

Black Velvet Band

by Karen McIntyre

For years after, when he told this story, Jimmy would say he knew the day was fucked when he saw the old man waiting outside the bar. Eight-thirty in the morning, he'd say, and there was old Mr. Edwards shaking in his tan raincoat, no match for the March wind trying to blow him into his grave. The neighborhood around Fitzzy's was no treat on the brightest of mornings. Under that gray and hopeless sky, the little wooden houses with their sagging porches, one yard with a plastic Santa still waving from his sled--well, it was enough to make Jesus Himself reach for the Jameson's bottle.

Jimmy wasn't supposed to let anyone in before he set up his cash drawer, filled the ice bins, and all the other small, rattling tasks it took to get the bar on its feet for another long day. But Mr. Edwards was one of Fitzzy's favorites. Everyone knew that. And so Jimmy picked up his pace, limping slightly, past the weedy lot to the corner where Fitzzy's Irish Pub squatted in its low brick building. There were

shamrocks in the window for St. Patrick's Day, and a chalkboard sign chained by one leg where Fitzzy, the owner, had written, "Irish Flu Shots, \$3" in green chalk, just beginning to blur.

When the old man saw Jimmy, he raised his newspaper in salute, and Jimmy gave a tight, businesslike nod in return, as if they were colleagues passing in the corridor of a bank somewhere, and Jimmy took the ring of keys from his jacket and opened the heavy front door. Even in those days, Fitzzy's was old school. Dim light and dark wood and that smell in the air. The ghost of ancient beer spills and cigarettes long exhaled.

Jimmy went behind the bar and found a fresh can of V-8. Eight vegetables? Jimmy hoped they were in there, for Mr. Edward's sake. Vodka, vodka, vodka, a full three-second pour. Salt. Pepper. A squeeze of lime for the vitamin C. Skip the horseradish, the poor bastard's belly took enough of a beating. He watched Mr. Edwards pulled the pale red liquid through a straw into his scarecrow body, his hands pressed down firm on the bar but still shaking as if small animals were trapped under his palms trying to escape.

He'd forgotten to lock the door behind them. The man walked right in.

The man was heavy, but not yet fat, in a down vest zipped tight and belled out over the tight cinch of his belt. Small eyes were set deep in the pudge of his face, like two nails hammered in.

"Come back in an hour," Jimmy said. "We're not open yet."

The man just stood there with his feet planted far apart on the tiles. "You look open to me. Any coffee?"

Jimmy folded his arms over his chest.

“Nah, never mind, when in Rome, and all that,” the man said. “I’ll take a Miller draft.”

Scott smiled as he pulled the Miller tap, knowing the hose ran down to the basement and into a keg of Kohler beer, the cheapest in the discount warehouse. He tipped the glass to get the head just right and held it up to admire the fizzing gold.

“A fine crackery finish with just a trace of paint thinner,” he said, and rang up seven dollars for a five-dollar draft. Asshole surcharge. Fitzzy would understand.

Erin, the day waitress, didn’t like the looks of the man either. “Did you see him before, jotting notes in his wee notebook?”

“Looking at us like we’re thieves,” Jimmy said.

“Well you, anyway.” She peered up at Jimmy. She was a young woman, almost pretty, dressed trim and tidy with her apron tied tight. A long brown braid down her back and startling light eyes with dark rings around the iris, like a husky. “Not to get your knickers in a twist. Just to be watchful and wary.”

“I’m always wary,” he said.

“Of course you are,” she said. “Now mind that mess down there.” She pointed at the clutter of glasses the night man had left at the end of the bar. Fitzzy liked to run a tight ship, and Erin would be the first to tell.

Schiff and the guys from the highway crew clomped in, wearing bright orange vests over their heavy work clothes.

“Hi honey, I’m home,” Schiff called out.

Jimmy was already working the tap.

“I was getting worried,” he said, “you might’ve actually finished that road by now.”

Schiff took a long drink, the muscles of his throat working. He was a big man with cheeks boiled red from being out in the cold all night. He looked at the man sitting in the corner by himself.

“Who’s the new boy?” he asked.

The man hopped off his stool and stuck out his hand.

“I’m Dan,” he said.

“Dan the man!” Schiff shouted in his friendly way. He took another long pull on his beer. “Hey Jimmy. What happened to my Bruins last night?”

“I couldn’t watch,” Jimmy said. “What a gong show.”

“That pussy Doughty went out for a muscle pull?” Schiff said. “In my day they played with broken bones.”

Dan hovered at Schiff’s elbow, looking from one face to another.

“I never got into hockey,” he said, like it was a virtue. Ignore him, Jimmy wanted to say. Though when Schiff found a new audience there was no stopping him.

“Football. Baseball. Basketball.” Schiff ticked them off on his thick fingers. “What do they all have in common? They play on turf. Or a field. Or a nice wooden floor.” In his Boston accent it came out *flah*.

“Hockey? Hockey! They’re playing on a sheet of fucking *ice!*” He poked Dan in the chest. “You tell me what’s hahdah!”

“Well the athleticism may be superior, I grant you that,” Dan said. Jimmy wanted to punch him in the squinty eye. You want hockey? *There’s hockey.*

“That you?” The man pointed with his chin at the framed black-and-white photo behind the bar. Jimmy didn’t turn. He didn’t let himself look at it more than once or twice a day. It was a good picture, the kind that jumped out at you from the sports section. He was skating just ahead of the pack, leaning forward with his stick outstretched, the puck and everything else still just ahead of him.

He started to mutter something to shut it down, to shut the asshole up, but Schiff was all over it, feeling the glow of his second beer, going on about how Jimmy was the *man*, a playmaker, the star on that miserable frat-boy college team, not like the pussies who were afraid to mix it up. Jimmy went down the bar, cleaning glasses, not wanting to hear it or explain what the doctor said, or whether he could *coach*, for Chrissake, like anyone would hire him.

By now, Billy the cop had come in, and a jostling rowdy group from the EJ factory, and they were thronged around the bar, the place filling up with bodies and the deep voices of men.

“Oh Billy,” Mr. Edwards called down the bar. Jimmy came over and refilled his empty glass. He never corrected the old man, not since that first week after he moved out of his dorm room, his belongings stuffed into Hefty bags, and took the job at Fitzzy’s because it was offered him. Mr. Edwards came in every day wearing the same worn suit, but his watch showed the right time and his shirt was always clean. He spent his days gazing across the bar, his face alternately lighting and fading, drinking and drinking but never getting drunk, just sinking slowly through the day like a ship taking on water until he left finally at three or four in the afternoon with that slow, straight-backed walk, Jimmy’s hand on his arm, out the heavy front door to the cab they would call for him.

Mr. Edwards fished in his wallet and pulled out a rumpled five. He dug his hands in his pockets and slapped a few coins on the bar.

“It’s ok,” Jimmy said.

“No, Billy, I’ve got it, son.” Mr. Edwards pulled a white windowed envelope from his pocket and tried to extract the social security check from inside.

Jimmy took the envelope, smoothed it, and put it back in the old man’s hand. “Put that away. You can run a tab.”

“I can?”

“Yes.”

“What did you say?”

He talked low into the old man’s pink ear, which smelled faintly of corn chips. “A tab. TAB.”

Mr. Edwards’s blinked his watery blue eyes. Jimmy took the old man’s glass and tapped the bar in front of him. “Another?”

“You’re a kind man and a gentleman, Billy,” Mr. Edwards said in that way you couldn’t tell was sarcastic or sincere, or maybe confusing Jimmy with his grown son who didn’t talk to him anymore. No matter, it was still a nice thing to say.

Down the bar, Dan pushed his own glass forward. “I’ll take another. And you can run a tab for me, too.”

“Sure, let’s see your credit card.”

“What? You didn’t ask him for one.”

“I know him,” Jimmy said.

“You know me too. You know damn well who I am,” the man said.

Schiff took a pile of folded bills from his Carhart overall. “Hey, let me get this round.”

“No.” Jimmy pushed Schiff’s money back at him. “He can pay.”

Dan stood up, struggling into his tight down vest. “You know, I try to be nice, and this is where it gets me. I can make your life a lot less pleasant, let me tell you.”

“Now now,” Schiff said.

“I’ll be back,” the man said. “And your boss will be hearing about it, too.”

“My boss,” Jimmy snorted.

“Yes sir, this will all be taken into account. I know when I’m being disrespected.”

He stepped backward and knocked into Schiff, who tried to right him with a hand on his arm but he twisted away, lost his balance and grabbed the bar stool. It went over, CRACK! on the tile floor, and the men all stood watching, drinks half raised.

“I’m fine,” Dan said. “What’d you put in my beer?”

“Uh...beer?” Jimmy said, and the men looked this way and that, trying not to laugh in this other man’s face. He made it to the door and gave it a mighty shove that got him nowhere, because it needed a pull. Which, he reminded them, was against the fire codes, and they listened in silence until he finished his speech about how even a shithole should be a law-abiding shithole, and then he left.

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Lunchtime. Someone had fed the jukebox and an Irishman was singing about a dark-eyed girl who’d led him away from home and into a lonely prison cell. Jimmy padded up and down the bar, pointing at empty glasses, and the man would either

shake his head and hoist himself off the bar stool or nod and Jimmy would grab the bottle from the speed rack and move it up and down for a generous pour, then a fizz of soda from the gun to make it a cocktail instead of a vice, and the clatter and clink of cutlery and the kitchen door swinging open and shut and Edwardo, the busboy, going back and forth with an armful of dishes and his smooth, dark face with its faraway look, and Erin squeezing between the coats draped over the back of chairs and stepping nimbly over the backpacks and pocketbooks and briefcases people left on the floor to set the heavy white platters on the tables, laden with shepherd's pie and fish and chips and hamburgers with thick golden fries. All the while, the Irish Rovers singing *I thought she was queen o' the land, her hair hung over her shoulders, tied up with a black velvet band*. The pouncing, lilting rhyme insisting its way into every ear, so all up and down the bar, fingers tapped and below it, on the brass rail, feet moved up and down, in mud-caked work boots or sneakers or shoes, all keeping time to the beat.

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Courtney came in after the rush, shaking her bright blond hair.

"Well, Daddy wants to know, should he talk to his friend?" she asked.

"I don't want him to go to trouble," Jimmy said.

"It won't be trouble. Unless you fuck up," Courtney said. Erin walked past, eyes down on the plate in her hand.

"Do we have to talk about this now?" he asked. "Here?"

She flipped her hair and smoothed it back down so the blunt shining ends lined up against her sweater. "So when *is* a good time, that's my question."

And then it started, Courtney going on about how her poor dad saw Jimmy as almost a kind of son, almost, and the thought of it began to squeeze at him, picturing Mr. Williams at the barbecue grill poking the meat with his gut sticking out and that look on his face. There was a bottle cap caught in the treads of the black bar mat under Jimmy's feet and it became a game, to see if he could kick it out with just the toe of his sneaker, and he realized too late she had gone quiet, in fact the whole bar had gone quiet, and he picked his head up to see her flushed face and the tears welling up over her eyeliner.

"Court," he said. "Court, please." He handed her a square white bar napkin. She dabbed at the wing of her liner.

"I appreciate everything," he said. "I just don't want you to ask your dad before--before I know what I want to do."

"Fine," she said. "I won't help."

"Good," he said. "That's a good plan."

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In the quiet part of the afternoon Jimmy spread the *Sun Herald* out on the bar and smoothed it open to the classified section. He touched the point of his pen down the row to the ad that said "Route Sales" and filled in the R and the O and the top of the small e, trying to think what it would feel like to want to drive a truck with "Martin's Potato Rolls" blaring from the side, that even in this crap town, some kid would tag with graffiti. Put on a uniform that said, this is it, this is my life, and jockey a hand truck loaded with hamburger buns through a jingling front door, then kneel in an aisle putting them away while people moved around you, shopping, looking down at your bent back.

He looked up to see Erin watching. She had one half-empty ketchup bottle stacked on top of another, the glass openings touching while ketchup glopped slowly down from one bottle to the other. He made as if to knock them with his hand but she grabbed his wrist, strong and quick.

“You’d have made a hell of a goalie,” he said.

She nodded at the paper. “I thought Courtney’s dad was going to hook you up with a guy.”

He flapped the paper shut. “I’m not driving a bread truck.” Quick he snatched the ketchup bottle from her hand and lobbed it into the recycle bin. It clanked hard against the beer bottles but did not break.

“You’re a bit of an asshole,” Erin said.

“You started it.”

He watched her roll a fork and a knife into a paper napkin and drop it into the gray plastic tray with the others awaiting the dinner service. “Me, I’m going to BCC. They have a two-year program to be an X-ray tech. Why are you laughing at me?”

He made himself stop. “No, I think it’s cute.”

“The hospital is always hiring, I’m practically guaranteed a job when I get out.”

“That’s what you want?” he asked. “People’s bones.”

“When you--” she pointed at his ankle--“had your situation there, do you remember your x-ray tech?”

“I remember nothing.” It was almost true. Lights smeared through a rainy windshield and the shattering of glass, his leg, everything.

“They’re almost always nice people. And you know, the guidance counselor lady told me, lots of athletes study physical therapy. You could be helping people. Use your strength, help them walk again.”

“I do that now,” he said. “You just described my job to me.”

She rolled the last knife and fork, dashed it into the plastic tray and turned away, braid swinging.

“Hold on.” He grabbed her arm. “I’m happy for you. Let’s have a drink, you and I. Celebrate.”

“Oh,” she said. “It’s not going to be that kind of day.”

“You’re no fun,” he said.

She looked at him a long moment. “Think you have enough fun in your life, wouldn’t you say?”

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God only doled out one first sip a day, and so Jimmy closed his eyes to the yeasty brightness fizzing over his tongue and opening out inside him, promising an ease and carefree it never quite delivered but still, it never hurt to try. He set the empty glass on the bar, meeting Erin’s eyes for just the moment it took for her to sigh and turn her face away.

He poured an inch of Jameson’s. Just an inch. Took a sip and looked into the glass. Put it down. Picked it up and drank it off to feel the warmth sluice down and spread through him, the pain in his leg receding and what was so wrong with that? The Irishman was singing about the girl again. That kind of day.

“All right, keep an eye, okay?” he asked Erin. The bar was almost empty. Just Mr. Edwards and a few guys from the law firm on State Street. He took his pack of Marlboros from behind the bar.

The day came at him in a rush of sun and cold, bringing water to his eyes. Broken glass glittered from the empty lot across the street. A pickup truck rattled past. He stood inhaling the smoke and freezing air deep into his lungs, his bad leg propped up on the building behind him.

Bartending wasn't a bad job. It was dead end, sure, but in a way that said, there are places I'd rather be, I'm just not ready to go there yet. He had that idea for a movie about a guy who won a scholarship and was on his way to the majors, then broke his ankle and lost it all--it made him cry when he'd told Fitzy, and Fitzy had thumped him hard on the chest, so hard he'd backed up a step and bumped into the edge of the bar. *Heart of a lion*, Fitzy had roared, *that's what you call it!* It was a good story, everyone said. It only needed to be written, and how hard could that be? Plus, when you were a bartender, you controlled the alcohol, so even though you were waiting on people, they respected you. The lawyers in suits. The businesswomen who came in for a glass of wine and stayed through dinner, picking at French fries. *It was supposed to be my weekend with the kids*, they'd say. Or, *I guess I'm the only one in the office who can refill the damn paper tray*. And he'd take their glass and dash the dregs in the sink and give them a fresh one filled to the brim, on the house, and they'd lift their cup of kindness with a look that was surely real happiness, what else could you call it? Fitzy always said, it was a sacred public service they performed, saving their people from drinking alone.

A blue Oldsmobile pulled up across the street and a man got out. Jimmy knew him, just from the plant of his feet and the bulk of his vest. Another man got out on the passenger side and stood looking at him over the hood of the car. He was a big man wearing a leather jacket and a blank, hard look. Jimmy stubbed his cigarette against the brick of the building and carried it inside to throw away.

Mr. Edwards was still sitting quietly at the bar and Jimmy put a hand on his thin shoulder as he passed, and Mr. Edwards raised his own gnarled hand and gave him a pat, and Jimmy went behind the bar, took the bills from the tip cup, and tapped them straight against the bar. In an hour, the light outside would fade and Sal, the night man, would take over, making his way down the bar, *hey chief, hey boss, how's it going, what'll it be?* And it did seem like any other Tuesday, as if Fitzy would walk through the door any minute now, in his old corduroy jacket with the pockets stuffed full of bills and receipts, and head back behind the bar to slap the register open and poke at the cash drawer with a grunt and a nod. But Fitzy would not be coming through that door anymore. He was gone, dead and in the ground at Gate of Heaven cemetery out on Route 12, past where the General Electric plant used to be. And though the corporation that had bought the bar from his widow would keep his name above the door, for all the dark wood and music it was a place without a soul and everyone could feel it.

Dan had come in with the hard-faced man. They stood at the end of the bar watching Jimmy. "When you get a chance," Dan said. "We'd like some service down here."

Jimmy picked up a glass. Swished it in the rinse water and stacked it on the rack.

“See?” the man said to his friend. “That attitude. Well guess what, there’ll be some changes here. No more so-called tabs for these so-called customers you know damn well will never be able to pay. And no more of how you do your so-called ‘restocking,’ I’ve seen the funnels and the jugs of warehouse gin, you think I was born yesterday?”

“Let’s not get into how you were born,” Jimmy said.

The men standing around them didn’t move. Still, there was that sense of them drawing together, watching.

“I’ve had just about enough of your attitude,” Dan said.

Jimmy felt it then. The *whoosh* of rightness he used to feel on the ice when he knew without thinking how the action would turn, skating fast and free into the clack of the puck against his stick, the crowd shouting around him. He took the keys from his jacket and dropped them on the bar.

Later, he’d tell the story from behind the bar at O’Malley’s, then at Sullivan’s, and finally at his own place down on Water Street, a snug little tavern with dark wood and cozy lamps, like a rich man’s library, he liked to think, the kind of place you could sit for hours and ride out a wintry day. And later he would say, putting on Fitzzy’s brogue, *‘twas the only sound in the place, it was. Not a cough, not a foot shuffle or the sound of the Gent’s room flushing, just the sweet jingle of those keys hitting the good old wood of the bar,* and the men gathered around would nod, seeing it too, the sound of his voice like music.