

A Tenderloin moment

Neighborhood bar fight turns into American parable

BY ED BOWERS

EARLY afternoon, mid-August at The Oasis: A man's forehead got slashed with a buck knife by a gentleman who was six sheets to the wind. The slashing occurred a few feet away from me, but I wasn't surprised. Five decades of madness has its advantages. Nothing surprises me anymore.

The first person I'd noticed when I entered the bar that day was Lulu, a rather annoying woman, pretty in the saddest way possible, whose self-loathing inside her black eyes can only be compared to her obvious contempt for men. Lulu was getting drunk with an Alaskan Indian man dressed in beige. At least that's the racial category I thought he belonged to.

The bar's atmosphere felt charged, especially after an African American gay man named Rocko asked me to read an acerbic and sarcastic newspaper column written by Dan Savage, a self-righteous man but a good writer.

The Alaskan Indian man crowded next to me to order another drink. He was on a run — I could tell by the gleam in his eyes, frosty and icy as the Antarctic — but I felt no threat from him. I knew he was one of those special people who should be left alone. The ability to survive in nature is based on discerning who's dangerous, then absenting yourself. I learned this the hard way and consider myself an expert.

Then Rocko and Lulu got into a fight over nothing, and she began insulting him with sexual innuendos meant to hit him beneath the belt. Later someone told me that during this argument the Alaskan Indian had passed a knife to Lulu, but, to her credit, she passed it back.

Three pretty Latinas in their early 20s came in for a drink and left three minutes after the drinks came. They were either the fastest drinkers in Northern California or they didn't like the bar's ambience. Many times when pretty women show up in the Tenderloin they're treated like aliens from outer space. Men start taking out their wallets, or making fools of themselves trying to communicate the essence of their species.

Lulu and the Alaskan Indian were now so intoxicated that Lee, the bartender and a good mixologist, told them that she wouldn't serve them any more. Hell has its standards as does Heaven. And that's when a red light lit up, a silent alarm sounded, and we were off to the races.

Lulu, adamant about getting another drink, had a crazed look in her eyes, as though having one more beer in a last-chance saloon on the corner of Taylor and Turk was the only reason for her to survive.

Drunk people often become infantile. Lulu kept insisting on getting a final drink from mommy, and Lee turned away in disgust. In a soft bedside voice, as though

addressing someone with terminal cancer, I said to Lulu, "The bartender won't serve you anymore. She said no. That's it. It's over. Just go across the street to another bar. You'll be OK."

I don't think I'll ever forget the deer-in-the-headlights look that Lulu gave me. She left the bar as though in a trance, reminding me of old '50s horror movies where zombies and vampires walk the streets in a daze.

But Lulu forgot to take her friend with her. The poor drunken Alaskan Indian, stranded in a bar that wanted him out, was dangerous now. It must have seemed, inside his besotted mind, that the whole human race had suddenly turned on him and yelled, "Get out!"

He wouldn't leave. This was his country, and he wanted another drink.

Fights bore me, because violence is the sad refuge of a species that carries a hidden beauty that is indescribable by words. So I won't go into many details of the fight that ensued: An off-duty bartender for the club, a man with an interesting face that reminds me of a Picasso painting, got slashed on the forehead by the Alaskan Indian man, who apparently wanted to turn the other man's face into a Francis Bacon painting.

As the adrenaline in the place went sky high, the miracle of the human mind kicked in for the Alaskan Indian man, and he finally realized that he should not attempt to order another beer. He fled, chased by a couple of regulars, a white man in his late 40s and a young African American man. Lee phoned the police, and in a remarkably short time the cops had grabbed him down on Market Street.

Disoriented, he'd made the mistake of doubling back. He was like American culture now, doubling back to the '50s and doomed to be arrested by reality.

I have to hand it to the SFPD — when they do their jobs well, they do their jobs well. Being subjected to misery every day must take a great toll on their souls. To serve the public by protecting it from violence is an honorable job. Plus, the cops who responded had good faces. I always check out faces first, and their eyes.

The bar patrons acted heroically, putting their lives in danger like soldiers to protect a shared space. They didn't get paid for this, nor will they ever get the proper credit. There's no reason to feel endangered in a Tenderloin bar as long as there are people like them around.

Now let me go into this story's deeper meaning: I would suggest it's a

metaphor for America's behavior, now that it thinks of itself as a big bad power. America has become spiritually bankrupt, is lonely and insecure, and compensates by acting tough.

One of the first commandments of living in the Tenderloin is to not overact in the "bad" department. All it will do is get you kicked, killed or arrested. If you think you're "bad," there's always someone else who is worse.

America's foreign policy has turned into a Tenderloin version of this bar incident. It's a violent, complicated country that sells video games to children to keep them from killing their peers or their parents. It creates superlative merchandise, art and literature, but it allows its citizens to go homeless if they are weak, sick or mentally ill. It loves God. It loves Money. And it goes to war in countries that don't have the slightest idea of who or what America is, or understand its desire to turn them into itself — or else.

So who are we? Is there a WE in this country?

WE are legion.

The politicians love this and the people hate that and the cops despise whatever and the street people hate it and it hates everything and the middle class goes to sleep like junkies in front of a TV set dreaming about sex.

Total Tenderloin. As above, so below.

Personally, I would have let the Alaskan Indian man sit in the bar until closing time without giving him a drink or acknowledging his presence. He might have gone into a silent, isolated space where, alone with himself, he'd forget about the categorical imperative of using his knife. Nonaggression would perhaps have neutralized his violence. Maybe his aggression then would have turned itself inside out, and, with great compassion, caused him to kick himself out of the bar.

I don't pretend to be sure about anything, but using aggression against a potential aggressor is like throwing gasoline on a small fire. In the Tenderloin, this tactic has tiny, often tragic results. In the geo-political realm, it could bring the end of the world.

But don't believe me. Look at its results where you live.

Stay home and watch TV and get divorced.

Pretend to be happy when you're sad. Go to sleep when you're awake.

Try not to worry about the news.

It won't affect you.

Will it? ■

Credit union moving to Marlton

AFTER a couple of years as tenants of TNDC, Northeast Community Federal Credit Union is moving out of its digs at the Ritz Hotel, 215 Taylor, to a new space at 288 Jones at Eddy.

That's part of the 151-unit Marlton Manor, which has been owned jointly by tenants, Mercy Housing California and A.F. Evans Development Co. since December 2000. A Sept. 4 ceremony celebrated the conclusion of a major renovation of the Marlton.

When Northeast moves in mid-September, it will occupy one of three contiguous storefronts on the Jones side of the building.

Northeast's new space is 817 square feet. One neighbor, Downtown Grocery, moved out during the 1½-year renovation and will reopen with 1,400 square feet. The third retail space, 1,200 square feet, is still vacant, according to Ramie Dare, housing developer for Mercy Housing California.

Northeast, a nonprofit financial co-operative, opened in 1980 in Chinatown and was developed by Asian Inc.

"This is a challenging program," Northeast's Isabel Huie told the Tenderloin Futures Collaborative in February 2003. "We want to encourage people in the Tenderloin to save money, but we know that many live day to day. The other big challenge is to make the co-op self-sufficient. We've gotten grants from the mayor's office, but now we're doing more outreach in the community, trying to get more regular depositors, organizations and agencies." At that time she said Northeast had 1,200 members.

The co-op credit union is open to anyone who lives, works or is associated with an organization in the Tenderloin, Chinatown, Nob Hill or North Beach neighborhoods. ■

— Marjorie Beggs

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