

A Smell of Mint

A short story by David Nobbs (*CO 1948-53*)

He decided to go to bed and read his book, but his legs didn't agree and he found himself in the hotel bar. Oh well. One nightcap wouldn't do any harm.

The room was buzzing. There were no free tables, but there were two empty stools at the bar. He had a choice between sitting next to a young lady, with an empty seat on his right, or next to a middle-aged man, with an empty seat on his left.

It was no contest, not simply because the woman looked as though she might be attractive, but because there was a lurking loneliness about the man, an air of conversation waiting to pour out, a hint of tension in the shoulders, which would only be released by the airing of some weird obsession. This was a man to be avoided.

James didn't actually want to speak to anybody. He wanted to read his book, a novel by a very promising young female writer. It was set, funnily enough, in his old school and was a moving and at times funny tale of the problems faced by the first girls to be admitted there. There had been no girls in James's day. If there had been...well, that was pure speculation.

The realisation that after seventeen years he was growing tired of Tim had come upon him slowly over the last months, but in recent weeks it had been accompanied by a feeling that he was no longer certain that he was actually gay.

He ordered a glass of pinot grigio. Nine pounds fifty. This was a posh hotel.

The barmaid had a big, round, cheery face, an East European accent, and cocktail mixer's biceps. 'Keep the change.'

'Oh. Thank you.' She had the grace to sound surprised.

He longed to open his book. He really fancied two of the girls in it. There was a revolution happening in his life. He wondered how you would describe a man admitting to the world that he was heterosexual after all. Coming out of the closet? Going *into* the closet?

But he felt that it would be bad manners to read here, at the bar. It would be inappropriate. He smiled at the barmaid and she smiled back as she shook her cocktail shaker with proud violence. A man reading at the bar, at eleven o'clock in the evening. What a dampener that would be.

He was becoming more and more aware of the woman on his left. Her body was turned slightly away from him. He began to want to speak to her. His book could wait. But how could he speak to her? He had no experience of chatting women up.

She was making occasional brief entries into a notebook. 'May I ask you what you are making notes on?' No. That would be an intrusion, inviting a snub. Too risky.

He thought of Tim, making their late night cocoa so prissily. They had to split up. This was his chance to become a womaniser at last. But the angle of her body, turned away, excluded him.

He caught the barmaid's eye and he knew that she could see what he was thinking. She was making mojitos now, and as she crushed the mint with her great mint-crushing shoulders an astonishing smell of mint wafted across the counter and turned the late night room into a sunny garden for a moment.

The young lady smelt it too, and turned her head towards the barmaid.

This was his opportunity.

'Amazing smell,' he said.

'Wonderful.'

In profile she was definitely attractive. Older than he had thought, but still younger than him. Say something, man.

But what?

An absurd sentence presented itself to him.

'Talking of mint, do you have a large garden?'

Ridiculous. Couldn't say that.

'Do you come here often?'

No!!

'Warm in here, isn't it?'

Hopeless.

'Would you like a mojito?' 'Hello, I'm James Parker. I'm an industrial chemist.' 'You're very pretty.'

'So how do you think the coalition are doing so far?' 'I live with a man but I'm beginning to doubt

that I'm gay. All those admissions, those difficult scenes with my parents, and I needn't have gone through any of it. Silly, isn't it?

He couldn't say any of these things. Besides, the moment had passed. She had turned away again. She was making little notes again.

Tim would be going round the house now, checking to make sure no lights had been left on. How irritating was that? James was ready to move on into a new life, a bolder life, where expensive wine flowed and lights were left on willy-nilly.

He waited till the barmaid was free, he didn't want to be served by either of the two barmen, he really was off men in a big way.

'Another pinot grigio, please'

Another nine pounds fifty recklessly spent.

'Can I buy you a drink?'

The words remained unspoken. There was no face to speak them to. The body language...well, not the body language exactly...the body position...made her desire for privacy unmistakable. A woman had a right to go into a bar on her own and remain unmolested. Not to believe that would be intolerably sexist.

He decided that he *would* read his book. The not quite so young lady was making her notes, the bar staff were busy; he didn't care what the dangerous lonely man thought. What did he care if he gave out an unfriendly signal?

He reached down, picked up his English Heritage bag, got hold of his book, began to lift it out of the bag.

He couldn't do it. It just wasn't a seemly thing to do, at the bar in this elegant, lively hotel, a man with his nose in a book at eleven fifteen at night.

He dropped the book back into the bag, dropped the bag back onto the floor, smiled at the bicipital barmaid, took a tiny sip of his pinot grigio, gave a wry internal smile at the thought that even that sip cost forty pee and how that would horrify Tim. Tim was mean.

He was aware that the lady of the notes had closed her notebook, was putting it back into her bag. He felt, rather than saw, her draining the last bit from her glass. Suddenly she turned her face towards him, gave him a radiant smile. Not exactly a personal smile, more a polished smile. A polite smile. A social smile. A smile with more gratitude for his good manners than regret that they hadn't spoken.

But still, a smile.

'Good night.'

This was the last chance saloon. 'No, don't go. Have another drink.' 'Please! You're gorgeous.

What's your room number?' 'I've never made love to a woman in my life. Show me how.' 'Here's my card. Phone me.' 'Let's meet at breakfast.'

'Good night.'

She was walking towards the door. She had... as he had known she would, damn it... a trim, slim figure and good legs.

And all he had said to her was 'amazing smell' and 'good night'. Four words.

Now that there were empty seats on both sides of him, he would read. And the lonely man was eyeing him. Conversation was imminent.

He lifted the book out, and there she was, on the jacket, in all her glory. That really very pretty face, a little younger than she had looked tonight. The lovely curl of the nostrils. Oh God.

She had probably been making notes for her next book.

If only he'd known. What conversational openings there would have been. 'I've read the first ninety pages of your book. It's wonderful.' What author could have resisted that? 'I've lived with a man for seventeen years. If there had been girls at the school when I'd been there, maybe I would never have slipped into being gay.' 'Oh, that's intriguing.'

He could have intrigued her time and time again.

'Your book has made me begin to wonder if I am gay. I'd love to talk about it more. May I buy you a drink?' 'I'm a little tired actually.' 'Well, dinner some time?' The room buzzed with conversations that might have been.

Bed on his own seemed horribly unappealing. Might as well go on drinking.

'Another pinot grigio, please.'

How Tim would flinch at this extravagance, at this excess, at this indiscipline.

As he paid Miss Bulgarian Dry Martini 2010, he felt a great need to speak to her.
'Shame,' he said. 'Pity old Marlburians have such good manners. They can get in the way.'
'I not understand,' she said. 'What is this "old Marlburian"?'
'It's a cocktail. Two parts pride, one part nostalgia, and always, very important, a dash of regret.'
'We not stock this.'
He took a fifty pee sip.
No, Tim wasn't mean. He was careful. And sensible.
There were worse qualities.
Besides, he couldn't bear to hurt old Tim.

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