

The First Two Pages: “Razing the Bar” by Leigh Lundin
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An Essay by Leigh Lundin

When SleuthSayers proposed an anthology set in a bar, I worried. I almost never visit pubs. Not only have I never picked up a girl in a bar, I think I lost one or two in alehouses dancing with that metro guy with a Ferrari, silk shirt, Italian shoes, and John Travolta moves.

But the central element of a work already in progress popped into my head, and within moments, I visualized my story, “Razing the Bar.” A mere 2000 words, it could work as a one-act play. Except for the dénouement, the two essential characters never leave the barroom... and yet it’s plot driven, distressingly so.

Barney, our bartender and first-person protagonist, knows “grapes, grains, and guests.” He’s aided by his loyal assistant, Grace, who handles the math and money side of the business. Colleagues who’ve become friends, she covers tasks he finds troublesome, and he gently scoots her out the door to meet her nightly bus.

NB: Projecting a moment, treating Grace as a romantic interest was an obvious option. I felt it would diminish the story, especially one so short it barely skimmed the surface of characterization.

I rapidly sketched the scene—time, place, characters. Closing time, remaining patrons leave, all but a stranger, expensively dressed but wearing a ball

cap. Grace already identified the customer as questionable, and Barney is about to catch up.

I held the door for him.

“Good night, sir. Mind the step.”

I didn’t see it coming. Swiveling, he jabbed a compact automatic under my jaw.

“Lock... the damned... door.”

The stranger clubs him and threatens to “Chinatown” the bartender’s face if he fails to cooperate. If mystery movie fans remember nothing else about *Chinatown*, they’ll remember the nose reference. That one word covers a lot of explanation. Clearly, this is not a nice man.

In the next half page, we discover the stranger knows more than he should about the pub, including the disabled alarm system. He’s aware Barney keeps a bottle of Glenfiddich under the bar. The essential question isn’t why a shabby bar keeps “liquid gold” on hand, but how the stranger knows.

His expensive tastes contrast with our bartender’s modest demeanor. The stranger sneers at our man’s flip-phone. He may be arrogant, but he’s organized. He never removes his gloves except to use his phone. After he collects Barney’s phone, he aligns it next to his own. That’s when Barney’s wife attempts to call.

Page 2 ends with our bartender thinking:

He acted unhurried, like this was planned, practiced, not a spur of the moment thing. This felt worse than wrong. It didn’t feel like a robbery at all.

Within a page and a half, the story grows from a show of force to indeterminate danger and a menacing sense we ain't seen nuthin' yet.

Return for a moment to the title. "Razing the Bar" might seem one among many facile puns; indeed, a tavern down the road from me is called Bar Codes. But in this case, the title isn't a mere gratuitous *jeux de mots*, but the background motivation behind the story. I confess, I'm way too pleased with it.

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Leigh Lundin likes long walks on the beach, candlelit dinners, and late night alibis. He claims to have lived in several Western European nations, the US and Canada, South Africa, and a CIA island off the coast of Venezuela, which probably means he's been tossed out of ten or twelve countries without half trying. Inexplicably, he's been published by *Ellery Queen*, *Alfred Hitchcock*, *Mystery Writers of America*, and the *Picaresque Picayune Penny Advertiser*. He's a founding member of SleuthSayers, where he occasionally sleeps on the sofa after hastily escaping some bedchamber. Authorities could not reach the reprobate for comment.