

AN UNCOMFORTABLE DESTINY

A Cold and Lonely Night (Saturday 9:00 p.m.)

A howling wind blew powdery white snow in random circles outside of Gus's Place, a cozy Long Island pub. Inside, two lone patrons sat at the bar, entranced by the soothing fire dancing in the fireplace across the room. Gus, the owner and bartender, was an elderly gentleman of sixty-seven years.

On that life-changing Saturday evening in November 2006, anyone with sense stayed home, but these two people came to temporarily avoid their bitter realities.

The woman, Katherine, in her early forties, had a unique face, simultaneously reflecting the rigors of her life's journey and her appealing beauty. She wore faded jeans, an old, hooded sweatshirt and, incredibly on this frigid night, bedroom slippers. She hunched over the bar with the hood placed over her head, revealing the ends of her shoulder-length sandy hair and her lovely, but life-worn, face. Soft brown eyes displayed an external sense of comfort, but a closer internal look exposed a troubled but determined soul. Her life was a predictable pattern of hope followed by disenchantment, and men were her downfall.

The man sitting to Katherine's left, Karl, was an extremely big fellow in his late forties. He stood at about six feet, six inches and weighed over three hundred pounds. His head was shaved, and he sported an unruly goatee. Despite his intimidating size, he had a comforting presence and rarely experienced confrontation.

The various great songs pouring out from the jukebox provided a pleasant distraction, but a haunting silence crept into the bar when the machine exhausted all previous requests. Gus grabbed a handful of quarters from the cash register and laboriously plodded over to reload it.

"Any requests?" he yelled.

"Yeah," shouted Katherine. "Please play 'I Will Remember You' by Sarah McLachlan. I love that song. It's sad, and it makes me feel good."

Staring at the fire, Karl took a long, slow sip of his beer, wondering how a sad song could make Katherine feel good.

The Vulgar Intruder (Saturday 9:45 p.m.)

As Katherine and Karl sat peacefully, Gus headed back to the storage room, but *boom!* The front door slammed shut as a man barged in. “Damn! It’s fucking cold out there!”

Katherine and Karl glared at this peculiar individual as if he violated some sacred religious ritual by failing to bow his head or make a sign of the cross as he rudely entered their sacred institution, barking out vulgarities. He was conspicuously small with flaming red hair, like a pissed-off, modern-day leprechaun. He carefully scanned the bar and absorbed its essence. Clearly, his fifty-six years of life had prepared him for this evening of destiny. His demeanor said, “Bite me, bitch.”

He strolled to the bar, sat two stools to Katherine’s right, then slammed his fist. “How about a goddamn glass of Chianti?”

Rushing back, Gus happily shouted, “Brian McNerney, you crazy bastard! It’s great to see you.”

“Great to see you too, amigo,” Brian responded.

“It’s been a while, Brian.”

“It has. Now how about you quit jerking me off, old man, and bring me my fucking wine?”

“Do you have to curse so much?” an annoyed Katherine barked at Brian. She hated that this obnoxious little man barged into her intimate place of refuge.

“Yes, I do have to curse. We live in America with freedom of speech. I fought for this country, and I’ll curse if I want to.” Brian then leaned really close to Katherine’s face, stared at her, and slowly enunciated, “I love to curse. I’m a vulgarity virtuoso.”

“Settle down, tough guy. We’re just trying to relax and have a few drinks. Watch your language around the lady,” Karl responded.

Brian boldly pointed a finger at Karl. “Chill out, you oversized piece of shit. I’m gonna take a piss, and when I return, I’ll show you the true meaning of pain.” Brian then stormed to the men’s room.

Karl was shocked at this diminutive man's audacity.

Gus cautioned Karl, “Leave it alone, man. He’s insane. Don’t let his small size fool you. He’s a Vietnam vet with a high threshold for pain. A few years ago, he beat a man to death with

his toaster after the guy broke into his home. Legend has it he still uses that toaster because it cooks his bagels to perfection.”

“For real?” Karl reacted.

“That’s crazy!” Katherine agreed. “I’d never eat from a toaster used to kill someone.”

“He’s actually a great guy, but he can be completely whacked. Please don’t mess with him. I don’t need any bullshit in here.”

Returning to the bar, Brian glared at Karl as he sipped his wine. The dilapidated jukebox helped ease the tension as Frankie Valli’s “My Eyes Adored You” gracefully flowed from it. Brian glanced at Katherine and noticed the hidden beauty of her face under her hooded sweatshirt. What was she doing with Karl, the oversized lumberjack-looking dude, who apparently lacked a pair of balls? Brian was a foot shorter and about 150 pounds lighter. When he challenged Karl to go mano-a-mano, he received no response.

Hostility (Saturday 10:20 p.m.)

Katherine’s cell phone ringtone loudly played Abba’s “Take a Chance on Me,” and Brian reacted, “That’s an annoying song.”

Scowling at him, she answered the phone, “Hello?” As she listened, a look of fear oozed across her face. Then she screamed, “You asshole! You ruined my life!” Katherine hung up and asked Gus for a shot of tequila.

Karl expressed concern. “Are you okay, Katherine?”

“I’ll be fine, Karl. He’s such an asshole,” she vented.

“Sounds like a real hassle,” Brian sincerely interjected.

“Don’t worry about it. Men have not been my strong suit, honey. This guy’s ruthless. And that song happens to be a classic, you unsophisticated piece of shit.”

Brian responded, “At least you have Karl.”

“I’m her cousin, numb-nuts, and I’m here to protect her from that evil Russian bastard,” Karl retorted.

Brian nodded, feeling joy at Katherine’s potential availability, however unlikely that opportunity seemed. Realizing this was not the time to allow machismo to blur his thinking, Brian resorted to a more passive approach with Karl.

Gus chimed in, “Sounds serious, Katherine. I’ll call the cops once the roads clear and get you out of here safely.”

“It *is* serious, Gus. That asshole forced me to do the single worst thing I’ve ever done. I really don’t want to talk about it.”

Everyone sat quietly, staring at the comforting fire, when Katherine’s cell phone rang again. She answered reluctantly, but just listened. After what seemed like an eternity, she hung up, bowed her head, and wept.

“What’s up, Katherine?” Karl demanded.

“He called me an ‘American whore’ and said he’s coming here when the snow clears to kick my ass.”

“Screw that! I’ll kick *his* ass,” Brian boasted.

“Igor makes you look normal, honey,” Katherine told Brian. “He’s a maniac.”

“His name is Igor? Like Frankenstein’s Igor?” Brian cynically asked.

Katherine only smiled, drawing Brian into her heart. She reached over and ran her soft hand across Brian’s cheek. “As Karl said, Igor is an evil Russian bastard.”

The Evil Russian Bastard (Saturday 10:40 p.m.)

The massive blizzard had Igor temporarily trapped in his apartment across town. He was sipping on vodka, listening to Beethoven’s *Fifth Symphony* and fuming at Katherine’s responses. He was a simmering kettle ready to boil over.

Igor was a forty-one-year-old Russian immigrant, physically gifted with good looks, grace, and strength. At first glance, this strikingly handsome man, standing at six-foot-two with an alluring smile, attracted women. But he was an out-of-control womanizer and a narcissistic asshole. Igor represented a highly ironic dichotomy: he was a skilled ballroom dancer, and he was a former Chechnyan rebel who violently fought in several conflicts. He was formally trained to gracefully maneuver his body in various forms of dance and in the art of efficient human extermination.

As the clock ticked away into the early morning hours, Igor continued to drink vodka. His determination intensified, and he planned to head to Gus’s Place to lethally harm his latest female conquest when the snow let up.

***Non Gratum Anus Rodentum* (Saturday 11:00 p.m.)**

As Igor drank and fumed across town, Brian sat in Gus's Place and took another sip of his Chianti. He glanced to his right, surprised to see an elderly gentleman sitting at the head of the bar, as if he mystically faded into the scene in virtual silence. Brian checked his watch: eleven p.m. sharp. He gazed at the tall but frail-looking white-haired man, wondering why he would be in a place like this on a night like this.

As Brian stared, the old man asked, "What the hell are you looking at, you sorry piece of human defecation?"

Brian smiled. "Excuse me, sir. Could you please watch your language? There's a lady here, and she's very sensitive about vulgarity."

The old man retorted, "Not my problem, dickhead."

Katherine looked at Brian. "I'm confused by your sudden concern for proper language."

With an admiring smile, Brian nodded. "Touché."

With the clandestine arrival of the old man, the proverbial full house was situated at Gus's Place. Gus turned down the jukebox and flipped on the TV to get a weather update. These five diverse individuals would not be leaving this fine establishment on this frigid, snowy evening.

Gus announced, "Okay, I'll keep the bar open as long as you like, and I'll get some hot food up and running for you. I have blankets and pillows in the back whenever you're ready to hit the hay. I've been through this rodeo a few times. We'll be fine."

"I'll take that cheeseburger deluxe deal you've got, Gus, and keep the Chianti coming," Brian blurted.

The others followed with their orders.

Brian removed his heavy white hoodie, revealing a conspicuous and seemingly tasteless tattoo of a rat on his right forearm.

The old man glanced over. "You were a tunnel rat in Nam?"

"Yes, sir, I was, for four long months," Brian responded proudly. "I was also an infantryman."

"*Non gratum anus rodentum*," the old man appreciatively stated.

"That's right, sir."

“What are you two talking about?” Katherine injected curiously. “And how did you know he was in Vietnam?”

“Not worth a rat's arse,” the old man responded.

“What the hell are you talking about?” Katherine demanded.

“Hey now, *you* watch *your* language, young lady,” Brian said in a parental tone.

“Up yours,” Katherine responded, contentious, yet affectionate. Despite the tense start, these two vastly different people slowly began to form a bond.

The old man chimed in. “Not worth a rat’s arse. That’s what ‘*Non gratum anus rodentum*’ means. It’s a Latin term, the motto of the heroic tunnel rats in Nam.” He walked over to Brian and gave him a manly hug of appreciation for what Brian experienced. Then he reached out his hand. “Retired Army Sergeant Major Dickie Gates here. It’s a pleasure to meet you, my friend. Sorry about the human defecation comment earlier. Sometimes I can be less than charming. I always loved serving next to you jarheads. Let me tell you something. This guy’s been through serious stuff.”

“Thank you, Sergeant Major,” Brian said in a humble tone.

“Please call me Dickie,” the old man said, and the machismo-based bond was sealed.

Tunnel Rats (Saturday 11:20 p.m.)

“So, what’s the story with these tunnel rats?” Karl asked as Gus interrupted with hot food.

Sensing this was going to be a special night, Gus refilled everyone’s drinks. The feeling in the air quickly shifted from contention and hostility to relaxation and unity.

After a robust bite of his Reuben sandwich and a huge sip of beer, Dickie began telling the story of the tunnel rats, but Katherine’s ringtone interrupted.

“It’s Igor, isn’t it?” asked Dickie.

“How did you know?” a surprised Katherine asked.

“I walked in as you were reacting to the previous call. He sounds like a real peach. No respect for people,” Dickie told Katherine, assuming the role of elder statesman.

Karl challenged Katherine, “Are you gonna answer it?”

Katherine leaned toward Dickie, then simultaneously placed her elbow on the bar and her hand under her chin. “Nope. Tell me more about those tunnel rats, Dickie.”

“Tunnel rats were courageous, but extremely crazy bastards who performed underground search-and-destroy missions.” Dickie looked at Brian. “No offense, man.”

“None taken, Dickie,” Brian responded, feeling reflective.

Difficult memories raced through his mind. Brian vividly recalled the Vietnamese enemies he killed as a tunnel rat, not to mention several others he killed as an infantryman. The bottom line was that killing was killing, even in wartime. No matter how noble and necessary it may have seemed in the context of particular situations, it still involved ending human lives. GI’s could place those complex memories in a permeable compartment in the back of their brains, but every now and then, those memories came to the surface. Brian was experiencing as much now, and it showed on his face.

Dickie continued, “Tunnel rats tended to be smaller guys with guts. The tunnels were more than just places to hide; they were virtual underground cities. The tunnel rats’ ultimate purpose was to gather intelligence. Additionally, they were sent in to kill any underground enemies and to plant explosives to destroy the tunnels. Tunnel rats were typically equipped only with a handgun, a flashlight, and a knife.”

Brian added, “Those tunnels were tight and scary. They had booby traps, and the Cong were sneaky bastards.”

“You bet,” continued Dickie. “Guys like Brian had to deal with flooded U-bends in the tunnels designed to trap gas. Plus, the Cong guards manned holes on the sides of tunnels and would jab spears through the walls to try to nail our guys.”

“And those damned snakes, spiders, scorpions, and bats. I still have nightmares,” Brian stated. Everyone listened with interest.

Dickie concluded, “They dealt with some serious adversity. This guy, Brian, is a hero.”

Karl looked at Brian respectfully. “Thank you, man.”

A tear crawling down his cheek, Brian nodded back appreciatively.

Katherine slid over to the bar stool to her right and hugged Brian to show her admiration. Remaining next to Brian, she kicked off her slippers. She was in a completely foreign place with exciting new feelings. Her soft feel and feminine fragrance blew Brian away.

Brian's and Katherine's Stories (Saturday 11:45 p.m.)

Shortly after Dickie concluded the compelling story of the tunnel rats, Gus, Karl, and Dickie grabbed blankets and pillows and found spots to sleep as the snowfall continued.

Katherine and Brian stayed at the bar. The fire seemed to get more comforting with each passing moment. Their naturally passionate connection made them feel like they could talk forever. Instinctively, Katherine wrapped her stocking-covered feet around Brian's legs. The simple and affectionate gesture felt so natural and so intoxicating for both of them.

Katherine took another sip of her beer. "What a great night. I like you a lot. You seemed like such an idiot when you first got here, but you're a nice guy. This is one of the best nights of my life."

Brian smiled affectionately, looked deeply into her lovely eyes, and gently placed his hands on her soft cheeks. Admiring Katherine, he wore a sad but satisfied expression.

She was feeling new emotions and wanted this night to last forever. This bizarre little man turned out to be amazing. Normally, men would make a physical play at this point and try to exploit Katherine for their own pleasure. Brian, though, had no such intention; he told her she was "magnificent." They kissed tenderly for several minutes, floating into their own universe.

Katherine affectionately gazed at Brian. "What's your story, Brian McNerney?"

Brian resisted, but Katherine insisted, and he related a complex tale of challenges. He was born on Christmas Day in 1950 as an only child. His mother died shortly after due to excessive hemorrhaging. That haunted Brian throughout his life, with no help from his father, who had subtle ways of reminding him from time to time.

Katherine asked how he was able to deal with his feelings over the years.

"My life has been a series of uncomfortable destinies. I don't know how else to describe it." His father, the son of Irish immigrants, owned and ran a bar & grill in Hell's Kitchen in New York City. The colorful neighborhood had earned a gritty reputation and figured prominently in the New York City underworld, especially in Irish-American organized crime circles. Basically, it was the home of a lot of poor, working-class Irish-Americans. That bar & grill was a solid business venture with one major problem: Brian's father thoroughly enjoyed the alcohol he served. Whiskey was his preference, leading to an eroded liver and his premature death.

Brian, a street-smart kid, was fifteen when his father died. His father's only sibling, Brian's Uncle John, who lived out on eastern Long Island, took his parentless nephew into his

home. A good man of simple means, Uncle John, with his devoted wife, raised and cared for their six children. Normalcy personified. Brian tried to fit in with that family unit, but it never felt right. At seventeen, he joined the Marines, served with honor, and became a decorated veteran who killed several enemies along the way.

“So, you actually have killed people?” she cautiously asked.

“Actually, I’ve *caused* death. There’s a huge difference. In my mind, killing someone means you did it maliciously and illegally. I caused death, and I think about it every day. It was always circumstantial—war or self-defense. Please don’t think less of me, Katherine.”

That experience of actually ending a human life was predictably profound. Brian once said it caused him to discover that he did, in fact, have a soul.

Upon his discharge at nineteen, Brian returned to Long Island, worked as a carpenter, and got married. Two years after his wedding, a drunk driver killed his wife in a head-on collision, leaving Brian McNerney a widower at twenty-one. His zest for life diminished, and he resorted to heavy drinking and raising hell.

With a reassuring smile, Katherine hugged him and headed to the ladies room. Brian then carefully grabbed her cell phone, jotted Igor’s number down on a napkin, and put it in his pocket.

When Katherine returned, Brian asked, “So, what about you? What’s your story?”

Katherine had a near perfect upbringing as one of five children born into an Irish-Catholic family on Long Island. She was the baby and grew up without a care in the world. Her mother and father were loving parents, and they provided a nice life for the entire family. Katherine should have lived a great life, but men became her Achilles’ heel.

She did marry twice but got divorced both times. Her first husband had a substance abuse problem. He loved to drink and loved drugs, specifically cocaine. After four painful years, Katherine divorced him. She later married another man who was a steady guy with moderate ambition. Things were fine until he got into a serious car accident, leading to a difficult recovery period in which he was prescribed Vicodin, a highly addictive painkiller. He developed a habit of topping that off with a steady flow of alcohol, leading to yet another fine mess and divorce.

Most recently, she’d hooked up with Igor, the attractive, narcissistic, and fertile Russian psychopath who seemed too good to be true. Igor grew up in Russia in a highly dysfunctional and abusive family situation. He developed strong narcissistic tendencies and compulsively

controlled and abused the females in his life. His good looks combined with his short-lived charm captivated Katherine, and they had a passionate relationship for several months until Katherine got pregnant. She very much wanted to have that baby, but Igor wanted no part of fatherhood. He eventually bullied Katherine into having an abortion. She acquiesced but hated herself for it and abruptly broke up with Igor.

Overwhelming empathy for this beautiful woman filled Brian. After sharing their stories, they were both overcome with fatigue, so they rested their heads on the bar. As Katherine dozed off, Brian fixed a temporary bed for her near the fireplace. He guided her there, and she fell into a deep, comfortable sleep. Brian threw a few more logs on the fire, headed back to the bar, and took another sip of Chianti.

Challenging Igor (Sunday 1:00 a.m.)

Brian made a daring decision and sent Igor a fiercely challenging text message: *Igor—I'm Brian, Katherine's new man. Stay away, you Russian bitch.*

In this case, ignorance was bliss. Brian didn't understand the full magnitude of how psychotically dangerous Igor was.

A drunken and angry Igor stared dumbfounded at Brian's provocative text message, then responded, *I'll be there in the morning when the snow clears. I look forward to seeing you. You're a foolish moron.*

Brian would deal with Igor in due time. Before his pending morning adventure, he got some much-needed sleep, and Igor simultaneously succumbed to the effects of the excessive vodka.

Another Uncomfortable Destiny (Sunday 5:30 a.m.)

Gus's Place was now quiet with the warm fire crackling in the background. Brian woke up to the sound of his cell phone alerting him to an incoming text message.

I'll be there soon. Meet me outside, you piece of shit. Igor.

Igor began his journey to Gus's Place to accomplish his violent deed. Receiving that message was sobering for Brian, and he felt like he was moving in slow-motion. He reached down to his ankle and placed his hand over the bump in his sock to verify the presence of his well-sharpened switchblade. His knife would be a last resort to disable and assume control over

Igor. He looked out the front window as a huge snowplow drove by, attempting to clear the road. Scoping out a possible roadside location for his inevitable conflict with Igor, he noticed a few frozen tire tracks from passing vehicles. Brian gathered his wits, devised a strategy, and forced himself to feel invincible.

Conflict Resolution (Sunday 6:10 a.m.)

The bright blanket of clean white snow outside softly illuminated the cold, dark dawn. Four of the five patrons were sleeping peacefully when Brian McNerney made his second notable entrance into Gus's Place in the past twelve hours.

As Gus and Katherine stared, stunned, Brian stood in the doorway, shivering uncontrollably. The right side of his white hoodie was completely covered in blood. Outside, the flashing lights of an ambulance and a police car added to the commotion.

Gus grabbed an old blanket from under the bar and covered Brian with it. "What the hell happened, Brian?"

"Igor's dead." After a short pause, Brian muttered, "What a crazy night."

"Oh my God!" Katherine blurted. "Please tell me you didn't kill him."

"No, I didn't kill him," a subdued Brian responded.

"Did you cause his death?" she snapped, recalling their earlier conversation.

Brian flashed a humorless smile. "No, I didn't."

A policeman walked in. "Thanks for the 911 call, Mr. McNerney. It looks like he slipped on the ice and smashed his head. The frozen ground is like steel. He took a very severe blow to the skull, which killed him almost instantly."

Brian asked, "Is there anything else I can do?"

"Nope. You've helped more than your share. That was mighty righteous of you, giving him CPR and trying to stop the bleeding. Well done, sir. You should get some clean, dry clothes on. We got it from here. We'll call you if we need any additional information."

The Walk Home (6:30 a.m.)

Gus and his patrons watched in amazement as the ambulance and police car sped away. They all experienced Igor's threatening phone calls but never imagined such an awful thing occurred while they were sleeping. On one hand, it seemed like poetic justice, but on the other

hand, it seemed tragic. Any human being with any level of compassion would feel bad—even for a piece of shit like Igor.

Gus directed Brian, “Come with me. Let’s get you cleaned up and put some dry clothes on you. I have an old set of overalls and a sweatshirt in the back.” When they returned, Gus shouted, “I’m putting on a fresh pot of coffee. Anyone interested?”

Karl and Dickie accepted. Brian said he was wasted and was going to walk home, a few blocks away.

“Would you like to come over for a cup of coffee, Katherine?” he asked, insecure as a high schooler asking a pretty young girl to the prom.

“I’d love that, Brian.”

Brian and Katherine said farewell to their bar-mates on that sunny, crisp, and snow-covered morning. As they headed down the street and slowly strolled over the virgin snow, Brian gently grabbed Katherine’s hand. “Thanks for joining me.”

“My pleasure. Well, that was one bizarre first date.”

“That wasn’t a date. That, my dear, was destiny.” After a thoughtful pause, Brian ventured, “But, if I did ask you, would you actually go on a date with me?”

“Yes, I would.”

“Okay, then I’m asking. I want to take you out to a real nice dinner and to watch a movie with me.”

“That sounds amazing,” Katherine responded enthusiastically.

“It’s a date. I recently did a carpentry job at Dante’s Corner Cuisine.”

Katherine exclaimed, “Dante’s Corner Cuisine! I hear it’s the nicest place in town.”

“Every evening as I finished up my work, I’d watch couples, all dressed up, arriving. I wondered if I’d ever be able to experience the same—wearing nice clothes and escorting a pretty lady to a place like that. I guess I figured I didn’t deserve it.”

Katherine didn’t immediately respond, just clutched Brian’s arm tighter, rested her head on his shoulder, and smiled. Her smile was beautiful and authentic, the type she hadn’t displayed for years. “You definitely deserve it, and I’d be honored to be your date.”

They arrived at Brian’s home. “Please come in. I’m going to brew you the best cup of coffee you ever had. I’m also going to toast you a killer bagel.”

“You know what, Brian? Just coffee will be fine. I think I’ll pass on the bagel.”

As they sat and sipped, Katherine carefully asked, “I realize this may be a difficult question for you, Brian, but what actually happened this morning with Igor? Did you... cause his death?”

Brian's expression was stoic. “It was like the cop said. He fell and hit his head. Trust me, okay?” Smile turning nervous, Katherine nodded.

When they finished their coffee, Katherine and Brian made love, then went to breakfast at a local diner. They later experienced an incredible first date. After the movie, they drove to the docks in Brian’s truck, where they sat holding hands, listening to Tony Bennett, and quietly enjoying the sparkling evening view of Long Island’s Great South Bay. After a rocky start, the Ballad of Katherine and Brian actually proved to be a very comfortable destiny.

THE END