

Bobby and the Princess

Dani Putney

The bar welcomed us with its anachronistic marquee: red, white, and blue like Uncle Sam was shepherding us into wartime America. The bouncer let us in free of charge because we were day drinkers returning to our haunt.

The lusher we were, my friends and I beelined to the bar. We liked the Princess Theater because drinks were cheap and strong. I played it cool and ordered a Bud Light, my go-to in small towns across the US. It makes me look country and masculine—I'm not one of *those* guys who orders Alabama Sunsets or Tequila Sunrises.

An older man, probably divorced and in his early fifties, approached us after I was handed my beer.

“Have you been here before?” he asked.

“Yeah, it's actually our second time today,” I replied with a chuckle and a shrug.

He nodded like he knew our type. I knew his. Sun-kissed arms coupled with a striped blue short-sleeve shirt, a polo, brown chino shorts, and flip flops told me everything. I've seen this man in Reno, Austin, and DC, so it's unsurprising to find him in Columbus, Mississippi, as well.

“What's your guys' names?” he asked. I immediately registered the *guys* because it made him look like he was trying too hard to stay relevant.

Each of us went down the line and shook his hand. I was last.

“I'm Bobby,” he replied. “My son is stationed at the Air Force base here. The whole family is visiting.”

I might think too highly of myself, but it seemed like he was talking to me, not the group. His steely gaze was locked on my face, my big brown eyes, perhaps my lips, too. Not to mention his grip on my hand earlier lingered a few seconds longer than your perfunctory handshake.

I bought his drink because it was the right thing to do. I liked his reaction—an “Ah, thank you”—he didn’t need to defend his masculinity and insist he pay for it. I hate it when men try to control every situation, even simple gestures of goodwill, to prove that they’re *men*.

His eyes crinkled, displaying prominent crow’s feet. I analyzed his visage like a voyeur: sun spots, wrinkles, pink lips. My indulgence triggered guilt. Why Bobby? Why is it always men like him?

My friends extracted themselves. I think they sensed the war in my bones. I stayed and chatted with Bobby, of course, discussing who knows what.

When a lull hit our conversation, he was quick to chime in, “You should catch up with your pals.” I awkwardly laughed, said “See you around,” and jolted off. Maybe I got it all wrong.

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I stumbled into a dusty theater—the establishment’s historic namesake. It was a club night, which meant the space was transformed into a dance floor replete with DJ, lights, and pop-up bar. The only thing missing was sweaty clubbers getting their groove on.

My friends and I weren’t going to let the mood die. We descended the theater steps with drinks in hand, chose a spot on the dance floor, and began to jive. I wonder how we must’ve looked to the bar staff in the back: We were three millennials trying to make meaning with our bodies on a humid Saturday night. I think it’s funny that I can’t even escape self-consciousness when I’m drunk.

I saw Bobby wander in. He was eating pizza—the Princess had free pizza?—as he navigated his way to a table above the dance floor. I didn't expect to see him again.

“You're just going to sit here?” I joked while approaching him. “Don't you like to dance?”

My faux mockery might've been too much. Had we talked enough for me to bring out the sass? I didn't want to lose his interest.

“Do I like to dance?” Bobby clapped back. “Let me finish my pizza first.”

More idle chatter came from my mouth. My MO: Show intent through your presence. I wasn't going to leave him; I don't think I could've if I tried.

“Hey, Bobby!” my friends shouted over the rap music. Like humans do, we formed a circle—more of a square, really—and danced unapologetically. Well, not Bobby. He was swaying like when you're trying to fit in with your dancing friends.

“Do you generally listen to rap?” I asked.

“Yeah, it's great,” he responded while looking at his feet. Was he nervous, or was I making that up? “It's almost tribal in its rhythm and lyrics.”

Nothing can take you out of a moment like a microaggression. I don't think I'd ever describe a historically black genre of music as *tribal*. But his crow's feet, sun spots, and pink lips wrested me from my intellectualizing. Next to Bobby, I was simply a corporeal being resisting metaphysical inertia.

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We stood around the bar finishing our final drinks. One of my friends went into the Princess' single-stall restroom to try to calm down a random guy who was upset. I like to think

the people I befriend have bigger hearts than me for a reason—the cosmos is compensating for my withered aorta.

“What do you think they’re doing in there?” I piped up to break the silence.

“They could be having sex,” Bobby said with a smirk. I was surprised to hear him say that. His type doesn’t generally joke, let alone suggest, that two men can dance the sweaty tango.

Bobby was a puzzle I wanted to solve. As a breathing contradiction myself, I was delighted to interact with a man who was simultaneously the same as the divorced, curious older men I’d encountered before yet nothing like them.

My friend emerged from the restroom. We paid our tabs, but before we left, each of us gave Bobby a farewell handshake. I was last again.

His grip was firm and warm while we touched for a few seconds too long.

I didn’t want to let go.

Dani Putney is a queer, non-binary, Asian American writer exploring the West. Their work most recently appears or is forthcoming in *Cold Mountain Review*, *Mura*, *Nightingale & Sparrow*, and *Vamp Cat Magazine*, among other publications. Presently, they're infiltrating a small conservative town in the middle of the Nevada desert.