

One of the remarkable things about Fritz Leiber is the ease with which he writes any kind of story. Science fiction, fantasy, weird—you name it and he's done them all. Just think of Gather, Darkness, "Scylla's Daughter," and (in the old Unknown) "Smoke Ghost," and you'll see what we mean. In that last story particularly Leiber helped to modernize the tale of terror, to take it out of haunted castles and moldering graveyards and put it into the dark, night-marish streets of a modern city. "I'm Looking for Jeff," written much later, belongs in this same category. After reading it, see if ever again you can drop in at a bar like the Tomtoms without thinking of Bobby—who always took the second stool from the left though no one could see her, except old Pops the bartender, young Martin Bellows (who lived to regret it), and now you—who probably will never forget her.

I'M LOOKING FOR "Jeff"

By FRITZ LEIBER

Illustrator: EMSH

AT six-thirty that afternoon, Martin Bellows was sitting at the bar of the Tomtoms. In front of him was a tall glass of beer, and behind the bar were two men in white aprons. The two men, one of them so old he was past caring about it, were discussing a matter—and while Martin wasn't really listening, much of the discussion seemed to be for his entertainment.

"If that girl comes in again, I won't serve her. And if she starts to get funny, I'll give her some real eye-shadow!"

"Regular fire eater, aren't you, Pops?"

"All this week, ever since she started to come in here, there's been trouble.

"Listen to him, will you? Aw, Pops, there's always trouble at a bar. Either somebody makes a

play for somebody's girl, or else it's two life-long buddies—"

"I mean nasty trouble. What about those two girls Monday night? What about what the big guy did to Jack? What about Jake and Janice picking the Tomtoms to break up, and the way they did it? *She* was behind it every time. What about the broken glass in the cracked ice?"

"Shut up! Pops is nuts, friend. He gets wild ideas."

Martin Bellows looked up from his beer at Sol, the young working owner of the Tomtoms, and at the other man behind the bar. Then he glanced down the empty stretch of polished mahogany and over his shoulder at the dim, silent stretches of the booths, where the lights from behind the bar hardly picked up the silver and gilt. He grimaced faintly.

"Anything for a little life."

"Life!" Pops snorted. "That isn't what she'd give you, Mister."

There's no lonelier place in the world than a nightspot in the early hours of evening. It makes one think of all the guys who are alone—without a girl or a friend—restlessly searching. Its noiseless gloom is a sounding board for the faintest fears and aches of the heart. Its atmosphere, used to being pushed around by the loud mouths of happy drunks, is stagnant. The dark corners

that should be filled with laughter and desire are ghostly. The bandstand, with the empty chairs sitting around in lifelike positions.

Martin felt it and hitched his stool an inch closer to the old man and the anxious, sharp-eyed Sol.

"Tell me about her, Pops," he said to the old man. "No, let him, Sol."

"All right, but I'm warning you it's a pipe dream."

Pops ignored his boss's remark. He spun the glass he was polishing in a slower rhythm. His face, puffed by beer and thumbled into odd hills and gullies by a lifetime of evanescent but illuminating experiences, grew thoughtful. Outside, traffic moaned and a distant train hooted. Pops pressed his lips together, bringing out a new set of hummocks in his cheeks.

"Name's Bobby," he began abruptly. "Blonde. About twenty. Always orders brandies. Smooth, kid face, except for the faintest scar that goes all the way across it. Black dress that splits down to her belly-button."

A car slammed to a stop outside. The three men looked up. But after a moment they heard the car go on.

"Never set eyes on her till last Sunday night," Pops continued. "Says she's from Michigan City."



I'M LOOKING FOR JEFF

Always asking for a guy named Jeff. Always waiting to start her particular kind of hell."

"Who's this Jeff?" Martin asked.

Pops shrugged.

"And what's her particular kind of hell?"

Pops shrugged again, this time in Sol's direction. "He don't believe in her," he said gruffly.

"I'd like to meet her, Pops," Martin said smilingly. "Like some excitement. Beginning to feel a big evening coming on. And Bobby sounds like my kind of girl."

"I wouldn't introduce her to my last year's best friend!"

Sol laughed lightly but conclusively. He leaned across the bar, confidentially, glancing back at the older man with secretive humor. He touched Martin's sleeve. "You've heard Pops' big story. Now get this: I've never been able to notice this girl, and I'm always here until I close. So far as I know she's just one of his pipe dreams. You know, the guy's a little weak in the head." He leaned a bit closer and spoke in a loud and mocking stage-whisper. "*Used weed when he was a boy.*"

Pops' face grew a bit red, and the new set of hummocks stood out more sharply. "All right, Mr. Wise," he said. "I got something for you."

He put the glass down in the

shining ranks, hung up the towel, fished a cigar box from under the bar.

"Last night she forgot her lighter," he explained. "It's covered with a dull, shiny black stuff, same as her dress. Look!"

The other two men leaned forward, but when Pops flipped up the cover, there was nothing inside but the white paper lining.

Sol looked around at Martin with a slow grin. "You see?"

Pops swore and ripped out the lining. "One of the band must have swiped it!"

Sol laid his hand gently on the older man's arm. "Our musicians are nice, honest boys, Pops."

"But I tell you I put it there last thing last night."

"No, Pops, you just thought you did." He turned to Martin. "Not that strange things don't sometimes happen in bars. Why, just these last few days—"

A door slammed. The three men looked around. But it must have been a car outside, for nothing came in.

"Just these last few days," Sol repeated, "I've been noticing the damndest thing."

"What?" Martin asked.

Sol shot another of his secretively humorous glances toward Pops. "I'd like to tell you," he explained, "but I can't in front of Pops. He gets ideas."

Martin stood up, grinning. "Got to go anyhow. See you later."

Not five minutes later, Pops smelled the perfume. A rotten, sickly smell. And his ears caught the mouse-faint creaking of the midmost barstool, and the tiny, ghostly sigh. And the awful feel of it went deep down inside him and grated on his bones like chalk. He began to tremble.

Then the creaking and the sigh came again through the gloom of the Tomtoms, a little impatiently, and he had to turn, although it was the last thing he wanted to do, and he had to look at the emptiness of the bar. And there, at the midmost stool, he saw it.

It was terribly indistinct, just a shadowy image superimposed on the silvers and gilts and midnight blues of the far wall, but he knew every part of it. The gleaming blackness of the dress, like the sheerest black silk stocking held up in near darkness. The pale gold of the hair, like motes in the beam of an amber spotlight. The paleness of face and hands, like puffs of powder floating up from a spilled compact. The eyes, like two tiny dark moths hovering.

"What's the matter, Pops?" Sol asked sharply.

He didn't hear the question. Although he'd have given anything not to have to do it, he was edging shakily down the bar, hand grasping the inner margin for support, until he stood before the midmost stool.

Then he heard it, the faint clear voice that seemed to ride a mosquito's whine, as they say the human voice rides a radio wave. The voice that knifed deep, deep into his head.

"Been talking about me, Pops?"

He just trembled.

"Seen Jeff tonight, Pops?"

He shook his head.

"What's the matter, Pops? What if I'm dead and rotting? Don't shake so, Pops, you've got the wrong build for a shimmy dancer. You should be complimented I show myself to you. You know, Pops, at heart every woman's a stripper. But most of them just show themselves to the guy they like, or need. I'm that way. I don't show myself to the bums. And now give me a drink."

His trembling only increased.

The twin moths veered toward him. "Got polio, Pops?"

In a spasm of haste he jerked around, stooping. By blind fumbling he found the brandy bottle under the ranked glasses, poured a shaky shot, set it down on the bar and stepped back.

"What the hell are you up to!"

He didn't even hear the angry question, or realize that Sol was moving toward him. Instead, he stood pressed back as far as he could, and watched the powder-cloud fingers wind around the shot glass like tendrils of smoke, and heard the bat-shrill voice

laugh ruefully and say, "Can't manage it that way, haven't got strength enough yet," and watched the twin moths, and something red and white-edged just below them, dip toward the brandy.

Then for a moment a feeling reached out and touched Sol, for though no hand was on the bar, the shot glass shook, and a little rill of brandy snaked down its side and pooled on the mahogany.

"What the . . . ,” Sol began, and then finished, "Those damn trucks, they shake the whole neighborhood."

And all the while Pops was listening to the bat-shrill voice: "That helped, Pops," and then, with a wheedling restlessness, "What's on tonight, Pops? Where can a girl get herself some fun? Who was the tall, dark and handsome that left a while ago? You called him Martin?"

Sol, finally fed up, came striding toward Pops. "And now you'll please explain just what the—"

"Wait!" Pops hand snapped out and clamped on Sol's arm so that the younger man winced. "She's getting up," he gasped. "She's going after him. We got to warn him."

Sol's sharp gaze quickly flashed where Pops was looking. Then, with a little snarl, he shook off Pops' hand and gripped him in turn.

"Look here, Pops, are you really smoking weed?"

The older man struggled to free himself. "We got to warn him, I tell you, before she drinks herself strong enough to make him notice her, and starts putting her broken-bottle ideas into his head."

"Pops!" The shout in the ear stiffened the older man, so that he stood there quietly, though rigid, while Sol said, "They probably have some nut bars out on West Madison Street they don't mind having nuts behind. Probably, I don't know. But you're going to have to start looking for one of them if you pull any more of these goofy acts, or start talking about any Bobby and broken glass." His fingers kneaded the old man's biceps. "Get it?"

Pops' eyes were still wild. But he nodded twice, stiffly.

The evening started out heavy and indigestible for Martin Belows, but after a while it began to float like the diamond-dusted clouds of light around the street lamps. The session with Pops and Sol had given him a funny sort of edge, but he rode out the mood, drifting from tavern to tavern, occasionally treating a decent-looking guy to a drink and letting himself be treated in turn, sharing that courtesy silently, not talking very much, kidding a bit with the girls behind the bars while he covertly eyed those in

front. After five taverns and eight drinks, he found he'd picked up one of them.

She was a small willowy girl with hair like a winter sunrise and a sleekly-fitting black dress, high-necked but occasionally revealing a narrow ribbon of sweet flesh. Her eyes were dark and friendly, and not exactly law-abiding, and her face had the smooth matte quality of pale doe-skin. He was aware of a faint gardenia perfume. He put his arm around her and kissed her lightly, under the street lamp, not closing his eyes, and as he did so he noticed that her face had a blemish. The tiniest line of paler flesh, like a single strand of spiderweb, began at her left temple and went straight across the lids of her left eye and the bridge of her nose and back across the right cheek. It enhanced her beauty, he thought.

"Where'll we go?" he asked.

"How about the Tomtoms?"

"A little too early." Then, "Say! I'll bet your name is Bobby. That's what Pops"

She shrugged. "He likes to talk."

"Sure you are! Pops was spieling about you at a great rate." He smiled at her fondly. "Claims you're an evil influence."

"Yes?"

"But don't worry about that. Pops is stark, raving nuts. Why, only this evening—"

"Well, let's go some place else," she interrupted. "I need a drink, lover."

And they were off, Martin with his heart singing, because what you always look for and never find had actually happened to him: he had found a girl who set his imagination and his thirst aflame. Every minute made him more desirous and prouder of her. Bobby was the perfect girl, he decided. She didn't get loud, or quarrelsome, or complaining, or soul-baring, or full of supposedly cute, deliberately exasperating whims. Instead, she was gay and smooth and beautiful, fitting his mood like a glove, yet with that hint of danger and savagery that can never be divorced from the dizzy fumes of alcohol and the dark streets of cities. He found himself growing very foolish about her. He even came to dote on her spiderlike scar, as if it were an expert repair job done on an expensive French doll.

They went to three or four delightful taverns, one where a gray-haired woman sang meltingly, one that showed silent comedies on a small screen instead of television, one full of framed pencil portraits of unknown, unimportant people. Martin got through all the early stages of intoxication—the eager, the uneasy, the dreamily blissful—and emerged safely into that

crystal world where time almost stands still, where nothing is surer than your movements and nothing realer than your feelings, where the tight shell of personality is shattered and even dark walls and smoky sky and gray cement underfoot are sentient parts of you.

But after a while he kissed Bobby again, in the street, holding her longer and closer this time, plunging his lips to her neck, drowning in the autumn-garden sweetness of gardenia perfume, murmuring unsteadily, "You've got a place around here?"

"Yes."

"Well"

"Not now, lover," she breathed. "First let's go to the Tomtoms."

He nodded and drew a bit back from her, not angrily.

"Who's Jeff?" he asked.

She looked up at him. "Do you want to know?"

"Yes."

"Look, lover," she said softly, "I don't think you'll ever meet Jeff. But if you do, I want you to promise me one thing—I won't ever ask for anything else." She paused, and all the latent savagery glowed in the pale mask of her features. "I want you to promise me that you'll break the bottom off a beer bottle and jam it into his fat face."

"What'd he do to you?"

The pale mask was enigmatic.

"Something much worse than you're thinking," she told him.

Looking down at Bobby's still, expectant face, Martin felt a thrill of murderous excitement go through him.

"Promise?" she asked.

"Promise," he said huskily.

Sol was content only during the busy hours when life ran high in the Tomtoms. Lovers for an evening or forever, touching knees under the tables, meant money in the register.

Sol and Pops had had a busy two hours, but now there was a lull between jazz sessions, and Sol had time to chew the rag a bit with a burly and interesting-looking stranger.

"Talk about funny things, friend, here's one for you," he said, leaning across the bar with a confidential smile. "See that stool second on your left? Every night this week, after one a.m., nobody sits on it."

"It's empty now," the burly man told him.

"Sure, and the one next to you. But I'm talking about after one a.m.—that's a couple of minutes yet—when our business hits its peak. No matter how big the crowd is—they could be standing two deep other places—nobody ever occupies that one stool. Why? I don't know. Maybe it's just chance. Maybe there's something funny I haven't figured

out yet makes them sheer off from it."

"Just chance," the burly man opined stolidly. He had a fighter's jaw and a hooded gaze.

Sol smiled. Across the room the musicians were climbing back onto the bandstand, leisurely settling themselves.

"Maybe, friend. But I got a feeling it's something else. Maybe something very obvious, like that it's got a leg that's a teensy bit loose. But I'm willing to bet it'll stay empty tonight. You watch. Six nights in a row is too good for just chance. And I'd swear on a stack of Bibles it's been empty six nights straight."

"That just ain't so, Sol."

Sol turned. Pops was standing behind him, eyes scared and angry like they'd been earlier, lips working a little.

"What do you mean, Pops?" Sol asked him, trying not to show irritation in front of his new customer.

Pops walked off muttering.

"Got to see that the girls are taking care of the tables," Sol excused himself to the burly man and went after Pops. When he caught up with him he said in an undertone, not looking at him, "Damn it, Pops, are you just trying to make yourself unpleasant?" Across the room the bandleader stood up and smiled around at his boys. "If you think I'm going to take that kind of

stuff from you, you're crazy."

"But, Sol," Pops' voice was quavery now, almost as if he were looking for protection, "there ain't ever been an empty place at the bar after one a.m. this week. And as for that particular stool —"

The humorous trumpet-bray opening the first number, spraying a ridicule of all pomp and circumstance across every square inch of the Tomtoms, cut him short.

"Yes?" Sol prompted.

But now Pops was no longer aware of him. It was one a.m. and across the smoky distance of the Tomtoms he was watching her come, materializing from the gloom of the entry, no longer a thing of smoke but strong with the night and the night's secret powers, solidly blocking off the first booths and the green of the dice-table as she passed them.

He noted without surprise or regret that she'd caught the nice boy she'd gone after, as she caught everything she went after. And now nearer and nearer—the towel dropped from Pops' fingers—past the bandstand, past the short, chromium-fenced stretch of bar where the girls got the drinks for the tables, until she spun herself up onto the midmost barstool and smiled cruelly at him. "'Lo, Pops."

The nice boy sat down next to her and said, "Two brandies,

Pops. Soda chasers." Then he took out a pack of cigarettes, began to battle through his pockets for matches.

She touched his arm. "Get me my lighter, Pops," she said.

Pops shook.

She leaned forward a little. The smile left her face. "I said get me my lighter, Pops."

He ducked like a man being shot at. His numb hands found the cigar box under the bar. There was something small and black inside. He grabbed it up as if it were a spider and thrust it down blindly on the bar, jerked back his hand. Bobby picked it up and flicked her thumb and lifted a small yellow flame to the nice boy's cigarette. The nice boy smiled at her lovingly and then asked, "Hey, Pops, what about our drinks?"

For Martin, the crystal world was getting to be something of a china shop. Stronger and stronger, slowly and pleasurably working toward a climax like the jazz, he could feel the urge toward wild and happy action. Masculine action, straight-armed, knife-edged, dramatic, destroying or loving half to death everything around him. Waiting for the inevitable—whatever it would be—he almost gloated.

The old man half spilled their drinks, he was in such a hurry setting them down.

Pops really did seem a bit nuts,

just like Sol had said, and Martin stopped the remark he'd half intended to make about finding Pops' girl. Instead, he looked at Bobby.

"You drink mine, lover," she said, leaning close to be heard over the loud music, and again he saw the scar. "I've had enough."

Martin didn't mind. The double brandy burned icily along his nerves, building higher the cool flame of savagery that was fanned by the band blaring derision at the haughty heads and high towers of civilization.

A burly man, who was taking up a little too much room beside Martin, caught Sol's attention as the latter passed inside the bar, and said, "So far you're winning. It's still empty." Sol nodded, smiled, and whispered some witicism. The burly man laughed, and in appreciation said a dirty word.

Martin tapped his shoulder. "I'll trouble you not to use that sort of language in front of my girl."

The burly man looked at him and beyond him, said, "You're drunk, Joe," and turned away.

Martin tapped his shoulder again. "I said I'd trouble you—"

"You will Joe, if you keep it up," the burly man told him, keeping a poker face. "Where is this girl you're talking about?"

In the washroom? I tell you, Joe, you're drunk."

"She's sitting right beside me," Martin said, enunciating each word with care and staring grimly into the eyes of the poker face.

The burly man smiled. He seemed suddenly amused. "Okay, Joe," he said, "let's investigate this girl of yours. What's she like? Describe her to me."

"Why, you—" Martin began, drawing back his arm.

Bobby caught hold of it. "No, lover," she said in a curiously intent voice. "Do as he says."

"Why the devil—"

"Please, lover," she told him. She was smiling tightly. Her eyes were gleaming. "Do just as he says."

Martin shrugged. His own smile was tight as he turned back to the burly man. "She's about twenty. She's got hair like pale gold. She looks a bit like Veronica Lake. She's dressed in black and she's got a black cigarette lighter."

Martin paused. Something in the poker face had changed. Perhaps it was a shade less ruddy. Bobby was tugging at his arm.

"You haven't told him about the scar," she said excitedly.

He looked at her, frowning.

"Tell him about the scar too."

"Oh, yes," he said, "and she's got the faintest scar running down from her left temple over

her left eyelid and the bridge of her nose, and across her right cheek to the lobe of her—"

He stopped abruptly. The poker face was ashen, its lips were working. Then a red tide started to flood up into it, the eyes began to look murder.

Martin could feel Bobby's warm breath in his ear, the flick of her wet tongue. "Now, lover. Get him now. That's Jeff."

Swiftly, yet very deliberately, Martin shattered the rim of his chaser glass against the shot glass and jammed it into the burly man's flushing face.

A shriek that wasn't in the score came out of the clarinet. Someone in the booths screamed hysterically. A bar stool went over as someone else cringed away. Pops screamed. Then everything was whirling movement and yells, grabbing hands and hurtling shoulders, scrambles and sprawls, crashes and thumps, flashes of darkness and light, hot breaths and cold drafts, until Martin realized that he was running with Bobby beside him through gray pools of street light, around a corner into a darker street, around another corner. . . .

Martin stopped, dragging Bobby to a stop by her wrist. Her dress had fallen open. He could glimpse her small breasts. He grabbed her in his arms and buried his face in her warm neck,

sucking in the sweet, heavy reek of gardenia.

She pulled away from him convulsively. "Come on, lover," she gasped in an agony of impatience. "Hurry, lover, hurry."

And they were running again. Another block and she led him up some hollowed steps and past a glass door and tarnished brass mailboxes and up a worn-carpeted stair. She fumbled at a door in a frenzy of haste, threw it open. He followed her into darkness.

"Oh, lover, hurry," she threw to him.

He slammed the door.

Then it came to him, and it stopped him in his tracks. The awful stench. There was gardenia in it, but that was the smallest part. It was an elaboration of all that is decayed and rotten in gardenia, swollen to an unbearable putrescence.

"Come to me, lover," he heard her cry. "Hurry, hurry, lover, hurry—what's the matter?"

The light went on. The room was small and dingy with table and chairs in the center and dark, overstuffed things back against the walls. Bobby dropped to the sagging sofa. Her face was white, taut, apprehensive.

"What did you say?" she asked him.

"That awful stink," he told her, involuntarily grimacing his distaste. "There must be some-

thing dead in here."

Suddenly her face turned to hate. "Get out!"

"Bobby," he pleaded, shocked. "Don't get angry. It's not your fault."

"Get out!"

"Bobby, what's the matter? Are you sick? You look green."

"Get out!"

"Bobby, what are you doing to your face? What's happening to you? *Bobby! BOBBY!*"

Pops spun the glass against the towel with practiced rhythm. He eyed the two girls on the opposite side of the bar with the fatherliness of an old and snub-nosed satyr. He drew out the moment as long as he could.

"Yep," he said finally, "it wasn't half an hour after he screwed the glass in that guy's face here that the police picked him up in the street outside her apartment, screaming and gibbering like a baboon. At first they were sure he was the one who killed her, and I guess they gave him a real going-over. But then it turned out he had an iron-clad alibi for the time of the crime."

"Really?" the redhead asked.

Pops nodded. "Sure thing. Know who really did it? They found out."

"Who?" the cute little brunette prompted.

"The same guy that got the

glass in his face," Pops announced triumphantly. "This Jeff Cooper fellow. Seems he was some sort of a racketeer. Got to know this Bobby in Michigan City. They had a fight up there, don't know what, guess maybe she was two-timing him. Anyway, she thought he was over being mad, and he let her think so. He brought her down to Chicago, took her to this apartment he had, and beat her to death."

"That's right," the old man affirmed, rubbing it in when the cute little brunette winced. "Beat her to death with a beer bottle."

The redhead inquired curiously, "Did she ever come here, Pops? Did you ever see her?"

For a moment the glass in Pops' towel stopped twirling. Then he pursed his lips. "Nope," he said emphatically, "I couldn't have. 'Cause he murdered her the night he brought her down

to Chicago. And that was a week before they found her." He chuckled. "A few days more and it would have been the sanitary inspectors who discovered the body—or the garbage man."

He leaned forward, smiling, waiting until the cute brunette had lifted her unwilling fascinated eyes. "Incidentally, that's why they couldn't pin it on this Martin Bellows kid. A week before—at the time she was killed—he was hundreds of miles away."

He twirled the gleaming glass. He noticed that the cute brunette was still intently watching him. "Yep," he said reflectively, "it was quite a job that other guy did on her. Beat her to death with a beer bottle. Broke the bottle doing it. One of the last swipes he gave her laid her face open all the way from her left temple to her right ear."