

A Saturday night at Skinny's

By Rex Carter

Stiff and sore and with a raging headache, Benny Fitzpatrick descended the last wooden step and pushed open the door to his tavern. He squinted as a beam of early morning sunlight streaked through the January sky and passed through a slit in the establishment's velvet curtains. He shielded his eyes and surveyed the carnage from the night before.

The old maple floor was littered with shards of glass, some affixed with the frayed labels from a bottle of Canadian whiskey, a quart of Russian vodka and a fifth of Jagermeister. A confluence of booze from those bottles pooled at a low spot, blending into a foul cocktail. The glass front to a Crazy 8s video poker machine formed a web-like pattern as deep cracks spread outward from where the tip of a pool cue had punched through. A purplish fluid stained nearly half the green felt of Benny's 2-year-old Brunswick billiard table, and wine still dripped from a webbed leather pocket. His prized Miller High Life lighted wall-mounted clock – the kind where a smiling maiden sits astride a crescent moon – lay in pieces. He ran his fingers over a wooden bar stool resting cockeyed across his glossy oak bar top; the chair sported two and half legs instead of the customary four.

Slowly walking across the sticky, glass-strewn floor, Benny took it all in. He detected a faint whiff of perfume that somehow managed to distinguish itself amid the odious amalgam of spilled beer, tobacco smoke and stale booze.

He slowly shook his shaggy 71-year-old head and beamed a knowing smile.

Enamored with Wisconsin's Northwoods and wanting to lay down roots in a place he considered God's Country, Benny Fitzpatrick moved up from Janesville and took title to Skinny's Bar in 1973. Skinny's, off the beaten path on Town

Road CC and situated on the shores of shimmering Colburn Lake, earned the reputation as an off-beat kind of place where an eclectic blend of patrons wore as much cardigan as camo. It was a place where flannel wearing truckers and loggers in bib dungarees rubbed elbows and swapped fishing tales with poets in fleece and corduroy clad English professors. And no one could accuse Skinny's of failing to be an equal opportunity business – few were immune from the barbs and slings hurled among patrons regardless of gender, race, creed or national origin. A buck's head mounted prominently above the bar sported a top hat, a white collar and bowtie, and a black-rimmed monocle.

For 45 years, Benny had lived in an apartment upstairs from the tavern. He'd gone through a wife and three girlfriends during that time. He made up for being unlucky in love by having good fortune in business. He paid off his mortgage 13 years early, and Skinny's was his, lock, stock and barrel. During good years, the bar yielded a fat profit; in leaner times, Benny eked out a bottom line commensurate with the tavern's namesake. Still, over the years, he managed to sock away \$152,884.66. With a standing offer to buy from a well-heeled fisherman extraordinaire from Milwaukee named Saul Fencik (owing to the tavern's prime location on walleye-rich Colburn Lake) money was the least of Benny's worries. In fact, for the past 13 years, he closed Skinny's for a month after deer season and vacationed in the Florida Keys. He knew a woman down there – a woman named Sophia De La Cruz, a pretty lady of Cuban descent 17 years his junior. She'd pleaded with him to move down for good. But Benny Fitzpatrick believed in signs – in an omen telling him to sell and move on. So far there'd been no bolt from the blue, no unmistakable signal that the time had come to turn the page.

Nah, money wasn't the issue. What tore him apart was the indecision that nagged at him morning, noon and night. After all, he was 71 and there still was a big world to see and a companion willing to see it with him. But he adored his bar, and in a way he loved its oddball collection of customers. Benny knew each regular by name – both full-time and seasonal residents – people like Klaus Deva, a tall, pale Romanian fellow

"Randy, can you watch the bar for about 30 minutes?" Benny asked of a trusted regular named Randy Kelsey. "I've got to run ol' Dan home. Sandra's probably out losing all his money at the casino, and I'm not letting him behind the wheel."

"Sure thing," replied Randy, a 28-year-old who was bull-like in physical stature with a demeanor

Her long auburn hair hung to the floor as she came eye to eye with the subject of her terror.

who spent winters in Tempe, Arizona, and summers in the Northwoods. Folks called him "The Count," and he showed up like clockwork every day at 4 p.m. for an old fashioned and a bottle of Pabst Blue Ribbon. Then there was old Peter Kaiser, a retired sawmill operator who liked to sit at the end of the bar eating peanuts and pontificating about the timber industry, the latest Packers game and weight limits on the county roads. Pete was forced to retire after he developed narcolepsy a few years back, and on rare occasions at Skinny's he'd blink out while raising his beer glass to his mouth. After a few minutes, he'd awake, take a gulp and set the glass back down without spilling a drop.

Benny knew each regular's politics, their religion, their kids' names, what they drank, and he how much they could handle before the cutoff point. He kept a list of phone numbers of wives, husbands and significant others – people he could call to escort a particular customer home if a snoot got too full. At times, Benny himself operated as a one-man tipsy taxi service after first deputizing a regular to watch the bar until he returned.

Such was the case Saturday night when things went terribly awry.

more reminiscent of the fictional bovine Ferdinand. Kelsey, who maintained a head of wild brown curls and a beard stretching to his chest, always kept a tattered and deeply cherished copy of Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass in the back pocket of his jeans. He went nowhere without it. Randy claimed the 19th century poet had signed the inside cover, but all anyone could ever make out was a faded gray smudge. Benny liked what he saw in Randy – the look of an enforcer with the heart of a cloistered monk.

It wasn't long after Benny had folded Dan into his pickup that Norah Hodges entered Skinny's alone. "Hot Norah" as she was known at Skinny's was a notorious flirt thought to be in her early 40s, and that night she soon caught up to the reputation that preceded her. She slipped out of her faux fur coat and walked across the room in a sleeveless silk blouse and skin-tight black jeans that ended at mid-calf. She wore black pumps strapped tight around her ankles. A glass of cabernet sauvignon in hand, she sauntered over to the pool table and grabbed a cue.

She directed a smile at a table of guys: Pat Skinner, Lew Kolbeck and Alton Black, a trio of

locals who'd just downed a shot in celebration of Black's achievement of catching a string of perch through the ice.

"Anyone wanna play?" she asked, her voice and manner acting like a shiny lure to a school of bass. The men glanced nervously at one another before Skinner, apparently bolstered by a shot of whiskey, summoned the courage to play pool with Hot Norah.

Skinner had no sooner looked up from racking the balls when he heard a blood curdling scream from just past his shoulder. It was Norah, wild-eyed with her arms folded inward and her hands pressed against her cheeks. She screamed again and hopped frantically on her pumps as if terrified by the floor.

The entire bar turned their attention to the spectacle unfolding at the pool table – Hot Norah squealing and screeching as if stark raving mad and poor dumbfounded Skinner standing by helplessly. Moments later, Norah, wine still in hand, leaped

like a kangaroo onto the pool table and pointed at the floor.

"It's down there!" she shrieked. "It's down there! A mouse! It's a mouse!"

Norah took two ill-advised steps backward on the Brunswick, stepped on the 11 ball and crashed to the table, her wine glass smashing against the slate top. She rose to her feet only to stumble into the side pocket. Her tightly strapped pump and its accompanying foot became ensnared in the pocket's leather web as the rest of her body flopped backward toward the floor. Her free leg scissored past her head as she displayed a feat of bodily contortion and flexibility heretofore not seen in these parts. Now with her back arched in reverse and fully extended downward, her long auburn hair hung to the floor as she came eye to eye with the subject of her terror. The rodent, locked in a fierce struggle for survival, scampered toward Norah as Skinner

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