

The Lion and the Vulture

By David Butler

Sparra came in clutching an overstuffed sports bag. He was drunk and leering. I could see him coming from across the street through the tinted windows. It was late afternoon and the pub was dark. As the sun sank down over the city its last rays ventured into the bar, covering only the first couple of feet of slate floor. It made Sparra's ratty red hair look bright and full as he crossed the road. I folded up the *Daily Telegraph* I'd been reading and came out from behind the bar to meet him near the door. He pushed through it with his head down, and had to stop abruptly to avoid crashing into me.

His eyes narrowed in the gloom, identifying me.

"Jesus Billy, I nearly knocked you over". He didn't. Sparra didn't knock anyone over.

"How you traveling Sparra?" I returned, looking him in his eyes and blocking his path.

He glanced around me, trying to make out the rest of the bar and see who was in. So far he was the only customer, and I didn't want him.

"I'm ok Bill. Just come in for a beer."

"Looks like you've had plenty already Sparra. Enough for one day."

He met my glance and I could see his brain working. Sparra has pale yellow eyes that constantly flash to each side and betray his shifty thoughts.

"No. I haven't had a drink all day. Honest Bill. You ask me Dad. He'll tell ya." He looked at me with a pathetic earnestness I hadn't seen in him before, even though he was lying to me.

"I don't believe you Sparra."

"You ask me Dad. I only come here cause me missus just kicked me out." He lifted up his sports bag as proof. His knobby elbow protruded several different ways as he lifted it. Faded, self-

etched tattoos tracked down his arms, the kind favoured by junkies and prisoners. Crude crucifixes, a girl's name and some letters across the knuckles was all the creativity he could muster. At some point he'd been on junk. His stretched skin, glazed eyes and wiry frame told of his old habit, as the blood vessels in his squashed nose told of the alcohol that replaced it. He was probably about 40 years old, and lucky to have made it.

"Me Dad's gonna pick me up soon. I'm staying at his place til I sort something out. I'm no good mate." He choked a little as he said it

I could tell I was about to get him a beer. I'd hesitated just enough. Christ.

"One schooner Sparra." I turned and walked back to pour it. He followed behind me and pulled up a stool at the bar. I pulled a pint of Tooheys Old for him, watching the dark liquid fill the glass and resisting the temptation to swing the half full mug into the side of his face and knock him off the stool. There was no point getting his junky blood all over me for the sake of one beer.

The bar was located along the back wall of the rectangular room, looking out over the hardwood tables and empty wine barrels with stools around them. Framed beer adverts from the 1940s through to the 1970s hung on the walls. There was an open fire place with an electric heater in the hearth along the right hand wall. The chimney had been blocked up long ago. The building itself was all brick and was over a hundred years old. The bar was by far the most attractive feature of the pub, with its dark, polished wood counter and mirrors along the back wall. The lounge area was rough and workman like, with a low ceiling and poor lighting. There used to be a pool table, but Kev Buckingham broke too many cues when he lost, and on one occasion cracked a guy's jaw with the eight ball.

I finished pouring Sparra's beer and put it in front of him. He lifted it to his mouth and took a long sip.

"Me Dad will get me soon."

"How is Vic?" I asked, not caring. Sparra was worthless. His Dad, Vic, was just as bad, albeit with more backbone than his son. He was one of those iron Irishmen who refused to submit. He'd had a drink everyday of his life since he was 11 years old. In the mornings he was a perfect

gentleman, sipping his beer and talking about the weather and the government with such a perfect mastery of small talk that he'd completely disarm you. By evening he was reeling and abusive, squinting through heavy lidded eyes.

Sparra ignored the question or didn't hear it. He was staring down into his beer, contemplating his future in it. I unfolded the *Telegraph* and found my place. I was ignoring my barman's obligation to fill the space between us with some inane banter, but hell, he had enough problems and I didn't want to hear them.

"See the thing with women, you give them a home, you look after 'em and treat 'em right, and then they just kick you out like you're no one— nothing". He showed me his open palm to prove he had nothing.

"I went to England for her. I spent thousands of dollars and years of my life getting her over here. Millions of dollars! All for her. Some thanks eh?" He choked again, swallowing the crude emotion welling up from his stomach. Christ.

"That bag's all I got."

"You should go see your Dad, Sparra, and talk it over with him. He'll get you sorted. You're not the first bloke in here who's been kicked out. You just take it easy and go see Vic."

He scoffed and said his Dad wouldn't give a damn.

"You're a good man Bill." He extended his hand over the bar towards me. I thought he wanted to shake my hand, but he held on after the shake, positioning our hands into an arm wrestle grip. He looked up into my eyes.

"I don't know what I'm going to do. I've only had a couple of drinks all day. You won't believe this, but when she threw my stuff in this bag and kicked me out, I marched all straight and tough-like down to the bus stop and cried like a baby. No word of a lie."

Sparra had a misguided idea of when I thought he was lying. His eyes were red and wide, and again there was the pathetic earnestness that I couldn't quite reconcile. I wanted to look away

from him, to avoid his eyes, but to do so would be some sort of betrayal. Still, he must have seen the resistance in me.

“It’s how women are. They say they love ya, and when you least expect it they’ll just rip out ya heart and stomp on it. *You’ll see*”

I saw my love on our honeymoon in Thailand, as we lay naked in the sticky night listening to the beach outside. Her damp hair stuck to my skin as she lay her head on my chest. *No*. Again I fought down the urge to reach over and belt him.

“Yep. You’ll see.” He squeezed my hand to emphasise his point. Still I stared back him, resisting him from the depths of my soul. Kev Buckingham walked in and found us locked in this embrace, and sat down cautiously.

Kev is completely unlike Sparra. Where Sparra is nervous and shifty, Kev is loud and confident. Where Sparra is scrawny and wiry, Kev is tall and thick, with a moderate gut. Where Sparra is disgusting and wretched, Kev is genuine and sort of respectable-for a career crook. He once did a 50 grand bank job and gave half the money to kids with cancer. Sparra would steal five dollars from a kid with cancer.

He let go of my hand. I wanted to wash it immediately. I nodded to Kev and started pouring him a beer. Sparra drained off the rest of his, picked up his bag and passed it over to me.

“Chuck this behind there, will ya Billy. I’ll be back later on. Me Dad won’t be far away. I’ll catch you boys later.”

He stood up and made for the door, veering to the left and nearly tripping over a stool along the way.

“Good riddance” I said to Kev.

Kev looked at me like I might be dangerous. “What was all that about?”

“His missus kicked him out and he had nowhere to go, and I’m the lucky guy who gets the blokes with no place to go.”

Kev was one of these. I was the last barman in town who’d serve him, and he knew better then to screw up his last drinking hole.

“Poor Sparra hey? Christ, what next. I knew a guy when we were all in prison who was going to kill Sparra just because he couldn’t stand the sight of him. Sparra got wind of it and faked like he was gonna neck himself, so they put him in psych for two weeks. Meanwhile, the bloke who was gonna kill him got stabbed in the throat and bled out down the bathroom drain.”

“Lucky Sparra.”

“It’s always ‘lucky Sparra’. The bastard’s so crooked he screws his pants on every mornin’. He’s weaseled out of every tight spot he’s ever been in, and put a lot of blokes in the can to save his own arse as well. Not a real popular bloke, our Sparra.”

“How come you’ve never done anything about it?”

“How come *you’ve* never done anything about it?”

“It’d be like a lion hunting a vulture.”

“Well there you go. It doesn’t bother me like it does other blokes. Sparra will get his in the end. Which reminds me, I bumped into my two police officer mates. Our Sparra had better check in with his parole bloke pretty soon or he’ll be going away for another couple.”

I talked to Kev and poured him a few more drinks as the sun went down. At 7 o’clock he picked up his coat to leave.

“Bloke’s gotta make an honest living. Can’t sit here all night drinking piss.”

I put on a *Righteous Brothers* record and settled down on one of the bar stools with a paper back. The place was empty and probably would be until around 9.

I only managed 45 minutes of solitude before Sparra's wife Mavis interrupted me. She was a big, broad woman with a shock of curly hair that had once been blonde, but was now almost white. Her two front teeth were missing from when Sparra had hit her with a frying pan. The police had given her a can of pepper spray for situations like this, and she emptied it all over him. He ended up in hospital for a month with a lung infection. She marched up to me, swinging her burly arms as she came.

"Where's Sparra Bill, and no lies."

"I don't know. What's up?"

"Well I don't know what's up, do I? We had a fight and I kicked him out. Nothing unusual there. But he's all hurt like I haven't seen him before. I don't know what's wrong with 'im. I just noticed me watch is gone from the bedside table as well. Mum gave it to me 'fore she died, and I reckon he's flogged it."

"He was in here earlier Mave, and he didn't look so good. He said he was going to his Dad's."

"Nah. I called Vic. He ain't there. I'm just worried is all." Small tears formed in the corner of her eyes and ran down her red blotchy cheeks. I poured her a large sherry and placed it in front of her.

"Thanks Billy. You're a good man."

She bent and slurped the top off the overfull drink to stop it spilling on the bar.

"What's got into him Bill? I don't know. He aint the same Sparra that come right up to me and told me I was beautiful years ago, like he meant it. He's gone into himself this last year, lost his swagger. And to flog me watch... That's cold, that is- even for him. Second most valuable thing he ever stole, after me own sweet heart."

She choked on these last words and the tears came back. She picked up the glass and took a large gulp, looking up into my eyes. Her teeth were stained red with the cheap sherry, and this led through the large gap of her missing teeth into the dark maw of her mouth.

“Look at me blubberin’ like a school girl. Pour me another, will ya Bill.”

I reached up for the sherry bottle and poured another large glass. As Mavis sipped it, Kev came back in from his work.

“Boss give you an early mark Kev?”

He laughed from deep in his belly.

“Yep. He knows who his best worker is. I’ll be employee of the month this month.”

“G’day Mavis,” Kev said with a stiff nod. “How ya be?”

“I’m alright Kev. You ain’t seen Sparra have ya?”

“Not since he was in here earlier. Said somethin’ bout his Dad’s place.”

“Nah, he’s not there. Bloody weasel.”

Kev looked at me, raising an eyebrow and disguising it by lifting his beer to his face and taking a long gulp. I was annoyed with Sparra and his self-created problems. Kev was my best customer, but now that Mavis was in and upset he’d feel awkward and might only stay for one more. They both sat there sipping their drinks, lost for the moment in their own thoughts. I turned up the music slightly and went to work on the scotch glasses with my polishing cloth.

Within minutes I saw Sparra walking past the front windows of the pub, turning at the door and pushing hard against it, stumbling inside. He veered like a tacking ship towards the bar, falling down into a stool beside Kev, without having noticed Mavis on the other side.

“Beer thanks Bill.”

He turned to his right, nodding to Kev and squinting to see who was sitting next to Kev.

“You!” he roared. Kev stared down hard into his drink.

Mavis returned his ferocious tone. “You’re damn right it’s me. Where you been hiding Sparra?”

“Don’t you talk to me like that,” Sparra yelled, standing up unsteadily and grabbing on to the bar to prevent him falling. “I’m your husband!”

“Well start bloody actin’ like my ‘usband! Tell me where you been Sparra?”

He sat down, regaining some composure. He took a sip of his beer and turned away from his wife, ignoring her. “It’s none of your business where I been,” he said coolly. “You can’t throw a man out an’ then ask him where he’s been.”

Sparra took another sip, still feigning uninterest. Mavis was having none of it. She got up and walked around to the seat on Sparra’s left. Sparra turned back the other way towards Kev. Kev hadn’t lifted his head.

“Well I’m not putting up with your nonsense anymore. You’re only home to eat and sleep, you drink my grog, and I haven’t seen you lift a finger round the house in months. In fact, I’ve hardly seen ya in months!”

He scoffed.

“You think its funny do ya Sparra? Well you can bloody stay out.”

“Oh I’m not coming back. Don’t you worry ‘bout that.”

“Good!” Mavis was shouting now, her voice shrill. “Nice knowing ya. You can pick up the rest of ya stuff tomorrow. Bring me watch back when you come.”

Sparra turned and glared at her.

“Yeah I know you flogged it. Think I wouldn’t notice me old Mum’s watch missin’ from the bedside table? Well I did, and I want it back or I’ll be calling the cops.”

“I didn’t steal ya watch,” he returned. His voice became low and menacing. “I aint that way.”

Kev looked up. Things had taken a bizarre twist, and Sparra was edgy. Kev shifted in his seat, realising he might have to jump between them at a moments notice. I quietly put the glass I’d been polishing back in the rack. There was no more ignoring this.

“Don’t lie to me Sparra. You are that way. But it’s a bloody low thing to do, even for you.”

Sparra stood up off his stool again, knocking it back on to the floor behind him.

“I...Didn’t...Steal...Your...Watch,” he shouted, a vein protruding out of his red face. As he stood, his beer was knocked on to the bar, spilling the liquid out towards me before the glass rolled back slowly off the edge and smashed on the slate floor. Kev watched intently.

Mavis stood up as well, pushing her face up towards Sparra’s, her eyes returning his glare. “Well where is it then? Hey?”

“You want your watch?” He thrust his hand into the right pocket of his faded jeans, pulling out a thick, black wallet with bits of paper sticking out. “You want you’re bloody watch? Well go and get it.”

He opened his wallet, pulled a green ticket from the back, and slapped it on the bar in front of his wife. A sob worked its way up and out of his bony torso. He choked on it, trying to hold it down. Tears began to flow down his face from his blood shot eyes. He looked down at the bar where his beer had been and slumped a little.

“Ah, where’s me beer gone Bill? That’s hard.” He thought I’d taken his drink from him during the chaos.

“Never mind that” Mavis interjected. “What’s this?”

Sparra bent and picked up his stool. He sat down into it, his shoulders hunched, defeated.

“It’s a ticket from the engravers.”

I poured him another and put it in front of him. He took a long sip.

“I can see that Sparra. What’s me watch doin’ at the engravers?” The shrillness had gone from her voice, replaced by genuine curiosity.

“Getting engraved,” Sparra said.

Mavis sat down next to him, putting her hand on his knee. Sparra- still not looking at her- took another sip of his drink.

“I was getting it done for our anniversary that’s comin’ up, before ya kicked me out. Now I don’t care. You can pick it up yerself.”

Mavis stopped and contemplated her husband, finding no answers in his hunched body language

“What’s going on with you these days, eh? It’s like I don’t know you anymore. These last few months, you gone right inside yerself. I been worried about ya Sparra.”

He was silent for a long time. Kev turned away and read the beer signs on the wall, as if noticing them for the first time.

Mavis waited for Sparra, her hand still on his knee. Sparra pulled the back of a long arm across his face, wiping the beer foam from his upper lip.

“I don’t know,” he began, shaking his head and looking down at his drink. “I just been turning some things over. Nothing serious, just takin’ time to work out where it’s at.”

He fell silent again. I could see the cogs of his brain turning.

“I guess I’m getting on a bit. I’m too old to be runnin’ round, raising hell like I used ta’. I got these two cops hounding me, and the parole officer always hanging over my head. And I got you to think about now as well. I’ve just been running over it all. Adjustin’.”

“You’re not...unhappy, are ya Sparra...with me?”

He sat there, motionless and silent as a stone.

“Nah,” he croaked, eventually. “It’s not that. Things have changed is all. I’ve got this history of doing something stupid whenever things is going good, and I ain’t willin’ to do that anymore.”

He lifted his head, turning his round, red rimmed eyes to his wife. Mavis reached over and kissed his forehead.

“I was worried about you,” she said. “I’d been thinking you weren’t happy anymore, like maybe I was stopping ya from livin’ how you’d always lived. I think that’s sorta why I kicked ya out.” She smiled a little. “Decent of me, wasn’t it?”

Sparra chuckled, a drunken, gurgling sound. “Yeah well, that’s your way Mavis. I worked that much out.”

Mavis squeezed his arm. “I think we’ll head home Billy,” she said, pulling a scrunched up twenty out of her jeans pocket.

I turned to the register and rung up the drinks. “You’re three twenty short there Mave.”

She dug deeper into her pocket pulling out a handful of change and giving it to me. “Put the rest in your jar Bill. An’ say hi to that wife a’ yours for me.” She stood up and gave Sparra’s chair a soft kick. “Come on. I’ve gotta work in the morning and I need you to drop me in.”

Sparra lifted his drink to his mouth, thrust back his head and sucked down the last half of his beer. “Cheers Bill. See ya Kev.” He stood up slowly and hitched up his pants. Mavis grabbed on to his arm and turned him towards the door. “Night all,” called Sparra as Mavis walked him out of the pub.

I noticed again the sound of the *Righteous Brothers* wailing overhead, as if they'd just returned from a drinks break. Kev was leaning back on his stool, staring blankly at the wall of spirit bottles in front of him.

"Some stink hey Kev? I thought she was gonna clout him." I laughed loudly.

Kev nodded. "Yep, some stink alright." He finished the last of his drink and slid his glass over to me, before standing up and lighting a smoke. I recognised this routine.

"You're not out of here as well?"

"Yeah, think I'll turn in. Maybe see what Carol's up to. She'll still be up watchin' telly."

He put a twenty on the bar and turned to go. This annoyed me. It was too early for Kev to be going home. He was usually here until 2am, drinking steadily and tipping after each drink.

"Sit down and have a beer Kev. Don't let that slime Sparra ruin your night. Him and Mavis are always warring like that. Too bloody dumb to know better."

"Nah." He shook his head, sucking on his cigarette. "How long you been married Bill? A year?"

"Year and a bit."

"Why'd ya get married?"

"Sit down and have a drink and maybe I'll tell you."

"Tell me and I'll be back for that drink tomorrow."

Something was up with Kev. He'd been quiet all night. Sparra must have really got to him.

"I don't know Kev, why does anyone do anything? I found a good girl, she loves me and I want her to hang around, so I did the right thing and we're happy."

Kev nodded. "Fair enough Bill. I reckon that might be why Sparra married Mavis as well."

"Sparra? Bullshit. He was probably drunk when he married Mavis, and I reckon she needed the citizenship. It's not the same. It's not even close."

"Come on," he said. "Mavis has been Sparra's guardian bloody angel; the one good thing in his sorry life that he hasn't managed to destroy, though he's come close more than once."

He took another puff of his cigarette and used its glowing tip to indicate me.

"If your missus looks out for ya like Mavis does Sparra then I'll count you a lucky man."

I could feel my face filling with hot, prickly blood.

"You can go fuck yourself Kev. You don't know anything about me, and you don't know anything about my wife. Don't give me this wise old man crap. I'm not taking marriage advice from a bloke who probably learned about love in the prison shower."

Kev could have flattened me with a simple right jab, but I was steaming now and didn't care. The air was thick in the empty bar, and I braced myself for the onslaught.

It didn't come. He stood and eyed me through narrow slits, and when he spoke his voice was a low growl.

"Anyone but you said that to me Billy and they'd be getting their jaw rewired." There was a slight hint of surprise in his words as if he'd just seen something he hadn't reckoned on; something he couldn't place.

His cigarette hung between his lips, bobbing as he spoke.

"You're probably right about Sparra and me, Bill. We're probably every bit as crooked as you reckon."

He swallowed.

“Now I’m going home to Carol, and you can sit here on your lonesome, and read your fuckin’ story, and have a real swell time.”

He turned and walked away, stopping by the door.

“Hey Bill,” he called back. “While you’re sitting here lovin’ yourself, who’s lovin’ your missus?”

A silence fell down on the cold slate tiles between us. The glowing wand end of his cigarette rose once more before he walked, for the last time, out of the bar and out of my tired concern.

* * *

Sparra came back in the next night around six thirty, minus the sports bag and the overt signs of drunkenness. He smirked jovially at me.

“Beer thanks Bill.”

I poured it. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a scrunched up five dollar note.

“Don’t worry about that,” I said. “Instead, you can tell me why you and Mavis got married.”

I gathered from the look he gave me that the question surprised him, but I could see his reliable old brain working once more, whispering softly the words ‘a free beer is a free beer.’

He pulled out a stool and sat against the bar.

“To tell you the truth Bill, I was a little drunk at the time. But it was either that we got married or Mavis woulda had to go home- she wasn’t a citizen you see. So we went for it. Pretty wild ride hey?”

I laughed. Sparra tipped back his head and opened his throat, necking half the schooner in one gruesome gulp.

“Your turn Bill.”

I looked at him and spun my long silver bottle opener around my right index finger, again and again.

“Well,” I started. “Well there’s that time, you know... there comes that time I should say, when it’s just the right thing to do, and you owe it to each other, and... we did it. And so far so good.”

Sparra laughed coldly. “Fuck me son. That’s the worst reason I ever heard. Good luck to *you*, Billy.”

As I would later tell the investigating sergeant, it was with an easy, delighted pleasure that I launched myself across the bar and into Sparra’s coarsely veined throat.