

JOHN KINSELLA

Arm Wrestle

He walked into the front bar, head down, hoisted himself on a stool, and said, A beer and a sherry chaser. He sculled the beer, sculled the medium-dry sherry, checked his pockets for cash, then asked for the same again.

The barmaid, familiar with Josh, asked him how his missus was, and he said, She's in the refuge again.

Did you hit her again, Josh?

He looked at her with a defeated aggression, then laughed.

You look like you've eaten a lemon...

Then he swilled his beer, planted it mock-gentle on the beer towel, and said, Nah, she just went there because she thought I was going to lose it.

Were you? The barmaid started polishing an already-clean glass, clearly agitated.

I don't know... can't really remember. Well, I do, I know I was yelling... she'd poured my stash of sherry down the drain. I was, you know, pissed off. But I didn't touch her.

Well, you're looking bloody sorry for yourself now, Josh. Think about what it's like for her and your kid.

He flamed, and struck the counter hard enough with his fist for her to jump, and the other early drinkers to look around from their crystal-ball beers, I've never touched the kid. Never would!

She gathered herself and stepped forward — there was no going back in this, And you shouldn't touch her, Josh — that wisp of a thing. I remember when you picked her up in here. In with her friends for a drink after work, blind to your tricks.

The barmaid knew those tricks well. They'd been an 'item' for a few months five years earlier. Not long before Josh had upped the ante, gone out of his league, scored an 'up-herself bitch' just to show it could be done. Her university degree meant nothing and everything. He'd left school at fifteen because his old man had thrown him out, not because he wasn't good at his work. He was smart — he'd tell the bar most days. They all knew he was smart. He made them test him with head multiplications and division — he was quick, even plastered, and he brought a calculator along for them to verify his answers.

Just because he was in and out of work, just because he'd been on the dole for years at a time, didn't mean he didn't know. And he read, read heaps. He could recite Tennyson's 'Lady of Shalott' off the top of his head, just like that, and could sing every Australian ballad known. And he loved Banjo Paterson.

Fuck off! Mind your business!

Watch your mouth, Josh, or you'll be banned from here again.

He was going to let her have it, 'reduce her', as he liked to brag he could do to any woman, but he thought better of it and started rocking dangerously on the chair. He was a skinny strip in t-shirt and black Levis in mid-winter, with Winnie Reds under his right t-shirt sleeve, epaulette of his rebellion. He hadn't washed for days.

The barmaid — he refused to use or even think her name at the moment because she had crossed him — was gathering her strength. She leant near him and said, Phew, mate, you're a bit whiffy. Go upstairs, you know where the showers are.

He registered she was actually being kind, and kept his hands down low, but they twitched. He turned and looked out over the pool table through the gilt-lettered plate-glass of the front bar. Cars were hustling their owners to work. It was about 8.30 am and damp and drab out there, out in the 'real world' he hated so much.

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Benny came in with a swagger.

Here's trouble, Hester (the barmaid) said to an old-timer, who lifted his head a centimetre, grunted, then dropped it to its flatline horizon again, perched over a pony.

So what's happening, gal? he asked Hester.

Nothing much, matey, what can I get ya? Hester didn't usually speak like this — she was putting on the dog, and this made Josh turn from his present perch, by the silent jukebox which he was studying for the ten-thousandth time — he had put away four beers and four sherries, hadn't slept for two days, and had dozens of sherries and beers and a whack of speed in him from a couple of days away, worn out and irritating him through lack. He was muttering Sweet Child of Mine, ha, Sweet Child of Mine, ha, over and over. But he looked over at Hester, whose name he had now allowed after unsobering a little, and at the new jerk who'd just come in. He knew Hester's turned-on/interested voice. And now he was interested in the scene, the scenario.

Benny pulled up a stool and put his elbows on the counter and said, You're a looker! And before Hester could take it in and respond: I'll have a double bourbon, thanks — and he slammed a tenner on the bar, adding, keep the change.

Josh hated Benny already. Hated him with a dangerous hatred everyone in the bar could pick up on. They shuffled restlessly and concentrated on their drinking, or thinking about drink, all the harder. And Hester's hand ever so slightly shook when she poured the double shot into the tumbler.

That's the girl, said Benny. He tossed it back and asked for another.

Benny. About forty-five, big, well-dressed, confident. A West Australian wheatbelt cowboy down for business, then, that business successfully concluded, out on a bender?

Maybe. He certainly added fuel to this theory when he started telling Hester her hair was the colour of last year's harvest. As the whiskey bit, he joked that she'd be beautiful even if it was the colour his crops were now — florescent green! And she did that awful flirty giggle thing, which made Josh want to lash out.

But he didn't. He kept his back mainly to the goings-on at the bar, with occasional glances intended to rivet Hester, the barmaid, into her place. Her job was to serve the old-timers and give them a bit of a thrill with her low-cut tops and short skirts, her reaching up to get bottles down, or bending over at the tables collecting glasses. That was it; that was within the tolerance settings. She knew the deal — she'd been working there for six years and was a professional, as far as these things went. She was demeaning herself behaving like a teenager, all twenty-five years of her. Enough to make you puke.

Josh lit a cigarette and dragged on it hard a few times. He stubbed it out on the jukebox, then threw his seat back so it tumbled, made a big Sorry Sorry show of putting it upright, then planted himself, one foot on the rail, elbows down, at the bar next to the hick, and said, Gimme a shot, doll!

Hester wanted to laugh, but knew it was dangerous. She went to pour him a shot of whatever, even though she knew he'd run out of money. But Benny clearly didn't take to the intrusion. He did a strange right angle turn to look

down at Josh, tilted an imaginary hat, and said, What's the problem, fella? Something got you by the short and curlies?

What the fuck?!

The old-timers rose, and retreated into the saloon bar. Hester thought of calling the boss from the other bar — the boss barely tolerated Josh at the best of times and they had actually come to blows in past years. Yet they went way back in ways Hester had never been able to unravel, let alone understand.

I mean, what's your issue, mate?

Benny wasn't flustered. Hester imagined he had too many acres and too much machinery to be flustered by a 'loser' like Josh. But she put her money on Josh, and clenched up, and thought this is why I hate and love this job. This is what I am. I hate and love myself. She thought all that and remembered the first time she'd slept with Josh in one of the rooms upstairs — aggressive and soft and jubilant and just plain sad. That was it. He'd made her feel unique and worn-out and that was at only nineteen — he was maybe two years older. They'd taken acid and he'd told her about a book called *The Little Prince*, which she went out and bought. She still kept a copy in her handbag, a dog-eared copy with underlined passages, especially about the rose under a dome.

I don't have an issue, matey! said Josh, spitting and dribbling.

Then Benny took Josh by surprise. Wanna arm wrestle, matey?

Josh kicked the bar, shook his head like he had a mane, though he'd hacked off his own hair recently, and it stuck out in tufts at angles, and said too loudly, Well, why the fuck not!

And then they were at a table near the jukebox, with the grey light swamping in through the window, and suddenly a crowd around them — old-timers,

who were coming in to the sports bar and dining bar for an early liquid or counter-lunch, even the boss, though Hester stayed behind the bar, watching on tippy-toes, struggling with desire and allegiance.

On the face of it, they were poorly matched. Josh was ill-looking and wiry, and Benny burly — if not in his prime, then just past it, and healthy-looking. But both parties knew they were about even, and that it would be a tussle. Hatred boiled in both men, just showing itself in different ways.

They eased on and then braced and held each other, swollen-faced, eyes popping for an age. People goaded them at first, then went silent, feeling something was at stake, something disturbed and dangerous. People broke away and left them to it. It was like possession, and the harder the two pushed against each other, the more expressionless their faces became. Hester feared Josh's skinny arm would snap.

Benny spoke first, grimacing. You've got issues, matey.

So have you, asshole, spat Josh.

You could be right there, matey.

The struggle continued, then both men, as one, eased off the pressure but held their wrists in place, vertical, with just enough tension on their arms to keep it all in place. Josh spoke first, and in a spiel...

I hit my missus sometimes, but never my kid. She gets on my nerves trying to keep me out of the pub, away from drugs. It shits me that she's right. I kinda love her but I hate her. I didn't mean to clock her so hard — gave her a black eye. I wasn't even angry with her, just *hanging*, and didn't know what had happened. She went off to one of those fuckin' refuges full of lezzo man-hating bitches. Now she's back again gettin' her mind poisoned and hating me more. Fucking can't stand it. And I might not even see my daughter again.

Benny, studying their gripped hands, said, I know where you're comin' from. But you're wrong about those refuges... sometimes they're the only places women connected with men like — us — have to go to.

Josh put more pressure back on and Benny responded, Fuck that, mate, what would you know!

Benny said, I've been where you're at now. You mightn't think it lookin' at me now, he added with a kind of strained trumped-up pride.

Josh grimace-laughed, Look like? You just look like a dickhead to me.

Benny eased a bit and said, Natural reaction under the circumstances.

Josh said, You trying to be all enigmatic or something?

Benny, who didn't know what he meant, launched into a speech, I'm on my third marriage and this one is a good one, a stayer. She tolerates my occasional binges because I keep it out of the house. We're well off. But before I inherited the farm I was bitter and angry and I pushed my first two wives around.

What, at the same time? Are you Brethren or something?

What?

You know, polygamy.

Nah, was married to one then the other. Gave 'em both a hard time. I used to have the knack, still have it, of luring the fillies in.

Jesus, and I thought I had problems.

At least you're admitting you've got problems.

Outside, the world flowed by and both men looked at it, only half-concentrating on the wrestle. Josh imagined he saw his girlfriend Beth sail past without a care, sail past in the passenger seat of a car — no doubt driven by one of those bitches trying to separate the family, bust them all up. He put more pressure on the hand he was holding and it responded the same. But it wasn't her, and he knew it. Who was this cunt? Why were they holding hands? Josh made a few short sharp jabs of intense pressure, thinking to finish it, but the other hand answered — they moved in a thirty degree arc, but not much more. Josh's arm was aching bad.

Hey, boys, how's it progressing? asked Hester from over the bar. I reckon it's a draw — you've been going for ages.

Stay out of it! both men said as one.

Then they laughed. And cracked up laughing till they cried. People started filtering back to watch and laugh, and then the boss called out in the loud, annoying booming self-possessed voice that had so riled Josh since he was a kid, Drinks on the house for the combatants.

Then the pressure was gone and both hands floated apart, as if they'd been strained against a door-frame and were defying gravity. They went to the bar and swigged their gifted beers. Neither man said a thing. Both left shortly after via the door through which they'd entered, with maybe a gap of ten seconds between them. Josh first, then Benny. They walked off in opposite directions, their lives altered in unpredictable ways.