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A Blues for Shindig

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Extract

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1 Blues After Hours

Soho, the sexual apparatus of London, throbs away at all times. The London genitalia. We fester moistly in her midst, a rather smelly dump. It is 1956 and we are one of the dozens of clubs that exist to defeat the insane licensing laws.

'The Rendezvous Club' is a squalid little gaff off a slippery courtyard, decaying happily into itself. It will be vigorously revamped soon, but for now, having put all its effort into avoiding the bombing it is relaxing. Inside, when the dim red lights are in operation and the punters fill it with temporary warmth and the juke is going full blast, then it seems cosy. And Soho has far worse dives, clip joints where you can find yourself buying fizzy water for ungrateful girls who will lift your wallet as soon as look at you.

So, a little light robbery in the shape of high prices for low liquor really shouldn't be a cause for complaint. In fact it fulfils its function, which is to supply booze in the bleak desert of the afternoon when the pubs shut their doors, very tightly. The glasses are clean and the prices are within reason, just. You might be asked to sign in as it is supposed to be a private club, and a dog eared book full of Mickey Mouse names lives under the counter near to the door. Every now and then the law come round by previous arrangement and examine this book for a laugh. They also come round on a more regular basis to receive their bung, but I know nothing about this. I keep my head down when it comes to the law, I know how they can wantonly upset a girl's life and throw it into disarray.

When daylight filters and creeps its way through from the courtyard and hits the ancient seats and the bar, the dust that lives in every crease and crevice forms a grey, greasy skin and the walls look like potato blight in action. The cellar which is now used for storing booze and for rehearsal by a bunch of jazz musos, is particularly creepy. It throws up the slightly peppery stench of dry rot combined with yellow soap and

meths along with older, nastier smells that overlay the scent of dope and resin. I reckon it was once a plague pit myself, and the air has a way of moving around you when you're down there.



Tiger, the governor, knows I am spooked by the place and will milk it with graphic tales of suicides, dead babies, bodies found bricked up in the walls. He is perfectly suited to this role. Built like a wishbone, angular, with a face as sharp as a cut-throat razor, stupendous stained ochre teeth and a spiv moustache, he has the look of an elderly horse with a sense of humour. Tiger had his eye on me for months before I worked there, but it was a badly focused, slightly bleary eye. He'd oil up to me whenever I went to his emporium to flog him dodgy liquor from the American bases. I think he was attempting to captivate me with his charm. His dedication to love was spasmodic and his chat-up original.

'You're a good-looking bird, fantastic gams, bit lippy, but I like that. Do yourself a favour, darling, I'll see you right. Do the books for us. Come over to Le Mans with us if you want, no need for the old woman to know. Think about it, doll.'

'No offence, Tiger, I'll give that one a miss.'

'Fair enough, gel!' So I feel his passion lacked urgency, and once he realised that captivation wasn't a goer he gave me a job in his club as barmaid.

'Wave yer legs about, dolly, keep the beer coming. You'll be laughing,' he says.

In his favour, Tiger gives off a nice aroma of Lifebuoy and his hands are scrupulously clean, which is a mercy.



At three or thereabouts the club jerks into vibrant sudden life as the pubs close. Our clientele transfer its attentions from one drinking hole to another with minor changes in personnel. Most of our regulars are small time crooks; men in their middle years, of a villainous mien, who don't take a lot of notice of me. They talk in hushed voices and stop if I come into range, so ear wigging is difficult. One or two made a half-hearted attempt at a chat-up when I first worked here but I knew in my

bones they only did it because they felt it was expected of them, it lacked any serious commitment.



Occasionally, a bird will come in with them and perch on a stool and chirp and preen, but nobody takes much notice. These are men's men. They are mostly called one-syllable names; Vic, Stan or Reg, and are not my idea of what gangsters should look like. No Sydney Greenstreets here, or Bogarts; this lot are scruffy, with dandruff, lank hair, paunches, bad breath. I don't think I'm altogether their idea of a perfect barmaid either. I try asking intelligent questions about the penal system and capital punishment, appealing to their area of expertise, but they don't respond well. *The Sporting Life* features heavily with Tiger and his friends, a quasi religion for them along with motor racing and boxing. They are fervently patriotic when drunk and 'Land of Hope and Glory' rings out. I hum 'The Internationale' very softly at these times and collect glasses.

I never expected the job to last; I don't see myself as one of the workers of the world. I expect I would have got the order of the boot if it hadn't been for me flattening the geezer. It happened like this:

One very usual day, I am bored but no more than usual. I look at the sheen on the carpet, which features a sort of pattern on the patina. I smile to myself the same time a solitary stranger plants his arse on the stool the other side of the bar. Close enough to breathe on me.

'That's what I like to see, a happy girl.' He beams drunkenly at me, elbows on the bar.

'Give us a light ale, darling.'

I give him his drink and he buries his snout in it. His face has relaxed into that state where the bones appear to have melted under the onslaught of drink and eyes and mouth are only loosely aligned to his face. Some of the regular team are sitting over by the door muttering away, and a crew of strangers comes in. This happens sometimes, a conference or motor show, hundreds of males of the species on the loose. Drawn to trawl Soho by the irresistible instinct of the hick.

Like spawning salmon they thrust to penetrate Soho, brave together, coming up the river, they egg each other on. Then,

tragically; mid stream, the pubs shut. Wild with frustration, looking for more booze, the poor bastards find us. They creep into the dingy dump with the scent of beer in their nostrils and theoretical lust in their loins and I'm the female in the front line, ripe for the odd jest, bit of baiting a pleasure.

'All right, my girl?'

'Afternoon, gentlemen! And what can I do for you?' I grin lewdly – encourage them to get all their ribaldry out at once. They snigger and shift their feet about. I can feel a snarl building up on my face; it travels up from my stomach like bile. I check it, convert it into a grin.

'No draught beer, I'm afraid, chaps.' I crack the word 'chaps' to make us all smile, and they order nice as ninepence, carry their beer into the corner by the bog and whisper about me. One time I wish my nasty leery friend Frantic would show; she'd assist them on their quest to corruption, no danger. Not a sign of her, naturally.

Meanwhile, the loner by the bar guzzles his beer and waggles the empty glass at me.

'Another beer, sir?' The 'sir' weighing in at half a stone of sarcastic intent.

'Yes, my darling.'

He leans over, reaching towards me, I take his hand firmly, return it to the top of the bar.

'Aw, come on.' But his hands stay in place. 'Have one yourself, darling.'

'Thanks, but no thanks.' I take his money, ring it up, turn back to him with his change and as I put it on the bar he reaches out, grabs my entire left tit, and tweaks it.

I don't think at all, I just see his pale face with the whiskers starting up on his chops, the little grin pasted on his mouth and the knowing look in the eye. My fist comes up and he's off his stool and headed backwards for the deck.

It's one of those moments when time goes into free fall and I watch as he arcs quite gracefully. I slow motion my eyes to the guys in the bar and see all their faces dead still and silent, then time comes back to its usual bustle and they return to life. He is flat out on the slippery carpet, his foot still hooked in the metal stool rung. I feel my face, white and cold. Their eyes are all focused on me. A great cheer goes up and Tiger and his

mates are lifting my arm in the air like a champ, calling me Rocky, buying me drinks. The offender lies in a heap in the courtyard. Sharks will discover him soon.



My reputation with the middle aged boys of Soho is made that day. I am an asset to old Tiger.

The salmon crowd have melted into the Soho afternoon.

First I was dubbed Rocky, but as there was an excessive number of Rockys about Soho at that time, Tiger changed it to Shindig. I liked it immediately; I was due a name change.

That was my first week working at the Rendezvous, a defining event, and I've been here ever since.

Late afternoon Tiger often sends me off for a break.

'Get yerself a roll, darling, no hurry,' he says, bunging me a quid. 'Hang about a sec, dolly,' and he shoves a bulky envelope into my hand. 'Stick that in yer bin, gel. Rathbone Street.' He winks.

This mostly happens just when the club is filling with more than the usual quantity of nefarious gits, and is looking moderately interesting. I never know until I'm at the door if my duties as gopher are to be called upon. These are a mystery to me and I have every intention of keeping it that way. I schlep round with envelopes to a few regular addresses in the West End with my curiosity turned off like a faucet. First time he sent me I asked Tiger what it was about; 'Hope you aren't involving me in nefarious activities, my son?' His old eye went dead like some spent mackerel on a fishmongers slab;

'You don't want to know, darling,' said with quiet emphasis. I never asked again. His face extinguishes all curiosity.

There seems to be no pattern to my trips. Today, as usual, I am pleased to go, I love Soho. He slaps my bum as I pass, for the audience. I can feel all their heads coming together for a brief resumé of my charms as I leave. They will be back to the important stuff of who's running in the four thirty or working out an accumulator within seconds.



I walk through Soho and the smells slide up to my face into my nose and through my brain. I am numb with salami,

pastrami, herrings, garlic, French bread, the piquant green scent of olives. Well past the deli doorway and a sneaky tendril of parmesan catches up, trickles into my nostril. The patisserie and my eyes slither over the brittle pastries, by Isows and my own private vision of chopped liver, salt beef, latkes, rye bread. Berwick Street market, fruit exults in its own sharp colour, peaches pastel softly. I nick one and the juice runs down my chops.



Up, over Oxford Street, another world. Straights rushing for bargains at the scruffy end of the street, all speedy bustle, all tat. My mate, Ace, with his empty camera, taking photos of happy families, lovers, kids. All the better for not being immortalised. Men with cases of foul furry toys, or nylons with no feet, three card tricksters. All doing their own sweet thing. All ready to run at the first sign of a copper.

I hand the envelope to some old bird but she sends me in to speak to a very fly young geezer in a nasty cheap sharp suit who oozes over me from behind a desk:

'So, you Tiger's new bird are you?'

'No, I'm not. I work for him.'

'Must be losing his touch. All right, darling, thanks very much.' His eyes slide down over me and I can feel them linger on the backs of my ankles like a couple of bluebottles; I reach the door. I see by the brass plate outside that it is a firm of accountants.

I take my time on my way back, stop at the record place and flirt with the governor who knows more about jazz than anybody I know. I play myself some sounds in the cubicle, which leaves me feeling so cool I practically bebop my way along the pavement and back to the club. Soon as I come in, Tiger joins his mates at the table and I do my stuff collecting glasses, washing up and serving the punters as they amble up to the bar. I am reading *Down and Out in Paris and London* and usually manage to fit that in around my bar duties by clearing the decks, wiping the top of the bar and yelling 'Any more for any more?' I can get away with this sometimes, but today the nefarious gits appear to have reproduced themselves and keep on coming.

The day I whacked the geezer is the first time Sid speaks to me.

'Hear you administered a bit of the old GBH today. That right, is it?'

I put down my book and see him looming gently the other side of the bar. He is vast and gives the impression of softness from his immaculate hands to his subtle cologne.

'I certainly did but I don't expect to add it to my official duties.'

'No, that would be a bad idea.' He moves off like he's on casters and stands near the table, observing. Tiger offers him his chair, but Sid shakes his head, a no. I get back to the kitchen in Paris, the juke plays Pat Boone and Vic Damone. I am tempted to put on some Elvis but I resist, then just after eight Tiger closes the door from inside;

'Get an early night, gel. Leave those glasses,' he says as he brings out the brand new packs of cards. That's me dismissed. I get out before he changes his mind.

I retrace my steps of earlier in the day.

2 Don't Sell It, Give It Away

It's night, Soho has changed her underwear and got her slap on ready. She sparkles now and smiles down in the warm, thick dusk. This time I continue northward and, as always, I make for the Roebuck in Tottenham Court Road, see what's happening. I've been fascinated by black culture since I first heard Billie wailing her dark blue songs of love lost, men gone and suffering womankind. I think I wanted to lose a man before I ever had one of my own.

Round the back doubles. I approach The Roebuck sneakily from the rear. Crowds outside. High haired African men with pegged pants, West Indians, Yanks with nice new suits from Alexander's. The occasional Zoot suit. Hep cats and heroes along with the usual bunch of crooks. Johnny-just-come with old timers, a few whites. The sweet smell of tampi and aftershave floats high above the heads. Through the door and the ancient reek of stale beer and fag smoke takes over. Packed as ever, nobody I know, knots of men parting, looking me over coldly, boldly. My face is frozen into a rigid smile under this icy appraisal.

I move through the mass of gently, slyly shifting humanity towards the bar. They move just enough so I can pass, never quite enough for me to pass with any ease. It is like swimming through a shoal of fish, with bodies touching, sliding softly along me. I know that if I lose my footing I will disappear and it will close above me. I will sink without trace, lost to sharks in the Tottenham Court Road, and I feel cold sweat trickle down the centre of my back. Then I see my cohort Rooster, and it's all change. I strut out from the crowd towards him and a drink has appeared like magic. I mingle, with enthusiasm.

'Wha' 'appen, darling? You looking fat so, must be a man you have found, sweet you up good.' Rooster, into his greeting routine.

'Nuttin happen as yet, buoy!' I respond.

'Make I make it happen now!'

And after these pleasantries we can both talk sensibly about our concerns involving whisky and gin from the base; tampi to the base. The American Airforce might have been sent, a gift, for the likes of Rooster and me.

'A sweet lickle number y'hear buoy' is how Rooster thinks of it and he isn't far wrong.

We go outside for a draw and stand discussing business, other people's for the most part. Then he does one of the speedy exits that are an integral part of the dope dealer's repertoire.

'Soon come y'ear.' And he's away.



I want some action so I move myself down to the Corner House, see if I can't catch up with BB. I need some halfway decent conversation after my day. I enjoy the great benefits that Joe Lyons has brought to the West End. The Coventry Street Corner House is startling in the way it fits in and complements deviant life.

It is a centre for mysteries and petty criminals. All classes and sexes trawl here from time to time. Ponces home in on likely fodder, old lecherous men after young boys and young boys from the meat rack in Piccadilly in search of rich men. Prostitutes are officially barred, but who knows what a girl is doing with her bits? Gamblers will drop in on their way home and bevvy merchants take a breather between the club and the next watering hole at Covent Garden or Spitalfields. There is never a time when you can't drink in London, but it requires a bit of ingenuity. The Corner House is a coffee shop in the morning, Palm Court in the afternoon, restaurant in the evening and then an all night cafe of a superior kind. People gird their loins, ready for the next alcoholic foray or the next bit of villainy.

It is buzzing as usual. A few hyenas and jackals lurk, with larceny in their hearts and cups of tea in their hands. They give a nice frisson of excitement to the atmosphere. I know most of them at least by sight and nod a greeting, give out a mutter from the side of my mouth, an affinity of the bent. Now and

then a copper will come in but he sticks out like a sore thumb. Grasses, however, abound.

I see Billy straight away. I watch him for a few moments. He is also called BB. A Bengal Lancer of style and one to be watched. He is thin, wiry, yet not skinny; his face is in motion all the time. Eyes watching out for angles and boys, mouth ready to spurt scalding sarcasm and sharp wit, chin set hard against the world. One tough little fucker. I like his smartness, his sexiness, his style. We two reckon we're a cut above the rest. We're right too. There is some old geezer talking to him so I go and get myself a tea and I hover. BB is my favourite working boy and we share an enthusiasm for books, republicanism and idleness. We are artists manqué and are convinced of our talents, which we have yet to identify fully. Meanwhile, we keep our bodies and souls together best way we can. We are also preoccupied with the Suez crisis – BB has a crush on Nasser. For my part, I am quite ecstatic about Nasser's nose, but it's a chaste affair. And of course his politics appeal to us, what we know of them. Mostly we are driven by a sense of the unfairness of the whole business into our usual violent anti British stance.

He spots me and his face lights up briefly, he dowses it fast. Cool is our watchword.

I bring my tea to his table and sit.

'How's my fave palone? What were you waiting for, girl?'

'Thought that geezer might have been a punter, BB,' I say as I join him.

'No, sweetie. I can't face that tonight. Did one earlier and that's enough for me.' He shrugs a languid movement. He nods over towards Victoria who is trolling in at speed. Otherwise known as the purple queen, he rackets along, more femme than most females with unique hip movements and swinging gait.

'Victoria has brought six men to fruition in slightly over an hour. Makes me tired just to watch her,' says BB. 'Must be stashing her bread in here the way she trots in to punctuate every trick.'

'It's her calling. I think hustlers are born not made, don't you?' I say.

'You're probably right, sweetie but I think the purple hearts have a lot to do with it in her case.'

Sure enough Victoria steams up to the table, all scathing anger at our laziness all virtue at his industry.

'Don't know what you two are doing sitting on your arses, there's money to be made out there.'

He gestures with his head in the direction of Piccadilly. It's nearly impossible to call Victoria 'he' but that's what he is, officially.

'Get her, duckie,' says Billy, to Victoria's back as he swans off at a rate of knots. 'Killer whore.'

'Yeah, I think it's her creative outlet.'

'Creative inlet, more like.'

We laugh.

'Mind you, I can't stand it myself,' says BB. 'But that's the men, they're grotesque.'

I nod.

'Yeah, I'd sue Zola for misrepresentation. If he was still around. It was never like that for Nana.'

'Well, to be fair he never went into details, did he?'

'But he made it sound exciting, glamorous.'

'Exciting? Hardly. Still, it beats working doesn't it?'

I agree. I'm in favour of whoring on principle and I say so now to BB.

'That's because you never had to do it, sweetie. Be an amateur darling like the rest of womankind. I prefer to give it away myself.'

'Vadar the amount of straights in here tonight, man!' I say.

'It's early, sweetie. The deviant faction will increase when the boozers shut. Do you fancy some speed?'

'Why? You got some?'

'Soon get some, must be a lot about, I've been offered three lots this evening.'

I must have looked dubious.

'I've got enough handbag to go halves,' he says. 'We could go down the Harmony and watch people. Might score a new homme each, I'm rampant.'

'Not sure I wouldn't rather have some blow.'

'I fancy speed, girl, had a hard day.'

I bung him a quid and he shoots off.

Some of the African students come in and sit in a huddle. They are like a separate species from the African guys I know,

who are mostly ex seamen who came here on spec and drive around in their sharp suits with criminal intent. These students lack romance with their side parted hair and stuffy clothes. But I love their ideas, which I plunder and claim as my own. They greet me and I join them. It's all talk of the Gold Coast and independence. These guys listen to what I have to say with patience and answer my questions. They never flatten me with their superior knowledge or sink me with my own foolishness. I would like to have a lover among them and they regularly chat me up with courtesy and some enthusiasm, but I like ruffians.



Must be an hour at least before I look at the clock. When I realise that BB isn't coming back I am not worried, more annoyed. I guess he's scored himself a boy. Least he could have done is come and tell me.



Next morning, well before nine, there is a frantic clamour at the door and when I open it, Victoria whisks in like some joyous avenging angel on speed and imparts the news that Billy got nicked last night, is up in court and I'd better get my arse into gear pronto. He looks happier than I've ever seen him and far younger without all his slap on.

'Bow Street it is. And you'd best get along there in double quick time. He might need bail.'

'What was he done for?'

'Who knows? But you'd better get your arse down there if you want to see him.'

He vanishes in a cloud of fag smoke and I bustle down to the court. Can't find BB's name on the board. Most people have an array of names and change them like their underclothes; so this is not surprising. I retreat home to bed.

Later that day I hear from Vic that Billy got three months for importuning.

'Be out before you know it, a shit and shave sentence,' says Victoria. 'Anyway, he only uses you because you've always got handbag.' Has more than his fair share of malice does Victoria. Having put the poison in he scampers off, but when I wait for

a letter with a visiting order and none comes, I suspect Vic might be right. I tell myself that such disappearances are not unusual. But it niggles. I remember our conversations about the future and what we both want:

'Well, sweetie, what I think is; we want it all don't we? Money, fame . . .'

'I don't want fame BB, all I want is to have enough bread so I can sit and watch people and listen to them and never have to worry about the rent again.'

He gives me a scathing look, so I add.

'And enough dope and a good screw now and again and . . .'

'Oh no, don't you want to be a success?'

'A success at what? No. I don't want to be part of a capitalistic bourgeois society, I want to be an outsider looking in.' I sound pious to myself and BB laughs.

'Bless you, my daughter!' and he crosses me. 'I want it all, everything, but I want the poor and oppressed to have some too, which is why I'm a socialist,' says BB. 'As long as I'm first in the queue, eh?'

'You sound like any other greedy cunt to me, BB,' and he laughs and we link small fingers in a collusion of some sort.

'Solid,' I say.

And now that he's gone I have nobody to have conversations with and no place for my dreams to hang. So I take up with Nifty who's a drummer and has been sniffing around me for some time, and I cultivate Tiger or he cultivates me because I enjoy his company more than enough. So, altogether it was a good thing I took on the little number down the club, or I'd have missed BB even more.