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SOUTHERN JOURNEYS

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PLUS: KIESE LAYMON, MARY MILLER, RONNI LUNDY,
AND ZORA NEALE HURSTON'S LESSONS IN LOVE





Social Engineering

BY JOHN T. EDGE

I clutch my nut tightly. Comforted, I pull the felt orb to my beige tufted chest. Rachael Roberts tells me that this is normal. At the end of a night, she says, it's common for drunks dressed as squirrels to walk up to the counter, looking for their keys or their phone, but with their costume's detached acorn accessory still in hand. They connect with their acorn, she says, like you are connecting now. They protect it, and maybe it protects them, like a drinker's talisman.

It's one-thirty-four in the morning at the Atomic Lounge in downtown Birmingham, Alabama. My friend Jay, with whom I'd just enjoyed a wine-soaked dinner of glossy oysters and duck-fat-poached swordfish, flaps his toucan wings and makes the sound he thinks toucans make. Bald and wry, a real estate guy by profession, he wears round black glasses and broadcasts joy. Twenty-plus years after graduating from college, Jay still talks about music like his life depends on it.

Feizal Valli, who owns and operates the Atomic with Rachael, knows how to read Jay. He flicks through a Spotify playlist in search of just the right Pixies song. As they talk nineties rock and assonance and dissonance, Rachael slides a piece of paper across the bar and into my blurred field of vision. She knows how to read me, too.

Written in tight script on one of those green-and-white guest check pads, her words account a surrealist barnyard: "gecko elastic, cookie armpit, giraffe crotch, zebra elastic." I had noticed Rachael

working on the far end of the bar, pulling costumes from cubbies and then carefully refolding and restacking each one. But I hadn't realized that she was doing triage, making note of which of the thirty or so costumes they stock needed repair.

Such is the life of a bar owner, her work seems to say. Such is the stuff of a bar that promises more to its customers, I begin to think.

Seven hours back, I started my night at the Atomic, drinking a very good mescal cocktail, stirred with grapefruit, served in a chilled coupe, garnished with a sage leaf set afloat on a skid of bitters. Seated at a white faux-marble-topped bar, beneath a mural of famous Alabamians painted by Feizal to replicate the *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* album cover, facing a small diorama plastered with the legend YOUR MONSTERS ARE MY MONSTERS TOO, I talked to a smart and conservative man in a smart and conservative blue blazer. And I talked to a proud member of the congregation of the nearby Catholic cathedral, a retailer who laughed hard and often. His parents named him Ignatius, he told me, but everyone has long called him Jerry.

We three talked about religions, novels, racial hierarchies, stained-glass windows, Greek restaurateurs, labor issues, coconut cake, Jewish merchants, segregation academies, and the future of Birmingham. The man in the blue blazer talked global dining destinations and economics. He threw around opinions like a hippie tossing flower petals at



a barefoot wedding. Jerry talked to me about the apostle Paul. And he confessed that since he was a boy, he has wished people would call him Ignatius. “But it’s just too late for that now,” Jerry said. “You can’t just become something else.”

As they talked, I made a game of spotting the Birmingham folk who populate Feizal’s Beatles-inspired mural. There was John “Big Daddy” Bishop, founder of Dreamland Bar-B-Que. Here was Sun Ra, the musician who, faced with the racism of Jim Crow-era Alabama, reckoned he couldn’t possibly be from here; instead, Herman Poole Blount claimed Saturn as his birthplace and took a new name. In the canon according to Feizal, Sun Ra, dressed in George Harrison’s red drum-major outfit, deserves front-row placement alongside chef Frank Stitt, garbed in Paul McCartney’s royal blue getup and clutching an English horn.

To our left I heard a whoop so I turned, glancing over the men’s shoulders toward the conversation pit, staged in the front window of the bar. A woman dressed as a duck sat cross-legged in a slipper chair, smoothing her bright yellow plumage and pulling on a Miller High Life. A young man in a penguin costume, seemingly two or three drinks ahead of her, made the sound he thought penguins make and sipped something brown from a rocks glass with one of those icebergs poking up and out.

A third man, wearing a brown squirrel costume with beige chest markings, stood tall, prancing back and forth like a dime-store marionette, looking for a shadow of his squirrely self in the light that bounced from dangling light fixtures and spangled off starburst pendants and refracted in the plate-glass front window. Jerry never saw that squirrel. I couldn’t take my eyes off him. And I couldn’t quit thinking about Jerry. About what he wanted, and what the Atomic promises, and what might come of time spent here.

A month earlier, Feizal Valli and I sat in the Atomic’s jungle room. In the light of day, a sober person might recognize it as a strip of three two-person booths, set in a hallway that connects the front room of the bar to the bathrooms and the Angela Davis room, entered through an oversized cutout of the Birmingham-born civil rights activist in her 1970s Afro-haloed prime. Plastic ferns dangled from ceiling brackets. Ectoplasm sloshed inside a lava lamp. A gold peacock

squatted above our booth. As we talked, I heard the trickle of water. And the wheeze and trill of a rhythm-and-blues-tuned organ.

Raised in Buffalo, New York, Feizal left home in his twenties. He’d been reading Bukowski and Kerouac, he told me, and he wanted to live someplace that felt real. New Orleans in the 1990s was real. From his apartment window, Feizal could hear nighttime gunfire. More than once, he came home to find couples having sex in his doorway.

He met a guy who managed a Bourbon Street strip club called Temptations. When a drug dealer shot a Temptations bartender in the knee, Feizal, who had never bartended before, lied his way into a job. “I didn’t have to fool with Chartreuse or egg whites,” he told me. “It was all about volume.” When that bar manager died of a drug overdose, Feizal began to manage Temptations. Working there, his vocation came into focus. His job was managing people, he understood. Only later did he recognize that his responsibility was to nurture the wildly damaged men and women he met on both sides of the bar.

Feizal recalled the restraining orders plastered to the back of the door. Posted on behalf of dancers, they kept predatory men out. Emancipation papers, taped alongside, signified that the minors who stripped there had won the legal right to quit the horrors of their childhoods and twirl beneath the light of a disco ball. Feizal dated strippers. He lived with strippers. He drank hard and often. He loved it until he understood it. Back then, the French Quarter was a place of “collective chaos,” he told me. “Everything felt so tragic there. We were all collapsing stars.”

As we talked, a young man stopped at the front corner of the jungle room to take a selfie among the plastic foliage. When he peered down at his phone to see how it turned out, Feizal reached for a remote. A trail of bubbles floated into the front corner of the room, swirling around the man, wrapping him in a boa of light and suspended air.

The man beamed, looked up for the source of this divinity, and snapped his shot again. Before he could suspect what was up, Feizal looked down, his face placid, his lips turned into a half-smile. “We’re players, inserted into your night,” Feizal told me later. “Our job is to surprise and delight and, sometimes, to move the narrative along.”

My friend Ari Weinzweig, the business guru and founder of Zingerman’s Deli,

once asked me: Why do you drink? He didn’t mean to accuse or criticize. But I heard it that way, because he was wearing shorts and a t-shirt and bouncing on the balls of his feet before a morning run. And I was hungover, dehydrated as a goat on a rock pile, gulping down a breakfast Coke. Ari genuinely wanted to know why I chose to abuse my body with drink at night, when I knew that I would surely be spent and sorry the next morning.

I tried to answer honestly. I talked about how, after a few drinks, I can sometimes see people more clearly. Guards down, inhibitions dropped, I get to glimpse who they really are, and maybe they get to see me, too. My answer was a beginning, but I hadn’t thought about the other questions embedded in his query. Like, *What good can a bar do?* Now that I stay up late less often, and I wake up hungover less often, too, I have begun to think through the real reasons why we claim bars to drink.

Good bars reinforce my belief in human nature. In good bars, I have a chance to connect with people who think differently from me, like the guy in the blue blazer who, in the first five minutes of our conversation, casually denigrated the college where my son dreams of studying. I can stutter-step toward common ground. At least, I can try. In good bars, in the time it takes to knock back a couple of old-fashioneds, I sometimes show my better, more tolerant self.

“We take care of people,” Rachael told me over coffee at an all-day cafe near her and Feizal’s downtown apartment. “And we take special care of the ones who appear to have gone feral.” She said this with a seriousness of purpose that told me she knows what is at stake. And she said it with a tilt of her head and a lilt in her voice that suggested her feral customers never know that she knows.

Rachael is from Trussville, Alabama, a small town northeast of Birmingham that became a bedroom suburb as she grew into a young woman. Quick and slight, she began bartending in college at the University of Alabama, working happy-hour crowds at a rooftop bar near the football stadium. Like Feizal, she learned to make drinks fast. Rachael loved the energy, the challenges, the tips. A musician, photographer, and graphic artist, she learned that tips could fuel her making. Work as a server gave her the flexibility to make her art.

After college, she floated to Birmingham, where she served in restaurants and bars. She

made a family in the service industry. On her off nights, she visited her kin who worked in other bars. Riding her bike back and forth, she occasionally stopped by the new Collins Bar, which Feizal had helped imagine and open. Rachael began to wait tables there. A romance began.

Feizal, who wears a sun-bleached, curved-bill University of Alabama cap on his days off, rose to fame at the Collins, curating a fanatical crowd of regulars and creating a back-of-the-bar wall chart of the periodic table of elements, inspired by the building blocks of Birmingham culture. For GA, he replaced gallium with the Garage Café, a beloved local bar with an outdoor patio, dotted with architectural antiques. Instead of nickel, his NI signified Niki’s West, the Greek-owned steam table restaurant. Feizal linked FM to Birmingham Mountain Radio and listed an atomic weight of 107.3, its location on the dial.

They moved in together in 2014. “I had never met a Feizal before,” Rachael told me. By this she meant that she had never met someone who could deejay while pouring drinks and making conversation and taking care of a bar full of regulars who claimed him as much as he claimed them. Working with Feizal at the Collins, Rachael embraced the ethic that now defines the bar they own together.

As our morning conversation wound down, a guy stopped by our table to say hello. He looked to be in his late thirties. His voice was bright and his smile was wide. He didn’t know me, but I already knew him. Rachael had previously told me about how his wife abruptly left him and their young child. About how that blindsided him and about how he had come to be a regular in their bar.

“He fought us,” Rachael had recalled. “At first we literally had to hold him down when he drank too much.” In the weeks after his wife quit him, he had flailed and caterwauled and screamed into the void. And then he didn’t. “We see him a lot less these days,” she said as he walked away. “He doesn’t need us like he did, and that’s good. For him, our job is done.”

In 2000, five years after I arrived in Oxford, John Currence, the owner of City Grocery on our courthouse square, called to tell me that he planned to inscribe a small brass plaque with my name and preferred drink and affix it to the copper-top upstairs bar,

alongside the names of other folk who were regulars. It was a simple gesture. But it meant a great deal to me.

When I moved to Oxford, I knew no one. In the years that followed, I had met and married Blair and made a career for myself. By 2000, our son Jess was toddling. We were on our way. That plaque, earned at happy hours that often began at four and stretched deep into the night, told me something that my family couldn’t: I was now that rare species of human—a regular in a bar I loved, in a town where I might just belong.

Many bars preach devotion to their regulars. Few do much to show it, Feizal told me during our first long conversation, as I sipped a Legendary Sex Panther, Atomic’s riff on an old-fashioned, served with a temporary panther tattoo and a moistened towelette. “When you come to my bar, even if it’s your first time, I don’t want you to feel like you’re even in a place of business,” he said. “I want you to settle in, I want you to wonder, *Hey, the way that bartender just made eye contact, the way he looked at me, do I know this person?*”

If you become a regular at the Atomic, Rachael and Feizal, like John Currence, will

memorialize your status. Mounted on a back wall at the Atomic is a Hollywood Squares-style assemblage of Warhol-inspired portraits of locals like my friends Hannah Hayes, the writer, and Hatton Smith, the coffee and beer marketer. Instead of serving as advertising collateral for credit card companies, check presenters here celebrate regulars, too. On a recent visit, I tucked my cash inside a black bi-fold that told the story of Stormie, a waitress at the nearby restaurant Bamboo.

The cocktail menu drives this home in ways that are lovely and sometimes twisted. In addition to the Legendary Sex Panther, a typical menu includes nine drinks, all named after regulars. Order a Perry Riddle, described as “bright but dark, mostly made of rum, flamboyant” and you get Dominican rum stirred with Italian Aperol. Ask for a Dr. Lucas Johnson—“to-the-point, smart, mildly threatening”—and you get a Miller High Life and a shot of well whiskey.

These tacks allow Rachael and Feizal to introduce newcomers to regulars, starting with their drink selection. That’s the point. Like the *Sgt. Pepper’s* mural, which upends the Birmingham cultural pantheon, Atomic’s



MUSIC FESTIVALS:

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ANNUAL CANE RIVER ZYDECO FESTIVAL

Natchitoches
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SOUTHERN SOUL LABOR DAY BLUES FESTIVAL

Shreveport
September 1, 2019

ZYDECO FESTIVAL

Lafayette
September 7, 2019

HIGHLAND JAZZ AND BLUES FESTIVAL

Shreveport
September 14, 2019

CAJUN FRENCH MUSIC FESTIVAL

New Iberia
September 21, 2019

BOGALUSA BLUES FESTIVAL

Bogalusa
September 27-28, 2019

LOUISIANA PRIZE FESTIVAL

Shreveport
October 2-6, 2019

FUNKTOBERFEST

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recognition of regulars is a work of social engineering that changes the narrative, re-ordering ideas about what celebrity means and from which source fame draws.

If the art and the drinks remind one of the rewards of being known in a bar, the costumes hint at the virtues of going missing. At first I thought those costumes were fey. They seemed dress-up equivalents of group trust-fall exercises for the drunken townie set. But as I got to know Rachael and Feizal, I came to recognize them as honest reflections of a relationship, built on the power of grown-up play.

The week before Feizal left New Orleans in 2005, as Hurricane Katrina threatened the city, he had dressed in a rabbit costume for a friend's wedding. During the reception, he took off the costume and threw it in the back of the car in which he would eventually drive north. For his first few days in Birmingham, he had no possessions, save the clothes he wore and that slip-on fuzzy white rabbit.

After Feizal and Rachael moved in together, before they celebrated their first Christmas, Feizal bought a penguin costume online. When he told Rachael about it, she walked to the tree, pulled a wrapped present from beneath the boughs, and handed it to him. He now had two penguins. But the men's size-small Feizal ordered from a Japanese manufacturer translated as an American women's small. It fit Rachael. In a "Gift of the Magi"-ish moment, they gained a matching pair.

When they married in Las Vegas in 2016, he dressed as Elvis. And she dressed as Priscilla. After the ceremony, Rachael and Feizal walked the streets, high-fiving strangers. When they opened a bar together, they bought costumes for their customers to wear. It wasn't a goof. It was an extension of their aesthetic.

Costumes transform their bar into a theatrical production, Feizal said to me that day in the jungle room. "You watch someone put on a Big Bird suit and then you ask, what will the Big Bird do? You give two banana costumes to two guys and then stand back to watch what happens. Pretty soon the dude at the bar in the banana costume sees the dude in the booth in the banana costume. They hug. And they start buying each other drinks."

Some animals are more trouble than others. Since the bar opened, Rachael has had to coax two squirrels from a tree that grows in a grassy strip outside. The first time, she worried about what the neighbors would

think or the cops would do. The second time, she took pictures and marveled at the power of suggestion.

Rachael and Feizal don't talk much about the metaphors embedded in the costumes. It's evident, they seem to think, so why break the spell? But I can't help myself. We come to bars to escape, I tell them. We drink to transform, I say. Inside the confines of a good bar, more is possible.

"Theoretically you could spend hours here," Rachael said to me over breakfast in her home, offering a gentle rebuttal. "Wearing costumes, playing board games, listening to music, dancing in the bubbles, but never drinking a drop of alcohol." She may be right. It's probable, though, that such a night wouldn't take full advantage of what the Atomic offers.

It's now close to two in the morning. Jay and I were three-quarters lit when we crossed the transom. After a few rounds, we're method actors, drunk on whiskey and what the animal kingdom offers. He flaps his wings and smiles that big smile. Again and again, I put down my felt acorn and absent-mindedly pick it back up.

As Feizal deejays the songs of my youth—"Elephant Radio" by the Squalls! Something I can't recall by the Smithereens!—I flash back to the beginning of the night, when I watched three chrysalis Elvi try on costumes, draping jumpsuits over chairs like the Atomic was a dressing room.

Minutes later, they stood transformed before the bar, collars flared, sunglasses on. When "Suspicious Minds," that 1969 schlock anthem, began ringing through the speakers, they looked around in amazement. Facing away from them, toward a wall of liquor bottles and high-fidelity stereo equipment, Feizal pecked at his Spotify app and tried to tamp down his grin. When Elvis reached for a high note, I watched Feizal look down, before someone figured out what he was up to.

As each of the Elvi realized that they were dressed like Elvis at the exact moment that an especially schlocky Elvis song coursed through the room, they beamed smiles like the one that had creased the face of that young man taking selfies in the jungle room—smiles that looked a lot like the one that I now broadcast as I stand facing the bar, staring into the mirror, clutching my felt nut to my beige tufted chest. 🐼



HOW DO YOU FEED YOUR SOUL?

My name is Buddy Guy. I'm formerly a cotton-picker from Louisiana and taught myself how to play guitar on top of the levee. Now, I've played music all over the world, even the White House. In Louisiana, we're trying to keep our music alive. Our music is just like the gumbo we cook here—it's got everything in there we can fit. And when I play my guitar or try to sing and see people enjoying it, I'm full just the same. It makes me the happiest man in the world. Like I tell everybody else: you got me out of Louisiana, but you didn't get the Louisiana out of me. Come to Louisiana and feed your soul before you get too old!

Buddy Guy

American blues guitarist and singer
GRAMMY® Lifetime Achievement
award-winner
National Medal of Arts award-winner
Lettsworth native

Visit his marker on the Mississippi Blues Trail in Lettsworth, LA.

Photo by: Chuck Lanza

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