The Book With No Name

A novel (probably)

Anonymous
One

Sanchez hated strangers coming into his bar. As a matter of fact, he hated the regulars too, but they were welcome simply because he was afraid of them. To turn a regular away would be like signing his own death warrant. The criminals that frequented the Tapioca were always looking for an opportunity to prove themselves within its four walls, because that way anyone who was anyone in the criminal world would get to hear about it.

The Tapioca was a bar with real character. The walls were yellow, and not a pleasant yellow, either, more of a cigarette-smoke-stained colour. This was hardly surprising, because one of the many unwritten rules of the Tapioca was that everyone who frequented it had to smoke. Cigars, pipes, cigarettes, joints, hookahs, cigarillos, bongs, anything was acceptable, apart from not smoking. That was unacceptable. Not drinking alcohol was also considered to be a sin, but the greatest sin of all was to be a stranger here. No one liked strangers in this place. Strangers were bad news. They were not to be trusted.

So when a man wearing a long black cloak with the hood pulled up over his head walked in and sat himself down on a wooden stool at the end of the bar, Sanchez didn’t expect him to make it outside again in one piece.

The twenty or so regulars sitting around at the tables stopped talking and took a moment out to run the rule over the hooded man at the bar. Sanchez noted they had stopped drinking, too. Not a good sign. If there had been any music playing, it too would surely have stopped when the stranger
entered. Now all that could be heard was the steady whirring of the large propeller fan hanging from the ceiling.

Sanchez made a point of ignoring his newest customer, pretending he hadn’t seen him. Of course, once the man spoke, the ignoring had to come to an end.

‘Bartender. Get me a bourbon.’

The man hadn’t actually looked up. He had ordered the drink without even acknowledging Sanchez, and since he hadn’t lowered his hood to reveal his face, it wasn’t possible to tell if he looked as nasty as he sounded. His voice had enough gravel in it to fill a pint glass. (In these parts a stranger’s nastiness was judged on how gravelly his voice was.) With that in mind, Sanchez picked up a reasonably clean whisky glass and walked over to where the man was sitting. He set the glass down on the sticky wooden bartop directly in front of the stranger and allowed himself one fleeting glance at the face inside the black hood. But the shadow within the cowl was too deep for him to make out any distinguishing features, and he wasn’t about to risk being caught staring.

‘On the rocks,’ the man muttered, almost under his breath. It was more of a gravelly whisper, really.

Sanchez reached under the bar with one hand and pulled out a half-filled brown glass bottle labelled ‘Bourbon’, then gathered two ice cubes in the other. Dropping the cubes into the glass, he began to pour the drink over them. He filled the glass just over halfway, and then placed the bottle back under the bar.

‘That’s three dollars.’

‘Three dollars?’

‘Yep.’

‘Fill the glass.’

The chatter in the bar had remained hushed since the man had entered, but now the quiet acquired a graveyard stillness. The notable exception was the ceiling fan, which actually seemed to be getting louder. Sanchez, who was avoiding eye contact with everyone by this time, picked up the bottle again and filled the glass to the top. The stranger gave him a five-
The bartender turned his back and rang up the sale on the cash register. Then the small sounds of the transaction were suddenly punctuated by speech. From behind him he heard the voice of Ringo, one of his most unpleasant customers. It too was a fairly gravelly voice, as these things go, and it said: ‘What are you doing in our bar, stranger? What’s your business?’

Ringo was sitting with two other men at a table situated just a few feet behind the stranger. He was a heavy, greasy, unshaven slimeball, just like most of the other lowlifes in the bar. And just like the others, he had a pistol in a holster hanging at his side, and he was itching for any kind of excuse to whip it out. Still at the cash register behind the bar, Sanchez took a deep breath and prepared himself for the ruckus that would inevitably follow.

Ringo was a renowned outlaw, guilty of almost every crime imaginable. Rape, murder, arson, theft, cop killing, you name it, Ringo had committed them all. Not a day went by when he didn’t do something illegal that might land him in prison. Today was no different. He had already robbed three men at gunpoint, and now, having spent most of his ill-gotten gains on beer, he was looking to pick a fight.

When Sanchez turned back to face the barroom he saw that the stranger had not moved, or touched his drink. And for a few horribly long seconds he had not responded to Ringo’s question. Sanchez had once seen Ringo shoot a man in the kneecap, simply for not answering him quickly enough. So he breathed a sigh of relief when eventually, just before Ringo asked his questions a second time, the man chose to reply.

‘I’m not looking for any trouble.’

Ringo grinned menacingly, and growled, ‘Well, I am trouble, and it looks like you found me.’

The hooded man did not react. He just sat on his stool, staring at his drink. Ringo got up from his chair and walked over to him. He leaned against the bar alongside the newcomer,
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reached out a hand and roughly pulled back the man’s hood to reveal the chiselled but unshaven face of a blond-haired fellow in his early thirties. The man had bloodshot eyes, suggesting he was slightly hungover or had only just woken prematurely from a drunken slumber.

‘I wanna know what you’re doing here,’ Ringo demanded. ‘We’ve been hearing stories about a stranger who came into town this morning. Thinks he’s a tough-guy. You think you’re a tough-guy?’

‘I’m not a tough-guy.’

‘Then get your coat and get the fuck out.’ As orders go, this had its limitations, for the stranger had not shed his cloak.

The blond man contemplated Ringo’s suggestion for a short while, then shook his head.

‘I know the stranger of whom you speak,’ he said in his husky voice. ‘And I know why he’s here. I’ll tell you all about him if you’ll leave me alone.’

Beneath a dark and insanitary moustache, a big grin broke out on Ringo’s face. He looked back to his audience. The twenty or so regulars were all seated at tables, watching intently as the events unfolded. The sight of Ringo grinning served to ease the tension a little, although everyone in the bar knew that the mood would soon darken again. This was the Tapioca, after all.

‘What do you say, boys? Shall we let this pretty-boy tell us a story?’

There was a noisy chorus of assent and a chinking of glasses. Ringo put his arm around the blond stranger and turned him around on his stool to face the others.

‘Come on, Blondie, tell us about this badass stranger. What’s he want in my town?’

There was a mocking tone in Ringo’s voice, although it didn’t seem to bother the blond man, who began to speak.

‘Earlier today I was in a bar a couple of miles down the road, and this big, nasty-looking dude came in, sat at the bar and ordered a drink.’
‘What did he look like?’
‘Well, you couldn’t see his face at first because he was wearing this big kinda hood. But then some punkass walks over to him and pulls the hood back.’

Ringo wasn’t smiling any more. He suspected the blond man was mocking him, so he leaned in close and tightened his grip on the other’s shoulder.

‘So tell me, boy, what happened next?’ he asked threateningly.

‘Well, the stranger, who’s a good-lookin’ guy, he downs his drink in one go, pulls out a gun and kills every single prick in the bar . . . except for me and the bartender.’

‘Now,’ said Ringo, taking a deep breath through his filthy nostrils, ‘I can understand why he might keep the bartender alive, but I don’t see any good reason why he wouldn’t kill you.’

‘You wanna know why he didn’t kill me?’

Ringo pulled his gun from the holster on his broad black leather belt and pointed it at the man’s face, almost pushing it into his cheek.

‘Yeah, I wanna know why this sonofabitch didn’t kill you.’

The stranger looked hard at Ringo, ignoring the revolver at his head. ‘Well now,’ he said, ‘he didn’t kill me because he wanted me to come to this shit-hole, and find a fat fuck who goes by the name of Ringo.’

The overemphasis the stranger placed on the two words ‘fat’ and ‘fuck’ didn’t escape Ringo’s attention. Yet in the stunned silence that greeted this remark he remained fairly calm, at least by his own standards.

‘I’m Ringo. Who the fuck are you, Blondie?’

‘It’s not important.’

The two greasy lowlifes who had been sitting at Ringo’s table with him stood up. Each took a step towards the bar, ready to back up their friend.

‘It is important,’ said Ringo nastily. ‘Because the word on the street is that this guy, this stranger we’ve been hearing
about, calls himself the Bourbon Kid. You’re drinking bourbon, ain’t you?’

The blond man took a look at Ringo’s two compadres, then looked back down the barrel of Ringo’s gun.

‘D’you know why he’s called the Bourbon Kid?’ he asked.

‘Yeah, I know,’ one of Ringo’s friends called out from behind him. ‘They say that when the Kid drinks bourbon, he turns into a fuckin’ giant, a psycho, and he goes nuts and kills everyone in sight. They say he’s invincible and can only be killed by the Devil himself.’

‘That’s right,’ said the blond man. ‘The Bourbon Kid kills everyone. All it takes is one drink and he goes fuckin’ nuts. They say it’s the bourbon gives him special strength. Once he’s had a sip he always kills every muthafucker in the bar. And I should know. I seen it happen.’

Ringo pushed the muzzle of his pistol hard into the man’s temple. ‘Drink your bourbon.’

The stranger swivelled slowly on his barstool to face the bar again and reached for his drink. Tracking his movements, Ringo continued to press the gun to his head.

Behind the bar Sanchez stepped away, hoping to keep clear of any blood or brains that might get sprayed in his direction. Or the odd stray round, for that matter. He watched as the blond man picked up the glass. Any normal man would have been shaking so much he would have spilled half the drink, but not this guy. The stranger was as cool as the ice in his glass. You had to give him credit for that.

By now every man in the Tapioca was on his feet and straining to see what was happening, and every single one of them had a hand on his own pistol. They all watched as the stranger held the glass up in front of his face, inspecting its contents. There was a bead of sweat sliding down the outside of the glass. Actual sweat. Most likely from Sanchez’s hand, or even from the last person to have used the glass. The man seemed to be watching the bead of sweat, waiting until it had slid far enough down the glass that he wouldn’t have to suffer
the taste of it on his tongue. Eventually, when the drop of sweat was far enough down the glass that it wouldn’t come into contact with his mouth, he took a deep breath and poured the drink down his throat.

In the space of three seconds the glass was empty. The entire bar held its breath. Nothing happened.

So they held their breath some more.

And still nothing happened.

So everyone started breathing again. Including the propeller fan.

Still nothing.

Ringo pulled his gun away from the blond man’s face, and asked the question everyone in the bar wanted to ask: ‘So then, Blondie, are you the Bourbon Kid or not?’

‘Drinking that piss only proves one thing,’ said the blond man, wiping his mouth with the back of one hand.

‘Yeah? And what’s that?’

‘That I can drink piss without puking.’

Ringo looked at Sanchez. The bartender had slunk back as far out of the way as he could, with his back pressed against the wall behind the bar. He looked a little shaky.

‘Did you give him a drink from the piss bottle?’ demanded Ringo.

Sanchez nodded uneasily. ‘I didn’t like the look of him,’ he said.

Ringo holstered his gun and stepped away. Then he threw his head back and began to howl with laughter, slapping the blond man on the shoulder at the same time.

‘You drank a cup of piss! Ha-ha-ha! A cup of piss! He drank *piss*!’

Everyone in the bar burst out laughing. Everyone, that is, except the blond stranger. He fixed his gaze on Sanchez.

‘Give me a fucking bourbon.’ There was quite a lot of gravel in the voice.

The bartender turned away, picked up a different bottle of bourbon from the back of the bar and began pouring from it into the stranger’s glass. This time he filled it to the top.
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without waiting to be told.

‘Three dollars.’

It was evident that the blond man was not impressed by Sanchez asking for another three dollars, and he rapidly made his displeasure clear. Faster than any eye could see, his right hand reached inside the black cloak and reappeared holding a pistol. The weapon was a very dark grey in colour and looked rather heavy in his hand, suggesting it was fully loaded. It had probably once been a shiny silver colour, but as everyone in the Tapioca knew only too well, anyone who carried a shiny silver firearm had probably never used it. The colour of this man’s pistol suggested it had seen a good deal of use.

The stranger’s swift movement came to an end with the pistol pointed directly at Sanchez’s forehead. This aggressive action was immediately followed by a series of loud clicks, more than twenty of them, as everyone else in the bar stopped watching the situation unfold, drew and cocked their own revolvers and drew down on the blond guy.

‘Easy there, Blondie,’ said Ringo, once again pressing the muzzle of his own gun to the man’s temple.

Sanchez smiled a nervous and apologetic smile at the stranger, who was still aiming the dark grey pistol right at his head.

‘Have this one on the house,’ he said.

‘Do you see me reaching for my fuckin’ roll?’ was the curt response.

In the ensuing silence, the blond man laid his pistol down on the bar next to his new glass of bourbon and let out a quiet sigh. He looked thoroughly pissed off now, and seriously in need of a drink. A proper drink. It was time to get rid of that nasty urine taste in his mouth.

He picked up the glass and put it to his lips. The whole bar watched, barely able to stand the tension of waiting for him to drink the contents. As if to torment them, he didn’t actually throw the contents down his throat straight away. He paused for a moment, as though about to say something. Everyone waited with bated breath. Was he going to say something? Or
was he going to drink the bourbon?

The answer soon came. Like a man who hadn’t had a drink for a week, he downed the entire contents of the glass in one mouthful, before slamming the glass back down on the bar.

Now that was definitely real bourbon.