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I'M LOOKING FOR

by FRITZ LEIBER

"Jeff"

Years ago, murder in fiction was done by gentle people and was solved when the Inspector learned that Aunt Fanny's lorgnette lay twelve degrees east of the old sundial. Then one day an author came along and took murder out of the rose garden — and the detective story was popular again.

The same goes for horror tales. Where once ghosts haunted baronial halls and got all tangled up in the cobwebs on Lord Poopdeck's armor, they now hang around the neighborhood candy store and the corner saloon. Horror in familiar surroundings is far more effective, we think; for nothing could be quite so blood-curdling as a familiar familiar!

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 thumbed 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. 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, nobody's ever been able to notice her except Pops. I think 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 to Martin, "but I can't in front of Pops. He gets ideas."

Martin got off his stool, grinning. "I got to go anyhow. I'll 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.

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 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 band-leader 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 was 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 witticism. 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. Per-

haps 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 something 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 ironclad alibi for the time of the crime."

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I'm Looking for Jeff

(Continued from page 27)

"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."