

Stuart Hadow Short Story Prize 2020

Bully

by Nolan Weiss

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If you want to know, I'll tell you everything. The thing is, I want someone to know the details. It can be anyone. I don't care. It might as well be you. I'll tell you the full story. I won't leave anything out. I'll lay it down plain for you. I'll be honest, more honest than I was raised to be.

You remember how it ended, don't you? That night almost two years ago. How a handful of people took out their phones and recorded the whole mess? I'm a changed person these days but, back then, I had different ideas. I had a different way of moving through the world. A different way of interacting with people on this little rock we're all clinging to, alone in the vastness of the universe. But I'm getting ahead of myself. The thing is, I can't change what I did in the past. I can't go back and live my life a different way. I can only study the past. I can pick it up, hold it in my hand, turning it this way and that, and try to learn from it.

The footage made it onto the news. Well, it made it to the internet first and then onto the news. But what's the difference these days? Videos get shared online and then it's game on. Comments attach to videos like barnacles on a jetty. People who never met you, never spoke a word to you, they size you up and judge you. They see a minute or two of footage and that's enough for them. That's all they need to form an opinion. They haven't seen what's outside the frame, haven't seen the hours and days and years that lead up to that minute of footage. When did it become a radical act to hold back on offering your opinion until you know the full story? To take the time to understand something, to get stuck into it and sit with it for a while, before you weigh in. When did everyone start giving their take on everything? That's what I want to know.

If you heard anything about it, you heard it started outside a bar. It makes it sound like something it's not, when they say it started there. People jump to conclusions. They think it must be all about the drink. It's the devil's nectar at play again. That's what's done it. They think it's happened like this so many times before and this is just like the rest of them. And if this was a different story, that might be true. That might be all you need to know about it. But they're wrong about that, in this case. Miles off.

It was a bar in my old inner-city neighbourhood. You know the one near the 7 Eleven? I'd been in the bar for around twenty minutes before it happened. They say that's where it started, in that bar, but where it really started was back in high school. That's what you won't find out online, in the endless stream of opinions. You won't read the full story.

Imagine: there's me, a balding, early middle-aged guy with a patchy beard and unfashionable jeans. I walked into the bar and saw a handful of people sitting at booths and over by the windows, their faces half-lit by the warm glow of candles. At the bar itself, over in one corner, a young couple pressed their faces close together like they were whispering secrets. There was memorabilia on the walls, old knick-knacks and photos and signed jerseys of the football team that folded years ago. Under all that, shining bottles of liquor and a sole bartender polishing glasses.

I took a seat at the bar and raised my chin at the bartender. I ordered a pint. The bartender had just laid the glass in front of me when I got into it.

I said, how's your night? I leaned forward, elbows resting on the bar, and said, been busy?

Barely a trickle, he said. It's been like that all weekend. Must be everyone's at that festival out of town. It always dies down when that's on. He asked me, you been up to much?

He had one of those faces, this bartender. He looked like someone you could open up to. Someone you could be honest with, you know? He looked like he could absorb anything. A

sponge with a moustache and an asymmetrical hairstyle. And so I decided, at that moment, to tell him everything.

You know, I said, I've been thinking a lot lately about death.

The bartender's eyebrows shot up like a spring. He leaned back slightly, enough to imply something about the person in front of him. That person being me, you understand. I don't think I need to tell you what he must have been wondering about me, some punter who just brought up death one sip into a pint of lager. I think that goes without saying.

Not in a morbid way, I said to the bartender. I'm not about to, you know. That's not it. I said to him, I've just been thinking about the state of the world, you know. About what life is really like, and what would happen if you were given a choice.

The bartender, to his credit, he didn't walk away. He cocked his head to the side and I could tell he was listening, he was giving it some thought. Maybe it was because it was a slow night or maybe there was something else. Maybe he was up for a conversation about more than artisan gin and cheese. Maybe he was ready for something different.

Just give me two secs, he said. I've got to serve these two.

The couple in the corner of the bar, one of them had waved the bartender over. The bartender walked the few steps over to the couple and leaned in close to hear their order. That's when I looked over my shoulder and saw him walking in. I saw him, the guy this is all about. He walked right past me and sat down with some people in a booth. He was wearing a blue and black flannel shirt, and black jeans. His hair was long and unwashed. He looked like every second guy in that area, with a casual but curated look. He fit right in.

The bartender finished serving the couple, who returned to each other's faces. He walked over to me and asked, what's this choice you're talking about?

I pulled my attention away from the guy and looked at the bartender. It was hard not to

stare at the guy, to hone in on him. There was a heat rising in me at this point, you know what I mean?

Well, I said to the bartender, I've been thinking about it like this: say you had to choose whether or not to be alive. Not before you're born. That's not what I mean. I don't mean you're waiting as a soul or something out in some pre-birth ether and you have to decide whether or not to leave that place and go down into the mortal realm and make your way into a waiting body. What I'm saying is, put aside whatever you might believe now and imagine there's a higher power. Imagine there's a God or Allah or whatever you want to call it. What if, at around the age you are now, that higher power tapped you on the shoulder and wanted an answer. What if you had to consciously choose whether or not you wanted to stay alive? You had to give them a yes or a no.

The bartender crossed his arms and looked up at the ceiling. I sat there on the stool, watching the bartender think about life and birth and ether, and listened to laughter and glasses clinking and muffled conversation.

So, the bartender said, uncrossing his arms and moving his hands while he talked, what would happen if you said no? If you hit the eject button?

I took a sip of my drink and cleared my throat. I had his interest at that point. The bartender and I were miles away from the physical world, with its solids and liquids and gases moving around the bar, swirling around each other. We were somewhere else, you know what I mean?

Well, I said, that depends on what you believe. Maybe you get a ticket to paradise. Maybe you get an endless supply of top-shelf liquor, your favourite foods piled up in giant heaps and no more alarm clocks. Maybe you never get a hangover ever again and you never get sick. Maybe you get to sun yourself on the beach, a paradise beach up in the clouds or wherever

you want to believe that is. Maybe you never have to worry about sunscreen. Maybe the water is always just the right temperature. Maybe you lay on that beach and watch the ocean sparkle. Or maybe you get sent down into the basement. Maybe you get endless grease and piss and spew and angry, ruddy-faced drunks that hound you day and night. Maybe you get constant pain and discomfort, always feeling ill at ease. Maybe it could be even worse than that. Maybe it's more like boredom, being trapped in an empty room with nothing to occupy you for eternity. Or, and this is my personal preference, maybe you get nothing. Just nothing. Maybe you get to go into the void. You enter the black hole of existence, where there's no consciousness. Where everything just ends, simple as that. There's no fear or loneliness or boredom there because nothing exists. It's pure emptiness. Maybe that's what real peace is about. What if a real end to suffering means an end to everything we know of as life? We go back to whatever there was before life, before we came kicking and screaming into this world. We go back to that nothing that came before.

I'd finished my pint at this point and the bartender nodded toward it, eyebrows raised. I nodded back. He walked over to the taps and pulled me another drink.

So, he said, calling over his shoulder, what about you? Which way would you go?

The bartender laid the pint in front of me and I stared at the amber liquid, watching bubbles rise to the foam.

I guess I'd have to weigh things up in the moment, I said. I'd have to take a long look at my life before I decided. I'd have to consider my experience of the world. I guess, I said to the bartender, your answer would depend on what your life was like. If you had an easy life, you'd probably go for it. If you were born beautiful and rich, why would you give that up? If you were given opportunities and loving attention from your family, you'd probably feel pretty happy with the way things were. If you walked into the best schools and universities, if

your teachers cared about you and guided you, you'd probably be pretty content. If you went from school to an unpaid internship because your parents could support you and then, after that, your dream job and all the confidence and happy experiences life could send your way, you'd probably want that to keep that going, wouldn't you?

The bartender picked up a glass and a tea towel. Yeah, he said, I bet they would. Bastards.

But, if you're like me, I said, if you had a bad time of it, you might reconsider. If you grew up with hardly anything, in a family that watched every cent while they watched other people spend like it was going out of fashion, you might think it's all a bit unfair. If you were an ugly, rat-faced little kid who went to rough government schools where you never reached your potential, you might not think it's all so rosy. Maybe you hid in the toilets at lunch so you didn't have to bump into the bullies who made each and every day a living hell. Maybe you made it out of that place as soon as you could, only to find more of those bullies in other parts of life. You found them as managers, as business leaders, as politicians. If you saw bullies like them filling up the highest, most important roles in society, you might not be so keen on the whole affair. If that was your life, I said, you might be tempted to check out.

Right, the bartender said. He had a look on his face like he'd tasted something sour. He looked down for a second and then raised his face and said to me, are you okay, mate? Should I be worried?

Don't worry, I said, I'm not going to go like that. That's not the way I think, at least not now. It takes the will away. That's the thing that gets me stuck, when I think about that. I want to believe that we can change our life. I know, I said, it sounds a bit like a self-help book but I guess I want to do something to change how I feel.

I looked at the bartender. I watched a smile begin to form under his moustache.

I said, that's why, when that guy over there in the flannel shirt leaves this bar, I'm going

to follow him outside and confront him.

The bartender, he glanced over at the guy and then reached a hand down to his pocket. I guess that's where his phone was, right there in his pocket. It's like he was reaching for his heart. That's how it looked to me. His first instinct was to reach for his phone. It was like it was a part of his body.

He said, what do you mean? What are you going to do?

I picked up my pint and lifted it to my mouth real slow. That's how I did it, drawing it out, making it like a scene from a movie. I was being a real idiot, you know what I mean?

I'm going to make some changes, I said. I looked over my shoulder at the guy in flannel, at his hair and his clothes and his body, taking up space in the world.

I said, I'm going to do something to make up for the years that guy bullied me in school. I'm going to move the balance away from people like him. Someone has to shift things in the right direction.

Just as I said that, and I'm not making this up, the guy in flannel got up from the table and hugged each one of his friends. They said goodbye, talking over each other and smiling, and then the guy walked past us and left the bar.

I got up from my stool and the bartender reached out and grabbed hold of my arm. He let go after a second and said, don't do it, mate. What if the guy's changed? What if he's not like that anymore? He might have kids and a wife or something. Maybe he's not so terrible these days. He might feel bad about what he did. You said he went to the same school, right? Maybe he had a rough time of it too. We're all different when we're young. Maybe he's come a long way. Maybe he's a good guy now. You don't need to do this.

We looked at each other, the bartender and I, the space between us filled with laughter and whispers and slurping and clinking. I shrugged at him and then I turned, opened the door

to the bar, and walked out into the cool evening breeze. You know what happened after that.

That's where the footage begins. Nothing I do now can change that part.