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THE BAR - by T.R. Nunes

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There's no harm in enjoying a delicacy, is there?

"Shit!"

I pulled my leg back and massaged my sore foot and stubbed toe... Damn, but it hurt! I slowly lowered my foot back down, wiggled my toes painfully in my walking shoes, and continued on down the trail. Another frustrating day, part of a generally frustrating life, I thought to myself, the toe being but a minor symptom of that greater disease called 'life'. I continued trudging on along the path through the trees, until I stepped into warm, golden sunlight and paused involuntarily.

It felt so good, I had to admit... Warmth that streamed from between the break in the clouds and bathed all that entered its path. I couldn't help but look up at the canopy of trees above me on that arboretum path, most still bereft of leaves, though a few that were younger and braver (or more foolish) had already begun to sprout green leaves, even this early in the spring.

Yes, it did feel good, damnit... Almost good enough to offset the emasculating day at work, with all of its typical backbiting, frustration, office politics... Yeah, sure the trees were beautiful, which is why I was here, to walk off the frustrations. Still, there was a part of me that the sunlight couldn't reach... Shut away, bitter, wondering if it wouldn't be better to just lie down in the early spring snow along the path and fall asleep... A nice, long, deep sleep...

Such were my thoughts at the moment the sunshine was eclipsed, and the numbness stole upon me... After which, I remember nothing... Nothing at all... Except, perhaps, the dreams...

Stevie and I were standin' there, in that sushi bar near Okinawa. We'd both arrived overseas about the same time, him from Cedar Rapids, and me from good ol' Fresno, California (or Clovis, actually). I'd never eaten sushi before, mostly growing up on a diet of good ol' American fast food. I don't think he'd eaten the stuff before, either, but he was always lookin' for ways to get me, or gross me out...

That afternoon, it was this new kind of sushi he'd discovered...

"Yeah Johnny, you just gotta try this stuff out," the enthusiasm in his voice both obvious and (seemingly) sincere. "You know what the Japanese say about sushi, don't you?"

Know that actually answering the bait (no pun intended) was probably the worst thing I could do, I answered nonetheless. "No, what do they say?"

"Well, like we used t' say about Iowa corn, the best sushi is FRESH SUSHI. And today, you're gonna try it as fresh as it comes."

"How much fresher can 'ya get than raw?" I asked, incredulously.

"Well," he responded, "I'm glad you asked. Just follow my lead, okay?"

Stevie turned to the sushi chef and said something, I have no idea what, though I'd guess he learned it from his local 'girlfriend'. After the chef finished serving another customer, he turned to us with a smile, a long, thin, glittering blade in his hand. Reaching to one side, he stuck his hand into a fish tank behind the bar, one I hadn't even noticed before. After a quick watery grab, his hand came out firmly grasping a small silver fish. He then proceeded to hold the live fish down in front of Stevie and fillet it on both sides, then in partially segmented pieces, held on to the body with just enough flesh so they wouldn't fall off. Stevie reached down with his chopsticks, pulled away a piece that appeared to be moving even after it came away from the still moving fish, put the bite into his mouth and started chewing enthusiastically.

"It really is the world's freshest sushi, Johnny," he was saying, though I was having trouble hearing him, as, in my disgust, I felt myself falling, falling, falling from that tall, tall Okinawa barstool...

... into a spinning maelstrom, a whirlpool, rotating round and round, faster and faster, deeper and deeper, until...

I opened my eyes, and found myself looking strait into the eyes of a giant teddy bear.

Huh? I tried to sit up, but couldn't, possibly because of when I'd passed out (when? Under the trees in the arboretum? Or ten years before, at that sushi bar in Okinawa?). I tried moving my head... That didn't work, either. I could move my eyes, though... I looked as the huge fuzzy apparition (had I been drinking earlier and just forgotten about it, I wondered?) and tried to shape a question using only my eyes.

"Ah, you are awake! This is indeed a pleasure!!" I could hear the words, though the lips of the giant teddy bear, easily six feet tall if an inch, didn't appear to move. He, she, it, appeared to gesture to someone or something outside my field of vision. A moment later, I found myself staring at two huge, cute, cuddly apparitions.

"You see, citizen Dweetoo, sometimes our 'guests' *do* join us. It was not just 'false advertising' as you'd said."

"How do I know it can really hear us?" The newly arrived teddy asked.

"I shall prove it to you... Watch...." The first apparition turned back towards me and spoke (or, at least the words appeared once again in my mind). "Can you hear me, honored one?"

Since he was looking directly at me, I couldn't help but assume that I was the 'honored one', though I still lacked any way to respond.

A pained expression crossed my questioner's face. "Forgive me, honored one... If you can hear me, blink your eyes once."

I blinked once in response.

"Coincidence, that's all it is," my questioner's companion responded.

"No, no... Be patient, and watch.... Honored one?" I was apparently asked again, "Are you intelligent?"

I blinked once in response.

"Are you comfortable?"

I blinked once in response.

"Are you... food?"

The question caught me completely off guard. I looked askance at the both of them. My questioner's companion appeared to be watching me quite intently for some reason, while my questioner just waited patiently for my answer, my reaction. And I had no idea how to respond... All the previous questions had required simple 'yes' or 'no' responses. As I debated how to respond, I noticed something quite odd... Both of these teddy bears shared two extremely UN-teddy bear like characteristics...

First of all, both had teeth. Long, sharp, yellow teeth that were practically unnoticeable underneath all their fur. Secondly, around the mouths of each, their fur was oddly discolored, almost crimson in color... And then there were the odd pinkish bits caught between their teeth...

Noticing my glances, the first bear, my questioner, yelled out, "Apply the field! Do it! Now!!" In but a few seconds I could feel myself sinking down, slowly, into a warm, dark, comfortable oblivion...

And yet, I still had time... A few seconds at least... Time enough to scream, silently, breathlessly, with all my mind, with every fiber of my being, at what I'd seen out of the corner of my eye...

"What exactly is it you're doing there, citizen Swieble?" citizen Dweetoo asked, trying his best to talk between succulent, juicy, and utterly delicious bites.

"Please try and save a few morsels for those of us who are serving tonight, won't you, citizen Dweetoo?", Swieble admonished, as he made the final adjustments to the maintenance field around the Terran's cranium. "I am adjusting the temporal field around its brain."

"Why? Seems like a waste of time to me," Dweetoo responded, reaching through the Terran's stasis field and cutting out a large, warm and still quivering chunk of thigh meat. "After all, once we've eaten our fill and the stasis field is turned off, it will die, won't it?"

"This is obviously your first time in a Terran Bar," Swieble responded self-importantly. "While these juicy tidbits are quite satisfying, they are nothing compared to that delicacies of delicacies I'm attempting to preserve."

"That? That ugly, gray thing?"

"Yes... It's rather ironic. Those same respected 'scientists' who managed to outlaw our age old food source, the two legged mammals we once hunted wild on our planet, have provided us with the technology to better appreciate these 'foreign imports'. For example, you saw its eyes?"

"Yes, yes, I noticed." Dweetoo seemed to be loosing interest in the questions and answers, his attention devoted increasingly upon the feast before him.

"Well, during their so called 'scientific expeditions', they learned how to study, to examine, to learn, without being discovered. Using such devices as this temporal blocker, all memory of an 'examination' could be suppressed. And this stasis fields that we're now using was initially developed to prevent bleeding and maintain life during examinations. Fools that they were though, they never realized the exquisite potential of their discoveries."

Unable to restrain himself any longer, Sweible picked up a knife of his own, reached into the stasis field, and carved off a particularly succulent slab of fresh Terran shoulder, stuffing the warming and quivering tidbit enthusiastically into his own mouth.

"I understand all that." Dweetoo's voice sounded just a touch petulant. Perhaps he'd never been to a Terran Bar before, but *shoulder!* Why, *everyone* knew about shoulder! "But why are you bothering to block its memories, or even keep its brain alive?"

"Ah, yes...." Sweible carefully picked up the transparent container that held the Terran's brain, carried it to a large metallic cabinet, placed it gently within, and withdrew another similar looking container. "Well, your lack of understanding is, once again, understood and appreciated, as this *is* your first time."

"You see, we discovered some time ago that the madness brought on by their 'situation' adversely effected the, um, sublime taste of that delicacies of delicacies. Therefore, we tried using the temporal fields to wipe out any memory of their current, er, 'circumstance', and also to implant a pleasurable replacement memory, one made up of past pleasurable memories but still new and unique. We found that such procedures not only maintained optimum blood flow and freshness, but also kept this greatest of delicacies absolutely fresh, and marinated to absolute perfection."

As he finished speaking, Sweible carefully opened the transparent canister, scooped out a succulent glob of flesh, and began feasting with a passion. Then he recalled his manners and magnanimously gestured to his dining companion with one of his fuzzy, furry, and well-bloodied paws...

... up, up, up, out of the deep, cold darkness... I couldn't have fainted on that path, could I? In the middle of a public arboretum??

"Johnny? Johnny?"

I heard the voice; that sweet, dear voice from my memories... I slowly opened my eyes, not wanting to see that it was all a fantasy, all a dream... And there she was...

"Kathy? Is it really you?" Even as I asked the question I knew it couldn't be true... There'd been that fight, and she'd left... Understandably so..... Months and months ago...

"It can't really be you, can it?"

"Yeah, honey, it's me," she responded, smiling that smile of hers, that smile that lit up any room she was in.

"It's me, baby...". Her smile deepened, and she reached out a hand, through the golden filtered rays falling down through the canopy of trees. "Take my hand, and let's go for a walk..."

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Though an amateur writer since childhood, [Tim Nunes](#) is new to the world of printed publication. A native of Central California for most of his life, Tim is a graduate of California State University, Stanislaus, and his 'day job' for the past fifteen years or so has been in Information Technology. Tim currently resides in the Chicagoland area with his wife and daughter, has blondish hair, brownish eyes, a graying beard, and a penchant for bad poetry writing and even worse clarinet playing... All else is subject to change without notice.

An advertisement banner for Restylane. On the left, there is a grid of colored squares in shades of orange, yellow, and grey. To the right of the grid, the text "Ask your doctor about" is written in a dark blue font. Next to it is the "Restylane" logo in a large, elegant, cursive script. Further right, there is a small blue link icon with the text "Click here for more information." and a checkmark icon. On the far right of the banner is a close-up photograph of a woman with blonde hair, looking slightly to the side.