

You're a Fine Girl

Running down the trail from her house in Uniontown past the Queen Annes and Craftsman houses that cannery workers used to call home in a bygone era, Brandy took a sharp left at the Doughboy Monument. In front of the Finnish Meat Market, she caught her breath. Digging the black crumpled apron out of her bag, she threw it over her head and tied it around her waist. Maybe, just maybe she could sneak in before her boss Mary noticed.

A wave of beer, snus, musty cigarettes, and fish hit her nostrils as she opened the big wooden door to "The Bear's Den Tavern." Astoria's rowdiest bar was filled with raucous shouting and a haze of cigarette smoke. Anything could happen at The Bear's Den on a Saturday night. The worst was a stabbing in the parking lot a few months back.

As she weaved her way through the crowd across the antique oak floor, her eyes met Mary's steely gaze behind the bar.

"I know, I know--sorry." Brandy said.

"Yep, you're late again," said Mary with a raspy cough. "What's goin' on with you lately?"

"Um, I---" she hesitated, hanging her head.

"Well, just don't let it happen again kid, yeah?" said Mary.

Brandy settled into the rhythm of the night, stepping and fetching whiskey shots all around. A logger in a red flannel shirt, highwaters and suspenders was leaning so far over the bar she could feel his hot whiskey infused breath inches from her face. Slack jawed, his bottom lip revealed a mass of chewing tobacco between his teeth and bottom lip.

He slammed down his beer glass and a grin spread across his bearded face. He had the widest chest and back that any human could have without being scientifically classified as a grizzly bear.

"Hey, Beef. You having fun?" said Brandy.

"Beef" leaned in lowering his voice, suddenly a somber flicker in his eye. "Sorry to hear about Ben. He was a great fisherman. So were you--I mean you still are--did they ever find his body? He just disappeared into thin air?" Beef stopped suddenly noticing Brandy's ashen face. "Sorry Brandy, I'm talking too much. Damn, I'm really wasted." He looked down bashfully.

"It's okay." Brandy said turning on her heel quickly to deliver a glass of wine to a table. "Really, it's okay," she said giving a weak smile.

As if on cue old Einer passed out. The old timer started his daily succession of Rainer “pounders” in the afternoon and almost always had to be carried home after last call by one of the greenhorns. They said he was almost weightless like a bag of crumpled newspaper. His small round face was full of boils and he wore a forest green knit cap that was too small and perched on top of his head. He only came alive for karaoke and the chance to sing his favorite song *Brandy You’re a Fine Girl*. He lived above the Finnish Steam Baths in an apartment next to the Sex Shop.

Einer annoyed the other bartenders, but Brandy felt an odd mixture of pity and jealousy. Since her husband Ben disappeared mysteriously at sea a few months ago, she resisted the daily temptations around her night after night. The numbing warmth of whiskey would ease her grief, but she had never fully believed that Ben was actually dead--no matter how crazy it might sound to others.

When Mary yelled last call, Brandy thanked Beef for getting Einer home safely and waved off repeated requests to walk her home. Admittedly, it was dangerous for a lone girl to be down by the river this late, but she was down there nearly every night and nothing had ever happened except for the sneaking feeling that someone was watching her.

The last of the fall leaves were rotting and turning grey, sinking into mush inside the gutters and puddles under the golden street lights--many of which had already flicked off for the night. She crossed Marine Drive passing Suomi Hall on her way to The Maritime Memorial--which had been built only a few years ago at the bank of The Columbia River under the Megler Bridge.

As she stepped into the center of the encircling black granite walls, the familiar words echoed in her head. Working as the captain on her family’s boat after her dad passed, she found herself repeating the same words to her own crew that her father drilled into her *own* head growing up: *It’s The Graveyard of the Pacific for a reason. Don’t fall in--you’ll be dead in minutes before anyone has a chance to rescue you.*

The vast indigo blanket of waves was undulating slowly in the wind. The River almost looked peaceful, but she knew better than to trust the river that had claimed the lives of the only family she had in the world--her father and her husband. Ben’s disappearance was the final straw. Brandy cursed the fishing life she once loved, put the family boat in dry dock and got a job at The Bear’s Den.

Tracing with her fingers along the stone, she found her father’s inscription: *Memento Mori, remember death*. Not many fishermen fathers enjoyed learning Latin. She pressed her numb cheek against the frozen granite and let the tears stream down.

She felt like someone was right behind her coming from the direction of the water. Before she turned around to look, a big orange moon revealed itself from behind the clouds. Then suddenly, huge droplets of torrential rain began to fall, smacking the side of her face. She

cinched her hood down over her face until only her eyes showed; the raindrops pelted her eyelids until she was nearly blind.

Remembering the feeling she had, she whipped around to see a figure dressed in foul weather gear directly in front of her. Was it Ben? The same swagger, the raingear he was wearing the day he went out on the boat and never came back. The hood was cinched down revealing two dark eyes with hands shoved in his pockets.

“BEN? BENNNNNN? Oh my God. Ben?!” she shrieked. What, I--don’t--understand” she almost whispered feeling hoarse from screaming into the wind.

Brandy fell to her knees in shock, grabbing his cold slimy green hipwaders in desperation, pressing her face against his leg.

The creature pulled her close with webbed claws and Brandy sobbed “Ben, you came back for me. I thought you were dead!” She was being squeezed--suffocated by the iron grip that began to bruise her arms.

“What are you?” She screamed.

Brandy started to lose consciousness as the monster pulled her toward the river. As her eyes started to close, she saw a man running toward her with a gaf.

As she slowly faded out, she heard:

“BRANDY, BRANDY, it’s *me* Ben!”

Then everything went dark.