Street Level

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It was chilly out, and the neon Miller sign shone red and blue through the steamy plate glass windows. Fifteen or twenty sets of Greek letters lined the walls, and lots of college boys crowded the bar, dressed in blue jeans and striped button downs, with short hair combed just so and held in place with something wet. The jukebox was playing a song by Madonna. A group of girls in the back corner, seemingly penned in by the mass of chattering bodies, laughed stacatto, piercing through the rest of the noise. No one seemed to notice and soon a group of boys at the bar burst forth over a joke of their own.

The crowd sucked the newcomers in. “Like an amoeba,” the young man thought. Though he was wearing jeans, they weren’t faded quite so perfectly, and his hot pink sweatshirt and ratty green jacket helped him feel out of sorts. He hung back by the jukebox while his wife walked to the bar for beer.

His wife’s friend looked more out of place than he did. The green army fatigues, flannel shirt, and black tic overcoat could have passed if she’d been a make-up conscious blonde, but the burnt orange hair bowl-cut just above her ears, ears arrayed with numerous gold hoops and oddities like a tiny plastic baby with a pistol and an eye patch, declared her an obvious outsider. Still, she seemed perfectly comfortable. If anything, she was looking smug.

He scanned the jukebox, looking for songs that would play soon after the current selection, dropped two quarters and punched three sets of numbers. He tapped on the glass case as number 192 ended and switched to number 204, smiled and turned away in time to take a plastic cup of beer from his wife. “When A Man Loves A Woman” by Percy Sledge. He touched her free hand and squeezed.

“Theyre seats,” she said, and they moved back toward the windows and sat down. They were more like church pews than seats, and he sat down next to his wife and opposite her friend, drank some beer and looked around. Excess merriment, he thought. What the hell do they all have to be so happy about? And the chattering laughter continued.

This was Sherries, and he’d only been inside once before, seven years earlier, cutting his one o’clock sociology class to have a beer with a friend. Sociology of a sort, he’d thought that afternoon, because his attitude toward Sherries was that he wouldn’t be caught dead there. Fraternities and sororities and they are obviously from Chicago driving Mom and Dad’s car. Preppies. Muffy and Buffy and...
pink and green and whatever other stereotypes came to mind when he saw someone in that particular uniform.

The uniform hadn't changed much since then, sockless topsiders had been replaced by running shoes never run in, but he wasn't fond of wall building anymore. The privilege of the very young, he thought, and then he remembered that his wife's friend was only twenty-three, still within the privileged years, when wall building was necessary for identity.

And after all, she hadn't built all the walls herself. Most she merely recognized and acknowledged, and agreed not to walk through. And she was more gracious about it then he had been at her age. For though she was probably thinking the same things about the crowd that he would have, she was willing to call a truce of action, and rub shoulders with them while pretending that their shoulders weren't there.

The jukebox had switched to a song he didn't know, and his wife and her friend had been talking about something and drowned out by the noise of the crowd, but now his second selection clicked in. The Zombies. He couldn't help it, the only songs he ever played in bars were those he'd first heard before he was twelve years old. "It's the time of the season for loving."

As if on cue, the boy standing a little in front and to the left of him, leaning against the wall that separated the door from the steamed-up windows, grabbed his girlfriend's ass. "I told you not to do that," she yelled, and this time the noise level dipped and a few heads turned. But only for a second. Then it was as if nothing had happened.

The boy, though, turned a bit red and looked at the floor. He smirked a bit. Not nastily. He was embarrassed it seemed, wondering perhaps what he would have to do to make up for this. Or perhaps this was fairly common, though not usually so public, and he was wondering what he could do to improve his timing. Suddenly the girl moved into the crowd, smiling and waving at a distant friend, and the boy followed her, still grinning sheepishly. Relax, the young man thought as he watched the boy. Relax. It's barely nine. It's the time of the season.

Then his wife and her friend stood up. "We're going to look for the bathroom." They moved through the crowd to the back, and he knew that when they returned they would be ready to leave. It was too noisy, and it wasn't their type of crowd, and it had been a joke to stop in first place. He drank some beer and hoped that the next song would be his last selection. He hated leaving with songs left unplayed.

Three girls moved into the empty spaces next to him, and the young man looked at the wall where the ass-grabbing boy had been standing and drank some more beer. It was almost gone. His song opened with merry-go-round flutes and he smiled and mouthed the words. "Let me take you down, 'cause I'm going to, Strawberry Fields."
The girl in front of him asked him if he was having a good time. He nodded and said yes. She was about twenty, and she was pretty, but not exceptionally so. She was smiling and he smiled too. It wasn’t often that strangers spoke to him, let alone pretty girls, and he thought it odd that she would speak to him here, where he was so obviously out of place. It was a kindness, and it endeared her to him.

As he watched her talking to her friends he saw just how vast the gulf between them was. Eight years seemed an eternity, although even to cross that span would be simple compared to the barriers imposed by class and culture. Never in his wildest would he imagine himself fitting in at Sherries. Never would he want to. And yet.

At the far end of the pews, for he was now convinced that the seating had been salvaged from a remodeled church, a pale black-haired girl had temporarily disengaged herself from the group. Round face and red lips, she too was silently singing along. “That is you can’t, you know, tune in, but it’s alright.” And he looked back to the girl who had spoken to him. “That is I think it’s not too bad.”

He finished his beer and stared out the window, then at the girl who was singing, then at the girl who had spoken. Yes, he thought, I think I’ll have another. And as he decided to ask the girl to save his seat, and would she like another beer because he was going to get one for himself, and play a few more songs and sit for twenty minutes, they came back, his wife and her friend, and he remembered who he was, and where he was, and he stood up, smiled at the girl who had talked to him, and said goodbye. She smiled as well, and then he stepped outside.

They were a few feet ahead of him, but their laughter punctured the night. “Did you see that last group that came in, waving their arms and shouting?” said his wife. “And that disgusting bathroom,” added her friend. And they laughed again, having absorbed the energy of the crowd.

And the young man stopped and looked through the steamed-up window, past the neon Miller sign, at the Greek letters on the walls, for his angle at street level prevented him from seeing the people inside. And he thought to himself “if only, “and he thought to himself” but never,” and he sang to himself “let me take you down.”

— Charles Faris