

DISCUSS THE REGULARS. They sit in a line like ugly, huddled birds, eyes wet with alcohol. They whisper into their cups and seem to be gloating about something—you will never know what. Some have jobs, children, spouses, cars, and mortgages, while others live with their parents or in transient motels and are on government assistance, a curious balance of classes particular to the parts of Hollywood devoid of klieg lights and make-believe. There are sometimes limousines at the curb out front; other nights feature police cars and ambulances and vicious street scenarios. The bar interior resembles a sunken luxury liner of the early 1900s, mahogany and brass, black-burgundy leather coated in dust and ash. It is impossible to know how many times the ownership has changed hands.

The regulars are warm with one another but generally come and go alone and as far as you can tell have never been to one another's homes. This makes you lonely and the hearts of the world seem cold and stingy and you are reminded of the saying, every man for himself, which as a child made you want to lie down and "be killed."

You do not take much stock in the North American definition of the word but you suppose these people are alcoholics. They like you, or anyway are used to you, and they reach out to touch you when you pass as though you are a good-luck gambling charm. You once found this repulsive and would circle the bar with your back hugging the wall rather than move through the network of fleshy red hands, but you have reconciled yourself to the attention and it has become familiar, even enjoyable for you. It now feels more like a commendation than an intrusion, recognition of your difficult job, and you nod and smile as the hands grab you around the waist, rubbing and slapping your back and belly.

From your post at the side bar entrance you watch them watch themselves in the mirror behind the bar. Preening, pecking, satisfied by their reflections—what do they see in their murky silhouettes? You wonder keenly about their lives prior to their residence here. Strange as it seems, they must have been regulars at some other Hollywood bar, but had moved on or been asked to move on, and they sought out a new retreat, settling down with the first free beer or kind word, some bartender's impotent joke mutilated beyond recognition in its endless retelling. And the regulars turned to tell the joke once more.

You wonder also about their present lives but to make inquiries is purposeless—the regulars are all sensational liars. But you want to know what it is about their existence that fuels the need to inhabit not just the same building every night but the same barstool, upon which they sip the same drink. And if a bartender forgets a regular's usual, the regular is cut down and his eyes swell with a lost suffering. Why? It bothers you to know that the truth will never reveal itself spontaneously and you keep on your toes for clues.

WHEN YOU FIRST COME to work at the bar you drink Claymore, the least expensive or what is called the well scotch. This was your brand when you were out in the world and you are happy to finally find a never-ending, complimentary supply. You have been at the bar for two years, drinking Claymore in great quantity, sometimes straight, oftentimes with ginger ale or cola, before the manager, Simon, asks why you don't drink the quality liquors. "There aren't many up-sides to the life, but I drink the best booze," he says. And so each night you sample a different scotch or whiskey. There are more than forty-five different types of scotch and whiskey and you are very tired at the end of your quest but you find at long last the quality liquor Simon spoke of. As someone who spends a good deal of time surrounded by alcohol, people often ask what you drink, and now you do not shrug or cough but look up and say directly, "I drink John Jameson finest Irish whiskey."

YOU FALL IN LOVE with Jameson Irish whiskey. Previously when you held a bottle of alcohol in your hands you felt a comfort in knowing that its contents would simultaneously deaden and heighten your limited view of the world but you did not care for the actual bottle, as you do now with Jameson, you did not trace your hands over the raised lettering and study the exquisite script. One night you are alone in the back bar doing just this—the bottle is in your hands and you are mooning over the curlicues at the base of the label—and the name John Jameson brings into your head the child's tune "John Jacob Jingleheimer Schmidt." You are humming this

to yourself when Simon, the man responsible for your discovery of Jameson whiskey, enters the bar singing aloud *this very same song*. He waves to you and walks past, into the front bar, and you are staring in disbelief because there is no explaining so obscure a coincidence and you feel you have been visited by the strongest of omens. Good or bad, you do not know. There is nothing to do but wait and see.

Now a group of drunks up front have picked up the song and are singing in the single voice of a runaway giant.

DISCUSS THE GHOST WOMAN that hovers beside the tequila bottles. Like all murdered ghosts she is in need of impossible assistance. There is a mirror running the length of the bar and as you set up for business you see or believe you see furtive movements of light just over your shoulder and in the reflection of your eyeglasses. This happens hundreds of times, so you come to take it for granted when, one night, alone in the bar, the ghost stops you in your tracks with a cold weight-force centered at your shoulder. You feel as though all the air has been pulled from your lungs and mouth and you cannot breathe in or out and you push forward again and this time do not feel the terrible force but the tequila bottles rattle as you move past. You cannot leave the bar unattended and no one will arrive to assist you for over an hour and what you really need is a nice big drink of Jameson but you cannot bring yourself to walk past the tequilas to the whiskey assortment. If you ever hear the rattling again, you say to yourself, you will drop your head on the metal sink edge and knock yourself out, and you see in your mind the image of your unconscious body sprawled on the rubber mats behind the bar. The ghost is fully formed and hanging over as if to injure you but your

lights are out and nobody's home and so the ghost, dissolving, returns wanly to the tequila.

YOU HAVE BAD TEETH and your breath is poor. Your tips consequently are also poor and there is clotted blood in your mouth and you lose tooth pieces on soft foods like mashed potatoes and rice. You are talking to the bar owner's wife when an entire molar comes dislodged and lies heavily on your tongue. You hope to keep the tooth a secret but you are speaking strangely and her head is cocked in wonder. You have begun to sweat and blush and you pray that she does not ask what the problem is but she is opening her mouth and this is just what she does. You swallow the molar and hold out your palms to show that you are not hiding anything. You are an honest man with a clean, hopeful heart.

DISCUSS THE NEW doorman, Antony, who at the end of his third night on the job accidentally cuts a man's thumb off. Antony is a talented mixed martial artist known for first-round knockouts and an apparent inability to feel pain. He is bitter that he has to pick up bar shifts to survive and he wonders if his management team is skimming more than what is customary. You find him intriguing and are impressed with his prejudice when he tells you he listens exclusively to West Coast hip-hop. Anything written or produced outside of California is of no interest to him; there are no exceptions to this rule. Antony takes a shine to you because you are so skinny and white. He is Puerto Rican and wonders at your drunken life. He asks if you eat only one Cheeto per day

and you tell him that sometimes if you are famished you will eat two. You tell him you are available as a sparring partner on Tuesdays and Sundays.

The lights are up and Antony is shouting for everyone to leave the bar. He is learning that people want more than anything not to leave and will have many excuses at the ready, but now their excuses are running thin and his mood is ugly. He has kicked everyone out and moves to close the heavy steel door when Simon calls out his name and he turns. He speaks with Simon while trying to close the door but it is jammed and he slams the door three times with all his weight and finally the latch catches and he walks away but hears a wailing outside and returns to look out the peephole and there is the man with the missing thumb spinning around and bleeding and Antony is stepping on something, later he says he thought it was an old cigar. The thumb is cleaned and wrapped in ice and given to a friend of the man who lost it and they rush off to the hospital together, and you tease Antony, calling him a terrific racist intent on de-fingering innocent white men. His eyes rise level to yours and you see that he is heartbroken by what he has done. "I know how important a man's hands are," he says. His shoulders are trembling and the bar workers say nothing. It is at this moment that you fall platonically in love with Antony.

WHEN YOU SLEEP, your dreams are those of a dullard: You polish ashtrays, stock the ice bins, reach for a bottle and find it there or not there, and exchange names and pleasantries with familiar-looking customers. These scenarios run in a spinning wheel and are identical in texture to your drunken memories. As a result you have only a dim idea what