

# Smart Bar

by Judith Ossello

Everything is painted black that isn't glass, velvet, neon, or chrome. The club is cold, and the DJ who broke-up with me while I forgot I was stoned is spinning his favorites to an empty floor. Endings have a rhythm. I heard this one coming. I can hear it now. It's not over. It's ending.

Zones are staked out along the bar according to ability, interest and urgency. This is the beginning of a crowd. No one is in the first few stools because they'd have their back to the entrance. Middle of the bar is average. They need striking distance. Normally, I don't mind being a practice round for a free drink, but it's not easy to get away. The guys in the middle give me high-fives when I walk past them. I just couldn't stop, even though they made me laugh.

Far end of the bar is where still waters run deep, picky people-watchers, and serious drinkers who leave their money on the bar tend to gather. I'm more comfortable on this side of the bar, even though it's been years since I had a drink with my brother. We used to spend whole afternoons drinking shots of Jager, watching the stack of money disappear while he'd tell me exactly how to write stories that were stuck in his head. When the money ran out, we'd put our sunglasses back on and talk about the weather on the walk home.

I get the bartender's attention, but I forget the name of the gin I like.

He pulls up a small glass and asks if I'd like it chilled or not. I love chilled gin as a mixed drink appetizer, but it's really something you indirectly request or suggestively support. My tongue burns. My throat becomes numb. Each sip tastes like revenge. London Dry is more of a workhorse gin, a co-dependent mother of cocktails who

can turn vicious, malicious or delicious.

When I first met my ex on a plane from London to Chicago, I started working on my top five film list because he thought I should have one. I'm going to finish it tonight while I listen to his sugary electronica version of Chicago House peppered with Russian or Italian disco imports. I prefer the way Dubstep hits my bones with the force and reverb of a lead pipe against steel, shifting the dance focus from repetitive legs and arms to responsive hips and shoulders.

I don't want any of his favorite films on my list—no Tarkovsky, Hitchcock or Cassavetes. I've been saying *Apocalypse Now*, *Gosford Park*, and *His Girl Friday*, but I need two more. I could add Fellini, but it's not just one film. Besides, Marcello Mastroianni wouldn't get mentioned which is part of the point. Cary Grant is perfect with Katherine Hepburn, but Judy Holiday is awesome on her own. I don't like Bogart or Bacall—it seems too contrived and intentionally cool. I love Leonardo Di Caprio, but I can't really say I like any of his films except *The Departed* which is based on a really good foreign film which should actually get the vote. This makes me think of Kurosawa and Wong Kar Wai and how *Chung King Express* made me wear summer clothes in winter because the weather in the movie was like a character.

The guy next to me seems like he's alone. Not lonely, but alone. I think we might have something in common.

“Hey, did you go to the Metro show?” I ask.

He doesn't answer until he notices me staring at him. “Talking to me?”

“Yeah. You.” My reaction is to smile. My response is to be critical. I start to wonder if he's on drugs while adding *Chung King Express* to

my top five list. I think that's a good decision.

"No one usually talks to me. I always sit in this same place at the bar."

"Can you just answer the question? I'm just . . . waiting. Sorry I bothered you." I consider moving to the other stool and putting my purse next to him or maybe just opening it up to see if someone sits down.

His words get a little lost in the conversations around us because he doesn't make eye contact when he talks. He's wearing a Gap or Old Navy sweater with a line across the front that is probably a few years old. I know these are sentimental sweaters. It's a bad sign that he's wearing one. I'm guessing recent break-up or relocation.

"Um, I can't really hear you. It's starting to get crowded. So you're here. For the DJ?" I ask.

"Tonight's going to be really good. I really like the guy playing later. I'm much better than this guy, much better than him. He's just trying to cover his mistakes." He pauses to let me hear the mistakes, but I don't really catch them. I used to listen to this DJ while cleaning the kitchen, taking a shower, reading a book, opening mail, or making coffee. I used to live with this DJ so I know he does make mistakes. I just can't hear them.

"Is he really that bad?" I ask. "The truth. What's so bad about him? He's my ex so I'm always looking for extra reasons. Why don't you go ahead and help me out? I'd like to agree with a smart guy like you."

Our eyes meet, and I go from pupil to iris to eye lids to eyelashes to shape of eye to nose to cheeks to mouth. I'm never sure how to judge if someone is good looking since attraction is pretty immediate

and unexplainable. Personality does have an interesting way of changing how someone looks. That's the part I like. His eyes are a lighter shade of blue than mine and lined with dark eyelashes like eye-liner. His face has sharp edges and long angles worn from thinking about serious things for a long time, probably until they start to seem ironic. I'll know more once he smiles, but he doesn't seem crazy. I can't rule out drugs completely.

"I'm so much better than this guy," he says with a disjointed laugh that reminds me of putting away silverware. He must be Eastern European, and he definitely thinks that he's smarter than some percentage of people around him. I bet he has a percentage in mind that feels accurate and ironic.

He pays the bartender for his Pilsner Urquell, smiles at his first thought, then carefully but quickly edits the second thought like he doesn't want to share too much information. I don't think he talks to a lot of strangers. I wonder if he's closer with his mom or his dad.

"He had a lot of trouble with this beer—bottom of the keg I think. It's going to be disgusting."

"Looks delicious. Maybe I can listen to your stuff? I'd love to hear it. What's your DJ name? Do you play real records or pretend with computer toys?"

"I've been coming here for weeks just to listen to the DJ's, and I usually just sit here, maybe dance—I'm an awesome dancer. We're going to dance later. And then, you, come and sit next to me. I've been waiting for someone . . . this place."

"Are you on something? I don't care, but I'd just like to know."

My necklace rattles against the bar as I lean forward to thumb my bra strap back under my tank top.

The DJ regains focus and gives me what should be a stern look, but it seems more like a face you make before you laugh. "It's DJ R-E-S, without records. Much better, actually. Faster. Precise. There are actually a lot of benefits and no sound quality loss if you use DJ quality music files."

I turn to look at the real him, rather than the reflection between bottles. "Can't you just write it down? I'm not going to remember it, especially if you're going on about music files. Really, you just proved my point on records being cooler. Listen to yourself."

He writes his last name and then adds DJ in front and crosses out a few letters and traces new ones over the cross-outs. His movements are exact and precise like instinct should be. "It's taken from my last name. Do you see it?"

"I'm never gonna to be able to read that. Can't you re-write it? I really want to look it up later. I'm sure your computer music is online somewhere. Right?"

He's not listening to me. Did I choose to sit next to him or maybe this was the only empty seat? I'm not sure anymore. He passes me the napkin, grabs my water, and pushes his beer in front of me.

"I'm from Detroit."

The napkin now has his full name and phone number. I fold it twice, put it into my pocket, and take a sip of his beer. It tastes like it always does.

"Actual Detroit?" I ask, admiring my nails. I rarely get manicures.

"Outside Detroit."

"How far?"

"No one is from Detroit, at least how you're thinking of it."

"Eight mile?"

"Whatever. Small town outside."

I realize the woman next to me is listening to our conversation. If it wasn't for her eyeliner, I wouldn't have seen her at all. Her dress is made of thick, rope-like material that adds an inch to her circumference and bundles her sharp bones into convenient arm candy. She smiles and looks over at a guy who is talking to a drunk blonde with a possible language barrier.

"My boyfriend ran into an old friend," she says to me and then looks at the guy from Detroit. "So, what do you do?"

Good question. Terrible voice.

I never ask good questions. I start conversations without proper introductions. Her boyfriend's stance summarizes everything feminine about a man and makes the woman he's talking to seem like a transvestite. I hope he doesn't come over here.

"And how old are you?" she asks.

The auction begins.

"How old are you?" He asks the space in between us. "I'm your ages."

"She looks younger than me." I say. "And you shouldn't do that."

The mosquito nods. "She's right. We're definitely close, but you're

forcing a number. Late twenties. Let's just leave it at that."

"I'm thirty?" He smiles.

"Yeah? I'm thirty-four. Are you really thirty?" I ask, trying to remember the high school math I would use to determine the mosquito's hypotenuse using a left shoulder, an elbow on the bar, and her hand on her knee as points A, B, C.

She looks over to catch her boyfriend's attention without success, and then turns to me. "You do not look thirty-four. I can't believe we're talking about age at a bar. Isn't this getting, um..."

"Maybe."

The DJ waits until we're both looking at him. "Well, twenty-eight. August 20, 1981."

"Really? That's so crazy." I say with a little too much excitement. I hate when surprise sounds like excitement. "It's, um, my Dad's."

I stare at my drink as if I can see the ice melting. What do I need to say and what do I want to say to strangers? The DJ seems to notice the hesitation so he shows us his license, but only the woman next to me reads it. I really need to get better at these bar conversations. It seems very personal to ask about work and age, but I guess you have to be a little cut-throat. Dead relatives are probably not expected to be brought up. I realize they're both looking at me. Did they ask me a question?

"Hey, this says September 20th," the mosquito says, giving me a cautionary look and handing the license back to him.

He puts it back into his wallet, takes a drink of my water, and smiles. "They made a mistake. I haven't gotten it fixed."

"Oh. I'm pretty sure that's illegal. I'll still continue to enjoy your beer though," I say.

The mosquito straightens her angles and stands up. "Well, nice meeting you guys. Wasn't the snow really coming down? I was hoping to have another drink before going back out. I almost fell getting out of the car. At least. Well. Have a nice night."

"Yeah. See ya," he says a little too quickly while watching her leave. "I bet she doesn't even know that guy. Now, let's do a shot and go dance."

"Maybe it's the music, but I should really leave. I'm also too happy she's gone, like we should celebrate or something."

"I'm the coolest guy in here. Come on."

"Yeah? I think you might be partially right . . . find me with the shots, okay. I'm going to check out the floor."

"Okay, go have a look."

"We've been broken-up for almost two years."

"Go have a look, but I'll find you."

"Thanks, coach. Just watch me walk. I'll be over on the left to make it easy."

I walk into the crowd making sure to stay near the back. Maybe this is fine. Maybe he'll leave. Maybe I'll leave.

After two more shots, he takes my hand and leads me back onto the floor. I realize that I've been calling him sweetie rather than



remembering his name. He tells me not to think too much about it so I don't, but I need to remember to ask that in my new list of questions: name, work, age.

He is a good dancer, but the best part is dancing with him. The music takes the place of our separate thoughts and gives the illusion that we understand each other. Dancing also establishes intimacy without the exaggeration of drunk teeth and fingernails searching for emotions.

I dance a little farther away to see if my way of dancing is different from our way of dancing, but I am redirected by a warm hand pressed to my waist and sliding down to my hip. For a few seconds, I admire the confidence of this peripheral guy seizing the opportunity to suggest a question or a compliment. I opt for the compliment and switch my hips in the other direction with a turn so his hand can't follow me.

"Sweetie, I just got body checked so you may want to reel it in."

He moves my hands from his upper arms to his shoulders. I think about other shoulders and high school slow dances. I turn to face the crowd. The guy from Detroit presses against my back until the rhythm becomes our breath and our fingers find and curl around convenient bones. Repetition becomes silence against skin.

When I occasionally see my ex through the crowd, I forget to breathe or remember to breathe. When the final beats from the first DJ play out and the music changes, I get nervous. We decide to walk towards the back of the floor to take a break, but my boyfriend, I mean my ex, now that he's seen me has remembered or found some scrap of relationship we didn't destroy. And now he's going to remind me of it by speaking to me.

In this silence between seconds, I am compelled to close my eyes

and lean towards the guy from Detroit. This was supposed to be the beginning of a kiss, but it started really far away. The music and light have gone far away from his mouth. I close my eyes. Nothing is there but the soft surprise of his beard and a slick movement of his tongue reminding me of his lips on mine. I take a quick, deep breath and smile without teeth. We are looking at each other now.

If I was dying, my life would be flashing before me, but his breath draws me closer to something more immediate than memories. My eyes close. A few thoughts enter. Tiny and unread, they are just witnesses for now. Later, I'll interrogate them, but the music is back, the rest of my body has returned, and my ex is gone.

He's still close, and it calms me. Nothing has really changed. We pick up our drinks and watch the dance floor. It's so obvious that there is nothing different. No intentions or expectations were exchanged.

"You're much calmer now," I say.

"I'm thinking of a way to get you to come home with me."

"It's nice to do some people watching," I say, leaning against him while he thinks. "You know, it's nice to see people enjoying themselves. Even if that woman over there wants to dance like a chicken, she's still having fun. I'm not interrupting your thoughts, am I?"

"You can't really judge. Having a good time is the thing."

"Well, I'm not judging chickens or chicken dancing."

"Right. Why don't you get your coat? And I'll get mine."

House music averages 125 beats per minute. Revenge averages 185

beats per minute, which is the max for my heart rate and the max for the drum and bass beats being played by the new DJ. I add Old Boy to finish my top 5 film list. The DJ thinks I'm smiling at him. I'm just matching beats.

