



Whisker Lickins
A story by Antaeus

As I get older, I think back on my life. The things I've done, the places I've been, and the people I knew.

Mostly, though, I think about the people I knew as a kid. Not my uncles, however, and definitely not the priests I served under as an altar boy. My father was the only family member who positively influenced my life as a child.

If I could go back, I'd tell a few of my uncles to go to hell, especially the priests, but they are all probably there already.

I could count the number of people, other than my dad, who positively influenced me on one hand. One of the earliest people was a man I called Whisker Likens. I first met the man when I was seven and cleaned the toilets in my uncle's bar before school.

Whisker Lickins was the kind of man who would listen in as an eight-year-old boy attempting to get out of trouble by telling his father a fabricated story. Then, when I had finished spinning it to my dad, he'd comment.

"That's a tall tale well-told, lad, but it still smells like a fart in a diving suit to me," he'd say. Then he and my dad would have a good laugh.

When I knew him, Whisker Lickins was an old man of sixty (which doesn't seem so old now). He had hunched shoulders and always wore a beat-up tweed jacket that was too big for him. He was quick to laugh at his own jokes and had a kind face. Unfortunately for him, it was the kind of face that looked like an old piece of red leather left out in the sun too long.

He had a fat walrus mustache under his alcohol-induced red nose that hid his upper lip. Every time he would take a sip of beer, he would lick foam from that mustache and rub the permanent stubble on his chin. I remember being fascinated by the red veins on his nose and the blue ones under his tongue.

I didn't know it then, but Whisker Lickins' ruddy complexion and deep-lined face were testaments to his hard life at sea. But it was his piercing green eyes that grabbed your attention. Those eyes had a knowing look in them—a look that said he was more

than the beer-drinking, egg-eating reprobate he pretended to be. To an eight-year-old boy, he was an enigma—a puzzle to be solved and a mystery to investigate.

I never knew his real name, but the man was a fixture at my uncle's neighborhood bar before I was born, and for the five years I knew him. If anyone else at the bar knew his name, they never mentioned it. Then, one day, when I talked to my father about him, I called him "Whisker Lickins."

Everyone had a nickname at the bar where I grew up. There was The Monk, Harry the Bat, Louie the Peddler, Bobby La Bate (French for "The Bat"), and many others. My nickname was The Kid or Charlie's Kid. Occasionally, the "F" word would be inserted in the middle, depending on what I was or wasn't doing at the time.

Well, It turned out my dad liked the nickname I'd given Whiskers, and it soon caught on with the rest of the bar's regulars. The guys at the bar would sometimes shorten it to "Whiskers" or "WL."

My dad would open the bar at six each morning except Sunday. I'd show up around six-thirty and start cleaning the toilets. Sunday was scrub everything day, and he didn't have to open the bar until seven that day. Since the bar didn't open until noon, it gave us five hours to deep clean everything.

Whiskers wouldn't be far behind. Even though the bar didn't officially open until seven a.m., Whiskers would appear at six-forty-five on the dot. On Sundays, he'd show up at five minutes to twelve. He was like the mailman. Rain, sun, sleet, or snow, you could set your watch by him. The man would always sit on the same barstool, where he could see the tiny-screen TV mounted above the bar. That spot was also where my father placed one of the baskets of hardboiled eggs and a saltshaker. Once settled in, Whiskers would order his "Breakfast Beer."

The man only drank Ballantine beer, whose trademark was three rings that meant Purity, Body, and Flavor. So, he would make an "O" with his thumb and index finger. The other three fingers would stick straight up. Whisker Likens did what Mel Allen, the Yankees baseball announcer, said to do:

"Make the three-ring sign for Ballantine."

As soon as my father was at the beer tap in the middle of the bar, the old codger would stuff two or three eggs in his tattered jacket pocket. My father knew but never said anything because the eggs were complimentary to customers. Besides, I think he felt sorry for the man, just as I did. Sometimes, my dad would make him a ham and cheese sandwich before he left work at six thirty in the evening. It was his way of ensuring the man had some protein for supper.

My dad was physically challenged, so he hobbled to the bar's far end after giving Whiskers his beer. There, he would line up eight empty shot glasses and beer glasses.

Around seven thirty, the big rig truck drivers from Davidson or Baltimore & New York Trucking would start showing up. They always sat at the end of the bar.

The truckers would start their day with one or two boilermakers and a couple of hardboiled eggs for breakfast. Then, they would leave the bar with a half-pint of ninety-proof Old Grandad whiskey in their back pocket. Sometimes, if they were feeling

generous, they would buy Whiskers a beer to wash down his egg before going on their way.

By eight AM, I had already lit a fire under the massive pot of water containing six dozen fresh eggs and was off to school. After school, I'd be back at the bar helping where I could, and Whiskers would still be sitting on his usual barstool. He'd spent the day eating the free hardboiled eggs, nursing his beer, and farting. Consequently, the seats on either side of him were always empty.

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Whisker Lickins was a retired Merchant Mariner who survived six U-boat attacks that sank all six ships he crewed. At the time, that fact meant nothing to me. All I knew was what the other patrons said about the man. He had no income and lived on welfare money and free drinks from the bar patrons who listened to his war stories. As far as I was concerned, he was a man who told exciting stories, but not someone I wanted to emulate.

I remember being fascinated by the stories he told. Especially the topless Haitian women he danced with, the golden sunsets he saw at sea, and the faraway places with strange names he visited. He would brag about the women he'd slept with and his drinking adventures. But it was the stories he told about his love of the sea that fascinated me the most.

The look in his eyes and the words he spoke painted vivid pictures in my mind. Although I had never seen the ocean, his stories made this inner-city kid feel that same love for the sea. Looking back, I think those stories he told about life at sea and far-off places prompted me to join the US Navy before I was seventeen.

However, Whiskers would never talk about what he experienced in World War II. Not even for a free drink. It wasn't until I joined the Navy that I found out why. While attending the Government Training Facility, AKA Boot Camp, at the Great Lakes in Illinois, I learned that the Merchant Marine ships hauled vital war cargo for the Allies during World War II.

Those hardy mariners sailed the supply ships, providing virtually everything the Allied armies needed to survive and fight on foreign battlefields. Those brave seamen sailed unarmed vessels through dangerous enemy waters to do that. Although the Articles of War stated unarmed ships were non-targets, to the Nazis, those ships were like ducks in a carnival shooting gallery. German U-boats would use the glow of lights from American coastal cities to silhouette merchant ships for torpedo strikes on the American coast. Merchant ships didn't only face danger from submarines. There were mines, enemy ships, and aircraft to worry about.

The movies they showed us about survival at sea while at boot camp were taken during the war. They were vividly raw, appalling, and uncensored. So, when I saw men and body parts floating in shark-infested water red with blood, I realized why Whiskers didn't speak about how he'd survived the six times it happened to him.

The non-military Merchant Mariners also suffered a higher casualty rate than any US military branch, losing 9,300 men in 1942 alone. Another 8,300 mariners were killed

at sea, and 12,000 more were wounded by the war's end. Those brave men had no military standing and received no government benefits until 1988. By that time, Whiskers was long gone.

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I learned that Whisker Lickins had a wooden leg when I turned ten. He showed it to me and let me touch it for my birthday present. I remember being disappointed because it wasn't a pirate peg leg.

As far as I know, the man never talked about how he'd lost his leg. However, when someone asked how he could drink so much beer, he'd say, "I've got a hollow leg."

As a kid, once I learned that he had a wooden leg, it cracked me up every time he said it—so much so that I'd start snickering even before he answered. Whisker Likens would give me a wink and a crooked smile.

Later in life, I was mortified when I learned Whisker Likens' story from a neighborhood historian. He had spent two days treading water while clinging to a piece of wood after a U-boat torpedoed his ship. A shark tore off his leg as they were hauling him into a rescue boat.

That's when I saw Whiskers in a new light. The man had fought in World War II and lost his leg. He was a hero, someone to look up to, a man to emulate. Hell, if I lost a leg to a shark and had to watch my buddies being eaten alive, I'd drink myself into a coma every day, too.

I don't know how often I used the hollow leg line with my friends as a kid. However, once I learned how Whiskers lost his leg, I didn't think the hollow leg line was funny anymore. Even today, the words irk me, especially when people with two good legs say them.

What I learned as an adult, from my negative assessment of Whisker Likens as a child, was that most people are judgmental, just like I was. They see the person before them and judge them in that one moment, with that one look. There is no thought given to what that person may have endured in life that molded them into what they see now. After all, isn't every one of us molded by our experiences in life?

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One cold and snowy winter morning when I was in my 12th year, my dad opened the back door to the bar to air the place out, as he usually did. That's when we found Whisker Lickins lying face up, covered in snow. He'd been lying there all night.

The medical examiner's report said that Whiskers had a heart attack the previous night when he stepped out of the bar to get some fresh air. I had already seen two dead bodies by the time I was twelve, so looking at a third didn't bother me. Compared to the suicide and the mob hit, Whiskers looked at peace. His blue face was relaxed in death, and many of the wrinkles were gone. His piercing green eyes were open and clouded over in death, and he looked smaller than he was the previous day. It was like whatever made him who he was had left.

I like to think Whiskers died looking up through the snow at the sea of stars. That all his dead comrades were with him at the end and escorted him to his reward. But then, I'm a writer who likes happy endings.

The poor man had no relatives, and no one even knew where he lived. Merchant Mariners don't qualify for a veteran's burial, or at least they didn't then. So, they buried Whiskers in a pauper's grave. It was not a fitting ending or place for a man who suffered and gave so much of himself for his country.

The face I choose to remember is not the blue one with ice crystals on his mustache. Instead, I picture Whisker Lickins as I knew him best. A beer-drinking, egg-eating freeloader, sitting in his spot at the bar. The man with the kind and cheerful face, the beer-foamed mustache, and a faraway look in his eyes. His body may be gone, but his memory is alive inside me.

Now that you've read his story, maybe you'll think of Whisker Lickins, too, once in a while.

Hindsight is twenty-twenty, and my biggest regret is that I never learned Whisker Lickins' real name. If I could go back in time, that's the first thing I'd ask him. Then, I'd sit next to him on a barstool and listen again to the stories he told. Finally, I'd slip the man a beer or two and stick some hardboiled eggs and a half-pint of whiskey in his jacket pocket when my dad wasn't looking.

I'd thank him for serving my country, then run home and write down all those stories. I'd do that so I could read them to my children and grandchildren, and his memory would live in them.

Yeah, you better believe that's what I'd do, and I'd do it in a heartbeat.