

LAST CALL

By

William Bungeroth

It had been a long day, but I had survived.

"Another?"

I nodded.

"That's Stoli, right?"

I smiled and nodded again as I watched the bartender go through his routine gleefully.

Shaker for one, shaved ice, a splash of vermouth, Stoli to the brim - hesitating while he took the shaker to the side of his head - shake three times, pour into a stemmed receptacle with three tiny snowballs waiting for the magic elixir.

Placing the Gibson in front of me, he announced, "Monsieur, for your drinking pleasure." He then noted the drink on my tab, turned to his left, and moved down the bar in search of another thirsty patron - a real pro.

This was my second drink, I think, but who's counting? It had been a long day, and I could finally relax. At five feet ten inches and one hundred ninety pounds, I carried the same weight I did when I played football during my senior year in college. The muscle hadn't turned to fat yet, but I was waging a battle against time. Without looking into a mirror, I would say that my main facial features - the ones that most people remembered about me - were a thin, pointed nose, a square jaw, and grey eyes that changed different shades of color from blue to green to grey, depending on the light.

I took the glass up to my lips and felt the cold liquid on my tongue, savoring it before swallowing its stress-relieving contents. Relaxed, I played with my glass, rolling its stem around in my fingers as I gazed into the old mirror, lost in thought. Its reflective surface ran the length of the bar and mirrored only the material contents in the room.

"It's a beauty, isn't it?" asked the voice in front of me as we both stared at the mirror. "It's one of a kind; I never saw another one like it," the owner of the voice said as he looked away from the mirror back towards me. "How you doing with your drink?"

"I'm fine," I replied as I took another sip, my eyes slowly moving from the mirror to the man working the bar. He was of average height, slight of build, yet wiry with wavy salt and pepper hair that he parted on the side. He also had emerald green eyes and a nose that was too large for his small features; it was as if someone had just stuck it on him.

But that's not what made him stand out; no, it was the crooked smile on his weather-beaten face. Studying him, it was hard to judge how old he was because of his energy, but he was undoubtedly beyond middle age.

Shifting my focus first to my left and then over to my right between the bar and the back bar, I said, "You the only bartender here?"

Looking up from the ice well, he smiled for a fraction of a second, then answered the question with another. "You ever bartend? It's really not that hard." He then moved away to keep on top of the clientele.

The bartender worked behind a massive mahogany bar complemented by a beautifully carved and rounded maple bar rail, which sloped downward towards a walnut foot rail. Though the countertop was highly polished, you couldn't see your reflection. On it was an assortment of hands, arms, and elbows, all attached to various patrons who were seated or stood in a variety of poses, with a drink in hand, waiting for their name to be called.

Overhead, connected to ornate tin-ceiling tiles, was a series of eight ceiling-mounted gas chandeliers strategically placed throughout the room for light. The handmade brass chandeliers each had six arms bent upward and held expertly crafted etched glass bowl shades designed to accommodate the flames. Looking around the room, it was surprisingly bright for gas illumination. The wood on the back bar matched the mahogany on the main bar, and on it were every conceivable spirit one could imagine, forming a military formation with all the labels facing outward. Above the back bar was the aforementioned mirror; it was ornately framed and covered in gold leaf. I felt as if I had stepped back in time to the late 1800s.

Catching the saloonkeeper's attention as he walked by, I asked, "Do you have the time?"

Stopping in his tracks, he walked back to where I was seated, then leaned towards me, put both hands on the inside bar rail, and said, "I don't carry a watch; never felt a need for one." Then, leaning back, he surveyed the scene at the bar and behind me. "Every year, just after the holidays, we're elbow to elbow," came the statement from my loquacious host, his eyes now looking directly at me. He wore a white shirt and an off-white apron, along with black slacks and a hand-tied black silk bow tie around his neck; he matched his surroundings.

"Can I get you anything?" he asked.

"No, I'm fine, but I would have thought a bar like this would have been busier during the holidays."

"Don't get me wrong; we're busy year-round, but especially after the holidays. Human nature, if you know what I mean."

A distinct voice rose above the crowd noise; it was the maître d, dressed formally in a black tux, calling out a single name from the dining room, announcing that a table was ready. The bartender then turned and waved back to the gentleman on my far right, and we both watched as he left his stool and headed into the dining room.

Refocusing his attention back on me, the bartender smiled, but only for an instant before repeating his earlier question. "You ever bartend? It's really not that hard." Before I could answer, he moved away in response to another drink order.

Oblivious to the crowd surrounding me, I searched my vocabulary to find a word to describe the place. It was very old and large, filled with memorabilia from another time. And despite its age and size, it reminded me of the type of watering hole that I liked to frequent: a bar that was built over time that gave you the sense that everything in it fits perfectly, including my soft red leather bar stool with the curved back. Don't ask me why, but it felt like a neighborhood bar, my favorite kind. 'Comfortable' was the word that finally flashed through my mind.

The vibration in my right pocket refocused my attention to the here and now. As I debated whether to answer it or let it go to voicemail, curiosity got the best of me, and I pulled the cell out of my pocket and put it up to my ear; nothing.

The reception must be bad in here, I thought.

I looked at the phone, undecided as to what to do next, wondering whether or not I should go outside and return the call. I hesitated, not wanting to lose my seat. Reluctantly, I put "man's new best friend" back in my pocket.

"The reception's lousy in here," the bartender said, appearing out of nowhere, another smile coming from those crooked lips. Taking in the room, then looking back at me, he said, "It's what you would refer to as a 'no phone zone: no emails, no texts, no calls. The owner specifically set it up that way, and the patrons don't seem to mind."

Noticing the look of consternation on my face as he started to walk away, the bartender hesitated before shouting over his shoulder, "If you can push your way through the crowd coming through the doors, the reception's better out on the street."

I watched him take a drink order while internally debating my next move. It wasn't long before I felt another tremor, then another, each one less forceful than the last. Hesitant about answering, I gave in and reached for my phone just as it stopped vibrating. Swiveling from side to side, I swung around to face the doors that were constantly opening inwards. Still debating whether or not to pick up or return the next call, I looked at the familiar callback number and stared at it. Having made so many choices in my life, both good and bad, I just didn't feel like making another, so I swung my stool around, faced the bar, and turned the phone off.

"Is this seat taken?" the Woman asked. Not waiting for a response, she repeated, "Is this seat taken?" as she forcefully came around the chair and sat herself down.

"It's all yours," I said, not making eye contact.

"I'm waiting for my husband," she declared as she got herself comfortably situated on the stool. "I can't believe how crowded this place is, but I just love the Art Deco feel to it, the vivid colors, striking geometrics, and lavish ornamentation of the decor. Even my chrome bent, Z black upholstered stool has that classic 1930s look and feel. I wonder if Deskey decorated this place?"

"Pardon?" I listened to her ramble on about the furnishings, not understanding a word she said.

Brushing a strand of platinum blonde hair out of her blue eyes and leaning towards me, she focused her attention back on me and asked, "Is it always this crowded?"

Waiting for my response, I slowly swiveled around to face her and, with a wry grin, said, "I hadn't noticed."

Upon closer inspection, she looked to be in her early forties, roughly five feet seven with an athlete's frame probably a runner. She wore pink pearl earrings and a matching strand of pearls around her neck. Nicely proportioned, her body measurements were accentuated by a black designer cocktail dress and high heels. The overall package looked pretty good.

Extending her hand in the direction of my glass, she introduced herself. Forced to respond, I took her hand and shook it.

"And your name is?" she asked.

Before I had a chance to reply, someone knocked me off my stool; I felt as if I were falling in slow motion, clipping the bar rail first with my shoulder then with the side of my head before tumbling headfirst and slamming the top of my crown into the foot rail. The rest of my body followed as I unceremoniously met the floor.

Stunned, I looked up to see an enormous man standing over me, moving with a quickness that belied his size. He shoved the stool out of his way and extended a hand towards me in an attempt to pick me up.

"It wasn't my fault; someone pushed me, lost my balance," he said. Pretending to look around for the culprit, he proclaimed again, "It wasn't my fault. I tumbled into you, trying to signal the bartender for a drink." With a sheepish grin, the Big Man continued to offer his humongous hand towards me. "I'm sorry. Let me help you up."

I had banged my head during the fall, and I instinctively rubbed the spot where it should have hurt; funny, other than my pride, I was all right. Accepting the outstretched hand of my apologetic assailant, I started the process of pulling myself up from the floor.

"Sorry about that," said the Big Man with a rueful look on his face as he easily pulled his once prone victim upright. "I've never seen a sports bar this crowded. Are you okay?" He was a cross between a defensive end and a sumo wrestler. At six feet seven inches and three hundred plus pounds, you wouldn't want him chasing you if you were a quarterback or walking behind you in a dark alley. He had a ruddy complexion, chestnut hair, light brown eyes, and crooked teeth, and his clothes were a cross between urban success and a country bumpkin in that nothing matched.

"What sports bar?" I stammered, having trouble understanding his question. I then shook my head and started brushing off my brown corduroy jacket and jeans while repositioning myself back on the stool. *I'll survive*, I thought

"Are you sure you're okay? You look okay. There we were talking, and the next thing I knew, you were on the ground," the comely Woman said, her nervousness coming out in rapid-fire speech. Not waiting for a reply or taking a breath, she went on. "You took a tumble. I'm sure it was an accident, right?" she asked as she looked up at the intimidating figure towering over the two of us.

Having been unaware of the Woman's presence 'til she spoke, the Big Man took in her attractive features in one pass while trying not to be too obvious. The smile on his face brightened ever so slightly as he said, "My mistake. I just got here, and the place is so damn crowded. I should have known better." He directed his remarks to both of us, but he was still looking at the Woman.

Watching the interchange between my barroom companions, I reset my bearings, then, with a wave of the hand, stated to both of them, "No harm, no foul."

"Good. I'll see if I can get us a drink," the Woman interjected. "What are you drinking?" she asked the Big Man as she looked around, trying to catch the eye of our saloonkeeper.

"Let me see," he answered in a rich baritone voice, convinced that whatever he ordered would be insufficient for a man his size.

Now standing in front of the three of us, the bartender said, "Johnny Walker Black, soda splash," as he established eye contact with the Big Man. He then nodded his head up and down at the Woman and said, "White Wine Spritzer, light on the wine." And then, just as he started to step away, he spun around, pointed a finger at my chest, and said, "Some onions for the Stoli, right?"

The three of us nodded en masse.

The Big Man was the first to speak. "Is he the only bartender in this joint?" he asked as he looked around the crowded room to confirm his statement. "Damn, he's good." And he was right because there wasn't a single patron without some sort of hard or non-alcoholic drink in their hand. Just then, a seat opened up to the right of the Woman, and the Big Man plopped down alongside her.

The bartender reappeared with our drink order. "You tend bar as long as I have in a place like this, it's easy to figure out what people want. Do I have your drinks, right?" he asked, not needing to wait for our answer as he hustled off to fulfill another patron's request.

While my newfound companions developed their relationship, I swiveled away from the bar and turned my attention towards this evening's clientele; nothing unusual stood out except all the different languages being spoken, yet understood. It was a diverse crowd engaged in animated conversation. However, there was a sense, no, a feeling, rather an uneasiness that I felt watching them look around the bar. Collectively, they were uncertain as to what would come next.

Rotating back to the bar, I once again found myself face to face with the bartender. "You didn't answer my question," he said. "Did you ever tend bar before?"

Startled, I stammered, "Yeah. Yeah, when I was in college, along the shore, the Jersey Shore. L.B.I., actually Beach Haven, a town on the Island, Beach Haven, New Jersey." Regaining my composure, I said, "Did it for three summers. I wasn't bad," as I lifted my chin and puffed out my chest.

The bartender slowly nodded his head as his crooked smile crept across his face. "Takes one to know one!"

"How's the food?" I asked, not wanting the conversation to end.

Washing glasses, he replied without looking up. "Good. No one ever comes back to the bar complaining." Anticipating my next question, he raised his head, and a tranquil look appeared on his leathery face as he said with clarity, "I'll eat when my shift's over."

Just then, there was a name called from the dining room. The Big Man responded, then got up and left his stool. His seat was quickly filled.

I resumed my conversation with the bartender. "That didn't take long. I wonder who he knows."

"Funny," the bartender said, shaking his head from side to side, "I've been tending bar for a while, and it's hard to figure out in what order the reservations are filled. Is it destiny, fate, or randomness that rules? Beats me!" Then he looked at the maître d, shrugged his shoulders, and walked away.

Another name was called, female this time. Then another and another and another, yet the number of patrons in the bar never decreased. They were calling names all night when I suddenly realized I hadn't given my name to the maître d.

Seeing the bartender, I leaned over the bar and stopped him. "I forgot to give the maître d my name!"

"I know. Don't worry about it. I'll take care of it. By the way, if I need help, would you mind pitching in?"

"No, be glad to." The words tumbled out of my mouth before I could pull them back. "But I haven't mixed drinks in forever, so I couldn't keep up your pace, especially with this crowd!"

The bartender didn't answer; he was too busy putting the finishing touches on his cocktail creation, garnishing it with a pineapple slice, a cherry, and an orchid blossom. Noticing my attention to his craft, he said, "Ever been to Thailand? No? I get requests for all sorts of drinks here. This is a Bangkok Cooler. As far as bartending, it'll come back to you. It came back to me when I started tending again. 'Tis an honorable profession serving others; you supply a little comfort, say a drink or a kind word, and you've done your part. I never cared about anyone but myself. It was quite a change for me at first, but I learned." Then he locked eyes with me and said in a firm but pleasant voice, "When I call, be ready. I don't want to lose a beat!"

I watched him walk away, never hurried, always courteous, a professional well suited to his role.

Someone tapped me on the shoulder; it was the Woman who had been silent ever since the Big Man left. Looking away from the bartender, I turned towards her.

"Do you know him?" she asked.

"No. I never saw him before."

"You sure?"

"Yeah, I'm sure," I replied; however, I was starting to get an uneasy feeling.

"Well, you seem to be the only person he engages with in a real conversation. What makes you so special?"

"Beats me."

She was right, though; ever since I had arrived, outside of serving the patrons, his focus was on me.

"Kindred souls, I guess," she said. Her face then took on a worried countenance. "I'm waiting for my husband. He was standing right next to me outside, and now I have no idea when he will arrive. Do you know what happens if the maître d calls out your name and your party's not here? Will they still seat you?"

As an observer of life independent of emotional ties, I noticed that the maître d never called out names in pairs. Before I answered her, I saw that the bartender had stopped what he was doing and was standing at a distance, watching and waiting for my response.

I thought about my answer, reality vs. a lie, then in a reassuring voice, I said, "I wouldn't worry about it. Tell the maître d that he's on his way and ask him if you can wait at the table."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure. The maître d is a professional. Trust his judgment."

She responded by looking towards the maître d.

Five minutes later, her name was called. I turned and looked at her, then placed her hand in mine and said, "Things will work out. They always do. Endless possibilities."

She smiled and said with a sigh, "Thanks. I guess I'll find out." And with that, she got off her stool and headed towards the maître d. A moment later, a black woman claimed her seat.

For a considerable length of time, I sat at the bar, sipping my drink and reviewing my past, reflecting on a life that was more about business deals than people. My charitable acts, though many, were never done directly; always through a third party. I thought of the various paths I could have taken, and idealistically, I knew what I wanted to do, but commerce won out in the end. I was a good provider for the employees around me. As far as having a family, it was always a consideration, but I never found the time.

Now that I had committed to helping the bartender, there were no further conversations between the two of us. I marveled at his proficiency in serving drink after drink; so fluid were his movements as he went nonstop from mixing to serving, all the while chatting (albeit briefly) with the clientele. I wondered how long he had been tending bar to be that smooth.

Periodically, I would rotate my stool away from him and focus in on the crowd to people watch, something that I enjoyed doing, though I always made sure I didn't stare at anyone too long; I knew it would make them uneasy. I was more comfortable watching from afar than I was developing or investing in close relationships. I had no regrets, knowing that if I had made any effort at all, my life might have been different.

One by one, my observation targets were called. Then above the din, the maître d called out a name, loud and clear; I don't know why, but as soon as he announced it, I got off my stool and vaulted over the bar.

The bartender was waiting for me, the bow tie no longer around his collar. There he stood, apron in hand, with that crooked smile filling his entire face; it was his time!

"We have a gift. We facilitate the journey into the unknown," he said as he extended his hand with the bow tie in it and shook mine.

"How long?" I asked as I slipped the apron over my head and tied it in the back.

He shrugged his shoulders, anxious to get to his table.

"How will I know?"

"You'll know. I knew, and so did all the other bartenders and maître ds that came before us."

He then shrugged again, winked, and relinquished his responsibility to another.

It had been a long day, but I had survived.

"Another?"

She nodded.

"That's a Cosmo, right?"

She nodded again and looked at the glass in front of her. She watched me from the corner of her eye work behind the bar: shaker for one, shaved ice, a splash of lime juice, triple sec, cranberry juice, Stoli to the brim, shaken three times, then poured into a stemmed receptacle. I was a real pro.

"There you go," as I placed the Cosmopolitan in front of the exotic-looking Woman with straight black hair and almond-shaped eyes. With a crooked smile, I noted the drink on her tab; then, just before I moved away to take care of another thirsty patron, I adjusted my black bow tie, stopped in front of her, and looked the Dark Haired Woman straight in the eye and asked, "Did you ever bartend? It's really not that hard."