

A bottle of wine contains more philosophy than all the
books in the world.

Louis Pasteur

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Fledgling Press Ltd,
7 Lennox St., Edinburgh, EH4 1QB

Published by Fledgling Press, 2011
www.fledglingpress.co.uk

Cover design by Graeme Clarke

Printed and bound by:
Exactaprint

ISBN: 9781905916429

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the following people, without whom this book would not have been possible. They are the ones who got on with the work, didn't cause any problems (well, none we have written about) and propped up the buggers in the stories.

Barry Alexander
Nikkol Baillie
Liam Brown
Mary-Anne Burns
Debbie Chisnall
Liam Cornwell
Simon Costello
Trisha Flynn
Johnny Holmes
Joe Hunter
Izzy and Jessie
James McGregor
Counsellor John McNeil
Sharon Nicol
Pauline Ritchie
Liam Scott
Michelle Sheridan
Derek Sneddon
Louise Steele
Alin Wallace
Rosie Westlake

Foreword

Life Behind Bars is the brain child of two larger than life ex-pub landladies, Kate and Linda, who have been best friends for over thirty years and have racked up almost as many years collectively in the licensed trade.

Between them, they have owned and managed everything from a lap dancing bar to an old country inn, and many others in-between. Being a landlady is almost a vocation. You have to be all things, to all men, at all times. All that for probably fifty pence an hour. They have been threatened, they have been physically attacked and even shot at, and that was just family and friends. Wait till you hear what the customers get up to!

Join them on a hilarious journey meeting Tint Eastwood, the Three Marys, the Cider Man, The One Armed Bandit, Lily and Marion and many more, all with tales to tell.

Truth is often said to be stranger than fiction, and in this case it is hard to believe that many of these antics actually happened. But they did. All the names of the participants in this book have been changed by necessity; we don't want anyone being sued. Although there are a few we would dearly like to! Anyone who has ever run a pub or frequented one will immediately recognise the characters. In fact, it could be you we are writing about! Or maybe you are in the next one!

Sadly, in a few years there may well be no characters like Linda and Kate. Why? The rate of pub closures has reached epidemic levels. It is estimated that thirty pubs a week close - *thirty a week!* At that rate the 'Great British Pub' and the 'Great British Publican,' but more importantly the 'Great British Customer' will soon no longer exist.

So enjoy this; let's face it, soon there may be no more to write about!

How do you do?

This is the tale of two formidable ex-landladies, who fear nothing and no one, except perhaps the VAT inspector and even he came to grief at their hands (honestly he did.)

If we had a pound for every time a well meaning person uttered those immortal words ‘You should write a book,’ we could solve the National Debt. So we did; (write a book that is, not solve the National Debt) and here it is, so sit back and enjoy the ride.

I’m Linda and the senior of us two; obviously I don’t look it. And I am wholly responsible for my partner in crime, otherwise known as Kate, becoming a member of that once elite body ‘The Licensed Trade.’

I have always been the most generous of people, especially with pain and suffering, and she had avoided marriage very successfully so I saw no reason to let her off scot-free. I persuaded her to come and join us, and buy a pub. To let you know what a devoted friend I am, the night before her final interview with the brewery, I helped her demolish a litre bottle of vodka. Well you have to, don’t you?

How she ever got through that I’ll never know, but she did and she was off and running. I have to say she would have been better off running!

Within four weeks she had signed on the dotted line and paid her money. She was ‘official’ and ‘legal.’ This allowed her to sign passport applications and assure HMG that she had known most of the lowlifes in the area for at least ten years and they were of good standing! Apart from that there were no real advantages except that she could sell booze.

I generously offered to be her mentor and she would be my apprentice. That lasted exactly one hour. We had been friends for thirty years and had seldom had a cross word. Forty minutes

into her new career she very unpleasantly told me she would dispense with my services and I was to 'fuck off' back to my own pub and leave her alone. Well!

As I said earlier, countless people had told us to write a book and countless times the reply had been, "If we did, you'd never believe it."

All the incidents have some bearing on the truth and all the characters have no bearing on reality, they are all real; just have no bearing on reality.

You must be joking . . .

It is almost 2am and I am alone in the bar, lovingly nursing a delicious vodka and tonic and pondering over the evening's events. I enjoy the stillness of the place that less than an hour ago was bursting with life and noise, while the glasses remain strewn across the bar and the smell of cheap perfume and sweat still lingers. And the dog has piddled against the bar because you either forgot or ignored its plaintive barking to go out.

This is the world that we publicans inhabit and quite frankly, customers in general are a bloody nuisance and only make the place untidy. I would much prefer them just to send us a cheque once a week; we'd then supply them with booze delivered to their home and let the buggers mess up their lounges, be sick in their toilets and shag their own wives. How pleasant and profitable life would be.

But till that happens I can enjoy the solitude, until the phone breaks my reverie. All pub phones ring at a hundred decibels so they can be heard over the Saturday night noise. But at 2 am in an empty bar, it could summon the dead. So I struggle off a wobbly bar stool, (well I think it's the stool that's wobbling) wondering who has lost their keys, their mobile phone, or maybe a husband MIA.

"Hello?"

"Hello it's me."

"For fuck's sake, it's 2am which *me* is it?"

"It's *me*, me"

Then the penny dropped.

"What's wrong? What's happened?"

"Oh my God! Oh my God! You'll never guess! Big Agnes dropped down dead."

"You're kidding!" (Why anyone says this, or why anyone would joke about such a thing is beyond me.)

“Of course I’m not kidding. Oh my God it was terrible. We’ve had the police, ambulance, fire brigade. We even had to shut the bar early; lost a fucking fortune.” (Oh yes, we are all that crass!)

“What happened?”

“Christ, you’ll never believe it and if you laugh I will NEVER speak to you again.”

God it *was* serious.

“What happened?”

“She dropped down dead.”

“Dead?”

“Don’t you laugh.”

You should never say that to anyone. Even if it’s not funny, they are going to roll about hysterically. I could feel the laughter rising already and I didn’t know what had happened.

“Well she dropped down dead. Right at the end.”

“The End? End of WHAT?”

“You dare laugh! Her song.”

“For fuck’s sake, her song? She was singing?”

“Remember we had a big karaoke competition on.”

“Right, right, and what happened?”

“Well Agnes had just come to the end, given it full blast, grand finale and then she just dropped down, stone cold dead. Oh my God, I still can’t believe it.”

Why would she think I’d laugh, what could be remotely funny about that? There’s more to this!

“What was she singing?” I whispered.

“I knew it, I knew you’d twig!”

You know what’s coming? You’ve already guessed? What would I twig? What was she singing? Yes folks, it was:

‘I WILL SURVIVE’

“Hello? Are you there? Linda? Hello, hello?”

Happy Birthday . . .

It had looked like it was going to be a really good night. We had a 50th birthday party booked. The family, who were good, regular customers, had been decorating the lounge all afternoon and it was spectacular. There were masses of helium balloons, streamers and party poppers everywhere. I knew the cleaner would go fecking ballistic in the morning and demand double time, but hey ho!

The sandwiches were cut, but not curled! No one had burned the sausage rolls and we managed to get the cat's teeth marks off the chicken drumsticks. Guests were arriving bearing gifts, all well scrubbed and ready to party. I had no misgivings about this crowd as I knew them well. Maybe I took my eye off the ball a little, and gave them the benefit of the doubt. Not clever, there was BOOZE involved.

The karaoke was belting out the old favourite 'I Did it My Way' sung by the latest Frank Sinatra wannabe! Shame she hadn't shaved and changed her socks. Drinks were flowing, tills were ringing and I was in the kitchen cutting the birthday cake when I was suddenly aware of the silence; that eerie silence when all you can hear is the music from 'High Noon' ringing in your ears.

The two adversaries had been staring in silence at each other for the past three hours; not a word had been spoken. Many, many years previously, in fact probably at the 21st birthday party, one had inadvertently spilled the other's drink and committed the cardinal sin of not 'getting them in again.' Sacrilege in a Scots pub.

Suddenly one of the two jumped up, stared malevolently into the other's face and with the battle-cry of the wronged—

“Aw, fuck it!”— he knocked the other clean out.

Then the party really began, tables, chairs, drinks, handbags and hair extensions went up in the air, and all the while the karaoke belting out ‘Send in the Clowns.’ Sometimes I just give up!

“Great party!” shouts one wit as I propelled him bodily out into the night air.

It looked like a scene from the *O.K. Corral* and the Indians had gained more than a few scalps. The birthday boy was under a pile of chairs; snoring his head off, dead to the world. He was loaded onto a ‘legless table’ by a couple of his ‘legless relations’ and carted off.

“SAY GOODBYE TO THE DEPOSIT!” I roared after them.

“Cheers hen, brilliant night! See ya tomorrow.”

Bloody numbskulls. And then spying the DJ, I let him have it too. “SHUT THE FUCK UP and pack your gear away ya eejit. The party’s over and don’t think you’re getting paid either!”

While this was happening the bar was full to bursting with all the local neds, who had missed the action and perhaps felt a little cheated; after all it was Saturday night and it wasn’t a good Saturday without a good fight. And they didn’t consider that to be a good fight.

No blood, no stitches, only a couple of broken chairs and the karaoke machine still intact. (Average life span of a karaoke machine in a town bar was six months.)

So round two was about to kick off. However, they hadn’t reckoned with me. I was absolutely spitting mad, dancing with temper. When calm, I am a force to be reckoned with, but in full sail and ready for action; more dangerous than a caged cougar!

I studied the group for approximately thirty seconds and they studied me. Bearing in mind most had double vision by now; I must have looked like a mob! I moved in on the ringleader, who was backing hastily towards the door, all the while making wisecracks just to keep face.

Should I cut him off at the pass? Or just go for it? The staff were waiting with baited breath, ready to spring to my aid, *my* aid! I don't think so! One snarl, just one snarl, that's all it took, bit of an anti-climax actually and the bar was empty. Disaster had been averted, well for us anyway.

Poor Tony the Chippie had the remains of the birthday party and the neds in a face-off. He lost a plate glass window and his beautiful shiny red formica tables never stood properly upright again.