

Birthday at Bowfin's

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Shelley had been in Bowfin's Bar before, but she still looked around carefully. There was rusting iron and dingy snowshoes on the walls. The antlers above the bar tangled a crutch from some tiny child. On one side of the bar was a stuffed snowy owl. He raised his wings in moth-like protest, and stretched his beak grotesquely open. But it was not out of place. Like the great paperwasp nests, and the dangling bindings of the skis, these things were part of Bowfin's now. They were worn in, not to the walls, but to the minds of the people, the people that Shelley saw here night after night as they sat at the bar, or near the pool table. She sensed their fit and was satisfied.

-Hello Uncle Dan! Shelley and her sister Yvonne yelled as an older man came to their table.

They looked expectantly up at him. Shelley felt a little uncomfortable about the blatant demand. But Dan was pleased at the double recognition, and offered them dirty leeks from his pockets. They gleefully rejected them, waiting for the popcorn they knew he bought them. Grinning,

Note: A short story stimulated by frequent visits to  
Hobbes Bar  
JEB

he produced two bags of cheese popcorn.

-Thank you! Yvonne smiled before she ripped open the cellophane bag.

-Today's my birthday! Shelley declared and turned proudly to Dan.

-Oh, my goodness, and how old are you now?

-Eleven, April eighth. She smiled triumphantly.

Dan smiled back revealing grit between his teeth from the dirty leeks. He picked Shelley up.

-You have your choice. What shall it be? Kisses or spankings? Eleven of them!

Shelley began to struggle, unaccustomed to the clinging fingers of the worn man. Dan paddled her once, twice, three times, and she nearly twisted away.

-Oh, ho? So you don't want to be paddled! Then you will be kissed. He declared.

While her mother watched laughing, Dan brought his distended nose close to Shelley's freckled face. His squeezing hands distorted her cheeks, and twisted her struggling mouth as he brought his lips onto hers.

Shelley did not like his leek breath. But that was one of the things that adults were entitled to--leek breath and kissing little girls.

Shelley turned back to her coke a little demurely. She was not used to getting so much attention.

-Shelley, lets play dice! Yvonne said.

Dice was a new game, one they had seen the men play for drinks at the bar. Rose, the barmaid, had taken the

cup from a parchesi game and put the dice in it. The men complained, wanting a leather pouch for the dice. Since Rose didn't get one they never played with them much. Rose's daughter Rhonda showed Shelley and Yvonne how to play, and rattled up for the first game. She tumbled the dice onto the cedar tableboards, and began grouping them into pairs.

-Two sixes in the first throw. I'll quit with that. Now Shelley you have to beat that in one throw. Here.

Shelley shook the dice and let them fall from the cup. Her three twos beat Rhonda, so she passed the cup on to Yvonne.

From their corner Shelley could see the pool table to the left, and the door far right. The line joining the two was the only aisle in Bowfin's. Along it the wood showed bare, worn and gouged from shoes and chairs scraping it. As Shelley looked around the door opened and the pathway filled with five large men. They scuffled in. The leader had his plaid jacket off before he reached the bar. Every woolen wrinkle of their shoulders behaved as if they owned Bowfin's. The man in red walked up to Rose and ordered drinks before they had even found seats. Shelley was not the only one watching. She noticed the chairs pull back farther into themselves, and leave the scratched aisle wide. Silence further abandoned the path to the strangers. Shelley could tell everyone knew who they were. The men strode over to the pool table and stood patiently around, leaning against the walls, crushing Rose's careful

ornaments.. Shelley saw little bits of hornet nest stuck to a baggy red shirt.. She wondered that Rose didn't say anything. But Rose was silently wiping the bar. She didn't even look at the men.

Dan and Mitchell did not stop their pool game when the men came in, but their movements were slower. Dan leaned delicately over the table and gracefully sank the three ball. The balls moved silently, seeming to be sucked into the pocket. The force and casual noise left the game entirely as they elaborately ignored the waiting men.

When there were only four balls left on the table the tough stranger in a green plaid shirt walked right up to it. He put his quarter carefully into the plunger and stepped back. He would have the next game. Dan and Shelley's father Mitchell finished their game and left the table. They sat at the bar resentfully looking back at the table, but unwilling to play the men. Dan had not put his cuestick down. He now laid it on the counter, awkwardly blocking the drinks.

People were murmuring among themselves, but their voices were not loud enough to hide the sound of the crack as the white ball scattered the colored ones. The strangers were playing pool at Bowfin's. Shelley and Yvonne waited for something to happen. They had heard about these down-staters before.

-What do those men want? Shelley asked Rhonda.

-They've been here before. But I don't know why they come.. They used to come alot before Dad bought

Bowfin's, I think. He used to have trouble with them when we first came here. But I don't know what they want.

Rhonda said.

But it was Shelley's turn to shake the dice. All four came up differently. She wondered at that, thinking it was probably harder to get than a pair. But it still didn't count.

As the strangers played game after game of pool Bowfin's got noisier. People forgot about the five. Rose had turned the TV up loud to cover the silences, but it could hardly be heard now. Rose cleared the pool-player's bottles herself so they would not have to walk to the bar. Slowly the pathway closed in, blocked by a leg, or a chair jutting past the corner of a table. The muddy marks men who went straight from the door to the bar<sup>made</sup> were blending into the tabled crowd.

Shelley stopped paying attention to the men. She played game after game of dice with Rhonda and Yvonne. Little Yvonne proudly added the scores after every round. The bar finally came back to normal, though here and there were rumbles of men complaining about pool. But there were other games for them to play.

Suddenly total silence cloaked Bowfin's. Shelley looked at the door. Everyone looked at the door.

-Its Frankie! Shelley whispered excitedly to Yvonne.

He was not a tall man, but he was strong, and showed it through a tight green sweater. As he stood at the door the aisle quickly redefined itself, widening the

swath between the tables, piercing straight to the strangers. Shelley saw Frankie wasn't an angry person; he looked almost fatherly as he stood there. She liked him. He had a caved in cheek that had sunk a linear scar diagonally crossing it. It looked like the two halves were not matched up. Shelley had not noticed that before.

-That's Frankie. Rhonda repeated whispering.

Everyone was whispering it.

Frankie took his hands out of his pockets and stepped forward. But he did not go over to the pool table. He turned to Shelley. Space was made before him as he slowly walked over. Fascinated, Shelley watched him. Frankie smiled at her when he stood behind the chair she twisted around in. He tickled her under the chin, and told her she'd get a crooked neck all twisted around like that. It was the first thing he had said.

-Can I borrow your dice? he asked gesturing to the four dice spilled unnoticed over the table.

-Sure, yes, you can. Shelley answered entranced.

Frankie poked at them until they were all sixes, then scooped them into the cup.

-Thank you, ladies. he said.

Everyone watched him return to the aisle, and face the pooltable. The strangers were standing there, not playing. They were just waiting for Frankie. As Frankie walked towards the table, the aisle shut behind him. People blocked it stretching to see what would happen. Shelley tried, but could not see what happened when Frankie

met the men. They were all quiet; Frankie didn't fight or argue, but the five men left the bar without finishing their game. Shelley watched them squirm out an aisleway that was insolently blocked with chairs and legs. They said nothing; all that remained of the strangers was the bang of the screen door when they were all out.

Frankie stayed at the pool table jovially playing with the men who drifted back to the table. They all liked Frankie. Frankie noisily asked for beer after beer, and soon Bowfin's was livelier than it had been on a Thursday for a long time. Shelley and Rhonda tried to watch the pool games, but they didn't dare go over to the table, not so soon after the men had been there.

Finally Frankie came back to them with the dice.

-Look, have you ever played this game? he asked, and drew a circle on the table with a piece of chalk.

-You have to dump the bucket inside the circle, but and die that remains in it is points against you.

He showed them how it was done, and laughed at how poorly they did, and then he went back to the pool table. Shelley and Rhonda played Frankie's game until she had to leave. Yvonne had fallen asleep cuddled by her mother.

Bowfin's was usually crowded, but Saturday nights were most crowded. Paula nearly didn't take Shelley and Yvonne with her, but the kids pleaded so, she finally acquiesced. They were lonely in the country, and didn't see many people except at school and at Bowfin's.

Shelley and Yvonne took the corner table away from

people, and stayed apart. They knew they were not welcome when Bowfin's was crowded. Paula pushed her way back to them from the bar. She set cokes in front of them and sat down.

-Look at Uncle Dan. He sure is drunk tonight, she said.

The kids looked over to where he leaned against the bar. He was talking to their daddy in a gestureful language. Rose went over to him and gave him another beer. Dan became angry, but Shelley couldn't tell why. She watched the argument, and the final production of two quarters by a confused Dan. Something held these people clustered at the bar--Rose, Dan, her daddy-- so even her own father looked strange. This was the quality that Bowfin's gave people.

-Lets watch Daddy win at pool! Yvonne said excitedly when she saw him walk over to the table. She still regarded Bowfin's as a resort whose pool table, TV, and food were for her exclusive pleasure.

Shelley went over more slowly, unsure about interrupting her father's game. Mitchell only smiled at his kids, welcoming them.

-Ya come to watch your old man win a beer at pool?"

-Yes, Daddy, yes! Yea Daddy! Young Yvonne yelled clapping her hands.

Shelley joined in the cheering whenever it was their father's turn to hit the ball. If he pocketed it, the cries overflowed into little dances by the table. Mitchell



won that game and began another. Shelley watched him, noticing he was strong and certain. She liked seeing her father bend over the table, his sleeve catching as he pulled his elbow high before shooting. The kids noticed the stillness of the bar when they waited for a shot. The drone of the TV and Rose's shuffling conversations were the only noises. The two men did not talk; they let the game define their situation.

Shelley did not see him come in until he was at the pool table, for Frankie moved silently. He hung his jacket on the corner of the cue rack. Frankie was careful of such things; other men might droop their clothes on the stools, leaving Rose to figure out who they belong to at closing time. Not Frankie, though.

-Well, Frankie, do you think you can beat me today? Shelley's father boisterously asked. He only talked to Frankie that way when he had a little corner of empty beer bottles.

-Give me a cue and I'll pocket twice your balls, Frankie joked.

He put a quarter in the slot, and waited to play the winner.

Shelley and Yvonne admired Frankie. When he came close to them they could smell cedar, and the dank bogpeat. Frankie made Bowfin's seem small. Shelley knew the thick cedars of Reese's Bog from the dirt road winding to Bowfin's. From the car she often looked into the dripping green. The smell that Frankie carried, came from the hollows.

Shelley wondered what he discovered in the muck. No one else went in there.

Frankie called the two girls over to him. They went hesitantly.

-Have you ever seen a porcupine run? he asked.

They shook their heads.

-Watch.. Frankie said as he began to imitate the waddle and fearful backlooks of a porcupine.

Yvonne smiled at him, but she still felt a little shy. Then Frankie let his feet go faster than his hands and tumbled over in a ball on the dirty floor of Bowfin's.

Yvonne crinkled with laughter, letting her blond hair fall down her face and quiver on her white smock dress. Shelley too began to giggle.

-Guess what I am now. Frankie said returning to them.

He put his hands flat at the level of his face and slowly wagged his head back and forth, blinking his eyes and gulping his mouth.

-A bear! Yvonne screamed enchanted.

-Nooooo. he answered continuing his motions.

-A fish, Shelley deduced.

-Nooooo.. Frankie said gulping at her.

-I know! I know! Its a turtle! Yvonne cried.

-Right! Frankie boomed and scooped a squirmy Yvonne up and held her by the feet, her head dangling by the pool table legs. Frankie grinned at Shelley and then lowered Yvonne to the floor.

-You two play much pool? he asked.

-Sometimes my daddy lets us play if there is no one else wanting to play. Shelley said.

-Going to play tonight? Frankie asked.

-Oh, no, there's men here. Shelley replied retreating.

-Then I'll play pool, and you can go play the juke box Frankie said struggling with his pocket for a quarter.

Shelley and Yvonne had not noticed it was Frankie's turn to play pool. They took the quarter and ran over to the juke box. As they were trying to decide Rhonda joined them.

-Play Q-7. Its Frankie's favorite. Rhonda said.

He smiled over at them when his song came on; Shelley was very glad Rhonda had told her to play that song.

Shelley looked back to where her mother was sitting alone at the table. Instead of racing to the pooltable with Rhonda and Yvonne, Shelley went over to her mother.

-Why don't you come over and watch daddy? Shelley asked.

-Oh, I'd just rather sit here for a bit. You kids can have fun watching him. I've seen him play before.

-Well, I'll stay with you for a bit then, Shelley confided, not quite sure that was what her mother wanted.

She leaned back in her chair, rocking on the back legs. Shelley could see Rose and Dan at the bar, but the pool table was blocked from view by Paula. Rose opened another bottle of Pabst for Dan. Shelley watched her lean over the bar and set it right in front of him. In the

mirrors all around she could see Dan and Rose a thousand times, each slightly distorted. Rose did not leave after she gave him the beer. She had pulled her stool over to that end of the bar. Shelley watched the two of them talking, talking over the bar. Rose's hair was rich, and thick, ending in natural curls at her neck. She was fat in the hugeness of a pregnancy that did not end when the child was born. Her distended breasts were piled into points of a Sears bra under the sort of white cotton shirts that still had to be ironed. Shelley realized Rose always wore black pants.

-Now Shelley, stop your staring, and mind your own business. her mother crossly said.

Shelley looked guiltily away, not understanding. Then she noticed that the sunlight of early dinnertime had faded, and wondered when they would go home. It was late, but her father kept playing pool. Finally Mitchell left with his children. He drove home slowly so Shelley and Yvonne could stretch their hands out the back window of the station wagon to the ashy coldness of the night.

Shelley and Yvonne came to Bowfin's too often. Rose first told them not to go over by the pool table, for their chattering distracted the men. People that had once smiled when Paula followed a prancing Yvonne into Bowfin's, now sighed. Why does Paula bring those poor children here, they wondered. Shelley knew people resented her now, but she didn't understand it. Paula slowly stopped bringing them on Friday and Saturday nights. Finally Rose told them not to go running about but to stay in their chairs at a

table. They couldn't even go over to play the jukebox, for they took too much time, and always played the same dopey songs.

Shelley didn't feel wanted in Bowfin's. She didn't even like coming all that much, but Frankie might be there. Frankie still played with the kids. He did tricks, and bought them popcorn. Uncle Dan did too, though he teased Shelley so much her mother said it wasn't proper. She was getting too big for that sort of stuff, now she was eleven, her mother said.

When there weren't any other men playing pool, Mitchell ignored Rose's disapproving stares, and put a quarter in the table; Shelley and Yvonne played against him, taking two turns for his one. These were favorite times but they were rare now.

Shelley thought of Frankie as they drove down the dirt road to Bowfin's, on a bright May evening. She told Yvonne to be quiet when they came to the cedar swamp. People called it Reese's Bog, but anybody could see it was a cedar swamp. Shelley rolled down the window when they got to the swamp and they listened. They breathed the pungent air of Frankie. Sometimes they heard the white-throated sparrow. Its thin whistle came from the distant heart of the bog where Shelley and Yvonne had never been. It grew dark first under the cedars; they could drive from the swamp out into the daylight of Bowfin's.

Bowfin's had hardly any windows. Shelley could see out only by the pooltable window and the one in the bathroom. But both looked toward the open lake, and not to the old

cedars. She sometimes stayed in the bathroom looking out across the lake. The window was bright, Bowfin's was dark and cozy. It wouldn't do to have many windows.

Paula fixed hamburgers for dinner on Wednesday, and Shelley was through with the dishes early. So it was still bright when they passed through the cedars to Bowfin's.

-Lets come back here when we get to Bowfins! Shelley whispered to Yvonne.

-I'd be too scared! she answered.

-Oh, no you wouldn't and we could stay right by the road. Besides, its still light out.

-We could tell Frankie about it. Yvonne said gaining interest.

-And maybe even see an owl!

-They only come out at night, silly. Shelley said.

-But I bet dark places like bogs are just where they hide in the day. Yvonne defended.

Paula had no objections to their going outside to play after they finished their first bags of popcorn; it would keep Rose from complaining.

The road to Reese's bog was very different on foot. Shelley and Yvonne carefully started back towards the cedars. Yvonne took Shelley's hand when they got off the paved road that encircled the lake, and onto the track that snaked through the black cedars. It seemed much darker than it had from the car.

-Its all roots in there. Those puddles could be deep. Yvonne said.

They looked at the brown puddles, and the root hummocks

sheathed in velvet mosses. There didn't seem to be any sort of real land. The cedars were tall, but not straight. They leaned all over, falling and holding each other, their shaggy bark rubbing off each other, their green meshing in lacy sheets, dividing the bog into private corners. Everywhere there were dead posts; their green fans gone, they angled through the swamp. Nothing rotted much in there.

-Lets go in; come on Yvonne. Shelley said.

She stepped off the road, and pulled her sister's warm hand down the embankment with her. She stepped onto the first hummock just next to an old cedar.

-Its bouncy! Shelley said to Yvonne who stayed on the safe edge.

-Come on, step into the swamp, its carpeted, Yvonne!

Shelley stepped on to the next hummock, and Yvonne timidly stepped to the first. She hopped around the hummock puddles, until the cedar web surrounded them. The road was a faint line past the curtain. Then they were still. They had come into Frankie's bog.

-Look Shelley! Yvonne cried and pointed to a red flower twisting petals over a scarlet cup.

-Its an orchid. Like on mom's corsage. Shelley said solemnly.

-Lets pick it! Take it to mommy then! Yvonne said.

-Oh, no, we couldn't do that. Its magic. Its the bog's and we can't take it. It belongs here. We can look at it. Besides mom would ask were we got it.

-I didn't really want to pick it, Yvonne answered ashamed.

-Look, look! Shelley exclaimed.

She had wandered over to a sunlit puddle, and in the light saw hundreds of mosquito pupae elbowing their way to the surface, then spinning back down with their siphon of air.

-They're fairy shells. Yvonne stated wonderously.

-No, they can't be. There's no such thing. We'll ask Frankie.

The puddle edged with moss, sloped down to a root showing black through the water. Cedars fanned on and on way down to the lake. Shelley wanted to explore further, discovering more tiny ponds and flowers. But she knew they would never find their way out. She put her arms around a cedar tree to see if she could reach. The stringy bark tickled her, but she could hook her fingers around it.

The road seemed flat and ordinary after the thousand valleys of the cedars. Only the cedar smell of Frankie came out of the swamp, but in the trees were the smells of the water, the trees and the rich mosses. The dirt road twisted to the paved highway, out of Reese's Bog. The fields were a muted green of spring, but it was not full like the puddles. Shelley and Yvonne silently hurried to Bowfin's.

But for the red sign out from Bowfin's could have been any other cottage near the shore of Burt Lake. It was a small sign, mildly contesting the mildy green of the clapboard house. Shelley and Yvonne scrambled inside, hoping Frankie would be there. Something closed in on Shelley that she had not noticed before. The room seemed incomplete,



only partially filling the outer shell. It was the dark wood that did it, the heavy cedar walls weighted with junk barely old enough to be considered antique.

-there's Frankie! Yvonne said and started to run up to the bar where he sat.

Frankie was sitting away by the owl. He had a glass of beer in front of him. Shelley thought it was strange for him to be using a glass, and not drinking out of the bottle the way he always did. Then she noticed he was sitting next to a lady. This was a lady they had never seen in Bowfin's before.

-Frankie! Yvonne exploded.

He slowly turned towards her.

-Yes, Yvonne? he asked with the voice that adults use for children. Shelley had never heard Frankie use it before.

Yvonne told him about the bog and the fairy shells. Those were just mosquito pupae, he told her.

-They will hatch in a few days and then you won't be able to go into Reese's Bog without getting eaten to death. Ever have a hundred mosquito bites? he asked.

Without waiting for an answer Frankie turned away from them, back to the lady. He concentrated on the beer glass he frothed for her.

Shelly and Yvonne turned quietly to their corner table letting the stained puddles of fairy shells, and the cushioned green logs fade. Maybe it was just mud and grass.

-Did you have a nice time outside? Paula asked.

-Yes, Shelley answered.

She didn't want to tell her mother about the hummocks now. It would be better to quietly think about the wailing White-throated Sparrow world as the cedar resins mellowed the ride home.

Paula brought them potato chips and hot chocolate. She stayed with them protectively watching them eat.

Shelley looked over to where Frankie was. Next to him the owl raised its musty wings. She wondered if he had ever seen a real owl. But Shelley realized she would never ask him. Frankie didn't seem to be interested in that sort of thing any more. He leaned silently toward the woman. Her light brown hair was gathered up in a soft bun at her neck. She seemed more delicate than the women that were usually around Bowfin's. When she grew up she would look like that, Shelley decided.

Shelley collected beer bottle caps from Rose for a game of checkers. When she had enough she went to the table with her little sister. They lined the caps up carefully and began to play. The game built a world for them more sure than that of Bowfin's.

-The caps that are turned over will be the kings, Yvonne declared.

-OK, and the winner in this game must be the fox in fox and geese next, Shelley said.

They began to play.

Shelley looked over at Frankie and wondered what he could be saying to that woman. She remembered the swamp and the

puddles. How long ago it seemed since Frankie had smelled of the cedars and played with them. What was Frankie saying to that woman?

-Your turn! Yvonne said impatiently.

Shelley looked back to the board and unthinkingly moved one of the pieces that were guarding her home.

Yvonne triumphantly moved a piece back.

-Queen me! she said enjoying watching her sister reluctantly turn the cap over. She was Pabst, Shelley Bud.

Shelley looked back at Frankie. He was arguing about something with the woman. They talked softly but urgently for a time. Then the woman stood up and left Bowfin's without Frankie. He got up immediately and went to the pool table. He pushed the metal armin hard. The balls rattled hungrily free, and he put the hard spheres into the triangle. One by one he knocked them off the table, taking all the turns for himself. Defeated, he returned to the bar. Rose silently gave him another beer.

-Shelley you're no fun! Its too easy to beat you! Yvonne cried exhasperatedly.

-I just wasn't paying attention; I'll beat next game, Shelley promised, and prepared to concentrate more fully on the board and bottle caps.

-Shelley look! Yvonne whispered.

It was three of the five men who had been here before. They sat at a table by the door after they noticed Frankie at the bar. Frankie must have seen them in the mirror but he didn't do anything. He just kept <sup>on</sup> drinking his beer.

-Why doesn't Frankie do anything? Shelley asked her mother.

-Maybe he doesn't feel like it, she answered.

-But... Shelley began to protest.

-I don't know Shelley, now be quiet about it, Paula said firmly.

One of the men went over to the juke box and put a song on that Shelley had never heard here before. Surely Frankie must do something now. But he didn't. He did nothing. Shelley noticed that Rose was looking over at her again, and she knew they would have to leave.

One by one they stepped out the screen door of Bowfin's. Shelley was last, but not lagging. She let the door slam, then looked back through the dim room, wondering at the empty bar, wondering why Rose wanted them out, wondering why Frankie didn't do anything, wondering what the men wanted. Shelley wondered about everything. She didn't understand Bowfin's any more.

The night air from the cedar swamps was cool as they drove home; it could never be the place they explored earlier, for Frankie no longer cared.

Paula did not take her kids to Bowfin's so often any more. Shelley realized it had been two weeks since they had been. She watched Rose take a fresh beer from the cooler, open it and invert a glass over the snout. As she carried it to a table Shelley wondered how often she had seen Rose do that. She couldn't imagine Rose anywhere else.

Then Shelley noticed the sign. It was carefully painted in black on a piece of posterboard by the owl. It said "NO MINORS AFTER NINE" in large capitals. Shelley knew it meant her. Paula noticed it too, and haughtily left with Shelley and Yvonne way before time.

The last time Shelley remembers going to Bowfin's was a Thursday night. Paula told the kids to stay in the car while she went in; she'd be right back. They waited a few minutes, then Shelley got out of the car and peeked in the yellowing light. At first the bar looked empty. She could see only the familiar wooden walls with their antlers and impaled waspnests. The pool table was empty; two cues lay across it meeting at the remaining white ball. Then she saw that Dan was seated at the bar where she was accustomed to seeing him. Her mother stood holding a glass whose lines echoed the only lights of the dark bar. Rose must have been in the back room, for Shelley could not see her. As she peered in, her face fogging the glassy view, Dan saw her and waved. She waved back, retreating. Her father wandered out from the bathrooms, and sat down by her mother.

Shelley watched for a minute, feeling strange, as if she were spying into Bowfin's. She wondered that she had ever felt at home there. The jukebox gleamed in the corner, its black discs inaccessible behind the plastic front, and Bowfin's was unchanged.

Shelley went back to the car to wait for her parents. She did not even think of entering.