

George Horrell

English 90: Long Story

The Poison Tree

He finished pouring the pint and scraped pugnacious foam from its head with a flourish. He slid it towards her boyfriend. The butcher abruptly grabbed the glass in his right hand with his meat-tenderizing fingers.

His hand was calloused, used to cleaving meat in twain. The butcher's features were angular and small, his eyes and nose too small for his broad face. He carried some pouchy weight in his belly, a product of excess instead of inactivity, and his shoulders hunched forward, as if his arms were pulling themselves together in preparation to gut some poor boar. She, on the other hand, was sweetness and light. Her hair had a fair flaxen quality to it. She did not have the most conventionally attractive head, it was bulbous like the bulb of a promising flower, domed like an egg and her hairline was unnaturally high. She nails were short from habitual biting.

The butcher grunted. She lifted her head and reached for a battered red leather purse stowed beneath her stool. She produced a torn five-pound note; he decided not to mention that they were no longer legal tender. She placed it carefully on the beer-mat in front of him, stamped with the insignia of the pub, "The Poison Tree".

Ed put away the shabby note then went back to polishing glasses. He liked to get them sparkling clean, but he always spit on the rag before he started. The Poison Tree was a Victorian-era pub, mottled with age and mossy with slothful ownership. But for what it lacked in splendor, it made up for in market share. The owner had been desperate to sell and would happily have pawned off the decaying buildings onto a high-street chain, but there were no takers. The Tree, as it was optimistically referred to by locals, was the only pub in the insignificant Yorkshire fishing village of

Mousehole Bay. It had stood for hundreds of years and would likely stand for hundreds more, with its drab scarlet interior and frayed leather seats. Inside the thin brick walls of the Tree, the clock ticked contrary to time, and mice rolled backwards out of their cells. Ed Ferries had never worked anywhere else; Gary, the pub's owner, had hired him once he'd finished his GCSEs at the school in the neighboring town of Whitby. Gary had been a regular feature at their house in his late teenage years – there weren't many single people in the village over the age of fifty. Gary often wandered into Ed's room late at night, and Ed had learned to prop a cabinet behind the door.

Ed surveyed the malcontents that inhabited the tavern, as they stared down into the bubbling glasses before them. Liquid pooled and ebbed across the sticky surface of the bar, flowing past the postman with melanoma on his left shin, congealing before the vicar with his hidden thumb drives, dripping on the foot of the teacher's mistress and wetting the hand of the bellicose butcher. He studied the butcher again and mentally remarked upon his corpulent features and the quite unagreeable color of his face – a purplish hue that belonged more in the morgue than amongst the living. Even from across the bar, he could smell the distinctive reek of gristle and offal.

"Another." The butcher barely did Ed the dignity of lifting his fat head or even raising his eyes to order, just grunting down into his empty glass.

"That'll be four eighty-five please."

Ed poured, and the butcher scattered coins onto the surface of the bar.

"Ta very much." Ed put the money away. "I haven't seen you in the village before. Are you a new arrival?"

"Yeah, I'm David Black. I'll be working for the Maclean's in the butchers."

"Oh yeah, we were all sad to hear about Mr. Wright. He was a good bloke and good with the cleaver." The butcher stayed quiet and stared at the screen above the bar - a darts championship.

"And you've moved here with your wife?" Ed tried desperately to sound disinterested, but his voice cracked on "wife". The butcher didn't look away from the flickering screen.

"Mary isn't my wife." Ed noticed now that neither of them wore rings. As he glanced at her hand, he noticed the delicate pallor of her skin, and the milky texture of her forearms. Ed stepped away from the butcher Black and started to tidy the bar for closing. By the time that he called for last orders, and then closing time, Mary was gone, but the butcher remained, eyes glued to the screen.

"I'm shutting up Mr. Black."

The butcher stood up too quickly, like an ungainly beast and knocked over a half-empty pint glass sitting on the bar. The muggy drink streamed across the surface of the bar and cascaded onto the floor. He lumbered out without a mutter of apology.

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Days shortened, and the sun dropped in the sky. When the door to the pub swung open, David could see how the ground outside had been softened and how rain flooded the path that lead from the high street into the Poison Tree. Shadows cast by the windows opposite the bar now reached high on the wall, and David polished glasses, chasing the sunlight that glinted off the bottles of spirits.

Julia Ferries, Ed's mother, sat on a corner in the bar and nursed a gin and tonic. Ed had never known his father, who had upped and left shortly after he was born, but he had never felt close to his mother. She had never buoyed him through difficult times, but they maintained an illusion of familial closeness. Sometimes Ed wished he had a different mother, someone that was more glamorous, more financially endowed. She was no alcoholic, but as did everyone else in the village, she liked the pub. Like an old yew tree, her face bore sixty-four deep set wrinkles and her back was beginning to show an early hunch. She had worked many different jobs in the town and she had serviced every lonely home.

"Not too busy tonight then?" Her voice warbled. She wiped a dollop of foam, freshly born of her pint from the corner of her mouth.

"Too wet for them to make the walk." The pub held an expectant, almost pious, quiet. The rain pattered against the windows and left long trails as it spilled down the panes.

"No Gary here tonight?"

"It's too quiet for us both to come in, I'm taking whole shifts and he's paying me extra to open and close."

His ma took another sip of her gin and tonic. As he distractedly polished a glass the door swung open and in came the hulking figure of the butcher who was followed by the shivering shade of Mary. The butcher wore a big coat with a dark tartan interior, but Mary only had a small wax

jacket and an umbrella. Her hair was thick with moisture, fine strands clumped into matted mouse tails. Mary dripped her way to the seat next to his Ma.

"The regular?"

The butcher grunted in affirmation.

"Anything for you miss?" She shook her head, a small attempt at contact lost in the rolling shakes of her icy shoulders.

"She doesn't want anything." The butcher glared at Ed. Ed poured the drink and as was now custom, took the coins from Mary's outstretched quivering hand. The butcher lapped the pint like a thirsty dog, and as he drank, Ed thought he saw canines the size of flints. He could imagine them tearing apart cartilage and grinding through grey bones.

Ed stood near to his ma and stole some sideways glances at Mary. Her whole demeanor called for rescue. She obviously had no idea how to dress for the countryside, she was probably a city-girl that had somehow got wrapped up with this rough country man. The way that she trembled there, like a lamb before the hungry jaws of the wolf. There was nothing for it – this man was obviously no good for her and took no care of her. He would have to step in and provide some good reasoning for her to leave the meat-grinder behind.

The butcher drank more than he should. He was a working man and always far exceeded reasonable consumption on a weeknight before a day's labor at the chopping block. Ed had been working in the pub for over a decade now, and he knew drinkers. He recognized the folk that would flirt with alcoholism for decades, extending its grip on their lives until they were retired, and they could willingly let in envelop them and carry their hoarse bodies to the hearse. He knew men that would leave their careers as fishermen and spend their retirement money going glassy eyed before the flickering bar screens, surrounded by other silent seamen. He knew the vicars that would sit bolt upright in leather backed chairs near the fire, slurping cardinal wine and avoiding eye contact with

their wives. Ed already knew his angle, his power over the butcher. The butcher's drinking habit would be his fulcrum, and the tap handles would be his lever.

Soon, his mother left the bar and shortly after her, he watched Mary step through the threshold back into the pattering rain. He was alone with the butcher.

“Another round?”

The butcher didn't lower his eyes from the screen but fumbled in his pocket. He pulled out a few coins – barely three pounds – and dropped them on the bar mat. He would've given it to him for free.

“Thank you very much.”

The butcher ordered the cheapest beer they carried, but Ed poured their most expensive beer into the tallest glass they had. The butcher slurped it greedily, the foam forming a gluttonous circle around his mouth.

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Rain lashed against the windows making them vibrate like the pipes of a mighty church organ. The wind licked the walls of the old building and he could hear it whistling through the cracks in the brickwork. Many months had passed now, and he had been consistently plying the butcher with alcohol ever since. The butcher never paid full price for a drink. He always poured the highest concentration beer they had on tap, and as the night drew to a close, he would sneak in half a shot of vodka to add some furtive kick. And he could feel the impacts starting to take shape. As the weeks ground on, the taps flowed into his gullet. The butcher's eyes darkened, and his previously vacant stare started to betray the menacing hunger of addiction. Mary had started to look different too. She had come in wearing thick sleeves and a motheaten black polo neck jumper. He asked the butcher to pay for his first round, to keep up appearances.

“Mary.”

She fumbled with her purse, digging like a badger through receipts and coupons, scrounging for coins. She couldn't produce a single penny. Her hands shuddered, and she shrank back on her stool.

“I'm sorry, I... we.... I don't have any money with me today.”

Ed watched as the butcher's eyes came into focus for the first time in weeks. With a single motion his right hand stiffened and flew upwards. It connected to the side of Mary's face with a loud crack, like the breaking of brittle bones, the rupturing of blood vessels. It happened so swiftly and was delivered with such deft clinical precision, that nobody in the bar noticed save for the three of them.

“That's alright, that's alright. I can just keep your tab running for tomorrow and you can pay me then.”

Ed wasn't taken aback. He had seen this too, with his mother, with the headmaster of the local school. Everyone had their breaking point, and it didn't surprise him that the butcher's

breaking point was now the first drink of the evening. If anything, the display cheered his soul, his attempts were clearly proving effective, and soon she would come to her senses and leave the butcher entirely.

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Tomorrow came many times over, and a puffy purple bruise extended around the right side of her neck, arranged in four distinctive bands. Her eyes sagged like overladen shopping bags and her lip billowed around a small cut in its left corner. She perched on the corner of her bar stool, ready for flight, but her head hung heavy with inanimate resignation, her eyes trained on the dented silver bar top before her. He winced as he considered that if he was going to have her and protect her, or even get close to her, she'd need more bruises. Behind this bar and the tap handles he could only watch and push her towards him, and away from the butcher, one drink at a time. He studied her from a distance. He had seen his mother come home with lesions and marks many times, but he found Mary's scratches troubling. The bruises gave her eyes some definition that they had lacked before and disturbed the sallowness of her face. She had been a vision of perfect anemic porcelain and now she was broken pottery.

The clock somehow found its way to eleven and the bar trickled out until it was just Ed and the butcher once again. He followed his normal routine and once the whites of the butcher's eyes were swimming freely in their sockets, he surreptitiously refilled the pint glass twice, and the butcher diligently drained the fluid away. But the butcher didn't move. So, he filled the glass again twice over, and eventually decided that the man would drink until he was on the floor. When the butcher walked out, he would never tip Ed or even pay for the last six rounds. Ed figured that the butcher thought that he was racking up a tab that he would never pay off, and when the butcher was forced to leave his barstool, he was angry and always left feeling entitled to more alcohol. This pattern repeated itself, a tessellation of inebriation and anger.

Weeks later, the butcher walked into the bar alone. He hadn't changed from work; his apron was blood stained and his stride was thick with labor. He sat at the bar and dropped a few coins on the bar mat. Ed reached for a glass, and unbeknownst to him, down the high street, just inside the

butchers a woman screamed. The vicar and the teacher's mistress turned their heads to the windows.
Blue lights flickered in the early darkness.