

Pretty, blonde and friendly, Irena Kowalski was the well-liked bartender at the neighbourhood pub. She always knew your name, your brand and the names of your kids. The fact that few women ventured into the smoky working-man's bar with its pool table, hockey posters and sports-tuned TV sets only made Irena all the more popular. Gregarious and warm hearted by nature, she would surprise an old-timer with a big hug and kiss on his birthday and crack jokes with the regulars as she wiped down the tables. Once, to the delight of the crowd, she came to a Halloween party dressed as a pregnant nun. Only 22, she presided with grace and charm over the pub from 11 in the morning until six in the evening.

One of the day-time regulars was Andy Jones, about 40 years old, average height, stocky with a budding Molson muscle. He wore large horn-rimmed glasses and a baseball hat, had shaggy black hair and a messy mustache. He wore ill fitting and oddly coloured clothes and as someone once remarked, "There seems to be a dire shortage of soap at Andy's house, of both the bath and laundry variety."

Andy attracted a lot of teasing and annoyance given his odd appearance, mumbling speech, distinctive aromas and habit of eavesdropping on conversations and making inappropriate and unwelcome interjections. At times he shot back aggressively but more often feigned deafness.

Andy did not hold a regular job, but got some kind of a disability pension and occasionally delivered flyers or did other short-term work for cash. As well, at the urging of his social worker, he frequently took short sponsored courses at the community college in computers, carpentry, furniture finishing or business. When, as part of a meat-cutting course, Andy worked for a week in a neighbourhood butcher shop, one of the boys brought the house down by cracking, “That’s it... if Andy is going to be a butcher, I’m gonna become a frigging vegetarian.”

Once or twice a year Andy would appear at the pub wearing a suit and tie and looking somewhat respectable. This signalled that he was obeying his social worker’s order to submit job applications at a certain number of local firms. Failure to do so would have led to his pension being cut off. When no job offers materialized Andy seemed somehow able to contain his disappointment.

In spite of his appearance and fumbling speech, Andy wasn’t stupid and always got good marks in the courses. And his tormentors at the pub would have been surprised by how much and what he read. Among other things, he was a big fan of Farley Mowat, Robertson Davies and the sonnets of William Shakespeare. Equally astounding would be the fact that Andy was in love and totally obsessed with Irena.

Irena started to get uneasy when she noticed Andy sitting at his regular spot sipping Molson Golden and staring at her for hours at a time and then leaving unusually large tips. She began to find unsigned quotes and full poems on the bar just after Andy had left. It began with quotes from Shakespeare’s sonnets, copied on odd scraps of paper in Andy’s untidy hand:

“Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?

Thou art more lovely...”

Another time it was:

“Let me not to the marriage of true minds

Admit impediments...”

Then for a few weeks, there were passionate and articulate love letters and poems, all unsigned, and apparently written by Andy himself.

On a Monday afternoon just after Andy left, Irena found a small jewellery box containing a ring which she thought was probably worth a couple of hundred dollars. More and more nervous over the past weeks, now she was really alarmed, convinced that she was being stalked. She decided she had to do something, so she went to the owner of the pub and reported the whole thing. The owner called in Andy, returned the ring and told him to stop sending notes to Irena. “The policy of this establishment is zero, and I mean ZERO tolerance of sexual harassment ” he said in a loud and threatening voice.

Andy denied that he had anything to do with the notes, but took the ring.

For a month or so, there were no more notes so Irena began to breathe a little easier. So what was her dread when, after Andy left the bar one late afternoon, she found this scrawled note on the bar: “For I have sworn thee fair, and thought thee bright,

Who are **BLACK AS HELL, AND DARK AS NIGHT.**”

In total panic, Irena ran in tears to Disco Dot, the middle-aged Nevada ticket saleslady, poured out the whole story from start to finish, told her about the ring and showed her all the notes, letters and poems she had received. After reading everything, Dot thought to herself, “I have to admit, the man can write.” But out loud she said to Irena, “There is no way that you have to put up with this, Irena. Leave it to me, I’ll straighten out the obnoxious little sucker!”

Dot was not a woman to be trifled with. With limited formal education she had risen to a highly responsible position in a large industrial company through hard work and brain power. Having put up with physical abuse during the early years of her first marriage one day she assailed her husband with a high-heeled shoe as a weapon. After he returned from a week’s stay in the hospital they both realized that the marriage was over.

The afternoon after talking to Irena Dot got Andy aside and lived up to her reputation as the sharpest tongue in the pub. “For God’s sake, Andy,” she said, “why would Irena want to have anything to do with a bum like you. She told you she has a boyfriend. You don’t have a job. You’re twice her age. You stink. You mumble like an idiot and you annoy the hell out of everyone here. Irena is definitely not interested in a slime ball like you. **LEAVE HER ALONE!**”

Nothing further happened for a week and Irena was beginning to think that the tongue lashing was working. Then she got another note, which scared her more than all the others, “Why should you be so full of life when I’m dead inside?” She fled to Dot again.

“Dot, I’m terrified,” she said, “Should I call the cops?”

Occasional sales of illegal smokes and booze and frequent whiffs of marijuana in the parking lot created a general reluctance at the pub to call in the law. The last time anyone could remember a call to the police was when there was an anonymous phone call (which proved baseless) about a bomb after a political meeting at the pub. So Dot said, “No, don’t call the cops, Irena. I’ll talk to Big Bill.”

Dot had been living with Bill for ten years. In his late fifties, tall and paunchy at about 280 pounds, a former farmer, fisherman, logger and truck driver from the Maritimes, he now made a living as an underground economy mechanic specializing in brake jobs. Without doubt, he was “the Man” at the pub ever since he downed a big loud bully twenty years his junior in a ten minute parking lot encounter. As Bill said later, chuckling over his beer and holding out his huge right fist, “I call it the Big Onion, cuz it always makes ‘em cry.”

Most of the regulars would have guessed that Big Bill would not take sides against Andy, because he was a thoughtful, fair man who never took part in the teasing and only engaged in disputes reluctantly if there was no way to avoid it. When his husky dog got sick, Bill agonized over having him put down. “I wasn’t sure if I had the right to do that,” he explained to his friend Bob Stewart.

But those who knew him better realized that when it came to women, Bill was a chivalrous knight, once offering to avenge Betty Egan, a flighty Friday evening drop in to the pub when one of her occasional boyfriends gave her a black eye. But Betty said, “No thanks, Bill, I was messin’ around on my old man, so I had it coming.”

When Dot told Bill the story, at first he was reluctant to get involved, but she said, “Now Bill, you know Irena is a good girl and she doesn’t deserve this crap.”

“Well, OK,” said Bill, “but it looks like strong measures are called for, so don’t you interfere.”

“You got it Bill,” said Dot.

A few days later Big Bill said to Andy, “Come around the corner here, Andy, I want to talk to you.”

“Sure, sure, Bill,” said Andy and followed him around the corner of the L-shaped bar room.

“Have a seat,” said Bill indicating a chair on the other side of the table, and then sat between two of his friends, Bob Stewart, a short, tough crane operator who had once actually beaten Bill at arm-wrestling and Buck McKenna, a stout gray haired Korean veteran and now cement truck driver from PEI. The silence and tension were ominous - Big Bill, normally so open and good-humoured, had a stern look on his face. The usually loud and profane Bob was totally silent and Buck’s habitually twitchy, expressive face was a still, inscrutable mask.

“Now Andy,” said Big Bill very deliberately, “we hear that you’ve been sending things to Irena and writing her letters and making a damn nuisance of yourself. Andy, that’s all got to stop. Right now, do you hear me? Because Andy, if it doesn’t stop, you see the three of us here, Buck and Bob and me? Well, if this nonsense doesn’t stop, the three of us are going to take you out to the parking lot, and we’re going to hurt you... **HURT YOU BAD!**”

“Bill, Bill,” sputtered Andy, “it wasn’t me. Some S.O.B. is writing to Irena and pretending it’s me. Nah me, nah me.”

Then there was stony silence. Later neither Bob nor Buck could say for sure how long the silence went on - maybe a few minutes, maybe five, but both said it seemed much longer.

“Well, Andy,” said Big Bill finally with a heavy sigh, “I’ll tell you one thing, you’d better find that guy and tell him to stop bothering Irena. Because if it doesn’t stop, you see the three of us here. Bob and Buck and me? We’re going to come and get you - not him - you, Andy, and we’re going to take you out to the parking lot, and we’re going to hurt you. **HURT YOU...REAL BAD!**”

“OK, OK Bill, I’ll tell the son of a bitch,” croaked Andy in a barely audible voice.

To her immense relief, no more messages appeared on the bar during Irena’s shift.

There was no sign of Andy at the pub for a month or more. When he did reappear, he sat by himself and was very quiet, never interrupting conversations but being very careful to speak to Big Bill when he saw him. No one at the pub knew that every night Andy, eyes closed, went to sleep reciting aloud again and again the following sonnet;

“When in disgrace with fortune and men’s eyes,

I all alone beweeep my outcast state...”

(1907 words)

