

## An Accidental Therapist

Best to drink quickly if you drink on the rocks. Otherwise, the ice cubes will melt and the good ship *Friendly Buzz* will meet a watery grave. If you were in an air conditioned restaurant, that was one thing, but the ceiling fans on the tiki bar's wooden overhang couldn't preserve ice. And if you were drinking at a bar on a summer night, forget it. So when Allen made a mojito, he made it to last. He'd only put a pair of ice cubes in there, so it wouldn't be too much of a disaster when they melted, and added just enough syrup to keep your good friend Moe out of Davy Jones' locker. His efforts made him the reigning lord of the Fourth Avenue Express tiki bar.

When Allen got this bartender gig, he challenged himself to talk at least a little to a customer every day. If he served someone watching baseball, he'd comment on the score. If someone was in from out of town, he'd suggest a few things to do. He found it a little odd that people would reply to him, as he'd always found his own face forbidding. His eyes and eyebrows made an odd team: the first looked ready to find and assess every threat in the room, while the second knitted together in such a way that made you think he was ready to destroy those threats. Those brows, which from a distance looked like they had eyebrows of their own, met at the top of a bladed nose so small it could've been sliced off someone else's face. He felt he unnerved people more when he smiled than when he scowled. The scowl at least looked more natural on his face, but he couldn't exorcise the demons he felt possessed it when he grinned.

But demons or no demons, people had responded to him. For instance, there was a group of younger guys talking about the Pope Benedict scandal. He'd often heard political talk at bars, but he was careful to dive in unless there was a group consensus, and if he agreed with the consensus. And the mood of this chat seemed anti-Benedict to him.

"Strength of mind and body, my ass," offered one of them. "It was the child molestation

thing.”

“You think he diddled kids?” offered another.

“Who’s to say? But I’m convinced he knew a lot more about it than any of us did. And now he’ll take that knowledge to the grave.”

Allen, who had kept a close watch on the Benedict case, tossed his hat in the ring with “Pope Nixon. That’s how they’ll remember him.”

The group of them laughed. One drew a picture of Nixon in papal regalia on his napkin and handed it to Allen. From then on, Allen was one of them. They’d come to the Express almost every night, careful to talk politics whenever Allen served them. And after his shift got off, they’d go to another bar and wait for him to dispense more barbed wisdom. They seemed especially fond of him comparing Ron Paul to the crazy homeless guy on the bus. In some ways, it was more than he’d bargained for, but he appreciated being in over his head. He’d found his niche, at least until he lost it.

Allen ran with the sort of crowd who felt the one-percenters lived in a deluded fantasy world, that they did more to ruin the economy than to stimulate it. During one particular conversation about the rich, Allen struck what would’ve been a *coup de grace* under different circumstances. Under these, it proved more a *coup de désordre*.

“Stuck in that house, killing those sheep,” he said. “That’s how I see the rich.”

Stares all around the table. When he was asked to explain, he mumbled a quick “never mind” and clammed up for the rest of the night. He had forgotten that most people hadn’t seen *the Exterminating Angel*; if they knew Luis Buñuel at all, it was for that weird eyeball shit with Dali. And Allen was blasted right back to his college days. Time after time, the circumstances were perfect for an “it’s like that scene in…” moment. But nobody except Allen had seen any of

those movies, and he'd often hijack so much of the conversation explaining himself that the original thread would vanish into the black hole. And if you slam the brakes on too many discussions, you get a reputation. As Allen saw it, we all take our lumps; his came when he learned you don't toss out references to Ozu or Tarkovsky unless you've got someone in the field prepared to catch them. But you can't learn a lesson only to turn around and forget it.

He tried to keep it up with these guys for a few more days after the faux pas, but he only loomed over discussions and made everyone uncomfortable. Whether he left them or they left him, Allen was no longer part of that crowd. It wasn't long before he stopped working at the Express. Whatever it was that let him walk up to strangers and have a few words vanished when his friends stopped talking to him. And not just whatever drove him to talk about the ballgame, but whatever drove him to ask his customers how he could help them.

He was sick of the drawing board, but he couldn't escape that fucker. He'd sit at it and sketch out plans, but a poorly timed reference erased them. He had to tear this leaf of paper off, throw it in the trash, and work on blueprints for a life without social interaction. He found work as a sys admin and withdrew into the internet, which became the source of his groceries, news, TV, porn, and video games in addition to his money.

After a few months of living alone, his studio apartment went to seed. The boxes, wrappers, cartons, and bottles for the food that came to his door in bulk every month were left strewn around the floor. He didn't even eat at his little red bistro table anymore, and didn't use dishes or silverware on any food that didn't require it. Bits of that food reunited with their containers on the floor. He didn't often change, switching from one sweatshirt to one t-shirt depending on the temperature. Unused clothes piled up by his bed nook, while a layer of general crap infested his rug.

But Allen didn't care, because he had a new goal. He wanted to make the Parthenon out of all the Mountain Dew cans he'd collected. But he scrapped the project because there was no way he could replicate the frieze with what he had. Besides, how could he capture the structural intricacies of even a Parthenon in ruins, and what about the interior? He had finished the columns and was gearing up for the remains of the roof when he gave it up.

He wanted some cash off those cans. So he crammed all them into what ended up being four garbage bags, taking two hour breaks every ten minutes because there were just so many of them and he still had his job to do. It took him three days to bag all of them; they had to be getting in the mid-to-high hundreds. Three more days were needed to work out which grocery store was the closest, had the most convenient hours and would give him the best deal. Never mind the universal ten-cent return value printed on the cans, right above the barcode for the world to see. And he had to take three or four Xanax before he felt comfortable with even opening that door, and they all had to kick in before he left. He brought the whole bottle along just in case they wore off before he got back.

But even with all of those hurdles overcome, he would still be wandering around town with three or four big garbage bags full of cans. People would see him and make assumptions that were neither true nor wanted. To combat this, he decided to take the bags in chunks. One of them was a hell of a lot easier to carry than four. He finally felt those Xannies, but he popped one more. He knew the cashier would talk to him when he traded in the receipts. Granted, it would just be the standard "how was your day" business, but it would also be the first time he talked to someone besides the deliveryman in months. His nerve could not fail him. And he didn't shower, shave, comb his hair, or do anything else that fit along the chain of events most of us begin when we wake up. He weighed all possible options and made sure his course of action was the most

appropriate one. With the best decision made, he got up and headed over to the grocery store to return those cans.

As he walked out, Allen thought of those stories you'll hear sometimes about a shut-in blinded by the sun when he stepped outside. He didn't believe them. The sort of people who made those jokes weren't the sort of people who would spend months indoors. But the sun left our empiricist an idiot with a swimming head, clutching a garbage bag. He couldn't grasp the full extent of what being outside for this three block journey bore. All things considered, that was for the best. It was a brief walk, but he panted just the same, and got horrible cotton mouth. Good news was, he didn't conclude people were staring or put any ideas together about the wide berth they gave him. When Allen arrived, he took a huge drink of water from the fountain and deposited those cans. Made a cool five bucks off of them.

"How are you?" asked the young woman at the counter. Early twenties like Allen, a pale blonde with sea-green eyes and full lips with a natural redness to them and a great figure her loose-fitting uniform and apron could not hide.

"I'm great!" he replied. "First time I've left my apartment in nine months, you know, because I stopped hanging out with my friends and lost my job as a bartender. Can't pay for therapy, but that's nothing new, so fine! I'm out of my place, right?" He didn't notice, but her nose wrinkled with every word he spoke.

"Um, yeah, good to hear," she answered. "I guess, well, good... luck?"

And she handed him his five dollars and thought she'd never see him again, but he was back the next day with more cans, exact same time (right down to the minute!) as the last day. He headed right over to her register and she tried to put up the "register closed" sign, but she dropped it. He bent over, picked it up and put it right where it should have been, apologizing

profusely the whole time. He also got a look at her nametag, which hadn't occurred to him the previous day. Jenna was her name.

"No, it's okay, thanks for the help," she replied. "My break just started."

"Oh." His face fell. He turned and got ready to head over to the next register, his receipt bent in half and crumpled in his massive hand.

"Wait," Jenna called. "I'll get you your money. Then I'll go on break."

"Are you sure?" he asked. "You've been working hard all day. I wouldn't want to interrupt anything."

"It'll only take a minute," she answered, and it did. She gave him an awkward sort of half-smile and added "Glad to see you out of your apartment again." Maybe that was against her better judgment, but what would you have her say?

"Only until the Xanax runs out," he told her, in the sort of voice where it was hard to tell if he was serious or not. And the next day he was back with another big bag and a "this is the first time in... I don't know how long I've left home without chemically induced courage!" Jenna let out a single "heh" at the phrase "chemically induced courage," and Allen's face lit up.

Jenna felt bad for even thinking this, but she wished he'd shaved. At least he combed his hair, and it didn't look bad. A little longer than it should've been, but if he got it cut, he could make the curls work out quite well for him. And maybe this was a step over the line, but she had to be honest: she was happy he didn't smell as bad as he had the previous day.

"Do people ever stress you out?" he asked.

"What kind of people?" Jenna glanced at her watch, but tried to make her glance inconspicuous. Two hours until quittin' time. Maybe she'd be able to get rid of him at the start of her break. Or not get rid of him, but politely ask him to leave, and only if he hung around more

than a couple of minutes.

“People in general.”

“Not really,” said Jenna. “I think everyone’s got a type of person they just can’t deal with, but people in general? I don’t think so.”

“Well, they stress me out. I got to a point a few months ago where my friends just became too demanding. What was the point anymore?”

“Sounds lonely.”

“It is,” he admitted. “But I’d rather be lonely than have to be someone I wasn’t all the time.”

“Yeah,” replied Jenna. “It can be hard.”

“But you try to be honest with them, and they all go away,” continued Allen. “And then what do you do?”

Jenna had no idea what you do. And she had no clue what to tell Allen, so she didn’t tell him anything.

“I almost finished the Parthenon,” Allen said.

“Wait, what?” asked Jenna.

“Out of the cans,” replied Allen. “I almost built the Parthenon out of the cans.”

“Athena, huh? Apollo was always my favorite of the Greek gods,” said Jenna. “By the way, why’d you stop?”

“I’d never finish that,” Allen explained.

“You sure had enough cans to.”

“Yeah, but it was a stupid goal in the first place.”

And Allen kept coming back, but Jenna noticed that not only were the returns worth less and less – ten cents, twenty cents – but he bought twelve packs of Mountain Dew with them. It's not as if he wasn't helpful, though. He spent an hour out of several days bagging for customers and covered for her on her breaks before a supervisor told him to stop. When she asked if he wanted a little of her paycheck as a reward, he said he'd never make her do that; her company was enough for him. And she knew she couldn't get her shift changed, because he'd just find out when the new one was. Besides, while this might have technically qualified as stalking, she wasn't worried about him hurting her.

Occasionally, he'd look over at her and ask what was on her mind, and she would keep up the most professional of all professional smiles, and she'd tell him there was nothing, and asked about him. And he'd tell her a lot of things were on his mind. It got to the point where she knew what was coming, and she knew what she'd have to say. She wouldn't call him a creep, but saying yes to the sort of man who showed up uninvited, day after day and hurled his life story at your feet was one of those things a woman shouldn't do. Especially since he'd never introduced himself. And for as shallow as this sounded to her, he wasn't ugly, but that wasn't the sort of face she'd imagined waking up to. It flitted through her head that he had masturbated to her at least once. She confessed that could turn her on in a different set of circumstances, but with him, no thank you. He had masturbated to her, or at least had tried to; he got somewhere between two-thirds and three-quarters in before he had to stop.

And after not having missed a single day after several weeks, he quit showing up. Jenna had no way of telling why, but she assumed he'd worked his way through one or another of his problems and only didn't come back because he was embarrassed about the whole affair. Shame, because he helped out in his own way, and she had to admit she found his presence flattering.



She would never find out how right she was about his reasons for not returning. After what would prove his last visit, Allen went back to the Fourth Avenue Express, and found that same group of college kids talking politics.

“Where’ve you been, man?” asked one of them.

“Well, there’s this girl,” Allen began, and he was off to the races. It was only when he said it out loud and saw the looks on everyone’s face that he realized he might’ve gone too fast. He gave the most sheepish grin the world had ever seen, cut his story off around their second meeting, and finished with “maybe that’s a little creepy.”

Nods all around the table.

“She could’ve had a boyfriend, for all I knew.”

He’d fucked up again. He thought about going back to his apartment. The dark, dusty apartment with the unmade bed, the rug that hadn’t been vacuumed in a dog’s age, the clothes spread all over the floor. He compared that to the tiki bar, with a couple TVs, all-time smoothest “Just My Imagination” on the radio, ivy over the wooden fences, and a table full of people who had invited him over. He pulled the last few bucks he’d made from those cans out of his wallet, curious if this new bartender could mix a mojito like he could.