

Restaurant Bar

by John Kolvenbach

A woman in her forties.

A: There are these bars. Or restaurant-bars, or whatever, bar-restaurants, whatever they are. But they're known places. People know that they're there.

Most of them are near airports. Especially airports that are hubs where you might have a layover.

and people know.

Or you might not know, you could be hungry and you need a drink and you might just walk into one of these places and not know. You might not even know that you're *there*.

It looks like every other place with the TVs and the old signs, the fake old signs and the music is too loud so you drink more than you do and food is salty so you're desperately thirsty, you're so fucking thirsty, so you drink more than you do and when you have, I dunno, say your second drink?

this, like, Veil is lifted and you're suddenly, What *is* this place?

Who are these people?

I thought I was among *business* travelers. Everyone has that same bag or a similar bag and it's not as if people are *topless* or whatever, walking around *topless* or whatever would indicate that you're in the place that you're in, but you're a third of the way through your second drink and you've been in your phone and completely unaware and then you look up.

and so does everyone else.

Everyone on cue, looks up at the same time.

to look at everyone else who has suddenly looked up. A herd of antelope in a bar and for no reason at all, their neck hair stands on end, all of it all at the same time, their fur, and they *freeze*.

A drink and a third in, and this whole roomful of people in this restauranty bar is hyper *aware*. that this is one of those places that business travelers go to to ruin their lives.

To *eject* themselves out of their circumstance.

It builds up in you gradually, you don't even *notice* it. You *adjust* in tiny increments, Life Is Hard, You Can't Always Get What You Want, Nobody's Perfect, maxim by maxim you eat these *maxims* until you find yourself in one of those places by an airport, almost by mistake.

or by, like, You were *called* to the place by a barely audible song.

And from the outside you might not even *know*. It's just another restaurant-bar that you go to, on a Wednesday, when you're traveling, but Do you? Do you, actually? Go to places? on a Wednesday? Have you *ever*?

Come on.

You wanted *chicken fingers*? You don't eat chicken fingers. You've never *had* a chicken finger. in your life You *went* there, semi-sort-of-consciously For That Purpose.

Because are you really supposed to spend your life with one person? Your entire life with *Mike*? And the person you like when you're twenty-five, you're supposed to spend the rest of your *life* - You didn't like *yourself* when you were twenty-five.

And he's *fine*. He's *fine*. *Everyone's* boring. Men are boring and the twelfth time he makes the same observation about your mother, that's not a *reason*.

It's not.

We're all going to die.

That's a reason.

I'm not saying it was a good idea. I'm not recommending it, I'm saying I was called by a barely audible song to a bar-restaurant near an airport. That's what I'm saying.

It *happens*.

It's weird that it doesn't happen more often and maybe *that's* what's astonishing is that we're all not at that bar all the *time*.

and it was exciting. Admit it. The way the whole bar looked up, prompted by *nothing* or maybe, and this is what I believe, Maybe prompted by just being animals together. and the herd was just like, Now.

The herd said, Right Now.

Our communal *willingness* all of a sudden, all of us *Yessing* in the same place, at the same *time*, the whole herd is like, *Consent!* We *consented in unison* at this bar-restaurant. Feel the power of that. I dare you.

I dare you to be in that room and *resist* that, good luck, You *show* me someone who can do that, All of our fur up on end, *You* try it, so Now it's just a matter of Who.

Who is it going to *be*?

Which one of these also-discontented-people-with-a-laptop is it going to *be*? Which one of you?

You?

Am I gonna drag *you* back to my sad hotel?

Which one of these probably-Dads am I going to climb into a *Parenthesis* with?

'Cause that's what it is. You have your life and your situation, You have everything you know and everything you do all the time and your husband and who you are and then you have a *Parenthesis*.

For I dunno. For an hour.

and then end parens.

And you go right back to your life and your situation and everything you know and everything you do all the time and your husband and who you are but now also you have a compartment.

You're you but with a compartment. It's in your, I dunno where it is, say it's in your loins or in your stomach, over by that area, There is a compartment now of That happened that time.

And you can peek in there.

If you're on a train.

You can take a look in there on an Amtrak train if you get a window seat and you're headed to Albany, with the trees going by and maybe a river, you can *look* in there and think,

Did that *happen*?

There's no way even to *know*.

Unless you gave him your phone number. Then you know. Then there's a second compartment and it's in your phone and your phone is also a bomb that could go off at anytime, like if you're in a meeting with various colleagues, a bomb could go off then.

Was it *fun*?

That's your question?

No.

Not if you mean fun, like.... Fun like things that are fun. That are considered fun. Fun like a water slide. Though I don't like those.

So I wouldn't say 'fun.'

I would say that it was a terrifyingly self-conscious hour with another person.

but not even really with him. I wasn't *with* him. I didn't totally notice him, even during. I *sort of* noticed him. A couple of things. A couple of smells.

His breath. He was a vegetarian. We're all just making *compost* in ourselves all the time, and way faster than it happens in the world. I could smell the whole *process happening* in him, I did think, You should probably add some *yard clippings*, to get the balance right,

So his *breath* I was aware of, I noticed that, but I mostly noticed my *self*.

A lot. I noticed myself.

There I was in, like, *relief*. I was *italicized*.

That's what it was like. A self-noticing hour in a hotel wherein I was *there*.

And now I have that, in a compartment near my stomach but un-integrated into my life. un-integrated into my regular self.

Is what it is.