

## Original Thirst

Dressed in his lucky blue golf shirt and khakis, Shane jogged down the steps from his apartment to the parking lot ready to follow God's will. He stopped before he reached his car when an urge to walk to the bar came over him. He smiled with one hand frozen around his car keys then patted his chest like he'd seen football stars do after a touchdown. God, it seemed, was talking to him again and, as he'd learned to do on tasks complicated and mundane, Shane followed. From where he stood he could see the closest bar, a dive called The General that housed many of the foggy memories from before he quit drinking.

He ran across the four-lane street and pulled open the metal blue bar door dented from years of damage from whatever turmoil needed to leave The General at last call. Inside the room smelled sour and the people inside ignored Shane. They sat at the bar, which was full, or stood around the pool tables to his left with their heads sagged low below their shoulders. There were small tables nearby, but Shane picked the booth closest to the door and sat down. The bar's walls were covered with wallpaper that featured cartoon war scenes with animals as soldiers. Countless drinkers had peeled away the wallpaper next to the booths and exposed the wood panels beneath. He tried to remember if he had left one of the callouts, swear words and crude pictures people had etched. The General didn't have waitresses and Shane waited until he caught the bartender's eye then shouted "Red Rooster." The bartender nodded and filled a glass three quarters full then set the drink on the bar. Shane walked to the front of the room and placed three dollars

on the worn-out, scratched plastic bar top before he returned to the booth. The glass felt warm from the dishwasher. He sat down and stared at the beer. The foam had dissolved and Shane thought the beer looked pale, not the rich full-bodied red he had hoped for.

Earlier that day he had prayed to God to stop him from drinking again. At that moment, with his preacher's Sunday sermon about submitting to God's will bouncing off the church walls, he had imagined Rooster Red and God had not stopped him from salivating. He'd been sober, cold turkey, for six months and cleaned up his apartment and his life. The one AA meeting he'd attended didn't seem right for him and God had done the work anyway, Shane figured. The pull for the bitter Red Rooster ale had returned over the last week and that morning he had made the deal with God. If Shane weren't meant to drink the beer, God would send him a sign to stop.

The smell of dish soap drifting up from the warm glass seemed like a strong sign that he wasn't supposed to drink. The General seemed hot as well and the temperature stirred up odors of sweat, cigarettes and body odor. Shane looked at a man who had lined up a ball for the corner pocket. The man paused with his right arm cocked back and his left extended out in front to steady the cue. His long black hair looked unwashed and clung to a dirty cutoff T-shirt with a faded Jeff Gordon face on the front. Shane realized there were no women in the bar. Even when he had a girlfriend, his eye wandered over any woman in range. That there were no women in the bar seemed like another supernatural sign. He turned back to the beer in front of him and paused with his hand on the glass.

Nothing felt right. A crack of a cue on a ball followed by “fuck, god damn it,” broke his concentration. He slapped an extra dollar on the table next to the untouched beer and left.

When Shane had prayed to God that morning in church, he had immediately pictured himself at a bar with a full, foamy Red Rooster in front of him. He had not been able to tell which bar, but he knew it seemed familiar. Luckily, Shane knew all the bars in the neighborhood around The General. He’d been kicked out of all of them at some point, even woke up in the grass outside the golf course bar with sprinklers spraying him in the face.

From the sidewalk he sighed and looked toward the west where the sun hovered just barely above the horizon and seemed to have engorged. He lifted his hand to shield his eyes and spotted the large Hilton among the smaller buildings. Shane knew the hotel bar, Webster’s, was classy, refined. He also knew the Red Rooster would be cold and served fresh. If God truly wanted him to not drink that night, Shane decided, he would definitely send the signals in a place like Webster’s. The General could have been bad luck. He lifted his chest as he walked quickly down the sidewalk.

The revolving door at the front of the hotel seemed to wave him in and Shane nodded at guests and concierge as he strolled into the lobby and toward the bar. The ankle deep pool of drunken memories didn’t include an *incident* at Webster’s, but Shane couldn’t be sure so he kept his head high and didn’t make eye contact with any employee. Webster’s walls and bar were dark, polished wood with carved moldings that seemed to swallow the

light from the small lamps on each booth and the backlit mirror behind the bar. He saw one person on a barstool and two booths occupied, but the room seemed silent. Two flatscreen TVs above each end of the bar were on low volume and it seemed like the sound had been captured as well as the light. He sat at the bar and smiled at the bartender when he placed a bowl of peanuts and a napkin down.

“What can I bring you tonight sir?”

“Red Rooster, please.”

The bartender nodded and turned away. Shane turned in his chair and watched the three women in the booth along the wall as they talked. He was annoyed that he couldn't hear their voices. They were middle aged and he thought not unattractive, but he noticed that one woman's stenciled eyeliner gave her a constant look of disgust. She glanced at him and then looked away quickly. He had the sensation that the conversation was about him. It was a familiar anxiety and one for which he had little defense. The tightness around his eyes was the beginning and the only way to stop the spread to his temper was usually alcohol.

“We just switched out the keg, which was outside for a while because of the delivery guy didn't tell me it was there so the beer is warm. Can I get you something else?”

“The beer is warm?”

“Yes. Kind of hot actually, was in the sun. Hope it’s not ruined to be honest.”

“Let me think about it”

“OK. Sorry, first round is on me when you decide.”

He glared at the Red Rooster tap’s flamboyant red crown that stood out among the others behind the bar. The rooster seemed to taunt him. The silence in the bar started to aggravate him. The anxiety had tightened it’s orbit around his skull and the pressure was overwhelming. He looked forward into the mirror and caught eyeliner woman staring at him. He turned quickly and her gaze returned to her friends. Shane felt sure they were talking about him and he didn’t think their opinion of him was high. He wondered if his golf shirt was not formal enough for the rich bar. He wanted to tell the women that he was perfectly able to pay for any meal on the menu.

“Still looking?”

The bartender’s voice came at Shane like a starter’s gun and he jumped in his seat.

“Jesus, no. Give me a minute please.”

Nothing felt right. The beer was hot, no one was happy, the place was quiet and no other beer would do. He closed his eyes and tried to pray but could only see the disgusted eyeliner woman's face, which stifled his inspiration. He pulled eight dollars from his wallet and slid them on the bar. The rotating door seemed like a boot that would kick Shane in his ass if he didn't leave quick enough.

Back on the sidewalk, the sun was now below the horizon and seemed to suck all the remaining light in the sky toward it. He looked back toward his apartment complex, which was just close enough for him to still read the sign at the entrance. God had spoken, it seemed, but Shane admitted to himself that he was a little disappointed. He glanced one more time to the West. The sunlight faded with each second and the haunting orange streetlights flicked on. A bright white sign began to stand out among the orange and he turned toward it. His face broke into a smile. The Lucky Duck was about a quarter mile away. He walked toward the bar with purpose. From two streets away he could already read the words and make out the mallard duck head logo that peaked out from the top right corner of the sign. The air was still warm despite the sunset, but not as oppressively warm as the early summer nights that had kept him awake and made the nightmares worse when he first quit drinking. The Lucky Duck's beers were always cold and the music was always on. If God really wanted Shane to not drink, then the beer would be warm at the Lucky Duck. As he walked toward the bar he promised God that this would be the last bar.

The Lucky Duck hosted the half-forgotten night he'd been laid off from his job at the paper and blown his severance on booze for himself and ex-coworkers. He knew there were a wall of beer taps, a pool table upstairs and a restaurant area away from the bar, but he couldn't remember where the bathroom was or what kind of food they served. The place had the neighborhood bar atmosphere that attracted families and businessmen, but not the rich kind who Shane was certain talked behind his back.

He opened the front door and breathed in the smells of fried meat and pizza. The sounds of a hockey game on one of the bar's TVs bounced off the red brick walls and mixed with loud conversation and a beat coming from the jukebox. The hallway forked behind an unoccupied hostess stand at the front of the bar. To the left was the main dining room and restaurant. He saw the soft yellow lights from lamps hanging from the roof that made the light wood tables glow. The booths looked comforting and the people inside seemed to all be smiling. In the dining room he could order beer, but alone in a booth seemed more exposed than alone on a barstool. To the right two steps downward lead to the bar. Just beyond the staircase, a neon sign for Decision Hard Apple Cider hung on the wall that made the bricks glow bright red.

He chose the bar.

Memories of fun nights and football Sundays bubbled from the foggy past when he saw the jukebox in the far corner and the beer taps behind the bar to his left. He sat down on a wood stool that matched the burnt-yellow color of the bar. The wood looked to him

like it at one time shared the color of the tables in the restaurant, but was scratched and rubbed down by elbows and spills. Shane nestled his forearms in two spots that had worn black over time. He turned his eyes to the wall of twenty beer taps and the long refrigerator that ran parallel beneath them. He looked each bottle and tap handle up and down until he felt like he was in a strip club. A waitress walked down the staircase from the restaurant with a plate full of chicken wings that sizzled and popped as she passed. She smiled at him when she walked back toward the restaurant and he returned the look.

“What can I get you to drink?” the bartender asked while Shane’s eyes lingered on the waitress’ legs.

“I’ll take a Red Rooster and a bacon cheeseburger with potato wedges,” Shane said without hesitation.

The bartender nodded and walked away before Shane could retract his order. At first he worried that he had spoken too soon without giving God a chance to intervene. In his half year of sobriety he had left even the choice of salad dressing up to God. He sat motionless with his forearms rooted on the bar and waited for a sign. The bartender tapped the order into the touchpad above the cash register. Nothing seemed to go wrong. All the buttons worked and a receipt inched out of the machine. He held his breath and watched the man pull a frosted mug out from the refrigerator beneath the taps. He placed the mug under the Red Rooster tap and pulled down on the carved bird head. The beer poured out of the spigot in an amber brown stream that splashed into the mug before it



turned a dark red. Brown tinted foam piled on top of the ascending liquid and seemed to accelerate the climb to the rim of the mug. Shane glanced at the bartender's face as he held the tap handle jealous of the man's indifference. The foam spilled over the top of the glass and dripped off the edge as the bartender carried it to the bar and placed the mug in front of Shane.

"There you go. You want to open a tab?"

Shane nodded and stared at the beer, eyes soft and distant, mouth open, ready to drink.

The foam had settled into a perfect one-inch cap on the red beer. Shane watched small bubbles escape through the top of glass that left craters in the foam as the beer settled. The glass had a thick, white frosted color with small ice chunks sliding down its edges. Through the mug the red beer looked dark, almost maroon. He knew the color would change after he drank the first sip to clear the foam. To him it was as if the foam guarded the drink; a final defense. He grasped the handle of the mug awkwardly, like the touch of hands on a first date. The glass was cold as he spun the mug to examine the beer. It sloshed slowly, but not enough to spill, and he watched the tiny waves of dark beer roll around the mug. The thirst he felt didn't start in his throat the way it did for water after a workout. His desire to grab the mug with both hands and drink with loud gulps had roots somewhere deep, behind his stomach. It was almost painful to only hold the handle. The nutty, rich smell that escaped the foam overpowered the smell of greasy food and table cleaner. The attraction was strong enough to drown out even his auditory perception of

the sounds around him. He didn't hear the hockey game broadcaster or the song on the jukebox. The beer drew so much from his sight, smell and touch that his body didn't have room to process sound. It had only energy left to taste.

His brain sent memories to his tongue of every red beer he'd drank in his life and promised the one in front of him would eclipse them all. His grip strengthened on the mug handle as he pulled the beer closer. He pursed his lips, ready to sip. A small drop of foam slipped over the edge of the mug and onto his bare finger. He released the mug and pulled his finger to his lips. The foam touched his lips first then danced across his tongue and around his mouth. The taste of the beer after so long without was astonishingly acute and powerful.

The beer sat in its mug alone on the bar between Shane's forearms and he stared at the drink. Everything seemed right. He searched his mind and the room for a divine signal that would stop him, but nothing held him back.

"How are you doing honey? The burger is almost up. Can I get you an appetizer or anything else?" the waitress' voice seemed like an intrusion, but Shane looked her direction out of habit.

"No, thank you. Just the beer."