

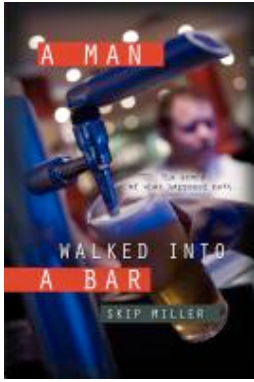


A M A N

The story
of what happened next.

WALKED INTO
A B A R

SKIP MILLER



*It is the pub where your father held court, the joint down the street, or the hangout of your college days. It is where you met the special ones, and tried to forget those who fooled you into thinking they were special. It is where loves go to shrivel, and where losers congregate to act happy. It is **A Man Walked Into A Bar**, stories about the people you know or have become.*

A Man Walked Into A Bar

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A Man Walked Into A Bar

Skip Miller

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First Edition

Saying Goodbye

A man walked into a bar. His work boots were muddy, and he had dirt caked under his fingernails. He wore a grimy hoodie, and kept one arm at his waist, like he was holding up his pants or had a stomach ache. He sat at one of the tables near the bar, pushed his hat back, and took a deep breath. A woman sitting at the bar said something lame about another day and another dollar. In his mind the man called her a stupid bitch.

When I'm finished here I'll go to the Country Club, he thought. I'll have the big porterhouse and a baked potato with sour cream, butter, chives, and bacon bits. For my side I'll have the peas ... no, the spinach. I'll start with a tossed salad—ranch dressing on the side—and one of those Canadian beers. Maybe I'll go home and clean up first. After I eat I'll look for a woman. Right now, I've got to take care of this.

The waitress was a pretty woman with short, blonde hair and a figure on the verge of being thick. She had green eyes, and looked like she cried easily. She brought the man a beer he didn't order. She slammed the beer onto the table, glared at him, and returned to the waitress station where she stood at attention, glaring at him.

She has no business trying to make me feel bad. I'm the one putting up with all of bullshit, not her. I'm the one looking for a place to live. I'm the one getting all excited about a baked potato all the way. What a load.

The waitress came back.

"Do you have a job?"

"Not yet."

"What am I supposed to do?"

"What you usually do ... any damned thing you want."

Her green eyes spit tears. She had a load of hateful things she wanted to say. Why bother. He could twist things around until she looked like a purebred whore. Not that he had to twist much this time.

"They're building a new hospital," he said. "I should be able to catch on there."

A Man Walked Into A Bar

She nodded. He can get a job anywhere. She always did admire that about him.

“What about you?” he asked.

Her eyes spit more tears, and her bottom lip quivered.

“Why would you even ask?”

When she came back, he could tell. He was surprised she would do it at work. She had always been so careful. That’s probably something else they do together. He wondered if she was stoned when she told their mutual friends. Maybe that was why she made it sound so romantic and proper. She made him appear ugly for living in his own house. How dare he? She was a princess who no longer wanted his punk ass around.

“How much weight you lost?” he asked.

“About twenty, I think. Thanks for asking.”

She made it look like she was wiping something off the table.

“Where are you going to stay?” she asked.

“Aunt Bert’s old place.”

“That’s just a cottage.”

“I don’t need much.”

“What if you get drunk and fall in?”

“I’ll climb back out.”

She took his empty, and brought back a full one.

“I’m not going to apologize, you know,” she said.

“It’s a little late for that, isn’t it?”

He watched her walk away. There was a time he thought she was the prettiest, sexiest thing on the planet. It made him throw-up sick when he saw her that night. She wasn’t so pretty after that. Listening to her was repulsive.

He knew by then. She started paying closer attention to the way she looked. She started doing something good with her makeup, showing just a little more leg or cleavage or both. She always was a flirt ... at first she might as well have hung a *I’m horny* sign around her neck. The night-time phone calls and her claims of a problem at work. Don’t wait up. Sure.

Finally, she left a goofy note about karma and destiny. They had been lovers and now they were friends, she wrote. Go find another

Skip Miller

woman, one who will love you the way you deserve. It took him twenty minutes to find out where she had gone, and with whom.

She moved out of the house. After several months he moved out, and she moved back in. Friends weren't trying to be cruel when they talked about seeing her at this place and at that place. They didn't mean anything by telling him how good she looked.

The next time he saw her, she was carrying a waitress tray. She had shed the housewife fat; her boy-length hair was sexy. There was something awkward about the way she moved. She said she had had her nipples pierced and they were still super sensitive. The way she came on to the guys ... she looked like a slut.

The next time he saw her she was wasted and draped over the tall dude. She wasn't wearing a bra. That made him remember her and the times both of them were wrong and too young to realize it. She was still pretty; she looked too old to play the game. He wondered if she still believed in that mystic shit, in the bones and cards and casting spells.

He stood, tossed a couple of dollar bills onto the table. He wanted to say goodbye, but she was busy getting up against an older man. She looked like a desperate whore.

When he walked past her he dropped a folded piece of paper onto her tray. She didn't see it until several minutes later. Take a left on Route 414 and then another left onto South Shore Road. It was down that way, out on the point where they went to drink beer and tell each other how much they wanted to.

She refolded the piece of paper and dropped it into the trash. She couldn't be that girl again. She hoped he understood that.

Self-Medicating

A man walked into a bar. He paused to relish that first blast of air conditioned air. He swiped some napkins from the dispenser on one of the tables, and used them to mop his forehead and chin. The day manager and bartender, a woman, laughed.

“You guys all do the same thing,” she said. “Maybe I should put a big bowl of baby wipes right there by the door.”

Yeah. Maybe you should.

“Is Mike working today?”

“She’s on the schedule. Whether or not she decides to show up is another matter. Want me to tell her you were looking for her?”

The man shook his head. He said he didn’t have to be anyplace for a while. He’d have a beer or two and wait.

“If I know Mike you’ll be waiting a long time.”

The bar was L shaped, with the short side of the L closest to the door. The man sat where the bar was anchored to the wall, beneath display boards of peanuts, little sausages, and energy pills.

“I remember you now,” the bartender said. “Your name is Jed. You’re like Mike’s ex-husband or something. You drink ... Pabst Blue Ribbon. I keep a couple of six packs cold for one of the night regulars. The last time you were in you put a hurting on the boy’s stash.”

“I remember that. I’ll try to behave this time.”

“So do you want that PBR?”

“Just coffee.”

Jed positioned himself beneath the wall display cards, left arm riding on the bar. That gave him an easy view of the front door and the big round table where the women gathered to count tips and bitch about deadbeat dads and college loans. She was sitting there the night she told him, “I am not a fallen woman. I never was worth a shit.”

I’ll drink to that, he thought.

Jed and Mike had been married for ten years. He knew she was screwing around on him—he hoped it wasn’t anybody he knew. The night he came home to the note on the breakfast bar ... he was emotionally exhausted by then. He was tired of wondering and waiting

for what he knew would happen. She his princess who made all of the men beat their chests and the women glare. He just wanted the whole fucking charade to stop.

Sometimes, when they went to parties or special occasion dinners, she made him feel like an AKC contender on a leash. She wore dresses that exposed just a little bit too much of something. For years he thought she acted crazy because she was ashamed of him—he was not the most polished marble in the bag. She, however, was the diamond that would dazzle the world.

He wasn't a marble. He was a drunk who dreamed of being a songwriter and living on a mountaintop where young people congregated to experiment with chords. Instead of those congregations he found his way to group meetings where confused people panned for answers, and he panned right along with them.

Eventually the group decided he drank to medicate himself into enough reality to forgive those who trespassed against him. When he was half gassed he didn't care that he didn't know how to small talk. The paranoia left him alone, which always was a good thing.

The whole mess was a revolving door. He was getting straight and heading for the exit. She was right across from him, getting fucked up and heading for the entrance. They didn't even wave to each other. The only thing she wanted was the pictures. She thought giving him everything else was a magnanimous gesture. It wasn't that at all. It was a pile of bad memories that he lugged around for years.

It didn't start out that way because it never does. It started with two attractive young people looking for a den where they could hibernate for a while. They had been slapped around by society. They just wanted to crawl off and hold each other.

They did not use their marriage to build anything. No kids, no wealth, no Hollywood lights and certainly no songs. They shared a mindless time in the grease pit, wrestling with dreams. They couldn't even get that right. One's dreams were the other's nightmares. She finally found her way into a lasting affair, but that is not what ended their marriage. The marriage just ran out of gas.

Ironies love to fuck with people. He did not write the songs. He did, however, become a reasonably famous guitar maker, a luthier who

could glue together wood in a way that made perfect sound. She did not dazzle a thing. She inherited a small bar that she decorated with theater handbills and pictures of herself in the company of famous people.

He was wondering if any of it had been worth it when he saw her crossing the parking lot. She still had the haughty, mighty beauty that should have dazzled the world. Once through the front door she never looked his way. Her attention was riveted to a low rent lawyer Jed called The Perpetual Candidate. She smooched the guy and then took him by the hand and led him toward her office in the back.

“She didn’t see you,” the bartender said. “Let me send somebody back to tell her you’re here.”

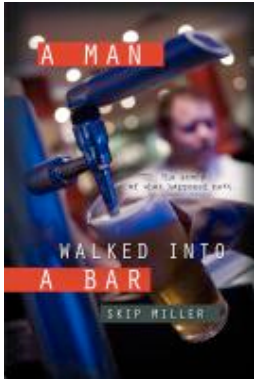
“Don’t bother.”

He stood and fished out the money for the coffee and the tip.

He had no idea he was being stalked by a young woman who was at the front of a pack of other young women. Had he looked up he would have seen the humored look on the bartender’s face. He didn’t even pay attention when somebody jostled him once ... twice.

“Papa! What do I have to do? Hit you on your own head? You give me a hug.”

He hugged her like she belonged in his arms.



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