



2 Drink Minimum

by Daniel Charles Ross

The bar is small, dark, and trite, nestled in a strip mall between a prosperous and garish Korean nail salon and the upscale Gourdough's Public House. This bar is not upscale. It survives precisely because it's a hole people can climb into and pull over themselves.

It's as anonymous as porn theater sex. It has no windows, no sign over the door, no chipped and faded little cigarette-company decal with a penguin proclaiming *Come on in, it's KOOL inside!* The metal door is old and rusted, dented here and there, with two punctures that let in rain. It works with a scream of protest, just like most of the bar's patrons.

The place has weathered barn wood nailed to the wall at the far end, and a few dart players of unreliable skill throw feathered projectiles at a target hung from a nail. A ragged color printout of someone's ex-wife is taped over the ten-ring, encouraging accuracy. Most of the darts embed into the barn wood anyway.

As a celluloid Nick the Bartender said to the you-never-existed George Bailey in *It's a Wonderful Life*, this too is a place where men, and now women, are hard customers who come to drink hard liquor, and get drunk. If you can't drink at least two, you are out of your league here. Go next door to Gourdough's where there is better lighting and you can order your fucking Mojito.

Coincidentally, the bartender here is also named Nick. He hasn't mixed a White Russian in two years. There was that Manhattan last month, but it was served to a regular who followed up with a triple Lagavulin neat. The woman's date never showed—married prick, got cold feet. After almost two years on that bar stool, she never came back.

This is a destination bar, where men and women often meet with others not their spouse. Couples huddle in booths around the perimeter of the main room. A few more sit at booths and a few tables in satellite rooms even darker than the main area. There are other regulars, too. You can buy or sell information here, or plan some deal, but don't get caught with dope or it's your ass. If someone calls in looking for a customer—a frantic wife, an angry husband—no one is ever there. Sorry, really busy. Take a message?

Detective Inspector Douglas Lee Havlichek is distinguishable from the other customers only to the bartender. Nick has served the cop booze since he came on the job; through two marriages, three killed partners and six promotions. He does a very passable simulation of a businessman, with his Abboud suits and Burberry trench coat. The homicide cops are well known to be natty dressers, and Havlichek does his part. You need nice suits when you go to your partners' funerals. Havlichek doesn't have a terrible average, though, for his thirty-two years. That works out to less than one dead partner per decade. But after he lost Mooney, Havlichek decided he'd rather work solo. He's on the glide slope to a disappointing retirement anyway, so the bosses agreed.

He also doesn't care about any two-drink minimum, because Detective Havlichek hasn't had two or fewer drinks at a sitting since 12th grade, when he partied so hard that he barely graduated. Only Mrs. Ellsworth had saved that, allowing a retake of the final exam over the angry objections of Mr. Crawford, the so-called "guidance counselor" who hated Havlichek since he was a southmore. That's how they say it here, *southmore*, not sophomore. So he passed with a D-plus—still hadn't studied—and drew the Logan green cap and gown to make the high school perp walk with almost a thousand other seniors that year.

Here's a piece of info for that next lull in class reunion conversation: Today, a man named Logan Green is the co-founder and chief executive officer of the ride-sharing service Lyft.

No, that doesn't mean anything. Nothing does.

Havlichek doodles on a bar napkin. When he looks up, Nick is already watching him. The detective waves an index finger in airy, imperfect circles, ordering another round. Nick pulls a Stroh's from an ornate tap and then pours an extra-double Johnny Walker Black while the beer foam settles. By the time Havlichek survived the summer after high school, he could drink a whole fifth of Johnny Walker Black and still be just walking-around high, could drive and everything. That time he wrecked his car down the street from Griff's house, where Griff's mother always bought the party alcohol, the local uniforms didn't even know he was wasted. That was the first time Havlichek thought about a career in police work.

Police work is how he describes it, because cops will tell you honestly, in quiet moments, that “law enforcement” isn’t the same thing. Rookies do law enforcement; veterans do police work. Police work maintains order and keeps people safe and free, keeps the jackoffs in their own districts, at least. Those lofty goals are not always the purview of laws, so most cops don’t enforce laws. They do police work.

Pavlichek’s phone buzzes in an inside-left coat pocket, but he doesn’t have to look at it to know who it is. His personal cell is in the inside-right pocket, but it never buzzes. He downs the scotch at once, then powers down the beer.

“Gotta run, Nick. Work,” he says. He leaves a fifty on the bar, because if you tip a bartender well now, he tips a cop well later. Havlichek gets only two steps away before turning back to Nick.

“Hey, *you* havin’ a good day, man?”

Nick shrugs. “Sure. I guess. You know, it is what it is.”

“You are right about that.” Havlichek waves a two-finger salute and turns to the door. “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

“Okay, Inspector,” Nick says. He wipes wet rings from the polished surface of the bar and picks up the napkin. Havlichek has carefully torn up the business card of the department psychologist and left it in a perfect teepee of matte pasteboard on the bar.

On the napkin, Havlichek has drawn the crude image of a handgun shooting a bullet through a cartoon badge, and all around it, over and over, he’s written the words *Kill me now*.