

HALL BROTHERS ENTERTAINMENT PRESENTS HALLOWEEN 2011

Rupert's Bar & Grill

By A.C. Hall

Daniel Howard pulled at his tie as he stepped through the door. It wasn't even lunchtime yet, but the bartender at Rupert's Bar & Grill wasn't surprised to see the strung out businessman. By the time Daniel sat down, Rupert had finished pouring his tall draft beer. He set it in front of him and nodded.

"Good afternoon, Daniel," Rupert said with his customary smile.

"Says who," Daniel answered rudely.

He usually paid little regard to the thin African American behind the bar. Daniel had been coming into the bar at least four times a week for the past year and still didn't realize that the man serving him drinks actually owned the establishment.

Daniel tipped the glass back and drained the beer in one long motion. He wiped his mouth with the sleeve of his button up shirt, then tapped the empty glass on the bar.

"Another," he demanded.

If Rupert took offense to the man's treatment, he never showed it. He always had a smile to offer, and stayed familiar with his patrons without annoying them. He was happy to play the sympathetic bartender, if that's what people were looking for. More often than not, people seemed to want to be left alone, especially the ones drinking in the middle of the afternoon.

Rupert refilled the glass, then reached under the bar and produced a television remote. The big screen TV suspended on the wall was displaying a sports highlight show, but Rupert switched it to a 24 hour news channel. Daniel wasn't fond of sports, but kept a close eye on current events. It was just one of a million little facts Rupert had picked up on his patrons over the years.

The news was talking about a shooting that happened a month before at a school in the nearby town. Rupert shook his head as he watched it.

"It's terrible that something like that could happen," Rupert commented. "Scary stuff."

Daniel looked up at the television for a moment. Rupert studied him, but saw no emotion cross the man's face.

"You don't agree?" Rupert asked.

Daniel sighed.

"Maybe I'm just having a crappy day and can't be bothered to engage some bartender about the news."

"A man'd have to go to work to have a crappy day, wouldn't he?" Rupert asked.

Daniel leaned back, fully focusing on the bartender for the first time since walking in.

"Excuse me?"

"The only afternoon you aren't in here is Mondays, probably because you've got some meeting or conference call you can't get out of," Rupert said. "But Tuesday through Friday, boy you practically owe me rent for how long you're in here."

Daniel had to chew the inside of his lip to keep from blowing up on the man.

"How bout you just pour my drinks and not worry about how I spend my time, okay?"

Rupert shrugged and then picked up another glass. He filled it with beer and set it down by Daniel's other drink which was still half full. Neither said anything for several moments.

"I figured that school shooting would scare the pants off of you," Rupert said.

Daniel threw up his hands in frustration.

"Seriously, you're gonna..."

"Especially considering your two boys," Rupert interrupted. "Their school isn't too far away from that one."

Daniel's mouth dropped open.

"What'd you just say?" he asked.

"If a school shooting near your sons doesn't scare you, I'd like to know what does. Will you tell me, Mr. Howard?"

"How the hell do you know anything about my sons?"

Rupert grabbed the towel he kept draped over his shoulder and wiped the bar as he answered.

"Maybe you mentioned them one night when you had too much to drink in here."

Daniel stood up, barely containing his rage.

"I never talk about my sons," he said.

Rupert frowned as he continued to wipe.

“You sure? People talk a lot when they drink.”

Daniel paused for a moment to consider it. He couldn't remember the last time he'd talked to anyone about his sons or his wife. It wasn't a topic that came up much in his life.

“All I'm saying is, if that doesn't scare you, I'd like to know what does,” Rupert said.

Daniel laughed and shook his head in disbelief.

“Are you some sort of freak?” he asked.

“You ain't scared of me, I know that much,” Rupert said, ignoring Daniel's question. “A minute ago you had to bite your lip to keep yourself from punching me in the face.”

Daniel's eyes went wide as he heard the man lay bare his inner thoughts. Rupert smiled.

“I notice things.”

He'd been looking for a place to escape for the afternoon, and suddenly Daniel didn't think this was that place. He pulled out his wallet.

“I think I'm done drinking for the day,” he said.

“Does that scare you?” Rupert asked. “Not having alcohol to help make your day more bearable?”

He pointed to the glasses.

“Those are on the house today, by the way.”

Daniel slammed a ten dollar bill onto the bar.

“Keep your damn charity for someone who needs it,” Daniel spat.

He turned around and stomped towards the door.

“See you tomorrow, Daniel,” Rupert called after him.

* * * * *

Two nights later Daniel was back and drinking beer after beer. He didn't say a word to Rupert, concentrating instead on getting as drunk as possible. It was Friday, which meant that evening his kids would want his attention, his wife would want his help, and his neighbor would want to hang out. Daniel figured that if he was passed out drunk, he wouldn't have to deal with any of it.

As the drinks kept coming, Daniel started watching Rupert more closely. The man seemed genuinely interested in his customers, and Daniel struggled to remember why he'd gotten so upset with him a few days before. When Rupert brought his next refill, Daniel grabbed him by the wrist.

"I'm sorry," Daniel said, his speech very slurred.

Rupert smiled.

"I forgot about it the moment it happened."

Daniel released his wrist and nodded.

"Good. You're a good bartender, I'd hate to get kicked outta here or something. Not sure where I'd spend my time then."

"It'll take a lot more than that for me to toss a payin' customer, I guarantee you that," Rupert joked.

Rupert turned around and started rinsing some glasses.

"You know that thing you were talking about the other day?" Daniel asked him. "About what scares me?"

The bartender froze, then turned around slowly. The smile on his face was bigger now, and his eyes were wide.

"I do recall asking."

Daniel took a long drink of his beer, then spoke.

"What scares me is my wife and kids finding out how little they mean to me."

Rupert leaned closer.

"Tell me more."

The drunken glaze faded slightly from Daniel's eyes as he spoke these words out loud for the first time ever. When he spoke again his voice was less slurred.

"I don't love them. They're a burden. I wake up hating having to be around them, and I loathe the idea of being forced to go back there at night."

Rupert was still smiling as he listened.

"But as much as I despise them, I hate the idea of them knowing it even more," Daniel continued. "Does that make sense?"

Rupert shrugged.

"Why not just leave?" Rupert asked.

After taking another drink, Daniel shook his head.

"Can't. My father in law is a cop, detective actually. He's a real stickler about family and loyalty. Wanna know what he told me on our wedding day?"

Rupert nodded.

“He said, ‘if you ever hurt my little girl, I’ll frame you for a crime so heinous that they give you the death penalty’. Can you believe that? The guy was deadly serious too.”

“Sounds intense,” Rupert said.

Daniel nodded. His jovial mood had taken a nose dive. He stared blankly at the half empty beer in front of him.

“Refill?” Rupert asked.

After thinking about it for a moment, Daniel shook his head.

“I think I’m done for the day.”

Rupert smiled and nodded. Daniel pulled some money and placed it on the bar, then turned and walked for the exit.

“Be seeing you soon,” Rupert called out after him.

* * * * *

The next afternoon was a busy one for Rupert. His business was rarely very full and he liked it that way. When he had to spend too much time working he became cranky. He liked learning about his regulars, getting to know all about them. That was hard to do when serving eight tables full of hungry lunchtime customers.

Things calmed down a little after three in the afternoon, leaving just two customers. They were both regulars, and Rupert tried to contain his joy as he watched them. One was a man named Leon, mid to late twenties, he usually spent weekends at the bar. Rupert recalled the details Leon had spilled a little over a year ago. He was a digital artist who was abruptly fired from the videogame company he’d helped launch. They’d gone on to release a popular game using many of Leon’s creations and art, making millions in the process.

At the end of the bar sat Jessica. She was by far Rupert’s favorite customer. Showing up two or three times a week, Jessica ordered a glass of water and would sit alone and stare at it. She wore a gold cross around her neck, and absentmindedly ran her finger across it for hours while she stared at the glass of water.

Rupert pulled the TV remote out and started flipping channels. When he came across a scary movie he smiled and put the remote down. A masked killer was chasing a group of teens through a forest on the screen.

“That’s scary stuff there,” Rupert said, loud enough that both customers could hear him.

Jessica ignored him, but Leon looked up and nodded.

“I guess,” he said.

Rupert brought a re-fill and set it beside Leon’s other drink. Leon looked panicked, his hand going to his wallet quickly.

“I actually wasn’t going to order another.”

“It’s on the house,” Rupert said with a smile.

He’d seen the inside of Leon’s wallet when the man visited last. There wasn’t much there.

Leon smiled. It looked foreign on his face, and disappeared quickly.

“Thanks,” he said quietly.

Rupert nodded, and removed the towel from his shoulder and started wiping the bar. A woman screamed on the television as she fell victim to the masked killer. Leon’s eyes looked up at it for a moment, and Rupert seized on the moment.

“So if that don’t scare you much, what does?” he asked.

Leon looked at him, clearly puzzled by the question. Rupert pointed to the free drink he’d given the man.

“Drink up and indulge me,” Rupert said.

When Leon remembered the bartender had given him a free drink, one he felt he desperately needed, he decided there was no harm in answering the strange question.

“This frightens me.”

“Talking to a black man in a bar?” Rupert asked with a laugh.

“No, not that, just...” Leon paused and swept his hands out wide. “This. I spend my Saturdays totally alone in a bar.”

Rupert leaned forward, a smile spreading across his face.

“Tell me more.”

Leon finished off his drink, then started on the re-fill before answering.

“You’re the first person I’ve talked to this week, did you know that? I’m scared of just fading away, of standing right here and having everyone else just pass me by and ignore me like I don’t even exist.”

He took another big drink.

“I almost mattered,” he said quietly. “Did I ever tell you I created the main character for the game Dungeon Slam?”

Rupert nodded.

“You did.”

“They’re making a movie now. A guy I hired to help program the game will be a millionaire soon, and I’ll be... here.”

Having heard what he needed to hear, Rupert wondered towards the far end of the bar.

“How about something a little stronger than that glass of water?” Rupert offered as he approached Jessica.

She jumped, seemingly frightened by his suggestion.

“No,” she said forcefully. “Just the water, please don’t bring anything else over here.”

It wasn’t the first time that an alcoholic had waged a war with sobriety in his bar.

“I’ve got a brother in the program,” Rupert said. “But he slips up all the time. It seems like every Thanksgiving he’s gone back a step.”

Jessica looked up at him, then back at the water. He noted that if she wasn’t so squirrely she’d probably be attractive.

“You scared you’re going to slip?” Rupert asked.

She gave him an angry look.

“I never slip.”

He pursed his lips and nodded.

“So what does scare you then?” he asked a moment later.

Jessica stared at him, her hand still wrapped around the gold cross around her neck.

“You probably don’t want to know.”

Her answer filled him with more excitement than he could possibly contain. He smiled and stepped closer.

“I really, really do.”

She looked down.

“You’ll think I’m crazy.”

“I won’t,” Rupert assured her.

Jessica stared at the glass of water for several moments, then spoke.

“Demons. I’m scared of demons.”

Rarely did someone confess a fear that surprised him.

“Demons?” Rupert asked. “Like, the demon of alcoholism, that kind of thing?”

Jessica sighed and shook her head.

“Forget it, it makes me sound crazy,” she said.

“No, I just want to understand.”

She took a sip of the water, then held up the cross.

“Demons. Real ones. That’s what I’m scared of.”

Rupert studied her face, searching for any indication that she was messing with him. He found genuine fear in her eyes and knew that she spoke the truth.

“You’re scared of demons from hell,” Rupert said. “That sounds like a valid fear to me.”

He turned to walk away. Her answer had both thrilled and confused him and he had much to consider.

* * * * *

A week later, Rupert was ecstatic. He was alone in the bar, so full of anxious energy that he was tapping his foot as fast as he could. He stared at the door, waiting for it to open. He tried to force the smile from his face but could not. Days like these were his most favorite.

After what felt like an eternity, the door opened and Daniel stepped inside.

“Did you know the sign outside says you’re closed?” he asked.

“Yeah, I was doing a few renovations today, didn’t want a bunch of customers getting in the way of all the fun.”

Daniel shrugged as he approached the bar.

“Whatever,” he said. “Why don’t you tell me what this is all about so I can get on with my day.”

Rupert smiled. Daniel was only ever nice when he had a few too many drinks sloshing around inside him.

“What’s the rush?” Rupert asked.

“What’s the rush?” Daniel shot back. “You called me, remember? I don’t even know why I bothered to show up. So unless you want to stop playing dumb and tell me what was so important that you called me at home and convinced me to come down here, I’m gonna leave.”

Rupert pointed to the far side of the room. There was a separate area for private parties. A window on each side gave a view of the inside, but it was dark, and the door leading into it was closed.

“It’s in there,” Rupert said.

Daniel looked at the darkened room, then back at Rupert.

“Go ahead,” Rupert said.

Daniel walked towards the room, but stopped in front of the door.

“You scared?” Rupert called out.

Daniel looked over his shoulder and gave Rupert an angry stare.

“If you’re scared that’s alright, I can show what’s in there to somebody else,” Rupert said.

Now that his manhood was being challenged, Daniel felt like he had no choice. He turned the doorknob and pushed the door open. At the far end of the room was a television. On the screen was security footage of the bar, taken from a camera embedded in the ceiling. It was paused.

“What is this?” Daniel said.

“Play it,” Rupert shouted from behind the bar.

He watched Daniel step into the darkened room, then returned his attention to the front door of the bar. A few moments later it opened and a confused looking fortysomething woman stepped inside. Behind her were two boys, ages 11 and 14.

She saw Rupert and he quickly put his finger to his lips, then pointed at the room where Daniel was. The woman nodded, then moved towards it, her children close behind. She stepped into the room just as Daniel pushed play on the television. The footage was from a week before, and on the screen was himself talking to Rupert.

“What scares me is my wife and kids finding out how little they mean to me,” Daniel said in the footage.

“What is this, honey?” the woman asked.

Daniel whirled around, shocked to see his wife and kids.

“Sheila?”

The footage continued to roll.

“I don’t love them,” Daniel said on the television. “They’re a burden. I wake up hating having to be around them, and I loathe the idea of being forced to go back there at night.”

“What?” Sheila shrieked.

“Honey, I can explain.”

She rushed towards him.

“Explain what you bastard?” she screamed.

Rupert came around the bar and approached the room, a big smile on his face. He closed the door, leaving them to their argument.

The door to the bar opened and Leon stepped inside. He looked around and nodded solemnly when he saw Rupert.

“Hey, are you the one who called me?” Leon asked.

Rupert nodded.

“Come on in, you’re gonna be interested in this.”

Leon followed him, pausing as he passed the private room. He could hear yelling coming from inside.

“Some husband and wife dealing with a little domestic issue,” Rupert explained.

It didn’t make much sense, but Leon accepted it and continued on.

“Did you really find something out about my old company?” he asked.

Rupert chuckled.

“When you see what I’ve prepared for you, I think you’re going to be downright shocked,” he said.

Rupert moved to the wall beside the bar and pressed on it. It swung open, revealing a small room hidden inside.

“What is that, like a panic room?” Leon asked.

Rupert motioned him to come inside. The size of a few walk-in closets, the room had one odd feature. The wall which had swung open appeared to be a two way mirror. From the outside it looked just like the other walls in the place, but the inside was see through, allowing a clear view of anyone in the bar.

Upon noticing this, Leon took a step back.

“Maybe I should take off,” he said.

“You don’t want to see the contract I dug up?” Rupert asked, pointing to a large bound document lying in the middle of the floor.

“That’s it? That’ll reinstate my rights to Dungeon Slam?”

Rupert smiled.

“Read it.”

Leon moved to it quickly, overwhelmed with the thought of finally getting back what was rightfully his. The document was thick with legal notices, contract

snippets, court orders and other similar things. Leon flipped through it, looking for the smoking gun that would force his old company to take him back.

“You remember what you said to me last week?” Rupert asked. “About being scared that you’d live your life and no one would even notice you?”

Leon was growing frustrated as he kept digging through the hefty document.

“Yeah, what about it?” he asked without looking up.

When Rupert didn’t respond, Leon glanced up. Rupert had backed out of the room and was swinging the wall shut. Leon shot to his feet and rushed forward. The wall slammed shut, sealing him inside the small room. Through the glass he could see Rupert. The man had a big smile on his face.

Leon slammed his shoulder against the wall but it didn’t budge. He pounded his fists against it and screamed as loud as he could. Out in the bar, Rupert didn’t hear a sound. The room was perfectly sealed, perfectly soundproof, and perfectly invisible to the naked eye.

Rupert just stood there, admiring his handiwork. He could still hear Sheila and Daniel arguing. It was turning into a very good day indeed.

The door to the bar opened and Jessica walked in. Rupert smiled as she moved tentatively towards the bar.

“Hello dear, thanks for comin,” Rupert said.

She nodded.

“They say you’re supposed to help others, so, here I am.”

Rupert motioned towards the bar and she approached it.

“I just don’t know that anything I say can help your brother stay sober, but I’m willing to try,” Jessica said. “Where is he anyway?”

She looked around the room, seeing no one else. Feeling someone’s eyes on her, she returned her attention to Rupert. He was staring at her, a slight smile on his face.

“You know, you really almost stumped me the other day when you were in here,” he said.

He walked around the bar and moved towards the front door.

“Excuse me?” Jessica asked.

Rupert locked the front door. Jessica’s hand shot to the cross around her neck.

“Why’d you do that?” she asked nervously.

Rupert smiled at her, but ignored the question.

“I’ve been doing this for too many years to count and I’ve heard some strange fears, but demons?” he chuckled. “That one posed an issue.”

She watched him closely as he approached a table. A black cloth was draped over it.

“Luckily, I’m a quick learner, because trust me...”

He paused as he pulled the cloth away. Below it laid a series of skulls, lined up in a circle in the center of the table. Strange runes were drawn all over the table in what appeared to be blood.

“... this weren’t no easy thing to just throw together.”

“What is that? What are you doing?” she yelled.

Rupert pulled a black candle from his pocket and lit it with a lighter. He started speaking a strange incantation as he held the candle above the table.

Jessica had seen enough. She ran for the front door. She shoved on the door but it was locked, and she found that the main bolts required a key.

Hearing voices coming from the private room, she ran towards it. She flung the door open, but an angry woman stalked towards her.

“Please you have to help me...” Jessica began.

“This is a family matter,” Sheila roared as she shoved Jessica back.

Jessica landed on her backside. Sheila slammed and locked the door to the private room. Jessica jumped up and started banging on it. When she realized Rupert had stopped talking, she slowly turned towards him, cross held tightly in her hand.

He lowered the candle and the circle of skulls burst into flame. All the light bulbs in the restaurant exploded, leaving the flaming skulls as the only source of light. Cackling voices rose up from out of the darkness. Jessica backed away, slamming hard into a table. Something rushed past her leg and dug a claw into her calf muscle. Jessica cried out and leaned on the table for support.

“Tell me Jessica, now that they’re here, were they worth being scared of?” Rupert asked.

She looked over at him. In the flickering light from the fire she saw a host of creatures gathered in the shadows. They were grotesque beyond description, their appearance so revolting that her brain refused to process their true form.

Jessica let out a scream from the bottom of her soul as the demons ripped through everything.

* * * * *

“Can I take your order, hon?” the waitress asked.

When she didn't get an answer she looked down into the booth for the first time.

“Whoa there, you alright mister?” she asked.

Waitressing at an all night diner, the woman had seen people in some pretty bad shape before, but nothing like this. The African American man was covered in scratches, some of them running down the length of his face. He was using napkins to wipe away the blood.

“I'm fine,” he said.

“What in blazes happened to you?” she asked.

He looked up at her and smiled.

“Work was hell today.”

She nodded slowly, not quite getting the joke.

“You take as much time as you need, honey. I'll come back once you've had a chance to look over the menu. Our specials for the day are...”

Her voice trailed off as she spied something out the window of the diner. A man wearing a black hoodie was leaning against the building across the street. He was staring at the diner intensely.

“Everything okay?” the man in the booth asked.

She nodded.

“Yeah, it's just that guy out there. He's there a lot lately. I get this creepy feeling when I see him, like he's gonna come in here one night and shoot up the place, kill us all and take our money or something.”

The smile on the man's face grew bigger.

“Is that something that scares you?” he asked.

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