

Bread and Circuses

By Ian Healy

"We hold these truths to be sacred & undeniable; that all men are created equal & independent, that from that equal creation they derive rights inherent & inalienable, among which are the preservation of life, & liberty, & the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these ends, governments are instituted among men, deriving their powers from the consent of the governed; that whenever any form of government shall become destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, & to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles & organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety & happiness."

--Thomas Jefferson

Tending bar is one of those jobs that's at the same time more glamorous than movies and less exciting than watching paint dry. I've seen my fair share of bizarre incidents within the confines of Wilbur's in the five years I've worked there, but it's a small neighborhood bar in a mostly upscale part of town, and the regulars are slowly dying off one by one. There have been days where not a

single person walks through the door with its frosted glass and I've spent entire shifts playing the online trivia game that the owner installed as a hook for the younger, hipper crowd.

I drew the short stick to work the unpopular closing shift on the Fourth of July this year, and it looked like it would be yet another shift sans customers. Nevertheless, I filled my ice cabinet and topped off the peanuts in the bar dishes, just in case. It never hurts to be professional. I had high hopes that business would pick up after the city finished lighting off its fireworks display but until then it figured to be several hours of quiet and online trivia.

So when the door tinkled open, I was surprised enough that I forgot to answer the trivia question and the timer ticked down to zero. The customer walked in - a man in his late thirties or early forties, unshaven, wearing cargo shorts, a t-shirt, and a military fatigues jacket. He plopped himself down at the bar, never once making eye contact with me.

Nevertheless, he was a customer, and this was my job, so I set aside the trivia controller, put on my best smile, and stepped over to him, setting a paper napkin down before him. "Evening, sir. What can I get for you?"

"Beer."

There are about a million responses to this one, most of which you learn your first week in bartending school. Most of them are designed to make the customer laugh and loosen up, but this guy didn't carry himself like he was looking for a laugh. His very presence seemed like a soporific. "Sure," I said quietly. "What kind do you prefer?"

"Whatever's room temperature," replied the man.

He had a bit of an odd accent, and coupled with his request for warm beer, I figured him to be from out of the country.

I opened a bottle of the Irish ale we kept in the cabinet at the vendor's request and poured it into a mug, watching the man out of the corner of my eye. Numerous scars decorated a face that might once have been handsome before encountering whatever had done all that damage. I glanced downward and saw his hands were similarly scarred. I wondered if he'd been in an accident or something. His general demeanor was of a homeless man, and I've had to throw a few of them out of the bar before.

"Six dollars," I said, setting the mug on the napkin.

He produced a ten dollar bill from a thick money clip. "Keep it."

All right, so he wasn't homeless then. "Thanks, mister. My name's Carl. Let me know if you need anything else. Just try not to monopolize my time."

At that, the man raised his head enough to look up and down the bar. A wry smile crossed his face at the lack of other customers. "I'll be good."

I took out a rag and wiped down a spot on the bar that was already clean. "Not going to watch the fireworks tonight?"

"No," he said. "I don't much like them."

"Why not?"

He took a long sip of his beer and then fixed his gaze on me. His eyes belonged on someone much older, someone who'd seen far more suffering and death than anyone should in a lifetime. I actually took a step backward. "Veteran?" I hazarded.

The man lowered his head and chuckled into his beer. "Thanks, kid. Best laugh I've had in a long time."

My ears burned at the *kid* comment. I wasn't that much younger than him. "Boy, if that's the best laugh you've had, I'd say you're overdue for some more."

The man took a long drink from his mug. "I'm Eric," he said. "Or Erik, Erich, Elrik, Uruk, Erikku, Erico, or

Eirikr. Or a hundred other names. But right now I'm Eric.
And yes, I'm a veteran."

"Iraq?" I guessed.

"Most recently," he nodded.

"You, uh, you get injured there?"

Eric shrugged in a noncommittal way. "No more than
anywhere else," he said. "I've been a soldier for a long
time."

"Oh?" I poured myself a beer. I figured it was a
holiday and I certainly wasn't going to see the boss today
- not when he could be off barbequing and boozing with his
family and friends. "How long?"

Eric set down his beer and fixed me with that gaze
again. "About seven thousand years, give or take a couple
decades."

I laughed and nearly blew beer out my nose. I had to
wipe my eyes with a towel. I set it down on the bar and
poured him another beer. "This one's on me," I said. "You
really had me there."

"I'm not joking," he replied in a quiet voice.

"Sure you are," I chuckled.

Without a word, he slid out of his fatigues jacket and
let it fall to the floor. His arms were covered with a
network of scars. I gasped. He pointed to several of them

in sequence. "This one was a bullet in the Falklands. Shrapnel in Korea. Razor wire on Normandy Beach. Bayonet in Appomattox. Tomahawk in Dakota Territory. Oh, and this one was from a Legionnaire's spear." He continued, using names and places I'd never heard before.

"You're making fun of me," I said, the protest sounding weak in the quiet of the bar.

"Am I?" he replied. He pulled down the neck of his t-shirt to show a larger ragged scar along the base of his throat. "Self-inflicted, 1281 BC." He showed me several circular scars on his temples. "Self-inflicted, 1508. Self-inflicted, 1871. Self-inflicted, 1914. Shall I go on?"

"Mister, I think maybe you ought to leave," I said, and meant it. The guy was creeping me out.

"I've been a soldier for seven millennia," he said. "It's all I'm good at. I can't die, although God knows I've tried just about every way possible. Watch." He grabbed my bar towel, set his hand on it. His other hand flashed around in a blur of motion, something sharp and shiny held in it. With a resounding thunk, he drove a switchblade all the way through the back of his hand into the bar surface.

I yelled in surprise. He regarded the knife protruding from his hand sadly and took a sip from his beer. Then he

pulled the knife out, folded it, and tucked it back into the pocket from which it came.

A small spot of blood decorated the white towel. He held up his hand and I watched as the wound closed, leaving a fresh scar amid the others.

"Oh my God, you're serious?" I whispered.

He nodded. "I was born in Sumeria some seven thousand years ago. I don't know why I stopped aging and started healing. I began as a soldier and since then it's all I've been. There's always another war to fight, always another conflict. It's what men do best." He raised his glass in a toast.

"We're not really that bad, are we?" I asked.

"Kid, I've seen atrocities that would make your toes curl. I've *done* things that bad. I've seen the worst Man has to offer. Hell, I *am* the worst Man has to offer." He finished his second beer. "So to answer your original question, I don't like fireworks because I don't like being reminded of what they represent."

"Well, they always represented freedom to me," I argued. "The celebration of our independence."

"I know. I fought for it," he replied. "Stupid. Your empire will fall like all the others. I'm amazed it's lasted this long."

"If you thought it was stupid, why'd you fight for it?"

He shrugged. "Seemed like a good idea at the time. I guess I had higher hopes for your country. Franklin, Jefferson, Washington. They were sharp guys. Idealists. They had a plan to build something different, something that had never existed in the world before. And you all have turned it into bread and circuses."

"Excuse me?"

"Juvenal. Roman poet. Commented that the people gave up all their power so long as the government gave them bread to eat and circuses to entertain. Not really any different than today."

I blushed, knowing that I was TIVOing a special American Idol presentation back at home.

"Why are you here at all? I mean here, now, in this bar?" I asked him at last.

Eric looked at me. "I was just passing through and wanted a drink. I left Iraq a year ago and I've been wandering since. Things are different now. War is different. I'm not sure how to fight it now. I can't tell which is the right side anymore."

"Well...our side is, isn't it?"

He fixed me with that gaze again. "Is it?"

I opened my mouth to reply, but couldn't find the words.

He set another ten on the bar. "Thanks for the drinks, Carl. Enjoy your Independence Day, such as it is. But ask yourself...are you really free? And if you're not, is your freedom worth fighting for?"

And just like that, he left the bar and I never saw him again.

I don't watch American Idol anymore. Maybe Eric's war isn't mine, but I can see the signs in daily life everywhere. We're not free, not really. Not anymore.

But I've searched my soul, and I am willing to fight to regain it.