Briefly, on Dive Bars

by Sean Lovelace

Windows:
Dive bars do not have windows.

Ceilings:
The ceilings of dive bars are low. Most are constructed of fiberboard tile, sagging, mildewed, often stained into fascinating patterns: there Alaska, there the Milky Way, that one a cat caught in the elbow of a tumbling train. A minimum of three absent tiles. Black holes, missing teeth. Exposing asbestos-crusted beams, duct-taped pipes, electrical wiring that hums.

The ceiling of a dive bar descends as the hours pass. By midnight, everyone is hunched over, morphed into hobbled, squinting creatures. But not unhappy or alone. Slouched together.

Collapse is imminent.

Doors:
One in the front, one in the back. For passageway, either is appropriate at any time.

Often painted red.

Floors:
Concrete. Drainage hole optional. Washed once in mid-summer, with a garden hose.

Walls:
Three possibilities exist for the walls of a dive bar:

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1.) A wallpaper of concert posters. Some mottled, some peeling. All faded to the same hue, a cross between smoker's teeth and jaundice. The men in the posters have beards. The women wear long, flowing dresses, and hold either a tambourine or a crossbow. The script is in large bubbly letters, pronouncing “HeathDoor,” “Goat Reunion,” and “BattleShip No.” You recognize none of the names, none of the musicians; and might question if they actually exist.

2.) Mounted animals. The animals of a dive bar are varied; their consistency only in the geographic dislocation of the species: a Russian boar in Indiana; a lesser kudu in Maine. Jackalope. Jackalope. Jackalope. A rabbit, with antlers, and fangs.

3.) Exposed drywall.

The Air:

Smoky sludge. Visibility blur. Oxygen wrestled to the floor, knuckled to the floor. Tobacco grease die away and sew the edges in yellow stone. Some blinding hole. What? Over there. Watch your sticky-step. Oxygen a stunned fish. Drying, drying. Writhing on the rocks.

Bathroom:

Unisex. No doors. No stalls. No toilet paper, no paper towels. No functioning sink, only a residue, a memory, a hole in the drywall, a jagged ring of rent metal. Hard water stains oozing like melted earwax. A light fixture and a chain, but no bulb. You do the rest. Go ahead; I defer. Defer to the principle of one object signifying the universe entire. One toilet, squatting there, impossibly low. Filled always and swirling. Swollen with a shredded soup of urine and turd-water and cigarette butts. Swirling. Why don't the owners do something!?

Owners:

If you meet the proprietor of a dive bar, you are not in a dive bar. The owner is away, on business, on pleasure, in some lost world. This leads to much friendly gossip among the patrons, particularly the day-drinkers, whose conversations tend to the meanderingly speculative. The conjecture is as varied as reasons given for drinking at noon. Where, and who, is the owner? In France; he's this little Frenchman. I heard he was Belgium. Belgium? She lives right down the road, above the city library—she owns it too! He's a cop. No, a judge. This entire place is owned by the sister of Cher. I shit you not. More money than God. Listen: All of this is a shell, a hidden subsidiary of a much larger corporation, I heard Quaker Oats. It's a big-ass tax write-off, man. Hey, hey, nobody owns the library. That's illegal.

And so on…

Patrons:
Information about the patrons is none of your goddamn business. The only exception being Max.

Bartenders:
See patrons above.

Max:
Every dive bar has a Max. Max is an elderly man. He wears a dented ball cap. He sits at the end of the bar, right along where it curves and then slams into the wall. You may find it cliché, but when Max enters the room, the patrons actually announce, “Maaaxx!” He appears during the daytime, every day, and will remain as long as he is being served. Max has no money. Not a cent. So barters for his drinks. He might reach into his jacket (no matter the weather, Max wears a jacket; usually a windbreaker in a shade of green: olive, hunter, etc.) and out comes a hamburger wrapped in aluminum foil. He hands it to the bartender. The bartender might ask a question (“How old is it?”), and will then pour Max a shot of cheap vodka, or

a plastic cup of beer. It isn't always a hamburger. Max might pull anything from his jacket pocket: a paperback of Grapes of Wrath, a military badge, a spatula.

Some say Max is an apparition. A spirit. A ghoul…

Watch it! I said watch it. A sour wind, a scuttle of clouds years from now, and you may be Max.

When Max disappears, a brass plaque will be set into the bar, right along the curve that slams into the wall. And a new Max will walk in, sit there; and reach into his jacket pocket.

Hours:
Time is of no concern to a dive bar. Of amber fluid are the hours. They follow no ordinance, logic, or reason. A dive bar will be open more often than closed. Anything else is bunk.

Service:
You may be served with great openness and verve. You may be offered nothing. Ice-fished, bricked-up. Walled. Simply ignored. Some say find a beautiful woman, and let her wave your twenty dollar bill. Some say sit there, silent and serious, a craggy boulder on a riverbank. Some say move along.

Darts:
One horsehair dartboard appears from behind the bar on Tuesday afternoons. Patrons bring their darts. They pitch and hurl. If a single dart is found at any other time, of the day, of the week—into the toilet.

Pool Table:
One pool table, in the corner. One pool cue, chopped down to two feet long. Several balls missing, usually the seven, and the fourteen. A game of billiards is a rarity. The table is for sitting; and for setting

beers. For upsetting beers. The felt is stained into years of spirals and oblongs and fractals and oil-slick archipelagoes. Slashes of gray cigarette ash, pocks of burn. Long, ripped lines; someone sliced the felt with something. Is that blood? Crusted over corner pocket. Canker scar. Yes, that's blood. So be it.

Telephones:

There is no telephone. No good reason to call anyone, out there, about anything, in here. You have your own telephone anyway, don't you? Flat as a credit card. Shiny. With your own ring tone. If that tone sounds, that song or bird-song, or hip-hop top-ten tune, or jingle, or jangle, or jingle-jangle, or something really, really cool like crickets or an old fashioned rotary ring; you know where that phone is going, right?

Swirl, swirl…

The Police:

There is never any call for law enforcement in a dive bar. Whoever has your wallet, your purse; rest assured—they need it more than you. That couple in the bathroom, who won't stop fucking in the bathroom, let them be. Think of all of the evil they are not consummating, out there, in that insane world. Those men grappling in the corner; they fight for love. For unreason. For some human concern, a secret thrum of the heart; much too large and low and beautiful for law enforcement.

Five Dive Bars You May Want to Visit (or not):

1.) The Red Door, Tuscaloosa, Alabama. Known for its location, or lack of. The Red Door may appear anywhere in the city. Beneath an underpass one week. Atop the downtown bank building the next. In a tunnel below Bryant Denny Stadium. Or nowhere, weeks without any red door. You simply have to keep looking. I wish you luck.

2.) The Cat, Carbon County, Wyoming. Located in a former guard booth of the now closed and abandoned Dagget Air Force Base. Revered for the professionalism of its alcoholics. Several U. S. duration and quantity records have been established at The Cat. Not a good choice for ordering a mixed drink.

3.) Tiffany Continues to Fart, Memphis, Tennessee (aka “Tiffany's” or “The TC”). Memphis is one of the last low places, a city of true character, of ditchwater, cobblestones, scrambling alley-dogs, the flicker of moon off knife blade. TCTF is one of the few dive bars that serve food: white bread, ten cents a slice. When leaving, do not fishtail in the parking lot. Do not look back. Do not lag, or stumble.

4.) Clip Clop Club, Los Angeles, California. An excellent locale to purchase methadone, copper tubing, or a license plate. Much of the talk is in code, so conversation is often uncomfortable. If you do not know the code, consider silence. Sundays and Wednesdays are vodka nights. Order any beverage, and the barkeep pours you rotgut vodka. Nod once, and drink it.

5.) The Solanas, Mackinaw, Michigan. Sans heater or wood stove, sans functioning front door, located in the frigid interior of the U.P., and named after the woman who strolled into The Factory and shot down Andy Warhol, the Solanas is one of the coldest bars in the United States. Do not touch the metal of your Lowenbrau (the only beer served here), with finger or lip. Do not stop moving. Get up and shuffle to the music. One of a handful of dive bars to have a jukebox, and everything is polka.

If any of these establishments offer you nothing; if they take one look, or no look at all, and simply ignore—I'm sorry.