

2 BARS

So, two bars walk into a guy.

He's a red sax riff on pavement. A dozen other guys feed their family on the clean-up alone, and no-one even looks twice at the guilty party, the culprit standing right in their zone. The uniform has garlic breath and nicotine yellow conjunctiva, which shines like egg yolk as he abbreviates my statement, and all I say is that it was a nice night to be out, unless you were that guy. Then I grind out my smoke and walk away. The swarm has spilled out onto the street, bringing club rush and nectar buzz, all glowing in shallow puddles, and it gets one to thinking of home and safety, which is where I head swiftly. At home I watch my cell-mate thrash about on our sweaty mattress for a few hours while I drink ugly booze and revolve old tapes. Eventually I take pity on us both and wake him to fuck. That brings him real sleep and me a relief of some kind that I cannot define, cannot replicate with other ingredients, cannot understand.

Morning comes on inevitably, bringing tomorrow's failures and yesterday's replays. He goes to work on someone else, I go to work on myself, knuckles bloody from loathing of a kind you never hear talked about. I pity the poor wretches he finds, at least I could brace myself for the kind of punishment he so lovingly dished out. That's a lame story though boss, I hear he braces them just fine. Let them pay for a pleasure slowly killing me, it was all just cigarettes and jazz anyway. I spend my day in the apartment below us, cooking amphetamines. It used to be occupied by a wounded bird who called herself Freedom and you could hear her down there sometimes, singing about troubled moments between

tricks. Now it echoed silence. Freedom spent half a day rotting in the midday sun beside the busiest highway in the state before someone called it in. Maybe they thought she was a mannequin or a prankster, the location being so bold and all, but the smell was unmistakably road-kill. Maybe they were just traveling too fast from here to there to notice her at all. I stopped wondering pretty quickly.

Being in her apartment was like crawling inside her womb, the walls wet from all the breath she wasted in there. I could still see her ring around the bathtub, could smell her cheap hair products in the curtains, could taste her acrid sweat every time I licked my lips. I guessed I would miss Freedom if I had ever taken the time to know her. I didn't know if that made me sad or satisfied.

And here is the product, all shiny and new, and it makes a girl content for a change instead of always on the wait. I package it as carefully as a Disney sweat shop toy and slap my label on each bag, making each appear as if crafted in a Vonnegut novel.



I ascend home to begin marketing and sales. Loose threads float in and out of our apartment all day, a collection of monosyllables and nervous tics I can only distinguish as different to my own ghosts by their faded t-shirts and slogans that all seemed to be answering questions I was asking myself years ago. Answers I never found.

I take their money, sometimes their tired bodies, never their excuses, and drift backward and forwards between my product and someone else's.

When my cellmate returns we throw together piles of grubby money and lie on it satisfied, while satisfactorily lying to each other. For nearly a whole moment it seems to make sense, then it's cloudy again, and our confusion bounces off each other like bats mind-fucking in the dark. We continue like this for a while, loving each other as a way to not hate ourselves, until someone flicks his switch, turning his lights out forever. The reports that I let filter through all spoke of a savage trick gone wrong, and I allow this all to make sense to me. I continue on with an emptier space, suddenly aware that everything around me was counting down faster than I would have ever guessed.

Somewhere around this time I consider killing myself, but it turns out to just be another brilliant plan that never lives beyond conception. I content myself with watching the TV instead, flicking through channels, needing to be engulfed in death and destruction. The little box never fails me. In Tokyo an earthquake, in Sydney a bush fire, terrorists on the Gaza Strip, a bio-chemical attack in Zaire, everyone concerned with entertaining us salivating sadists. Like Capra said, it's a wonderful life.

Sometime later they came to arrest me in the lab as I begin experimenting with a new type of amphetamine brew, like Archimedes struck down sketching geometric patterns in the sand; my weapon conceived too late to fight the war. There is no-one left for me to be taken from, so nobody notices my disappearance, myself least of all.

In jail it's all about marching down painted lines, waiting for doors to open and close, like you're slowly being filed away in some ancient bureaucracy made stone. It could lead to paranoia if one didn't block that shit out and pretend that all you could pick up was stray ra-

dio waves. It is here that I learn to play guitar and hand-job the bulls, which leads me into a brief song writing career. My songs are bought by cons with ciggies and drugs, to be converted by their own tied hands for loved ones back home, like things were still read unless they begun 'I regret to inform you about your daughter or son'. Another phase in a lifetime of them phases past, and all I have to show for it is a few black spots on my lungs and a bunch of unsold songs about necrophilia.

When I bounce back out on the street I feel unavoidably lethal, and take to sticking up drunks with a 9 inch nail driven through an umbrella handle. And though it's not as lucrative as the lab trade, it does provide some stimulating mental images to dwell upon, which is a currency all of it's own. Friends I made back in the day inspire me to write a love letter, Lynch style, to some come stain from my old crew who had turned from a mule to a rat, and that brings me into contact with Big C, the man not the disease, who I guess would be the hero of my story if I had to have one.

How do you describe Big C to those that haven't had the privilege? Try to imagine a mountain, that dances.

Big C was a wheel-man at the time for a bunch of speed freaks from Footscray, which was all very low-key for a man of his appetites. Big C's name was most likely to be spoken in hushed tones around round tables, by men whose hands never appeared dirty. Big C got his start the hard way, in a boy's Remand, where everyone starts out getting fucked squishy, no matter how hard they become later on. Big C liked to torture and kill kiddie freaks as favors on the side to victims and their families, but he didn't like to advertise the fact for fear of alienating certain clients. Big C, a rock spider's

boot heel, which I guess is what earned him the hero tag, paid in full. You break it, you replace it. There were lots of empty spots on the shelves around here because the bulls just couldn't stop seeing red.

When Big C and I hooked up, it was fucking beautiful. Scat jazz smeared like shit on a wall. My cell-mate never knew how to play me like this, but for Big C, I was like an extension of his body, even when I wasn't. Big C had this amazing philosophy that you could fill a syringe with and spend the night dancing to, his rap patter that beat the brain like rain on a windshield. Coming down from his company was a rough ride for the uninitiated, and had wrecked as many as it built. I loved every moment with him as if it were my last, can recall with perfect clarity only this time from my past. I held him tighter than I ever held myself.

In the beginning, it was Big C who called the plays. We always knew how to make a dollar. Fuck, if need be, as it sometimes did, I could always lure some sack of meat with \$500 in it's back pocket to the darkest alley you could ever imagine going down. Opportunity for a woman in this town knows no bounds. I read that in a suicide letter once and try to live by it every day.

One day, as the stories go, Big C said to me;

"How would you like to meet a friend of mine?"

A rhetorical question they only hang a mark on because it looks like a sickle.

"I'd love to" I say

"That can be arranged"

And me, speeding away, riding in the silence of a promise I wasn't sure how to pay. This friend of Big C, he was not the kind of person I hoped existed, if you get my meaning, and of course, he got us involved in some despicable shit. Big C loved him, couldn't see beyond the lame stories he recanted like Yard bird's

(the name I give this fuck) word was gospel. It went something like this; Yard bird was your average nipple fed tv baby, obeying the rules and slaving at some shoebox profession, when, one night, he locks himself out of his apartment. You or me would say 'Shit', and find some way back in, not this joker, he turns instead and walks away from whatever, home and hearth, as they say. He never looks back, finds shelter here and there, until miraculously one day he comes across some adventure that lines the path, you know, his way. The generous benefactor is some low rate from the North, running enough horse to choke a horse, and Yard bird happens to be exactly what he needs. As Lynch says, a strange world indeed. Meanwhile Big C is holding his breath every time this gimp (he took one in the knee) enters the room, because some strong arm work he provides is keeping us pampered in glassy eyed style.

I guess you could say there were those that were blind, those that could see, and some, like me, who existed between. Always seeing what was coming, remembering what was gone and doing nothing in the now, just riding it like a wave or the illness of some green corridored scene. In this way it would make sense to me if the next world fell under the control of computers, in the way that it makes sense that God lost control of this world when he created us. That's me alright, a true believer.

Now, I knew exactly where Yardbird's gravity was going to pull us, but in Big C's favor, I always pretended different. So the story goes.

See, Yardbird has an angle all of his own. A pure original, the genuine article. It involved a high level dog and pony act, a strongman show, and of course, work

for those that had to shovel up the shit that was always left behind once the entertainment was over. That was where we came in. Big C and his reputation for witnesses incapable of articulation, and me, his faithful sidekick, hammering our arms and finishing his thoughts. Of course it played out all wrong, for us anyway. Alright for the guys signing the cheques, as it always goes. We ended up betrayed and alone, running in separate directions, afraid of our only ally, just the way Yardbird and his cohorts planned it. Big C bore a large hole in his stomach courtesy of my .38, while mine was to the heart due to poor aim.

Played, like fools we were played, and this wasn't a day that went by that I didn't imagine a terrible revenge on Yardbird and his crew. Not one single day. Big C never got the revenge I knew he had planned. I'm sure he laid up nights dreaming ways to do me. I never saw his eyes again to tell them I was sorry, he never found out why it went the way that it did, at least to my mind. Some green pig from the south-west blew his head off during a routine traffic stop. They just about broke that poor pale faced kid's neck with all the medals they hung off it. Good for him. Big C must have finally hesitated. So much for never making decisions until after he executed them.

With Big C gone, I drifted back into my trance. Gave up on the dreams they sold in magazines and tv jingles. Gave up on the illusion of ambition and settled instead for less and less, tired of cleaning, tired of mess. Until that fateful moment when minding my own, I went out for a dance and encountered Yardbird hobbling some steps around the bar. The next morning I woke up with a smile, and went looking for a pen.

Then I sat down to write without really knowing why. Deciding to start with the events of last night, and the two iron bars I walked into a guy.

