

Why We Congregate Here

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Non-Fiction

Everyone has a safe place, somewhere that they like to retreat to at the end of a long day, a space in which they feel free to be themselves. For many in my town that place happens to be our local bar. It is a small place that pretends to be a diner during the day, but without fail, every night reveals its true nature.

The large community table that dominates the space during daylight hours is revealed to be little more than 2 pieces of plywood thrown over the billiard table, artfully adorned with a custom tablecloth that has been cut and sewn just right so that it allows the table to masquerade as a center of community amity. The reality is that that table is more closely akin to community discord, as most drunken conflicts stem directly from using it. The smaller tables, they get shifted backward and pushed to the side. This creates space for the dance floor. Lastly, one whole corner is cleared, so that the band of the week has room to set up. It has become the bar.

As day fades into night, the patrons also begin to change because this is now a place where the class lines blur: lake-house people mingle with trailer park people; each sipping on their cocktails, exchanging rumors collected throughout the week. Gossip becomes currency here and whoever possesses the most interesting story is the wealthiest person around, making money almost obsolete. The happy, smiling families of the daytime diner are gone.

They are steadily replaced with individuals and, or, small groups that gather in their respected areas. The lifelong sports fanatics and retired high school athletes are always near the pool table, congregated to discuss their glory days on the fields. Despite their differences in age the game connects them. Cross-town rivalries, coaching strategies, game-winning plays, and the current high school team are all discussed with verve. They drink, laugh, and flirt, getting louder and louder as the night progresses deluding themselves into believing that past glories still define them; although, their letterman jacket no longer button and their stomachs slowly creep over the waistband of their jeans. The barflies are permanently stationed on their barstools near the door, and they spend every single night in the bar. Occasionally they cause a scene, but mostly they serve as a cautionary tale for what life can turn into regardless of your class status. Sometimes the other patrons will laugh at their antics: flashing people for money, dancing alone on the dance floor, trying to trade sexual favors for drinks, or whatever mood strikes them on any given day; but the laughter is always short-lived and followed by pity. We stand there, and we look at these people, and we wonder: How does one allow their life to deteriorate into something so low? Lastly, the older generations gather in the back corner with a few tables pulled together.

It is to that back corner, the one filled with the town elders, that my partner and I always beeline for when we enter the bar on Friday night. It isn't because we do not drink that we choose to sit with these people, as many assume, nor is it because we are somehow distantly related to them. We choose to sit in the "old folk's corner" because it is the part of the bar that is filled with the most life. It does not matter to us that we are nearly forty years younger than our tablemates because on the nights we sit with them; they are no longer forty years older than us. It is as though our presence creates a time warp; they are once again young, carefree individuals brimming with life and we become privy to day's gone bye.

Sitting around that table, we learn things that other people never get the chance know. These individuals have not only described love to us but have brought it to life in vivid detail. One older couple has a more interesting love story than even the renowned author Nicholas Sparks could write:

It started in the 1940's, and they met, by chance at the grocery store. The guy was goofing off with his buddies and accidentally ran into the girl causing her to drop everything in her hands. "She was so cross with me" he always interjects at this point in the story, "but I couldn't help but laugh. I asked her if I could take her out to dinner to make up for my rude behavior, and by some miracle, she agreed." They then talk about the dinner and how they kept brushing hands and locking eyes, each one knowing that they were falling in love.

She always gets a mischievous grin on her face as she says: "Time was against us, though, because the world was at war. I knew he was leaving soon and I was afraid I would never see him again. I was so surprised when he asked me to get married that I never even thought about it. We just did it." Next, they tell of love letters traded across oceans and continents, the worry that she felt with each radio broadcast, and the elation when her soldier finally came home. She says, "It is a horrible feeling to be both happy and sad at the same time. You know none of the other boys at the grocery store that day, the day we met, none of them made it home, only mine. I was so happy he was here, but I could also feel his pain over his three friends that were never coming back." They always end their story holding hands, gazing at each other, with what I am sure has to be the same love that was ignited within them seventy years ago.

In these stories, we witness the kind of love that our generation only finds in the movies. The men open doors and pull out chairs, and the women have a quiet dignity; it almost makes us forget that they range from fifty to eighty-plus years old. In fact, it isn't always easy to believe that these men and women who sit at their tables, talking quietly, were once just like us; but sometimes, if the band plays the right music, they will get up, invade the dance floor, and remind us.

The stories are not always so happy, though. On occasion, we learn about wars that usually only exist within our history books, but are made vivid when reminisced about by these men. On these nights they drink heavier, especially Butch, who has to be the toughest man to have ever crossed the threshold

of this place. His eyes become distant when he talks about Vietnam, as though he were watching a film in his mind, and if you look close enough, there is a glint of fear reflected there. He talks about an enemy that was more of a shadow within the jungle than an actual human being. He often contemplates what hell will be like because he swears that's the only destination for his soul after what happened in Vietnam: "We couldn't tell, we could never tell who was a friend and who was an enemy. In war a soldier follows orders, he doesn't ask questions." He always looks at Devon then and says: "You're lucky kid, never been to war, don't ever go, it isn't worth it." As tears fill the eyes of this hardened man, we never know just what to say, so we sit, and we listen. He describes death in a way that makes us cringe, which isn't easy to do since we deal with it almost daily, but hearing him talk we understand that the death we face on our rig, isn't the same as the death he faced in Saigon.

Death also has its own set of rules here. When a prominent figure from our local bar dies, the bar mourns in its own way. Each respective group will raise their glasses and drink to whoever has been lost; one time a group of guys, led by the farmer's son but comprised of men from every group, broke out into a chorus of "Drink a Beer" by Luke Bryan, but after that, life moved on. Death cannot be allowed to become the focus within the bar because that would dampen the collective emotional climate of the place. So, to combat this, someone new is invited in to take the vacant spot, to make the subtle switch from patron to "regular." Their life story becomes part of the collective, and they get their turn to be famous. It is in this way that the cycle continues (regardless of it's been five days or five years since your last visit when walking in, it will always be familiar). In a small town, death is not a claim to fame, but rather, everyday life is.

In this place there are no rules about what can and cannot be talked about, there is also no judgment. We are bound together by a mutual understanding that stems from the mantra: "Respect the Bar" because, within the confines of the bar, everyone knows everyone else, or at least we know a part of their story. Yet, curious as it is, should we run into each other outside the bar; at the grocery store, the gas station, the bank, or the post-office we will only exchange a nod of recognition. This is because we never think of each other outside of the bar. We all occupy the space knowing that we will be talked about, understanding that assumptions will be made about us, and recognizing that we all have our reasons for being there. In the end that is why we congregate here because in this place we are all equal, all searching for a place belong; just as the bar is able to transform from daytime diner to nighttime bar, we to, are able to make the switch from our daytime selves to our nighttime personas and oh, what a change it is.