

TALL TALE

By

ANDY BRESLIN

“It all started almost a quarter-century ago.”

I looked behind me to see if this initial thread of what promised to be an impressive yarn was directed at anyone else, but none of the rowdy tavern patrons was paying the slightest attention to the storyteller. Some were trying to get laid, others, drunk. The latter were uniformly more successful, making steady and increasingly sloppy progress toward their goal.

He was seated on a barstool, where I had seen him waiting to be served since before I’d even managed to push my way through the crowd to reach the bar, but while he remained dry, I’d managed, with considerable effort, to secure a pint of Guinness. I smiled politely at him, harboring only a mild suspicion that he might be a psychopath. He had a friendly sort of face. Weather-beaten, but still bright, framed with reddish locks now going slightly gray. This was a man who had been around the block a few times, probably because he couldn’t remember where he parked his car.

“Aye, twenty five years ago, in this very tavern,” he said, his Irish brogue dripping with rich character, conjuring images of faraway green lands, and—though I was loath to admit it—pots of gold guarded by pugnacious drunken munchkins. “I was in here drinking away me paycheck, as I was in the habit of doing in those days. Now, son, sobriety is a chronic disease, unfortunately incurable, but thank the good lord, it does respond to treatment. I’d only just arrived and begun my medicinal

regimen, when this young gypsy kid comes in, takes a seat beside me, and we start talking about politics.”

I smiled again, enjoying his tale already, thanks largely to the lilt of that irresistible accent which seemed to caress his very words as they slipped out of his mouth. A few heads nearby began leaning in to eavesdrop.

“Now I have never had the slightest interest in politics,” he continued, “except until another man starts talking about his own. Then I heartily disagree with whatever he says and act as if I believe every word that manages to escape me mouth. If he complains about the unions, I pretend I’m a union man. If he bemoans big business, I call him a communist. I’m just in it fer the thrill of the argument, you see.

“Mark my words, lad, the quickest road to an early grave is taking politics seriously. You can take that wisdom to the bank, you can!” he roared, wagging a crooked finger at me. “And nothing will inflame the fires of fury in a man as sure as losing an argument, and that he was. I don’t mean to brag, but I can dish out the sophistry and the rhetoric better than any Philadelphia lawyer. I could sell snow to an Eskimo, sand to an Arab, and fertilizer to a member of Congress. I’d have been a crackerjack attorney meself, if it weren’t for my unshakable integrity.

“Repeatedly snared by my inescapable logic, the young and hotheaded disputant was getting so flustered, I thought the veins in his head, already swelling and pulsating, were sure to burst and soak us all in his self-righteous blood. But I’d had my fun, and only a fool can discuss politics for more than fifteen minutes without getting bored, and that I was by now.

“So I tell him I didn’t mean anything and hoped I hadn’t offended. And just to be a good sport, I ask him if he’d like to play a game of darts. A friendly game, and just to make it even friendlier, I talk him into betting ten dollars on the outcome.

“And of course he was so fired up over the argument that his dart game was nothing but a pathetic spectacle, hobbled as it was by his indignant ire. Now mind you, I can spear a cigarette from a man’s lips twenty yards away with me eyes closed, and I’ve done that on a dare as well, I have. With God as my witness, I’d have been a darts champion, if not for my unwillingness to dedicate myself to such a frivolous pursuit.

“I could have won the game in no time at all. Instead I stayed right with him. Every bad throw he made, I duplicated exactly. At first he didn’t notice, just thought I was as bad as he. But after a while he saw the pattern beginning to form, but he didn’t say a word because it would have only further amplified his embarrassment. So he just stood there in silent humiliation throughout the long contest, both of us making throws that would have shamed my grandmother, who had arthritis all her life, and vertigo to boot. All the while the kid is growing angrier and angrier, till his shots are missing the board and I had to end the game quickly before someone was injured by an errant missile.

“I offered him a handshake, but he just scowled at me, staring daggers, better aimed than his darts were. He muttered something about the true test of man not being his ability to throw darts. Naturally I was intrigued by the cryptic remark and petitioned him to elucidate his thoughts on the subject. So he eventually comes out and asserts that he is a manlier man than I, or words to that effect.”

He interrupted his story to make a half-hearted attempt to get the attention of the barman, but failing, returned to recounting his tale.

“Shocked by such an unsubstantiated accusation, I felt compelled to rise to the challenge. I am not one to kiss and tell, now lad, but with all due humility, I’ve always had a certain charm with the fairer sex. When I left the maternity ward, I broke a half a dozen hearts. As sure as I’m standing here, I could have been a gigolo, if not for fear of the pains of hellfire that would have been my due for such an immoral avocation. But I wasn’t about to endure any sully of my reputation as a ladies’ man. I suggested that the first to persuade one of the many lovely lasses in the bar to give him a kiss would be the winner. I also suggested a doubling of our previous wager, to which the cocky little bugger heartily, foolishly, agreed.

“Well Romeo, he approaches a beautiful girl, sipping at her rum and coke on the other side of the bar, and such a charismatic imp was he that she slaps him right across the face inside of a minute. Undaunted, he moves on to another corner of the bar to seek a woman with lower standards. So I go up to the young woman who had so recently exhibited such exquisite good taste, and I say to her, ‘Pardon me miss, I hate to bother you, but you were just approached by a vulgar pig of a man a moment ago.’ She smiled back at me, already impressed with my trenchant insight. ‘Now, I don’t mean to trouble you, but we are involved in a wager, the upshot of which is, if you give me a small peck on the cheek it would go a long way toward teaching the scoundrel some manners. I’m just doing my civic duty, you understand.’

“Well, she gives me a long one, square on the lips, I swear on me mother’s grave. And truth be told, I suspect she was not solely motivated by our altruistic mission to mold human character, for I was quite the handsome devil in those days. But I tell you, he was so inflamed with rage and humiliation, I thought for sure he’d drop stone dead right there in the bar, and shuffle off to meet his maker, straight

from a tavern. I don't imagine St. Peter would look too kindly on any showing up at the pearly gates reeking of liquor, and I didn't want his immortal soul upon my conscience, so I says to him, 'Look son, let me buy you a drink to show you there's no hard feelings.' Well, in response to my noble gesture of brotherhood and generosity, this ungrateful whelp had the audacity to suggest that he could outdrink me!"

I sipped my own dark and heavenly beverage and continued to enjoy the narrative.

"I was flabbergasted of course. Just by the ornery belligerence of this fellow who couldn't seem to make peace with me no matter how hard I tried, as well as by the absurd speculation that I could be outdrunk by anything less than a hippo, and a seasoned drinker of a hippo at that. I suggested a trebling of our wager, and he agreed.

"He allows me the choice of drinks, so naturally I took Jameson's. The bartender, he starts setting up shots, one after another. Now me mother started giving me whiskey before she quit nursing me, and I saved her a great deal of trouble, for I liked the whiskey better. Why, if ever I cut meself, the blood runs a beautiful golden amber hue, you see. I would have become a professional drinker if there were such a thing, and many's the night I've lamented that there is not. The point is there's not a man born who could outdrink me, not a one.

"We down them one after another, and I pretend that I'm getting drunker than a monkey, but all the while me liver's laughing, sayin' 'is that the best ye can do?' This fellow, he held his own, I'll hand it to him. I thought for sure he'd 've been down fer the count after six or seven, but he hung on. He began slurring his words and rocking in his seat, so I mimicked him, just to maintain appearances. 'Twas the

finest piece of acting I've ever done in me life, it was. Well, around ten shots or so, he's about ready to fall off his barstool, and I'm making as if I too were three sheets to the wind, ready to fly a fourth. He says to me—and I'm translating it into English, for it was spoken in drunken gypsy, mind you—he says, 'Look, you're not so bad after all. Let's call it a draw.'

"So then I drop my pretense of intoxication and turn cold sober in an instant, and I say, 'But lad, we're just starting to have fun!' and I slap him a hard one on the back, knocking him onto the floor from which ignoble position he labored long to crawl back up. And when he did, there was another shot waiting for him and I put it right up to his lips and plead with him to have one more shot with me, 'for old times sake,' I say.

"And we both slam our shots back, but his head keeps going back, and the next thing ye knew, he was on the floor once again, this time passed out cold."

A crowd had gathered about the yarn spinner now, though I was still his primary focus, rapt in the story, eager to hear more. "What happened then?" I asked.

The orator glanced about to briefly acknowledge all the listeners who had gathered and then returned his eyes to my own and continued, "Well, I cleaned out his wallet to pay the bar tab, and the girl who'd kissed me earlier, she and I shaved his eyebrows off. Then we got his keys and found his car in the lot. We threw him in the back seat and drove the car to a tow-away zone and left it there. The keys, we threw in the river.

"I admit, I was a vindictive young man then, and I've learned my lesson. I've learned to turn the other cheek, just like it says in the good book. For you see, that gypsy, he had his revenge on me. He placed on me a dreadful curse with which I

shall be haunted for the rest of my days. A malediction of such malevolence that, twenty years later, it pains me still.”

“What is it?” I asked, summing up the thoughts of the large crowd around us.

He fixed me with a sober and solemn stare and intoned gravely, “Lad, you see me as I am, flesh and blood in all its glory, but forever after and to this day, no matter what I do or say. . . ” he paused and his voice acquired a tone of even greater austerity, “. . . I am completely invisible to bartenders.”

The crowd erupted in laughter, and I noticed that while I had finished my pint, he still hadn’t gotten a drink. This was soon remedied by the rowdy assembled listeners, now laughing and roaring thanks to him and soon he was offered several shots of whiskey. These he gratefully accepted and downed in rapid succession.

I realized that this was how he drank, spinning colorful tales to the delight of those around him. Such a good story it was, hitting a common nerve. Many had been the time I’d felt I were under such a curse, gripped by thirst and unwelcome sobriety in crowded pubs, unable to get a drink to save my life. I bought a shot and presented it to him. He accepted it with a nod and a wide grin before quickly emptying the glass. With another nod and a quick word of thanks he slipped through the crowd and out the door.

After some effort, I engaged the bartender’s attention, eager for another taste of precious ale.

“Quite a storyteller that guy is, huh?” I said.

“What guy?”

I paused for a moment, then smiled and said, “Never mind, just another pint, please.”

THE END

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