

Mermaid in Vegas

By Anthony Schmitz

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Stroke. Stroke. Flip. Push.

You can watch her for hours and it's always the same.

Stroke. Stroke. Flip. Push.

Like a polar bear in a zoo. Except this is not a zoo.

Where it is I can't tell you exactly, because that would be unwise in terms of my health. In fact it would render all further questions about my health irrelevant, if certain individuals were to track me down.

Her hair streams out behind her. She swims with her mouth open and the water...

Well, there's no need to get into that quite yet.

Let me tell you the things I can tell you.

The glass wall is — I'm guessing now — maybe fifteen yards long, maybe ten feet high. The only light in this place comes from inside the tank. It's blue, it's green. On her it looks good.

The glass is right behind the bar. The light does not do so much for Eduardo, the bartender, who looks not quite living and not quite dead. The light doesn't do much for any of us in the bar. But that's not the point. The point is that she is here, open-mouthed, endlessly swimming back and forth, beautiful, inscrutable, trapped. The point is that she can be kept.

If you can stand to listen to it, someone is always raising the question, *sotto voce* if sober, full volume if loaded.

"You think she's real?"

"Of course she's real. Look at her, she's real."

"I mean real real. Like, not in a costume."

"That look like a costume?"

"Only half a costume."

"Still."

"Who can tell? They got so much dough, they can make her look real.

What do they do here but mint money?"

"But there ain't enough money. Not for that."

"There ain't enough reality for that."

"Well. You got a point."

I can see it both ways.

Usually what happens is, I walk in, I sit down at the bar, I tell Eduardo to get me the usual. "The usual, Tommy, coming up." He does the thing he always does with the glass — tosses it casually in the air, catches it just before it would otherwise shatter on the bar, simultaneously grabs a bottle of Crown Royal, fills the glass halfway. Plunk, plunk, two cubes, and gives the glass a push my way.

"Run a tab?"

"I should know better but yeah, go ahead."

For a while I sit and watch.

Stroke. Stroke. Flip. Push.

You can't turn away. You can't bear to watch. That's how it is.

She rarely turns to look past the bar. She's in there with the decor, such as it is. A layer of sand on the tank floor. A wooden chest overflowing with what appears to be actual jewels. Some boulders where she could sit. She never does. A cave where she could hide. She doesn't do that either.

It's happened that she's looked out and caught my eye. I can tell you what I think I see there, but whether I'm right or wrong, there's no way to know.

I asked Eduardo once, "You ever talked to her?"

"Who?" he said.

"Who do you think?"

"What do I look like, Tommy? A mind reader?"

"Behind you."

"Oh, her."

"Yeah."

"How would I? She's behind that glass. She's underwater. Christ, I don't know if she *can* talk."

"I just thought..."

He acts as if the idea never occurred to him.

"You've never been curious?"

"Maybe I been here too long. It's like the wallpaper. You stop noticing."

"You stop noticing?"

He shrugs. "You asked. I'm telling you."

I finish the first glass, order another. I stare at the glass and meditate. The whiskey helps the meditation. I wonder if the Buddhists ever thought of that.

I wonder if she ever stops.

It's not really a hubbub when Frank walks in. You don't get through the door by being a rube. The people who know are people who know. They are not left goggle-eyed by much of anything, Frank included. Then again, Frank is Frank, and he has his entourage of thugs and women and assorted hangers-on. It's like ignoring a parade. Not so easy. There's always some whispering, some rubbernecking. If nobody offered to do it for free, the management would have to pay for it. Frank has expectations.

Dean glides along with Frank, Mr. Yin and Mr. Yang. Frank is all nervous energy, a choppy sea of malice and anxiety, while Dean hums to himself, lopes along beside the little man.

"Eduardo, buddy," says Dean. "What you say to the usual?"

"I say you got it, Mr. M." Again with the glass, up in the air, a couple somersaults and it slaps down, bottom first, in his palm.

"Hey, hey, Eddy," Dean says. "The man's a goddamn artist." Frank's guys make some noises that signify their agreement.

One of Frank's stooges steps over to take the filled glass from Eduardo. He hands it to Dean, who drains it in two gulps.

"Ha, ha. I'm giving up drinking," he says. "But until then, Eddy, give me another."

"You're giving up drinking like I'm giving up..." Frank has to stop to think.

I could fill in this blank. Beating up babes. Being a bully. Sucking up to mobsters. And so forth.

"Like you're giving up what, boss?" Tom Tom, one of Frank's bodyguards, breathes through his mouth while he waits for an answer.

"Jesus, I don't know."

Everyone waits a beat for this information to settle.

"He doesn't know, ha ha ha." Tom Tom starts and next thing you know the hilarity has spread like a disease. "He doesn't know!"

Dean slips away to a table occupied by a certain type of gal. She's wearing a blue sequined dress that could have been painted on. She wouldn't get through the door except that she looks the way she looks.

Dean pulls out a chair and leans back in it like he's been there for hours. He's still patting his pockets for a cigarette when Frank realizes he's been abandoned. He looks around, spots Dean. In a heartbeat he's at the table, too. He grabs a chair and perches on the edge. One of his legs bounces up and down. He's like a machine that can't be turned off.

"Like your dress, sweetheart," says Frank.

She takes this in stride. She's aware of exactly how much she's got going on. You can just about hear the gears grinding in her head. Frank or Dean? Dean or Frank? Not so easy to say. Dean might be a better time, but Frank is Frank. Like the choice between Jesus Christ and St. Peter. You can make allowances for the otherwise insufferable qualities.

"Thanks, Frank," she says.

"Already I'm Frank?"

"Who you want to be?" Dean wonders. "Father Time?"

The girl gropes in her clutch for a cigarette, hoping to stay out of this.

"What, you think I'm too old? What do you think I'm too old for?"

"You're not too old for a stupid argument. That's one thing."

Tom Tom takes a few steps toward the table. "Everything okay sir?"
"Get lost, Tom Tom," says Frank.

Tom Tom fades into the shadows. The girl fumbles in her clutch for a lighter.

"What's your name, cupcake?" Frank asks.

"Not Cupcake."

This strikes Dean as amusing enough to justify a half-crooked smirk. Frank gives him a stone face.

"You done?"

"Just getting started."

"It's Connie."

"Like Connie Francis," Frank says.

"Like Connie Darling, which is actually my name."

"I very much doubt that, Connie."

"Come on, Frank. Why don't you leave the girl alone? In fact, why don't you leave me and Connie alone? We were just starting to get acquainted. The first few minutes of what could be a beautiful relationship."

This is why these girls are here. If Dean or Frank hops into the elevator with Connie and rides to the love nest management sets aside for these assignations, that's fine. If Dean *and* Frank hop into the elevator with Connie, that's okay, too. And if instead they have a brawl with each other down here in the little secret bunker down beneath the sidewalk, well, who's going to complain? So long as they can move their jaws the next day, sing their songs, tell their jokes, cover up the bruises with make-up. It's all part of the excitement, part of the thrill, part of the job of being Frank or Dean. Or, for that matter, Joey or Peter or Sammy.

"Here, sugar, let me light that." Frank leans over toward her.

"It's Connie, like I said."

"Yeah, right."

"It's too much to call her by her name?"

"I'll call her what I want. Jesus."

Connie decides to get up. Frank grabs her arm.

"Sit down." He gives her a tug.

The chair skitters away. Connie is on the floor. One shoe is off. A handful of sequins make an escape.

"Keep...your...hands...off...me," Connie hisses.

There's something about how she says this. Something that makes it sound like more than an idle threat.

Frank doesn't hear it. "My hands go where my hands want to go."

"Everything okay, sir?" Tom Tom asks again. "I should help the lady up?"

"Fuck off, Tom Tom."

"Yes sir."

"The lady can help herself up."

Frank stands so quickly that his chair bangs against the floor, too.

"Come on, Dean. We're getting out of here."

Dean is still lounging in his chair, his legs stretched out. Smoke swirls around his head. He stubs out his cigarette, drains his glass. He looks at Connie, still on the floor, and extends a hand to help her up.

"I wonder what an actual man would have done," Connie says. "Just sat there? No, I don't suppose an actual man would have done that." She ignores Dean's hand. She picks up her shoe and looks at the broken heel. She takes

off the other shoe and throws it across the room. "Rat Pack. Yeah, they got that right."

Dean puts both hands on the table to pull himself upright. He stands slowly, then gives himself a second to make sure the room isn't spinning too severely to navigate. "It's been a pleasure, Connie," he says as he goes slouching after Frank.

When I turn back to Eduardo to order another, something strikes me as out of whack. It takes a minute to put it together. It's the girl in the tank. For the first time I can recall she's stopped her routine. She's poised at the glass, staring at the girl in the sequin dress. What she's thinking, well, who can say? Her hair shimmies in whatever currents move through the water. Her eyes are wide open, unblinking. Her eyes are blue, like the sky or the sea in the real world. She looks around the room. Briefly her eyes settle on me. I could feel a lot of things, I suppose.

That it should be a jolt of fear comes as a surprise to me.

I am a casino dick. Not, like Frank, a dick who works in a casino, but a detective of sorts. I am a guy who strolls around the casino, apparently minding his own business, betting some, winning occasionally, losing a lot like everybody else, except that my chips don't cost and don't pay. Some days I come to work in a tuxedo, other days it's a pair of dirty chinos and a shirt that needs pressing. I might wear glasses or I might not. I might have a mustache, or a beard, or be clean-shaven. And all of this might change from morning to afternoon. I look in the mirror sometimes and surprise myself. *Who is this guy?* I wonder.

The name on my Social Security card is Thomas Blinder. Pronounced with a short i, please. Then again, yesterday I was Rex Thorncat for a few hours. The day before, Jeremy Edgerton. I'm not what you would call a master of disguise, but here's a little secret. You don't have to be. Most people don't care about much except themselves. They notice even less. I'm not complaining. If the world were different, my job would be harder.

I collar casino cheats. It doesn't really matter so much, given the volume of money that pours through this place. It's like hiring guards to prevent tourists from stealing a bucket of water out of Niagara Falls. It's not that a thousand here or there is so important; it's the principle of the thing.

Principle is very important to my employers. They are in favor of taking your money, but they are very much opposed to you taking theirs. If I find you in possession of, say, some interesting wiring that you use to hotwire their slot machines, or believe that you are using one of the common betting scams at the roulette wheel or craps table, I will report you to our security personnel. These are gentlemen in uniforms who will escort you through the casino to a door that you would otherwise not notice. The cheerful lighting, the happy tinkle of ice against glass, the shapely gals wearing too little; all this comes to an abrupt end on the other side of the door. Instead there is a long, dim hallway that leads to another door. Behind that door is a small room with a gray metal desk and a few sturdy chairs. The floor is linoleum, the light fluorescent. It is not the type of room you enter with the expectation that anything good is right around the corner.

I'm telling you this because it is related to a story I heard about how the mermaid came to be here.

For a couple days I had been watching a team of cheats led by a gentleman named Bobby "Fingers" Alcalzo, may he rest in peace. Bobby Fingers, as everyone except maybe his mother called him, had worked out a bit of cheating pageantry that on paper sounds ridiculous but was, in the bustle of a casino, effective. The idea was that one member of the team distracted the dealer the moment the ball landed. Bobby Fingers seized this instant. With the sleight of hand that his moniker suggested, he moved the bet to a winning number. A past-post move, as we call it in my profession.

Like me, Bobby Fingers was not a man who looked the same two days in a row. Unlike me, he did not live in Las Vegas, since that would be impractical for a man of his occupation who desired a prolonged career. He spent a few days with us during the year, then moved on to Europe, or certain Caribbean locations. We had photos of him, many of which I took myself. But they were of limited use, given his endless disguises.

He might appear with a full beard, looking like Leo Tolstoy. His head might be shaved like Yul Brynner. He would do subtle things, such as stuffing his nostrils or plucking his eyebrows, which changed his appearance to a much greater extent than you would think. We had a dance going, him in his disguises, me in mine. I always had an eye out for him, in part as a matter of professional pride, and in part because the last thing I needed was for my employers to believe Bobby Fingers and I had a deal going.

My employers, in case you don't know, are people who know people. People like Jimmy Hoffa, Joe Kennedy. If they are unhappy with you, they will sometimes employ dramatic means to make that clear.

So the way it happened is that I was making my usual rounds, drink in hand, dressed in farmer's overalls, a chambray shirt, a wig and a set of tinted

aviator glasses. Pig farmer in Vegas was the overall idea. I didn't see Bobby Fingers so much as sense his presence. Sorry to go mystical on you, but it's a feeling like not quite remembering something, the nagging sense that something you want is just out of reach.

My impulse was to crane my neck, look this way and that. Naturally that's all wrong. Might as well wear a signboard that says CASINO DICK in foot-high letters. No, the correct response is to play the fool, and slowly at that. Nod at a pretty girl, as if unaware that she would just as soon scrape dog crap off her shoe as to acknowledge my existence. Jingle the chips in my pocket. Wander slowly toward the roulette wheel and watch goggle-eyed as the ball spins round and round.

Not that this had previously worked with Bobby Fingers, whose radar was set more finely than mine. He would usually give me a grin and yell across the table, "Tommy Blinder!" This always with a long i, as if he didn't know my name. "You need some chips, man?" Then he and his pals would head for the door.

On the day in question his powers failed him. Maybe his arrogance overwhelmed his common sense. Maybe he had beaten me so many times that he had come to believe he couldn't lose. His disguise was more like a Halloween costume. He wore a turban and a long white robe. He had grown a beard for the occasion and dyed it black. Whether his accent was reasonable or not I couldn't possibly say, though my gut tells me it was probably in the ballpark. Disguise is a kind of mimicry, after all. You don't just put on a wig and some odd clothes. You inhabit the role. You become the pig farmer or the sheik.

Bobby was working with a gentleman dressed like nobody in particular. A paper salesman from Poughkeepsie, an insurance agent from Sioux Falls. Gray suit, dingy white shirt, rumbled, balding. Human, but in the manner of lobby furniture. So while Bobby Fingers is playing Ali Baba, jabbering incomprehensibly at the dealer, Mr. Nobody moves chips hither and thither after the ball has landed. It's practiced and subtle. My bet is that you wouldn't notice a thing. It's magician quality work, done with hundred dollar chips paying thirty-five to one. Presto change-o!

I nod at a guy who nods at a guy and the next thing you know five security boys are converging on the table. The insurance agent takes off like he's a split end for the Packers. He stiff arms one of our boys, gives another a head fake, swivels, gives him some kind of kung fu kick to the knee and boom, he's gone. Poor Bobby Fingers misses a couple beats, and when he does finally make a turn for the exit, I stick out a boot and trip him.

His headdress flops over his face. I grab him by the neck, not choking him exactly, but making the point that he should stay put. In his phony accent he says, "Let me go, imbecile. Or never you work again in this town, except garbage."

"Forget it, Bobby. I got you."

"Oh, Blinder. Don't tell me, is you."

"It's Blinder. Short i, asshole. And drop the stupid accent, okay?"

"Shit. It's the goddamn cold meds. I knew I should have stayed in the room. My fucking head feels like it's full of cement. I shouldn't have been working. Get the kufiya off my face, Blinder. Do me that favor at least."

"Kufiya?"

"The rag, for Christ sake. It's humiliating, caught by such a fucking hick."

"You're caught, Bobby, that's for sure." I push back the headdress. For the moment Bobby can still afford a look of contempt.

"Is this how you want to win? I'm drugged, man. It's not fair. Where's your self-respect? If I were you..."

"If you were me, you wouldn't be under arrest."

"You're not even a real cop."

"Still."

"Anyway, I'd let me go. I mean, where's the glory in doing it this way? I can barely think right now, that's how loaded I am on that crap."

"You weren't so loaded you couldn't steal us blind."

"Yeah, well, a drunk chimpanzee could steal you blind."

By now our security boys are jacking up Bobby, putting him in the cuffs and none too gently at that. "The back room, Tommy?" asks Benny, the security chief.

"Yeah," I say. "We're going to invite Mr. Fingers to offer us some insight into his techniques."

"You want me to call Mr. Stiglioni?"

"That's a good call, Benny. I'm sure Robert will be eager to join us."

"Stiglioni?" There's a note in Bobby's voice. He's doing his best to control it. There's a little warble back there, a tightness. Fear does that. "We don't need to get Stiglioni involved."

"I think we do, Bobby."

He steps up to me so he's all but whispering in my ear. I motion to the security boys to leave us be. "Maybe we could settle this between us, right now."

"How do you mean?"

"I could repatriate some of your dough."

"What?"

"Jesus, Blinder, do I have to write it out for you? There's enough for everybody if you know what mean."

"You're trying to bribe me?"

"I'm trying to share the wealth. Like Castro. Or Mao. Bring some socialism to Vegas."

"I'm not sure this place is even capitalist, Bobby. All I know is, it's not smart to steal money from these guys. Not for you, not for me."

"There's got to be something you need. Something you want. Talk to me, Blinder. Don't make me beg you."

"I think you better talk to Stiglioni."

I remember the look in his eye. Resigned, that's one word. Terrified, that's another. One of the guards grabbed the cuffs and marched Bobby toward that brown steel door. That was the last I saw of him.