

# “According To Bill”

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You could just see him, if you strained your eyes, and Bill's eyes were very strained.

It didn't help that the young man was sitting in one of the darkest corners of the bar, and Bill found it hard to stare without it being obvious. Lighting in Bradley's had always been something of a contradiction in terms, as the dim bulbs seemed to apologise for intruding on the atmosphere, and made little or no difference to the shadows of the room. The gloom which filled the looming cavern of a bar, with its high Victorian ceilings, actually owed more to penny pinching on behalf of the landlord than any artificial attempt to create ambiance, and Bill was used to serving the shadowy customers who came to hear the blues without taking much notice of their features.... But this was different. Every so often the old barman found himself taking furtive glances at the youth in the corner, and it made him feel uncomfortable.

Bill just knew him as Skaler, and he came and went with the independence of a cat. He would always come up to the bar and buy exactly the same thing, a glass of the most expensive Port, and he never, ever drank it. He definitely wasn't a drinker, Bill knew that; you could tell the ones with problems, and he didn't fit in with any of them. They would either knock it back by the bottle full and slowly vanish into their glasses, as that lost inner focus fogged over their eyes, or they would peck away at it all night, making their little pilgrimages to and from the bar through the haze of nicotine, as their soul quietly struggled to the surface and quietly died.

This one was different. He really was there for the music, and somehow he seemed to almost inhabit the melodies and wrap them around him. He would sit privately, lost in the music, as relaxed as someone in a warm bath, but from the shadows this Skaler would watch the different singers and musicians with a keen eye, never less than engrossed in their melodies and following their technique like a craftsman.

It was no surprise to Bill. Over the years he had worked in endless clubs, and by now he knew a musician when he saw one. Skaler had that kind of air about him, and you could tell at once that he wasn't your run of the mill punter by that kind of gothic New Romantic clothing and that long black hair, but there was something unusual about him which Bill couldn't quantify. He seemed to move through the place like a night breeze, and he had the most unsettling smile Bill had ever seen. Bradley's was too dark for you to be able to even make out someone's eyes most of the time, and yet somehow, when Skaler smiled at you at the bar you could really make out his grin. It was really unnerving, strange in a way you couldn't quite put your finger on, as in one way it was the most heart-warming, human smile you could ever wish to see, but in another, it made Bill think he was very glad that there was a heavy wooden bar between them.

The customers came and went through the cigarette smoke while the acts changed places on the tiny excuse for a stage, and Bill kept himself busy at the bar, tending the optics and cleaning glasses. He was never exactly ran off his feet, although business was steady, and he distracted himself with this and that, even occasionally listening to the different singers and bands... but every so often he couldn't help himself, and he felt his gaze drifting in the direction of that pale young guy in the corner in his old velvet coat.

If you had put Bill on the spot and asked him how long it had been since this particular customer had been coming in, he would have grinned hugely, and leant forward to tell you conspirationally... but then he would have stopped dead before he had uttered a word. He would have sworn to you surely as bricks are hard that it had been ages, and that he was certain of this because that old so and so who sits under the fire exit sign fell off his chair three times, from an over enthusiastic interest in Jack Daniels, and Bill had to put him into a cab again, so that meant that it must have been back in..... But then he would blink, look really puzzled, and swear that it happened on another evening altogether. He could never remember exactly when or how Skaler had first come into the club, and that troubled Bill.

One thing he could remember with a clarity as clear and cold as a February frost; was the night when this Skaler had taken his turn on the club's stage. Bill was unlikely to forget that, and it was the main reason why he kept looking across the bar at him with such curiosity.

No-one had taken much notice when the skinny youth in his long velvet coat had walked up to the microphone, brushing his long black hair out of his eyes and pulling back those battered lace shirt cuffs. Another one, Bill had thought to himself affectionately, recalling an endless line of rock mad kids in torn jeans and odd clothes, their eyes burning with earnest inspiration, as he watched Skaler lift a battered old guitar case off his shoulder and begin to tune his ancient acoustic guitar. Bill mixed someone a double, and glanced up to see Skaler touch the retro steel microphone, with a gesture that struck him curiously respectful. Skaler said something Bill didn't catch, in an unassuming tone of voice, lost to the barman under a slightly soused request for a bag of prawn cocktail flavoured crisps, and he turned on autopilot for the till. It must have been about this time that Skaler's fingers caressed the strings, and with closed eyes he sang into the microphone....

Bill had never been able to figure out how long he had stood still, just listening, as if he had never heard music before.

He remembered that he had suddenly become aware of himself again when the last note of Skaler's song had echoed into the silence across the room. The young man had opened his eyes, and with a smile far older than he should have been able to show for his years, he had quietly thanked the company for listening.

Then Bill found himself standing next to an open till, one hand still raised and holding a ten pound note, whilst the other one lay dead in the copper tray. Three customers stood at the bar, and all of them were still watching Skaler in silence.

Bill found that his cheek was wet, and the shoulders of one man sitting near the stage were shaking with emotion.

Something had seemed to snap, and suddenly men all around the room seemed to shake themselves and avoid each others eyes. Then, as Skaler returned to his usual seat, Bill noticed the proprietor making his way across to the youth very quickly. This was a surprise to say the least, as old Bradley never came into the bar to speak to anyone. He was a sour faced, misanthropic man, who usually shunned anyone who frequented his club, ignored his bands and performers, and rarely even treated Bill to more than three word together, and Bill had known him for 38 years. His wiry, white-haired face was always stuck behind a Henry Wintermans cigar, and a smile was never entertained either side of the tobacco. On this night when Skaler had performed, Bradley approached and asked if he could sit down. Bill had watched in disbelief, as a man he believed had no vocabulary beyond a terse good night had spoken to Skaler animatedly for over an hour, but when he got up to leave the table, Skaler had agreed with a smile never to play again.

Bill has lain awake at night more times than he cared to think trying to remember that song: something so longing and dark that it made him shiver to remember anything about it, but he tried time and again as hard as he could. A music that had ran through him like something he had known all his life but had lost forever, and he remembered with terrible sadness the longing he heard in that voice, orphaned by sunlight and adopted by the moon.

When Skaler had next come in and came over to buy his Port, Bill had nodded gruffly and said "Nice set, the other night." Skaler had looked at him for a full thirty seconds in silence, with his head tilted to one side, then he had flashed Bill that dangerous grin, winked, and said "Thanks", before picking up his drink and wandering off.

That was the first time Bill had noticed that smile, and somehow the first time it was uncomfortably knowing, as if Skaler had understood exactly how his music had made everyone feel... and what was more, it was deliberate...

It was a fact that Bill didn't know what to make of it at all, but he couldn't forget that music. Sometimes he lay awake next to his wife in the cold early dawn light, trying to recapture it. It had got to him in a way which he couldn't explain, and as much as he longed to hear the song again he couldn't bring himself to ask Skaler to play it. There was something dangerous about the guy when he smiled like that, something downright frightening, and Bill was ashamed of the thought. So whenever Skaler reappeared, Bill caught himself looking across the bar, half desperately wanting to hear him play again, and spending the rest of the time avoiding his eye and avoiding speaking to him, chilled by that indefinable threatening aura.

Skaler would sit in the darkest corner of the bar, face half hidden by his long hair, shrouded mainly by the natural shadows of the bar and almost a silhouette, watching the other performers without a care in the world, as if nothing had happened. Sometimes Bill wouldn't see him for weeks and then he'd turn up out of the blue, buy his Port, flash Bill that grin and then head for his corner as if he'd never been away.

Tonight though, something had happened which really had unnerved Bill, and he was trying hard to ignore it.

Usually it was the case that Bill would stack glasses in the little dishwasher in the corner of the bar, and if Skaler was in, Bill had fallen into the habit of sneaking a furtive look across his corner. When Bill did this tonight he saw that the young man was looking right back at him.

Bill actually jumped and damn near dropped a glass, but the shadow of Skaler just calmly turned back to watch the stage. The hairs on the back of Bill's neck bristled with static, and that dangerous feeling knotted his stomach so tightly he thought he'd be sick.

For the first time since Skaler had played, Bill avoided looking across at him. In fact Bill made such a point of not looking in Skaler's direction that several other customers found themselves looking over at his corner when Bill was serving them.

The fact was that Bill was a very big man, well over two metres in height and heavy with it, and this bizarre feeling of being watched threw him such a curve that he didn't know how to deal with it. Over the years he had worked many a door in club land, and expanded on his natural muscles until he had a build which would scare off all but the suicidally drunk; But tonight, somehow, a sour sick taste never left his throat, and a completely unfamiliar feeling of fear distracted and surprised him in a way he just couldn't shake off. An itch between his shoulder blades instinctively told him of eyes on his back from the darkness, and Bill found himself wondering urgently how he was going to get the guy outside at closing time.

The fact that he was so unnaturally aware and on edge undoubtedly caused a chilling sweat to break out all over his body, when a hand landed firmly on his shoulder at about 2 am. The owner of the hand was on Bill's private side of the bar, and the thing which almost stopped his heart was the fact that he had not heard a sound to indicate they were behind him. Years of following the body language of customers, and watching potential trouble makers, had given Bill keen senses and a personal radar attuned to threats, but he had not heard a sound. The hand was accompanied by something sharp, cold and pointed digging into his ribs, and that really took him aback. Somehow it was disappointing, as although throughout this night of expectation and tension Bill had been waiting for violence of some kind, he never expected it to involve a knife. That seemed too cheap and ordinary for the guy in the corner.

The pressure on his ribs increased, and Bill felt the hand turning him by his shoulder to face the man behind him. The shock when they were face to face was almost too much.

A completely unfamiliar face stared back at him, unshaven and hard. A man in his forties with feverish red eyes, wearing an old sheepskin coat which had seen better days. Bill was so surprised for a minute that he started to laugh, but then there was an urgent jab from the knife and he remembered what was happening. The stranger just indicated the till on the counter behind them with a sharp nod of the head, and simply said "open it". No fuss, no bother, no lovable cockney rouges banter, just give me the money or die, it's your choice, thought Bill. Not being one to protect old Bradley's wallet at the expense of his life, he went to open the till.

From somewhere over his shoulder Bill heard someone say “I don’t suppose you’ve got change for a twenty?” He looked up urgently at the mirror behind the bar for assistance, but saw only himself and the robber. But then he saw the thief look sharply to his left, the hand dropped, and the pressure on the knife completely fell away.

There was an odd intake of breath from behind him, and Bill turned cautiously around. Skaler was standing on the other side of the bar, and the stranger was staring intently into his eyes, which seemed to have become black with white pupils, in a way which oddly reminded Bill of the night sky.

Nothing whatsoever was said between the two men, but the stranger’s eyes widened in shock. His name was Craig Atkinson, and he was experiencing a vision. In his mind he saw a vivid flash of the future, a future where he had allowed his craving to get completely out of control. Something which had started out as a recreational interest would cause him to wind up shivering under a canal bridge, gripped by a raging fever. He watched himself in his mind’s eye slipping into hallucinations, and as the Blue Devils took hold, Craig Atkinson, 46, of Wimbledon, saw this wasted, gaunt future self forcing a rusty hypodermic into a vein at the back of his knee...

The bar snapped back into focus, and Atkinson went to scream, his whole body shaking, but Skaler silenced him by raising a finger and shaking his head.

Craig stared at him, and Skaler gave him that strange smile. “I really wouldn’t take this money if I were you,” he said, in that odd melodic voice, “It’ll only bring you bad luck.” Atkinson shook his head in agreement, and Skaler grinned, “You know I’d just nip off and get the next bus, if I were you, there’s a good Billy Wilder film on later. Really top notch, you know, one of his best...”

The stricken man gave him a look of almost insane gratitude, and nearly fell through the door trying to get out.

Bill’s eyes were almost as wide as Atkinson’s, and for a long minute he stood just staring at the door with his mouth open, unconsciously rubbing his side where the knife had dug into his skin.

With a huge effort Bill picked up a glass, and automatically started wiping it out. He avoided Skaler’s eyes, and shrugged his shoulders. “You want me to ask you how you did that don’t you?” he said, in as conversational a voice as he could, “Well, I’m not going to.”

Skaler gave him a very wicked grin, “I don’t know what you’re talking about. Can I have my change now, please?”

Bill noticed that there was a twenty pound note on the bar in front of him, and with a frown turned to the till. It was whilst he stood sorting through the change that he happened to look up, and saw only himself in the mirror. He turned sharply to look at Skaler, whose grin widened, but whose face held the most unconvincing innocent look Bill had ever seen.

Turning back to the till he closed his eyes and took a very deep breath indeed. Then swallowing very hard he turned back to Skaler and handed him his change. Skaler handed him back a five pound note as a tip, saying “have one on me,” and Bill noticed how sharp his canine teeth were. Then with a solemn wink, the young man headed for the door.

For the second time that night Bill stood looking at the exit for well over a minute, until his thoughts were disturbed by a vaguely familiar, gin-sodden voice somewhere to his left. When he turned around a shambolic figure was waving at him in a boozy sort of way, and rather grumpily asked “Are you deaf, I said I want a double scotch and ginger!”

Bill glared at him for a second and then shook himself, “You can have what ever you like mate, be my guest, the whole bars at your disposal. Champagne, Napoleon Brandy, anything you want. Just don’t ask me for a glass of Port.”