All of me

A man walks into a bar ...

Ed Rybicki

You know, I have the cover of an issue of *Nature* on the wall in my bar. There's very few of my regulars who actually notice it. It's not even very special, in a scientific way: more a spoof, commemorating a semi-centenary. But it's a good in-joke — for those of us who know.

Anyway, tonight was a night like pretty much any other at the Cat-in-the-Box: reasonable crowd, the usual three-to-one man-to-woman ratio. The guitarist seemed pretty good — but I suppose I'm biased.

I stood for a while in my usual inspection place just inside the door, scanning the customers. Once you know what to look for, it's easy to spot: about half and half, then; insiders and civilians. I found my gaze lingering on the cover. More a visual cue than anything particular — hell, I could hardly see the thing — but it got me to thinking, again, of the might-have-beens. If I hadn't tried out on a whim for the rugby team; if I'd carried on down the physics postgrad trail my father so wanted me to follow; if I'd swung one way rather than the other.

If I'd never met Eileen.

I noticed someone loitering in the entrance, then; more as a darkening of the ambient light than anything else, but it got me looking at him. My height, pretty much; a bit shabby, running shoes and jeans, hair overlong — typical student, I couldn't help thinking, casting a glance down at my own understatedly elegant rig. He came in a bit farther, so I was now behind him and to his right. Just let him look to the far side of the circular bar, I thought; then we'll know.

His double-take was almost comical: he started so hard he almost hit me. OK, so he'd recognized the Eileen — and now for the intervention, I thought, as I gently took his arm, just as he set off to sprint around the bar.

"Hey, sport!" I gave him, as he whipped round, wild-eyed. "Just got in?" That got to him: I could almost see the wheels turning as he wondered how I could possibly know. I noticed a couple of folk watching

me as I smiled at him, and gestured to my left. "Come sit and have a beer," I said. His eyes went back to the Eileen. I could feel him tensing to pull away, so I leaned in to his ear. "She won't know you, whatever you might want," I said. "She's with a bunch that she does know" — and I indicated his get-up — "who do a whole lot better than you."

He looked over to her, yearningly. Sure enough, the crew around her was pretty well-dressed; about half gay, the rest straight. Nice to see the talents being used for profit, I thought. He looked back to me. I could see his eyes flicker over me,

then he decided to follow. Good idea, that: we were of a height, but I massed easily a third as much again as he did. Professional rugby leaves you with more than just aches and scars: if you keep up the exercise, the bulk stays pretty firm too. Not to mention impressive, if you're the under-exercised lab rat I knew he was.

He came along pretty meekly as I ushered him into a seat — I made sure he could still see the object of his affection over my shoulder. I put up a hand without looking round, and Thomas was at my shoulder just about instantly.

"Pint of draught for John here — and a sparkling water for me." He nodded and was off, as the new boy gaped at me.

"What ... how did you ...?" I noticed he had a faint accent: off to one side of the bell curve, then. That made what I had to say quite a bit easier. I leaned onto the table, clasped my hands together and smiled as winningly as I could.

"You want to know how I know your name, how I knew what you were looking for ..." I flapped my hand at him to shut him up "... how I knew what you'd drink?" I sat back, and raised my eyebrows at him.

As he started to babble, I leaned in and chopped him off. "Let me tell you the things I know" — counting on the fingers. "One, you work in a high-energy physics lab." Gobsnacked would be a good term for it; he looked as though I'd punched him. "Two, you've had this recurring dream of Eileen over there for years, but you've never met her." Eyes wide enough

to be twin moons now. "Three, you've come a long and devious way to get here; you can never go back." He gulped, and nodded. "And four, you've got a pocket full of funny-looking money you can't spend here, so you're going to need some help." He could have doubled for my labrador right about then: eyes wide, fixed on me, mouth open ... except with the dog, it's always about food. "So, fortunately, you've come to the right place," I finished, sitting back and gesturing out to the bar.

He followed the wave, to see a rather large cross-section of the clientele looking at us. Some were amused; some — generally the outsiders — frankly curious; some looked sympathetic. I think he got it, right about then: pretty bright, but again, I'm biased.

That *Nature* cover? It's the one with a parody cover of a pulp SF magazine with 'Many Worlds' blazoned on it, marking 50 years of quantum strangeness — and the much-repeated young woman on the cover bears a remarkable resemblance to Eileen. Which is ironic, because there's only a few of her. On the other hand, as the only non-physicist among the insiders, I have the best proof of anyone of the many worlds theory: *all of me*. ■

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