

THE UNFRIEND ZONE



JOE TOWNSEL

**THE
UNFRIEND
ZONE**

AND

**THE
MANIAC
IN THE
MIRROR**

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ISBN #: 978-1-365-68452-4

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Cover Design: Joe Townsel
Editors: Erich Paetow and Joe Townsel

First Printing: January 2017
Second Printing: September 2018

Don't mess with what lies beyond the glass.

THE UNFRIEND ZONE

Life is full of nice surprises.

A secret admirer left a very special gift on my front porch.

That's not the surprise, really, that I got a gift from a secret admirer. I've gotten my fair share of roses, candies and other silly presents left for me for those who preferred to remain anonymous.

No, the surprise was the nature of the present.

When the doorbell rang, I expected my visitor to be on my front porch, ready to take in my classic beauty. So I made my way to the door leisurely, knowing I was worth the wait.

I was disappointed to discover this visitor didn't wait. In fact, there was no trace that anyone had been at my door. Not even a residual cloud of dust, like in those Roadrunner and Wile E. Coyote cartoons.

But my visitor did leave something behind.

On the porch was a comically wrapped box. Not postal wrapped, but with gift wrapping paper. "Merry Christmas!" was written in red and green font that I can describe only as "flamboyant." I laughed out loud. It was September 15th.

I picked up the box. Upon closer examination, I saw that one end of the paper didn't quite reach the other. To rectify this, the giver simply, and crudely, slapped down a scrap of non-matching paper to cover the exposed portion of the box.

I had a 10-year-old nephew who could wrap a present better than this. But who knows? Maybe the person who gave me this most unusually-wrapped gift was about 10. Not that I'm bragging or anything, but I have admirers of all ages. Oh, the burden of being a popular babe that all the boys pine over! (Kidding. Sort of.)

Well, I speculated long enough. Time to see what treasure was encased in this most unusual wrapping job.

I took my present inside, set it on my coffee table, and began unwrapping. It was a bit of a chore, since the out-of-season paper had been plastered down with no less than a full roll of Scotch tape.

When enough of the paper was gone to expose the appearance of the box, I sat stunned for a few moments.

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It was an iPad.

Would someone really be so generous as to give me such an expensive gift? It was also a little creepy, but of course, that's always outweighed by "expensive."

The answer: Probably no to both. I noticed that the box was missing something necessary to make this an expensive *new* gift. No shrink wrap. The box had been opened. And there was a large puncture in the cardboard just above the iPad logo. Hopefully, someone wasn't giving me a live frog, lizard, or something else that required air holes.

I took off the lid, expecting something lame and cheap instead of a spiffy new tablet.

Surprise again. It was an iPad after all!

No, wait. After a closer look: something very much like an iPad. It looked like one, for sure, but not quite.

It actually looked like something ... hand-made?

That was a little weird. But intriguing.

There was a card in the empty box.

Happy Birthday Darlin'! I made this just for you! Let's be friends, whaddya say?

A tablet crudely wrapped in Christmas paper in September. And a note wishing me a happy birthday when mine is in March. Didn't know what to make of that, but no matter. I tossed the note aside, like a kid tosses clothes aside in favor of getting to the new toys at Christmas.

I was more interested in the iPad knock-off right now. I was intrigued by this must unusual tablet, but cautious as well. I didn't want to mess with it until someone I trusted had a look first.

And I knew exactly who to see to have it checked out.

Howard is my platonic guy friend, and has been since we were kids. I don't have many platonic male friends. Or many girlfriends for that matter. The first group wanted to get into my panties. The second group was jealous because men would fall all over themselves, buy me anything, do anything for me, for the slim chance to get into my

panties. Really, I don't mean to sound like a stuck-up bitch. But what's true is true.

Howard was the same as the other guys, but also different where it counted. I knew he wanted me. (All straight guys did. Some bi and gay guys did too, for that matter.) But Howard put on the best show of being just a friend, and was always available when I needed him.

My former best friend Doralea would often scold me for simply "taking Howard off the shelf when I needed him, dusting him off, and putting him back on the shelf until needed again." In the same breath, she would also tell me how much I demeaned myself by pursuing men unavailable and out of my reach. The classic "just a friend" and "bad boy" dilemma.

I thought both of her judgments were a bit harsh. It was those types of disagreements that led to our falling out, more than anything else. I loved Doralea to death, but she was a "Plain Jane" (compared to me anyway). If I'm being honest, I thought her holier-than-thou reprimands smacked of envy.

I never intended to take advantage of Howard. But even though he did a good job of hiding it, I caught him checking out my cleavage and butt on occasion. I understood, of course. It was the nature of the male beast. It takes tremendous self-control for a man to ignore a nice set of jugs and a luscious ass. I don't care how "platonic" the relationship is. If you doubt this, go watch *When Harry Met Sally* again.

Besides, if he could help me with a problem, and he got to check out my bod, well, that seems mutually advantageous to me. And yes, I'm a little flirty because I like the attention. What girly girl doesn't? But I would never lead someone on. Who wants to deal with that with the consequences of that?

I stepped onto Howard's front porch. Correction: his parents' front porch. Even though we were both in our mid-twenties, Howard still lived at home. I'm sure you've seen in movies that the high school nerd blossoms into a cool multi-millionaire by his first high school reunion. Well, that may still happen for Howard, but for now, he is still the stereotypical nerd/geek.

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Howard opened the door. He was very surprised to see me. As expected, his eyes went straight to my chest. (Well, his gaze, not his eyes. Although his eyes might have popped from his sockets in extreme lust; just like in those old cartoons with the horny, salivating wolves.)

I have to admit something else: Even though Howard would always do a favor for me, I would put on something just a little bit sexy to grease the wheels. Especially for a favor that might take some time and effort, or one he may be reluctant to do for me. To ensure his compliance, I treated him to a low-cut t-shirt and high-cut jeans shorts.

By contrast, Howard had a stained football jersey on. (He himself was not the least bit athletic but was a moderate New England Patriots fan). His ensemble always featured plaid shorts as well. And the *pièce de résistance*: two mismatched argyle socks with his prized leather sandals worn over them). I always giggled a bit when I saw his socks. I'm sure it hurt his feelings, but I couldn't help it. And I always composed myself quickly.

"Yvonne," he said, wiping something from his hand to his shirt. His fingertips were covered with the orange residue of Cheetos. "This is a surprise."

"I'm sorry Howie, I should've called first."

The only thing he ever corrected me on was the use of his preferred first name. Calling him "Howie" tore a chunk out of his manhood, I suppose. But anything else I said or did to annoy him, he managed to refrain from comment and rebuttal.

"Yvonne, please. For the millionth time: call me Howard."

"You're right. I'm sorry ... Howard. It's just that you were Howie to me for many years."

"And still am, it seems."

His expression softened, and his shy smile emerged.

"No worries," he said. "And you were Evie to me for a long time."

"Oh, sweetie," I said, tapping his nose with my index finger. "I'll always be Evie to you!"

Touching Howard anywhere on his face always made it turn beet red, and I loved to torture him this way. We both played the game, so it was okay.

“Okay, okay, you big tease. Come in before the neighbors start to talk.”

We went into the living room, which was always very dark. All three members of Howard’s family had light sensitivity issues (or so he claimed), and the drapes were always closed on bright sunny days. Sometimes you had to be careful not to bump your knee on the furniture in the dark, even at high noon.

We took a seat on the sofa. Howard sat as far away as possible without actually sitting on the end table. I patted the cushion next to me, and smiled, telling him to sit a bit closer. He complied.

“Are your folks home?” I asked.

“No, they’re out of town for the weekend.”

“Hmm, really?” I said, raising my eyebrows. “Interesting! So we have the house to ourselves?”

“Stop it, you hussy!” He said, laughing nervously. I laughed too, not at my own corny seductive behavior, but at his use of the word “hussy.”

“Just joshin’, my friend. Actually, I think it’s great that your mom and pop are getting out these days.”

Howard’s parents were very nice, and their good qualities were absolutely inherited by their son. Unfortunately, one bad quality was passed on to Howard as well.

Howard’s father retired a few years back, and his mother followed suit only six months later. Howard told me how increasingly difficult it became for both of them to drag themselves out of bed and get to work. Once they were both done with their insignificant careers, they wasted no time in getting under each other’s feet. Homebodies since the beginning, they become virtual shut-ins in short order. Until a few weeks ago, they almost never left the house.

I didn’t visit often because, well frankly, as an adult, I’ve never been big on visiting a grown man who still lived with his parents. Even if the grown man was supposedly only a platonic friend, like Howard. I found it unsettling and I felt like I regressed a little, just

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knowing his parents were in their bedroom down the hall. Suddenly, I was Evie again, seeing if Howie could come out to play.

Or worse, Howard would take me to his room to chat. His bedroom was still that of a teenage boy's, adorned with pin-ups of busty half-naked models (leering at us with their two-dimensional seductions). There were also various superhero action figures (dolls), and (no joke) a "Star Wars" comforter and sheet set.

Recently, he left me alone in the room to get us a beer, and I poked around a bit. Under his bed, I found an impressive collection of *Playboy* and *Penthouse* magazines. I wondered how often he actually opened one and held up a centerfold with one hand, in this age of readily available free Internet porn.

Since my visits were infrequent, the crippling paralysis of his parents' worsening agoraphobia was always very apparent, alarming and depressing. As mentioned before, I think Howard inherited this fear as well. I had no doubt he would be a shut-in also, if not for his duties to run all the errands and take care of all the business of the household.

The décor of the house was the same as your grandma's, and the stifling air was musty. Since retirement, the closed drapes and the neglected personal hygiene of the entire family created a habitat so dark, dank and stinky, it reminded me of the old house Norman Bates shared with his poor mummified mother. In short, the house reeked of old people.

But, a little less than a month ago, something lit a fire under the butts of Howard's parents. Suddenly, they got a second wind and started living their lives to the fullest. Howard joked, telling me he had become an "orphan," but in the happiest sense, of course.

I was happy for his folks, and even happier for myself for all the reasons I mentioned before. The house was still dark and gloomy, but at least I felt like I was visiting a man who didn't always have Mommy and Daddy lurking in the shadows.

As I entered the dimly lit room on this occasion, I was relieved to find that at least the stink, which had been diminishing, was now completely gone. Once my eyes adjusted to the dark, I could see

Howard's face was even more red than it had been while standing on the front porch a moment ago.

Mission accomplished! My poor friend was putty in my hand. And he even provided the million-dollar question to get the ball rolling.

"So what do you have there?"

He pointed to my box. My present, I mean. (Get your minds out of the gutter.)

"Well, Howie ... Howard, I did have a little ulterior motive coming over today."

"So, what else is new?" he asked.

I took the tablet out of the box, and handed it to him.

He took his eyes off my boobs (which I'm sure was a Herculean effort for him), and he now seemed mesmerized by the iPad knock-off he now had in his hot little hands.

"Wow! Where did you get this?"

I told him how a secret admirer left it on my porch.

He turned the tablet around in his hands, examining the front back and edges.

"This seems almost ..."

"Hand-made?" I finished.

"Yes, exactly! I mean, there *are* imperfections. But the type of flaws that come with something made by hand and not by a machine."

Howard put his index finger on the upper edge, which made me a bit nervous.

"Are you sure it's okay to turn on this ..."

Before I finished my question, he pressed the power button and the tablet came right to life. I was *sure* it was completely shut down a moment ago. Even so, this was quick even if the device was just waking up from a temporary slumber.

"That's impressive," he observed. "Absolutely no boot-up time."

"It was completely off, then?"

"Yes! This is already quite the device. I would think something hand-made would be slower to respond, not the reverse."

"May I?" I reached for the tablet.

"Sure. But I want to have another look."

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“Of course. That’s why I came over.”

He took on that hurt puppy dog look. Good Lord!

“And to see your handsome face of course.”

Now chipper again. Crisis averted. That was a close one.

Howard handed it to me.

I immediately felt a low, soothing vibration. It was almost like getting a massage for my hands. Honestly, it reminded me of holding my vibrator before getting down with it.

I looked at Howard, as if to ask, *Did you feel that?*

His return look said, *Yeah. Pretty cool, huh?*

Less impressive was what I saw on the screen.

There was a single app installed. Not even the garbage apps that came with the average mobile operating system. Just one app.

The app was called *Friend Zone*.

The icon was unremarkable. A stylized *FZ* in a blue box. I imagine the intellectual property lawyers at Facebook would have something to say about that.

“What the hell is this?” I asked.

“I dunno.” Howard was clearly very fascinated with my new toy. “Some kind of social networking thing maybe, or a dating site. Tap it and see.”

My good humor about the tablet was still dominant, but I was getting a little unnerved. This is the type of stuff those cheesy horror movies on Netflix are made of.

Then, a possibility occurred to me, too sudden and obvious to disregard.

“Howard. Sweetie. Darling.”

“Yvonne. Sweetheart. Baby.”

“Did you build this tablet? Be honest. Is this your idea of a joke? Or are you my secret admirer? Hmm?”

Howard’s face became so red it looked like the top end of a thermometer on a hot day.

“Yeah, right! No, it’s not me. Actually, I’d like to take credit. Whoever made this must be a genius.”

I tickled him under his chin. If he was fibbing, that would lower his guard.

“You, my dear, *are* a genius.”

“Yes, of course I am. But whoever built this is a different kind of genius.”

He could tell I was a bit nervous, despite my teasing, and I know he enjoyed reassuring me.

“Let me guess. You brought this over to have me check it out.”

“Guilty as charged.” I said.

“No problem. This will be fun, actually. This tablet is really cool.” A short hesitation. “I’m thinking whoever gave it to you must be really smitten.”

“No doubt,” I laughed. “I am the most gorgeous woman on Earth, right?”

“Always have been, always will be.”

He took the tablet back, and tapped the *Friend Zone* app icon. Nothing. He tapped a few more times. Still nada.

“Maybe it needs to be rebooted?”

He held down the power button.

“Well, that’s interesting, because there’s no home button. I know a home button is going out of style on other tablets and phones. But on this one, just holding down the power button doesn’t do anything.”

“Well,” I said, “I guess eventually the battery will go dead. It’ll get rebooted then.”

“Good point. But how do you recharge it? There’s no charging port either.”

“Now, that’s *really* weird!”

Howard chuckled.

“Well, you have a free tablet that won’t turn off, with one app that doesn’t work. That must be some special guy who gave you such a great gift!”

“Stop it,” I said, “jealously doesn’t become you.”

“True dat.” He was losing interest in the tablet, and concentrating on my boobs again.

He handed the tablet back to me. That same soothing buzz. Good vibrations baby!

“So this *Friend Zone* app doesn’t work?” I asked.

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“You saw me tap it several times. See if your soft touch does the trick.”

I tapped the *Friend Zone* icon.

The damn tablet shocked my fingertip! I swear, I actually saw a spark. Apparently, Howard noticed it too.

“You okay?” He asked.

“Sure,” I said, distracted. I was instantly enthralled with this peculiar app. “Just a little sting.”

“Funny, didn’t shock me at all,” he grinned. “Must be your electric personality.”

“Funny.”

The app came alive.

There was no other way to describe it. And when it opened, the tablet’s vibration surged for just a moment.

Howard had the typical nerd’s irritation with a layman’s beginner’s luck. But he was, again, fascinated with the device.

“The app opened for you?”

“Maybe it’s coded for my fingerprint?”

“Well, that’s possible I suppose. But I didn’t even see a login prompt calling for a fingerprint. And how did your secret admirer get your print coded in anyway? Maybe he got it while you were in an alcohol-induced coma?”

“Very funny, asshole.”

Howard looked like I had slapped him. He knew that when I called him a name, I was pissed. Or scared.

Right now, I didn’t want to think about how I was able to open this app, when Howard couldn’t.

I just wanted to explore this weird *Friend Zone* app. So did Howard, as he looked over my shoulder to get a better look. We were like two nervous and excited kids, huddled together in the dark, checking out a forbidden *Playboy* magazine.

The *Friend Zone* interface wasn’t particularly interesting. It was definitely a watered-down Facebook knock-off. But the thing I noticed next made me drop the tablet onto Howard’s outdated green shag carpet. Howard picked it up and handed it back to me.

“Evie, what the hell?”

THE MANIAC IN THE MIRROR

Friday morning.

My morning ritual never varies, and that's just the way I like it, thank you very much. I leave my converted loft in Tribeca, ready for business, six or seven days every week at 7:00 a.m.

From there, it's an exhilarating ride to the World Trade Center Transportation Hub to the Lower Manhattan Financial District. This is my favorite part of the day, my brief commute. Only here, do I get the benefit of interacting with some of New York's most colorful characters. And I make it a point to do so, every a.m. and p.m.

At the station, I enjoy the same three-line clichéd conversation with Joe, who runs his own newsstand and actually seems to enjoy it.

"Mornin' Joe," I say, "Whaddya know?"

He always chuckles politely, as if he didn't hear that corny joke a hundred times every day, from me and countless others. And his response, equally clichéd, never varies.

"Not nearly enough, Boss," he says with a grin.

That's one aspect of the convo I don't care for, but it's not Joe's fault. He's just picked up the colloquialism from every other service provider on the planet. To be clear, I'm not fond of the new trend for everyone to call me *Boss*. Being called *Sir* is bad enough (makes me feel as old as I am). But for users of the term *Boss*, it combines acknowledgement of authority and informality that just doesn't sit well with me. Honestly, everyone in the city knows my first name, and I wish it was used instead.

But I will never ask Joe, or the other hard-workers I'll encounter, to change the habit. It isn't worth creating an awkward moment.

He hands me today's copies of the *Journal* and the *Daily News*. I used to pick up the *Times* as well, but the reporting there has gone a bit too far to the left, for my taste.

I remove a ten-spot from my wallet, and exchange it for the periodicals.

"I'll get your change, Boss."

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“You keep it, Joe. You know how much I hate getting those coins plopped on top of a receipt into my palm. Don’t need either.”

He tips his hat and grins, thanking me for the gratuity, as if it’s the first one I’ve ever given him. I always enjoy seeing his two gold teeth, and I hope my tips contributed toward these dental adornments.

The exchange typically ends with both of wishing the other a pleasant day, sometimes him first, other times me. And that ends our chat, on most days. The only variation of the theme occurred on mornings of, or adjacent to, days of special occasions or events.

Today is such a day.

Most mornings, I put the papers into my briefcase and immediately make my way to the Fulton Street exit of the terminal. Today, I pause a minute to look at the front page of the *Daily News*, dated Friday, January 13, 2017. This action inspires Joe to make an unsolicited, but not unwelcome, observation.

“Inauguration Day in one week,” he says.

“Yes, indeed,” I reply, with my attention still on other items on the paper’s front page.

“I ... imagine the election didn’t go your way again this year, huh Boss?”

That gets my full attention, and for a moment, Joe and I share awkward eye contact. But only for a moment.

“Yes, my friend, I have to say that is accurate. But men like you and I don’t dwell on disappointments. We adapt.”

Joe’s big grin fades a bit. That last comment may have come across as a bit condescending, but I think he knows this is not my intention.

“I hear ya, Boss.” But he hasn’t heard me, not at all. It’s obvious Joe and I voted for different candidates last November. Even though he brought up the topic, I wish I had responded only with a simple shrug of my shoulders.

Truth is, I would enjoy engaging Joe (and others I encountered every day) in lively debate. A sharing of beliefs and ideas. One of us might be able to convince the other of the merits of a specific point or two. But, sadly, there is still such division in our country, inviting

discussion is like sitting on a powder keg while you light a cigar. Not worth the risk of conflict that might escalate.

So, unfortunately, it's time for our usual, mundane closing comments. I loosely roll my copy of the *Daily News*, and tap Joe on his shoulder.

"Happy Friday, my friend," I say. "Same Bat Time tomorrow?"

Joe's wide grin returns. He doesn't understand my reference, but he thinks it's funny, so he always responds appropriately.

"You got it, Boss. Same Bat Time, same Bat Channel!"

There is nothing more endearing to me than someone speaking those words who was too young to remember the old corny TV show.

With that, I make my way to the terminal exit that would give me access to Fulton Street. My favorite avenue in all Manhattan.

Fulton Street isn't my favorite because of the traffic and noise, but I certainly don't mind either. No, I love this lively street, and all of Lower Manhattan for that matter, because the inspiring and majestic sight that greets me each and every day.

It is where I work, and where I will always work. Over the years, many colleagues and some competitors have questioned me about my choices in life:

Why maintain a relatively small suite of offices in the Financial District? You have the means to build your own glass and ivory tower, for God's sake.

When the hell are you going to move out of Tribeca? Surely, you've acquired enough billions from your real estate transactions and casinos to treat yourself to a swanky penthouse in mid-town.

At the very least, why take the subway to your office? Buy a nice car and hire a driver to get you around the city!

Curious about my responses? Here you go:

Yep, I'm a rich dude. No denying it, no matter how hard I try to convince the IRS otherwise.

Yes, I could have those things. And much more. But that's irrelevant.

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Keeping my loft in Tribeca keeps me grounded in a way difficult to describe in this simple narrative. I do have a nice car, which I enjoy driving myself when the distance to my destination requires it, and the subway or a cab can't get me there. And hiring a driver would make me feel even more self-conscious than everyone calling me "Boss."

Not upgrading to a huge residence (or two, or three) in affluent neighborhoods is a choice neither of my ex-wives could understand either. They have both moved on to seduce even older moguls, who have more money than common sense. I wish both my ex-wives well, but am not interested in replacing them anytime soon. (Well, there is one possible exception.)

My business, however, is another story. Unless you're entirely off the grid or just live under a rock, you probably know I employ thousands around the world. Obviously, that requires abundant office space and resources. But one of the smallest offices, and the most intimate, is the one that started it all. My quaint digs, right here in Manhattan. The office to where I take public transportation to the WTC Hub, and walk several blocks the rest of the way.

That about sums up why I've made the choices I've made. Works for me. If it doesn't work for others, well, I honestly don't give a fuck. (Pardon my French.)

It's a cold but still a beautiful day on Fulton Street. Not too cold for me to take a moment, as I do every day, to take in the awe-inspiring sight of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center.

I was a young man (younger, at least) when the WTC towers opened on April 4, 1973. Although it took many years, I was never happier or more proud than when I opened my first business in Tower No. 2 on September 11, 2001. What began as a suite of three offices, a small conference room and a cramped reception area, has grown into something substantially larger. But, as mentioned before, not too much larger. This office, my first, would always be the humble cornerstone of what many have crudely called my "empire."

The Twin Towers have graced the New York skyline for almost 45 years. I've been a tenant in Tower 2 for nearly 17, and counting. If

I never make another dollar, or accomplish anything else, I'd still be a very happy man.

Walking the remaining blocks on Fulton Street to the Twin Towers, regardless of the weather, always got my heart pumping and my blood flowing for the business day ahead.

My stroll takes me past *Joe's Spitting Image*, a much less vibrant pub than the name suggests. This is not another business owned by my favorite news vendor. This is a different Joe. I understand there are quite a few of them around.

I stop by Joe's for a beer most Fridays, assuming two things: First, it isn't too late, and second, I won't be recognized by too many of the patrons. I truly enjoy the interaction with the so-called "man on the street."

But sometimes, I stop being just another guy having a beer, and am recognized as the billionaire on TV. At that moment, some begin to fawn and kiss ass; others glare at me and clam up. Adoration can be boring, and hatred can be dangerous. The reverse is also often true.

It's too early for Joe's to be open, and the interior too dark to make out anything other than the tables by the window. In fact, Joe would have closed for the night only a few hours ago. (Last call would come and go, but there was always time for a few more rounds for Joe and his regulars.) Most likely, he was still sleeping off his last shift.

That's why it catches my eye when I detect movement inside. Trust me, I have no desire to inspire the wrath of a burglar who I've surprised in the middle of his robbery. But this Joe, like the other, treats me well. I have to, at least, have a second look before calling the cops.

I walk up to the window, press my face against the glass, cup the sides of my head, and peer inside.

Nothing. Well, almost nothing.

No prowler inside, but I see my own reflection in the glass looking back at me. After a moment, the reflection in the glass gives way to an even more unsettling image deep inside the empty bar.