

## The Whiskey Whale

By Rebecca Fisher

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Phil had worked at the Whiskey Whale pub for twenty five years and could've told you the names of most of the people that walked through the doors on any given night. He could've told you about Betty, the fifty-eight year old widow and her habit of dancing with anyone and anything that found its way onto the dance floor as she progressed from half-lit to entirely too drunk to stand by the end of the night. He could've told you about Russell, the forty-two year old business man, of what business no one really knew because when Russell walked into the Whiskey Whale, he ordered his regular and sat quietly contemplating the ashtray in front of him. He could've told you about Frankie, the shady guy who did whatever it was he did in the booth in the back of the bar with the "clients" that strolled in and out only once, never ordering a drink. He could've told you about the periodic visitors and their family troubles of late or about the history of the Whiskey Whale and its owners, but what Phil couldn't have told you, was how he would die that night.

Phillip March grew up in Cincinnati and played baseball in the streets all of his young life. He would've never guessed he'd be tending bar to the different characters of State Street for twenty-five years or dying of anything other than the heart attacks that had killed every other March for five generations. He married a pretty girl named Beverly Perry right out of high school and fathered two beautiful girls within three years. He worked odd jobs here and there at Mr. Perry's firm, but found himself a home in the

Whiskey Whale twenty five years ago and hadn't left since. Though the pay wasn't much, he was able to afford a decent home and schooling for the girls on good tips and hush money from the Frankies of the town. Life was simple. Life was good.

It was Friday night at five, and Phil's shift started in an hour. Beverly had cooked her famous lamb chops and his stomach was nearly aching full. As he sat back in his recliner, he looked at the family pictures above the television and felt a sudden and disturbing sense of inevitable doom in the perfection of it all. His daughters were grown up and married, his house would be paid off in a year, his marriage hadn't suffered a hitch in the thirty years they'd been together, the house seemed oddly peaceful and no one he knew had job security quite like a man who fed the progressive disease of others. He began to sweat and quickly loosened his collar and belt buckle.

"Beverly," he choked out in a voice unexpected, "Bev!" Beverly peeked around the corner with sudsy, yellow dish-gloves and an apron tied around her skirt. She dressed her part every day, and though she hadn't had a job outside of the house since he met her, she was diligent about her domestic duties and hated to be interrupted.

"Yes, dear, what is it?" The running water drowned him out, so he attempted to speak louder. He loosened his collar again.

"I need some water. My throat is a little dry." As he scanned all the family photos, smiling faces and perfectly placed knick-knacks on the mantel, the room began to spin. He got up and paced, desperately trying to catch his breath. Was this the heart attack he always knew would come? He grasped the door frame and braced himself. Visions of poor dancing Betty and spiritually conquered Russell filled his mind as he sank lower and lower to the floor. He remembered each glass that he refilled one after

the other. Beverly came in with the water and jumped at seeing him on his knees gasping for breath.

“Phillip, what on earth are you doing on the floor?” She got on her knees with him and fretfully straightened up his messy collar, which made him fly to his feet in a panic and gasp for air in desperation.

“Good lord, Phil, I’m calling 911!” She ran to the phone as he paced the house.

He imagined Frankie in the back of the bar with the people that he dealt with in the booth. He knew Frankie was up to no good. He could tell by the way the people shook. Phil never served Frankie a single drink of alcohol, but let him do his business in the back for a “tip” here and there. The people that came in never came back, and Phil always had an awful feeling that they were gone for good. He suddenly got sick to his stomach. He ran to the bathroom and fell to his knees by the toilet.

As the room spun he could only think of Betty and her spinning dance with chairs, violent men and broken bottles thrown her way. When she would ask for another shot, he knew she was far beyond drunk, but he poured it anyway and watched her become a shadow of a human being for fifteen years. He watched as her husband tried for five of those years to come and drag her out each night, unsuccessfully, and then for ten as she withered into nothing. He vomited uncontrollably.

“Now he’s throwing up! I don’t know what happened! His father and grandfather and great-grandfather all died of heart attacks! Please get here right away! Good god, he vomited again!” Beverly was nearly screaming into phone. She had the cord stretched all the way from the kitchen, through the hall and was barely stretching her head into the bathroom doorway watching as Phillip lost himself.

He never really knew what Russell did for a living, but he knew that he was lost and trying to find a reason to leave the Whiskey Whale. Phillip had heard about a wife and a daughter, but Russell rarely talked. He just stared at an ashtray and drank. Occasionally a tear would fall, and on rarer occasion, a glass would fly in a sudden fit of rage - but for the most part, Phillip watched Russell slip further and further into darkness on his stool and filled his glass at each request. His chest ached in sharp waves of stabbing pain. He knew it was coming.

“PHILLIP!” Beverly’s head was leaning into the bathroom screaming at him as his back slid down the wall next to the toilet. He grasped his chest. Her echoing voice made a sort of music, and he was spinning with Betty again. She loved to pull him from behind the bar when it was late and he was closing. She would spin and spin, and he would gently lead her outside and into a cab. He knew she had no one to go home to and nothing left to live for, but he also knew she’d be back.

“PHILLIP! GET UP!” His face was on the cold tile floor, the only relief he could find. The waves of pain were becoming more intense. He wanted to give into it. Hundreds of faces flashed through his mind with stories of struggle and sadness - reasons for a shot and excuses to drink. He had aided them all, probably helped ruin lives and marriages, destroyed the dreams of small children, been the cause of black eyes and bloodied bodies in an alleyway somewhere nearby.

“PHILLIP, they’re coming!” Beverly had put the phone down and was kneeling over him, petting his head. She whimpered as she looked over his whole body. Desperate to help in some way, she slid his tie up to his collar and straightened it again. This constricting move made Phil leap to his feet and fly from the bathroom in a fit, delirious

and half-blind. He ran into walls and bounced off of doors, desperately trying to loosen his tie. As he flew through the kitchen, he tripped on the outstretched phone cord and hit his head on the cutting board sticking off of the counter. He landed hard on the floor, face up, and as he opened his eyes he saw it. Beverly had been cutting the meat with a butcher knife they had been given as a wedding gift thirty years ago. It was airborne. He could hear Beverly shrieking as if background music to the slow motion of the blade somersaulting in the air. He was glued to the floor, unable to lift his arms. He felt one last sharp pain before the waves subsided, replaced by a new sensation.

His eyes wandered around the kitchen, seeing old pictures on the refrigerator, family photos hanging on the wall by the doorway, one leftover lamb chop and a screaming but beautiful Beverly trembling through the kitchen toward him. His eyes stopped on her. *She* is why he poured the drinks, *she* is why he danced Betty out the door to close the bar down, and *she* is why he took hush money from Frankie and listened to the sad lives of strangers. It was Beverly that made it all worthwhile. All of the panic seemed silly now as she leaned over him sobbing.

“What’s the matter, Bev? I feel better now.” He tried to reach his hand out but couldn’t move. He could hear sirens coming up the street, but knew it wasn’t going to be a heart attack that killed this March. He felt like a victor over a long-time foe. His vision started going gray but he could feel his fingers and the warmth of Beverly’s hand on his.

“Don’t move, Phillip, they’re coming...” The words covered him like a blanket as Beverly smiled at him through tears and held on tightly to his hand. He felt good about life as she held him. Leave it to Beverly to make sense of things.