URBAN EXPERIENCES

Memories Of The Old Place

When I asked my father why he had such an attachment to his saloon on Manhattan's East Side, he gave me a cryptic look. "If you have to ask such a question, you'd never grasp the answer." Only later did I come to realize that it was one of those eddies that humanize the city.

Y WILLIAM McGOWAN

FOR MOST of my life, my father owned a saloon on the East Side of Manhattan. Unlike many of the establishments catering to men of my own generation, Danny Boy's would never be confused with a failing art gallery that applied for a liquor license as an afterthought. Art was in the conversation, not on the walls. Class and taste were demonstrated in the way that you treated people, not in the priciness of the menu or the trendiness of the decor.

The place was stout, plain and resolutely unhip, a public house in the old style: simple yet idiosyncratic. Years of tobacco smoke had yellowed the whitewashed walls and clouded the waxed beams stretching overhead. Beery shadows spread past scuffed wooden paneling into deep brick alcoves. The place always wore the musty perfume of yesterday's spilled whiskey. "Cut flowers are for funeral parlors, not barrooms," my father once explained to a floral salesman who stressed their deodorizing qualities. "Thank you all the same." I remember coming back from college one time and thinking that a hanging plant might brighten the front window. The regulars eyed it susp ciously and waited until I left before taking cigarette lighter to it.

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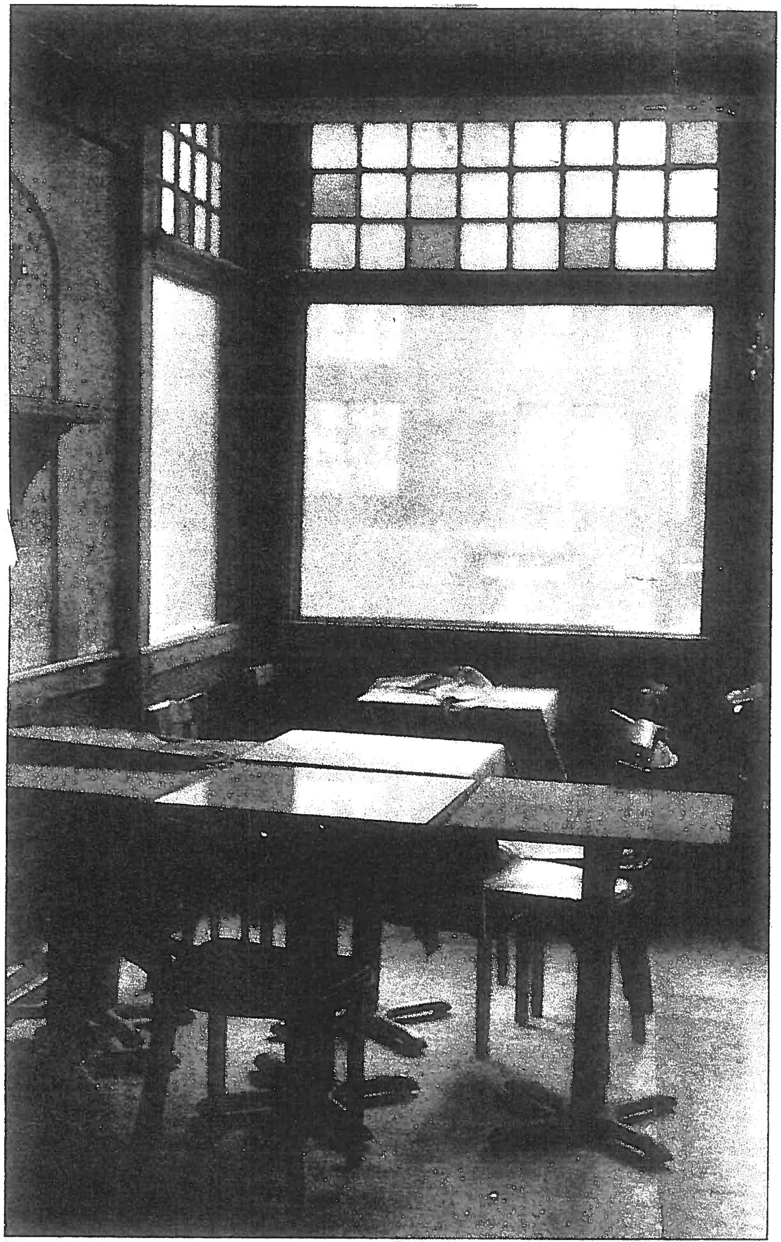
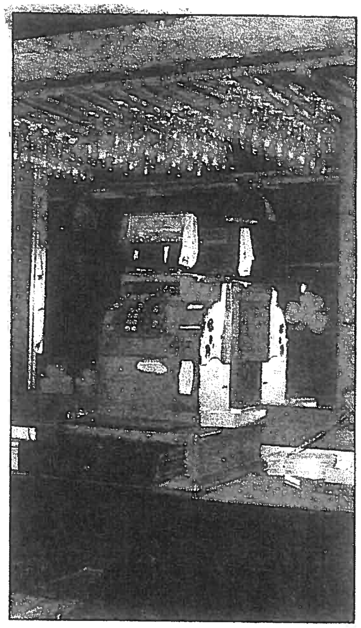
A Runyonesque array of rogues and roug guys, gentlemen and jewels made up the c entele, people of night and city, drawn fro the same mythic dimension of New York th bred my father, a retired captain of dete tives. There were priests and prizefighter judges and professors, lawyers and stockbr kers, cops and carpenters. Sudanese dipl mats joined floozy actresses and artists alo with greengrocers, seedy newsmen (fro UPI mainly) bookies (just don't let them s near the phone, that's all) and famed southe writers (Capote was a Sunday-evening reg lar dissolving a Sunday-evening sadness Some were well off; others weren't. And the was also a clutch of moth-eaten guys of co pletely indeterminate livelihood and residen — antic and jovial men of goodwill who we always ready with a song, a gag or a story.

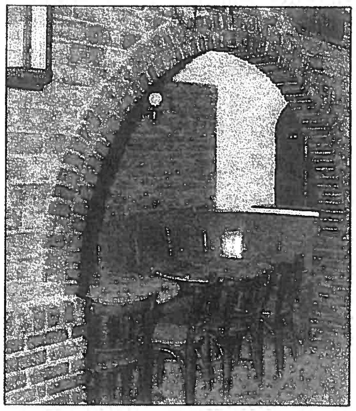
Just as the place itself nestled in the co shadows of office towers behind it in a leanin peeled-paint building, misfits in the outsi world always fit snugly. Most of the patro shared the very simple desire to lose the selves in the company of each other, regar less of position or pedigree. They all had solidity of character that went beyond cla and social convention, and shared a curiosi and fondness for each other as well as a reve ence for the idea of equality. A militant dece cy was the standard for behavior. Howev different their backgrounds, the customers my father's place had a way of finding comm ground, no doubt a function of the humili learned in the Depression and an appreciati of broadly diverse people attained throu service in World War II. Bonds, however m mentary and liquor-born, were forged. Bei completely unsnobbish, the clientele had greater capacity for spontaneity and for livi bigger in the moment than my own peers which left a lasting impression on me.

I wasn't always such an enthusiast, thoug As a self-conscious teenager, I became imp tient with some of the patrons, particular the ones I thought maudlin or foolish. Balk village lad, I was embarrassed when order to walk one of them home to their furnish rooms, or to hail them a taxi, their glazed eye weak with overindulgence. I began to fee that my attachment to the place was of que tionable social cachet and that I was too s phisticated to have old guys with jellyfla arms and stinky-breath faces singing into m ear as I escorted them down Second Avenue Sometimes on a date, I'd go right by the plac with the same discomfiture a groom might fee as he steers his bride away from a table o loud uncles at their wedding — the ones he conveniently left unintroduced. Everyon goes through a time of feeling awkward abou where they fit in; but it's only later that yo





LISA BARLOW



'The place was stout, plain and resolutely unhip, a public house in the old style: simple yet idiosyncratic . . . A militant decency was the standard for behavior.'

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realize that the anxiety is not just your own. During my disenchanted phase, I couldn't see why my father had such an attachment to the place or why he chose to spend his evening hours in the company of such dubious fellows. When I asked him one time, he simply gave me a cryptic look that said, "If you have to ask such a question, you'd never grasp the answer."

I can't say what it was exactly that turned my head around. It might have had something to do with the writer's block I suffered for a while, which left me with lots of time on my hands and not a lot of money in my pocket. Free drinks at Dad's bar took on new appeal. There was no dramatic breakthrough moment, though, just a quiet revelation. Something that Eugene O'Neill said about the men he used to drink with on the old West Side waterfront seemed to click inside me. "I lived with them, got to know them. In some queer way they carried on, I learned not to sit in judgment on other people."

After that I found myself wandering down there at cocktail time, soaking up the bar banter, which always flew back and forth with such zest and timbre, punctuated only by the clankings of the rusty cash register, not by traded business cards and dropped names. Politics and religion, topics usually taboo in most bars, always led the conversational agenda. The syntax may have been rough at times with double negatives and malapropisms, but the talk always brimmed with lyricism, wit and the idiom of old New York, surely the dialect of a lost Atlantis. I'd sit there sometimes and scribble notes on coasters and napkins, barely keeping up. The place became a touchstone for me, a way to reconnect after a frustrating day wrestling with phrasing and loneliness.

To brisk passersby, the place may have seemed strange and slightly unwholesome, merely a dark place to get drunk in. But it was really just like a small town, with its own distinctive characters, customs and sense of community. It was one of those eddies that humanize the city. We regularly fed the neighborhood bagmen ("Hey, Irish, put a little more ketchup on that burger this time, will ya?") and overpaid local unfortunates for window washing and the like. Christmas Eve one year, we set up a bar outside in the falling snow and served surprised strollers as we sang carols. Once, my father brought George the Turk and Blind Andy — customers with nowhere else to go — home to our holiday formal as my mother's starched lace curtains — until George put us all in stitches with his tales of the aging dowagers trying to corner him into marriage.

My father cashed checks and lent money when it was needed, and was both confidante and confessor to a variety of the heartsick and rueful: once-attractive girls wrinkling into spinsters; good-time Charlies turned into miss-outs; delinquent fathers hoping to win back an alienated child. Sure, he was concerned about feeding his family, but the place was really like a midtown living room for him; patrons were house guests, not dollar signs. He was religious about "buy-backs," usually giving a customer one free drink for every three bought, sometimes going one for two. Bartenders were instructed to refuse overly generous tips from the inebriated. Lost wallets and forgotten raincoats were routinely returned, a rarity in New York. Such integrity paid itself back. When our last bartender, the late Eddie Verdun, took sick with cancer, the benefit we threw to defray his hospitalization netted nearly $20,000. A couple of his longtime customers wrote $1,000 checks right at the door. Later, during the witching hours, my father would go on a pub crawl around the block to size up the competition, all winks and whispers as he traded hearsay and quips with the other owners. Pauli, our grizzled Chinese porter, would accompany him, cracking jokes, guarding his flank: Fool to his Lear on the hearth of East Side gin mills. Meanwhile, back at our place, Danny O, the crank, would have everybody riled to blow up the Bank of England.

At one point, my father reversed a longstanding order and I got a chance to bartend. "You lack love for your fellow man and have the kind of face that anybody'd love to punch in the nose," he scolded, "but I'm short a barman tonight." (I only got slugged once, and that was by a waitress, perhaps deservedly, after an unintended insult.) As all good things, I began to appreciate the place just as it had to end, but for a few months, I tended whenever the regular man wanted off, happy to be spared another night of young urban ennui.

Experience taught me that handling bar patrons is not romantic or thrilling. However fascinating a story was the first time, it rarely held up to a fifth telling. Excitement when it did come took the form of wondering whether the two smart alecks remaining at 4 o'clock in the morning were readying to rob me and whether the base-

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would take them both down in one swing if they rushed. There were also the times I had to break up fights between guys with hair-trigger tempers by vaulting over the bar like a doughboy going over the top.

Another swell scene was when I warned an out-of-towner that the woman he was with was a known professional we usually didn't let in. To get back at me, she convinced the guy that I had mortally insulted her honor, and Galahad waited outside until I closed and chased me for 30 madcap blocks in a taxicab.

Bad jokes and bromides, bruisers and blowhards may have lengthened the night sometimes, but I came away with a lesson from all this. The range of human feeling was somehow wider in these people than in a lot of my contemporaries, allowing for greater joy and greater sorrow. Why? Who knows, but it might have been because they weren't as distracted by continually looking over their shoulders to see where they stood in relation to the other guy. In their often messy, profane, whiskey-rank presence, something of a mystery was uncovered, and I began to see that even the most ordinary life held amazing secrets and a density of experience worth absorbing. Even small change could be coined in solid gold.

Occasionally, there were especially high-proof nights when a fine flash of heart and brain would burst from the gab and goodwill. These were times when the most banal scrap of conversation would glow sacramentally and when the sensation of existence was sharper, pure and shared. There were instants in that bar when I thought all the joy in the world spun from that very spot, and even upon waking the next afternoon I felt the aftereffects of an untypical transit. The euphoria wasn't simply a function of boozy bonhomie, though, but came from a feeling of deep human connectedness rooted in mutual respect and compassion.

"Here we are," Himself would be saying, nursing a scotch at 4 a.m. while we closed. Pauli, who had to be up early to open up for the lunch trade, would be chasing out the stragglers in his screechy broken English ("Letsee go! Letsee go!") while sweeping the floor in search of loose change. Second Avenue would be quiet except for street people and stray taxis, whose taillights traced red arcs downtown. "Here we are." My father was normally an articulate fellow, but these were the only words that seemed to fit.

In May, 1984, my father sold the place to an outfit that paid handsomely to turn it into a fancy French wine bar. He was tired of the hours, and many of his favorite customers were getting on in years. On the last night we had a final party to drink
the place dry, as tradition holds
place should be dry when it chang
ownership. People came from
over the city: 20 years of ha-has a
growly how-are-yas. Choruses
"Danny Boy" circled round the t
as a New Yorker reporter duly to
notes. Everything was free. Hi
spirits were general, except in t
last knot of regulars who took t
closing as some kind of greater d
possession and faced diaspora su
lenly. I myself, the penitent sno
was about as happy as a librarian
a book burning.

Closing for the last time, my f
ther and I locked the door behind u
standing minutely in the mornin
sunlight that knifed between t
high-rises. Pauli shuffled away to h
Chinatown, a little faster than he
normally go and a little mo
hunched, unconvinced, perhap
that the skyline would be as sturd
having lost a part of its footings.

"It'll all be so sterile after this,'

intoned, clumsy with feeling.
"Sure it will," my father snapped,
aquiver, an old believer to a new
olyte. "Sure it will. Do you think I
n't know that? Do you think
u're telling me something?"

Having grown up in this atmo-
here where snobbery and manli-
ss were mutually exclusive, I'm
comfortable with the increased
atus consciousness of watering
les frequented by men my own
e, shooting at 30 from either side.
ey all seem too predictable and
epackaged, dull even if the brass
shiny, full of the tepid, the tight-
ngued and the oh-so-tasteful.
inking establishments used to be
ces that brought people from dif-
ent backgrounds and generations
gether, permitting them to appre-
te their common lot. Now they've
en ferned, feminized and strati-
d, with the accent on the upscale,
t on the broad-based.

Bars of the so-called "new man"
ve become extensions of office life
clean, well-lit places where the
stle and the get-ahead leave no
m for grit, color and spontaneity.
eryone's about the same age, do-
about the same thing. What
sses for social diversity is being
th people who don't have a law de-
e or an MBA. Blah! Executive
ybooks don't seem to come with
ts to pencil in reckless good
er, a sudden, sodden cry or a de-
ved punch in the nose.

ometimes I feel I'm in an eerily
imated fashion spread with the
dels all too preoccupied with pos-
to enjoy the aimless grace of plain
naraderie. For their part, I'm sure
y find my regard for the common
ch vaguely loser-like, but that's to
expected from their sensibilities,
ped by TV commercials and men's
gazines that counsel how to drink
a style that'll boost your career.
tus anxiety has imposed a grim
formity of upward mobility and a
ire to cut the other guy down.
at they are in danger of becoming
guys who get straight A's and still
Life — lost in "the suck of the
f," as Walker Percy phrases it,
hter for their self-absorption.

owadays, I tend to do most of
drinking in "old man" bars, gen-
tionally dislocated but more at
ne with the prevailing values,
ever arcane. I find something in
se places that I don't around my
rs: simple pleasure within the
ff democracy of other guys. I
w a lot from this well of informal
seemingly unimportant attach-
nts. There is a natural sociabilitv

man" bars just don't have. Some of my friends worry about my preference for such obviously declasse places, often dark as caves. They don't seem to view my bar buddies in the proper light, seeing only the smudgy shadows. Occasionally, I'll run into one of the old crowd and drink too much. To the days back when, salute, honor bright! Once in a while, I'll muster the nerve to walk by the old place, each time met by a twinge of phantom pain and a longing that follows me home. Many lives, that place.