

PIANO BAR ...

By Rachel Cann

WHY WE LIKE IT: *The fine line between fiction and creative nonfiction was never finer than in Piano Bar. We think it reads stronger as fiction—so that’s why it’s up there—but at the same time we like to respect the author’s wishes. So here it is again. Even better the second time around—we assure you. ‘Play it, Sam...’*

Piano Bar

"Sit chilly and play a pat hand." That's how I was supposed to act around Phil's friends. Three or four of them appeared out of nowhere at our table at the Place for Steak where Phil introduced me as his 'girl.' I was sitting there trying not to listen, in case I were ever investigated, scanning the dining room for someone who might have been the perfect husband. As usual, I could see no one for me but him.

We used to raise eyebrows when we entered a dining room: me with the blush still on my bloom, him walking like he owned the place. I was just glad that my breasts were still in the right place. Sal picked up our check, and already the shrimp were settling better.

"Glad I'm finally getting to meet you," said Sal. "Tried to catch up with you one day at Bobby's Place to give you some money, but we must have missed each other." Sal was bald like Phil but with an unsettling pin-head atop his bulky frame. I think he had just been busted for booking and sentenced to doing his civic duty, pushing a broom, at one of the hell-holes they called an institution in Massachusetts.

"Thanks," I said. "I think my car broke down the day I was supposed to be there."

"Every three months she'd come to visit me. Her and the Eskimo." Phil beamed fondly in my direction, cradled an imaginary baby in his arms to give Sal the picture.

"I heard," said Sal, shoving a roll into his back pocket, smiling approvingly. My claim to fame. Everybody but me thought Phil would never hit the streets. I prayed a lot and never gave up.

Jackie, or somebody, was getting up to leave. "Gotta get home before my wife throws me out." He grinned through teeth with too many spaces. The muscles in his back tightened as he waved a goodbye. "Good to see you, Phil," he said. Phil had so many friends it was hard to keep them all straight. Wherever we went, there'd be someone he knew. I'd never seen it fail. And he seldom had to pay for our dinners. Most often it would be an unctuous owner crooning 'compliments of the house' and holding a bottle of champagne. Gangsters were good for business and they left big tips for the help.

"Nervous wreck. Nervous wreck," said Sal. "Good thing he's only doing one to three or he'd be spilling his guts. He's already got me signed up for 50 a week for the wife and kiddies."

"Do you believe it?" said some guy in a slick red Miami Beach jacket. "Guys like that make me want to puke. Better believe, he'll be crying into his pillow every night."

"Bigger men than him have cried," said Phil, softly.

"We're having a few drinks in the lounge," said Sal. "Come on out." He shook my hand over the coffee cups. "Nice to have met you."

"So, who's Sal?" I asked.

"Worth a million bucks. You know the face on the side of the Nepco trucks? The guy with the crown on his head? That's him. His family brought the first hot dog over on the

Mayflower." I should have known better than to expect an honest answer. Phil trusted no one he hadn't known for at least forty years.

The lounge was warmly decorated with lots of teakwood and black leather. A drunk lady across from us at the piano bar was giving exaggerated come-hither looks to Sal, holding her chin up with her hand as her elbow kept sliding off the edge.

"Oh, honey," I said. "What am I gonna do without you, when I'm her age?" He had 80% blockage in one aorta and 100% in the other. I could never get over the feeling that we were living on borrowed time.

"Sweetie. Don't worry about me. When you're her age, I'll be skiing in St. Moritz." It was exasperating. The older I got, the better he looked. When I got to be forty he said he'd trade me in for two twenty year-olds. Big joke.

Sal escaped to the bar in back of us, and the drunk lady put a pout on her face. She turned to the guy on her left, but he was smiling at us. "Hey, don't I know you?" the guy said.

"I don't think so," Phil said. "Who are you?"

"I'm a pilot for Delta. Is your name Phil?"

"A cop," Phil muttered to me. "A hundred to one."

The guy came to our side of the piano bar and shook Phil's hand. "Are you sure you're not Phil Magner?"

"Of course I'm sure," said Phil, a little indignantly.

"Well, you look so much like a friend of mine. Haven't seen him in years. Phil and I go way back. Incredible resemblance. Old Phil was quite a guy."

"What ever happened to him?"

"Got himself in a little trouble awhile back. You know what I mean? I heard he had open heart surgery while he was in the can and died right on the table. But he was too tough for them. What a guy! I read in the papers he made parole a few months ago."

"What airline did you say you flew for?" asked Phil, dead-pan.

"Delta," said the guy, smiling with an open, ruddy face. "I fly Boston to the coast."

"How many flights does Delta make to the coast?"

"Eight..., or nine, I think. I just flew in. Stopped off to have a few drinks to relax."

"Well, nice to have met you," Phil said.

The piano bar was filling up with tanned, good-looking faces and a lot of cleavage. I ask the piano player to play my favorite song, "Windmills of My Mind."

"Sorry, but it's a long time since I've played it. I'm just filling in tonight." She smiled and did some nice Gershwin instead. Sal was back with a fat plaid arm around Phil. "So, who's your friend?"

"Damned if I know, but he was just giving me my whole life story." The next thing I knew, he was around to the other side, deep in conversation with the pilot. I was trying to read his lips. The drunk lady tipsied herself away and a girl in her twenties took the seat. She plopped her bag down on the veneer and joined the piano player in an oomphy version of "Hey, Big Spender." Phil brought the pilot around to meet me, smiling like he'd just scored us two free tickets to the coast.

"Meet Jim Finn," Phil said, triumphantly. "Commander of the State Police."

"He couldn't fool me," said Finn. "Haven't seen him in twenty years, but there's nobody in the world like him. I remember the first time I saw him, when I was just a lieutenant. What a

sharp dresser! Back before I was married I used to hang around the old 1-2-3 Club. Knew Harvey Peters real well, the owner. He was scared to death of you in those days, Phil."

"How do you know that?"

"He told me. Quite a lady's man, you were Phil. Boy, those were the good old days. Not that I'm not happily married," he explained. "Tomorrow's our anniversary. Went out tonight and bought her a watch." He took out his wallet and showed us a wrinkled receipt for \$217.00.

"Always pay cash for everything. Never took anything that wasn't coming to me. Don't believe in it. What you guys do is your own business. I'm not working tonight. Just stopped in to have a little drink." He had an arm thrown over Phil's shoulder, real palsy-walsy.

"Geezus," said Phil, edging out. "You're going to give me a bad name with my friends."

"Ach. After all these years. Live and let live. Really, Phil, you were always one of my favorites. Quite a character you've got here," he said to me. "You and Pinky O'Neal, God rest his soul."

"What ever happened to Pinky?" asked Phil, with genuine interest.

"Heart attack about ten years ago, after he got out of Leavenworth. God, what a character. Worth a million bucks. Couldn't walk into a drugstore without coming out with both pockets full. I knew his wife well. Lovely little Norwegian girl. I went to his funeral, you know. I don't care what anyone says. He was one hell of a guy. Paid my respects to the missus, and she thanked me for coming. Yep, Phil, I've come to have known some big ones in my time. But God, you're looking good. Haven't changed a bit. How did you they treat you in Atlanta?"

"Well, Jim, what can I say? It was no picnic."

"And your wife, Liz? Lovely lady. Have you seen her lately? Beautiful girl."

I was dummying up pretty good till then. He then asked me if I ever met her. I was having a hard time keeping a civil smile on my face at that. "Yeah," I said. "Pretty good looking . . . for her age." Liz is the wife who left him when he was in Walpole in the fifties. She'd give her eye teeth to have him back. Even if I were to run off and marry someone respectable, Phil would never go back to her. He said.

"Just between you and me," said Finn, loud enough for me and everyone else to hear. "I always figured it was you who iced Harry Zimmerman."

"Back up, there, did I just hear you call me a murderer?"

"Off the record, off the record, Phil. I always figured you had it in for him. Poor Harry was too stupid to do anyone any harm. But he did have an eye for the ladies and maybe he was dumb enough to make a pass at Liz."

"Off the record, every time your guys find a dead body, my name comes up. They never made one stick. So whaddya want to go saying things like that in front of my girl? I ought to sue you. Come on, let me walk you to your car to show you what a gentleman I am. Wouldn't want anything bad happening to you. My friends might get a little upset to find they've been sitting at the same table as a cop."

As they walk out together, a brandy snifter is passed around for the piano player. I was pressed on all sides by warm bodies. Sal handed me a ten spot to put in the kick.

"Sing, 'Melancholy Baby'," hollered Sal. "Boo... hiss..." the crowd roared. Some joker up front kept passing the brandy snifter although there was enough money in it to buy groceries for a month. Phil was back beside me, handing me a five dollar bill, which I shove into his pocket, taking a one out of my change purse. "Ah, baby," he said, still smiling. "Don't bust my balls."

The piano player was singing "Mammy," out of the side of her mouth. Her teeth were big and yellow as a horse's. Sal, with his belly sprawled on his end of the piano bar fluttered another ten from a meaty hand. "Sing what I tell you . . . and tomorrow we're taking you to the dentist." I was embarrassed by his remark but the piano player laughed. "Okay, okay," she said. "Whatever you say."

"Sing, 'Don't Cook Dinner, Mama, Daddy's Coming Home With the Crabs,'" Sal hollered. Again the crowd roared with laughter.

"I don't know it," said the piano player.

"Play it," insisted Sal. The piano player faked the tune and added a couple of verses of her own. The snifter was almost full. "Commander of the State Police," Phil said, under his breath. "Slimy son-of-a-bitch."

The piano player began playing a song I wished that I knew. Something about an ace in the hole. "Come on," said Phil, interrupting a semi-epiphany. An ace in the hole. I needed an ace in the hole. Where was I going to find an ace in the hole? "The baby will be up early in the morning. Let's go."

The song continued to haunt me as he eased the Caddy through the heavily wooded Jamaicaway with its luminous bandaged tree trunks warning low speed at each loop in the road. "Just remember, girls, keep that old ace in the hole."

Phil's mustache settled into a grim line as he navigated the dark. The passing trees seemed to be bowing their heads like so many mournful soldiers. It was just a matter of time, and it would be me at that wake. And the money, from wherever it came, would go wherever it always went: into other people's pockets.

"I had a nice time tonight," I rattled, in an attempt to chase away the gloom. "Such a relief not to keep saying, 'eat your peas, eat your peas.'"

"Can you imagine that bastard pretending we were old friends! Like I can't even take a leak, and someone's writing it down in an Organized Crime Report. Better believe it will show up on the blotters tomorrow. At least he won't be doing undercover work there any more."

"I thought you'd never get rid of him. But what's this about you killing Harry Zimmerman?" I asked. "Isn't he the one who used to bring you mushrooms?"

"None of your f-----g business," he shouted, corners of his mustache lifting in an ugly snarl. "Nosy broad. You're all the same." The car screeched to a halt. I could smell the burnt rubber. "Get the f--- out."

"Take it back, or I will, big shot." My hand was on the door handle and the fear of being on his bad side curdled my blood in a rush. I gave him a few seconds to think. Me and the Eskimo were really all he had.

"Okay, okay. So you're not a broad. But if I told you once, I've told you a hundred times. Keep asking the wrong questions and you're asking for SERIOUS trouble."

"Tell me you're sorry," I said, thinking of the bullet-riddled car I'd seen belonging to Harry Zimmerman out in Revere. It was amazing how many thoughts one could think all at the same time. But a germ of an idea was born, a discovery that I was worth something. I could write a book. He was always accusing me of it anyway. People liked to read about gangsters. It would serve him right.

He put the car back into gear and pinched me on the cheek hard. "You might be crazy," he said, "but you're still my baby."

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *The Piano Bar is the chapter that tells why I wanted to write a book about the "most feared man in Boston" described in Wikipedia that way some 30 years after his death. He was Phil Waggenheim. The book is called Connected (Love in the Time of the Mafia). He's mentioned in a lot of books but when the FBI spied on Bulger it was my friend's bald head appearing on the front page of every newspaper in the country.*

AUTHOR BIO: rachelcann.com has it all. umass Amherst b a 64 boston state teachers mfa 1966 emerson college masters in creative writing 1991. I have a broken shoulder. Sorry for no caps.