

Reaper Bar

I've been slinging drinks for twenty years, but only the last five in a reaper bar. I've actually been working under the same roof for seven years, but the owner changed the name of the place five years ago. It used to be called Kat's back before I started working here, named after the original owner, Katherine O'Leary. It's just another pub in London's East End. Bill Wiseman bought it ten years ago. He's a transplanted Yank, but he's a good enough guy to work for. He's the one who changed the name. Now it's called The Garroted Artery. Kind of a play on words, if you get my meaning. And you can bet your ass it's pronounced just like "carotid."

The reapers came out about the same time I started tending bar here, when it was still called Kat's. No one knows why they went public. Maybe someone found out and was gonna out 'em, anyway, so they beat him to the punch. I know, it's kinda hard to believe that any human could get some kinda leverage on a reaper, let alone the whole damn bunch of 'em. But we (and by "we" I mean humans) haven't figured out too many of the rules they play by and they sure as hell ain't volunteering the information.

Anyway, once they were outed, they pretty much stopped trying to blend in. See, before seven years ago, they were walking around, right out in the open, and *no one knew a damn thing!* They look human, for one thing. Forget about the dark cloaks and scythes. Forget about skeletons with red eyes. These bastards look like any one of us. But now they don't give a damn, see? We (the humans) know they're here and there ain't nothing we can do about it, anyway. Maybe they feel sorta, you know, *relieved* to be out.

No one has ever seen them eat, but they sure as shit like to drink. It didn't take 'em long to start congregating in pubs they liked. You know how it is. You open a place in a certain area, or decorate it a certain way and a certain clientele starts to take over the place. Sometimes nothing even changes about the pub, itself. The place can be open for years and all of a sudden a new element starts hanging out there. Pretty soon you get more and more of the one type, and less and less of the others. That's why you got your cop bars, your gay bars, your sports bars and now you got your reaper bars. Now, I ain't saying they didn't drink in pubs before they were outed. They just didn't get together in numbers, you know?

And I'll tell you something else about the bastards, too. They pay their fucking bar tabs. Yeah, they're just as likely to start a tab when the drinkin's gonna be heavy (and when ain't it, with them?). But the one thing I've never heard of 'em doing is asking for credit past last orders. When a reaper's done drinking (or the pub's closing, which is more likely to be the appropriate time, if you get my meaning), he settles up his fucking bar tab. *In cash!* These bastards never leave you hanging with a three hundred pound tab. And they tip, too. They don't tip so well you got barmaids fallin' all over themselves rushin' to serve 'em. But they always tip at least five quid and sometimes as much as fifteen if it's been a long night. If you do the math, that don't add up to a whole lot, but you gotta take into consideration the "politeness" factor. They never grab a barmaid's ass. They never start fights. They never cuss you out if you fuck up a drink. They don't get piss drunk and then turn loud and belligerent. They just sit and drink, sometimes talking together in little groups. They don't care what you put on the TV. They don't care what's playing on the jukebox. Hell, most of the time it's the barmaids pushing dollar bills into the juke. And no matter how much I've seen 'em drink (and

they can seriously put it away, let me tell you), I've never seen one get so drunk I'd have cut him off, if he'd been human.

So, pretty soon word gets around that reapers are a pretty good bunch to have in your place. Now, the thing with the pub names, I don't know how that got started. I don't know if the reapers chose the pubs because of the weird names, or if someone just figured out that pubs with names like Hand in Shears and Bishop's Finger seemed to attract more reapers than humans. Masque Haunt near Old Street Station is probably the busiest reaper bar in the East End. Either way, it pretty soon got around that if you *wanted* your place to be a reaper bar, you stood a better chance if you changed the name to something kind of weird, or even gruesome. And if the name was sorta clever, too, it sure as shit didn't hurt. So, Kat's became The Garroted Artery.

Like I said before, I've been slinging drinks for twenty years. You can imagine I've seen plenty in that time. But I've never seen any shit like what happened in the Artery that Thursday night.

It was a night like every one that comes before it in a week and every one that comes after it in a week. Reapers don't put no special significance on any one or two days of the week like we do on those two precious days commonly referred to as The Weekend. The place was pretty well full, but kind of quiet. Not library quiet, mind you. But the jukebox had played its last paid tune and Sandy hadn't gotten around to puttin' another pound in it, yet. The only noise was the air pushin' through the vents, the clink of glasses and the low sounds of reaper conversations. Cigarette smoke hung in the air in stinky little clouds. Someone spilled a drink and apologized to Sandy immediately, but he didn't offer to grab a rag and try to get it out of the carpet before it set in.

The front door opened, moving silently on its well-oiled hinges. There was no chime when someone walked into the Artery. There wasn't any need for one. A lot of places put a chime on the doors so they can size up everyone who comes in. Mostly it's so they can card anyone who looks too young right away, before they have a chance to sit in a dark corner and start sipping someone else's drinks. You get enough of those caught in your place and you're gonna get your on-license jerked by the DPS. No, the reapers, themselves, made a chime unnecessary. Anytime someone walked in that wasn't right, they all stopped what they were doing, turned in their chairs and on their barstools, and stared at the newcomer. Usually it's an under-ager and he gets the boot mighty quick. A few times (so I've heard) it was fellas lookin' to buy a bottle for some kids from a place that has an off-license, too. Let's just say that that's another reason why it's good to run a reaper bar.

Anyway, this lady walks in, cool as a cucumber. Human, I guessed. Funny how now that the reapers are outed, you get to recognize little differences. I'm not always right, but I was this time. The funny thing is (funny 'cause of what happened), the reapers didn't stop and look at her. It's like they didn't pick up on anything wrong with her. I've been goin' over it and over it in my mind, and I can't come to no other conclusion. They just didn't pick up on her when she came in.

She wasn't nothin' special to look at. Kinda pretty. You could see she was probably pretty good looking when she was younger, but age fades beauty, they say. She wasn't dressed up, but she wasn't dumpy-lookin', either. She had on beige slacks and a tan sweater that she probably thought were close enough in color to get by. She had a dark blue coat on that ran down to her knees and big rubber galoshes to keep the early

December slush off her feet. She only looked about forty-five, or so, but she had on one of those clear plastic hair covers like you expect only old ladies to wear. It was tied under her chin and drops of water from the rain outside dripped down from it and made little dark spots on her sweater. She wasn't carrying a purse and her hands were hanging limply by her sides.

She stopped when she got next to the end of the bar closest to the door. The Artery's bar runs from near the door clear across the short end of the room. The Artery is only about twenty feet from front door to kitchen door, but it runs about seventy-five feet along the sidewalk and has pool tables and dart boards at the far end. The bathrooms are at the far end, too, and their wall is at about the same twenty-foot mark as the front wall of the kitchen. Between the side walls of the kitchen and the men's room is an alcove with more tables in it. The back door is there, too, and runs into a long, narrow hallway that runs behind and between the neighbor's stores and eventually lets out in the alley. The hallway is supposed to be kept clear 'cause it's a fire escape, but the lazy assholes from the music shop next door are always leavin' their empty fucking boxes in it just outside their back door, squeezing a five-foot-wide hallway down to about two feet. A big guy like me has to slide past those fucking boxes sideways when I take out the trash.

So this lady, she looks around the pub like she's lookin' for someone in particular. I don't know who the hell she'd be lookin' for in a reaper bar, but it takes all kinds, I guess. Anyway, she looks towards the back alcove and that searching look disappears from her face. She starts walking directly toward the alcove and her right hand goes into the pocket of that dark blue coat. It wasn't until then that I noticed how the coat hung crooked and looked like it was being dragged down by the right-hand pocket. She gets to the steps going up to the three tables that are set apart from the others in this fancy little "upper area" as Bill calls it (there's no real reason for the stairs; Bill put the platform riser and stairs in, himself, with help from me and a couple other guys who I think were friends of his) and *that's* when the reapers started to notice her.

All at once the reapers in the whole place stop what they're doing and turn to look at her. Only one of the tables in the "upper area" was taken and all three reapers sitting there turned to look at her along with all the rest. Her right hand came out of her coat pocket as she stepped up on the lowest of the three steps.

I think I told you before that when the reapers pick up on someone who ain't right they just turn and look. Every time I've ever seen 'em do it, they let us handle whoever it is. They just kind of alert us to 'em. But this was different. Maybe it's 'cause they panicked a little 'cause they didn't pick up on her at first and figured out they were stuck behind the eight ball. Or maybe they could finally pick up on exactly *what* was wrong with her.

Anyway, out comes her hand and – I swear it's true – the reaper sittin' in the middle at that "upper area" table gets recognition in his damn eyes! But he's lookin' at her face, *that's* what he recognizes. He never looks at the revolver in her hand as it gets clear of her coat pocket. Her hands are cold and wet from the rain outside and her grip must have been horrible, but she was at the top of the steps now and only about six feet away from him. Her first bullet took him in the side of the neck.

I didn't know what to expect from a reaper gettin' shot, but I sure as shit never expected the spray of bright red arterial blood that fanned out onto the wall behind him. His two companions (is that the right word to use for them when they're in their little

groups?) stumbled to their feet as they shoved backward from the table, their eyes wide with shock. One of them, the one to her right, nearest the bathrooms, fell over the back of his chair as it tipped over and he went down hard on the floor. Bill had us put carpet on the plywood, but there was no pad under it and that floor was pretty damn hard. I never knew reapers could get the wind knocked out of 'em.

The other one, the one to her left, he tumbles himself backwards over the low railing that went around the sides of the "upper area" to keep people from doing just what he was doing now. He fell on the floor below. It was a longer fall than the other one took, but the carpet on the main floor was padded and softer, if only by a little. Just as quick as he could, he gets up to his feet and straight arms the fire bar on the exit door, running into the hallway before he's even standing up all the way. Without using a special key this alarm goes off, and it was going off now. But the alarm was old and wasn't working right. It only gave out a few short warbles and then stopped. The reaper disappeared down the hallway. I could hear the sound of cardboard boxes being knocked over just before the door snicked closed.

The guy that had been shot was trying to stand up and back away, but he was doing a shitty job of it. His left hand was plastered to the side of his neck and was already covered with blood. More blood was running between his fingers and down his arm to the elbow. His right hand kind of waved around in the air to his side, like it was looking for something to hold onto. His legs were wide apart. He was a tall guy and had backed clear over the top of the chair without knocking it over.

Just as the back door closed she fired again. This one missed completely and put a hole in the wall just to the left of him. It couldn't have missed him by more than two or three inches, I guess. Her third shot came a lot quicker than the second one, but it was dead on (pardon the pun). This one punched a hole through his shirt and a bright red stain immediately bloomed on the front.

He had backed himself up against the back wall and had nowhere to go except sideways, one way or the other. He looked to his right, where the exit door was, but it was too late. She was right on top of him and her fourth shot went straight into his forehead, just above the left eye. I don't know what caliber gun it was. I know it was loud. And it took most of the back of his head off and spread it all over the fucking wall behind him. I doubled over and puked all over my fucking shoes when I saw that, so I missed seeing her last shot, and I'm fucking glad I did.

When I stood back up, wiping puke from my chin with the back of my right hand, she was laying on the steps with her feet at the top and what was left of her head on the lower floor at the bottom of them. The gun was lying on the floor about a foot and a half away from her. Her trigger finger twitched a few times and her feet kicked a little once. The clear plastic hair cover she'd been wearing was torn to shreds on the left side, but there wasn't much head to cover on that side, anymore, anyway. Like I said, I don't know a lot about guns, but if I had to guess, I'd say that it was the pieces of her skull flying out that tore apart that hair cover, not the bullet that went through her head. The two reapers sitting at the table to the left of the stairs were covered with blood and little bits of brain and skull. A larger chunk of skull had plopped into the mostly-full pitcher of beer sitting on their table and had splashed a good amount of it out of the top. I don't know why I noticed that, but I did.

It got real quiet all of a sudden. Slowly, as my eardrums recovered from the sounds of the gunshots, I began to hear the air vents again. Then, slowly getting louder,

I could hear Bill's running feet coming down the back stairs from his apartment above the pub. The door from the stairs to the kitchen banged open and I could hear Bill's heavy breath as he pounded into the bar, sweat already dripping from his face (even though he'd been running *down* stairs – he'd never win any "thin man" contests, either).

"*What the blue fuck...?*" is all he got out. He saw what was in his pub (and all over his carpet and wall) and stopped cold.

Sandy started to turn her head toward him, but her eyes never left the scene in the "upper area" of the pub. She turned her head back without saying anything.

All of the reapers in the pub were standing up now. Not one of them made a sound. They were all staring at the dead one. Well, the one that had been sitting with him and *hadn't* gotten up and ran was still on his back, looking over at his dead friend, but all the rest were standing.

They all stood like this for what seemed like about half an hour, but it couldn't have been more than a minute or two. I'm always looking at the clock, wherever I work. It's a shitty habit and just makes the work day fucking *drag*, but I've never been able to break the habit. I remember looking at the clock just a few minutes before the lady came in and it had been about a quarter to ten. When it was all over and I looked at it again (yes, even with all this shit going on, a habit is a habit) it was only ten 'til.

Anyway, the reapers, they start making this low humming sound. I don't guess that's exactly right. If I had to write it out, I guess it'd be like, "hnnnnnnnnnn." A real nasally sound. But it got louder and louder. Their eyes were doing this weird in-n-out thing, too. I can't describe what it was really like, but it freaked me out more than the sound they were makin'. The rest of them turned and looked at two reapers in particular for a few seconds. Then, I swear it's true, those two just *winked out*. No shit. They fucking disappeared right in front of us. I don't know where they went, but they weren't there, anymore. The others sat back down and slowly got back to their normal routine, like nothing had happened.

I couldn't believe what I was seeing. Okay, what I had just seen – the shooting – had pretty much blown my wheels, if you know what I mean. But this, these fuckers just going back to drinking *like it had never happened*, that made me feel like being sick all over again. I could see that Bill and Sandy had the same look on their faces that I felt on mine. Disgust mixed with...I don't know. Shock? Surprise? I don't know the right word, but I know that part of it was disgust. How could these fuckers have ever passed themselves off as human?

Bill reached across the top of the bar, pulled the phone out that was underneath and dialed 999. The bobbies showed up in just a few minutes and the Ambulance Service weren't far behind. They got the mess cleaned up and took statements. The pub closed for business, but no one left. Everyone there was a witness except Bill, but it had happened in his place and he wasn't going anywhere. The paramedics left about four in the morning, but they only hauled out one body.

Sometime during all the confusion with the bobbies asking all their questions and everyone milling around, before someone figured out it would be a good idea to tape off the crime scene, the reaper body had disappeared. Even the blood he'd splattered all over the wall and floor was gone. The chairs were still overturned, but it was like the shooting had never happened. Well, except for the last shot.

The bobbies wrote it up as some weird fucking suicide. And never mind the other four bullets that had been fired from her revolver and were now unaccounted for. Bill,

Sandy and I agreed to never talk about it. Not to each other, sure as shit not to anyone else. We didn't *talk* about not talking about it. We just sorta agreed by looking at each other. No one said it, no one needed to. But we all knew.

I don't know if the two reapers who had winked out had come back after the body of the one who'd been shot was gone. I hadn't marked their faces and would probably never recognize them, anyway. I try not to notice the reapers too much. I'm always afraid that I might notice one of them noticing *me*, and that would probably be bad.

It's been a month and I haven't set foot in the Artery since that night. I just can't make myself do it, you know? Slinging drinks is about the only thing I've ever been really good at, though. I don't think I can do anything else and make a living wage. My savings is almost gone, not that I had a lot to begin with, on a bartender's wages. If I can't tend bar, I'll probably end up on the dole.

Fuck it. It's probably time I got out of the East End, anyway. Too many pubs with weird names. I know a guy named Keith. He tends bar in a place called the Duke of Clarence. It's in southwest London, a lot more posh customers than the Artery. Technically it's in South Kensington (in Old Brompton Road), but it's still southwest London. You do get people in there getting piss drunk, but they're *people*, you know? Humans. And you can usually find somebody's grandmother sitting by the front window at eight in the morning with a pint, crocheting something.

They have another bartender, Beth, and she just came into some money when her aunt died. She had to leave college when she had her daughter. Now her daughter's grown enough and she has the money, so she's gonna go back and finish her business degree. Keith could use the help. He's fucking Irish, but what are you going to do? Besides, he's a friend of mine. I think I could end up doing pretty good there.

I don't sleep much at night, anymore. Maybe slinging drinks at the Duke will help that, too. I just can't get it out of my head, you know? The way those fucking reapers just sat back down like nothing had happened. At first I wondered how I ever could have mistaken them for human. But now I realize that there are a lot of people who act like that, more or less. A lot of them are in prisons and psychiatric hospitals. But the ones that aren't, those are the ones that make me shudder when I think about them.

Are there really humans that are no better than the reapers in the Artery that night?

Or are they even human?

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