

The World of Beer

By Jackie Shannon-Hollis

Amstel. He starts with an Amstel then works his way around the world. Becks, Sapiro, Pilsner Urquell, Guinness Stout, Negra Modelo. Not in any order, just jumps around the world. Like his Claudine. Traveling her way out there.

"Bugiganga, baby." That's what he says when the girl behind the bar brings his fourth beer. Czech Republic.

"Whatever." The girl wipes the ring his last beer left. Her big hoop earrings skim her bare shoulders.

He lifts that beer and toast its brown light. "Let's get bugigangaed." That's the one word he remembers from Claudine's Portuguese tapes. It's the only one he asked her to explain. They were in the car, him driving and her with her head phones on. Claudine saying those Portuguese words, with their big r's and g's. She pulled the headphones off and said it slow, like he was stupid. "Boo-gee-gan-ga." Made each syllable a small country of its own. "Boo-gee-gan-ga. It's the junk, knickknacks, like in the stores of beach towns."

There was a car ahead of them that day, with one of those yellow ribbons slapped on its rear: Support our Troops. Claudine made a loop with her finger. Like that ribbon. "The pink ribbons like that," she said. "You know. The ones for breast cancer?" She cocked two fingers

into quotes. “My group says they should say ‘support our breasts.’” Claudine touched her chest. “What’s left of them.” He didn’t laugh. But she did.

The bar girl’s breasts drop and curve. The way they move, she’s got no bra on.

“Deckel my ass,” he says. His chin is down, almost in the beer from Ireland.

“Tickle your ass?” The way the girl says it, he doesn’t even have to look in the mirror behind the bar to see what she sees. Hair crept back, belly crept forward, some kind of sweat on his face that he can’t seem to wash off.

“Deckel,” Into the beer. “Deckel.” Another of Claudine’s words. Not foreign, just fancy. Like the journal that had the torn edged pages.

He’d flipped the pages, like a magazine, and stopped where Claudine had her list: Before I Die. “How much you pay for this thing?” That’s when she told him about deckeled edges on handmade paper. When did she get to know that? When did she start to care about such a thing?

Claudine used to be the kind of girl who would go to the store and get cigarettes and a six pack. One pack for her, one for him. When she couldn’t get pregnant, long after the doctors said it wouldn’t happen, long after he’d given up, she’d have him stop at the store on the way home. One time he got tired of waiting in the car and went in. She was in the medicine row. He watched her through the curved glass mirror at the end of the aisle. She spent twenty minutes picking out a pregnancy test. Read each box all the way through. She put the box on the counter and asked the cashier for a lottery ticket. He waited for her by the door, with the things he’d already bought. Six pack and some Marlboros. After Claudine got the lottery ticket, she saw him with his bag. Didn’t even try to hide what she’d bought. “Maybe we’ll get lucky,” she said. “One way or another.” She dropped her stuff in his bag. Took out the Marlboros.

The day the doctor told her the breast had to go, Claudine went into the bedroom and shut the door with a soft click that didn't ask him to follow. He waited there, by the door, until dark. He left the light off when he went in and laid down next to her. She was on her back. It was with his hands that he found her arms, folded across her chest. Each hand holding a breast. Tears, like quiet waterfalls, down the sides of her face.

It wasn't the breast or the cancer that took her away. It was more like he got cut out in that surgery. All those women around her after. "It made me see," she said. "What's important. Not wasting time." She didn't look at him then, just kept packing her things. "To do the things you want to do." He was nowhere on her deckeled list.