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Tony Cerullo

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Tony
Cerullo

Literary Short Fiction with a Clever Title

A realistic character with believable problems and flaws walks into a bar. The bartender (who is overwhelmed with sorrow due to his memories of letting a friend die decades before, recently stirred up in him by the receipt of a letter from the dead man's sister), is too distraught to pour a drink. The realistic character with believable problems and flaws, being so grounded in reality, does not know this and wouldn't care if he did. A silence ensues.

Another metaphor scoots in, taking its place at the adjacent barstool. A man in all black, smoking a black cigarette, a black hat perched neatly on his black hair, offers the believable character a name.

"How about 'James?'" he asks.

"No, thank you," says the character. "I know better than to take gifts from obvious devil figures. Besides, no one is named James anymore except in hack stories."

The man in black smirks. "And this isn't one?"

James shrugs and the devil orders a Cosmopolitan.

"So can I interest in you in a plot device, sir?" says the bartender to the devil.

"No thanks," Beelzebub murmurs. "I already am one."

"Very good, sir."

James, noticing with irritation that the devil figure got a drink, asks for a rum and coke.

"And hold the coke," says he, being clever.

"My mother is a fish," says the bartender. Both James and the Devil figure look at him with irritated glances.

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean?" James barks.

The bartender shrugs and arbitrarily begins to wipe a glass with a rag. The glass is already clean, but being a background character, he needs something to do to help set the scene.

Alone with his thoughts, the realistic character remembers a very subtle conversation that he had with the hobo who his abusive alcoholic parents with hidden dark pasts lent his room out to. Their dialogue haunts him to this day, and he still can't maintain a proper erection without the feeling of ragged woolen gloves against his skin and the smell of pork and beans heated directly in the can wafting through the air.

An author-insert character sits in the corner, trying not to be so obvious about it. He drains his martini and saunters up to the bar for another.

"Say, would you care to tell me how wonderful I am?" he says.

"Oh yes," says James, the believable character. "I'd totally hang out with you in high school."

"Thanks," says the author, straightening his pompous red beret. "I crave acceptance."

He looks thoughtful as he steps behind the bar and mixes himself another dirty martini (he's the author, so effectively it is his bar).

"While we're on the subject of my personal wish fulfillment, how about a quirky geek girl to fall madly in love with me?" On cue, a pink-haired pixie girl in a Monty Python tee shirt walks in, humming the *Legend of Zelda* theme. The devil figure finishes his drink and goes, slipping Pixie girl an apple from force of habit.

James, irritated at having been so completely ignored while the author has his narrative masturbation scene, coughs loudly. Because this is a story, this gesture actually gets the attention of the other characters.

"Hey, I thought this story was supposed to be about me?"

The author slips an arm around Pixie Girl and shrugs his shoulders.

"Yeah, sorry about that. I'll be off having improbable sex. Good luck, James."

The author leaves, taking a few bottles with him.

"So what now, sir?" says the barkeep, changing his cleaning from clockwise to counterclockwise.

"I think I'll have a final reflective moment."

"That sounds good sir. Shall I ask you a profound question?"

"That would be nice, Barkeep."

"Steve."

"Well, that was never established."

"Very good, sir. How about, 'Will love ever find the heart of humanity?'"

And, from across the smoky taproom, an allusion to William Faulkner appears, and is promptly shot.

