Gang. You know what the Purple gang was?

SHE. The name. A Detroit gang?

HE. A *Jewish* Detroit gang and one of the most vicious ever. I interviewed for a publishing job in New York once. When I told the publisher that I was from Detroit, the first thing he said was that he always liked to hear about the Purple Gang.

SHE. Why?

HE. Because that meant that *all* of his Jewish brethren weren't striving doctors or mousey accountants. Some were dangerous fellows, real men.

SHE. I imagine that made you pretty mad. Considering.

HE. It did. The interview was quickly terminated. It goes without saying that I did not get the job. Last time I ever interviewed for a job. You think we should kiss?

SHE [slowly]. *Should?* Not could or would or will? *Should!* Such an odd word to use.

HE. You are not answering the question. You are analyzing the question. Now, you can either do a thing or you can analyze it.

SHE. Can't you do both? Maybe first one, then the other?

HE. Oh, enough of this! "Come and kiss me one-and-twenty; youth's a thing will not endure."

SHE. I think you're just saying that cuz you've had a few scotches.

HE. True. Well, partly true. *In vino veritas*. Even more truth in scotch. However, let me assure you that I am not drunk and I am not smelly. I *walk* up the stairs, excepting that once. And I take showers. Actually, I take a couple of showers a day. Kind of compulsive about it, actually.

SHE. Well, *there's* a persuasive argument! Now *I* wonder when that damned tow truck will get here.

HE. A friend of mine—the same Morgan, already alluded to—recently quoted Hemingway who is said to have said, “Never regretted anything I did in my life; only regretted the things I didn’t do.” I had to tell my friend Morgan I was appalled that at his age he was still quoting Hemingway.

SHE. And how did Morgan like that?

HE. Oh, he got pissed off and stopped writing. Then he started writing again. It’s like that with all my friends. On. Off. On again. Off again. And so to perpetuity. And so to the crack of doom. That’s because I understand my friends much better than they understand themselves.

SHE. Really!

HE. And they don’t like that. Know thyself, said Socrates. But nobody does, and, when you serve it right up to them, they don’t want to hear it.

SHE. And now Morgan’s “off.” How long will it be before he’s “on again”?

HE. Not very. He and I have that much in common at least: as a former female mate said unto me, “You never forgive, but you always forget.” Morgan is like that. He absorbs the sting of truth. Then he forgets about the sting. And then he writes again. Well, emails again.

SHE. Email! That kind of surprises me.

HE. Why?

SHE. Oh, I don't know. I guess I see you sitting at your desk with a quill pen.

HE. Well! Talk about the sting of truth! I confess: I do own a very old-fashioned Pelikan fountain pen in which I take great delight. However, we were talking about a kiss.

SHE. Whether we *should* kiss. And, then, if I am following you, you quoted Hemingway about only regretting the things you *don't* do—though you angered your friend Morgan because *he* quoted Hemingway. So you think that he's too old to quote Hemingway, but, now that he has, *that's* the quote you want to use to persuade me that we *should* kiss. Is that right? Am I following this? We will regret it if we don't kiss?

HE. Yes. In a word.

SHE [before she can reply, her cell phone rings, and she answers it]. Hello? Oh, yes, he's right here. What? Yes, I can give him a message. [She listens.] OK. Yes, thanks. I'll tell him. [Clicks the cell phone off.] She says there will be a slight delay because the tow truck *broke down!* She will get another one. She said that they will make it as soon as possible and Triple A hopes you understand and are in a safe place.

HE. Well! The ironies abound. You have a plentiful supply of scotch?

SHE. I do.

HE.. Listen: let me go check on my car again. I'll be right back. [He exits.]

SHE [pulls a stout volume from under the bar, checks the front, flips to a particular page and gasps aloud]. Jeez!

HE [returning]. Vehicle is in evidence and is still stationary. Safe and stationary. I suppose that's the silver lining to its being incapacitated.

SHE [excitedly]. Listen to this! I was looking up Johnson and the *first* thing I came to was this. “In 1729, he felt himself overwhelmed with a horrible hypochondria, and with a dejection, gloom, and despair, which made existence misery. From this dismal malady he never afterwards was perfectly relieved; and all his labors, and all his enjoyments, were but temporary interruptions of its baleful influence.” Poor guy!

HE. And I imagine you would recommend Prozac?

SHE. Well? Why not? Something!

HE. Samuel Johnson was a tragic genius. And I would not change one single thing about him.

SHE. Not even if you could make him happy?

HE. *Especially* if it would have made him happy. Then he would not have been Doctor Johnson.

SHE. That’s interesting.

HE. Everything about Johnson is interesting. ‘Twas he about whom I failed to complete my dissertation.

SHE. That’s *very* interesting.

HE. Really? Why?

SHE. Because if you had finished it and got your PhD and taught at Dartmouth . . . why, then you might have been in danger of being happy.

HE [after a pause]. OK. Now, how long did they say that damn tow-truck would be?

SHE. A little while.

HE. What shall we do? What shall we ever do?

SHE. Another scotch?

HE. Only if you will join me.

SHE. All right. [She pours out two scotches, adds ice and water.]

HE. Thank you. Now, let us return to the question of the kiss.

SHE. I don't think I want to do something only because I'd regret it if I didn't do it.

HE. That's the best *possible* reason for doing anything. It's almost the *only* reason for doing anything.

SHE [sipping the scotch]. Hey, this is pretty good.

HE. You sound surprised. Don't you drink?

SHE. Sparingly. My parents constantly warned me about the dangers of too much drinking if your life takes place in a bar. Like a drug addict who's a druggist.

HE. And the adjuration worked?

SHE. I guess. I enjoy a beer or glass of wine with lunch and maybe something like this at the end of the night.

HE. And *your* parents weren't drunks?

SHE. Actually, Mom was a teetotaler. Dad had an occasional beer. My role-models.

HE. Why'd they home-school you? Usually, it's a religious thing.

SHE. That was part of it, for sure.

HE. How'd it work out?

SHE. It was funny. The more we studied together—don't forget: they were reading everything I was, especially through high school, so they could test me—the more religion just kind of faded into the background.

HE. What about math and science?

SHE. I got through geometry and algebra but not much further. Nibbled a little at calculus. I liked science.

HE. How'd you study it?

SHE. Just by reading. No labs or anything. A couple of years ago I read a book called *The Ascent of Science*. Blew me away. That was after the guy told me I needed to know that genes weren't something you wore. I really loved that book: it described science as "man's greatest intellectual adventure." And I loved the title of his first chapter: "Newton Gets It Completely Wrong." You gotta love a history of science that begins like that!

HE. You know, you'd do really well in college. But don't go.

SHE. Why not?

HE. The classic answer: it would get in the way of your education. What about the kiss?

SHE. Part of the education?

HE. Sure.

SHE. Let me think about it.

HE. Like Satan being the hero?

SHE. That *is* an interesting idea!

HE. Yes. But back to the kiss.

SHE. Let me think some more about it.

HE. I would think that in this kind of situation the more one thinks about it, the less likely is it to occur.

SHE [after a calm silence and a tapping of the now-closed *Norton Anthology*] All right.

HE. Really?

SHE. Sure. No regrets! [She leans across the bar and, as he leans forward, she kisses him; it is a slow and moderately long kiss. They pull back. They look at each other. Her cell phone rings.]

HE. Well! *Not* saved by the bell.

SHE [picking up the phone]. Hello? Yes, I'll tell him. Triple A says it will be not much longer and hopes you are in a safe place.

HE. Am I?

SHE. I'm not so sure. You are a good kisser.

HE. This is when the *jongleur* gets *really* lucky. That was a beautiful kiss.

SHE. I always thought that the phrase "getting lucky" meant a little more than just a kiss.

HE. Not to the ideal *jongleur*. The Art of Courtly Love, in the Middle Ages, was all about being pantingly in love but without sex—at least, without "completion," as they referred to it in the Bill and Monica escapade.

SHE. Really? They made an ideal of frustration . . . like never achieving happiness? Jeez.

HE. Yes, it was interesting. You could have sex with your wife, but that was gross. You'd rut around in the straw. Maybe have kids. And you'd probably get some disease. The *ideal* was to be in love with an exalted lady—preferably the wife of someone else, *ideally* the wife of your liege lord. Thus, the stories of Lancelot, Arthur and Guinevere. Tristan, Mark and Isolde. This was the age of the cult of the Virgin Mary. And the creation of a celibate clergy in the Catholic Church. It was the Lateran Council of 1200-something that mandated no women for priests: it was the thirteenth, greatest of centuries.

SHE. Damn! But you know a lot.

HE. Have spent my whole life getting educated. But for what, exactly? Yeats . . . you know Yeats?

SHE. Just the name.

HE. Greatest modern poet. Get him in your laptop. William Butler Yeats. Irish.

SHE [obeying and noting]. OK.

HE. Yeats, the great William Butler, said that “Life is a long preparation for something that never happens.”

SHE [pausing to think about it]. Wow. Jeez. What a sad thought. Do you think that’s true? Doesn’t feel true to me!

HE. Of course it’s true. Doctor Johnson said much the same: man is never but *to be* blessed—“blessed” in the sense of happy. We’re never happy: we’re always *going* to be happy.

SHE. Then why bother with the kiss?

HE. A temporary respite.

SHE. I see.

HE. Care for another temporary respite? Or are you one of those women who regard a kiss as a promissory note to be redeemed at the lady’s choosing?

SHE. Do most women think that?

HE. Certainly. It should lead to something . . . should get *results* by God . . . preferably to something they’ve had in mind since pre-puberty.

SHE. Well, I don’t *think* I think that.

HE. I begin to perceive that you are a somewhat unusual person. What about that time you were in love that didn’t work out?

SHE. Oh, that certainly wasn’t part of any plan!

HE. Wasn't? Sounds interesting.

SHE. That's just what it wasn't. He was a nice guy. I met him at church.

HE. Church?

SHE. This was when we still went . . . one of the last times. Anyway. He was a nice guy. And he'd come to the bar. And my parents liked him. He'd help out around here.

HE. But?

SHE. Well . . . it's kind o hard to say.

HE. Because it's so complicated?

SHE. Not that at all! No, because, well, it's not nice.

HE. All ears.

SHE. Ummm, he was a nice guy who was, well, just kind of conventional, and that was it. He never read a book. He never asked a question. But he was a nice guy. It just kind of faded away.

HE. Like religion in your family?

SHE. Exactly like that . . . and about the same time.

HE. Well?

SHE. Well?

HE. What about that temporary respite?

SHE [after tapping *The Norton Anthology* again]. Well . . . OK.

HE. My side of the bar or yours?

SHE. Yours. I don't think I want you behind the bar.

HE. Why not?

SHE. Oh, I don't know. It'd be kind of like going backstage. Lose all the magic.

HE. All right, then. *My* side of the bar.

SHE [walking around the bar]. Here goes.

HE [standing up and embracing her]. You are beautiful, and you are interesting.

[Another long kiss.]

SHE [walking back to her side, the "backstage" side, of the bar]. You're a *very* good kisser. And you're really smart and attractive, and I could learn a lot from you.

HE. But? I can feel a *but* a-comin'.

SHE. I think we should stay "strangers in the night"—another song on the jukebox. My parents really liked Sinatra.

HE. So we come back to Frank Sinatra—singer of sad songs, the go-to guy for broken hearts. So you want to keep this just like our first song—"drinking my friend to the end of a brief episode?"

SHE. You know something interesting?

HE [slumping in his seat at the bar]. Sure. Tell me.

SHE. That song was written by the same guy who wrote "Over the Rainbow."

HE [considers this]. That *is* interesting. They seem such opposites—but, really, they're about the same thing from different angles. Different angles: speaking of which: can you tell me why we're going to keep this a very brief episode?

SHE. The bleating.

HE. The bleating?

SHE. Your “bleating” about anti-Semitism. I just can’t . . . take that. And I can see where this’d go.

HE. Where is that?

SHE. Pain. Painful smashup. I can’t . . . just won’t . . . do it.

HE. So once again I have the Jews to thank.

SHE. And so do I.

HE. Certainly wish I’d kept my mouth shut on *that* subject.

SHE [after her cell phone rings]. Hello? Yes, yes. I’ll tell him. The tow truck’s here . . . right outside.

HE. Well . . . thanks. Listen, I’ll come back and pay you for the scotch.

SHE. Better if you don’t. Really. Sorry. Really sorry.

HE. Me too.

SHE. I got enough money. Just decided: I *will* sell the bar. World’s out there.

HE. Hope you find your Adam. You’re a pretty interesting Eve.

SHE. Thanks.

HE [standing up, ready to leave]. I can tell you why this won’t work as a singles bar.

SHE. Why?

HE. Because people don’t meet in singles bars anymore.

SHE. No?

HE. No. Everybody meets online nowadays.

SHE [opening her laptop and, while HE moves very slowly and reluctantly, she taps a few words]. Hey! You know that line about man is always to be blessed? It’s *not* by Johnson.

HE: What?!

SHE [reading]. "Hope springs eternal in the human breast; Man never Is, but always to be blest." Google says it's by Alexander Pope, from *An Essay on Man*.

HE. Damn! I hate it when I'm wrong.

SHE [with a bright laugh]. Everybody does. Well! Good luck to both of us! [She lifts her glass.] Here's to getting blest.

HE. I think you might find it. Me? Maybe not so much. Good night. And thanks.

SHE [as HE exits]. You're welcome.