

BEYOND THE PALE

Stephen Book

Flash
Fiction Online

I 'VE SEEN A LOT OF DIVES IN MY LINE OF WORK. Tonight's bar was no different. The sign over the door identified the place as *Beyond The Pale*, and from the condition of the lounge it was clear this one lived up to its name. A dingy film covered the linoleum floor, giving it the color of bile. Above, a lonely ceiling fan hummed and did the hula. Two dangling light bulbs cast a twilight glow across the room. But the décor, or lack thereof, was of little concern. I needed a drink, and I needed it fast.

A man behind the counter stepped forward as I approached an empty stool.

"What'll it be?"

His accent told me he was Australian. The round plastic tag on his shirt identified him as Rick. He had a large, squared-off chin and hair like a Shih-tzû.

Before I could say anything, a beefy man stumbled up to the counter, his eyes bleary, his nose slick with snot. "Why?" he cried.

Bartender Rick pushed out an open hand. "Now, Frank, it's going to be all right. You just need some more time. Here, I'll get you another." He palmed a dusty glass and pulled down the beer tap. While he poured, he told Frank to settle down, let it all sink in.

Rick turned to me as the distraught man staggered away. "The poor bloke found out his wife left, and then he went to pieces."

I looked over my shoulder. Frank slumped into a chair, blinking his eyes like a confused boy. Behind him two other men, each at separate tables, sat with the same pathetically lost expression on their faces.

"Now, where was I?" Rick asked.

"You were asking what I wanted."

"Right. What can I get you?"

"Whiskey. The strongest you've got."

Rick raised his eyebrows. "Rough night, eh?"

"You have no idea."

"Try me." He grabbed a bottle from the backbar. "I've got all the time you need."



"What can I get you?"

"Whiskey. The strongest you've got."

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"Try me." He grabbed a bottle from the backbar. "I've got all the time you need."

I shook my head at first. But then, for reasons I didn't understand, I opened up. "I just shot a man."

"Whoa. That's not something you hear every day."

"It's not something I want to do every day."

Rick picked up a rock glass and poured. "You make it sound like you've done it before."

"Once."

He placed a napkin on the counter and set my drink down.

"What are you, a cop?"

"Fifteen years."

From the corner of my eye, I saw one of the other men walk toward a door at the far side of the lounge. He was nicely dressed in a two-piece suit—totally out of place for a joint like this. He stopped, looked at Rick and thumbed toward the door.

Rick nodded.

Without saying a word, the man opened the door and stepped through.

"So..." Rick fixed his eyes on me. "Why did you shoot a man?"

"I answered the call to a robbery in progress. The guy pulled a gun, and I had no choice." I picked up the drink. My hands still trembled.

"Well, I'm sorry to hear about that." Rick swept an arm through the air. "It seems like everyone is having a bad time of it. Take Charlie, for example. He's the one that just left. He wakes up this morning, finds out his life's savings and his job were just flushed down the toilet. So, he climbs twenty-three floors and takes a swan dive off the roof."

He picked up a second glass, poured another drink while he continued. "And Frank used a rope. He tied himself off inside of his garage." He took a sip and then leaned in on both elbows, eyeballing me like he was searching for something. "You understand, right?"

Anything I might have said was lost in my mouth. My thoughts turned to the robbery. I remembered the hard lines in the man's face. I saw his gun. There was a loud crack, and then...

Nothing.

*He took a sip and then leaned in on both elbows, eyeballing me like he was searching for something.
"You understand, right?"*

I turned for the front door, but it was gone. A cold, sick feeling washed over me as I stepped back and gazed upon the other door, at its chipped green paint and brass knob.

After a moment I said, "What's through there?"

"I can't say. My job is here."

I opened my mouth to say something, but found that nothing came out.

Rick nodded and then pointed toward an empty table. "Take as long as you need." ☹

STEPHEN BOOK



Stephen Book's short fiction has previously been published by Six Sentences, one of which, "Mixed Drinks", was a finalist for Six Sentences Contest #3. He lives in West Texas, out where the dusty air paints the sky brown on a bad day. For more about Stephen, his thoughts, and his writing, please visit <http://dostxbook.blogspot.com>.

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