

An Act of Kindness

Debbie's routine remained rigid for the years. She'd been a regular at Murphy's since it became Murphy's. Before, she'd been a regular at O'Donohugh's, and before that the bar was simply known as The Pub. Guinness Stout on tap was a staple at each incarnation. The lacquered bar hadn't changed, the stools were the same, and even much of the neon was the same. Just the name above the green awning outside changed. But Debbie didn't like change. Each night she arrived after supper, which she ate with her aged mother in a nearby nursing home, and sat on the same stool.

Debbie wasn't the only one who liked a routine. Another regular at the bar was Pinky Mills, his watery blue eyes nearly submerged in their sockets. Pinky wore the same gray twill jacket every night; one pocket bulged with a bag of loose tobacco and rolling papers, while the other contained a Zippo lighter and a bottle of naphtha. He could roll a cigarette with one hand while fumbling in his pocket for the lighter. Someone once told him that a pint was as good as a loaf of bread, so he typically drank his supper.

Each night when Debbie arrived, she'd order a pint for herself, one for Pinky, pat him on the back, and then make her way to her regular stool. Once seated and served, the barkeep would slide in a small bowl of pretzels next to her Guinness. She liked the way the salt played against the bitter of the beer on her tongue. Once done with the first beer, and after she'd received the second, she'd turn on her stool, raise a glass to Pinky and receive his ever present frown. Then she'd survey the crowd, peering over the rim of the glass as she sipped, looking at the smiling faces of strangers.

Occasionally, former patrons of the bar who had moved on with their lives would return to relive college memories, to remember the good times spent drinking beer and playing darts late into the night, and they would recognize Debbie and tell her how they remembered the time she bought their table a pitcher of stout. Those were the times she lived for and why the bar felt more like home than home.

One night, fate disrupted Debbie's routine. She didn't appear at the regular hour as her mother had fallen gravely ill during their supper. She was shaken and in desperate need of comfort when she arrived. Her mother in the hospital and the inevitable expected, Debbie walked up to the bar, ignored her designated stool, and ordered a Jameson's, neat. She threw it back like a sailor and nodded for another, and then another, and then one more. Pinky appeared by her side but said nothing. She assumed he might say something about his beer being late. Instead, he pulled a pack of papers and his tobacco from his pocket and rolled a cigarette, lit it with his Zippo, and handed it to her. Debbie didn't smoke, but she took it. She shot back a fifth Jameson's, winced a bit, and took a drag. "Better than pretzels," she said as she exhaled.

"Better sit down," Pinky said.

"I've drunk whisky before."

Pinky nodded. "I'm sure."

She looked at her empty glass, nodded to the bartender for another, and then found her stool. Smoke curled up from the cigarette and she watched it rise and feather like a spirit into the currents of the bar.

“Care to talk?” Pinky asked.

“It’s my mother. Things aren’t good.”

Pinky nodded. “My own mother passed a dozen years ago. Awful to lose the one that first loved you.”

Debbie brought the cigarette up to her face. “I see why you smoke these. It’s comforting to hold onto to something.” Her lips puckered and drew in smoke. She exhaled and watched as the cloud of smoke dissipated into the air. She took another drag and exhaled deeply, wanting to see exactly how long the smoke took to blend into the air of the bar, how long it took to move from being there to simply being part of everything else. She began to count and then swayed on her stool.

“Steady,” Pinky said.

When her eyes opened, she was looking at all the dollar bills that bore scribbles and signatures tacked to the ceiling. Pinky’s face hovered over hers. “All right there, Debs?”

She nodded and he and some other patrons helped her to her feet. “Maybe a booth would be better. What do you say?”

Debbie nodded and leaned on Pinky as he navigated her through the tables and chairs to a booth in the corner. “There we go.” He settled her in, waved to the bartender, and mouthed for a glass of water.

“A pint would be better,” Debbie said.

Pinky nodded but didn't order the beer.

“She's all I've got left.”

Pinky nodded again. “I'm sure they'll do all they can.”

The two exchanged more words in these brief moments than they had in the last dozen years. While always aware of one another's presence, and always cordial, the two had little in common aside from their penchant for routine and a good stout or three. If there were ever mismatched physical specimens, Debbie and Pinky Mills were them. Debbie stood a full head taller than Pinky, and if someone were to tell you that Pinky had been a jockey earlier in his life, you'd have no reason to doubt the claim. The two sat in the booth and chatted intermittently as they sipped the beers someone had sent over. After a while however, it became apparent that the Jameson's were taking their toll on Debbie. They'd crept up on her with the suddenness of regret and she teetered in the booth.

“Why don't we get you home, Debs?”

“I, I'm alright. Just one more—”

If Pinky knew anything, he knew to never tell a drunken person that they'd had enough to drink. And not because he had ever offered such an opinion, but rather because he'd been on the receiving end of such unwanted advice numerous times and had become combative as a result.

Prior to his tenure at The Pub, O'Donohugh's, and Murphy's, Pinky had been a regular at Spats, a bar two block over on 25th Street. His last night in that particular establishment was the evening of his mother's funeral. And much like Debbie, he'd broken with routine and opted for too many whiskies. As the night had worn on and Pinky sunk deeper into his grief, the curve of his back increased to the point where his forehead hovered mere inches from the surface of the bar. Having buried his last ally earlier in the day, and having no companion to look after his wellbeing in the bar, things went poorly when the young barkeep declared him drunk with a voice too loud for common decency. Pinky was stirred from his malaise and became keenly aware of the faces of patrons looking down upon him.

"Come on. You've had enough, pops. Time to go."

These words clicked him over from pain to anger. The barkeep, being young, tall, and feeling confident in his authority and the protective barrier of the bar, realized his mistake too late.

"Pops?" Pinky scoffed.

"Seriously, pops. You need to go." The barkeep inclined his head towards the door.

"So you think I've had enough, do you?" Pinky's voice had risen loud enough to draw the attention of people who were beyond his immediate circle.

The barkeep crossed his arms across his chest like a professional wrestler. "Last warning, old man," he said.

Pinky fumbled in his pocket and produced his ever-present Zippo and bottle of naphtha. He sparked the wheel, ignited the wick, and squirted the lighter fluid through the flame all in one easy motion. The bar top erupted in blue and orange fire that glistened in the widened eyes of the barkeep. The crowd around Pinky took a reflexive step back and more than one woman screamed. A moment later, hands fell upon Pinky's shoulders and upper arms and he was lifted off his stool and carried like a dripping sack of garbage to the door and jettisoned onto the street, his Zippo and naphtha still in hand. Through the window he saw the barkeep douse the flames with the soda gun. For a moment, he eyed the fabric awning over the front door and considered another blast from his improvised flamethrower, but thought better of it as horrified patrons watched him through the same window.

So in this moment, Pinky knew exactly what not to say to Debbie. She was in pain, and the wrong word or gesture could easily turn her towards anger. Debbie needed comfort more than anything, and Pinky, if nothing else, was a person who could listen with a sympathetic ear. Debbie's soul poured out of over the next hour or so. Stories of childhood bullying, promises broken by young beaux, the jilting by adult lovers, promotions at work denied, and betrayals of friendships that cut her to the core, and each ended with her mother as her lone supporter or secret avenger. Her loss would mean more than one could imagine or endure.

After the stream of stories ebbed to a series of heavy sighs, Pinky leaned in and asked, "Can I walk you home, Debs? It's a bit late and I want to make sure you're safe." Anyone who knew Debbie also knew she could discourage any would-be mugger with her venerable size and

a quick don't-fuck-with-me look, but in her current state, she was uncharacteristically vulnerable. Debbie nodded and the two slid out of the booth and made their way to the exit.

When they arrived at her home, he took the keys out of her wavering hand and unlocked the door and opened it for her. She took a step across the threshold and turned to Pinky. "Would you care to come in?"

Pinky's ever-present frown wavered before he nodded. "Just for a bit, I suppose."

Once inside, Debbie closed the door behind Pinky and rested her hand upon his narrow shoulder. No more words were spoken as she leaned over and kissed his lips. If he had been surprised, his eager hands revealed it as a pleasant one. With a quiet passion only the loneliest know, clothes found their way to the floor and the two long-time acquaintances stumbled to Debbie's bedroom where Pinky lovingly kissed every inch of her skin.

When Debbie was unable to hold back any longer, she wrapped her arms around her partner and rolled over on top of him. Her ample breasts bookended Pinky's face as she straddled him. The bed springs gave voice to their thirst, and Pinky's arms reached around Debbie's back and his fingers found her soft flesh. She tore at the bedclothes, frenzied, as all the pain that had collected in her heart was on the verge of expulsion. A small, seemingly innocuous guttural sound was drowned out as the pace quickened. An eruption deep within Debbie reverberated with joy and sublime pleasure. In that body-shaking moment, Debbie felt the earth move.

She panted her recovery for a few moments, savoring a delight that had been too long denied. As she lifted herself up onto her extended arms and released Pinky's head from the

embrace of her bosoms, she gazed upon his face and discovered a smile, the first she'd ever seen on his face. Like a contagion, one crept across her lips as well.

“It’s always the quiet ones, isn’t it?” Debbie mused aloud.

Her glassy eyed companion seemed to acknowledge her sentiment by remaining silent. So coy, Debbie thought. She rolled off of Pinky and made her way to the bathroom and tidied up. She looked at herself in the mirror and saw what she hadn’t seen since she was young. Since before boys had stopped looking at her in that way they are so disposed, since before girls began snickering behind their hands after she walked by. This moment, she already knew, was etched and would be revisited. Aglow with passion, tingling as if she’d just been struck by lightning, a playful thought entered her mind as she wondered if Pinky, who she assumed had also been long deprived, might be interested in a repeat performance, an Act II. She plucked her silk bathrobe from the hook on the back of the door, put it on and cinched the belt around her waist.

As she emerged from her bathroom, she was surprised to see Pinky hadn’t moved an inch since her departure. Even the broad smile remained just as it had. The realization spread through her slowly, just as February rain will find its way into the lowest point of your soul. The seductive smile on her face faded into one of resignation. “Oh, Pinky,” was all she could muster.

Debbie still haunts Murphy’s, her routine as rigid as ever. Each night she orders an extra pint and lets it sit in front of the empty stool next hers, a small memorial for a final act of kindness.