

Mark Hannon

There's No Such Thing as a Free Lunch

As Siefert got off the bus from Buffalo's City Hall, he braced for the cold by pulling the collar high up around his neck and then jamming his hands in his coat pockets. Head down, his galosh-covered feet squeaked in the morning snow. The snow had just stopped falling when he had gotten downtown, and the sun was just coming out as he had come down the steps of the hall to the sound of scaping shovels. When his feet hit clean pavement in front of his bar, he looked up, pleased that the bartender had made the sidewalk as clean as a whistle, just like he always did. Siefert noted that the beer signs in the windows were lit, as was the sign over the door that read, "Schiller's Select Bar and Grill," a custom made maroon and white neon monstrosity that was installed to joyously proclaim the demise of Prohibition when old man Schiller went legit in 1933. When Siefert bought the place after getting back from Korea, he thought about changing the name and getting a new sign, but the regulars liked their landmark and he left it alone.

Through the steam-covered windows, he could see the usual dozen customers sipping sixty-cent boilermakers, some of whom were just off the night shift and some were pensioners following the early morning

habit of a lifetime. As Siefert pulled open the door, heads turned to see who was entering, mumbled “Hi Seef,” and turned back to their shots, beers and newspapers. Janik, the day bartender, stared at him through red-rimmed eyes as he wiped down the bar. Siefert went behind the bar, dropping rolls of change into a tin box next to the register and putting some papers in a drawer below it, Janik’s eyes following him.

“So,” Janik said in a low voice as Siefert put his jacket on a shelf, “vhat happens?”

“I made a deposit, and we go to work like usual,” he answered, pushing his glasses back up his nose where they belonged. “Under, what’s that movie’s name? The *Advise and Consent* of Anthony Phillip Lalle, Jr.”

Just then the door opened and two stocky individuals dressed in flannel shirts and plaid hunters’ jackets walked into the bar. Janik went over to serve them.

“Hey Janik, hey fellas,” said one.

“Good morning, plant life, working and retired,” greeted the other.

“Hello Uke, hello Tommy,” answered Janik, shaking hands with one, and then the other. “You guys early on dis street today. Vhat you gonna haf?”

“Schmidt’s draft,” replied the Uke, adjusting his peaked cap.

“I’ll have one of your famous Cokes,” answered Tommy.

As Janik went to get the drinks, Siefert walked over to the pair of vendors. “Hi fellas. Got any good records for the jukebox today?”

“Nah,” responded the Uke. “We really don't have any business over here today, we just came over to see you. Me and Tom were down at the Hall yesterday, getting licenses for some machines, and we heard some guys talking.”

“Friends of ours?” inquired Siefert.

“Not exactly,” continued the Uke. “One of Hanlon the lawyer’s cronies that works for the city. He was saying that Hanlon and Bergdorf were thinking of buying this saloon on the East Side and were going to try to get the liquor board to find some violations, so the owner would sell out to them.” Janik, who had come back with the drinks, stood listening to the conversation and shook his head.

“Yeah, I know,” said Siefert. “We’re probably gonna hear from them today or tomorrow, I figure. Thanks for the tip, lads. Janik, the boys’ cocktails. On me.”

“Sure, Seef. The boys been good to us, lotsa years. Maybe they can find us jobs...,” said Janik, his voice trailing off.

“Thanks for the pops, Seef.”

“Yeah, thanks. C’mon, Uke, let’s went.”

“OK, boys. C’mon back this afternoon, we’ll have some beers,” called Seef, as they headed for the door.

The boys gave each other surprised expressions as they went out. Seef never drank in his own place.

Siefert then turned back to his bartender. “Janik,” he began, “the OV guy deliver today?”

“Yeah, Seef, sure he did, but...”

“How about Smokie? Is he comin’?”

“Sure he will, around eleven, like always, but look Seef...”

“Hungry Bear Provisions?” rattling off the names of the suppliers due that day.

“Yeah, Seef, he already been here, but maybe we shouldn’t do the lunch today. It’s 1964, maybe we should do new things...,” but Siefert just smiled.

“Janik,” he answered, putting his hands on the Pole’s broad shoulders, “we’ll do the lunch today just like always.”

Janik shrugged, mumbled something about mad Krauts and went back to his customers. Siefert picked up a cigar box filled with receipts and glanced at them. The usual, he thought, his mind wandering.

Hanlon and Bergdorf had first come in a few months ago, two guys in suits and ties buying a round for the bar, like liquor salesmen. Chatting up the regulars, two perfect strangers dropping the names of American Legion ballplayers and their connections with RFK’s campaign. Janik took all this in while he served the round, then went over by the register and flipped a transformer switch that started the HO scale American Flyer running around the mantle that surrounded the barroom.

Siefert heard the train start up from the office in the back and came out. Janik caught his eye in the mirror behind the bar and nodded at the two businessmen who were talking loudly with their hands and barely touching their drinks. Seef walked over towards them, and as he did, Hanlon nudged Bergdorf.

“Hey, here’s the grand fella himself,” Hanlon said, sticking out his hand. “John Hanlon. I’m with Dudek and Mix downtown. This is my partner, Nate Bergdorf. We were in the neighborhood and decided to play a little hooky from work. Heard all about this place and decided to try it out. Buy you a cocktail?”

“Kevin Siefert. Just a coffee, Janik. You guys got clients over here?”

“Yeah,” intoned Bergdorf. “We have some people interested in real estate on this side of town. We’re trying to put a deal through for them combining several fairly big parcels in the neighborhood.”

“Things are changing in this neighborhood, Seef,” added Hanlon.

“That’s good. I wish you fellas luck on the deal,” Seifert said, shaking hands with them quickly. “I gotta run out to the bank. You guys have a good one, and we’ll see you soon,” he finished, as he pulled on his coat and went out the door.

That was their first visit, and Janik had them pegged as trouble right off the bat, he thought, surveying the bar while Janik dispensed cheap whiskey and sound advice.

The rest of the morning was uneventful, with deliveries on time and customers arriving and departing like the buses on Broadway during lunch. Janik poured and Seef talked, encouraging everyone to come back in the afternoon, which further perplexed the Slav bartender.

After their first visit, the two lawyers started coming in about once a week at different times. They always tipped the staff well, bought drinks for the regulars, complimented them on the softball or bowling teams that still filled the bar at night while hinting at the changes on the horizon, how other places were having a hard time fielding teams with people moving out of the neighborhood.

One time they came in and tried to get Janik to put up some Kennedy for Senator posters. “Boss won’t do it, no signs unless he knows the politician personal, is a friend with them. ‘Big shots in Washington can’t help you here on Broadway,’ he says.”

After Kennedy got the nomination, they came in again with posters and, ignoring Janik, waited until Siefert came out of his office.

“Hey Seef!” Hanlon said with a wave. *So now I’m Seef to these guys, eh?* the bar owner thought.

“Now that Bobby’s wrapped up the nomination, we thought you might be interested in putting up a

couple of posters here,” Hanlon said.

“We know they vote the D line in this neighborhood,” added Bergdorf, “and since we’ve met the man, we can get him to stop in here next time the campaign trail brings him to Buffalo.”

“You guys both know him, huh?” Seef said, rubbing his chin. They nodded, sensing a sale.

“Ahh, I’ve got plenty of friends downtown now, fellas. Do you guys know Russo, or Cudney or Tony Lalle?”

The lawyers looked at each other and shook their heads. “No, can’t say as we do, Seef,” said Hanlon. “But we figured you’d want to get on the bandwagon now, my friend, this guy is going places.”

“We brought two,” Bergdorf said, picking up the three-color oversized posters. “We figure one in the front window and one on the side of the building where everyone parks.”

“Hmm, I think we’re going to sit this one out,” Siefert said, and walked over to turn on the neon Genny sign in the front window.

A week later, they made their pitch to buy the place. Having gotten Siefert to sit down in a booth with them, Hanlon explained the deal. “Things won’t be the same in a few years, Seef,” he said, glancing at the mostly middle aged and white clientele. “Nate and I want the joint now, and it’s your chance to get out while the getting is good.”

“And a pretty penny we’re willing to pay you for it, Seef,” Bergdorf continued, writing a figure on a bar napkin and pushing it before Siefert.

A quick look told Siefert that the figure was nowhere near the sweat equity he’d put into the joint, even if he wanted to sell. “I don’t think I’m interested, gents,” he responded as he slid out of the booth.

“Hey, Seef, think about it,” Hanlon put in, but before he could continue, Siefert was off talking to a salesman about pickles.

The two shysters had kept coming in, badgering Siefert to sell out. The last few times they had muttered about violations that needed to be corrected and people they knew downtown that might take a dim view of such transgressions. Particularly giving food away.

“It doesn’t pay, Seef,” advised Hanlon.

“Not only that,” added Bergdorf, “but the liquor code says a tavern can’t give anything away free,” at which point Janik rapped his knuckles on the bar, signifying to the auto worker sitting next to Hanlon that his last beer was on the house.

Thinking about those two dupas, as Janik called them, Siefert got ready to set up the last free lunch counter in town. Around eleven, like always, as Janik said, Smokie delivered the rolls just as they opened. With the fresh bread in, they laid out platters filled with several kinds of bread and rolls, sausages, cold cuts, cheeses and onions on the bar, interspersed with bottles of fresh horseradish and mustard.

Today, the lunch crowd was rolling in, and it looked like it would be really busy. The Uke and Tommy came back, had their Schmidt’s draft and a Coke, but only Tommy ate, walloping into the food like a starving man while the Uke talked to a guy from the power company about getting some cigarette machines into his plant. Then Siefert spotted them out the window, coming across the street. Hanlon and Bergdorf, laughing and talking, with Tony Lalle from the liquor board in between them.

When they came through the door, both Hanlon and Bergdorf were still talking, and Tony, silently

listening, nodded to Siefert. Bergdorf started the ball rolling by waving a hand at the bar and saying to Tony, “See, there it is, plain as day.”

“Yeah,” chimed in Hanlon, “in direct violation of the licensing laws.”

The lunch crowd had quieted and was watching the irregular guests. Tony waved Siefert over and stepped forward to the bar.

“Hello, Mr. Siefert.”

“Anthony.”

“These fellas here,” jerking a thumb over his shoulder at Bergdorf and Hanlon, “have brought a tavern license violation on your part to my attention. They say you are serving food here free, in violation...”

“Of the State Liquor Authority Code,” Hanlon added.

“Yeah,” finished Tony. “Is there any way you can explain this?”

Janik, filling three beer glasses for the newest arrivals, looked like he was going to cry.

Siefert, hanging his head down, adjusted his glasses, spread his hands wide and answered. “Anthony, I am not giving this food away free. I put it out to sell it. I got menus with prices and everything,” he continued, reaching into a drawer beneath the register and pulling out a bunch of cheaply printed lunch menus that no one in the bar but Siefert had seen before. “And,” he went on, “these guys are not getting free food. They're stealing it, and I don't want to file charges.”

At this, a roar went up in the saloon, Janik went from dismayed to ecstatic and Tony smiled.

“By the way, you two,” Siefert said, referring to the lawyers, “since I can't give anything away free here, those beers are twenty cents each. American. The Uke said he was buying yours Anthony.”

“That’s bullshit!” shouted Hanlon.

“No, that's Simon Pure that Janik served you,” Siefert replied.

“I mean that crap about stealing! You don’t believe this malarkey, do you, Lalle?”

“Well, the menus do make it legitimate,” he answered.

“Come on,” said Bergdorf, pulling on Hanlon’s sleeve, anxious to get away from their would-be patrons’ laughter.

As the door closed behind the two, the Uke punched Tommy in the shoulder and said, “Get rid of that Coke, Tom, today we drink some vodka. Set the boys up, Janik... and don't forget yourselves and our friend from city hall.”