

Here Comes a Regular: How Barflies Became My Brothers

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Illustration by Dan Evans

When I was bartending we had a cook named Tommy: he had a bristly white moustache that hung over the corners of his mouth and he called me his brother, *I'll see you tomorrow my brother*. He had been living with his mother in the Bronx, but then she got very sick and there wasn't anything anyone could do. He stayed in her empty house eating orange sherbet directly out of the plastic tub, pouring orange soda from a two-litre bottle into the scooped-out divots till it all turned to slush. He'd do this all night: days and weeks doing just this, all alone. Sometimes he'd have a girl come over and they'd do lines of cocaine together off the black plastic top of a DVD player. Sometimes he'd watch the Yankees. Mostly he'd play internet billiards with strangers. This is the immobilising power of sadness, the purple-black tidal wave, the poisonous squid dragging you by your tendons to the darkest bottom of the ocean.



When the money ran out he moved into a low-income housing complex in town and that's how he found the bar. He didn't have a car, he walked everywhere, miles and miles if he had to, and by the time he made it into work his cheeks and forehead would be lit-up red by the sting of winter air. He'd make fried plantain chips and a chicken parmesan that was so good you'd want to close your eyes. He'd play Dean Martin songs in the kitchen through his cellphone as it sat in an empty can of bread crumbs to amplify the sound while he hosed off the dishes. Sometimes he'd sing along so loud that the people sitting at the bar could hear him, and they'd say, *What the hell is that*, but they would all sort of be singing along too. Grimy men with stretched red faces; round lunatics in oil-spotted shirts; men with powdery patches of psoriasis on their elbows; men who smelled like mint and cigarettes every time of day; men with serious problems and malaises who just couldn't help it when it came to anything, pummelled by decades of grand and minor scale calamity.

But now here was an interlude and there was an amazing kind of life in their eyes. Tommy would rumble out of the kitchen in his busted sneakers, with the rubber soles peeling and dangling askew off the bottom like the tongues of old horses, and he'd slap his meaty palms on the bar again and again and again, his mouth wide open as they all roar the "ohhh, ohhh, OHHH" part in "Volare", and tonight he is home again, he is home like he was born in this room, like all his ancestors were born here going back to the prehistoric times and they were seated before him now, the outside world a barren, frozen planet but here inside a fire 10 feet high. Here, he was a man of great renown, a man with solutions, and now the people at the bar were thinking they might stay a little longer.

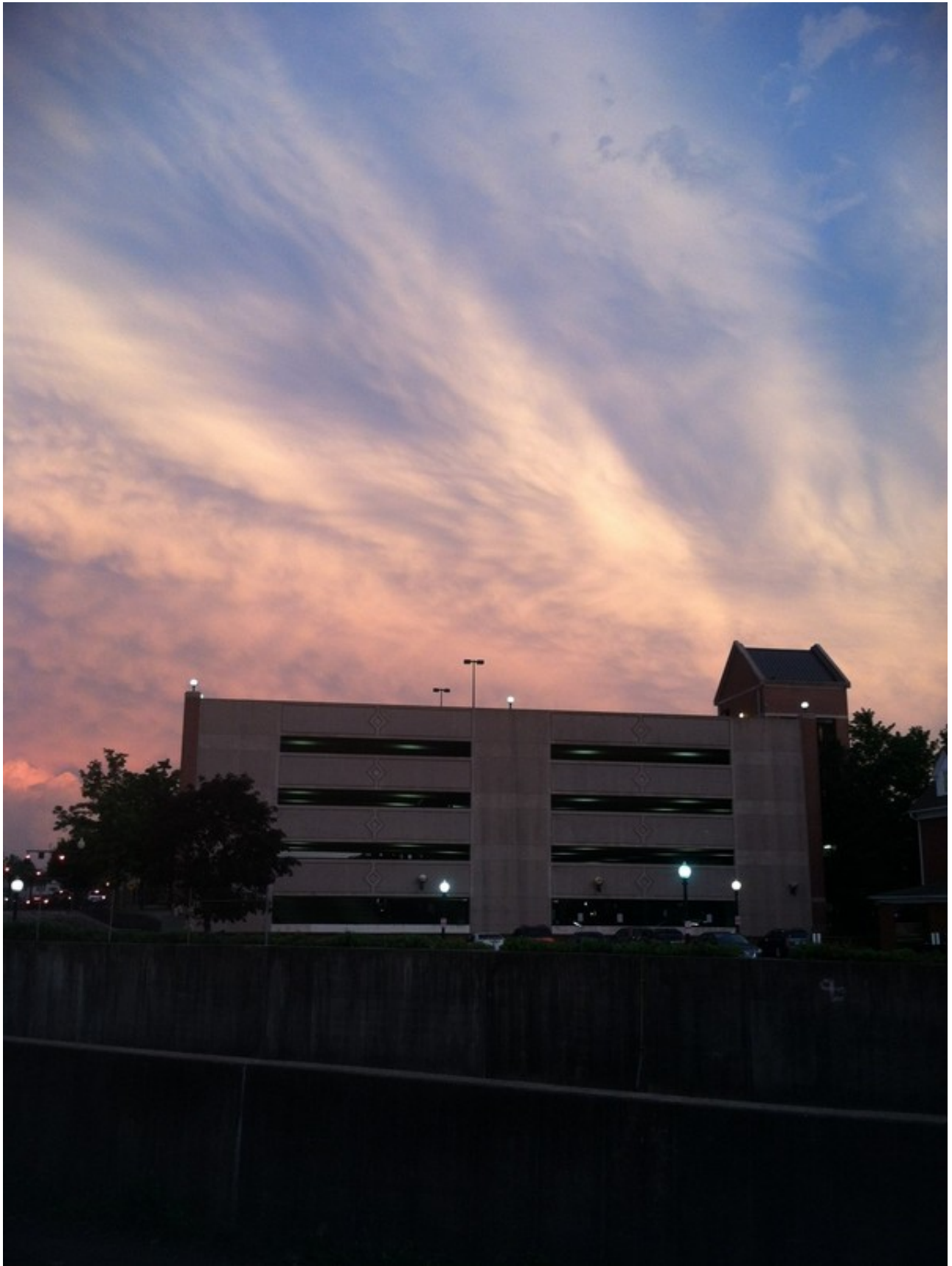


Those were good times. You'd have to say that all that booze had something to do with it.

But there was something else going on in there too, a kind of silent agreement – with each other, with the bar itself and with good God above, that all of your memories, your lusts, your victories and your most divine bullshit could play in here like the truth. Your tragedies were

real tragedies and your miracles were real miracles, and no one could say otherwise. Here, you were free from interrogation, speculation; you were spreading your towel out in some distant oasis whenever you wanted.

There was a guy who came in once who worked construction; he was tan, muscular but his torso was hunched and constricted and bent in odd directions. He was holding a bottle of Budweiser. He told me that in the summer when he was younger him and this girl would go down to the marina at night to get drunk in random boats, bobbing there in the dark in this sort of open-air hotel room they'd hijacked for themselves, and when he said sometimes they'd fuck in those boats too his voice took off and he clapped his hands so hard a cloud of sheetrock dust flew off him.

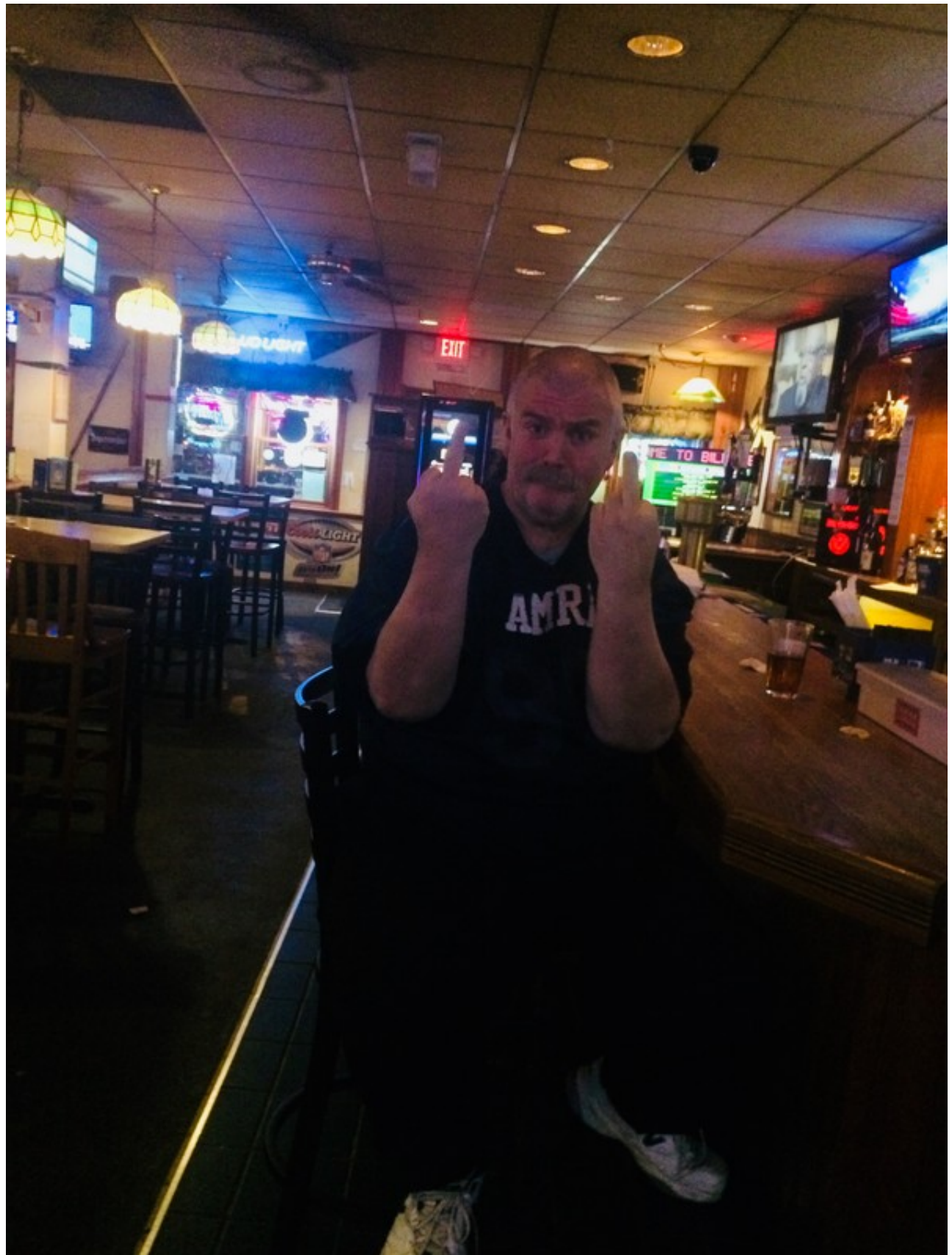


Sunset from the backdoor of the bar. Photo: Author's own

There was another man who would come in to use our cordless phone. He'd go behind the building to make calls, out on the concrete steps that led down to the dumpsters and below that to a hideous-looking river that storks with stained feathers would creep along the shores of. I imagined that these were vacations for him, a beach carved out of 15 minutes, the tiny mercies in an otherwise grey march to wherever he was going. When it was warm sometimes we'd have a beer back there and there was a generator that hummed loud enough that we didn't feel strange just standing there not talking.

These were not quite travellers, but they were always sort of preparing for something. There was always a discussion about going somewhere, coming from somewhere, a friend at some other bar, a call they were waiting on, some big news that had just come across the wire, and whoever was in here half-watching the limp and lazy middle-innings of a Wednesday afternoon baseball game was going to make it real and juicy by listening to you talk about it. A girl they knew in Costa Rica; a guy they knew who just bought a jet ski; a picture their friend had just texted them of Keith Hernandez at a casino steakhouse.

They had a certain dignity. They didn't go places for leisure or indulgence, they ended up there for work, or the Marines. Somewhere they followed a girlfriend to, somewhere in Pennsylvania or Tennessee, seven years working for her dad's roofing company, which they would share not with shame or bitterness but a voice of triumph and love in their hearts, something that came from them and is of them, a proof of a life at all. They were out there threading the remnants of one day to the rumours of glory that may wait in all the rest of them, one after another, and that alone was a testimony, evidence of a tremendously powerful spirit. I had never been to Tennessee but this was my postcard, received in real time. There was a guy who told me he once took a shit in a port-a-potty in the middle of an Aerosmith concert in New Jersey. Imagine that?



Tommy. Photo: Author's own

On Saturday afternoons there was a group that would come in to drink beer and play music on the jukebox, we called it the matinee. They'd eat our stale tortilla chips and salsa we poured from a gallon jug into little plastic cups. Someone would play that Stevie Nicks song with Don Henley. It was early enough that this horrible old bar still had the smell of chemicals from the cleaning crew that came in overnight, and for these moments it was a Fresh bar, a disinfected bar. We'd watch out the front window as cars tried to parallel park, lurching and coming to sudden angled halts as traffic whipped by, some panicked face in the driver's seat trying to figure it all out. Someone was talking about DIY methods to get rid of the flies that were laying eggs in his shower drain. Someone was talking about the absurd and let's face it irresistible melodrama of Don Henley's voice.

Someone was talking about how far a drive it was to Wisconsin, what was Wisconsin like, and he would say that it was beautiful there, that he drove there once with his ex-boyfriend, and then that would be what I said whenever I met anyone who mentioned Wisconsin. I would say, I heard it's beautiful there, in a tone like that was a surprising detail, my valuable dispatch to share from a foreign land. And then two years ago I was in Wisconsin for a wedding, at a vineyard that was on the other side of a gentle sloping hill, and my girlfriend was wandering through the rows of grapes as the sky was turning this diluted shade of Vitamin Water pink. It was October and it was late but no one was wearing jackets. In every picture she is uncoiled and warm looking, putting on a show, smiling crazy—it can be like that in October, even in Wisconsin, which you maybe wouldn't think—and in the rows of grapes I thought about Saturday afternoons, drunk with my brothers.

I thought, it's beautiful there, it's true what they say.

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