

TELL HIM YOU'RE MARRIED



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YOU'RE MARRIED

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TELL HIM
YOU'RE MARRIED

SHORT STORIES BY
STAN ROGAL



INSOMNIAC PRESS

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ONTARIO ARTS COUNCIL
CONSEIL DES ARTS DE L'ONTARIO

This book is for my family as well as old pals, lovers and further ghosts who provided the inspiration for many of these stories. Salut!

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Obscure, unfeeling and unloving powers determine men's fate. The system of rewards and punishments which religion ascribes to the government of the universe seems not to exist.

—Sigmund Freud

Because I am not like them, I am evil. —W.C. Williams

Some people have forgotten how to want. —Donald Barthelme

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FRIENDS

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Morality is the blind spot of the brain

— Arthur Rimbaud

IT WAS AFTER work. I was in the bar having a beer with a few of the regulars. It's a funny thing, when you think about it, how a number of people—formerly strangers with little, if any, common background—can somehow meet in a place like a bar and over a relatively short period of time become a close-knit circle: sharing drinks, telling stories, setting up a football pool, passing around pictures of their kids, gathering at one another's homes for parties or BBQs, having the odd fling amongst themselves or with one of the partners. Become regulars. Become friends, almost. Almost, because you know that when, for whatever reason, a seat becomes vacant (job transfer, layoff, fight, romance, bankruptcy or boredom), there will always be someone else to fill the spot; to maintain the group. As if nothing had really changed; as if no one had really left.

The group was a mixed bag: Tom sold furniture, Brian was in the printing business, Mike stacked groceries at Safeway, Carol was in real estate, Beth handled catering and special functions here at the hotel. I was working part-time at the front desk, trying to pay my way through university. On the side I did a bit of acting. Nothing big. Alternative stuff put up in galleries and warehouse spaces. All of this placed me slightly on the outside of the group. For them, unless you were making it on TV or in the movies or playing one of the megamusicals, acting wasn't a job, it was a hobby. Because of this, I kept my conversation centred around the hotel business or sports or

what went on in the bar. Safe topics. Not that there was any pressure to keep up my end, these guys were all talkers. I could sit back, shut up, enjoy my beer and watch the events unfold around me.

Tonight's subject was Brad. Brad also worked for the hotel. He was the front desk manager. Previous to this he had been in the sales department, making cold calls to potential customers. It seemed to me that the best salespeople came in two varieties: either loud and abrasive or else slick and oily. Along with this, they had to love selling. Tom (furniture) was of the second type while Brad didn't fit well into either category. I suspect he had ambitions toward loud and abrasive but too often slipped into slick and oily, leaving him floundering somewhere in the nether zone. He got by, but was only too happy to transfer to management. Brad's biggest failing was that he believed himself to be a good salesman, even a great one, and carried with him the worst traits of the profession, a sort of *I can beat you at your own game* attitude. Not that he wasn't likeable. He would go out of his way to do anything for you. His saving grace, so to speak. Generally though, among the group, it was agreed that periodically he had to be put in his place—*for his own good*, as Tom would say.

"Do you think he'll go for it?" asked Carol.

"Course he will," answered Brian. "Just get a few beers in him first."

Everyone laughed. I thought that the idea was slightly cruel and underhanded, but I also knew that Brad had set himself up, just as he was always setting himself up. Not that he deserved to be taken advantage of because of this, it was simply his way and people knew it. Still, when you set yourself up as often as Brad did, there's bound to be someone sooner or later who throws their hands in the air and says: *All right! It's come to this and no getting around it*. Besides, I always had the sneaking suspicion that Brad's attitude was a rather perverse way of gaining attention and recognition among his peers. Regarded in this light, he was more than a willing victim.

Rob walked over and joined us. "It's all set," he said. Rob was the general manager of the hotel as well as another regular at the table. He was in on the plan, adding an appropriate level of authority to the proceedings.

"Like taking candy from a baby." Tom lit a Cigarillo.

"Make sure he has a few beers first," said Rob.
 "Under control. I'm going to savour this."

It was Tom's scheme and it had been brewing in his head for weeks, ever since Brad claimed he could drink anyone under the table when it came to Tequila shooters. Tequila, he said, was his drink. Tom argued that he was prepared to accept the challenge, but at a later date, claiming that he had to be in the right headspace for Tequila. He said he also needed to make sure that he had a slow *morning-after* at work in order to get over the effects, admitting he'd be pressed to his limit against someone like Brad. No problem, Brad shot back. Anytime you say. I can drink Tequila until the cows come home and wake up fit as a fiddle the next day. Brad had this annoying habit of using hackneyed phrases and clichés when he was into his cups.

The fact of the matter is that Tom originally postponed the contest in order to give Brad time to forget the discussion, then catch him offguard with no way out but to go ahead with it. Which is how the deal went down before Brad arrived at the table. Now he was almost through his second beer and Tom, behaving less sober than he actually was, announced that he was in the mood and prepared to *whip Brad's ass*.

Brad was quizzical at first, but the gang was quick to jog his memory.

"Sorry. Can't tonight," he said. "I promised Susan I'd be home for dinner."

"What are you talking about," piped Brian. "It's not even six yet. You don't eat till eight or so, right? You've got plenty of time."

"Sure!" Carol jumped in. "Anyways, Tom's a beer man, you know that. He can't handle the hard stuff. A couple of shots and he won't be able to remember his name, never mind stand." She gave Brad's elbow a nudge.

"Yeah, I know, but...I kind of promised Susan I'd be home early. And not half-gassed. You know what I'm saying?" Brad shrugged. "I just came in for a couple to unwind."

"I'm disappointed Brad. I put twenty bucks on you, isn't that right?" Rob nodded to the rest of us and we nodded back. "If you

refuse, it's the same as losing, isn't that right Beth?"

"Absolutely. You gave Tom the choice. You said, *anytime*. If you refuse, Rob loses twenty bucks, I lose twenty bucks..."

"You bet on me too?" Brad grinned at Beth.

"We all bet on you, pal." It was Mike this time. "Tom's been bragging all week how he's gonna take you down a notch. We're tired of listening to him. You gotta show him."

"Mike's right—are you a man or a mouse?" Carol bent her body into Brad's arm. She'd had a few rye and waters and was feeling no pain. She arched her eyebrows. "Hmm?"

The waiter dropped another round. Brad tapped the table with his fingers, gripped the cold mug in his hand and twisted his lips. Everyone knew that he was considering the proposition. He didn't answer and Rob didn't give him a chance to.

"Atta boy," cried Rob. He called to the waiter. "Bring a half-dozen Tequilas, Gerry. We got ourselves a little contest going down." He motioned to Brad with his fingers. "Don't worry about this. I've got the booze covered. And we'll make sure you're out of here in plenty of time for dinner, yeah?" He included the others.

"No problem," agreed Carol. "Tom won't last half an hour. He'll be under the table, guaranteed. You relax."

The shooters arrived and Gerry placed three in front of each man. The contestants hoisted the first glass, toasted, and tossed them back. Tom made a face and smacked his lips.

"Whoa!" he said. "It's been a long time."

They raised a second glass. "Remember," said Brad, taking control by deciding on the rules, "the first one who can't get out of his chair, or falls down, or throws up, loses."

Tom nodded. The men tossed back the second and third shots. Carol made a circle in the air with her finger and six more shooters arrived. The contest was now seriously underway and the men settled in to pacing themselves with beer chasers.

It wasn't enough to simply knock a bottle straight back, the idea was to allow the Tequila to work itself into the system and pinpoint exactly how many glasses it took to reduce one man to the level of a soggy dish rag. Furthermore, at intervals over the next two hours, the men were required to stand up and circle the table unassisted. If

a player went to the toilet, he was escorted by one of us. We had to make sure neither man had an intimate conversation with the big, white porcelain telephone. All of this occurred, naturally, amid much fanfare and table talk. Everyone was getting pleasantly plastered. At 8:15 there was a phone call. Gerry came over and spoke in Brad's ear.

"It's your wife. Are you here?"

Everyone roared and shook their heads. Carol slapped Brad's back with her palms. "Uh-oh, uh-oh..." she giggled. Rob winked at Mike, Brian pointed a finger across to Beth who waggled a finger in return. In a fraction of a second an entire story went around the table without anyone having said a word.

"Shit," mumbled Brad. He tried to focus on his watch. "Um...tell her there's a problem with a guest. An emergen...emergency." He had difficulty speaking. He took a deep breath and rolled his tongue inside his mouth. "Tell her...be home soon."

Tom reached over and clinked Brad's glass with his own. "Down the hatch, old buddy."

They drank. Next, it was time for another walk around the table. Tom rose and gave his head a shake; he staggered slightly. He was playing it to the hilt. Surprisingly, Brad made it to his feet as well. Which was another thing about Brad, and you had to respect it—he was the tenacious sort. Once he had his teeth into something, you practically had to bash his head in to make him let go. He met Tom halfway.

"I'm gonna whup yer ass, boy!" He faked a southern sheriff accent, but badly. "Gonna drink you under the table." He stumbled, caught himself and joked. "Uh-huh," he grinned stupidly and made it back to his chair. There was great applause and more shooters ordered.

Susan called at eight thirty and again at eight forty-five. At nine, Brad raised his glass and watched as it slipped between his fingers and spilled across the cloth. Most of us have been there at one point or another—one too many to drink and the world suddenly shifts. The group took a collective breath and stared at Brad. Everyone was silent. Brad squinted at Tom and smiled. It was a smile of defeat and we all knew it.

"You win," he muttered. His hand crumpled, closely followed by

his head, his shoulders and his chest; slowly, painlessly. He laughed a low, guttural laugh. He hadn't passed out, he'd merely crossed over to another dimension of time and space. He appeared to be happy though, and at peace. As I was the only one without a car and lived reasonably close to his place, I was elected to drive him and his car home.

"What happened to him?"

"He got into a bit of an argument with a bottle of Tequila. The Tequila won."

Brad had wanted to walk into the house under his own power, which would have suited me fine, especially since I wasn't too eager to speak with Susan. Unfortunately, he wasn't able to stand, never mind walk, so I slung him over my shoulder and lugged him in.

"Hi, honey." He tried to lift his head to offer Susan a kiss, but it refused to move more than a few inches. "Shorry," he slurred, and chuckled to himself as his head dropped. I actually envied him at this moment, off in another world, cheerful and happy; oblivious to the situation around him. I wouldn't envy him later, of course, facing the music with Susan, his head pounding, his stomach pitching. Now though, he was a contented drunk. We carried him to the bedroom and rolled him onto the mattress.

"Why was he drinking Tequila?" she asked. I admired her for showing such considerable restraint. We moved to the kitchen. "You want dinner? I cooked it. Someone might as well enjoy it."

I figured, what the hell? I hadn't eaten all night. Susan was right—someone might as well enjoy it. The table was laid out with flowers, candles and cloth napkins. There was a roast in the oven with all the trimmings. I'd been to their wedding. I tried to remember what the date had been. It escaped me at that moment.

"You want a drink? Rum and Coke?" She poured me a stiff one. I was hoping that she wouldn't ask me again: what happened and why? Dinner was on the table, there was a bottle of wine opened and I had a rum and Coke in my hand. I was hoping she'd just leave it; work it out with Brad later. She didn't.

"Why, for chrissakes, was he drinking Tequila? He can't drink Tequila."

I thought: I could lie. I could come up with some story and try and cover for him. Then I thought, no. When Brad sobers up he's sure to spill his guts and try to get forgiven. Better to tell her. Better to tell her and have her mad at me now for giving her the truth rather than mad at me later for being a liar.

"He was in a contest."

"A contest?" She filled two wine glasses. It was Beaujolais. This dinner was obviously meant to celebrate something. "What kind of contest?"

"A drinking contest," I stalled.

"With who?"

"Tom."

"Tom? Why is it always Tom when something like this happens? Goddamn Tom. I might've known."

"Yeah." I tried to recall previous times involving Tom getting Brad into trouble. I couldn't. More likely, Tom had been used as a convenient excuse. Possibly my name as well, though as a rule, you stick to one name to keep things consistent. I tried to shift the responsibility, at least some of it, back to Brad.

"Well, Brad challenged Tom a few weeks ago to a Tequila drinking contest. He challenged the whole gang, actually, but it was Tom who took him up on it. You know, first man down loses." I spooned more gravy onto the potatoes. I thought again about the wedding date. It must've been in the summer. People get married in the summer, divorced in the winter. This was September.

"I never heard anything about this."

"I don't suppose he'd tell you." I spoke the words lightly, hoping she'd see the humour. "I don't suppose he even remembered making the challenge." She didn't crack a smile. I tried to get through dinner quickly, but without seeming too much in a rush. I poured us more wine. Susan was going through hers at a pretty good clip. "Anyway, Tom couldn't do it at the time, but he was ready tonight. Brad had said, *anytime*." I kept chewing and washed everything down between the rum and the Beaujolais. It was a decent bottle. Very tasty. The entire meal was very tasty. Brad had picked the wrong evening to try and boost his ego.

"Is Tom in as bad a shape as Brad?" Her voice lowered. "I hope he is."