

Bones  
<http://nogoodsonofabitch.com>

## THE DANCE OF THE BAR RAT

We were way too drunk and way too old to be in this bar that night. Not that every one there wasn't drunk, they just weren't *drunks*. No, this was the kind of bar for the kids who were one or two years out of college – the sloppy brats who were still out drinking to get laid. The kind of guys who could confidently find the kind of girls not yet too proud to hit the sheets in the same room as another horny couple-for-the-night doing the same. But my friends and I were a good ten years past these old joys of dorm room dalliance. We didn't belong in a bar like this, with its spinning purple lights bouncing across the dance floor, bathing the sweaty dancing maniacs in a translucent glow, illuminating their teeth and shadowing their eyes. A festival of bouncing white corpses. A ghouls' night out. Yeah, something like that.

No, we didn't belong in a bar like this. But we didn't belong in the other bars either – the sad dirty roadhouses and honky tonks where the quiet alcoholics lined the bars like hogs around a feeding trough. We were stuck somewhere in the middle. We'd tell ourselves that we were heading out on the town to meet girls and not to just get completely shitfaced as quickly as possible, but every night we'd stumble outside at last call, blind drunk and alone.

We were the bar rats – scurrying the tavern floors all night in a mad hungry panic, only to retreat to our holes when the lights came on. One day some of us might meet a nice girl and spend the rest of our nights at the dinner table and in front of the television, and the rest of us might just give up and crawl the bar tops with the bar flies. But until then, we were the bar rats. And we walked the line.

I was with two of my drinking buddies that night, and we were backed up against the bar, glasses of bourbon-and-coke or gin-and-tonic or some-shit in hand, cowering away from the maddening crowds. It was gearing up to be another meaningless Saturday night where we'd stay in our safety zones, swapping back and forth between rocks glasses and shot glasses and then beer glasses once the cash got low. We'd stare at the younger girls – maybe make a pathetic fruitless attempt to talk to one of them, and then bitterly watch as they all filed out of the bar one group at a time. Until it was just us again. Alone. Except for maybe a couple other sorry bar rats in another corner.

It was only 11 o'clock and already I was deep in the drink. My depth perception was completely shot. If I squinted my eyes one way I could get a clean focus on the group of frat boys in their collared shirts and ball caps, but the crowded dance floor behind them was nothing but an undulating mass of blue and gray. If I squinted my eyes the other way, I could catch a glimpse of a halter top or a sun dress twirling through the crowd, but the frat boys would disappear. I figured I'd be better off keeping my eyes in the second position.

My ears were marshmallows. I couldn't differentiate between the pounding dance-house beats and the idle chatter of drunksters engaging in the whiskey sour mating ritual. My friend standing to my right was saying something to me. I think I heard, "...shot..." I didn't answer, just turned around and leaned over the bar behind me. There was a shot waiting there. Purple. Jager. It was in one of those small paper cups that looked like the kind that my brothers and I had in a dispenser in the bathroom as kids. I grabbed the shot, closed my eyes, exhaled, and poured it down my throat.

I pushed myself back around to face the crowd and I scanned the dance floor with half-blind eyes. Left to right. Right to left... Stop!

There she was.

The One. She was dancing with her friends. Beautiful. She was a little thing, couldn't have been much over five feet. Just a random pretty girl in a random bar, but the one girl in the whole gray mass of zombies that stood out in my weary vision. Crystal clear. I've seen The One

in many bars before. Not this One in particular, but a girl like her. A beautiful bird that pops up into my drunken view with a startling clarity. The kind of girl that sends a rush of energy through my body and a flurry of, dare I say, butterflies, through my gut. An impressive feat considering that I'm so damn numb at these times that I wouldn't notice if the guy next to me burnt my arm with his cigarette. Normally when this sensation hits, I immediately put the girl on some enormous pedestal and rationalize all the reasons why I shouldn't talk to her (has a boyfriend, you're too drunk, must be a nutcase to be in a bar like this, most likely a vegetarian, etc etc etc) until I've gotten myself so down that I just turn around to the bar and order a double.

But this girl. There was something different. Her eyes, maybe. They were huge. Wide and bright and innocent. But the smile on her face told a different story. It was this mischievous, knowing grin, and it was such a direct contradiction to her eyes that I was struck. Enthralled. I could see all this perfectly from my spot at the bar.

I used to joke that drinking didn't actually make your vision blurry. No, it just so happened, coincidentally, that at the exact moment when the booze connected with the brain, that the world itself went blurry. I would see everything clearly, it just happened to be truly blurry. This girl was whole, though. The whole world around her was fuzz, but she was whole. Could it be that my theory was true, I wondered? Could it be that I had found the one human besides me who didn't change? Just the two of us. Two solids in a world of ghosts.

Ah, I was thinking crazy thoughts now. It was probably time to call it quits and stagger over to another bar. But she was dancing. And I was going to dance with her.

I stuffed a bent cigarette into my mouth, lit it with a shaking hand, and pushed myself off the bar. My pals may or may not have been saying something to me. I didn't answer. I just lurched towards the dance floor.

Of course, at this point in the night my peripheral vision was toast, and I must have traded shoulders with three different fratboys. I could feel their amateur drunken animal rage racing towards me. But they were miles away. Finally I made it to the dance floor and pushed my way through the crowds until I was standing behind her. She was still dancing. Dancing in that

goofy, try-to-be-sexy way that the young non-doomed drunk girls do. I stood there motionless for a moment, burning cigarette dangling from the corner of my mouth. Damn, it was hot in here. I was already sweating. All the oxygen was being sucked away by a thousand panting partiers, and I could barely breathe. Elbows crashed into my side. Shoes crushed down on mine. I began to move my shoulders back and forth. My sad attempt at getting a groove on. I tapped her on the shoulder.

She turned around. Looked up at me with her big eyes. I imagined that they were blue, but there was no way of knowing under all these evil purple lights that kept shooting by, stealing color from anything bright. Damn, she was a cute little thing. I smiled down at her, trying to do my best James Dean – cigarette hanging from mouth, one eyebrow cocked. It was pathetic, I'm sure, but she didn't seem bothered. She began to dance with me. Waving her arms around, turning her back to me but keeping her head tilted in my direction, never losing eye contact. I loosened up a bit and started bending my knees and twisting at the waist. I didn't even know what the hell I was dancing to. The music was nothing but a pulsing monotone. Waaa waaa waaa waaa. She moved in closer to me. I held my ground. We never turned our eyes from each other. I was hypnotized. She moved in closer. Maybe a little too close for my drunken state, as just her presence alone was enough to knock me off balance. I stepped back and into the dancing dude behind me. I could feel his sweaty wet shirt pressed against mine. I felt his shoulder blade against my back. A turtle underneath a wet rag. It was gross. And enough to knock me back onto my guard. I stepped towards the beautiful little girl in front of me and pressed myself up against her until our hips were touching. Soon we were swaying back and forth in tandem. I put my hand against the small of her sweaty back. She had her hands clamped together behind mine.

I was looking down at her. The burning red ember of my cigarette in the foreground, she in the background. The ember and the Beauty would trade prominence – one stealing focus, turning the other into a blur, and then switching back again. Over and over. The smoke drifted up from the cigarette in between me and the girl, and I'd see her bright eyes through ribbons of

white. She looked like an angel floating through the clouds. Except for that smile. There was nothing angelic about that smile.

Soon, the one thing that always happens when you leave a cigarette in your mouth for too long happened. The smoke drifted into my eyes and burned like a motherfucker. My left eye began to tear, but there was no way in hell I was going to take my hand off her back to rub it. I squeezed my eye shut. The girl, and the world behind her, jumped to the right a couple inches. I opened my left eye and squeezed shut the other, and she, and the world behind her, jumped to the left. I opened both eyes, and the world came back to its rightful place. I decided to keep it that way. I'd rather suffer for a few moments than remain with one eye shut and a cigarette hanging from my mouth, looking like fucking Popeye.

She began to playfully mock me, closing and opening one big eye, then repeating with the other. I thought of that scene in Gremlins when Gizmo blinked for Elliot. Or whatever that guy's name was. I laughed.

I realized we were no longer dancing, just rocking back and forth slowly. I noticed everyone around me was doing the same thing. We must be listening to a love song. Waaa waaa waaa waaaa. Maybe. Her smile began to twitch a bit as if she were about to say something. What would it be? *Kiss me?*

"You're really drunk."

"Yeah," I replied. "Fuuuuck...."

Man. There was an infinite number of cooler things I could have said there. Apparently my ability to speak had hopped on the same train as my eyes and ears. Well damn, I guess there'd be no smooth talk coming from this mouth.

So what next, then? I knew we couldn't remain in this position forever. Soon her friends would come by and rescue her from a "bad decision." It was time to take this situation out from this dangerous territory and over into *my* zone. The bar.

"Let's do a shot," I said.

She smiled. "Do you drink Jager?"

Bullseye!

“Come on.”

I grabbed her hand and led her out away from our spot. Miraculously I didn't bump a single person. Or maybe I bumped all of them. Whatever. I breathed a sigh of relief as we stepped off the polished wooden floor and onto the cigarette-scarred carpet. The safe zone. Oh, what a glorious night this was to be! I didn't know what to expect, but it was going to start with Jagermeister, and that was just damn fine with me.

She broke free of my grip and said, “I've got to run to the restroom. I'll be right back.”

She smiled at me, then turned and left. I raced over to the bar to order the shots and to tell my buddies not to wait up for me. They weren't there. Probably figured I was just another night's casualty. It happens. I ordered the drinks, tapping my feet impatiently as I waited for the uninterested bartender to swagger over to the bottles, fill up the small paper cups, and place them in front of me. I threw down a ten and a five, grabbed a shot in each hand, and hurried back over to the spot where we'd last separated. I waited.

And waited.

5 minutes. Must be a long line to the pisser.

10 minutes. Probably telling her friends not to worry, this guy's cool, I'll call you later.

15 minutes. Uhhh...

20 minutes. She's not coming back.

And that was that. The dance was over. The girl was gone. Likely ran out the back door with her girlfriends to find another bar and another dance floor.

And so it goes. I raised my left hand. Looked at the purple juice soaking into the sides of the paper cup. I tilted my head back and drank it down. I immediately followed it with the shot in my right hand. I gasped, felt a ripple race through my stomach. The glands in the sides of my mouth opened wide, gushing saliva onto my tongue. I was about to puke...

The One was gone. For good. No big surprise, really. What did I expect? Shit, I'm one of the bar rats. A happily ever after? We're lucky just to end up with an awkward morning after.

No, a drunken dance with a beautiful girl is as good as it's going to get for a guy like me. And that's alright. It's at least a reminder of where I stand – somewhere stuck in the middle of a bar full of young women and potential love and/or regret and excitement and/or mundanity. Or a bar full of barflies and sadness and laughing at dirty jokes in between coughing fits. And regret. I stand in the middle. The sign points in both directions. And one day I'll have to choose a path.

Until then, I'm a bar rat. And I walk the line.

The need to vomit passed peacefully. I raised my arms out to my sides. I extended my fingers and felt the paper cups roll off my palms and bounce down onto the floor. I looked up at the ceiling of this horrible bar. And laughed at the purple beams that criss-crossed the room like search lights.