

Visitors' Night at Joey Chicago's

by Mike Resnick

So I'm sitting there in Joey Chicago's 3-Star Tavern, nursing an Old Peculiar, and doping out the odds if Belmont comes up muddy after the rain we're expecting, when an annoying high-pitched voice says: "Gimme a bourbon martini and make it snappy!"

"Ain't no such animal," says Joey. There's a pause, and then he says, "Ain't no such animal as you, neither."

"Watch your mouth, Mac," says the voice, "or I just might put my fist in it."

I look up, and what should I see but an ugly little creature, maybe 15 inches high, standing on the bar, paws on hips, glaring at Joey.

"Harry," says Joey to me, "where the hell has Big-Hearted Milton gone to?"

"He's in the john," I say. "He's hexing a rasslin' match. He says he thinks better in there."

"Well, you tell him if he wants me to keep paying him for protection, he'd better get his ass out here."

"What about my drink, Mac?" snaps the creature.

"Keep your shirt on," says Joey. "I'm working on it."

"I ain't got no shirt," says the creature.

"Harry," says Joey, "are you gonna get Milton or are you going to spend all night listening to me argue with this disgusting little critter?"

"Keep a civil tongue in your head!" says the disgusting little critter. "I get mighty ugly when I'm riled."

"You ain't so good-looking even when you're not riled," says Joey as I walk into the men's room. Milton is sitting there on a closed toilet seat, fully dressed, mumbling some spell at a pentagram he's drawn on the floor.

"Come out to the bar," I say. "Your urgent assistance is required."

"In a minute," says Big-Hearted Milton. He mutters one last spell and then stands up. "Okay. Now Rikki Tikki Tavi is going to beat Monstro Ligriv in straight falls tomorrow night at the Garden. I figure we should clean up, because everyone knows it's Monstro's turn to win."

"We'll worry about that later," I say.

"Harry the Book isn't interested a sporting event?" he says, arching an eyebrow. "You gonna start taking bets on the stock market, perhaps maybe?"

"Just pay attention, Milton," I said. "There's some kind of strange creature in the bar, demanding a bourbon martini, and Joey Chicago wants you to make it go away."

Milton's face goes white as a sheet, and he has trouble catching his breath. "A bourbon martini?" he repeats. "Is this a redhead named Thelma?"

"No, it's an ugly monster from some mystic world."

Milton relaxes visibly. "Okay, no problem," he says. Then: "You're sure it's not a Thelma?"

"I'm sure," I say. "Now come on. I'm the guy who convinced Joey to hire you for protection, so if you don't vanish this critter, or at least turn it into something friendly with a bankroll to bet, it'll reflect badly on me."

"Why do you care?" asks Milton.

"I'm using the third booth in the bar as my temporary office."

"They evicted you again?" he says, though since this is the fifth time in three years I don't know why he looks so surprised.

"A temporary setback," I say with dignity. I make a face. "The Boston Geldings haven't beaten the point spread in two years. How the hell could I know they were going to get hot against the Syracuse Ridglings?"

"You could have asked," says Milton, looking very self-important.

"You could emerge from the damned bathroom more than once a day," I shoot back.

Then we are in the tavern, and Milton takes a look at the little creature, which is sitting cross-legged on the bar, munching on a pretzel.

"About time," says Joey Chicago. "Make him vanish, Milton. When I wouldn't serve him, he went around spitting in all my customers' drinks."

"I don't see any customers," replies Milton, looking around.

"Would you stay if someone kept spitting in your drink?" demands Joey. "Just make the little bastard vanish."

"Piece of cake," says Milton. "Where does he come from?"

"How the hell do I know?" says Joey.

"I can't send him back if I don't know where to send him," said Milton. He turns to the creature. "Excuse me, kind sir, but what realm do you reside in?"

"I'll never tell!" snaps the creature.

"Well, so much for sending him back," said Milton with a shrug.

"You mean I'm stuck with him?" demands Joey. "I want my protection money back. First thing in the morning I'm hiring Morris the Mage."

"No, you're not stuck with him," says Big-Hearted Milton, who has never offered a refund since T. Rex was a pup. "I just said I couldn't sent him back."

"You're going to take him home with you?"

"So he can spit on my chopped liver and in my matzo ball soup?" says Milton. "Don't be silly."

"Then what are you going to do?"

"I can't send him home," says Milton, "but I can encourage him to go home on his own power."

"How?" asks Joey curiously.

"Like this," says Milton, snapping his fingers.

Nothing happens.

"What's Morris the Mage's phone number?" says Joey disgustedly.

"Oh, ye of little faith," mutters Milton. He mumbles something that wouldn't make any sense even if he was saying it clearly. Then he snaps his fingers again, and suddenly there is a very bright blue something, about the size of a bulldog, but with scaly skin, three-inch claws on its front feet, two rows of razor-sharp teeth, bloodshot little eyes, and halitosis. It is standing on the floor, and suddenly it sees the creature on the bar. It flaps wings I didn't even know it had, flies up to the bar about ten feet from the creature, gives a high-pitched hum that sounds more ominous than a growl, and begins approaching it.

"Omygod omygod omygod!" shrieks the creature.

The blue thing launches itself through the air, and the creature vanishes about a fifth of a second before it reaches him. (Okay, so maybe it was a quarter of a second, or a half, but bookies who hang out at the track measure everything in fifths of a second, so don't hassle me, okay?)

"Well, that's that," says Milton. "One problem presented, one problem solved. I'm going back to the men's room."

"Uh ... Milton," says Joey, pointing to the blue thing, and we see that it has just downed a bottle of vodka and is going after Joey's bottle of '73 Dom Perignon, which is the only bottle he has ever owned and is just for show. Joey tries to shoo it away, and it just snarls at him.

"Milton," says Joey nervously, "thank it and send it on its way."

"It's not that easy," says Milton, frowning.

"Why the hell not?" demands Joey.

"Bringing them here is easy; sending them away isn't."

"What are you talking about?" says Joey. "A spell's a spell."

"Some are more complex than others," says Milton.

"I knew I should have hired a union wizard!"

"Do you know what they cost?" says Milton.

"Less than this momser is going to drink before I get rid of him, I'll bet," snaps Joey.

"I'll get rid of him," says Milton. "I just can't send him back to where he came from."

"I don't care where you send him," says Joey. "Hell, send him to visit my ex-wife and the bastard that yenta ran off with!"

Milton rolls up his sleeves. "Stand back, everyone!" he says.

"What do you mean, 'everyone'?" says Joey. "Except for Harry the Book, who's running his business out of the third booth here, everyone's long gone."

"Silence, mortal!" says Milton.

"You're as mortal as I am," says Joey, "and if you don't vanish this beast pretty damned fast, I'm gonna give you one hell of a kick in your most mortal part!"

"All right, all right," says Milton. He turns to me. "Harry, how much would you say it weighs?"

"Maybe 45 pounds," I tell him.

"Mammal, reptile, or dragon?" he asks.

"Yes," I say.

He frowns. "Okay," he says. "Here goes!"

He mumbles something that almost rhymes, but it is in no language I have ever heard and makes even less sense than French, and then his eyes roll back in his head and his arms stick out straight ahead of him and he goes into a kind of swami trance, and suddenly we hear an ominous and portentous gulp!, and we look at the bar, and there is this thing that looks kind of like a leather gorilla, except that it's got an extra pair of arms and a third eye right in the middle of its forehead, and it is chewing and making crunching noises, and a few blue scales kind of dribble out of its mouth.

"Man, that was good!" he growls. "I haven't eaten in 253 years, give or take an afternoon." He looks at Joey's stock. "What have you got on tap?"

"Old Peculiar and Old Washensox," says Joey in kind of trembling tones.

"I'll have a keg of each!" says the leather gorilla. "By Merlin, it feels good to be free again!"

"Uh ... Milton..." says Joey.

"You said get rid of it, I got rid of it," says Milton defensively.

"Milton," I say, "I know you're not a betting man, but I'll give you seventeen trillion to one that I know what Joey's going to ask for next."

The gorilla gets tired of waiting, so he climbs down behind the bar, lifts a five-gallon keg, and chug-a-lugs it. "I could get to like this place," he says.

"Make me an offer," mutters Joey.

The leather gorilla belches. It is so loud that six glasses shatter. Then he turns to Milton. "I intuit that you're the one who brought me here."

Milton tries to answer, but he's shaking so badly nothing comes out, and he just nods weakly.

"You conjured me to kill the Spedunker, right?"

"The blue thing with the wings and scales," said Joey.

"Yeah, a Spedunker." Suddenly the gorilla grins. "Now I'll bet you're trying to figure out how to get rid of me."

"I would never do such a thing," says Milton. "Honor bright and pinky to the sky, the thought never crossed my mind."

"Your nose just grew seven inches," notes the gorilla.

Milton's hand goes to his nose. It is the same almost-shapeless blob as usual.

The gorilla throws back his head and laughs. Three mice who have been attracted to all the strange new smells faint dead away. "I was just pulling your leg," he says. "Or maybe I should say I was pulling your nose!" He laughs at his own joke, and two of the overhead lightbulbs burst.

"Now that you've had a snack and a little something to wash it down with," says Milton hopefully, "maybe you'd like to go home and take a nap?"

"Go back to that tiny cave where I was imprisoned for millennia?" demands the gorilla angrily. "Never!"

"Harry," says Joey, "go find the phone book and look up Morris the Mage's number."

"Relax," says the gorilla. "I find you even more distasteful that you find me. I'm off to explore this strange new world. Where's the nearest whorehouse?"

"For gorillas?" I say. "I don't think there are any."

"Yes there are!" says Milton quickly. "There are three of them in Brooklyn."

The gorilla turns to Joey. "Loan me a fiver," he says. "I came out without my wallet." He frowns. "In fact, I came out without my pants."

Joey opens the cash register and gives him a ten-spot. "You'll want to visit a Brooklyn bar when you're done," he says hopefully.

"Thanks, fella," says the gorilla, grabbing the sawbuck. "You're okay."

He lumbers to the door, starts to walk out, and bounces back to the middle of the tavern.

"What's going on?" he demands, looking right at Milton.

"I should have thought of it," says Milton, frowning. "The spell brings you here, but it doesn't let you leave. You're just here to eat the Spedunker."

"I ate the Spedunker," snarls the gorilla. "Now I've got urgent business in Brooklyn."

Milton starts backing away from him. "I don't know a spell to let you out," he says. "All I know is how to bring you here."

"Well, you'd better think of something fast," says the gorilla, slowly approaching him. "Because I'm getting hungry again."

"Gorillas are vegetarians," says Milton.

"So they'll penalize me fifteen yards," says the gorilla.

Milton screams a spell at the top of his voice, and before the gorilla knows it there is a seven-ton gryphon in the bar.

"Oh, shit!" says the gorilla, and vanishes just before the gryphon can reach him.

Well, you can figure what comes next. Milton summons a dragon to scare the gryphon away, and then he calls up a poisonous hydra-headed chimera to frighten the dragon, and then he magics up a kraken to eat

the chimera, and after two hours have passed I feel like I have watched the same movie fourteen times in a row.

"What now?" says Joey in disgusted tones as we watch the latest arrival, a creature that looks like a refugee from a movie with actors named Boris or Bela or Basil or something else beginning with a B. The creature is considering which of Joey's bar stock to sample, and Milton decides to give it one last try, and he mutters and mumbles and goes into his swami again, and suddenly a trunk reaches out and holds the creature high above the floor, and it curses and cries and says that it has a wife and three kids and a mortgage and it hasn't sent in its insurance check yet, and the elephant loosens its hold for a second and the creature disappears in a cloud of gray smoke, which is very fitting because it was obsolete long before Technicolor movies hit the scene.

I am wondering what Milton is going to conjure to get rid of the elephant, who is so big that he is stuck half in and half out of the tavern, when one of the mice that fainted wakes up and squeaks a couple of times, and the elephant takes one look and trumpets in terror and backs out into the street, taking half of the front wall with him, and the last time I see him he is making a bee-line for Third Avenue, which is not going to help him much because that is Casey Callahan's beat and he doesn't allow anything to speed down his street, even elephants.

"Well, that's that," says Milton.

"No," says Joey. "Pay me for all my bar stock and fix my walls and buy me a new bottle of '73 Dom and _then_ that'll be that."

"Don't be so ungrateful," says Milton with dignity. "You asked me to solve a problem. I solved it."

"It's like solving a fist fight by turning it into World War VII!" snaps Joey. "Now, are you going to make restitution for damages or not?"

"I'm tapped out at the moment," says Milton, "but..."

"No buts!" snaps Joey. "Get out of my establishment."

"I thought we were friends!" says Milton in hurt tones.

"You got it absolutely right," says Joey. "We _were_ friends!"

"Okay," says Milton. "If that's the way you're going to be, give me one for the road and I'm out of here."

"Where's your money?" demands Joey.

"Put it on my tab," says Milton.

"We're mortal enemies," says Joey. "You ain't got no tab!"

"Hey, Mac," says a voice. "Is this guy bothering you?"

We turn to see the little critter who started the whole thing.

"You betcha," says Joey. "Make him go away."

The creature says something in French or some other alien tongue, makes a mystic sign in the air, and _whoosh!_, Milton is gone (though he later turns up in a house of excellent repute in Brooklyn.)

"I'll have a tall one," says the critter.

"You got it," says Joey, drawing one from what remains of the tap. "By the way, I'm really sorry we hassled you before. You looking for work?"

The critter shrugs. "Doing what?"

"Protection," says Joey. "Keeping the riff-raff out of my establishment."

"Sure, why not?" He extends a wiry little three-fingered hand. "By the way, my name's Louie."

"Louie," says Joey Chicago, "I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship."

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