

Poor Marvin has, of late, been calling "Gin in the Bottle" his nightly watering hole. The bartender is unfriendly and curt but the booze is cheap. It also has the added distinction of being home of some nefarious deeds during prohibition. Even this quaint and charming history is not enough to keep the bar in the black but somehow it continues to remain afloat. The bar top is scratched, sticky and dirty with the shellac being scraped from the wood in many places. The once beautifully ornate front has all but deteriorated from kicks, brawls and spills. The brass rails are tarnished and the stools are covered in cracked vinyl with padding protruding through the layers. Wallpaper is peeling and on particularly hot days a smell of rancid cigars and sweat fill the air.

This is most assuredly the definition of a dive. This particular dive bar on the Southside was home to many a delusional and troubled soul. Marvin was not the first nor would he be the last. Currently he sits at the corner of the sticky oak bar twirling a swizzle stick between his fingers. A glass of cheap bourbon sits untouched in front of him. Condensation from the glass is no longer visible except on top of the bar where it sits atop the once pristine napkin, used as a useless coaster, is now all but disintegrated. Marvin is just one of several currently drowning their sorrows in various glasses of cheap and watered down liquor. The others are scattered, hiding in the

darkness. All of them complete with their own fears and demons. Each one has a reason to be drowning in booze.

For poor Marvin it is not as simple as all of that. He had never picked up a glass of anything harder than a wine cooler before coming here. Finding out that the woman you love has been sleeping with your superior (also doubling as your best friend) for the better part of your marriage will do that to a person. This pain is monumental but when you have children and you find yourself wondering if they are even yours it becomes much worse.

Marvin, on the tail end of that singular thought, breaks down; salty tears ruining any tasty salvation at the bottom of his glass. This was quite often the sounds heard out of the "Gin in the Bottle" most nights. There are many dark corners and few people cried loud enough to be heard but Marvin was different. His sobs were loud, obnoxious and blatant. He didn't want attention; he just couldn't hold them back.

"Listen friend," started the bartender. "I dunno what yer problem is but could you like take it someplace else? You're bumming out the other customers."

Marvin took a second to choke back his tears to scan the room. The woman in the corner was snoring with a collection of drained margarita glasses in front of her. Bob, an elderly regular, sits at the other corner picking his ear with a pencil. A young goth couple occupy a booth making out. Marvin turns back

to the bartender, "Seriously?" Marvin asks before downing the bourbon.

He slams the glass down and taps the lip. The bartender obliges and as soon as the last of the caramel-colored liquid sloshes into the glass it disappears down Marvin's throat. He taps for another. The bartender begrudgingly pours it. Marvin reaches for the glass but his hands falls flatly to the sticky bar top. He lifts his head enough to see that the bartender has moved the glass from his reach. Marvin frowns and pouts.

"C'mon, buddy - I ain't drivin, ok?" pleaded the sad-sack.

"Man, you got it bad," states the bartender flatly as he pushes the glass into Marvin's trembling and waiting hand.

Marvin plays with the glass sliding it between his hands. "You have no idea, none at all."

The bartender looks at Marvin. His eyes are a stellar steel blue with flecks of gold. They are unfeeling and unwavering much to the dismay of many a drunk. He is the complete opposite of what a bartender should be. Then again, this is a dive bar and not the 51/50 down the corner. Here you come for the cheap watered-down booze and anonymity (stale cheese puffs are free). The bartender, not often swayed by sob stories, was feeling particularly interested tonight. Marvin was not like the other regulars he saw. He was dressed in a suit and this is a stained jeans and dirty t-shirt kind of place. He was also well-groomed.

This was a stuck-in-the-80s mullet kind of place. Marvin was also articulate and has expensive tastes. The rest of the low-life scum in the bar would be happy with a thimble of booze in a glass of piss. No, Marvin was certainly different.

The bartender heaved his barrel-shaped chest and let out a deep breath that smelled of stale cigarettes. "What seems to be the problem?"

Marvin scoffed, "My wife left in the middle of the night with the kids and then served me with divorce papers." Marvin moved the glass to his lips with a trembling hand. "That fucking bitch," he spat before chugging the liquor down and slamming the glass on the bar. His eyes tense, he stared directly through the bartender, "That whore was fucking my best friend."

"That's rough, man - real rough."

"No shit."

Marvin tapped the rim of his glass once more. The bartender thought about it a moment and then smiled, "I got something special for you. I can tell you need something stiff and I don't offer this to just no one, you see."

Marvin grunted. The bartender disappears from sight and Marvin hears a click shortly after. The bartender stands up with a box in hand and places it in front of Marvin. The box is thick with dust. Underneath all of the grime it was still easy to tell

that sometime in its life it was vibrant red leather but it's dull now. Gold tacks keep the leather attached to the wood. The lid is hinged and locked with clasps. The bartender clicks the sides of the box and clasps spring open. He opens the lid and as he does so a thick layer of dust slides off covering the bar. Rubies, diamonds and jade are inlaid in the top to form a mosaic but Marvin was not able to make it out.

"This is ancient," began the bartender. "The Egyptians created beer but this stuff is much older."

"Whatever."

"The owner of this land found it when they broke ground 200 years ago. This bar is still owned by them." The bartender points to a very old photograph on the back wall. Marvin ignores it.

"Lovely story but what the fuck is it going to cost me?"

The bartender's eyes widen and his pupils seem to spit fire. It startled Marvin a little. "Now listen here - I am doing you a favor. Got that? A favor. You can get up and walk your happy little ass right on out that door any time."

Marvin puts up his hands, "Fine - I'm sorry. Stressed out."

The bartender relaxes and allows a small smile to crawl onto his face, "All is forgiven." The bartender reaches into the box and gently removes a bottle. The contents slosh around but the bottle itself is covered in thick dust which makes discerning the

liquid inside impossible. The bottle, like the box, is inlaid with jewels. The cork is attached by a spring mechanism much like expensive European beers. The bottle is very wide at the bottom and tapers off near the top. A tassel, worn and dank, swings from the neck. Undecipherable symbols, like Cyrillic or Farcie, are stamped in wax around the neck of the bottle.

Marvin licked his lips and rapped his fingers impatiently on the bar. He felt the buzz slipping away and wanted it to remain for a long time.

"\$200," said the bartender unwavering.

Marvin didn't bat an eye. "Pour it - it'll be \$200 less that bitch will get out of me."

The bartender popped the cork and a puff of alcohol gas exited from the bottle of ancient swill. The bartender carefully tilted the bottle toward Marvin's glass. He didn't want to spill one precious drop. The slightly viscous, murky caramel colored liquor clung to the sides of the glass as it enters its new vessel. The bartender only poured enough to make the glass 1/10<sup>th</sup> full.

Marvin looked disappointedly at the small amount as the bartender replaced the cork. The bartender replaces the bottle inside the box and puts it back under the counter. Marvin lifts the glass toward his mouth and he stares into the murky liquid and then smells it. His body involuntarily recoils at the stench

which was a cross between raw sewage, the sickly sweet putrid smell of death and dried lavender. He spent his money on this disgusting concoction that was who-knows-how-old so he should at least drink it. The bartender washes glasses and straightens bottles as he secretly watches Marvin through the mirror on the back wall of the bar.

Marvin traces the edge of the glass with his fingertip against the grain creating a low melodic whistle. Marvin smiles slightly as he remembers watching Mr. Wizard as a kid and seeing an episode about that very thing. The memory faded and he cursed under his breath, "I hope that bitch drops fucking dead," as he downs the fowl liquid. His entire body jerks, his face scrunches up and he sputters out saliva like a child taking Dayquil. He shakes off the effects and stands, wobbling. "Fuck. That was... strong."

"You ok there, man?" asks the bartender with mock sincerity.

"Yea - yea... I'm fine. That shit packs a hell of a punch." Marvin straightens out his coat. "I'm gonna go home now and cry myself to sleep."

The bartender purposely ignores the comment and returns to his chores. Marvin uses the brass rail around the bar to steady himself as he lurches toward the door. Once he lets go of the rail he very nearly collapses to the floor but luckily one of the sticky round tables breaks his rapid descent. He takes a second

and then rights himself and stumbles for the door. Knowing he was going to get shitfaced he purposely left his car at home. He didn't want to run the risk of killing some poor drunk hobo or mommy with a jogging stroller. He hails a passing cab.

Marvin stands in front of his split-level, cookie cutter home. The cabbie got a large tip since he helped Marvin to the door and even helped find the spare key hidden inside a particularly ugly garden gnome. Marvin sighs as he enters the house. He closes the door and locks it before stumbling to the couch. As soon as his hand caresses the supple leather he collapses on top of it and falls asleep.

He is awakened the next morning by a thunderous knock. He figured it was just his head then the thunderous knock came again, "Police. Open up," roared the voice from behind his front door.

"Shit!" Marvin exclaimed under his breath.

Marvin bolts upright and runs to the door opening it in haste. Two police officers loom in the doorway; both much bigger than he. "Um - what can I do for you?"

"Marvin Bishop?" said one of the officers.

"Yes."

"I'm sorry to have to tell you this but your wife was killed in a car accident late last night."



Marvin blinked. His mind raced. "What...?"

"I'm sorry," stepped up the second officer.

"What about Marcy and Daniel? My children," asked Marvin pleadingly.

"They're fine. They weren't with her. Both kids are in child protective services." Marvin sighs, relieved at the news but wondered why his wife was out late but that was a question for later. The officer looked Marvin up and down with a scrutinizing eye. "I suggest you clean yourself up. You need to come with us to identify the remains. You can take your kids home when you're finished."

"Can you wait while I take a quick shower and change or can I meet you?"

"You are taking this awfully easily," said the second officer.

"Listen," started Marvin. "That bitch was fucking my best friend and took my kids and wouldn't tell me where they were. She then served me with divorce papers. So, yea - whatever... she can rot."

"At least you're honest," replied the first officer. "You can come down to the station when you're ready."

Marvin nodded and closed the door as soon as the officers leave. Once the door is shut he begins to dance like he just scored the winning touchdown in the Super Bowl. He rushes upstairs and showers then puts on decent clothes. He drove to the station with the speakers blaring the best of Michael Buble` (don't judge). The desk sergeant directs him to the morgue and Marvin happily rides the elevator down. It is cold and antiseptic and the coroner greeted him solemnly and directed him to the viewing room. Marvin stood and waited patiently. In moments the coroner appeared from between rows of coolers with a gurney and parked it several feet from the viewing window.

Marvin never beat his wife but he did feel as though he may beat her corpse with a bone saw after the sheet was pulled down. A small measure of satisfaction crosses his lips as the sheet is pulled down. His wife was indeed dead as road kill and stiff as a rusty nail; her face mangled with bits of glass embedded in her soft flesh. The fat whore never looked better. Her eyes distorted with the look of fear - *she saw it coming - good for her!* He would have done a haughty jig if he was sure the coroner would keep his mouth shut. He would wait until later when he was alone. Right now he put on his best sad face and nodded to the coroner. The coroner, much to Marvin's dismay, covered the corpse quickly. He wanted to take a quick picture with his iPhone so he would have a memento. No such luck.

It wasn't until the ride home that he had a flash of realization. *Was it true? Could it be true? No! Impossible!* There was still that little tug; that nagging sensation in the bottom of his gut. The type of feeling you get when you have to speak in front of a crowd moments before. It's that primal fear; animal instinct kicking in, flight or fight response. It'd have to wait. The kids needed to get home; to his home this time. They're asleep in the backseat. He hated that bitch for what she put him through but the kids had no idea. She told them he was away on business and they were going to stay with Grandma. Now their mother was dead but they didn't need to know all of the horrible things she was putting him through. Let them grow up delusional.

The incident at the bar crossed Marvin's mind a few times over the past few months. Now being a single father he had very little time to dwell let alone enjoy himself. Many times he caught himself wishing his bitch of a soon-to-be-ex-wife was still pumping blood through that dark and hollow meat pocket she called a heart. Before he dared vocalize the wish he stopped himself fearing it may come true. He had not given up the thought that he caused her demise or that the wretched drink facilitated it somehow. On the surface he thought it was coincidence but deep down there was something weird and off that he simply could not shake.

Marvin's greatest flaw is that he's too complacent. His job was so-so but it was a job, his kids weren't that bright but they

were his kids (at least he thought so) and his friends had stuck around (with the obvious exception) after his wife left him. One flaw in being complacent: the in-laws; Betty and Steve aka Douchezilla and Doucheasaur. They saw their grandchildren whenever they wanted. He and the kids were over for holidays, birthdays and barbecues. When the letter arrived that they were suing for custody he was surprised and floored like he was hit with a ton of bricks.

Marvin phoned those bastards but they ignored his calls. The children were snatched up at school by Family Youth, Nazi pigs that they are. His lawyer told him to wait it out but if he did his lawyer would bleed him dry. The fucktwats-in-law cited "abuse" and "mental anguish". Those kids were treated perfectly and they knew it. This was the last thing his lovely wife wanted. They were carrying out her final wishes. It was like getting stabbed between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> rib. It won't kill you but it sure hurt a hell of a lot.

He knew he would ultimately win but at what cost? He'd have the kids but he'd lose the house and they would get the kids anyway. Until the charges were deemed false the kids weren't allowed near him; plenty of time to poison their minds. It was time to put his theory to the test. Marvin hopped into his C-Class Mercedes and headed for the slums. The bar would be open but would the same bartender be slinging booze to the desperate sad sacks? He knew what to ask for and what to do and was smart

enough to know not to wish them dead. That'd be too convenient. It would also ruin any type of self-satisfaction at gaining a victory over those two-bit coots.

When he pulled into the parking lot across the street he could make out the same familiar bald head of the bartender. Marvin smiled and started to cross the street just when the heavens opened up and poured buckets of water on him. Oh great he thought as he grabbed the heavy door and swung it open. He shivers as the cool air hits his wet body. He sits at his old seat.

"Hey - remember me?" Marvin asked, removing his hat.

"I remember all my customers. I read about your wife. I guess you could say you got your wish, eh?"

"I guess you could."

"What brings you back to this beautiful side of town?"

"I need another shot." Marvin stares at the bartender who returns the gesture.

The bartender ponders the request then ducks behind the bar. Marvin hears the familiar click and then the sliding of wood on wood. The bartender reappears with the box and places it on the counter, opening it; he pours Marvin his miniscule shot. Marvin ponders what to say. He wasn't drunk so he was able to be

rational. It then dawned on him. Marvin rubs his finger around the rim and raises the glass to his lips.

"I wish I had several million dollars," he said as he downed the disgusting liquor. His body lurched front and back and he gagged. He didn't remember it being this bad but then realized he had been drunk that time. The lashing inside his gut sent him crashing to the floor. The feeling passed quickly but felt like a lifetime. Marvin stood on shaky feet and used the bar rail to steady himself. Déjà vu.

Marvin leaves the bar and crosses the street to his car. Fifteen minutes later he was back in his neighborhood in front of a drive-up ATM. This was the final test. He opens his fairly thin wallet and removes his debit card. Since he had his kids he had to placate them with all of the newest trends. His funds dwindled faster than the Titanic sank. Add in the legal fees from fighting the in-laws from Satan's den and he was going to go into hardship within a few months. Marvin swiped his card, entered his pin and waited. The screen flashed and beeped, "Please Swipe Slower" and he obliged. This time he swiped the wrong end, cursed under his breath, then repeated the process.

The ATM whirred and he waited patiently until a receipt spat out. He snatched it but didn't look. Marvin shook and tried his best to calm himself. He slowly turns the receipt over. At the bottom, in black and white, it reads: \$2,568,000.21 and Marvin

fainted. This account previously had just twenty-one cents. *It worked!* When Marvin came to he drove him and slept like a baby that night.

The next few days passed easily. He gave his attorney the boot and hired the most ruthless son of a bitch money could buy and paid him a hefty retainer. He swore he'd not only get the kids back but to also crush the in-laws to take everything they had. Marvin believed every silvery word out of his sneaky wretched mouth. Money was a powerful motivator. Marvin sat back and relished in his new found wealth and waited for the Hammer of Thor he purchased to give slow and painful torture to the in-laws.

Jan and Mark certainly weren't expecting the high-powered attorney Marvin hired. They were also not expecting the limitless amount of money he seemed to have. The biggest wrench in the machine was that his kids hated him. The in-laws had poisoned them. This could be dealt with as kids love money and the cool things that it could buy. This would be a non-issue in time. Then it finally happened. The levee broke. Court ordered visitation.

Marvin became relaxed and answered the knock on the door with a smile. It quickly vanished as the men in dark suits rushed him and tackled him to the floor; cold handcuffs against his skin, clicking as they pinched his flesh. His bank accounts seized and his children were once again not allowed to see him.

*The damn money!* He thought. It had to come from somewhere. Bank errors, hacked ATMs or whatever but the Cavolusso Crime Syndicate? Shit. Double shit. All of their money from illegal businesses was laundered in legitimate businesses. The same money they tracked with those metal strips they stick in cash, through serial numbers and online accounts. It all pointed to one man: Marvin.

He was arrested, charged and booked. His kids and in-laws were given new identities. He wasn't told a damn thing. He lost his home and car to afford bail. He had no job and was never going to see his kids again. He was a villain. After a week residing at the worst urine-scented motel room he decided, at 3AM on a Monday, to set the world right. He removed the newspaper he kept as a souvenir about his wife's death and took a taxi to the bar.

It was closed. He paced back and forth hoping an idea would come to mind. "I'm a criminal," Marvin whispered. "I'm a goddamn criminal." He grabbed a trash can and hurled it through the front window shattering it spectacularly. He climbs through the shards leaving blood and bits of flesh behind. Marvin didn't feel a damn thing. There was no alarm and no stirring of activity from around the bar. This kind of thing happened all the time in this shithole of a neighborhood. Marvin reached the bar in a few large, purposeful strides and hopped behind it. He isn't an agile



man by any stretch of the imagination but now he was fueled with a myriad of feelings. Rage. Terror. Angst.

Marvin left the newspaper on the bar to watch the headline change. He located the compartment where the bottle was kept and opened it to view the beautifully ornate box. His hands trembled as they slid over it. It was cool to the touch but surged with electricity. He placed it on the bar and dexterously found the locking clasps. Click. He opens the lid and exhales deeply seeing the bottle inside and with two hands he carefully removes the cask from its prison and sets it upon the bar. He places a small glass next to it, removes the cork and pours himself a shot. He strokes the glass. "I wish none of this ever happened," and then swallowed.

He convulsed and spat, gurgled and clawed at the air. He grabbed at his throat and kicked hard at the bar. Glasses broke and wood splintered. He coughed and vomited a thick black fog which lurched along the floor. It swirled around Marvin and gripped his body. The force turned Marvin toward the back wall and he faced the old photo. Front and center stood the bartender. The shock and fear in Marvin's eyes were resolute and fixed on the face of the bartender. In seconds his body begins to melt away and join the black fog. When the last of his form is translucent the fog is sucked back inside the bottle. His eyes were the last to go and were full of fear.

"Another soul claimed," said a soft voice. The bartender stepped out of the darkness. He snaps a finger and the bar is as it was before Marvin entered. Thad smiles at the headline of the newspaper: "Mother and Two Children Dead in Fatal Car Crash; Distraught Father Kills Self." He grabs a towel and pours a drop of vodka on it and cleans the box so that the inlay shines bright. If you squint your eyes and look just right you could see the form of Djinn; a Genie, carrying a dagger and wearing the face of evil; a demon. Thad, still smiling, replaces the box under the bar.

"You cannot escape your fate no matter how hard you wish for it," said Thad in barely a whisper as the panel clicked shut. The bell above the door rings and Thad looks up. A man in a wrinkled and stained suit enters.

"Are you open?"

Thad looks at his watch. "Not for another few hours. Sorry."

"Damn." The man looks d around at the empty bar. "Listen. Can you be a favor? I've just had the worst week of my life."

Thad smiles and motions to a seat. He obliges and Thad produces a glass and pours the stiffest cocktail he could think of. The man downs it not caring if any spilled down his mouth or got on his clothing. "Thanks for this, man - I just found out my wife wiped out my bank accounts. Didn't pay bills. They're foreclosing and I'm fucked. I wish that bitch was dead."

Thad disappeared behind the bar; a familiar click and wood sliding on wood. Soon Thad appeared and places the box on the bar. "I think you deserve something special; something with more of a... bite but it will cost you. Maybe more than you can afford to give." The man looked at Thad with pleading and desperate eyes. "Tell you what - first one is on me." The man smiled as Thad poured him the drink. "Now, tell me all about it."