

FREE ZOMBIE DUST

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I STILL TOLD EVERYONE Long Room was my favorite bar in the city, but as I walked home from the Irving Park L stop I would not go inside. I quickened my pace and nodded with a nod that could be mistaken for a stretch, while I looked with a look that could be mistaken for a glance, at the door guy whose name I couldn't recall but who recognized me as I recognized him. Sitting upon its long row of stools, waiting with elbows on the wood and concrete bar top, were too many ghosts of too many good memories of my first year and a half in Chicago—when we were there and didn't need to talk to anyone else. When we could make the one-block walk to our new home, still fresh with living memories.

Long Room was the first bar I visited as a Chicago resident with a 606-something zip code and the weight of five new keys hanging from my belt loop. In Knoxville, I never needed five keys to an apartment. There was usually one to the front door, and occasionally a complex would have an outer gate that required another key. I lived in a building across Eleventh Street from the World's Fair Park that was built for just that occasion in 1982.

I remember going there to throw frisbee or just sit on the manicured lawn under the Sunsphere and think about how tired I was of the city and almost all of its people; sit there and talk to friends and roommates about the places we didn't want to go but that we went regardless. I had lived in the suburbs that make up the larger part of Knoxville since 1992 and I was well aware of it. At that time, I lived in apartment 2007, which was the year that I moved in after my freshman

year of college—well before the people living in the rooms surrounding the concrete courtyard. All except my next-door neighbor in 2008, who was well into his 70s judging by the pace he would walk the single flight of metal and concrete stairs to his corner one-bedroom. My neighbor and I, the old guard of Eleventh Place. To the others, I was old because I was 23, and he was old because he was; but neither of us ever officially complained. Like me, he wouldn't speak to the neighbors unless it was of barely recognizable courtesy; and I'd oftentimes sit at my patio table and watch college students play drinking games and yell at one another.

This is the place where she and I drank beer and got to know each other. Sitting on the patio talking and laughing with someone who didn't yet drive around town with a general disgust. To her, this had been a place where she'd come to school and met friends, a place where her dead parents weren't buried. A place where she went to Urban Bar and people like me saw her and went up to bum a smoke and buy her a drink just as an excuse to talk; something I never did even though that's how we met.

She stood by the bar in the carpeted room so filled with smoke that people who didn't smoke smoked anyway. Her and several of her friends still in their work shirts from the beer bar down the street, were grabbing a drink before the 2 a.m. last call. I sat at a table with three friends—late on a Thursday but we didn't work nine-to-fives. I approached her alone and tried to make her laugh. She did without the care of purpose and I remember smiling before I joined with her laughter.

She was something bizarrely new who hadn't gone to a high school down the street. A girl from a place called the Midwest or Great Plains or something of which I had very little idea aside from a vague notion of tornadoes and fields of wheat or corn. Something I would celebrate when I first told friends about her—as if Tulsa were a magical place that spawned girls with thick dark hair wildly falling over her shoulders and face. I still imagined her soft, blue eyes behind the heart-shaped sunglasses that I would have gladly stepped on had they been anyone else's.

I'd spend every Sunday sitting at her bar while she gave me beers and food and more attention than her other customers. I never paid covers when her bar had shows and I'd stay until four in the morning and help put chairs upside down on tables. We went out to eat every night at the three or four restaurants in downtown Knoxville that we deemed appropriate for our taste and conversation.

That year, I spent Thanksgiving with her family instead of my own. After dinner, we met her adoptive brothers out for a drink. After they left, we sat on a cold empty patio and I brought up my leaving for graduate school. Something we both knew but hadn't discussed.

"You know I'm leaving. If things are going this well then, I want you to go with me."

She smiled.

ON AUGUST 31, 2012, we drove what was then our car 540 miles to a hotel by O'Hare. After tumbling into rush-hour traffic on the Dan Ryan, she nearly peed her pants trying to hold it until we got to the hotel. She didn't but she briefly blamed me, the navigator, for the ordeal; an ordeal that was quickly forgotten after dinner and a hotel room in our new city.

We woke early the next morning after having meticulously planned our route to the new home we'd only seen once. Checking that our car—packed with a TV, two computers, hopes, clothes, plants, premonitions—hadn't been robbed and after refreshing the dying plants from a bottled water, we made the long-short drive to Irving Park and Ashland. It was a quiet neighborhood aside from the constant traffic. It was close enough to the few areas we had read enough about to think we knew.

Arriving long before the movers, we sat on the curb, quietly excited. They pulled up in a loud orange semi, not nearly small enough to fit in the alley, far too large to sit on the busy Ashland Avenue for hours. They would return in three to four days, they said, after they dropped off some strangers' furniture in Wisconsin and other places I hadn't been to—the Great Migration of Knoxvilleans to the Midwest, from the hills to the plains.

As the truck left, in a fleeting moment of panic, she sat on the single concrete step leading to the gated side entrance and cried as she called her uncle to tell him we made it okay. Then we met Sebin, the peculiar, jolly superintendent of our building whose sporadic shuffle and rushed tour put our problems in perspective. He swept us around the yellow building, showing us the three entrances, two laundry rooms, and storage basement. Quickly talking through his smile in a heavy accent as we smiled back and nodded while he tested key after key—removing each correct one and placing it on a ring for us.

The way the doors and locks were haphazardly replaced over the years required a different key to every entrance and yet another different key to both laundry rooms and the storage room. I suggested we get plastic color rings to designate each door so we didn't forget, which we did that day at the hardware store down the street. We bought the cheapest air mattress and folding chairs we could find for the days ahead: without a table, pots and pans, books, movies, records, couch, art.

We carried what belongings we had and dropped them in a pile in the center of the room, next to the pile we inflated the air mattress in the living room; saving our bedroom for our bed. We unfolded our chairs and I began applying the plastic colored rings to our different sets of keys. I still think it took us a few weeks to get it down. We certainly didn't know if the pink or green key opened the way to the narrow mothball-smelling carpeted stairwell after our walk back from the Long Room on that first night.

THE LONG ROOM WAS A BAR. Outside, a small yellow-lit sign hung from ornamental metal protruding from the wall. One or two

Midwestern brewery neons hung in the window. It didn't have a food menu. It didn't have TVs lining the walls. Its name, an accurate description of the layout: a long, concrete-topped bar stretched down the room with dark wooden accents and about twenty or so backed stools to match. A mirror behind stretched the length of the bar with faint yellow lights on the ceiling, providing just enough light to read the drink menu but not enough to read the specials' board.

Running along the opposite wall were a few two- and four-top tables, leaving room for patrons to walk and brush elbows with one another. At the end of the tables, before the single-stall bathrooms, hung one of the only pieces of decoration: a framed, yellowed map of Chicago and its neighborhoods marking places I didn't know. The only other displays of excess were wrought iron designs at the top of either end of the bar inexplicably nautical in nature, with a couple of fake or stuffed birds among them—curiously watching bar-goers without ever letting on what they were thinking.

Four or five booths resided in the back next to an old photo booth that still worked, before leading out onto a small enclosed patio that allowed smoking at the tables away from the door. Music played loudly enough to hear, softly enough to have to listen.

IT WAS BUSY THAT FIRST SATURDAY NIGHT but we found seats at the bar which we preferred to tables anyway. She was a bartender and liked talking about drinks with people who knew more than I did. We looked over the menu and recognized few, if any, of their mostly local and regional drafts. The woman behind the bar—satisfyingly slow moving with short, dark curly hair and glasses—came up with a smile. We all spoke. The woman's name was Dina. She and I wanted pale ales. Dina recommended a beer whose name I had imagined to life when looking over the menu: thought about its dryness, felt it between my fingers, made it into a hot-selling, yet-to-be-invented form of speed. Dina poured us two Zombie Dusts and walked on.

Later, I ordered another and she tried something else—eager to test her pallet on the unknown. After that, I ordered another and she returned to Zombie Dust. She and I told Dina we loved it. Dina said a lot of people loved it. Dina said so many people loved it that it was hard to find—that, or wasn't readily available, but mostly a combination of the two. Dina told us it was brewed in Munster, Indiana. To us, that might as well have been Chicago. Dina said that you could sometimes find six-packs at Binny's or other liquor stores but that people would call and ask if it was there. Dina even passed on rumors of waiting lists which I imagined taped behind checkout counters, scrawled hastily with the names of regulars and friends.

We drank with Dina as patrons evaporated around us. Conversations became loose, cars drove by on Irving Park. We asked for the check. Dina picked it up.

"A welcome to the neighborhood thing."

WITH DINA, WE NEVER PAID FOR A CHECK. We would ask and Dina would either ignore us or conjure an excuse to cover the check. We usually left a ten or twenty under our stacked empty glasses when we left. Whether that money went into the register or Dina's pocket didn't matter—it usually wouldn't have been close to the cost of our tab.

After bringing our drinks, we would all catch up on the past few days. Mostly pleasantries that always required the same response. Dina would ask her about her job and try to convince her to come work at Long Room, something she had already applied for our first week in town. Dina would ask me about my classes at DePaul and tell us about Violet, Dina's art student daughter, with whom we eventually shared a drink on Violet's twenty-first birthday.

After locking ourselves out of our apartment in the cold, when she was wearing a kimono without shoes, we walked down to have a drink at the Long Room and wait for the locksmith. Dina offered to hide a key in the bar for next time, but I never made copies and we locked ourselves out again.

We stopped by to see Dina before going to concerts, sometimes after, on our way home before closing time. We stopped by to see Dina before and after my first and only Broadway show in Chicago. A Christmas present she had given me that year. We told Dina about the show and how much we had laughed and how we saw a guy shooting heroin on the Red Line.

The following Christmas, I bought her tickets to a show she wanted to see in March. By March, she had left me and Dina had left the Long Room. I sold the tickets to a stranger for half of what I'd paid for them.

IN JANUARY, I STOOD OUTSIDE THE LONG ROOM, counting rats as they made little prints in the snow on their way under a parked car. Stooping, I could see a box from the pizza place across the street, shifting with the movement of its occupants. I remembered she and I had eaten the pizza from across the street on quite a few occasions when it was the only place open, vowing it would never happen again. Pizza fit for rats and drunks, I thought.

More often, we had gone to Dinner Diner across the street where we got the same thing every time. The guys behind the counter would start making two grilled cheeses with bacon, one with hash browns and the other with fries, when we sat down. She would speak Spanish to the Latino man behind the counter and I would listen and try to make out what they were saying. I'd tell her what I thought they said and she would give me a grade. It was the most I've practiced Spanish in my life and I kept trying to listen to Spanish speakers on the bus or train, trying to eavesdrop and failing.

People who frequented Long Room frequented Dinner Diner. It never closed and I'd see the same two men there. About fifteen or so stools sat lined up under the fluorescents—the inside of the small brick building resembling the outside with its bright white glow forcing your eyes to adjust uncomfortably to features. They had no tables, but a new, digital jukebox sat awkwardly against the end of the wall and gave

patrons something to keep them busy if the counter was full.

I would sometimes put on universally hated music before paying my bill and walking home to where her clothes were still in her dresser in my bedroom and closet; her pink and white '80s road bike locked on the outside of the rack next to mine; some of her trinkets in a box by the door. Things she hadn't moved out even though she was staying with a coworker less than a mile away. Things she said she couldn't move out because our car was only mine. Everything was there but her. The music at Dinner Diner a cruel prank in which I was never witness to the pay off, but felt confident in the fact that someone was upset with something I'd done.

I LEARNED FROM THE BAR BACK that Dina was gone after something like twelve years at Long Room. The owners say Dina quit, but the bar back didn't think so. He said it wasn't about Dina drinking behind the bar; it wasn't about Dina giving away drinks. He said the owners simply wanted fresh faces. I considered asking around to find out where Dina was working, but they probably wouldn't have had Zombie Dust and it wouldn't have been the Long Room. Still, I thought about Dina behind the bar calling customers by name and buying them a shot—joining with a shot of wine if it was too early for liquor.

James was one of the bartenders at Long Room who still knew who I was, and I went in some nights when he was working. He knew I wanted Zombie Dust but would usually ask what I wanted in case it changed, or on the occasions they were out. James might not have charged for a drink or two, but he never picked up my tabs and I didn't expect him to. He was tall and slim and always wore things somewhere between a shirt and sweatshirt. He taught yoga and looked comfortable and sometimes ate Thai delivery behind the bar as we talked about his upcoming band project or whatever music was softly playing overhead.

I usually went in by myself after work or class and would have a beer or two before going home. I knew who some of the regulars were and would talk to them without ever getting to know them—enough to only barely acknowledge one another until someone felt comfortable moving down seats to have a conversation. The conversations were understood to last only as long as the next word.

Most of the time the clientele was couples or small groups of people in their twenties and thirties, talking about beer or their jobs or their relationships. I sometimes would talk to people who sat next to me who I didn't know. That is how I met a young lady with reddish bobbed hair and glasses who was there with a friend. The young lady's name was Kelly who talked endlessly about her psychology graduate program and the professor with whom Kelly went to church every Sunday. Kelly laughed at times when I didn't know I should be laughing. I caught myself watching the laugh, only joining in when it was too late and forced and obvious I wasn't laughing.

The friend's ball cap succeeded in covering half of the face and nearly all of the dark, straight hair. The friend disliked me. I knew

because the friend told me. What little I had said had been enough. So I told the friend I didn't like the hat and that it was too pulled down too far. A childless comeback based on no merit aside from the fact that I already knew I didn't like the friend either.

Kelly talked; talked to me; talked to the friend; talked to James who also talked to everyone. Kelly said they were regulars at Long Room and didn't know the bartender's name. I told them "James" and James said his name was Chris—a detail I told myself to remember for the next time I went in.

Kelly and I later went to Dinner Diner and Kelly sat a few stools down and bet the guy at the next stool to finish their famous "Slinger." A plate which came with nearly everything the diner serves. Kelly finished it. The Latino man behind the counter brought Kelly a pancake made in the shape of male genitals, something I've seen them do on a number of occasions. Kelly yelled at him, I paid our bill, and Kelly and I left. I could understand that not all people find it as amusing as the standard fare at Dinner Diner.

Kelly came to my apartment to listen to records I hadn't put on in years. The records of bands from six or eight years ago that everyone knew but that I would never listen to alone. Stale music from the past flowing through the apartment where her dresser had been moved out, and my room was rearranged as much as the space would allow. The closet where my sweater hung instead of her green polka dot top on which my mother had sewn up a rip. The storage room where my bike was now locked in her old spot on the outside of the rack, within easy reach.

Kelly and I exchanged numbers and we met once more to only confirm that Kelly and I should no longer have beers together at Long Room.

I WALKED BY LONG ROOM RECENTLY without glancing at the door guy whose name I didn't recall—afraid of seeing Kelly and the friend in the ball cap sitting at the bar. Ashamed to see Chris because I thought his name was James. Except I was not really afraid or ashamed of either. I didn't think about Kelly and doubt Kelly thought about me. I would have politely waved or given a small tilt of my glass in Kelly's direction on the way up to my mouth.

Chris would have said hello and offered me a Zombie Dust if they had it tapped; even maybe laughed about the fact that I called him by the wrong name. Chris was moving to Boston soon with his girlfriend, and he offered to buy me a beer the next time I came into the Long Room. Maybe I would go back and sit with my elbows on the bar and read over the draft list, even though I knew what I wanted.