

so this guy walks into a bar

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so this guy walks into a bar

by [MasterofAllImagination](#)

Summary

A man with black glasses and a tie too skinny to really deserve the term takes his order.

“Bourbon,” Hermann says, hooking his cane on the edge of the bar and sliding by degrees onto a stool.

“Straight up?” the bartender asks.

“*Please.*” Does he *look* like the kind of man who enjoys having his nostrils fumigated by undiluted whiskey? “On the rocks.”

Notes

Now with slightly extended ending [here](#)

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

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The man, for some unknowable reason, likely insanity, smirks; and turns around to grab a bottle. The shelves are dense, the bar is dimly lit, and the stools are newly upholstered to appear as though they are old. Typical and *Amerikanischen*. Some kind of rock ‘n roll plays, thankfully quietly, on a jukebox at the back; similarly dressed up in plastic and neon to look retro yet sporting an LCD screen.

Hermann turns back around and watches the man fix his drink. Tattoos ensconce his arms and disappear underneath sleeves rolled to his elbows. Their patterns are indiscernible to his weak eyes in the low light.

“You a fan?” the man asks. He sticks an index finger against his forearm. “I’ve got the ’62 Mothra,” he says, switching sides, “and the ’54 Godzilla, of course; gotta have the original, and here—” he pulls aside his loose collar—“I’ve got a couple Harryhausens, absolute genius, that guy, I swear.” He shakes his head appreciatively, as though inviting Hermann to share in some private joke.

He slides his eyes up to the man’s face. “No,” he says, curtly, looking pointedly at the drink that has not yet been relinquished to him. “I am *not* a fan.”

The bartender’s raised eyebrows fall. “Oh. Well. I guess you just like tattoos, then.” He shrugs, holding Hermann’s eyes for a moment, as Hermann debates the merits of correcting him over the merits of being left alone with his bourbon. Alcohol wins. He looks down at his drink, and hears the bartender move off after a moment.

Halfway to the bottom of the glass, Hermann’s editor slinks into the establishment, already a couple sheets to the wind and toting a woman on his arm as though she were a handbag. “Hermann!” he hails, a bit too loudly for the sedate atmosphere. Hermann pulls his back straight and holds his glass between them, like a barrier.

“Simon,” Hermann greets. “And--?”

“Julia,” the woman says, and Hermann is abruptly sure that that isn’t her real name at all.

“Charmed,” he murmurs. “I suppose Paramount’s agent cancelled?”

A smile swerves across Simon’s mouth. “Nah, tha’s—tomorrow morning. Tonight’s for *fun*, Herm!”

Under his breath, Hermann mutters, “*How* many times have I told you—” but Simon insists on continuing.

“The signing went great, the numbers are great; New York Times. Top o’ the list—How many weeks, Jane?”

She looks bored as she supplies, “Dunno, babe.”

“Anyway. They’re *interested*, Herm.” Simon claps a sticky, sticky hand on Hermann’s shoulder, and he does his best not to convulse. “I’m gonna sign you the biggest film deal this side of *Fifty Shades*.”

And the damned thing is, he probably will. The man is a louse, but, like the self-same vermin, has a proclivity for worming himself into the wallets of tight-budgeted publishing firms to always find Hermann’s novels such lucrative deals. So he forces a smile and does not shrug off the hand.

“I know you are, Simon,” he says, lifting his glass.

With that, Simon considers his professional duties discharged, and returns to slinging his arm around Julia’s shoulders. “Come join us,” he offers, falsely.

“I’m fine here,” Hermann returns, truthfully.

Simon shrugs and moves deeper into the bar to seek, like a nocturnal pest, some dark corner.

Hermann considers his bourbon—it really isn’t that bad—and makes the split-second decision to down the rest in two large gulps.

The tattooed man comes back. “Another?” he asks. It’s the mark of a good bartender, but Hermann can’t quite find it in himself to be appreciative.

“Water,” Hermann says. The man leans heavily on his forearms in front of him, and Hermann can slightly make out some of the shapes, now: stylized butterfly wings in mustard and rust opposite blue-black scales, almost fishlike if he didn’t think too hard about it, which he isn’t wont to do at this juncture. His hand hurts from signing autographs and he hasn’t eaten since lunch. He will have his liquid dinner and then go back to the hotel room to retire early so as to be fresh for the meeting with Paramount, the *real* one, in the morning.

“You *do* like them. That or you really are a fanboy, and you’re embarrassed, which, I get it, man; but this is a safe place. You can admit it.” The man shows no indication of moving to get his asked-for water.

Hermann wasn’t—he isn’t *staring*. But surely no one bearing such audacious body art does so for no other reason than to *solicit* attention, so he isn’t sure why the man *cares*—

“Take a picture. It’ll last longer.”

Damn, but Hermann is *tired*. “I am merely trying to determine,” he says, carefully; although the bourbon has not yet gone to his head, “why a grown man would choose to permanently

adorn himself with cartoon characters.”

There is a brief pause in which Hermann dares to hope that he’s scared the man off. Nope. He merely settles his weight more solidly over his forearms, bracing his legs wide so he can lean over the bar with his face close to Hermann’s, so that he’s forced to sit back a bit to maintain his personal space.

“How would you even know what a cartoon *is*? You don’t look like you enjoy yourself too much.” He reaches out, and, in a move so unexpected that Hermann has no time to counter it, flicks a finger against the topmost button of his buttoned shirt. “You’re kind of a walking neon sign, blinking, *repressed, repressed*,” the man says, putting on a passable if exaggerated German imitation of Hermann’s slight accent.

His eyes narrow. “And I suppose you and your *bartender’s intuition* have sussed this deep insight out of me in, what, the five minutes you’ve known me—”

“Oh, I only needed five *seconds* to figure you out.”

With a clink, Hermann sets down his empty glass. “*Do* go on, Freud.” He gestures jerkily at himself, his mouth settling into a sneer, the sweet aftertaste of the bourbon behind it.

The man actually walks around from behind the bar—doesn’t he have *patrons*?—so that he can dump himself on the stool next to Hermann, after giving him a purposefully elongated once-over, which Hermann bears with aplomb, briefly wondering why *this* was how he was spending his evening; picking an argument with some American slob in a god-forsaken bar, he was a *novelist* for God’s sake not a—

“You’re a desk jockey,” the man declares.

Hermann rattles his cane. “Oh, *well* spotted.”

The man holds up a finger. “Ah—not done—you *like* being a desk jockey.”

Hermann blinks.

“What, really? God, that’s sad.”

“Pots, kettles,” Hermann says, going to pick up his glass and belatedly remembering it was empty.

“Lemme get that for you—” the man snags the glass from under his nose and leans his torso completely over the bar, smearing the front of his shirt in god-knows-what residue, fumbling under the bar for something. He emerges with a bottle (different than the one he’d poured from originally; Hermann glances at the label and has to refrain from raising an eyebrow) and pours out a finger that he drinks from himself before handing to Hermann.

Hermann pointedly wipes the rim of the glass with his sleeve before sipping, and now he really can’t resist the rise of an eyebrow. The American parlance, he believes, is *good shit*.

“I daresay I make more in a week than you do in a month,” Hermann declares, crassly, he’ll admit, but something about the man makes his jaw grind just a little bit to the left; makes his skin crawl, but not necessarily in the *opposite* direction of those gaudy tattoos. He sips again.

The man shrugs, insouciance written in every wrinkle of his shirt. “Do what you love and you’ll never work a day in your life.” He grabs for the glass still in Hermann’s fingers, which Hermann relinquishes—“*Excuse me*—” only in order to prevent spillage from a tug-of-war. The bartender takes a large swallow, and Hermann watches the movement of his throat as it goes down.

He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. “Listen, why don’t we—”

“Gottlieb!” Simon calls, from across the room. People stare. Hermann rolls his eyes to heaven with his back still turned, summons all his patience, and looks around, motioning with his hand for Simon to *keep his voice down*. Simon wanders over, clearly having reached the full three sheets, wobbling. “Gottlieb. Don’t forget. Paramount. Paramount. Tomorrow; paramount that you don’t forget—heh—forget Paramount—boy, I should write my own shit, shouldn’t I?”

And Hermann doesn’t have a chance to tactfully say goodnight to his editor because the man with the tattoos has grabbed him by the shoulder and spun him back around (the barstools *spin*? Practically *barbaric*--) and is demanding of him, “*Gottlieb*? Is your last name Gottlieb? He called you ‘Hermann’ earlier, didn’t he—but there’s *no way*—” His jaw is slightly slack, and though his sideways look is somewhat skeptical, his eyes shine behind his glasses.

Of all the bars in all the world, Hermann thinks, to be recognized in *this* one by *this* man? Incredible. In the denotation of the word, as meaning, begging credulity.

“You’re Hermann Gottlieb!” the man gasps. “You wrote *These Empty Streets*, oh, god, and—*Blue Scheherazade*—oh my god.” The man sits back hard and slaps his knee. “God. *You’re Hermann Gottlieb*?” Briefly, he looks disgusted.

Hermann can’t help but chortle softly. “Never meet your heroes,” he says, flatly. “Here. You seem like you need this more than I do.” He pushes the bourbon’s remnants towards him, which are knocked back immediately.

Drumming fingers on the bar, Hermann contemplates getting up and leaving, but the bartender’s astonished eyes still haven’t left him; and seem to be raking over him with new consideration, devoid of the deliberation of earlier.

“Look, you’re a bit of an asshole and all, but I guess genius always has its drawbacks, and it’s not like I’m ever gonna get another chance to pick *Hermann Gottlieb*’s brain about the ending to *Old Phantasma*, off the record of course; authorial intent is dead, long live reader interpretation, etcetera etcetera; besides, I could score some serious upvotes on Reddit even with just hearsay—”

Hermann wants to snap a name before realizing he doesn’t know it. “*You*,” he settles for instead. “Shut *up*. I wouldn’t discuss my work with you even if I hadn’t already spent the day

doing so, *ad nauseum*, on occasions to people even lower on the strata of intelligence than I suspect *you* to be—”

“Hey, asshole; I have two Ph.Ds—”

“From the internet?” Hermann asks, sweetly, complete with a twist of his head.

“From *Berkeley*,” the man snaps.

“Really.”

“*Yeah*.” The man spreads his arms, looking down at himself; as though the view were something to be impressed with. “I’m a bit of a genius myself.”

Hermann snorts, and makes no attempt to hide it; picking up his cane in his hand and idly tapping it between his knees a few times.

“*And*,” the man says, suddenly standing; suddenly leaning into the space between their two stools and brandishing a finger in Hermann’s face, “I’m published, too! I mean, *Lost Horizons* was no bestseller, but.” He shrugs, aiming for magnanimous and falling short somewhere in the vicinity of self-satisfied.

Hermann’s grip on his cane slackens, and then tightens reflexively to stop it from falling between his suddenly lax fingers. “Lost—*Lost Horizons*?”

“*Yeah*.” The man sits down again, although Hermann has a sick and slightly out-of-body suspicion that he is no longer *the man* but one *Newton Geiszler*—

“Holy shit. You’ve read it. You’ve read my book.” Geiszler raises a hand to his hair, bunching it up into his fist; when he relinquishes his grip, it sticks up at all sorts of new and odd angles. “Hermann Gottlieb has read my book! This can’t be happening to me. This *can’t* be *happening*.”

Personally, Hermann echoes the sentiment, trying to control his own face so that it neither soars into heights of disbelief, nor falls into depths of chagrin, because he has of course read *Lost Horizons*; has in fact read it multiple times and even currently has a copy packed among his things back in his hotel room.

His rapidly deteriorating confidence in his own literary judgement is given a reprieve when a man approaches them from the other side of the bar, stolidly built with blonde hair set atop his head like a pile of straw. “Newt,” he says. “What’re you doing? If Pentecost catches you, you’re in for it.”

“Aw, shit,” Newt says.

Hermann wishes he could forget he ever heard the name--the incontrovertible evidence that the insufferable man before him was indeed the author of his favorite book--spoken aloud.

“Bitches gotta drink,” Newt says with a wink, leaning over to place a hand on Hermann’s shoulder. It is not the quick contact of a brotherly clap, nor the uncomfortable and lingering

thing that Simon bestowed upon him earlier. Hermann makes a series of rapid calculations in his head, closes his eyes, and holds out his hand.

When he opens his eyes, Newt still hasn't taken it. He raises his eyebrows pointedly, and, slowly, Newt slips his hand into his for a dry and brief handshake. "It has been a pleasure," Hermann declares, gravely; "and I hope we never cross paths again."

"*Newt*," the man behind the bar says.

Distracted, Newt glances between Hermann and the man, blinking rapidly. "Yeah. Yeah, coming, Raleigh." Newt levers himself off his stool. Hermann had long since rotated his seat to fully face his companion, so Newt ends up hovering just beyond the bracket of his knees, a small smile playing over his face. "See ya around."

"Doubtful," Hermann rejoins, but Newt has already gone back behind the bar; his tattoos hidden from view as he chats animatedly to another patron.

Well. That was that, then; and Hermann's glass is empty, and his mind is suddenly very, very tired again; so he's not sure why it takes him such a long minute to stand up and dig out his wallet. And a pen. And a business card, on the back of which, he writes, *I'm not paying for the second one*, and folds it between a tenner, before walking out the door without glancing back.

And if it had been his personal card, and not his professional card; and if it had borne his cell phone number on its front—well. The bar had been dimly lit, after all, and he hadn't been wearing his glasses. Perhaps he mixed them up.

End Notes

Pacific Rim drinking game: take one shot every time your treacherous little brain whispers, *but what if we really do get a Pacific Rim 3?* (I daren't hope, and yet, I hope anon.)

I'm on tumblr, if you're curious, under the auspicious handle of terribleoldwhitemen.

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