

What to Do in Lodo on the Summer Solstice

The way Mike had heard it, the way they all had heard it as it had been passed like a rare artifact from person to person over the course of many years in hushed tones conveying a sense of loyalty and decorum rather than respect or admiration, Bobby Leahy had gotten the idea of celebrating the summer solstice from a *National Geographic* special on TV about Native American water rituals. Bobby and his friends, however, then in their early twenties, had taken some license in their interpretation of the ritual as they decided to forgo the canoe and drums in favor of a fifteen foot ski boat and a cassette player. So, at midnight, with their faces to a cloudless sky, when Lake Tenderness was at its placid, glassy best, Bobby and the revelers had motored in tight circles to the sound of *That's Entertainment* by The Jam. The next day people living all the way across the lake, two miles almost, had said Bobby's screams woke them from their most sound dreamstates. Those prone to exaggeration insisted his echoes lasted for years in the surrounding woods and foothills. Except for Bobby, none of the group was still around Lodo, although there was nothing sordid or mysterious about their absence. One had died in a car accident a year later. The rest were scattered across Colorado, the Midwest and even California. The story though, like Bobby, remained behind as a curious thing to be considered and then quickly done without.

Mike and his family had lived far enough away so that they had slept soundly while Bobby was pulled from the fresh water lake. He wasn't there to see Bobby find out firsthand how a case of beer, an ounce of pot, a 45-horsepower Evinrude outboard, and a *National Geographic* television special could change your life. Mike had heard the story a hundred times. How the motor had splintered Bobby's fingers, sliced open three gashes on his stomach and done unspeakable damage to his genitals. How when they pulled Bobby out of the water the blood cascaded down his legs, flooded the boat, covered spent beer cans and orange life jackets. How Bobby had been the only one hurt.

If you happened to be at Johnny Egan's, a drinking place in Lodo, short for "lower downtown," you might have heard Bobby's story. Players shot pool, drinkers sat at tables and booths, played cards, held their drinks. A thin cloud of smoke hovered over the bar just below a motionless ceiling fan. The walls had absorbed years of smoke and spilled drinks, leaving a pungent odor you could smell on your clothes the next day. Wide plank floors, tongue and groove walls of knotty pine stained dark brown, and exposed beam construction all gave the place the feel of a horse stable. Then there was the mirror, the full length of the twelve seat bar, hanging at an angle like a giant rearview mirror so you could see everything behind you as you sat on a bar stool. The locals liked that Egan's was the last place left standing in Lodo that wasn't new, rebuilt or restored. Mike liked that he could sit there and, if it was what he wanted, not be bothered at all.

That particular night, Mike didn't want to hear Bobby Leahy's story. Despite the fact it was the solstice, and despite the fact Bobby was sitting at the bar. It didn't matter. That's not what Mike was doing there. Days would become shorter starting tomorrow, and he felt he needed a good night's drinking. He was content to do this amid the low murmur of pool players and the muffled clicking of balls on the felt. Rain fell hard, and

he was in the midst of a weeks-long drinking spree. Mostly bottles of beer, but some gin too. His girlfriend, who he now called Jane although that wasn't her name, had been gone before the drinking got good and rhythmic. But it seemed to Mike lately that he hadn't seen her in years, like she was a long time gone, almost to the point of it being okay for him to reminisce about.

When Mike sat down the bartender gave him a beer. Kevin was the bartender's name. He was the kind of guy who remembered your name, remembered your drink and then moved on to the next customer. His ear was not available for bending. Mike took off his hooded nylon pullover, and said hello to Bobby seated two stools down, and to Nils, Bobby's friend who sat between them.

As long as Mike had been coming to Egan's and drinking with this crowd (almost ten years), he'd never understood the connection between Bobby and Nils. In his late sixties, Nils was at least twenty years older than Bobby. They drank, argued and drank some more. Maybe that was enough. Nils resisted participation in typical barroom fodder, believing that to do so was to lower himself to a level at which Bobby was very comfortable. Bobby could be relentless in his need to argue the finer points of anything, especially when he could instigate an altercation.

Bobby was short and solid. He wore a gray T-shirt, revealing his small, but muscular right arm. He kept his left arm, the one with the disfigured hand, to his side. The hand was no longer a hand, really, but together with the arm it all resembled the mini hydraulic arm and shovel of a backhoe, permanently stuck in the stopped position. Two fingers remained in a fixed clench, and the wrist was bent unnaturally downward.

"Still in that funk, I see," Bobby said to Mike. He leaned forward onto the bar, and looked past Nils at Mike.

"How can you tell?"

"When's the last time you had a haircut and a shave?"

"Be nice," Nils said. "Mike doesn't need your shit tonight." Nils wore black, as usual. A polyester short sleeved shirt buttoned to the top, old black jeans with a black belt, black loafers and no socks. He had large teeth for such a thin face; and there were too many of them. Mike assumed them to be dentures. The single benefit of this curiosity, though, was that Nils had the most engaging smile Mike had ever seen. It was infectious. One of Nils' smiles made up for a year of Bobby's frowns.

"Your hair really is getting long," Nils said.

"Yeah," Bobby said, "I thought you bankers weren't allowed to do that."

Mike looked at himself in the mirror. His dark hair was too long, parted in the middle. He tucked it behind his ears to keep it from getting in his eyes. His face looked rounder, probably from too many pizzas, and he had permanent dark circles. Was he only thirty-one? "I'm not a banker," he said.

"Banker, lawyer, it's all the same."

"It's called accounting." Mike shook his head and pulled some hair behind his left ear. "Whatever."

Bobby and Nils didn't know the full story of Mike and Jane's breakup. And why should they? While at Egan's, Mike didn't like giving out too many details of his personal life. Especially to Bobby and Nils who wouldn't understand how Mike could have told Jane to leave. All they'd known was that he and Jane had been together for almost five years and that they'd planned to get married. In the world of Bobby and Nils, that was not something to be trifled with. You don't mess with a good thing. They'd each been through divorces, had monthly alimonies to pay, had lamented about the relative

impossibilities of finding a good relationship, although they weren't articulate enough to put it that way. For them it was now more of an us-against-them mentality. There was comfort in that narrow stance that Mike was beginning to break out of lately--sort of taking off the blinders. Nils and Bobby had thought Mike lucky. The only way to deal with them was to make them believe she'd done the leaving. Mike had planned to tell the truth eventually about the breakup, but one night the truth just slipped out of his grasp. Making her out to be the cause had happened spontaneously amid mugs of beer and shots of Souza Commemorativo. Mike realized quickly, even through the alcohol-induced haze, that this was the easiest way to explain the situation. She left, I'm devastated, let's drink. Three simple steps that nobody, particularly Bobby and Nils, would question—at least for a while.

The front door opened. A woman about Mike's age walked in and shook closed her black umbrella. As she looked toward Mike, a barely perceptible smile, like a tremor that you didn't feel but you heard about the next day, crossed her lips. She was dressed well for a place like Egan's, with a simple top, white with a flower pattern along the neckline, and a short, black skirt. She had the type of walk that said she dared you to talk to her as she made her way to the opposite end of the bar.

“Mike?”

“Huh?”

“I said ‘what was it then?’”

“What was what?”

“Why did you and your girlfriend split up?”

"Why do you care?"

"You know, Mikey, it's been a while, and Nilsy and I think it's okay to tell us the whole story."

"Don't include me in this."

"So, what's it all about? It doesn't make any sense, and we need to make sense of things."

"Oh," Mike said, and then he thought about it. "I don't know, you know? We were there one day and everything seemed fine. The next day it was like I'd missed something that was right there the whole time. And then she was gone for good."

"Jesus," Bobby said, shaking his head, "that's just bullshit. I'm going to pee."

Nils asked Mike what he did with himself lately when he wasn't drinking in Lodo.

"Nothing much, Nilsy. But I'm thinking about taking a gun and sniping some tourists." Mike smiled. "Would that be wrong?"

"Only if you didn't finish them off," Nils said, with another toothy smile.

"I'll try to remember that."

"Seriously, though." Nils played with the collar of his black shirt. The swollen knuckles on his bony hands revealed his age more than anything else about him.

"I read a lot," Mike said. "She liked to read. Said it was good for you, so I started doing that."

"What kind of books?"

"Lately, ones with mostly pictures in them."

"Huh?"

"You know, art books. Painters, sculptors, stuff like that." Mike eyed Bobby returning from the Men's room. "Yeah, I know, I'm starting to sound like the people

coming out of those new martini bars down the street. But, seriously, there's something there. And I never quite get it, but I'm trying."

Bobby returned, and they drank.

"What about museums?"

"What about them?"

"Not you. Mike, did you ever go to a museum with her?"

"Never did that, Nils."

Egan's was still quiet. Except for two pool players' occasional excitement over a made shot, there were only the low sounds of private conversations. Bobby lit a cigarette, handed a smoke to Nils and then lit his, all this with the mutilated hand hidden at his side.

"I'm an old guy, Mike," Nils said, and Mike thought: *Yes you are, Nilsy*. The older man put a hand on Bobby's good forearm without looking at him, and continued. "You know, you won't be seeing me at these fancy restaurants opening up around the corner." He took in smoke and then exhaled. "That's lost on me at this point in my life. I've been divorced two times, Mike." Nils held up two long fingers, his cigarette wedged between swollen knuckles. "And I've seen Lodo go from a worn out city neighborhood to..." Nils looked at the ceiling for the words that weren't there.

"Fucking Nils."

"I know what you mean, Nils. It's this whole rejuvenation going on, almost a sterilization, don't you think? Starbucks and the Cheesecake Factory."

"Exactly. You said it better than me. So I ask you. What's worse? The drugs aren't gone; they're just hidden better. And the whores, well, look around. I'm told they just dress nicer, but I don't know."

"Is there a point here, Nils?" Bobby pulled his arm from Nils' grasp.

Nils looked at Bobby, seemingly ready to impart a philosophical thesis certain to put all things into tight perspective. Nils hesitated, burped and then shrugged and waved his hand.

“See? I told you, you old fuck, you don’t know what the hell you’re talking about.” Bobby’s laugh rose above them, into the wooden beams and ceiling, echoing off the walls and finally, thankfully Mike thought, out the door and onto the street.

Nils smiled again. The beer had definitely taken hold. “I’ll be sixty-seven years old in a month, Mike. You’re how old? Twenty-nine? Thirty? You’re young. You’ll find this stuff out.”

“Jesus, Nilsy,” Bobby spouted. “What are you talking about? You hear this shit, Kevin?” Kevin wiped down the bar next to Mike, and then looked up at Bobby.

“All I’m saying,” Nils said, slurring his words, “is that things change. And one little thing can lead to disaster.”

“Like what?” Bobby said.

“It can be anything.”

“For example.”

“Bob, shut up.” Nils’ eyes became slits.

“I’m just asking a question,” Bobby said. “You seem to be a wealth of wisdom tonight.”

“Well, look at *you*, for example. How are you celebrating the solstice this year?”

From Bobby’s silent stare, Mike couldn’t tell if he was too drunk or too stupid to understand what Nils was saying.

“Oh forget it,” Nils finally said. He looked up at Mike, sighed and showed his beautiful gopher teeth. “Shit, I been drinking too much. I don’t know what I’m talking about.”

“That’s for damn sure,” Bobby said, obviously relieved that he didn't have to test his battle readiness.

The three men faced straight ahead looking at each other in the mirror and finished their drinks. Without thinking about it, Mike started humming *That’s Entertainment* low enough so that Bobby couldn’t hear it. Mike’s whole upper body swayed slightly to the rhythm of the acoustic guitars in his head.

“Christ,” Bobby said, shaking his head slowly. “You guys are bringing me down.” He held his empty glass in his good hand, still hiding the other hand beneath the bar. After a while he said, “Look who’s here. It’s April.”

With a nod and a shift with his eyes, he pointed to the back corner of the bar. As Nils turned to look at who Bobby saw, Mike looked for her in the mirror. Sitting alone in a booth was the woman who’d walked in before. She’d lowered her top to expose smooth, white shoulders. Mike liked the way the light accented her collar bones. April reminded him of something, but he couldn’t focus enough to grab hold of the memory. He’d seen her with Bobby at Johnny Egan’s, and had said hello to her many times, but could never muster enough gumption to negotiate a transaction. When he was young, he considered paying for it an act of desperation. Now, acting in desperation was a daily occurrence, and not a barrier to anything.

April sipped a glass of white wine. Then, with a bar napkin, she wiped bright lipstick from her glass. She squared her shoulders, almost as if she’d been told to sit at attention, and scanned the bar.

“She’s been here for a while.”

“Really?” Bobby considered this for a moment. “I’ll tell you, she’s what you need tonight, Michael.”

Mike looked down at his drink. “It’s not about sex.”

“Wrong. Wrong. Wrong. Everything’s about sex.”

“I don’t pay for it.”

“You should,” Bobby said. “My April is worth every penny.”

“Bobby, just because you can’t get it on a regular basis...”

Bobby slammed his fist onto the bar. “When’s the last time *you* had it, asshole? Some time before—what was her name?—Jane? And why did she leave, anyway, Mike? We haven’t gotten a real clear picture yet on that particular point.”

“You haven’t been listening, Bobby.” This was the perfect moment to tell them the truth about her leaving, Mike knew. He almost did, in fact. Almost told them the whole sordid little tale of late nights sitting in his empty apartment staring at a pile of large books, some opened, some bookmarked with shreds of newspaper, thinking of nothing but her and the mistake he’d made in letting her--no, making her--leave. Almost said that he wanted her back; had called her friends, her family all the way across the country, her former coworkers, only to find that she’d given strict instructions that no one was to help Mike find her. He could have told them it had all happened because he’d gotten scared of it all, and that he’d found he couldn’t bear to feel so singularly committed to anyone, couldn’t have anyone feel so strongly in need of him, that he couldn’t possibly live up to her expectations. And he could have told Bobby he’d made a terrible mistake, that he’d do anything to return to the time when he felt her with him even when they were miles apart. But he looked at Bobby, his disfigured hand hanging

limply to his side as he readied himself for yet another argument, and Mike felt only repulsion.

“You want to see how it’s done, college boy?” Bobby said, unimpressed by Mike's cold stare. "Watch. You'll learn something *else* from your elders tonight.” Bobby stood facing April, his left arm behind his back, and began to walk toward her. He didn't see Mike approach him from behind.

Mike had never been much of a fighter, except when he was a boy, undersized for his age, and always feeling the need to demonstrate his toughness. The first thing he did was grab Bobby's shoulders, but that didn't work. Between Bobby's drunken weaving, and solid frame, Mike couldn't get a good grip. So he tackled him. They fell to the floor between a waitress and two guys ordering drinks, with Mike on top and Bobby flat on his face. With strength summoned from a place Mike had never tapped, he pulled hard on Bobby to get him rolled over enough so Mike could see Bobby's surprised expression turn to anger. That look both scared and pissed off Mike, and the punching began immediately. With his forearm on Bobby's shoulder, Mike used his other fist to hit Bobby's face again and again. Bobby was strong, and had Mike not outweighed him by thirty or so pounds, this would have been a fairer fight—but that wasn't the case. Mike was able to pin Bobby for long enough to hit him three, four, five, six times in the nose, ear, jaw and one errant punch to the collar bone. By the time Kevin and others, including Nils, had pulled Mike away and thrown him onto a chair, Bobby's blood flowed from his wounds onto the floor at Johnny Egan's, which after the initial yelling for them to stop the fight, had suddenly gone almost silent. Bobby lay there moaning, moving from side to side, shielding his mutilated hand from view, but asking for assistance to get up.

Mike rubbed the hand he'd been punching Bobby with. It hurt worse than if he'd punched a concrete wall. Several knuckles were bleeding, and he couldn't catch his breath. His heart beat so hard in his chest, he actually thought he might be having a heart attack. Nils had been bent over Bobby, and was now in Mike's face, not smiling at all. "What goes on in there, Mike?" Nils said, with a finger poking at Mike's forehead. Mike could smell his stale breath. "You know Bobby, you can't let that stuff get to you."

"Somebody turn on some fucking music!" Kevin said.

Bobby stood up then, with the help of Kevin and the two guys who'd been ordering drinks. His face looked better than Mike expected it to, though the swelling had started around one eye and his upper lip. Blood ran out of his nose and into his mouth. His teeth seemed intact.

A blues ballad played, the volume so low Mike could only make out the base line.

"Gimme a fucking beer, Nils"

Then April and her soft white shoulders appeared from behind Bobby. She put her arm around him and guided him to her booth, slowly, carefully, as if Bobby could break. Mike had seen these shoulders before, but not on anyone he knew or had known. It was in one of his books.

"Well," Nils said, after bringing Bobby his beer. "That's my signal to leave." He stood up, held out his hand to Mike and said he'd see him later. Nils grabbed Mike's injured hand and shook hard. The pain shot up Mike's arm, but he didn't react, despite its intensity. "Will you be staying here a while?"

Mike, nodded, moved to the bar, resumed his position. *We always stay*, he thought.

Nils looked around, then leaned into Mike, close to his ear. “Can’t say he didn’t deserve it—but surprised it came from you, Mike. Didn’t think you had it in you.”

Nils put on a dark windbreaker and walked past the pool players to the back of the bar where Bobby and April sat at her booth. A few minutes later as he watched in the mirror, Mike saw Nils again walk the gauntlet through the pool players, and out the door alone. Mike could see dimming sunlight reflecting off the buildings across the street. Although it was almost nine o'clock, there was plenty of light to be had.

Bobby stayed with April, in close, his good arm around her. She’d pulled her top a little lower, revealing more of her white skin. Now Bobby put his head on April’s chest, as if listening for her heartbeat. As she held his head there with her hand to Bobby’s cheek, that same subtle smile reappeared. She closed her eyes and raised her chin until her face was toward the ceiling. Mike closed his eyes too. He’d seen something like this in one of his books. An encyclopedia of Renaissance sculpture, must have weighed about ten pounds, was filled with pictures of works and the stories behind them. One section was about an Italian sculptor. Beneath a picture of a statue, a caption said that it was the last thing this artist had ever done.

Mike opened his eyes. Bobby and April, with her porcelain white skin, had moved away from each other a little. And they were talking. She dipped a napkin in a glass of water, wiped his face, and stroked his graying hair. She smiled. She looked to her side, pulled out lipstick and a small mirror. After applying the lipstick, she rose to leave. Bobby said something then. With his deformed hand he motioned for her to come closer, which she did, bending over the table, her ear an inch from his mouth. Bobby pointed toward Mike, and April looked his way and then back at Bobby. She nodded in a way that suggested whatever Bobby had said, she was in full agreement.

When April stood up, she straightened her shoulders, and looked directly at Mike. He looked at her for a long time, and she at him. The sculptor in the book had carved a statue out of solid rock. Mike didn't know what kind of rock, but when it was complete this statue of a young woman was pure white, like snow before it's plowed. Mike had spent hours staring at the magnificence of the artistry. Each detail of the woman was perfect, down to the slight bend in the neck, the gradations of musculature in the arms and legs, the arch of the back, the shoulders slightly squared off, and the roundness of her thighs. The book said no woman had posed for it, that the artist had carved it from the memory of a woman who had died soon after the two had parted. Mike wondered. Had she left him? Or had he left her? How long had it been before the artist was able to sculpt this woman's likeness?

April smiled at Mike, and then turned to Bobby, who'd walked up behind her. Mike turned from them toward the mirror. He closed his eyes again and thought of the woman he hadn't seen in what now seemed like a very long time. And when he opened his eyes to see the reflection of Bobby walking alone out the door of Johnny Egan's and into the remaining light of one more summer solstice, he had another memory, almost a feeling of her being present. At first he smiled a little at the absurdity of the thought, and then he closed his eyes again and tried to hold on to it. The clicking sounds from the pool table and sporadic conversations continued. Egan's was settling in for this longest day of the year, and Mike was trying to settle into it, too. But he wouldn't simply get drunk, stumble home and stare at pictures of artwork he didn't fully understand. He felt slightly off balance, as if he'd been riding on a whirling amusement park ride. He wondered if the people in the bar ever celebrated this night like Bobby once had, like he still did tonight.

When April sat down next to him, he didn't say anything at first. Instead, he again sang to himself the song, with its driving acoustic guitars and sardonic lyrics now stuck in his head, that Bobby and crew had been playing on Lake Tenderness.

"What do you want?" he said, not looking at her.

"Bobby said you could use some company," she said, facing him. Her voice was soft, not sweet exactly, but contained none of the edge present in many who spend most of their nights in smoky bars.

"Bobby's an asshole, April. We both know that."

"He had a bad night."

"He had it coming."

"Maybe," she said. "He's smarter than you realize."

"What does that mean?" He looked at her now, finally.

"I'm sitting her, aren't I?"

Mike looked at her and let on a faint smile, which she returned. He stood up, took April's hand, and led her out of Johnny Egan's.

As the sun crept ever closer to the foothills, it hid behind the newly refurbished brick buildings, but still provided enough light to reassure Mike that he hadn't missed the day completely. A faint twinkling of stars had begun to replace the daylight—the sky now a deep hue of indigo. Cars passed, and couples and groups of people walked, ran and splashed along the sidewalk. Everyone in Lodo was coming outside all at once.

And so they walked, silently, holding hands, slowly taking it in. Anyone looking at them would think they'd been together for years, a couple having no need to acknowledge one another with a gaze into the eyes because just the touch of their hands was enough for each to have the comfort that the other would never leave them. They

passed the crowds outside the bars with the doors open wide, music and echoes of voices and laughter drifting into the night. At one point, Mike was positive he heard Bobby's cackle coming from inside one of those bars. He looked at April, and her return expression said that she'd heard it too.

"Why do I find that reassuring?" he asked her. "That he can keep going—and not let getting the shit kicked out of him slow him down."

She stopped walking, and thought.

"I've thought about this a lot, actually. Bobby and me have a lot in common. We understand each other—it's why he comes to me for comfort. Yeah, yeah, he pays me, I know—and that's always the way it's gonna be with us. I'm not his girlfriend. Still, I'll play that part when he needs it.

"So what have you figured out about him? How does he do it?"

"Mike, honey, it's not that complicated." She had to speak up louder because of the crowd noise around them. "I don't know you too well, not yet, but I know you're overthinking Bobby. He's a simple—very simple," she laughed, then regained her composure. "Sorry. Bobby's no encyclopedia. He goes with what's in front of him, and he figured out a long time ago how to live with what happened. Don't know how or when. Don't know if he had a drunken revelation or a sober one. For all I know he may have had no "ahaa" moment at all. He's one of the lucky ones—doesn't spend time looking in no mirror. Instead, he sees and reacts. The rest, to him, is bull shit."

Mike laughed—hard. And he didn't stop. He couldn't.

"What is it?" April said.

"I'm sorry," Mike said, catching his breath and stifling more laughter.

April smiled. "Why you laughing so hard?"

“It’s you—it’s Bobby, I don’t know.” He paused. “I’m just surprised, is all.”

Mike used to think Bobby resented everyone who’d heard him scream that night long ago on Lake Tenderness when his blood spilled into the hull of the 15-foot boat. Mostly because the ones there to witness it hadn’t suffered like Bobby did to this day. But Bobby had found a way to live with the physical reminder of his shortcomings. He’d stopped caring, or never cared, that people leave, that those who were there for the beginning of his malady would never return. And Bobby knew, as surely as he knew the summer solstice would come around every year to remind him, that those awakened easily by far away screams late at night will just as easily roll over again and go back to sleep.