

there will never  
be another night  
like this



JOHN SALTER

there will never  
be another night  
like this

STORIES

S L / . N T  
B O O K S

THERE WILL NEVER BE ANOTHER NIGHT LIKE THIS  
Stories

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For William Borden  
1938-2010  
teacher, friend, brother



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## A New Science

SOME KIND OF COMIC BOOK convention is being held in one of the banquet rooms at the hotel. Barker just wants a gin and tonic, but the lounge is crowded with geeks carrying their loot, comic books and stickers and buttons, trading their loot, spreading their loot on the bar. He feels like an outcast when he squeezes his way between them. The geeks are harassing the bartender, ordering complicated drinks, *Sex on the Beach* and *Cum in a Hot Tub*, *Liquid Viagra*, college drinks like that, even though the geeks all appear to be approaching middle age. The bartender spots Barker, aims her finger at him like a pistol. Cups her other hand behind her ear and furrows her brow.

“Gin and tonic,” he shouts.

The bartender makes it right away, serves him first. For this, Barker gives her a two dollar tip. Barker intends to have more than one gin and tonic and doesn't want to have to wait.

He takes a sip. It is everything he dreamed of when he got dressed and slipped out of the room, rode twenty floors down in the elevator. The elevator ceiling was mirrored, and Barker tilted his head back to straighten his hair until it occurred to him they probably had a security camera up there, that some fat-ass in a utility room was probably making fun of him. So he quit that, decided instead to find a bathroom on the first floor to freshen up in, but he really needed that gin and tonic. He's not an alcoholic, goes weeks between drinks, has a bottle of Wild Turkey—unopened—that's been in the cupboard for

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years. A gift from his brother in Nebraska, and every time Louis stops by, he asks if the bottle is open yet, and Barker offers to open it on the spot, but Louis holds up his hands and says no, not on his account. And Barker always thinks he'll open it when Louis mentions he's coming up north, but of course, he never remembers. An alcoholic, Barker thinks, wouldn't have a dusty bottle of Wild Turkey, but he was fixed on getting the gin and tonic. And when he stepped from the elevator and checked the map to make sure he was correct about where the bar was, and then saw it was full of geeks, he panicked. Got it in his head that all the gin would be gone, the bottles piled in a garbage can, and decided he looked good enough for a hotel bar.

He drinks the first one too fast, waves for another, lights a cigarette. The geek next to him makes a show of waving away the smoke. Barker pretends he doesn't notice. He studies his coaster.

The woman upstairs, in his room, his bed. The tall woman. The way she fell asleep afterward reminds Barker of the deer he killed when he was fifteen. After he shot the deer, it ran. Barker was on his way back to the camper, sleepy and looking forward to shucking his coveralls and taking a nap. His father had gotten him up early, and at the edge of the clearing where they'd parked the camper, in the predawn, they'd split up, going to the tree stands they'd hung days before. Then: endless waiting, trying to stay awake, watching the trail below. No deer had shown up. Barker was on his way in when the deer, the buck, ran across the trail in front of him and stopped fifteen yards into the trees. Looked back, not at Barker but in the direction of his father's stand. Barker had been a little relieved to see no deer, but here was a buck, and he shot it. Raised the old Savage 99 lever-action and shot the buck. It didn't fall all the way over, just stumbled, regained its footing, and ran. Didn't get very far, and when Barker caught up to the buck, it was on the ground, fighting death, kicking and bucking wildly, and then it died. Died fighting death right to the end.

That was how she fell asleep. Bucked and kicked and moaned and then passed out. The tall woman. In his bed, upstairs.

The geeks on his left are doing shots now. Tequila. One of them leans over to Barker. "Hey, aren't you the Captain America guy?"

"Say again?"

"Aren't you a vendor?"

"No."

His new gin and tonic shows up. There is gin running down the outside of the glass. That's how crazy it is for the bartender, how busy she is. She takes Barker's money, blows loose hair from her eyes. "Keep it," he says.

She smiles. The geek who hates smoke pays for his beer with exact change, folds his wallet up, tucks it back into his pocket. It strikes Barker that two kinds of people live on the planet. Those who tip and those who stiff. Barker always tips extra. Bartenders, waitresses, the Vietnamese woman who cuts his hair back home in Fargo. His wife waited tables when he met her. He used to go for dinner after work, eat and read, then drink coffee and read. She got to know his habits. He always dropped an ice cube into his coffee to cool it off. She started doing that for him when she brought his coffee. Little things like that. Never brought him grape jelly with his toast after he told her how all he ever got growing up was grape jelly.

He lights another smoke. Again, much flailing from the geek. The geek has a stack of comic books in plastic sleeves. He has his hands at his sides, and he bends to study the top comic book cover. He studies it for such a long time that Barker wonders if the geek is falling asleep. But then he lifts the comic book and tucks it beneath the others and begins to study the next cover. Laughter erupts among the tequila geeks. One of them tried to drink a shot without using his hands and spilled the shot down his shirt. The geek is in his thirties with glasses and a cell phone clipped to his belt. They are all in their thirties with glasses and cell phones clipped to their belts. "Cut him

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off, cut him off," they shout at the bartender. They want to engage her. They want to draw her in, but she's too busy. Barker doubts she would give them the time of day even if she weren't busy. She looks a little jaded. She wipes down the counter and cracks only a perfunctory smile before flitting away.

The woman in his bed is not his wife. His wife is in their bed, he thinks. No, he doesn't just think she is. He knows she is. She is in their bed in Fargo, probably sleeping, with the remote in her hand. If the remote is not in her hand, it is probably just a few inches from her hand, on the smooth green sheet. From the ceiling it would look a bit like a crime scene photograph but with a remote control by her hand and not a revolver. If tomorrow evening he got on the train and rolled west through the night with his head against the window, watching small towns flick by, the occasional farmhouse light, drifting in and out of sleep, if he got off the train in downtown Fargo and climbed into his Oldsmobile, drove home, hit the garage door button when he turned the corner so the door would be open by the time he reached the driveway, if he pulled in and parked next to his wife's Cavalier, got out with his suitcase, shut the door, went into the dark kitchen, if he petted the cat and drank a glass of water and took a leak, brushed his teeth or maybe not, if he went into the bedroom and took off his clothes by the light of the television, if he crawled into bed with his wife, he might not notice right away if it was a revolver by her hand and not the remote.

He fishes a chunk of lime from his glass and chews it, glances around and swallows it. His wife has never talked about killing herself, so this whole business with the remote control and the revolver is just nonsense, he decides, the kind of garbage you consider while drinking a gin and tonic in a hotel bar. His wife is not depressed. Isn't happy in the ecstatic sense. Nobody is. On a scale of one to ten with one being very unhappy and ten being overjoyed, he would place his wife at a seven. Six. Six isn't bad, overall. Even five is okay. He means