

# THIS IS NOT A BAR

I went to this new hotel downtown to hear my guitar teacher play. My girlfriend, Lorna, came along, although she doesn't care much about jazz — she plays classical piano. From the lobby, we made a left and passed along red halls with chandeliers lighting them, heading toward the hotel restaurant until we heard music. It was just a trio, upright bass and drums and my teacher, whose name is Arthur. They were set up outside of the eating area, in an open space between the entrance to the restaurant and a nice-looking bar about fifteen feet away, lots of burnished dark wood and brass fittings, which was completely empty. We took seats at the bar and listened.

"They aren't very loud," said Lorna. "I'll bet those people eating dinner don't even know there is a band."

It was a new hotel, like I said, and it smelled that way. New carpet, new paint, new everything. It made me a little headachy. So we sat at this new bar and listened for a while, waiting for someone to take our orders. After a while, a man came. He had a moustache, a thin one, and the badge on his suit jacket read "Manager."

"I'm sorry," he told us, "but you can't sit here."

"Why?" I asked. "We came to hear the music."

"I understand," he said. "But this isn't a bar."

"It isn't?" I turned and looked again. There were cabinets filled with liquor bottles, whiskey, vodka, various flavored liqueurs. There was a cash register, with one of those computer screens. Sprouting up from the center of the long, impeccably polished bar were beer taps with the usual brand names on them.

"I know it looks like a bar," he said. "But it's not."

“We’re sitting here,” I said. “Everything seems good to go. All we need is for someone to bring us drinks.”

“It’s for show,” he said. “There’s another bar, a real one, in the Chesapeake Room, if you’d like to go sit there. It’s just at the end of the hallway.”

I looked at Lorna, who looked back at me. She’d put on lipstick for this, and a pretty flowered skirt. We didn’t get out all that much. “But there’s no band in the Chesapeake Room,” I said to the man. “We came for the band.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Really?”

He nodded. I could see the situation wasn’t something he was proud of. “Look,” he said. “I’ll tell you what. Seeing as how you’re here specifically for the band, you can sit here.”

“Can we get a drink?”

He thought for a moment. “Yes, of course. I’ll have to bring it from the other bar. What would you like?”

“A beer,” said Lorna. “Rocky Oyster Pale Ale.”

“And I’ll have a Beefeater martini,” I said. “Olives.”

He was gone a long time. We sat, listening to the music. I held Lorna’s hand for a while. We could see into the restaurant, and it was just us paying attention. There were a lot of mirrors in there, to make the place look bigger, and some tasteful little holiday lights had been wrapped around the fluted columns.

“My mind keeps drifting,” Lorna said. “I’m barely here.” She took off her glasses and smoothed her eyebrows, then put them back on. “I think it’s the improvisation.”

Between songs, I went up and said hi to Arthur, who seemed pleased to see me. He had on a white shirt and a gray sweater-vest, and looked more like an elementary school teacher than a jazz cat. “You should turn up,” I said. “We can barely hear you.”

“We started louder,” he explained. “The restaurant manager came and told us to turn down.”

“Strange gig,” I said.

“You know it, man.”

Our drinks arrived, the manager carrying them on a tray from down the long hall, so I rejoined Lorna. “Thanks,” I said, and he nodded, then disappeared. We clinked glasses and listened to the next song. They were good, these guys — as good as you’d hear anyplace. It was pretty much a secret that they were working so hard; over in the restaurant, you probably got the impression of piped-in Muzak, or something.

The martini was solid — very cold. I was munching on the second olive when a scraggly-looking kid in an army jacket came and sat on the next stool. He waved to Arthur, and Arthur acknowledged him with a big smile, without breaking rhythm or losing his place in what he was doing, which was playing three different things at once: bass line, little two-note chords popping on and off like Christmas lights, and an improvised melody line on top. The guy was some kind of genius, and his fingers were extralong, slender, pale, and tapered. I didn’t recognize the song, but that was hardly the point.

The kid kept looking around. Finally, I leaned over to him and said, “It’s not a bar.”

“It’s not?”

I shook my head. “Nope. I know, I know, it looks like one. But it’s not. It’s a fake bar.”

“But you have drinks,” he pointed out.

“I know,” I said, raising mine, then taking a sip. “They made an exception.”

“If it’s not a bar,” he said, “why did they hire a band to play in it?”

“Your guess is as good as mine.” There was something about his face I liked. He had acne on his cheeks and forehead, and curly brown hair that looked like he never brushed or combed it, but just showered and let it dry however. He reminded me vaguely of me, just a long time ago. I’m forty-eight; he might have been twenty-three. “Are you one of Arthur’s students?”

“Yeah,” he said.

“Me, too.”

The manager came back to check on us. “Anything else?” he asked.

“I could use another,” I said. I looked at Lorna, and she nodded. “And my friend here would like to order, too.”

The manager wasn’t sure what to do with this one, I could see. “Did you —”

“I told him,” I said. “He knows it’s not a bar.”

“It’s just for show,” said the manager. “We have other bars. I really don’t know why they put this one here.”

“He’s here for the music, too,” I said. “Maybe you could break the rules for him, also? I’ll bet he just wants a beer.”

“Jack Daniels, actually,” said the kid.

“Ice?” asked the manager.

“Ice,” he said.

“All right,” said the manager, then headed off down the hallway again.

We sat there, just the three of us, listening. The drummer was using brushes, whisking so lightly around the top of his snare that the sound he produced wasn’t much more than wind makes shaking leaves from a tree. I felt bad for him — all the drummers I’d ever known liked to make noise. It was why they got into the business in the first place.

“I’m Andy,” said the kid to me.

“Cleve,” I said.

“Nice,” he said, as if I’d just hit a jump shot. “Cleveland?”

“My dad was a history buff. It’s better than *Grover*.”

“I guess.” He adjusted his balance on the bar seat. They were reasonably comfortable, wooden swivel ones with padding, but they had no backs. “He liked *Sesame Street*, too, huh?”

“I doubt he’d ever heard of *Sesame Street*.”

The manager reappeared, saving us from the rest of this conversation. He gave us all our drinks and promised to come back and check on us later.

“That’s Lorna,” I said.

He nodded toward her, and she responded with a little smile and wave.

“Arthur’s amazing, huh?” I said. “You been his student long?”

“Couple years.” He was paying close attention to the music. “Nice,” he said, appreciating some of Arthur’s tricky fingering. He took a sip of his drink. “Huh.”

“What?”

“It’s not a drink.”

“What do you mean it’s not a drink?”

“I don’t know.” He held his glass up to the light. It looked pretty much like it ought to look. Amber liquid, some rocks. Lorna had taken to doodling on a napkin, and I could tell she was getting near her limit already. “It’s weird.”

“You want another?”

He grinned suddenly. “Sorry. Just my sense of humor. Thought it would be funny if this not-bar were serving not-drinks, you know?”

“Do you think I could smoke?” Lorna asked.

“I doubt it,” I said.

“You can smoke in bars,” said Andy.

“I think we’ve established what’s wrong with that argument,” I said.

He tipped his head to one side and looked at me with great seriousness. “How do you feel about the minor seven flat-five?” he asked.

“I don’t really know how to answer that.”

“It’s probably my favorite chord. It’s just so *there*, like your pivot foot in basketball. Know how I think about it when I’m soloing?”

“How?”

“Like a red ladder, leaning against a wall I have to paint. But instead of starting with the first rung, I step onto it a few rungs up. If I’m in E minor, so it’s an F-sharp minor seven flat-five, I forget about the F-sharp entirely and just think *A minor triad*.”

“A minor is red to you?”

“Of course it is.”

“Are you synesthetic?”

“I couldn’t say.”

“Why a wall?”

“I paint walls for a living.”

“Excuse me,” said Lorna. “I’m going to see about a restroom.”

“Make sure it’s a real restroom,” I said.

“Pretty,” he said, when she was gone. “Your wife?”

“Not yet. I’m kind of doing her taxes. That’s what I do. She’s a real musician, plays all over the place. Recitals, accompaniment gigs. She made fifty thousand dollars last year.”

“Damn.” I could see he was impressed. “How long have you been doing her taxes?”

“Going on two years now. It’s an open-ended kind of thing.”

“I get it. Endings are overrated anyway.”

“Hey, maybe we could jam sometime,” I suggested. “Since we’re both students of Arthur’s and all.”

“I don’t know,” he said. “Maybe.”

“You pretty good?”

“I’m all right.”

“Me, too,” I said. “I’m all right.”

I dropped Lorna off at her house. I call her Lorna, because that’s what she says, but on her tax forms, it says “Laura.” I tried asking her about it one time, but she just corrected me. “Lorna,” she said. “My name is Lorna.”

“I could come in,” I said, now. “It’s not that late.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” she said. “I have an early day. I’m giving lessons all morning, and I have to practice for Seattle. And then there’s this guy who’s going to call me about a gig in Liechtenstein.”

“Liechtenstein?” I said.

“The country.”

“It’s hardly a country.”

“You’re right. Technically, it’s a principality. Apparently, you can rent the whole thing out for functions, like a Sheraton.”

“Wedding? Bar Mitzvah?”

“It’s more of a corporate deal. But they want music. German, preferably. This is some German company that’s renting out the country. I think they make razors.”

“Principality.”

“Exactly.”

We kissed a little, but not the very best kind — we were both sort of phoning it in. I ran a finger along the outside of her bra and she licked my ear. She was thirty, just turned, a secret late-night consumer of frozen edamame and watcher of *Friends*. “I’ll call you,” she said, and then she went inside.

I wasn’t sleepy, so I went to this actual bar, Dapper Dan’s, which is only across the street and down a block. A locals kind of place. I wasn’t there more than a few minutes before Andy came in. I’d never seen him there before, but then I thought maybe it was sort of how you learn a new word, and then suddenly you start hearing it everywhere.

“Jack on the rocks,” I said to the bartender, when he came in. “I’m buying.”

“That drink at the hotel was nine bucks,” he said.

“You should have paid them with not-money.”

“Where’s Laura?”

“Lorna,” I said. “She went home. She has a recital in Seattle next week, and she’s practicing all the time. Brahms, I think.”

“Longhair music.” He seemed a lot more at home in Dan’s. The

bar was just a converted row house, very narrow and very deep. A lot of cops drank there, and the food was pretty good, burgers and such. They had a fire going in the fireplace, and the air was thick with the smoke.

“You’re doing her taxes, you said?”

“That’s correct.”

“So, you’re, like, an accountant?”

“No. Years ago, when I was about your age or so, I got a job doing people’s income taxes at this storefront office in Bedford-Stuyvesant, in Brooklyn. After a while, I took those skills to another office in Manhattan, a much more upscale place. Before I know it, I’m getting three, four hundred bucks for a tax return. Then they send me to represent a client at an audit, because no one else is available. The IRS says, ‘We can’t talk to you.’ But they send me back the next week for another client, and the next week for another. Then in the mail I get this letter with my Enrolled Agent number. All of a sudden, I’m official with them. I figured it was a sign.”

“Wow,” said Andy. “I’m planning on moving to Manhattan. Do the jazz thing.”

“I guess that’s the place. I played in Manhattan, of course, back in the day.”

His eyes lit up, and I could tell I’d impressed him. “Where’d you play?”

“When I moved there,” I said, “that movie *Urban Cowboy* had just come out.”

He shook his head, wrapped his large hand around his glass and took a swallow. “Never heard of it.”

“It was a big deal at the time. People all of a sudden started buying huge belt buckles and cowboy boots and went line dancing. Half the bars in New York installed mechanical bulls. So, me and my buddy started a country band.”

“Country is cool,” he said, but I could see he was just humoring me. “Chet Atkins.”

We got a little drunker. I decided to confide in him. “I’m trying to get back to my roots,” I said. “I’m not really a tax guy.”

“I get it,” he said. “You’ve been faking it all these years.”

“Exactly my point. I don’t even know that much about it. It’s not like I ever studied or anything. I just fill out the forms and send them in.”

“Does Laura know?”

“Lorna. Not really. Although she may suspect something. This sudden interest in music, for example. All I ever want to do is talk about ‘Stella by Starlight.’”

He shook his head and grinned. “‘Stella,’” he said. “That’s some deep shit.”

“You know it, man. It seems to me that I took a wrong turn somewhere back in my twenties. I can’t say exactly how it happened, it just sort of did. One day I was like you, all hopped up on Wes and Joe Pass and Pat Martino, and then suddenly me and my buddy are playing these electronic bull bars and singing Patsy Cline.” I tried to remember what had happened next, but it all seemed very mysterious somehow, as if aliens had erased my memories and sent me back to earth with the outside structure of a life, but none of the interior part, the part that mattered. “And now, here I am, staring at fifty.”

“You think maybe it’s too late?” he asked. He looked concerned. His acne was a serious problem, and I wondered if he took anything for it. It was going to be hard for him to get women looking like that.

“I don’t know. I have three ex-wives. Can you believe that?”

“Damn,” he said.

“What about you? What’s your plan for taking Manhattan?”

“Gonna head up there, bring my ax, start hitting the sessions. That’s it.”

He seemed to believe in some mythical version of the city, where Sonny Rollins walked the Brooklyn Bridge at night practicing his saxophone, where you might drop down into some tiny club on Fifty-second Street and see Bird or Diz or Mingus. I didn’t see the

point in telling him it wasn't true. Perhaps, if enough people like him decided it was true, it would become true. What did I know?

"It's all gotten kind of fake up in New York, too, these days," I said.

He nodded. The smoke was really getting thick in Dan's, like maybe the chimney was blocked up. "'Not yet,' you said. You thinking of proposing?"

"To Lorna?" I was a little surprised I'd let that slip. Before I could answer, a bunch of alarms went off. People from the back of the bar started getting up and moving in our direction. "What's going on?" I asked the bartender, but she wasn't paying attention. A big guy with tattoos on his arms sitting next to me on my other side said, "Fire."

We headed out into the street. There were maybe forty of us — an entire bar full of customers, just no bar to be in. Sirens approached, engines appeared. We already had cops — they'd been in the back eating the shrimp basket. I could see Lorna's house across the street and one block south, a two-story brick row house with her landlady's bicycle parked out on the porch. There was a light on in the upstairs window, which was her apartment.

For ten years now, Lorna had been performing and taking in checks, but she'd never filed a form. Not one. I'd met her when she answered my ad on Craigslist and she came by my office — well, ok, it's not an office, exactly, it's just a house, but my block isn't zoned for a business — with a box full of letters from the IRS and the State, all neatly lined up in order by the date she'd received them, not one of them opened. She owed, with interest and penalties, something on the order of two hundred thousand dollars. I was working my way through the years, trying to rearrange her past for her, whittle away at the debt. In the meantime, we were having some pretty hot, if occasional, sex.

Andy was talking to a cop. "What would I have to do?" he said.

The cop was one of the ones who had been eating shrimp, and he'd brought his plate out with him. He stuck a French fry in his mouth, chewed and swallowed. "Depends," he said.

"You must have some kind of guidelines, right?"

"Sure."

"So, like, what? Hey, watch this." Andy put his hands on the ground and kicked his feet into the air, executing a fairly smooth handstand. He held the position, then collapsed his legs back to the ground and stood up. "What about that? Public nuisance. That count?"

"Hardly," said the cop. "You have to be a lot more threatening."

The alarms had stopped, and the general consensus from the people standing around in the cold was that there had been a grease fire in the kitchen. What we didn't know yet was whether we'd be going back in. A passing car gave us all a honk. I guess we looked like we might be demonstrating against something out there, all of us standing in a group.

"Like if I gave you a shove?" said Andy. It seemed to me he was drunker than I'd realized. Bigger, too.

"That might do it." The cop looked at me. He was big, too, probably about my age, although stouter. He had a kind of weary look to him, and I thought I knew how he felt. "You with this guy?"

"Sort of," I said. "Depends on what you mean."

"What would be your assessment of his mental state?"

"He's a jazz musician. He paints houses. He's moving to New York. I can't tell you a whole lot more." I didn't think the whole bit about the red ladder would interest the officer much.

"Well, tell him he's close to getting what he wants."

Andy then put me in a headlock. This was quite painful, as I have some stenosis in my cervical spine — c-5 and -6. My left arm went right to sleep. "Now, I'm in trouble, right?" he asked.

"You got it," said the cop. He put his plate down on the sidewalk

and pulled something off his belt. It wasn't a gun, exactly — more like a ray gun.

"Go on," said Andy.

"Nah," said the cop. "I can't use this."

"Why not?" said Andy.

"You want to fill out the paperwork? Because I sure don't."

"Come on. No one will say anything."

"You don't know the half of it. Reports, questions. This guy here" — he pointed at me — "he puts in a call to the *Examiner*, next thing you know I'm on the front page."

Andy let go of me. "Sorry," he said. "I thought I could get Tasered."

I rubbed my arm and waited for the feeling to return to it. "You need to examine your priorities," I said.

"Sometimes I get a little out of control," he explained. "I spent my whole childhood on various medications."

They weren't going to let us back into Dan's. "You know what's just about five blocks from here?" I asked. "Come on. We'll go see the lights."

"I've heard about them, but I've never been."

"Well, you need to go. Better than getting zapped with fifty thousand volts any day."

"You don't know that," he said.

We hiked over. It was nearly midnight. There's this block nearby where every row house does up the Christmas decorations. Plastic candy canes eight feet tall, plastic manger scenes, whirligigs and all kinds of trains on outside tracks.

"Wow," said Andy. "It's like a dream I had once. Only better."

There was a baby Jesus made out of electrical wire nestled in a cradle made of rusty hubcaps. There were wooden snowmen and vinyl elves and camels. A tour bus pulled up behind us and people

started to come out with their cameras. “What do you know about Liechtenstein?” I asked.

“I think it’s, like, a big tax haven. I read that somewhere.”

We walked a little further. At the end of the block the decorations ended, except for an inflatable Santa on the roof of a dry cleaner’s across the street, so we turned around in front of the hardware store and started back. I wanted to tell him things. I was full of advice, but I wasn’t sure where to begin, or what the point would be to opening my mouth in the first place. I could tell him what not to do, what not to say, how not to go wrong along the way, or at least how maybe not to. He’d listen, sure, but it would just be sounds. I’d just be some guy who told him a bunch of stuff one night. He had to find it all out for himself.

“Hey, isn’t that Laura?” said Andy, pointing across the street.

It was. Or at least it was someone who looked a lot like her. She seemed to be with someone. He looked a little like me. “Keep walking,” I said.