

A Bar In Time

by Foster Trecost

Nights like that didn't happen often, nights when I wandered the streets of an unknown town, dark and quiet streets. But there I was, alone at an hour when it shouldn't have mattered, but alone still, and not wanting to be. I trickled along like a slow leak, a notch above meandering; gravity had become a lateral force that pulled me forward.

Occasional streetlamps brightened their corners, but only seconds were needed to pass from darkness to darkness again, and that's where I was when I stumbled upon a blade of light slicing through a tiny window. At first I thought someone left it on by mistake, but a closer look revealed it wasn't a mistake, rather a gathering site of sorts, if not the only one in the town, surely the only one open.

Companionship awaited. I'd buy someone a beer and he'd buy me one back. We'd talk and tell stories, listen and ask questions. To get a feel for where I'd be, I peeked through the tiny window but what I saw, instead of easing my loneliness, intensified it. A pitiable mix of patrons lined the bar, each sitting separate from everyone else, their mouths moving only to accept the next draw, and then the next.

I went in anyway, sat among them and before long, became one of them.

In the absence of conversation, beer disappears at a startling pace and after three I stood to leave. I hadn't bought a round for anyone, nor had a round been bought for me. Those there seemed somewhere else, and it was time I went somewhere else, too. I paid my tab and started for the door but stopped when someone squeezed my arm at the elbow: "We're glad you came," he said. "Thanks for stopping by."

Glad I came? I scanned the room, the same room I'd spent the past hour, but it wasn't the same. Stone faces animated to life, mugs were raised to hearty here-here's. In return I offered little more than a confused smile, then left, but managed no more than a few steps.

Glad I came? I walked toward the tiny window, unsure which version of the bar I'd see, but stopped before I got there. Maybe it mattered and maybe it didn't. I rewound to my hotel instead.

The next morning, I asked about the bar on Main Street.

"It's a bit before my time," said the clerk. "Shut down years ago but still looks pretty much the same. You can see inside through a tiny window."

Questions came to mind, but since I'm the only one who could know the answers, I opted not to ask. They were glad I came. To think about it now, I'm glad, too.

