

After Drink You Can Turn Earth Up Side Down

By Rodge Glass

In this club in downtown Hong Kong the waitresses never let your glass get below midway before offering you another drink. They all look eighteen or nineteen. They all look good. They're wearing tartan skirts above the knee and ties pulled loose over part-open white shirts, like someone's got to halfway to undressing them before deciding against it. The emblems on the waitresses' shirts read: WAN CHAI AMAZON: A WHOLE NEW ADVENTURE! As four or five of them zip between tables, talking in hand signals to punters (*You want another beer or not?*), I think to myself: we're probably the youngest men in here. Then I think: it was funny, the way Angie put it. *Our baby is born. Come and see.* Like she wanted an opinion on a new dress. Like I was expecting the news and understood. Like it's not a twenty thousand mile round trip from England to visit. Looking down, I notice my bag is poking out from underneath my stool, the panda toy and fake road sign I got at the market spilling out onto the floor. I don't bend down. With one swift kick I push them both back in the bag, the contents resting under a nearby table. Then I shout into Nick's ear.

'Lot of westerners in here,' I say.

Nick doesn't reply straight away. He's watching the dance floor, where the first few brave souls of the night are trying out their moves to Eric Clapton's 'Cocaine'. Three couples are having a good time. One especially. A young local girl is slow-swaying along to the live band with a white guy in an Armani suit. Maybe he's sixty, or older. The girl laughs at something the man says, claps her hand onto his chest then lets it run down the buttons of his shirt – one button, two buttons, three – before her slim fingers rest on his belly, just above his

belt. Lingered there. Her nails stroking ever so slightly, slow and soft. The guy grins. Life's just too fucking good, isn't it? When he sees me looking, he winks, like I'm next in line or something. I give him the finger but he's not even surprised. He answers by licking his lips and whipping the girl round, fast, in a circle. This makes Nick finally look away. He grabs more monkey nuts from the bowl, drops the shells on the floor with the rest and faces me.

'Yeah, yeah,' he says, readjusting his baseball cap. 'So what?'

I've forgotten the question I asked, or if I asked a question at all.

'So nothing,' I say, keeping my voice light, one palm on his shoulder as I lean in to be heard. 'Hey, you were right. Fucking GREAT band here. I mean. Just – fucking – GREAT.' These last few days, I lie without thinking. I talk without noticing. Sometimes, I don't know where I am. I wake up during the night, stagger to the hotel room toilet and think I'm already there, in my new home in the sun, Angie sleeping and the baby in the cot by our bed. Angie stirs and says, 'Sweetie, come back.' Like she used to. But here, now, I say to Nick, 'This place is a real find.' And it sounds like I mean it.

After a few songs I sneak a look at the score. No change. So I turn back. It's probably rude to check the football while these guys are ripping into 'Wish You Were Here' as if they wrote it themselves, as if they're really trying to tell us something, you know? But then, it's not like we're watching the real thing. In some shitty bar next to a strip club. On a Tuesday night in April. And besides, everyone seems to be doing it. Just before they go for one last chorus I even catch the keyboard player, this guy who looks like a tribal Indian or something, craning for a view from his place at the back of the stage. But no luck: the stocky, Zen-like bass man is in front of him, in his road. One of the two guitar players is to his left, knees bent, chin to the heavens, riffing in front of the other screen. The drummer, complete with full classic rock uniform – ponytail, hair dyed black to cover the grey, skull tattoos, faded Sabbath T-shirt – is crammed at the back, his cymbals in that bit too close, blocking the smallest screen. That's the one by the exit. Or the toilet. Or both. There's no signs on anything around here. Up front, the singer and other guitar player hover at the edge of the stage – in their minds, this is a different crowd. One's doing the lead vocal, the other the harmony. Both have their eyes closed: *Oh, how I wish you were here*, they sing, crouching for

effect. Then standing straight. Then opening their eyes again. The two of them, in unison. Like this outpouring of emotion, it's sudden, unexpected.

Just as I'm thinking of jumping up there and joining them, dipping and stretching in symmetry, letting the sounds conquer me too, a tartan skirt comes by, picking up two empties and looking around for more. I don't wait for a hand signal. I give a couple of my own, waving her over, then pointing to our three-quarter full bottles. She smiles, all cheeky, like I've just done something witty or interesting and I think: I could get used to it here. Meanwhile, Nick's far away. He's been singing along, his whole body consumed, feeling the thumps and chord changes along with the band as he lunges back and forth on his stool, playing the drums on his knees, his gym-toned muscles taut and visible through a T-shirt I suspect was chosen because it's ever so slightly too small. I wonder if Nick's high. I met him three hours ago. How the hell would I know what Nick's like high? Or sober? Or sad? It feels like an age before 'Wish You Were Here' finally finishes, the ripple of applause and whoops slowly dies down, and he starts talking again. Like we never stopped. Like, in this place, time doesn't pass unless Nick says so.

'These guys play here every night,' he tells me. 'Ten til six thirty in the morning. Three full sets. Can you believe that? They know, like, *six hundred* songs, man. You name it. You fucking name it. They know it. The Stones. The Beatles. *Anything*.'

Trying to keep my face straight, I say, 'They do any African stuff? I like African music.'

Nick comes in closer, checks to see if I'm just passing the time, then backs away.

'Probably,' he says, finally. 'What's wrong? You don't like The Rolling Stones?'

We've not paid for the drinks yet. I decide to play nice.

'Every night they play?' I say. 'Wow.'

Nick nods, hard. Relaxes. Smiles.

'Yeah. Well. They get two nights off a month.'

‘Must need a lot of stamina. And strong wrists!’

I laugh dirty. Let him work it out.

Another few seconds pass before I take a good long swig on my drink, which is actually, no shit, called *Hong Kong Beer*. There’s not even any Chinese characters on the side of the bottle. I think: this fucking place! Then I think of how far I am from Australia, and how long it takes to get there. Then how long it takes to get from the airport to the city. From the city to Angie’s. From her front door to the back room, where my boy could be sleeping, right now. I try and imagine his little nose. His ears. His smell. I wonder what name she gave him, and why she didn’t tell me on the phone. A wave of heat passes through me as I allow myself to hope she named him after me. I shake my head, forget where I am, then it comes back.

‘These boys make a lot of money?’ I ask Nick, pointing to the band with my bottle. ‘This place is filling up.’

Nick laughs, snorts.

‘You’ve not been here long, have you my little friend?’

Nick can fuck right off if he thinks I’m rising to that. I’m not even supposed to be here.

‘Back soon,’ I tell him, keeping it cheerful. ‘Going for a cancer stick.’

Standing up, I notice the back of my jeans are suddenly soaking wet. Behind me, an old man in Bermuda shirt and shorts who can’t be much less than seventy is having a good time, laughing at the cocktail glass he’s just knocked over me like he’s fascinated by it, like he’s never seen a spilt drink before. The teenagers either side of him are laughing too. So hard it sounds like anger. The old man says ‘Sorry dude,’ laughs some more and says, ‘Lemme buy you another one,’ but shows no signs of actually getting up, doing it, or helping me dry off. I forget what I got up for in the first place.

As I clean myself up in the toilet I think: it feels like a long time since I stood at that airport gate, boarding pass in my hand, watching my connection get smaller and smaller and disappear into a paper cut in the sky. For a while, I forgot about the cost – I was just looking, looking, looking at that paper cut, a narrow slit that let a plane through into the other side of the world, my maybe future: Angie, responsibility, the end of late nights and stupid mistakes. Back in the club, I rub my jeans with a paper towel. It's not helping. I remember watching that plane leaving and thinking: I could just hide. That was a week ago. Today's the third straight morning I've got up late, hung over to hell, sat with a strong coffee in Starbucks in Tsim Sha Tsui and stared into my coffee cup imagining the little bubble in my drink is a plane, or a ship, making its way across the water. Wondering what I'm waiting for. I don't know where the days have gone. This morning, Angie's message read: *You coming or not?*

When I get back from the toilet Nick's joking with the band, between numbers, maybe making a request. I look down, and see that in among the monkey shells and the stickiness of spilt drinks, my bag has moved again. Or disappeared. Looking around on the floor, under tables, behind chairs, stumbling around blindly, I know I'm not going to see it. I remember buying the sign this morning: above a series of Chinese characters that could have meant just about anything it said AFTER DRINK YOU CAN TURN EARTH UP SIDE DOWN. A few hours ago, that made me laugh. I can't remember why. It was supposed to be a translation of something, maybe a proverb. Something wise in a Chinese dialect made silly by the English language. What did I buy the sign for? And what about the panda? Its big black eyes stared out at me, questioning.

The band are doing 'Hotel California' now, the two guitarists smiling as they faithfully play out the instrumental note for note as a duo, in harmony. It sounds like the oldest song in the world. Tired, almost dead. A dead song from a long-dead age. But these boys are trying their best to bring it back to life. They look like there's nothing else in the world they'd rather be doing than playing the instrumental from 'Hotel California'. The whole scene gives me a shiver. You can feel something spilling out of them, these musicians, into the room and round the whole place, the whole street, all over the Wan Chai district, throughout Hong Kong. And Nick's right with it, fist pumping in the air. When the song finishes, there's damn near a standing ovation. The singer takes off his hat, bows low and says, 'Hong Kong – you are too kind!'

‘Hey Nick, these guys local?’ I ask him.

‘Filipino, dude. You know nothing?’

I shrug. Nick shakes his head.

‘They left the Philippines together – all still live together too, in an apartment near here. And they still send most of their money home. Good boys. Fucking tragedy it is. Fucking triumph.’

‘Right,’ I say. ‘What?’

I’m trying to concentrate on Nick’s eyes, though they’re spinning now.

‘They went to Japan first. The Japanese are good musicians, you know, but fuck it, the truth is: their language can’t cope with English sounds. Wrong shaped mouths. Good news for Filipinos! So they worked in Japan. Then here.’

Nick rubs his index finger and thumb together.

‘More green,’ he says. ‘But still slavery.’

It feels like my turn to speak. To say ‘wow’ again, or give an opinion. Though I’m thinking of something else, somewhere else, I ask, ‘Do they play their own stuff?’

‘They could do that,’ he says. ‘Their songs are amazing. The best songs on this planet if you ask me. But what are you gonna do?’

He waves a hand dismissively at the crowd. I think to myself: yeah. Nick’s definitely high.

‘That’s a shame,’ I tell his spinning eyes. ‘Really.’ The band, I notice, is spinning too. Bass drum, spinning. Guitars, spinning. Dancers, screens, stools. All moving, in beautiful circles. Then more drinks land on our table and more empties are taken away. I don’t remember drinking them.

‘I understand it though,’ says Nick. ‘A lot of guys here are a long way from home. They want something that reminds them of what they’re missing.’

‘Then why don’t they stay there then?’ I say. ‘I mean, they’re just here for money, right? And to get laid?’

Nick puts his drink down hard on the table. The froth surges up the neck, over the lip of the bottle and down the sides of the label reading *Hong Kong Beer*.

‘Look buddy.’ He searches his brain for my name. Draws a blank. ‘You know fuck all about this place, alright?’ Nick clocks me checking out one of the tartan skirts zipping by. ‘You come in here, spit on us and leave. You types make me sick,’ he says, whispering the final word.

I don’t know what that means but I do know his two eyebrows have become one bushy line that won’t sit still. Why not? Why won’t it sit still? His pupils are spirals. I laugh.

Nick says, ‘Insult my people again and I’ll kill you.’

His face is hard now, the whole thing, like it’s set in concrete.

‘Your people?’ I say. ‘I thought you were from West Virginia.’

I look around the club, thinking: I could stay here forever. Thinking: I’ve got to get out of here. Thinking: but where to? For a second it looks like Nick’s going to boil over, frothing at the mouth, just like his beer. Like he’s going to hit me. But he just downs his drink, grabs his coat and leaves. Then, as if he’s planned it, the skirt comes by with the bill. Just a skirt. No smile. No woman inside. I pay and move to a barstool to watch the rest of the show.

I don’t sit on my own for long. As the band kick into ‘Crosstown Traffic’ I feel an arm slip through mine, and a hand fall on the small of my back.

‘Hello,’ says a voice.

‘Hello,’ I say back. But quickly, ‘My son is born. I’m not supposed to be here.’

‘That nice,’ says the voice, who also has a warm body, which has already pulled in close. Guitar Man Number 1 is changing over his instrument to one which is pretty battered, with black stains round the sides. I reckon I know what’s coming. This is Hendrix, after all. The suits expect.

‘I not supposed to be here too,’ says the voice.

‘Then what are you doing here?’ I ask.

‘I come to Hong Kong to make business,’ says the voice and body with hands. And after a moment, ‘Monkey business!’

Then a grin, a giggle. She smells like perfume, like sweat.

‘I have a family,’ I say. ‘I’m going to see them.’

‘Good. Our secret then. Monkey business?’

It’s not funny, so I don’t know why I smile. Laugh again. Can’t stop.

‘No way,’ I say, still laughing. ‘No more trouble. That’s why they went to –’

‘England, yes? I go to England. We get married. I have lots of sons.’

I finish the drink in front of me in one gulp, though I don’t know if it’s mine.

‘No. Not England. You know what...fuck it. Sorry. I can’t.’

It’s hard to get words out now.

The voice and body is a girl, who looks young but old too. Her eyes say: *I know you*. Her lips say: *I know you*. Her hands say: *I know you*. She pouts, fake sad, sexy, pulling one of those little girl faces that must work on the guys out here. Seconds pass. Nothing happens.

Then she says, 'If you can't then what you doing here?'

Her voice is clipped. The night is short.

'Hey. You hear me? What you doing here?'

When I don't answer, she follows my gaze. The guy in the Armani suit is down the front now, the dance floor is full, and he's bowing down in tribute as Guitar Player Number 1 sets his instrument alight for the first time tonight. Then the guy stands, lets out a yell, looks around, and sees me again. Just for a moment. And he smiles. In his eyes, it's 1970. He's young, single, before divorce and kids and decades in sales, before escaping East to forget. Here, when he walks down the street, everyone wants to say *hi*. When he talks, people listen. Life's just too fucking good, isn't it? He raises his beer to the skies, mimes along to 'Crosstown Traffic' and pulls his new girl towards him for one more kiss.

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