

# One pint too many: the night I accidentally bought a pub

*How I drunkenly signed away my future to a fireplace and a woman with a gin laugh*

Let me start by saying this: no one ever intentionally buys a pub at one in the morning while three sheets to the wind, wearing full military mess kit, with a sword on their hip and suspicious stains on their cummerbund. No one wakes up and thinks, “Tonight feels like a good night to acquire a licensed premises, inherit a cellar full of damp, and ruin the next decade of my life one blocked toilet at a time.”

But life does not always wait for sobriety. And neither, apparently, does British real estate.

At the time, I was a proud Canadian officer stationed in the UK. Shiny boots, crisp salute, polished maple-leaf protocol, and the unearned confidence of someone who thought she understood Britain

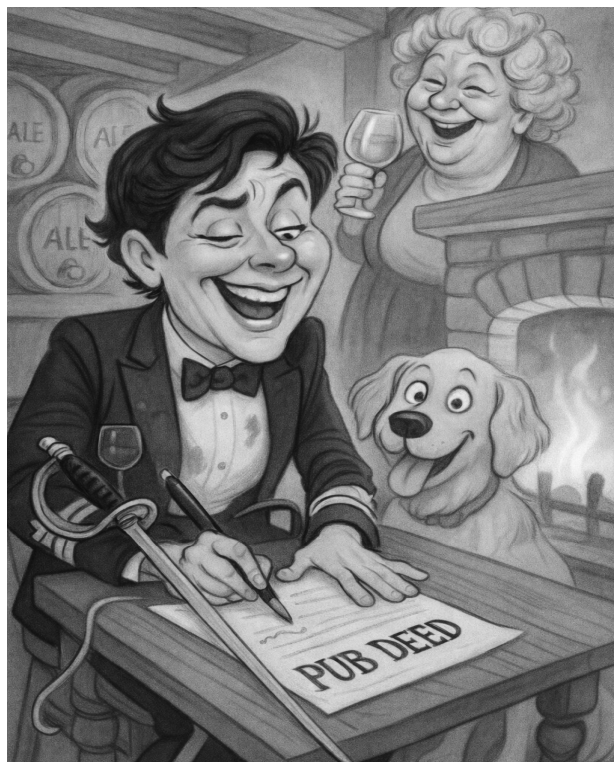
because she had mastered roundabouts, sarcasm, and the phrase “you alright?” which, as it turns out, is not usually a question.

But nothing, and I mean nothing, prepares you for your first proper UK mess dinner.

These are not dinners. They are ceremonial liver assaults dressed up as tradition. Downton Abbey meets Fight Club, but with more port, more silverware, and less chance of anyone admitting responsibility the next morning.

It started the way these things always start. Very civilised. Very polished.

Very “pass the claret, Colonel.” Everyone looked magnificent and deeply untrustworthy. There were speeches. Toasts. Toasts to the



speeches. Toasts to people who were dead, people who were late, people who had once done something heroic with a horse, a hill, or a very badly drawn map.

You clink glasses so often your wrist starts to cramp. You stand, sit, stand again, drink again, and at some point begin to suspect the entire British military was built less on discipline and more on the ability to remain upright while quietly pickling its senior officers.

The Brits were delighted that a Canadian could hold her drink without crying, vomiting into a regimental hat, or declaring immediate war over the quality of the gravy. I took this as a point of national pride.

That was mistake number one.

Several bottles later, decorum limped out of the room and was replaced by bad decisions in shiny shoes. The evening developed that dangerous golden glow where everyone becomes hilarious, every idea seems historic, and your brain starts offering suggestions that should legally require a second witness and a cooling-off period.

By the time the port had done its third lazy orbit of the table, the mess dinner had stopped pretending to be dignified. The candles, placed there by some optimistic soul to suggest tradition, warmth and military refinement, had become weapons-grade infrastructure. Somebody folded the first menu into a paper aeroplane, held the nose over the flame just long enough for it to catch, and launched it across the room like a flaming declaration of war. It sailed beautifully for about four seconds, trailing smoke and bad decisions, before crash-landing in the bread rolls at the next table. Naturally, this was not treated as a warning. It was treated as a challenge. Within minutes, the room was alive with burning aircraft, men in dinner jackets ducking like they were under enemy fire,

napkins being slapped at smouldering menus, and perfectly respectable grown adults cheering every time one made it past the soup course without setting fire to the Colonel's eyebrows. Somewhere in the middle of it all, between the formal toasts and the smell of singed paper, I remember thinking: this is exactly how empires end. Not with a battle. With port, candles, and an idiot with excellent folding skills.

A rogue band of us decided the night was not done. Of course it wasn't. Nights like that never end at a sensible hour. They stagger forward under their own terrible momentum, fuelled by port, bravado, and the kind of poor impulse control usually seen in toddlers and investment bankers.

So off we went into the nearby village, uniforms slightly less crisp, dignity slightly less available, swords swinging about.

And that was when we found her.

The pub sat there glowing in the dark like a bad idea with a licence. It smelled like stories. It smelled like trouble. It smelled like home, which was ridiculous because I had no business feeling at home in a building that probably had beams older than Canada.

Inside, it was everything people imagine when they picture a proper British village pub, except stickier. The bar was worn smooth by generations of elbows, grudges, and men explaining things. The carpet had seen too much. The walls were cluttered with horse brasses, old photographs, charity shields, and the kind of framed notices that made you feel rules had once existed but had long since given up.

Behind the bar stood the landlady. She was glorious.

Not sweet. Not quaint. Not the sort of woman who would offer you tea and a biscuit unless the biscuit had been dropped in gin first. She

actually had a laugh like gin hitting a hot pan. Sharp, smoky, and mildly dangerous.

We got to talking. I cannot pretend the conversation was intelligent. It was one of those drunken international summits that begins with cultural exchange and ends with someone insisting butter tarts are the superior dessert while another person defends Bakewell pudding like it is a matter of national security.

She liked me. Or she smelled weakness. With pub landladies, it is often the same thing.

Somewhere between my third scotch and her fifth gin and tonic, she leaned across the bar, eyes glittering in the firelight, and said something like, "I'm thinking of retiring soon. Fancy running the place?"

Now, a sober person would have laughed. A sensible person would have said, "That's charming," and changed the subject to the weather, football, or the correct way to cook a roast potato. A woman with functioning judgment would have recognised that this was not a casual conversational prompt. This was a trap wrapped in nostalgia and served with ice.

But I was not a sober person. I was a Canadian officer marinated in misguided patriotism, port, scotch, and the dangerous belief that charm was the same thing as competence. So I said, "Honestly? Yeah. Imagine owning a place like this."

That should have been the end of it.

A throwaway comment. A boozy fantasy. One of those things you say when the fire is warm, the booze is working, and the room has started to feel like destiny rather than an insurance liability. But this was England. And in England, especially in a village pub after midnight, a casual drunken conversation can turn into paperwork with terrifying speed.

I remember fragments. Her laughing. Someone saying, "Go on then." A pen appearing from somewhere. Me making grand declarations about community, tradition, hospitality, and probably gravy. The landlady saying something about a deposit. Me nodding as if I

were not a danger to myself and others.

There may have been a handshake. There may have been a witness. There was definitely a moment where I signed something with the theatrical confidence of a woman who believed she was making history, rather than committing financial self-harm in formalwear.

Then, mercifully, the night disappeared.

I woke up in my barracks feeling like I had been hit by a bus full of regrets, reversed over by a hungover regimental goat, and then lightly seasoned with shame. My mouth tasted like old coins and betrayal. One high-heeled shoe was still on. My hair had developed a shape not found in nature. My cummerbund was missing its dignity. I had the dim, pulsing sense that something had happened, but my brain was refusing to provide details because even it knew the truth was going to be upsetting.

I reached into my coat pocket hoping for paracetamol, chewing gum, or evidence that I had at least behaved like a woman with some connection to reality. Instead, I pulled out a folded piece of paper. Not a receipt. Not a napkin. A document.

A proper bloody document.

There it was, creased and smug, sitting in my hand like a tiny legal demon. My name. Her name. The pub. A deposit. My signature at the bottom, large, confident, and absolutely not the handwriting of a woman making sound life choices.

I stared at it. Then I stared at the wall. Then I made the sort of noise usually made by a kettle being strangled.

I had put down a deposit on the pub.

Instant cold-sweat panic. Not delicate panic. Not "oh dear, I may have overcommitted" panic. Full-body, military-grade, soul-leaving panic.

I texted everyone I could remember being with. "Please tell me this is a joke."

The replies came back with all the compassion you would expect from hungover officers.

“Nope.”

“You did it.”

“Chick, you’re a fucking pub landlady now.”

Then one of them sent a photo. There I was, standing in the pub, holding the paper like it was the *Magna Carta*, grinning like I had just adopted a puppy instead of six years of unpaid plumbing bills, cellar rot, licensing headaches, and old men complaining about the price of bitter. I looked deranged. Worse, I looked happy.

That was the bit that frightened me.

I called the landlady in a spiral of shame, denial, and very bad breath. She answered brightly, which was rude.

“Well,” she said, with the calm satisfaction of a woman who had clearly seen this sort of thing before, “I wondered when you’d ring.”

I tried to sound composed. I failed immediately.

“Did I actually sign something?”

“You did.”

“And put down a deposit?”

“You did.”

“Was I... coherent?”

There was a pause. “You were enthusiastic.”

That is the word people use when they mean catastrophically drunk but legally useful.

She was delighted. Not cruelly delighted. Just pub-landlady delighted. The way a cat is delighted when a pigeon flies into a window. “Thought you might back out,” she said. “But nope. You signed it with a flourish. Proper Canadian flourish.”

I could have backed out. Probably. Maybe. With enough legal wriggling, humiliation, and money I did not want to lose, I could have pretended the whole thing was a misunderstanding caused by port, patriotism, and architectural seduction. I could have fled back to Canada, tail between my legs, bank account smoking, and spent the rest of my life telling people I nearly bought a pub once.

Nearly.

That little word sat there, irritating the hell out of me.

So I leaned in. I leaned in so hard I packed my life into a shipping crate and moved to England permanently.

I became that woman. The Canadian officer who accidentally bought a pub. A living cautionary tale in shiny boots and a bar towel. Back home, I became legend. In the village, I became entertainment first, then gossip, then eventually, somehow, landlady.

People came in just to meet the idiot who bought the place by accident. Some of them stared at me like I was an exotic zoo animal. Some asked if Canadians had pubs or just igloos with beer. Some wanted the story straight from the horse’s mouth, usually while ordering the cheapest pint and judging my glassware.

And then the real education began.

I learned that pubs have souls. Annoying souls, mostly. Expensive souls. Souls that smell faintly of damp carpet and fryer oil. But souls all the same.

That pub became mine in the way no sensible investment ever could. Not neatly. Not profitably. Not without shouting. It got under my skin, into my clothes, into my bank account, into my stories. It gave me regulars, chaos, laughter, rage, black mould, and a front-row seat to the strange theatre of human behaviour.

And every time someone came in and asked, “You buying this one too?” I would smile, nod toward the

bar, and say, "Not unless you pour me six pints, feed me a mess dinner, and hand me a pen."

The moral of the story? Do not drink with British officers unless you are prepared to wake up with consequences. Do not flirt with a pub unless you are ready for it to flirt back, steal your wallet, ruin your sleep, and somehow become the love of your life.

And if you ever find yourself in a warm old bar after midnight, listening to a landlady with a gin laugh tell you she is thinking of retiring, keep your hands away from pens. Unless the fire is roaring. Unless the place smells like ale, gravy, and bad decisions. Unless some stupid, reckless, half-cut part of you already knows.

In which case, pour yourself a pint, you mad bastard.

You're home.

# STICKY TOFFEE NANAIMO

## MESSTHE LIEUTENANT'S LAST GOOD DECISION

*Best eaten before buying a pub. After that, you'll be too busy crying into a leaking cellar drain.*

*It is not elegant. It is not restrained. It is dessert after a mess dinner, which means it should look like a small, delicious building collapse.*

### INGREDIENTS

#### For the sticky toffee crumble base

- 100 g chopped dates, packed (about  $\frac{2}{3}$  cup)
- 100 ml boiling water ( $\frac{1}{3}$  cup)
- $\frac{1}{2}$  tsp baking soda
- 50 g butter, softened ( $\frac{1}{4}$  cup)
- 50 g brown sugar, packed ( $\frac{1}{4}$  cup)
- 1 large egg
- 75 g self-raising flour ( $\frac{1}{2}$  cup)
- $\frac{1}{2}$  tsp vanilla extract
- Pinch of salt

#### For the Nanaimo-style crumble

- 100 g graham crackers or digestive biscuits, crushed (about 1 cup crumbs)
- 40 g shredded coconut ( $\frac{1}{2}$  cup)
- 2 tbsp cocoa powder
- 50 g butter, melted ( $\frac{1}{4}$  cup)

#### For the custard cream

- 200 ml double cream ( $\frac{3}{4}$  cup)
- 2 tbsp custard powder or instant vanilla pudding mix
- 2 tbsp icing sugar
- A splash of milk, only if needed

#### For the toffee sauce

- 75 g brown sugar, packed ( $\frac{1}{3}$  cup)
- 50 g butter ( $\frac{1}{4}$  cup)
- 100 ml double cream ( $\frac{1}{3}$  cup)
- 1 tbsp dark rum or Canadian whisky, optional but strongly encouraged

#### To finish

- Dark chocolate shavings or chips
- Toasted pecans or walnuts, optional
- Sea salt flakes

### METHOD

Heat the oven to 180°C (350°F). Grease a small baking tray or line it with baking paper. You are not making a formal cake here. You are making controlled rubble.

Put the chopped dates in a bowl with the boiling water and baking soda. Give them a stir and leave them to soften for 10 minutes. They will look deeply unattractive. That is normal. Dates in hot water have the visual appeal of something found at the bottom of a pub sink, but they redeem themselves in the end.

Cream the butter and brown sugar together until soft and combined. Beat in the egg and vanilla, then stir in the flour, salt, and the date mixture. Scrape it into the tray and bake for 20 to 25 minutes, until set, sticky, and smelling like you have made at least one decent life choice.

Let it cool, then tear it apart with a fork. Do not slice it neatly. Neatness has no place here. You want chunky sticky crumbs, soft bits, crispy edges, and enough texture to make the glass interesting.

For the Nanaimo crumble, mix the crushed biscuits, coconut, cocoa powder, and melted butter in a bowl. Spread it onto a tray and bake for 8 to 10 minutes, just until slightly toasted. You can chill it instead if you are tired, lazy, or already two drinks in, but toasting gives it better flavour. Let it cool, then

crumble it roughly.

Whip the double cream to soft peaks, then fold in the custard powder and icing sugar. If it becomes too thick, loosen it with a splash of milk. You want it spoonable, not stiff enough to patch a wall, although God knows that skill does come in handy when owning a pub.

For the toffee sauce, put the butter and brown sugar in a small pan over medium heat. Let them melt and bubble together for a couple of minutes, stirring so it does not catch. Add the cream and rum or whisky, then simmer until glossy, thick, and dangerous. Taste it carefully. It will be hotter than it looks and twice as manipulative.

To assemble, spoon a layer of sticky toffee crumble into glasses or jars. Add a dollop of custard cream, then a layer of Nanaimo crumble. Drizzle over toffee sauce. Repeat the layers until the glass looks like a dessert brawl.

Finish with dark chocolate, toasted nuts if using, and a pinch of sea salt. The salt matters. It stops the whole thing from becoming a sugar coma in a waistcoat.

Serve while the toffee sauce is still slightly warm and the layers are messy. This is not a pudding for people who say “just a sliver.” This is a pudding for people who wake up owning licensed premises.

## THE MESSY SAILOR - A STICKY RUM COCKTAIL FOR PEOPLE WITH PAPERWORK REGRET

*This is basically dessert in a glass with a naval hangover and Canadian tendencies. Dark rum, caramel, coffee, maple, salt, and bitters. It is sweet, smoky, slightly dangerous, and exactly the sort of thing you should not drink before signing anything.*

### INGREDIENTS

- 50 ml dark spiced rum (1.7 fl oz)
- 25 ml toffee or caramel liqueur (0.8 fl oz)
- 15 ml cold espresso or strong brewed coffee (½ fl oz)
- 10 ml maple syrup (½ fl oz)
- 2 dashes Angostura bitters
- Tiny pinch of sea salt
- Splash of whole milk or cream, optional

### METHOD

Fill a cocktail shaker with ice. Not two apologetic cubes. A proper handful. Make the shaker cold enough to feel like it has bad news.

Add the rum, caramel liqueur, cold espresso, maple syrup, bitters, and sea salt. Shake hard for 15 to 20 seconds, until the outside of the shaker frosts and you feel briefly in control of your life.

Strain into a rocks glass over one large ice cube or a scoop of crushed ice. If you want the full foggy Canadian coastline effect, float a small splash of cream over the top and let it swirl through the drink like weather rolling over Nanaimo.

Garnish with grated nutmeg, a caramel shard, or a tiny chunk of Nanaimo bar on a cocktail stick if you are showing off. And if you are serving this after the Sticky Toffee Nanaimo Mess, do not pretend it is necessary. It is not necessary. It is excessive. That is the entire point.

## TASTING NOTES

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Serve after dessert, before dessert, or instead of dessert. But for the love of God, do not serve it anywhere near a legal document.

