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New Nonfiction

A NIGHT ALONE IN LAKELAND, FLORIDA

by G.S. Payne



I am a stranger, unencumbered by the distraction of familiar company. No one has come with me, nor am I meeting anyone here. The advantage is clear to me. Rachael seems to understand. She has set a Corona in front of me, the only non-domestic beer she has available. I've specifically asked that she not garnish it with lime. Or any fruit for that matter. How did that trend get started? Rachael doesn't know, but we agree that the concept is probably sourced in the offices of some Madison Avenue advertising agency.

Rachael is working the bar at the Terrace Hotel. It's a short bar, five stools across. I'm occupying the second one from the right. Behind me, as I can see in the mirrored wall behind Rachael, are four high tables. Seated at one of them is the only other customer, an older guy murmuring into his cell phone. It is 5:00 p.m., and I have just checked into the hotel.

The Terrace was built in 1924, part of the Florida boom times of the '20s. It's a grand old hotel, nine stories high and situated in the heart of the historic district in downtown Lakeland, a town of about 90,000 that sits off Interstate 4, midway between Tampa and Orlando. The Terrace is a member of the venerable HHA — Historic Hotels of America. To qualify for

HHA status, a hotel must be at least 50 years old, have a spot in the National Register of Historic Places, and be recognized locally as having historic significance. There are over 200 hotels registered with the HHA, scattered all over the country. My goal is to spend a night in each and every one of them. Everybody needs a hobby.

Most of the hotels in the HHA come with a ghost story or two. I ask Rachael if there's a ghost that haunts the Terrace. "Oh, that kind of talk creeps me out!" says Rachael. "But there's something about a woman years ago, a bride who hung herself on the night of her wedding. Something like that. People say she's been spotted from time to time. I hope I never see her, that's all I can say."

Rachael is twenty-three and thoroughly adorable. Her red hair is very short, but ultra-feminine, curled stylishly at her temples. She's lithe and, in the pseudo-tuxedo bartender uniform the Terrace has her wearing, looks even smaller than she probably is. It's a club-like bar, with leather stools and lots of heavy, dark wood. No doubt the Terrace wants a certain staid seriousness to be represented by the employees, but when Rachael turns around to work the antique cash register, I spy the very top of a tattoo right above her collar. She turns back toward me, and we talk some more about ghosts. She shudders and then laughs, and, for some reason, I find myself thinking of Audrey Hepburn. Since I'm old enough to be Rachael's father, and she's already mentioned a boyfriend, we're able to settle quickly into comfortable conversation. She's clearly a natural at it.

I talk with Rachael until I finish my second Corona (I had only planned on one at the Terrace Bar, but then I hadn't planned on Rachael) and then I make my way out into the cool, clear Lakeland evening in search of dinner, after promising Rachael I'll be back later for a nightcap. The Terrace has its own restaurant, of course, as all grand hotels do. The Terrace Grille looked inviting when I scoped it out earlier, but I am looking to go where the typical local might go, and so I hit the streets.

Since Lakeland is a small town, the Terrace is located right on — what else? — Main Street. I walk down it a block, under the glowing streetlamps, past brick buildings, many of them built, I would guess, in the 1940s, after the depression finally waned and money started coming back into the city. Most have glass storefronts, retail shops that are closed for the evening. Some have been renovated into office space, small law offices mainly. There's a coffee shop and a pizza joint.

On the corner, I come across Harry's Seafood Bar & Grille. When I checked into the Terrace, I asked the woman behind the front desk where a decent, local, pub-style place might be, preferably within walking distance. In addition to staying at all of the hotels in the HHA, my plan is to immerse myself in the local scene of each one. "Harry's is right down on the corner," she told me. But Rachael had mentioned an Irish place named Molly's just a block to the south, and it's relatively impossible to keep me out of an Irish pub.

Molly's is actually Molly McHugh's, but the locals naturally abbreviate.

It's a low-lit place with a long bar and an adjacent room with a pool table and a dartboard. The place smells like a bar — the scent of stale beer and cigarette smoke accumulated over the years. I feel comfortable right away as I walk in, past the three other people sitting at the bar. It's definitely an Irish pub-style place, the kind of joint that might get loud and raucous late on a Saturday night, with a band on the small stage at the far end of the bar playing sing-a-long Irish ballads like "Finnegan's Wake" and "Wild Rover." But it is a Thursday, and the music currently playing not-so-loudly over the bar's speakers is Buddy Guy's "Stone Crazy." I ask for a Guinness and a menu.

"Sorry, man, we don't have a kitchen," says Jeff, the bartender. Jeff is dressed casually in a flannel shirt and a ball cap. He's twenty-something and you get the impression his one-bedroom, rented apartment probably looks and smells a lot like the bar in which he works.

"Well, just the Guinness then." So much for the fish 'n' chips I had in mind.

"We can call out for food from the Gym," Jeff offers. The Gym is a sports bar across the street and, apparently, the go-to place for anybody who's hungry at Molly's because Jeff hands me a Gym menu from a stack he keeps behind the bar. I don't really see anything that grabs me from the standard bar fare that the Gym's menu presents and put it down and start reading a *St. Petersburg Times* that somebody left on the stool beside mine. They must have been from out of town too, because the *Lakeland Ledger* is the local paper of choice.

Jeff notices the headline on the sports page, as he sets the pint of Guinness down in front of me. Like all good bartenders at Irish pubs, he has somehow managed to carve a shamrock into the foam. I notice it but wonder how many people miss that subtle touch.

"They're probably going to let Peña go," Jeff comments with respect to the headline. Carlos Peña is the Tampa Bay Rays' Gold-Glove first baseman. But at the plate he hit a paltry .196 this year, the final year of his contract. Jeff thinks the team should try to keep him. "I mean, look," Jeff says, "I know his batting average sucks, but let me ask you this: don't you think that every hit he saves by making a great play at first is the equivalent of a base hit at the plate? If you could somehow factor defense into a batting average, the guy would be Ted Williams." It's a decent point and I agree. We talk some more about the Rays (they play in St. Petersburg, about an hour and forty-five minute drive west of Molly's) and the inequities of baseball, both of us lamenting the fact that the New York Yankees' payroll is typically four to five times that of Tampa Bay. Then I ask Jeff where, besides the Gym, I ought to eat dinner. He mentions Harry's. That's two recommendations and the conclusion seems foregone. I settle up with Jeff, grab the *Times*, and head back to Harry's.

It's against one of my self-imposed travel rules to visit a city and eat at a chain restaurant. The idea is to sample the local lifestyle. But with only five Harry's locations total, and all of them in the state of Florida, I figure

Harry's is acceptable. It's a New Orleans-style joint. Cajun/Creole food. Gumbo and crawfish and red beans and rice. A line has formed out front that wasn't there when I passed by the place on my way to Molly's. I don't like to take up a table as a single diner so I ask the hostess if I can order from the menu at the bar. She says sure and points the way. Harry's is a lot brighter than Molly's and a lot busier. I sit at the last remaining spot at the bar and order a Yuengling from Kirsten, a blond who welcomes me in a scripted way, which I suspect she learned as part of the restaurant's training program. I ask what's good and she tells me everything. I suspect she learned that too.

"Try the 'Bourbon Street Salmon'," says the guy sitting next to me. He says his name is Marcos and that he comes to Harry's at least twice a week and has tried everything on the menu. That's all the credibility I need.

"I'll have the salmon," I tell Kirsten. Marcos introduces me to Cindy who is sitting on the other side of him. Cindy is thin and older and tired-looking, as though she's been in bed with the flu for the past week. She is sloshing a white wine and I wonder at the relationship between her and Marcos, who seems younger and more energetic and significantly more sober. Cindy asks me what I do.

"I'm a writer."

"Wow, that is *cool*," she says. "What do you write?"

"Well, mostly I ghostwrite. Articles and books for other people."

"Oh, man, I *love* ghost stories," she says. Marcos rolls his eyes and I get the feeling he wishes he was with somebody else. Kirsten, meanwhile, has brought me some bread. It is no less than a loaf, sliced and warm and with a side of soft garlic butter. I decide that I like Harry's.

A chair has opened up around the corner of the bar, right beside Cindy and perpendicular to the side we are sitting on. An older, gray-haired man with a mustache and a slight paunch takes the empty seat. Both Marcos and Cindy know him. So does Kirsten, and I quickly get the feeling that everybody in town knows him too. This is one of those towns, and he's one of those guys.

"Big game this weekend," he says to Marcos. "I believe the Gators are going to have themselves a handful." Marcos nods and I figure this is a good spot to get in on the conversation.

"Nah, I'm thinking Florida by two touchdowns," I venture. In reality, I have no idea, but I know this is Florida Gator country. I just hope I'm not asked which team the Gators are playing this weekend.

"Ya think?" says the man. "Fella, I hope you're right. Hey, I'm Doug." I say hi Doug and introduce myself.

"He writes ghost stories," Cindy explains. Marcos rolls his eyes again. I briefly consider correcting Cindy but then decide against it. Doug and I talk football and he tells me the story of how he came to be a Gator fan, even though he was a running back for Vince Dooley's Georgia Bulldogs back in the late '70s. The two teams are notorious rivals.

"I blew out a knee in my senior year," he explains, "and the university

just basically spit me out. Maybe it's different there now, but when I got injured and was done for the year, I never heard from anybody again. It was like, 'Well, I guess we're done with him.' Anyway, I moved back here after graduation and just started rootin' for the Gators."

My salmon arrives, blackened and with a bourbon soy glaze. It's all I can do to focus on the conversation, which is meandering from football to other subjects and involves Doug and Marcos and occasionally Cindy, who participates predominantly by repeating something that's just been said and nodding enthusiastically. I have long since dropped the *Times* at my feet. Having a newspaper to read is a good substitute for conversation, if you find yourself alone at a bar with nobody to interact with. Somehow it makes you look not quite as alone. But there was never a need at Harry's.

After finishing my dessert, a chocolate chip and coffee ice cream caramel brownie thing called "Lulu's Mud Pie" (Cindy just *had* to try some so I slipped a small portion of it onto a napkin for her), I bid adieu to my newfound Lakeland friends. Doug tells me not to be a stranger. "You come back to see us." I promise I will and head back out onto Main Street thinking that a cigar right about now would be just the ticket.

In my pocket is an Arturo Fuente Presidente which I was able to procure at the front desk of the Terrace. Upon arrival I had discovered that I had failed to pack an after-dinner smoke and asked the parking valet where a guy could get a good one. "We sell 'em at the front desk," he said. Sure enough, there was a big wooden box on the counter marked, appropriately, "Cigars."

"There's all kinds of different ones in there," said the gal working the desk, "and I don't know anything about them, so you'll just have to pick out whatever you want." The Presidente was twice the price of what I'd pay at my local tobacconist, but I didn't come to the Terrace to save money, even though at \$120 per night, the hotel is something of a bargain. A similar hotel in, say, New York, would probably be three bills or higher.

Adjacent to the Terrace is Lake Mirror, one of many small lakes and ponds that dot the downtown landscape. A little pre-trip research told me there are 38 named lakes in the surrounding area, making it easy to see how the town got its name. Lake Mirror is probably about a third of a mile in circumference and there's a beautiful sidewalk complete with a balustrade that rings the lake. A fountain rises in the middle, and I can see small groups of geese and ducks here and there around the fringe of the lake. Along the walk are benches every twenty or thirty feet, and ornate lampposts that provide a warm glow on this cool, November evening. It's the perfect place to stroll and enjoy my Presidente.

Halfway around the lake I can see the Terrace Hotel, now on the other side, and I suddenly notice I am completely alone. Downtown Lakeland is not exactly hopping on a Thursday night, but I am struck by the fact that not even one homeless person has made the lake's promenade their temporary refuge. I expect to see ragged men lying on the benches, grocery carts parked right beside them, a sight I have seen in so many small town

parks. But on this night it is just me and it is quiet except for my footsteps.

The lamplight casts shadows everywhere and the colors of the day have become washed out by the night and there is an eerie film noir quality to the surroundings. With a little fog, this would be a good place to shoot a 1940s murder mystery and I feel like I should be wearing a trench coat and a fedora. The atmosphere is appealing to me. So is the solitude, my treasured companion.

Once around the promenade, I walk across the street to Munn Park, just north of the Terrace. The park, I have learned, is named after the city's founder, Abraham Munn, who purchased 80 acres in what is now the downtown area in 1882. "Munnville" was a potential name being bandied about by the locals until they finally, and wisely, decided on Lakeland.

A block square in the middle of the historic district, the park is vintage small town America. I notice a circle of benches, and it's easy to imagine where the bandstand would be for the 4th of July ceremonies. There is plenty of open area in between the old oak trees that hang Spanish moss from their stout branches. A tall marble column with a Confederate soldier standing at its top rises in the center of the park. The monument reads: Dedicated to the Veterans of the Confederacy, June 3rd, 1910.

Here, I notice I am not entirely alone. A young couple is sitting on a bench towards the far side of the park. I contemplate walking over and striking up a conversation, but even in the relative dark I can tell that my interruption would be inappropriate. As a light breeze rustles the leaves of the oak trees above my head, it occurs to me that this is a fine night for young love.

I turn my head towards Main Street and the neon lights of Linkster's Tap Room. The doors are open and I can see the long bar inside and the glow of wall-mounted, flat screen TVs that run the length of it. The bar looks inviting, and I'm about done with the cigar and ready for a beer.

Behind me, I suddenly hear a train whistle and turn to see a short freight train, maybe only eight cars long, clacking its way along the tracks that run just north of Munn Park. There are train tracks all over Lakeland and it's almost impossible to drive from one end of the town to the other without having to stop at least once at a railroad crossing, no matter what time of day. Standing in the park, listening to the train go by, it occurs to me that if it was a little closer to Christmas, I might as well be standing under somebody's Christmas tree. A wooden figure come to life, set down in a make-believe park in the middle of a make-believe toy town. I half expect the train to start circling the park.

Linkster's Tap Room is long and narrow, the bar along one wall and a single row of tables and chairs against the other. The TVs that line the wall above the bar are each tuned into something different. There's an Orlando Magic basketball game on one of them, a Tampa Bay Lightning hockey game on another, a college football game on a third (Connecticut versus Pitt), and miscellaneous sports and news programs on the rest. I sit down in front of the Lightning game. The bartender, a good-looking kid with a

backwards Rays cap, comes over with a friendly smile and asks, what'll it be? I ask for a Newcastle. "Coming up," he says, and then he reaches across the bar to shake my hand. "I'm Dale." Hi, Dale, I say.

I glance to my right and see two guys lighting cigars, and I wish I'd saved some of my Presidente for Linkster's. This must be the last place on earth where a guy can legally light a cigar and order a beer. They see me looking their way and nod and I nod back and soon we are talking.

Brian is about thirty, black, with a big smile and friendly eyes. He is from Brooklyn. For a while, he lived in Manhattan. I ask him about the contrast. What brought him here. "Originally came down for school," he says. "But then I decided to stick. I like the weather. Yeah, it's a different pace than New York, but it suits me. I still have family up there, and I go up and visit a couple times a year to kind of get my urban fix, but I'm always happy to come back down here."

Brian's buddy is Sam. Sam has been glued to the Magic game but the period has ended and we all start talking about sports. Dale has set down a second Newcastle in front of me, anticipating that I would want another one without bothering to ask (good call), and joins the conversation. We all agree that we're sick to death of professional, prima donna athletes, but since people keep paying to see them, not to mention eating up everything that's reported about their personal lives, then maybe the fault belongs to society. The conversation continues and, as the second Newcastle begins to disappear, I start weighing my next move. I'm good for one more beer on this night and am enjoying Linkster's. But I had made a promise to Rachael back at the Terrace. Rachael wins. I shake hands with Dale and Brian and Sam. As I'm walking towards the open door and feeling the night breeze, I hear Dale behind me. "You come back to see us." I promise I will.

"Corona, no lime," Rachael smiles as I enter the Terrace bar. Soon one presents itself in front of me. There are two other guys at the bar now and a couple sitting at one of the high tables. The guys are sitting at opposite ends of the short bar and I sit between them.

"Rachael," I say, "let me ask you something. Where are the bums in this town?"

"The bums?"

"Yeah, I took a walk around the lake out here and through Munn Park and I didn't see even one. In other places I've been to, parks like that, full of benches and common area – they're magnets for homeless people. What's the scoop?"

"You'll find them a little farther north," says the guy to my left.

"Well, I wasn't exactly looking for them. I was just wondering."

"They built a couple shelters a few blocks north," he continues. "And the cops have done a good job of kind of herding them up there. They've learned to stay out of the historic district."

"Either that, or they're just good at camouflaging themselves," says the guy to my right. "How do you know I'm not one?" he adds with a sly smile.

"Yeah, I might be one, too," laughs Rachael. "Disguised as a bartender."

“Good disguise,” I say. We talk some more about the town, and Rachael brings up the Terrace ghost again, telling the other guys I was asking about ghosts earlier. Eventually, we are led into a discussion about horror movies and what is the best one of all times. We cannot agree. I say *The Shining* for its pure eeriness. The other guys kind of nod but are unwilling to put it at the top. Rachael has never seen *The Shining*, and I realize suddenly that the movie — one I had seen at the theater when it first came out — was made several years before Rachael was even born.

Eventually I finish my beer, and it is time to say goodnight. Rachael asks what floor I’m on and I tell her the fifth. “That’s where they see the ghost!” she says. She’s smiling, and I’m hoping she’s kidding. Then she asks if I’m staying tomorrow as well.

“Nope, gotta get back on the road tomorrow,” I say. “But I have really enjoyed your town.”

“Well you come back and see us,” she says. I promise I will.

Maybe, I think, on the way back from St. Augustine I will do just that. A small port city on the Atlantic Coast, St. Augustine is a two-hour drive to the east and my next destination. Founded in 1565, it bills itself as America’s oldest city. In the heart of the historic district is the Casa Monica Hotel, built in 1888 and another member of the venerable HHA. As usual, I will arrive there a stranger.

G.S. Payne was born and raised in Pennsylvania. He earned his undergraduate degree from Penn State University and, eschewing the confines of academia, has been largely self-educated in the twenty-plus years since, devoting his energies towards the study of his true passion, creative non-fiction. Now living on the Gulf Coast of Florida, he works predominantly as a ghost writer, specializing in narrative non-fiction, memoir, and prescriptive business books. His clients have included captains of industry, athletes, and people whose lives nobody would believe had he not been there to document them. When not toiling in relative (and welcome) anonymity with his clients’ work, he spends his time with his hobby which is, indeed, spending the odd night in one of the venerable old hotels of the HHA. Either that, or on El Pilar, his sailboat, and splitting his time between Clearwater and Key West, paying homage when at the latter to his hero, Ernest Hemingway, by drinking in the same bars in which Papa himself drank. Works in Payne’s own name have appeared in Foliate Oak, Straitjackets, and History Magazine.