

Mistakes

In Toronto, there is a bar on every street corner. For a first year college student like me, this was a big, wonderful adventure.

There were three of us. We'd become friends after the first week in residence at the university. All of us were from somewhere else, and the big city was a little intimidating. Al and Tony were in the same science program as I was. None of us had a girlfriend, so we sort of hung together.

Friday nights we usually visited the bars on Spadina Avenue. Being broke most of the time meant we couldn't afford the fancy places; we generally looked for somewhere where the beer was cheap. And at twenty five cents a glass, the kinds of places we found ourselves in were mostly filled with aging alcoholics and mumbling drunks. But with beer that cheap, we didn't care. We revelled in the atmosphere, such as it was.

Al was a funny guy. A short, stocky Mediterranean type, he was always full of stories from high school about his Italian friends and the good times they'd had. Rick, on the other hand, was pretty quiet; he was the tall athletic type who didn't say much, but he did enjoy having a good time. I was my usual self; quiet, but with a sarcastic wit that made my friends laugh.

We'd gotten to know each other during Freshman Week. One of the 'Get to Know Each Other' activities was a treasure hunt, and Al, Tony and I found ourselves on the same team.

Freshman Week at the university was a big deal back then, and the treasure hunt was set up so that teams would have to travel all over the city, getting to know it and each other. You got points for finding things and bringing them back to a central location. And not just ordinary things ... you had to locate all kinds of weird, embarrassing stuff in the most out-of-the-way places, and somehow figure out a way to obtain what you were supposed to find. There were hundreds of items on the list; the winning team would be the one who located the most.

After several hours of wandering the downtown area, we had successfully located a well-know biker bar and obtained the price list. We had 'liberated' a beer glass from the restaurant at the top of the TD Bank building. We even managed to obtain the phone number of one of the 'Hari Krishna' guys who chanted up and down Yonge Street in their filmy orange saris. We were having a blast.

We didn't manage to locate a police officer and steal his hat. That was probably a good thing. On the other hand, that day, cops were pretty scarce on the streets. I think they may have had some bad experiences with our treasure hunts in the past.

Some of the items on the list were much more challenging. We decided to tackle a hard one next. We were supposed to visit the Victory Burlesque Theatre on Queen Street and find out some personal information about a stripper named 'Bountiful'.

For first year male college students, that was a challenge we couldn't ignore.

We located the theatre without any problem, and in our enthusiasm, actually paid admission to see the show. While Al and I sat in the back and enjoyed the show, Tony used his charm to get back stage and talk to Bountiful. He brought her out front to talk to us.

I'm not sure what you would picture when you think of a stripper named 'Bountiful', but she was, well, bountiful. We were in awe. Tongue-tied. Tony was a god!

Somehow Tony convinced her not only to tell us about herself, which was all the competition required, but to actually accompany us back to the treasure hunt 'headquarters' and perform for the judges.

I think that may have been why we won.

After the first week or two of classes, Tony, Al and I were often joined on our Friday night excursions by Rick, a short, skinny little guy who could tell jokes like you wouldn't believe. He kept us in stitches all the time, and we were happy to include him in our little group.

The first time Rick went to a bar with us on a Friday night, we discovered something about him that was a little unsettling. When he drank, he became a different person.

Normally guys who drink a lot get loud and stupid. Everyone laughs a lot and has a good time. Rick was the exact opposite. Normally quite a funny guy, when he drank he became taciturn and morose. He kept to himself. Until he'd had too much to drink. Then he became nasty.

Not to us, you understand. To other people in the bar. Usually the biggest, meanest looking drunks in the place. He would say things to make them angry. Insult them. Make fun of what they were wearing. Imply that their manhood was in question.

The first time Rick started doing this, we were dumbfounded. How could nice, funny Rick turn into such an unpleasant, obnoxious person? Worse, he seemed to have no idea of the problems he was causing us.

I don't know how familiar you are with cheap bars, but it is generally true that when you call across the bar to someone wearing leather and sporting a 3-day growth of beard, and call them a 'frigging pansy', you can expect certain things to happen.

The first few times this occurred, we managed to talk and joke our way out of it. We would apologize for Rick, and drag him out of whatever bar we were in as quickly as possible. Not so easy when all of us were pretty unsteady on our feet.

We liked Rick. Maybe we figured that we could keep an eye on him and keep him out of trouble. Who knows what we thought. But it didn't work. And things didn't get better. Twice in the next month, Rick's mouth got us into some serious trouble. Punches were thrown. Rick, being short and skinny, received most of them.

Al and Tony thought this was all great fun. They were content to sit back and let Rick take his lumps, hoping perhaps that he would learn a valuable lesson. But I couldn't do that.

I didn't drink much after that. I couldn't. I somehow found myself in the role of Rick's 'protector'. When he'd had a little too much to drink, it became my job to keep him from shooting off his mouth, and if that failed, which it mostly always did, to get him and the other guys out of whatever bar we were in, in a hurry. Sometimes forcefully. I needed to be mostly sober to do that.

But inevitably I slipped up. We were having such a good time; some girls we knew from the girls' dorm had joined us, and Rick was behaving himself, so I had a few drinks. And then a few more.

First year male college students tend to drink a lot. Sometimes to excess. As long as you can get up and walk away when you're done drinking, everything is OK. That night I could barely stand.

And then Rick started in on several older guys at the next table. He called them every name imaginable, and made fun of their clothes, their long hair and their looks. Rick was barely functioning himself, but his mouth was working overtime.

One of the big beefy guys at the next table stood up and approached Rick. He grabbed him by the shirt front and lifted him out of his chair, and prepared to throw a punch. This had happened before.

I really should have done nothing. I wasn't in any shape to talk Rick out of this, and it was too late to take hold of him and get him out of there. I did the only thing I could think of ... I grabbed the big beefy guy and hit him. Hard.

This particular bar was a little fancier than the usual ones we frequented; it was quite dark, lit only by spotlights here and there, and flashing coloured lights hung haphazardly around the room.

I must have broken his nose. All I remember is blood flowing everywhere, and those flashing lights, and me throwing up on the floor, my head spinning.

Somehow Al and Tony got both of us out of there. Rick and I were both unhurt, but I was completely out of it. The flashing lights, the blood, and all those drinks had completely freaked me out. I don't remember anything else from that night.

That was the last time I went out drinking with the guys on Friday nights. We still hung out together, but I'd had enough. They continued their fun for another month or so, until Rick finally did get roughed up after opening his mouth one too many times. After that we all sort of decided there were better things to do. Besides, exams were looming.

I still hear from Rick once in a while. He's married, and has two handsome sons, both of them taller than he is. I don't know if Rick still gets belligerent when he drinks; I don't know if he even drinks at all, any more.

But I hope he keeps a close eye on his boys when they go off to college!