



Probability

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The first time this little guy comes in I'm new on the job. He looks around as if he's scared a prohibition agent will pop out of the walls and bite him. Then he gets up his nerve and sidles to the bar. His voice is as thin as the rest of him.

"Glass of beer."

I draw. He drinks and pays and goes out.

That keeps on, Monday through Friday at five-ten p.m., year in and year out. He slips in, peers around, has his beer, and pops out. Even in '33, when we become legitimate, he acts the same way—scared of his shadow. Except he isn't big enough to have a shadow.

During the war, when we're rationed, I save him his daily glass. He never fails to come in except for two weeks every summer when he's on vacation. From 1922 to 1953 he drinks one daily beer.

In thirty-one years, he and I grow older together, and after the first ten he talks a little so that over a period of time I manage to learn something about him. That first day he'd come in, he was on his first job out of college. Well, so was I, only I went to bartending school to learn how to mix prohibition liquor. But even so, it gave us something in common, and when he learned we had started life together—as he put it—he talked a little more.

His name is Pettis. Six months after I learn that, I get his first name. It's Rabelais, and I could see why he doesn't like it. But when he breaks down and tells me, he gets real bold and says:

"And what's yours, my male Hebe?"

"Mike Murphy."

"Naturally," he said. He laughs. It is the only time I hear him laugh in thirty-one years. I can't see anything funny.

He is a draftsman for those old skinflints Cartner and Dillson. When they die, their sons take over and are even worse. In the depression, Pettis gets a little shabby but he always has the price of a glass of beer. In '53 he's at the same desk and doing the same job he started on in '22.

In '35 he gets married. He tells me so. Tasting his beer, he says, "I'll be married this time tomorrow." I often wonder what his wife looks like but I never see her. Not even when it gets decent for ladies to come in, she never shows. Marriage doesn't seem to change him; he never looks happier or less shabby or less browbeat.

In '42 I heard his first complaint. By then we're both getting into our forties and, what with his lack of size and caved-in chest and my insides all busted up from pre-World War I football, the army doesn't want us. So he never misses a day except on his vacation.

He says, "I can't get raw materials." About three months later, I understand what he means when he says, "My hobby is inventing."

In '45 I ask him, "What do you invent?"

It takes him two years to decide to tell me. By now we are pretty good pals. He never tells anyone else that I know of. He says, "I invent machines. Super machines."

In '48 he says, "But they don't work. Someday... ."

And in '53, on the day of our thirty-first anniversary, you might say, he comes in and things are different. All different. I can feel it when he opens the door and comes in at five-o-nine instead of five-ten. There is plenty more different, too. He walks up to the bar like it's his and roars:

"Two beers, Mike!"

I drop a glass I'm so surprised, but I give him two beers like he wants. He gulps them both down, puts a foot on the rail and looks me straight in the eye. His eyes are a sort of washed blue. I've never noticed them before.

"Beer for the house!" he yells at me.

"Take it easy, Mr. Pettis," I says.

"Easy, hell!" he shouts and slaps a roll as big as his hand on the bar. "And call me Rabelais, Mike. We're pals, aren't we?"

"You bet," I assures him. And I mean it. Not because of the dough. That makes me sweat. I can't figure where this little guy gets such a wad. And good money, too.

He sets them up three times. By now he's feeling fine. I suggest he get going before he misses the last train home.

"I already missed it," he says proudly. "And I'm not going home. Let the old battle-axe really have something to complain about. Beer, Mike!"

In a way I hate to see it, but then I figure a man has a right to let off a little steam once every thirty-one years. Even so, I get a little worried when he asks for the phone and calls up his wife.

He says, "Myrtle, this Rabelais. Rabelais, your husband, you old sow." He takes a breath and says, "You're damned right I'm drunk. And I'm staying that way. Go home to your mother... . Oh yes, you are. You're leaving on the 12:05 tomorrow and you'll eat chicken a la king on the train and fall asleep at Holt's Corner and snore all the way home. And your mother will be mad because her left fender will get dented on the way to the station." Bang! He hangs up.

"Beer, Mike."

"Now look, Mr.—Rabelais—"

He ignores me. "Mike, who owns this place?"

I don't, but I'd like to. I tell him who my boss is and he hunts him up in the phone book and calls him. He says, "This is Rabelais Pettis. I want to buy your Fifth Avenue Tavern. How much?... Sold!"

And so help me, the boss comes down and Rabelais hauls bills from every pocket and lays it on the bar in a great big pile. Then he has the boss sign the place over to me. Me, Mike Murphy. I figure tomorrow when he wakes up broke I'll have to give it back. But tonight I own it. I'm real proud.

But I don't get to enjoy it. He says, "Mike, let's do the town." Can you refuse a guy who just gives you a thirty thousand dollar property? We do the town. We do the girl shows, and he yells at all the dames and tries to date the usherettes until we finally get pitched out. We get pitched out of five before I steer him to a hash house.

"Phooey," he says. "We'll go to the Buster for a steak." That's our fanciest place where the food starts at ten dollars. We have two of the biggest steaks I ever saw with champagne and stuff, and so help me, when Rabelais tries to date the floor show girls, instead of getting pitched out, we walk out with two of the cutest kids I ever hope to see. Only they're young enough to be our daughters or maybe grand-daughters even.

Rabelais is big hearted if not big in any other way. He says to his kid, a redhead a foot taller than he, "Do you have a fur coat?"

"No, Rabelais." She learns fast that he likes the name now.

"Ha," he says. "Then we'll get some."

"In the summer?" I asks.

"We'll make it winter," Rabelais says. "I'm tired of summer. Besides in '56 there's a new bar in town and it's a pip."

Now the three of us are halfway sober and we just look at each other and shrug. But Rabelais acts and talks normal enough. He calls a cab and has us hauled to an old cottage in the suburbs. He waves the cabby off with a twenty dollar bill. When we go inside, he points across the way. "I live there. This is my secret laboratory."

We think he is kidding us some more because there isn't anything but dust and cobwebs in the place. But he takes us to the basement and there is a whole mess of junk lying around. There are bars and gears and wires and some stuff that doesn't make any sense at all. It has cobwebs and dust on it too.

"My super machines," he says. "They don't work."

The redhead looks a little as if she thinks he's nuts. But what can she do? Already he's given her a hundred dollar bill just for fun.

"But," he says, leading us into another room, "this one does work."

There isn't anything in the room but a big metal plate on the floor with a wooden bench on it and levers and rods in front of the bench. "Climb on," Rabelais says.

We sit on the bench to humor him and he pulls one lever as far left as he can, then another a little ways, then another, and a fourth. Then he twists a rod to the right. The lights go out and a cold draft of air comes in through a window. When the lights come on the air is still cold. The girls are shivering.

"Three p.m., January 12, 1956," says Rabelais. "Let's go get fur coats."

So we go out the way we came in and it's daylight. And there's snow on the ground. The cottage is the same but the street is a highway now. Rabelais hails the fanciest looking cab I ever see and we get driven to town where he buys all of us fur coats in a store I never heard of. Then we go to a dinner club that makes the Buster look like a greasy spoon. None of us can say a word.

After he pays the check, Rabelais says, "I'm short of cash. Let's go to the bank."

"Banks ain't open," I remind him.

"Mine is," he says and makes a phone call. Pretty soon a big fancy limousine with a chauffeur drives up and we all pile in. I manage to balk long enough to buy a newspaper. Sure enough, the date is January 12, 1956.

We go to the financial section and right past my tavern. It's all lighted up and fancy looking and there's a big sign saying, "MIKE'S" outside.

Rabelais says, "You're making a mint, Mike."

"I see," I agrees, dazed. Rabelais flicks the paper with a silly grin and tells me to look on page four. I do and there's an editorial beside a cartoon of me, pot belly and all, and it says, "Mayor Mike Murphy agrees to run for Congress... ."

"Me?"

"You," says Rabelais. "You make it, too, Mike."

Before I can answer, we stop at a building lighted up. Over the door it says, "Pettis." That's all. It's his, the whole building. And it's full of offices. He shows me one where his former bosses are slaving over drafting boards. The bank part is closed but some slavies are working late as people in banks always do and we go in and Rabelais gets a wad of money and we leave.

It goes on like that. I'm ashamed to say we get sort of looped and the next thing we know we're in Paris and having a fine time. Then we take

another flier on his machine and it's summer. We enjoy that for a while and then try another season. It goes on that way for a couple weeks. Once we accept the fact that we're traveling in time, it's easy.

But Rabelais, even when he's looped, won't take us into the past or far into the future. He just says, "We have to watch probability, Mike."

I don't get the idea but it doesn't seem to matter much. We're having too good a time kicking around in the near future. Finally when we all feel ready for a Keeley cure, Rabelais takes us home. We land in the basement at the very moment we left it but with our fur coats and fancy luggage and souvenirs. Rabelais looks over all the gadgets we have and those that are too much ahead of our time, he throws away.

In a taxi heading for town, I smoke my dollar cigar. I'm happy. The girls are quiet, a little sad.

"It was fun," the redhead sighs. "Kicking won't seem the same."

"Quit that kind of work," Rabelais says. "Go to college or something." And he hands each of them a big wad of money.

Downtown we split up, each of us going off somewhere to get the rest we need. I sleep around the clock and a little more. When I wake up I'm the owner of a tavern still, so I figure I'm to be mayor in '54 and congressman in '56. It's a wonderful life for a while. The only thing is that I miss Rabelais coming in at five-ten for his beer.

In '54 I get elected Mayor like he said. My business gets remodelled and all is swell.

Then one night I go to sleep in my new house and I wake up in the middle of the night feeling a cold draft. When I turn over I roll onto a lump in the mattress and I know it was all a dream and I'm Mike Murphy, bartender, again.

The next a.m. I pick up the paper and it's the summer of '53, the day of Rabelais and my thirty-first anniversary and I'm back at the old stand. It was a fine dream, I says, and go to work.

At five-o-nine, though, I can't help looking at the clock. And sure enough, Rabelais comes in, walks up to the bar like he owns it and roars at me, "Two beers, Mike!"

I can't help saying, "Look, haven't we done this before?"

He grins at me. "And we may have to do it again a few times," he says.

By now I know him pretty well, I think—or maybe I dreamed I know him; I'm not sure. Anyway, I give him the two beers and wait for him to get around to telling me whatever is on his mind.

He goes through the same act as before—only I can't be sure he did go through the act or I dreamed he did. "Beer for the house," he yells.

"Take it easy," I cautions. "Take it easy, Rabelais."

"You never called me by my first name before, did you, Mike?"

I open my mouth to remind him that he told me to back in 1953 and then I remember it is 1953. That confuses me because I remember, too, that in 1954 I was—or maybe it's that I'm going to be—mayor. I just close my mouth and wait.

Rabelais takes his time. When the early rush clears out, he gets me off to one end of the bar and says, "Sorry to keep you waiting, Mike, but we have to do it all over again."

"Then it wasn't a dream?"

"No dream," he says.

"But everything was going fine."

"Up to a point," he says. "Up to the sixties."

Then he explains the way his machine works. But all I get out of what he says is that there's a law of probability so he can't go back and shoot his grandfather when the old man is a boy or juggle stocks in '47 to pay off and make him rich in '53 and things like that. That is why he wouldn't let us go back into the past. He was afraid we would do something to change history and—bingo.

And he wouldn't let us go into the future very far because up a way the atom bomb gets loose and it is awfully sad to see and dangerous besides.

"That was in the sixties," he says. "Or will be in the sixties. Only I got it figured out so it won't be, Mike."

It's over my head; I just keep on waiting.

He explains that he made a pile of dough in the near future by betting on horse races and cleaning out a few bookies and investing his winnings in stocks he knew were going up (and in fact they wouldn't have gone up if he hadn't looked into the future and known they would so he could go back and buy them) and anyway, he figured the exact day it would be safe to start and so he did.

"Only," he says, "we made a mistake by making you mayor and then congressman. I have it figured out for you to be congressman right from the start—in fifty-four. That gives you two extra years of seniority on Congress and so when the chips are down you have a little more pull."

"Fine," I says and start to take off my apron.

"The thing is," he explains, "there are a couple of lunkheads in Congress that get super-patriotic and they're the ones who cause the trouble

with the bomb getting loose." He leans over the bar and looks real serious at me. "And you," he goes on, "are the one who stops them before they get started."

"Me? Me, Mike Murphy?"

"You," he says. "We just go on a different time track from the one we tried before. And this one ought to work." He gives me his grin. "You should see the history books about the year 2000. You're a real national hero, Mike."

I throw my apron into a corner and roll down my sleeves. I'm ready.

And it goes just like Rabelais says. I pass up the mayor's job and go straight to Congress. In my third term I get a chance to cool those two excitable characters—cool them politically, that is, and I do.

The only thing wrong is that Rabelais never lets me go into the future to read the history books that tell what a great guy I was and the things I did. So I'm never sure I'm doing the right thing. Like I tell him, how can I be sure what to do if he won't let me read about what I did?

... THE END

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