

Revenge

Julio stepped out of the bar into the cool September night on Tenth Avenue. His eyes needn't have adjusted to the orange glow of the streetlamps, as the inside of Ted's Tavern was notoriously dark. A breeze was coming off the Hudson. He cinched his thin fluorescent pink jacket around his waist, and started down the avenue toward Chelsea. He hadn't been picked up that night, but it was a Thursday—Ted's was busier on the weekend. He ruminated about his conversation with Mario, who did nothing but gossip. What was *her* problem? The bodega at the corner was empty. A Mexican boy sprayed the flowers with a hose. On the opposite corner, the cheap Chinese restaurant had long since closed for the night. One lone Asian girl sat pouting on the steps. Julio turned his purple canvas sneakers into the tree-lined side street. He proceeded east toward Ninth Avenue.

A group of four white guys joked and horsed around halfway up the block. They were headed in Julio's direction, but he was too buzzed to care, and his thoughts were wandering. As the gang approached, he could see they all wore jeans, colored T-shirts, and workboots. By the time he realized they were laughing at him and pointing, it was too late. The one with the long brown hair grabbed his arm as he passed, forcing him to stop in his tracks. "Where've you been, *girlfriend*?"

Julio snapped to attention. The alcohol buzz shrank back to make room for adrenalin and fear. “Cut it out, leave me alone,” Julio stammered. He tried to pull away, but Long Brown Hair’s grip was too strong. Brown Hair stuck out a leg to further impede Julio from moving. “What the fuck?” Julio cried out.

“You a faggot, faggot?” Brown Hair asked him. Julio struggled, but now two of the other guys edged forward, one on each side. Julio felt like he couldn’t breathe.

“Whaddya want? Get the fuck outta here.” Julio was trying to be aggressive. This was natural for any New Yorker, but Julio was used to projecting a feminine air. He had no muscles or masculine swagger. He sounded vulnerable.

“What’s yer name, faggot?” Brown Hair asked him. A pout took hold of Julio’s face. His lower lip projected ever so slightly, like he might cry, but his eyes defied. “C’mon, faggot, what’s yer name?” Brown Hair punched him hard in the gut. Julio doubled over, but the two helpers lifted him back up. His legs started up off the ground to hold the doubled-over position, but the one on the left kicked his legs down. Julio stood up erect, but felt like he was going to throw up. He didn’t dare. He didn’t say his name either.

“C’mon guys, over here.” Brown Hair motioned to a small building courtyard, and the three of them pulled Julio away from the sidewalk. A light from the vestibule of the building illuminated the boys’ jagged faces. They couldn’t be seen from a car passing on the street, or by anyone walking down the sidewalk. The fourth guy stood streetside and started whistling. He paid attention to whomever might be coming.

Julio struggled. “No, no, leave me alone. C’mon, please, leave me alone.” He was no match for their combined strength. Finally, he kicked Brown Hair in the nuts. Brown Hair grabbed his crotch and howled, “Awww, owww,” but he was smiling. He was visibly delighted.

“You know what this means, faggot?” He grinned. “This means we’ got to fuck you up.” The guy on the right moved behind Julio, pinned his arms back with one tan bicep, and covered his mouth with his hand. Julio couldn’t move or shout. Brown Hair and the guy on the left started wailing on his torso and kicking his legs. Julio would later describe it as though they were slamming bricks into him. They kicked him with their steel-toed boots until Julio couldn’t tell where one sharp pain ended and the next began. The guy behind him removed his hand from Julio’s face, and the others punched him mercilessly in the head. He started crying, which enraged the gang all the more. Only the fourth guy knew how long this went on. For Julio and his attackers, it seemed to last both thirty seconds and an hour. Their fists cut Julio’s cheek, his clothes, and his chest. Finally, the fourth guy whistled a different tune. “You’re done,” he called out to them. They dropped Julio on the ground, and skipped over and around him. They ran off in a flash.

Julio slumped down to the pavement in a ball. He whimpered but didn’t cry. He hurt too much to cry. He didn’t think he could move. Presently, a young hetero couple passed the courtyard. Their approach had spared Julio any more damage. They noticed him, doubled up on the cement, and gasped, as they tried to help him to his feet. He stood up, but not erect. “Can you take me around the corner, please, please?” he begged.

“Around the corner?” the woman asked. Her beau was on his cell phone talking to the police.

“My friends are at the bar,” Julio responded. Then he spat out a tooth.

“Absolutely. Gene, tell them to go—where?” She looked back at Julio.

“Ted’s Tavern on Tenth.” Tears started to well up in his eyes, but the rim of his eye socket burned when the salty liq-

uid touched it. The couple supported him, one on either side, and escorted him to the bar. Hairy, burly Ted grunted loudly when the trio struggled through the door. He came out from behind the bar, and took Julio from the couple. "Thank you so much," Julio said to them. They insisted on waiting until the police came. They had called an ambulance as well.

"Third fuckin' time this month," Ted blurted. "This is getting out of hand. I can't have this." The situation was becoming clear to the hetero couple, as their eyes wandered to the bar and the few patrons left on a Thursday night at that late hour. The dim red lighting cast a glow on the sexual posters and art scattered around the walls. They were a liberal couple, but nevertheless they felt uncomfortable. They waited for the ambulance anyway.

Julio's pain had increased the longer he lingered after the attack, and his whimpers and tears turned into bawling. One of his friends, still nursing his drink, came over to the barstool on which Julio was perched and put his arm around him. "Julio, baby, what happened?"

Julio was too distraught to answer, but Ted grimaced and shouted, "The dude was gay-bashed. It's becoming a regular thing." Then he paused and said, "We need to start telling guys to travel in pairs, at least in this neighborhood." He turned toward the nervous couple and gruffly asked, "Did you see the fuckers who did this?"

"Yeah, but we were coming up the street, and they ran in the other direction. I didn't get a good look. Did you, honey?" the man offered.

"No."

"There were four of them. That's all I know. But by now they could be anywhere; they could have even reached a subway."

The police and ambulance showed up at the same time. The medics were pleased that Julio was on his feet, that his

vitals were strong, and that he hadn't lost too much blood. They wanted him to accompany them to the hospital. He was fine with that, but he complained that he had to go to work the next day. "I wouldn't count on it," one of the medics said.

"I'll call your work, Julio, and tell them what happened, baby doll. Can you give me the number and your supervisor's name?" his friend said consolingly.

"Sure."

The police asked Julio for guidance as to what the perps looked like. Julio had gotten a good look at first, but the beating had confused him. His description could have been any one of tens of thousands of young white guys in New York City. All he remembered for sure was that the main guy had had long brown hair, down below the shoulders. They assured him that was helpful, but the guys who overheard knew it was just talk. Ted complained, "Long Brown Hair and his buddies beat up two other guys in the last month. Are you going to help?"

The cops assured him they would do what they could. The ambulance medics escorted Julio out. His friend went with him. The hetero couple whispered their good-byes and fled. The cops spent fifteen minutes talking to Ted. "Look, I know the difficulties the cops have, but I think three beatings in a month is a rash—a crime spree. And we've been having the problem since midsummer off and on. This is *our* neighborhood. We need more foot patrols. What do I need to do to get more foot patrols—every night?"

"There are foot patrols already, but you need to talk to Captain Grant at the precinct on Twentieth near Seventh."

"I know that. I approached them once already. Shit. OK, I'll try again. We really need the community to get up in arms," Ted mused, frustrated and loud.

"Some community involvement might actually help, sir." The cops gave him Captain Grant's card and took their leave.

Ted spat on the floor. Then he threw an empty green Heineken bottle against the brick wall behind the bar. He knew he'd have to clean it up, but he was pissed off, and he didn't know how else to handle his anger in the moment.

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Ted talked to five other bar owners in the area about the attacks. Three of them had had patrons who were affected. They signed on Ted's letter to the police. By Monday morning, they had acquired fifty-two signatures on a petition asking for more foot patrols. Ted arranged a meeting with Captain Grant for Tuesday afternoon.

The precinct was busy. Cops together with handcuffed suspects stood around waiting. At the front desk, the phones kept ringing, but finally, Ted was able to explain that he had an appointment with Captain Grant. A small black woman escorted him to the office of the man Ted was hoping would be able to help his comrades. Captain Grant's office was modest, with a cheap desk, a framed photo of the mayor on the wall, and books and piles of paper strewn on a table and bookshelves. Thin sunlight from a window which opened on the back of the building to the next street, couldn't compete with the fluorescent tubes overhead. Captain Grant was on the phone. Finally, he hung up. "Yes, Mr. Stevens? We've spoken before. How can I help you?"

Ted launched into his summary of what had been happening on Tenth Avenue. He explained that the problem was getting worse, that it seemed to be the same guys causing the trouble, and that so far the police hadn't been able to catch them. "More foot patrols would greatly help. They would be close by when it happens again, and they could apprehend these guys. The gay community really needs this from the po-

lice department, Captain.” He held out the petition. “This is a petition signed by five business owners in the neighborhood, and fifty-two others.”

Captain Grant took the pages and dropped them on his desk. “Mr. Stevens, I understand. The problem is that we’ve had massive budget cuts in this city. The department has not been as badly affected as other city agencies, but budget cuts have meant furloughs. This precinct alone has seen twelve cops laid off so far this year. Your small, six-block area has problems, but so does a lot of other territory in this precinct. What am I supposed to do?” He paused, looking down at his desk. “What kind of community support would we have? I mean, it’s one thing to sign a petition.”

“We’re spreading the word to encourage guys to travel at least in pairs. I’m sure the community will support the police presence,” Ted nodded his head confidently.

“In the past . . . we’ve had the problem . . .” Captain Grant searched for the right, politically correct words.

“What? Tell me,” Ted said encouragingly.

Captain Grant looked him square in the eye. “Gays often don’t want cops around. If they’re doing drugs or having sex in a doorway, they want to be left alone. That doesn’t create a positive atmosphere between the cops and the neighborhood.”

Ted’s red eyes widened. He blurted in response, “There’s a big difference between smoking a joint and beating someone up so bad they land in the hospital.” He gestured with his right arm in disbelief.

Captain Grant held his gaze. “Not really, Mr. Stevens. They’re both crimes and the law has to be enforced, even for small crimes and misdemeanors.”

Ted realized he wasn’t going to get help. He realized that protecting gay guys against beatings was not a priority. He couldn’t understand what was happening, so he fell silent.

Captain Grant went on lecturing about how much he wanted to help, and how he would try to put a few more foot patrols on the street on the weekends, but Ted was crestfallen.

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By the time Ted had returned to the tavern, he knew everything he had to do. He pushed past the black rubber strips that kept out the sunlight when someone opened the front door, and strode into the dim lighting of the bar. Some old-timers were sitting there. A young Hispanic guy with a black leather baseball cap was leaning against the wall at the pool table. “Hal, are you working till closing?” Ted called out to the beefy, thirtysomething bartender.

“Yeah,” Hal replied. He lifted his eyebrows in expectation.

“Where’s Troy today?” Troy had a body like Hal’s and bartended on the weekends.

“I dunno. I ain’t his keeper.” Hal didn’t want to upset Ted. He liked his job.

“When do you work together again?” Ted creased his forehead and looked frustrated.

“Friday at six.”

“Can you talk to Troy, and both of you come in at five? I’ll pay you, but I need to meet with the both of you.” Ted’s voice was tense and serious.

“Sure, Boss. We’ll be here,” Hal replied. Ted strode back through the bar to his office, and Hal looked at him quizzically. Then he returned to cleaning glasses.

Most of the beatings had happened in the vicinity of Ted’s Tavern. If the police couldn’t or wouldn’t help, then Ted thought he would have to find some way to catch the gang-bangers himself. It didn’t sound like the kids doing the damage were sophisticated, powerful fighters. Ted, Hal, and Troy might be able to catch them and beat them up. He would

need halfway decent bartenders to watch the bar on the weekends while Hal and Troy were out, so he called in some favors and got two temporary bartenders and a back. All of this was arranged by the time Hal and Troy met with him on Friday afternoon. He explained the situation and encouraged them to help. They grinned and readily agreed. "How long is this going to take?" Troy asked.

"I don't rightly know." Ted grimaced. "They've been coming sometimes every weekend, sometimes not for two or three weeks."

Hal and Troy were known as the Twins. They both had the same muscular build. They worked out, like Ted, and their substantial muscles were powerful. Troy had blond hair, Hal brown. Their faces were handsome, though boyish and unchiseled. They were in that perfect place in their lives between youthful potency and middle-aged deterioration. They also had masculine demeanors, which was the primary reason Ted hired them. They could intimidate. "Go home, and put on some sneakers, and good clothes for the weather. Be able to run. I think we'll start around midnight," Ted instructed.

When the Twins came back, Ted served them a few stiff drinks, and he had some himself. Their physiques required at least three to get them somewhat buzzed. He needed them to be psyched enough to be bold, but not too buzzed to lose their self-control. He, Hal, and Troy were laughing and punching each other when they went out to roam the neighborhood.

They walked a six-block semicircle with Ted's Tavern at the center. They went no farther than Eighth Avenue. Their jackets hung around their waists, since the early morning air blew warm. Nothing happened. Ted was disappointed, but he shrugged. "Maybe tomorrow."

The trio didn't want to split up, because there were four guys in the gang. They were younger, and from what Ted had heard from the victims, they weren't as built as Ted and his

boys, but there were still four of them. Saturday was unlucky too. At four in the morning, the guys moseyed into the bar and took some barstools to get drunk. Ted, especially, tied one on after closing. “We’re going to have to come back next weekend, boys. And next. And next. Damn it, we’re going to find ‘em.”

“Have they ever not come, Boss?” Troy asked.

“It’s hard to tell, but I think so. This has been going on since last April/May, and lately it’s been more and more often. They’re getting bolder, but I think they’ve gone as much as three weeks with no action,” Ted replied somberly. “Archie, will you unplug the jukebox?” he barked at the temporary bartender. Archie did as he was ordered. Ted had that magical quality that made people want to do what he said. The room went silent.

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The next Friday was quiet again. This time, the weather didn’t help—it went down into the forties. The trio were unhappy that night. They also thought it unlikely that the gang would come on a night like that, but they persevered. Saturday was back up in the sixties, but until Tommy came running up to them on Ninth Avenue, a short distance from the bar, they were having no luck. “Ted! guys!” he exclaimed. “Peter’s been beat up.”

“Where?” Ted grabbed him by the arm, wanting a quick answer.

“On Thirty-First between Ninth and Tenth.” They were a block away.

“Go. Go.” Ted motioned to Hal and Troy to move fast. Tommy ran back to the bar. “Across the street,” Ted yelled, “toward Eighth.” They all ran toward Eighth Avenue, and looked around anxiously.

“Whaddya want to do, Boss?” Hal asked, when they came up empty.

“All right, let’s split up. Troy, take the subway over there. Hal, you take Thirtieth Street. I’ll take Thirty-First. Go.”

Hal was the one who first spotted them. The avenues in this part of town were busy with people all day and night. The streets, however, running crossways to the avenues, were quiet, because they were lined with medium-sized office towers, and it was the middle of the night. The four youths were walking together half a block from Hal when he ran toward them. They were over the excitement of the beating, and were looking quietly at the ground while they walked toward Seventh Avenue. Unfortunately, they heard Hal’s feet pounding the pavement as he approached. He was right behind them, but he was no long-distance runner, and he couldn’t stop them before they took off. The smallest one, a blond boy with a dark t-shirt, stumbled just enough for Hal to grab him, but the others, including Long Hair, ran around the corner and out of sight.

Hal thought his lungs were going to burst as he swung the boy around and down onto the pavement. “What the fuck, man?” the boy yelled. Fortunately, two people in the vicinity paid no attention—it was New York. Hal breathed hard, his sweat dripping into the boy’s eyes from his forehead.

“You fucked up my boy, dude,” Hal said as soon as he got his breathing under control.

“Fuck you. I don’t know what you’re talking about, man. Let me go,” blondie blurted. The kid was about twenty years old, but no match for Hal. Hal lifted his arm and swung, hard, at the kid’s cheek.

“Talk to me,” Hal growled at him. “You want me to bring you back so the dude you beat up can identify you? Then we’ll call the cops, after we beat the shit out of you.”

“What the fuck d’you want?” blondie hollered. Still, the New Yorkers in the street paid no attention, but Hal knew the cops would be coming soon, and he didn’t want to deal with that. Hal noticed a monogram on the boy’s shirt breast,

LUCKY'S, and beneath that BROOKLYN, NY.

"What's Lucky's? Is that where you hang?" Hal demanded. The boy shut his mouth in defiance, and Hal lifted his arm to swing again.

"OK, OK, yeah."

"Who's the ringleader? C'mon, fuck. Tell me." Hal lifted his arm again.

The boy was obviously scared of that arm, because he stammered, "Jimmy."

"Last name," Hal demanded. The boy didn't want to tell him that, so he struggled to break free. "OK." Hal didn't let go. "Is he the long-brown-haired kid?"

"Yeah," the boy answered. Hal could hear a siren coming. He sat up on his haunches, letting go slowly. The kid just looked up at him. Hal stood up and backed off.

"Go," Hal commanded. The kid jumped up and ran around the corner. Hal got out of there as fast as he could. He ran back down the street toward Eighth Avenue. Once he was close to Ninth Avenue, he felt safe from the siren. He returned to Ted's Tavern and played dumb to the police. They had come to talk to Peter, who wasn't that badly beaten up. There was no need for him to go to the hospital. Hal waited patiently for Ted and Troy to come back.

When Ted walked through the door, he looked at Hal, who smiled knowingly. "What happened?"

Hal whispered, "I got some intelligence. Wait a bit, and let's go in the office." The police were oblivious to the trio's exploits, and eventually they left.

Ted put his hairy arm around Peter's shoulder and gestured out to the room, as he hollered in a booming voice, "Can't you guys fight back? I told you to walk in teams at night—and fight back."

"I took a chance. I'm sorry," Peter whimpered.

"OK. Don't worry, Pete." But Ted couldn't help grinning, knowing that Hal had accomplished something.

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Once Ted, Hal and Troy had gone back to the office and Hal had reported everything that happened, Ted put his arm around Hal and patted him on the back. He had done the right thing letting the kid go: they wanted the whole gang. Now the question became, what should they do next? But Ted had a plan. They could not find a Lucky's in Brooklyn website. There was no Ted's Tavern website either, though. It was a level playing field. Ted instructed Troy to go downtown and find out a location for Lucky's first thing Monday morning. Hal and Troy would go back to bartending the following week. Over the rest of the weekend, Ted worked out what he wanted to do in his head. The trio needed a fourth, and Ted knew exactly who he wanted to fill those shoes.

Bill had a more modest body than Ted, Hal, or Troy. He was bald, hairless, with an egg-shaped face punctuated with black-pupiled eyes. He was as tall as Hal, but lacked Hal's muscled bulk. Bill had something, though, that Ted needed. He had SM street cred. He was a bottom who could take a beating without a whimper. He was also intelligent, and that was another thing Ted was counting on—a quick wit. That night he spoke to some of Bill's friends, and asked them to ensure Bill would come see him early the following week. Bill didn't patronize Ted's more than twice a month, but the bartenders and many of the old-timers knew who he was. When Bill came in on Wednesday evening, Ted got a call from the bartender on duty. "Thanks. Give him whatever he wants to drink, on the house," Ted said into the phone. "Ask him to wait until I come out."

"Will do, Boss."

When he was fairly sure Bill had had three drinks, and was starting his fourth, Ted emerged from the office and slapped Bill on the back. "How's it going, Billy?" Ted knew Bill enough to be confident in calling him "Billy."

“Hello, Sir, how ya doin’?” Bill replied. He had had enough alcohol to be buzzed.

For a while Ted and Bill talked quietly at the bar about what had been going on with the gangbangers. Ted filled him in on all the details. “You guys were on patrol, I heard, Sir,” Bill said.

“Yes. Why don’t you grab your drink and come back to my office, Bill?”

“Sure, Sir.” Bill followed him toward the rear of the bar and hesitated before a large red and black poster sporting a photo of a young man naked with a ball gag in his mouth, face toward the camera. The subject had a strained visage. “This is cool, where’d it come from?”

“Yeah,” Ted put his arm around Bill and grinned, “one of our regulars brought that in—a poster from breederfuckers.com.”

Bill smiled, “Homosexual revenge art.” Ted laughed, the pair exited to the office, and Ted shut the door. Finally he filled Bill in on everything that had happened between Hal and blondie, then fell silent, waiting for a response. “What’s next, Sir?”

“We found out Lucky’s is in a warehouse district near the Queens border. I got the exact address here. I’d like you to go there on Friday evening, and sniff around for Jimmy, the long-brown-haired kid. He’s the ringleader. If you can find him, I’d like you to confront him and tell him if he doesn’t lay off, all hell’s gonna break loose. If you can’t find him, I’d like you to go back until you do.”

“They’re going to beat the crap out of me, Sir,” Bill said, grinning. He wasn’t on board with this plan yet. “Why don’t all of us go? If there’s four of them, and four of us, sir, it’s a fair fight.”

“Part of the problem is that on their turf, there may be a hell of a lot more than four of them. In fact, that’s likely. An-

other part of the problem is that Troy, Hal, and me are associated with *this* bar. They could find out where we're from and come with a larger gang and trash my bar. At this point, they don't know Hal isn't just some random friend of Pete's. I don't want this place to be put in danger, along with all the guys who would be here when they came. Also, I just want to give them a chance to lay off. I want to threaten them. They don't know what "all hell's gonna break loose" might mean. If they have half a brain, they'll know trouble's brewing if they come back. And they won't beat you up. You can let 'em know there's guys who've got your back."

"They're gonna beat the crap out of me," Bill confirmed, grin still plastered across his face.

"Yeah, OK. From what I hear, you can handle it if they do, and they'll let you go if you can run away. You'd be takin' it for every gay guy in Manhattan, Bill," Ted said grimly.

Bill smiled at Ted for as much as two minutes in silence. Then he replied, "You got it, Sir. Gimme the address. I'll go Friday after dinner."

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It would be wrong to say that Bill wasn't scared when he got off the G train in Brooklyn Friday night. He would go through with the plan, but he worried that a bar full of drunk thugs were going to beat him to a pulp. On the other hand, a bar full of people might contain at least one or two who would call the police if that happened. Bill was used to painful beatings, but those were controlled and dished out by his buddies. There was no hostility in his SM encounters either, no drunkenness, and no ugliness. He mulled all of this over, as he strode on the sidewalk past small factories and warehouses toward Lucky's.

Lucky's was in a modest wooden building, painted white, at the corner of a deserted street. The front featured a large

picture window, with a door on the side leading into the tavern. It appeared to Bill that the second floor hosted an apartment. A white, wooden staircase led up the side of the building. He heard no music, but the bar was full. When he entered, he could see he wasn't outfitted appropriately. He was dressed all in black—black baseball cap, black autumn jacket, black jeans, black boots. He could have been mistaken for a goth if he had been wearing makeup. Lucky's patrons wore blue jeans, colored T-shirts, and yellow steel-tipped boots. No one looked up as he proceeded to the bar.

He got a seat at the end and waited. There were two busy bartenders, and one of them had to pour for the waitresses. He could see there was a kitchen at the back of the building. Eventually the bartender on his side stopped to serve him. "What'll it be?"

"I'll have a draft Bud," Bill replied. This would never do under normal circumstances, but he wasn't there to drink. The bartender poured and returned. "Listen, is Jimmy here, long brown hair?"

"Sure." The guy scanned the bar. "Maybe not. John, is Jimmy around?" he asked the other bartender.

"He went upstairs. I think he's busy."

"I'm sorry. He's usually here at this hour, but he went home," his bartender told him.

"He lives upstairs?" Bill asked, surprised.

"Who's askin'?" the bartender retorted, now slightly suspicious.

"We met out and about. He said to come visit him here sometime." Bill was making an effort to be casual.

The bartender relented. "He's the owner's son. Jimmy lives in the apartment upstairs, but I think he might be gettin' laid at the moment. If you want to wait . . ."

"Who's the owner?"

“Jim Osbourne. He’s right over there.” The bartender pointed past Bill’s head to a large round table where the owner was sitting. He was a thick-necked, sweaty white man with a large round paunch.

“Thanks a lot,” Bill responded cheerfully. “Sorry to bother you.” The bartender went to look after other customers. Bill got up and stood against the bar rail on the wall. He surveyed the room. Out of perhaps fifty people, only three were women, other than the waitresses. The crowd of men was not mixed. They were all workers at the factories or warehouses surrounding the bar, or guys who looked like they were. Burly arms, hairy chests, beer guts—this was not going to be easy. Osbourne sat with three tall, well-proportioned guys at a table on a riser. It looked like this was his office and he was holding court over the bar. The noise level was considerable. Where was the music? Bill was used to gay bars with their *thump-thump-thump* music to dance by.

Finally, Bill got up his nerve and moved over to the owner’s table. “Mr. Osbourne, sir,” he broke in. The four men looked up at him.

“What can I do you for?” Osbourne grinned at him. No one got up.

“Mr. Osbourne, sir, I’ll get to the point.” Bill’s voice made it sound like he had nerves of steel, but his insides were churning. It was similar to the feeling he’d had the first time he approached a Leather Top years earlier. “Your son, Jimmy, sir, has been beating up guys in Chelsea with his little gang. He needs to stop, or there’s going to be hell to pay.”

Mr. Osbourne got a huge smile on his face and struggled to stand up under his weight. The three goons got up too. “Well, well, are you some kind of fag, whatever-your-name-is?” He flicked his wrist as though he were snapping his fingers, and the goon nearest Bill moved behind him, blocking his exit.

“I’m just the messenger, sir. What Jimmy’s doing ain’t cool,” Bill replied. His voice was quiet but solid.

“Let’s take this bugger outside.” Two of the men gripped his arms. They maneuvered him out of the way, and Mr. Osbourne and the third guy led the way to the door. Bill went willingly. He didn’t have to be forced. The five of them moved a few paces down the street away from the bar’s window or front door. Bill was actually relieved. He wasn’t going to face a riot inside the bar. Mr. Osbourne faced Bill while the two goons on either side held him fast. “D’you take it up the ass, boy? Jesus doesn’t like fuckers who take it up the ass, ya’ know.”

“It’s not a good idea to make this situation worse than it already is, sir.”

“Who’s the threat comin’ from? Last I heard, Jimmy was fuckin’ up faggots in Chelsea. Big fuckin’ deal. You think I’m afraid of some pussy boys from the big city? Let ‘em come any day of the week, pussy boy.”

Bill stood his ground. He didn’t move; he stoically awaited Osbourne’s next move. The big man spat on his face. The spit dripped off his forehead and down his nose. Bill’s eyes flinched, but he kept his composure. He was used to being spit on, but somehow Mr. Osbourne’s saliva repulsed him. Osbourne motioned to the two goons to let Bill go, but when he started to edge away, their grip tightened. That’s when Osbourne swung at Bill’s gut. Bill was unprepared, and the fat fist sank deep. It felt like the big man had punched him in his nuts. Bill was used to dealing with pain, and a long, low sound escaped from his lungs. He stood up, however; he didn’t buckle over.

Mr. Osbourne moved to one side, and motioned for the other guy to take his place. This one had strong, tanned arms, and a murderous look on his face. He punched Bill like he was at a boxing gym and Bill was his bag. Arms, chest, belly,

and finally face he struck in rapid succession. To Bill, it felt like he was being stoned with bricks, but he didn't struggle to get away. He just let the violence turn into louder noises coming from his throat. The pain softened into something controllable. The goon paused, and Mr. Osbourne said, "Aw, fuck. Let's go back in." Then to Bill: "Tell yur friends, any time they want to come down to Lucky's and cause trouble, we'll be waitin' for 'em."

The goons at his side dropped Bill to the ground. He didn't need to drop, but he thought it wise to make them think he'd had enough. The men went inside. Bill got up, dusted himself off, and made his way back to the G train.

* * *

Bill walked into Ted's Tavern with a swollen eye socket but no other visible damage. He was smiling. Hal and Troy were bartending. Hal yelled over, "Y'all right?"

"Yeah. All's well." Some of the other patrons looked up and winced. The ones who didn't know Bill shook their heads. A skinny couple approached with outstretched arms. Bill motioned them away. "No. I'm all right." They stopped and went back to what they were doing. Bill went over to the bar near Hal. "Is Ted here?"

"Yeah, but have a beer first, or a whiskey, or whatever you want. What do you want?" Hal smiled at him.

"Gimme a Bulleit bourbon. Maybe a double, since yur buyin'."

Hal laughed. "OK." He went to pour. Bill took a swig of the triple Hal brought him.

"Do you have a paper towel?"

"Sure." Hal gave him a paper towel. Bill crumpled it up and stuck one end in the whiskey. Then he clumsily tried to dab his swelling. "Here, let me," Hal said. He dabbed the cuts

on the bulge on Bill's eye socket. "I'm glad you're in one piece."

When Bill had finished his whiskey, and had had one more shot, Hal directed him toward Ted's office. As he walked in, Ted hollared, "Oh, Jesus." Bill shook his head.

"Don't worry about it. I've had much worse." The pair talked for over an hour about Bill's experience. Ted wanted to know details about the neighborhood. Were there any apartment buildings? Were there any homes? Stores? Bill told him that in the three-block radius around Lucky's, there were only industrial buildings. The bar was situated on a corner, with its front on the side street and its length on a three-lane boulevard. When Bill was there, there wasn't much traffic. He described the inside of the bar, the placement of the kitchen, the bartenders and waitresses. He told him there were predominantly men in the bar—tough-looking dudes. He told him Jimmy lived upstairs in an apartment. He didn't know if he lived alone. On the other hand, Jimmy was getting laid, so it didn't sound like he was married with kids. They discussed Osbourne and his goons. Bill hadn't seen weapons, but frankly, there was probably more than one gun on the premises. Bill thought it seemed hopeless. What could they possibly do? Were they going to bring two hundred gay guys to fight these tough guys?

Ted raised his arm with one finger pointing at the ceiling. "Never fear, my friend. I've got it all figured out." He was grinning from ear to ear. "Stay cool."

Bill hesitated. "Sure, but what're you gonna do?"

"All will be revealed." Ted laughed.

Ted instructed Hal, Troy, and Bill to be ready Saturday night, a week later. Then, he sprang into action. He drove his truck to Lucky's four times during the ensuing week, at different times of day and night, memorizing the trip down to the last detail. Once, he drove it at five thirty in the morning, and saw

the solid metal gate lowered in front of the bar. They would take the Williamsburg Bridge so as to get out of Brooklyn fast.

Ted borrowed a white van from a shady friend who asked no questions. He shopped for the equipment they'd need. He bought a plastic bracket to fix above the license plate on the rear of the van. This would make it difficult for any cameras along the route to pick up the number, but drivers behind them would see it without a problem, so it would attract no unwanted attention. He bought ammunition for his gun, and stowed it in the compartment next to the driver's seat. Finally, on the Friday night before they were to go, he parked the van on the street and loaded it.

The guys showed up late on Saturday night. Ted corralled them in the office and told them to hang out on the couch. He gave them a couple of drinks, but no more. He explained in painstaking detail what each of their jobs would be. They were nervous, but joking around. The bar closed. The bartenders cashed out. Ted told them not to worry about the state of the bar. He'd clean up. They were glad to get out of there. Usually, the staff had dates on a Saturday night. At last, the conspirators were alone.

They waited until five. It was Sunday morning, October 15, so the skies were dark, and night wouldn't lift until nearly seven. Bill sat in the passenger seat of the van, and Hal and Troy piled into the back. Since it was so late and there was little traffic, it was only five thirty when they pulled up to Lucky's. There were no difficulties on the way over. They sat in the van for a few minutes, looking around. No one was on the street, but occasional cars passed on the boulevard.

Everyone knew what to do. Ted passed out navy-blue ski masks and black leather gloves, which they all put on. "OK, go," Ted ordered.

Bill and Troy hustled to the stairs and climbed to Jimmy's apartment. Bill tried the door, and it opened. He had halfway

expected that. The pair found Jimmy lying passed out on a ratty couch in the front room. On the table were two whiskey bottles, one empty and one half full, and an ashtray full of roaches. This was perfect; it couldn't have worked out better. Troy walked the apartment looking for other people. There were only a few rooms, so that was easy. There were no others. "Check one last time," Bill whispered. Troy did, and came back empty. He had even looked in the bedroom closets.

The pair hoisted Jimmy's drunk, unconscious body off the couch, through the side door, and down the stairs. They laid him on the cement. Ted and Hal had cut the lock on the gate with a police-grade bolt cutter. The gate was up. Now they had less than five minutes. Hal had wanted to go in when Ted raised the gate, but Ted told him to wait until the others came down with Jimmy. "I don't know if there's an alarm," he said.

Jimmy started to revive a little bit, so Bill and Troy moved him away from the bar and handcuffed him with a steel chain to the chain-link fence of the warehouse next door. Meanwhile, Ted and Hal broke the window in the front door of the bar. No loud alarm sounded. Ted knew that didn't mean there *wasn't* an alarm. He reached in and unlocked the door. The pair spent two minutes walking around the barroom pouring gasoline from canisters over the floor. Finally, as they exited, Ted struck a match and dropped it.

When Jimmy started whining and hollering, Bill took a rolled-up sock out of his back pocket and stuffed it in his mouth. Troy taped his mouth shut with duct tape. Shortly, Ted and Hal came running out, and the four of them looked back, mouths agape, at the brightening glow of the flames. "Let's go," Ted ordered. Before they all hopped back into the van, Bill turned to Jimmy and said, "This is from your fag friends in the city." Jimmy wrestled against the handcuffs and cried out in anguish. It was muffled by the sock.

"No sirens," Ted muttered, as they pulled out onto the boulevard and started back to the bridge.

“Please, please, please, no cops, no cops, no cops,” Bill mumbled. They heard no sirens. When they were some distance away, Ted pulled over and Hal opened the back door, leaned down, and pulled off the guard on the license plate. This was so they wouldn’t get any extra attention from the cops, should there be any.

When they pulled off the bridge in Manhattan, Bill exclaimed, “Maybe Jesus likes guys who take it up the ass after all.”

“Not so fast, dude,” Ted replied soberly. They made it without any problems back to their home bar. Ted took the bolt cutters back to his office, and disposed of the gloves and ski masks in a garbage bag, which he deposited in a nearby dumpster. They were probably too far away by now. The four sat in the bar drinking. They drank until they were drunk.

* * *

Ted returned the van on Sunday evening. There were no police. While he sat in his office musing about their crime, he thought, *When are they coming?* That’s what Hal, Troy, and Bill thought too. Other friends wondered why they seemed nervous and depressed. When Hal or Troy bartended during the week, they kept looking at the front door, imagining the rubber flaps unfolding to reveal cops. Bill passed a pair of cops in the neighborhood one day. He grinned at them and said, “Gentlemen.” When they were behind him, he grimaced. Was that too much? Were they looking for him? Ted thought about the whole thing over and over. Had a camera picked up the license plate anyway? Had someone seen them? Would the cops find the gloves and ski masks in the dumpster?

But the cops didn’t come. No one came. Week one passed by without a problem. There was no news about the arson. It had not even made NY1, at least that Ted saw. No one of them

was worried about the other three. The trust the gang had for each other was rock solid. They didn't crack, and the cops didn't come.

They didn't start relaxing until three weeks had passed. Saturday night of the third week, Bill sat and kept Hal company while he tended bar. They spoke warmly and comfortably with each other. They were both feeling like they were going to get away with it. After the bar closed, Hal and Bill went back to Hal's apartment, and Hal fucked him for two hours until the sun came up. Hal told him that it was the first time he had had sex since three weeks before, and Bill confirmed the same for him.

By Thanksgiving, they were all feeling good. Ted invited them to an expensive restaurant in Midtown that weekend. They ate and drank and laughed for hours. Eventually, talk turned to the fire. "What if they retaliate?" Troy asked Ted.

"Who? Where? They only saw Hal and Billy. There are nearly a hundred thousand gay men in Lower Manhattan at any given time. How are they going to find Hal or Billy?" Then he looked at Hal and Bill. "Hal, grow a goatee and sideburns. Billy, grow a mustache. Just for a year." They laughed. "You know what probably happened, don't you?" The three gang members quieted down and looked at Ted. "Mr. Osbourne probably got a huge insurance settlement and moved to Florida." Ted paused, and then crossed his arms behind his head and continued. "You're missing the true beauty in all of this. We're going to be a ghostly legend in the hetero world for decades. They're going to whisper, 'Fuck with the faggots, and bad things happen.'" Ted grinned at them.

The bond that had been forged between them would never fade. Somehow, they felt like they had always been boys, and now, suddenly, they were men. Finally, Bill asked if there had

been any beatings since the arson. Ted said not that he knew of, and he had been keeping his ear to the ground.

In fact, the beatings stopped permanently.

— PUP

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