

PAPER COVERS BRICK

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Culla's is a neighborhood bar in a dying Minneapolis neighborhood, a workingman's bar with ever fewer workingmen. Other than the new natural food store, it's the only business on a block of boarded storefronts and tenements, hard against what's become a four-lane thoroughfare. The bar's red brick façade, darkened by decades of soot and diesel fumes, punctuates the row of gray plywood windows. The sign is faded white, but the red and blue Budweiser neon reminds the busses and semis and commuters that Culla's is still there. A "Re-Elect Nixon '72" poster suggests the preferred clientele.

The remaining regulars still gather at Culla's every evening. They once worked at the auto parts store that now sells natural food, or at the machine shop that became a head shop that closed, or at the docks unloading river barges. Most of the old guard have moved away to find work, or to escape the University's relentless expansion that's devouring their neighborhood. So have their sons, who would have followed in their footsteps.

Culla's has been a local institution as long as anyone can remember. My father took me there on Sundays for football and hamburgers, as did his father. I drive by it every day when I return to my dormitory from my college classes. As I wait for the light before turning into the neighborhood, I see a stooped old man limp to Culla's door, while hippies load a VW van with produce from the natural food store. I recognize every dilapidated, ramshackle bungalow as I glide past on deserted streets, but I ignore them. I focus instead on my new home, the gleaming high-rise dorm that caused twenty houses to be razed and finally broke the neighborhood's spirit. In my mind's eye, I see children playing in the hardscrabble yards, but I close my ears and heart to their laughter. At night, I look out my tenth-floor window, across the pitch-black expanse where porch lights once glowed, and see Culla's lonely Budweiser sign flashing red and blue.

Always striving to be considered cool, I told my roommates Mark and Lou I'd heard about great greaseburgers at a neighborhood dive. They were excited to go slumming. We did, and they loved it. So, sometimes at midnight after studying, we brave the subzero darkness and trek to Culla's. We trudge along icy streets, past abandoned houses, drawn by the flashing neon and anticipation of sizzling gut bombs.

Two sensations always strike me when we burst through Culla's door from the cold night. The room is claustrophobic, with just a dozen bar stools and ten tables, all in dull red naugahyde and formica that's more like a diner. Even the bar is chipped and faded red formica. The other thing is the smell of cigarette smoke mixed with stale beer and grease smoke from the little broiler on the counter behind the bar.

The room is so small that we fill quite a bit of it as we stand inside, stamping our feet, pulling off our gloves, and unbuttoning our coats. It's so dim our eyes don't have to adjust from the dark outside. Everyone turns and stares, and the bar is silent for a moment, except for the wrestling or boxing on the TV. The men's faces are tired and lined. Some eyes are hard with hostility, because we're college kids and don't belong; some are indifferent; and some suggest a hint of curiosity. Then the conversations and the slap of Yahtzee cups resume.

We usually find stools at the bar, which I find odd. Mark says it's because the regulars don't want anything to do with us and take a table. Lou says it's because Culla wants students' business, and has told them to move for us. Whatever the reason, we sit and Culla greets us pleasantly. Actually, I've never been sure who Culla is. There's the bent old woman with jet-brown hair behind the bar who waits on us, and there's the frail white-haired man at the end of the bar who tells her what to do. Mark says the woman is Culla, and Lou says they're married, so they're both Culla.

We order three cheeseburgers and Grain Belt drafts. Culla explains patiently that the broiler can only cook two burgers at once, and we say that's OK. I've never seen another broiler

like Culla's. It's the size of a toaster oven, but has gas flames. The tiny cavity is caked with layers of black grease, and barely holds two burgers.

Culla takes raw patties from a plateful on the counter and slips them into the little black hole. The blue flames ignite the grease and the meat begins to sizzle. Soon, grease smoke mingles with the pall of smoke from Luckys and Marlboros. The cloud obscures the hanging Budweiser lamps, making the room even more dim. It hovers around last summer's fly strips, still loaded with dead flies. Years of cigarette and grease smoke have covered the ceiling and walls with a gray-brown film.

With trembling hands, Culla cuts quarter-inch thick slices of Velveeta and slaps them on the sizzling meat. She serves us flat beers before shoving Wonder buns into the oven. Seconds before they ignite, she assembles the burgers and serves them to Mark and me. The buns are soaked with grease, and the Velveeta has dripped onto the plates. "Wannanegg?" she asks, pointing to hard-boiled eggs in a bowl. We say, "No thanks," and dig in. Culla sticks the third burger in the oven and a new veil of grease smoke lifts into the hazy air.

There's nothing like the first bite of Culla's cheeseburger. The charred beef, gooey, tangy Velveeta, salt and grease meld in my mouth. Imagine Ronald McDonald and the Big Boy getting stoned and creating the perfect, succulent greaseburger. Mark grunts as he devours his, unaware of grease on his chin and the Velveeta goober in his mustache.

Half way through my burger, a man taps me on the shoulder. He says, "You boys wan' some honest work tomorra? I got me fifty pallets a bricks that need movin'. I'll pay ya a fair wage fer a day's work." It's the first time one of the regulars has spoken to us. The barrel-shaped man has a weathered face and a silvery flat top. He's wearing a faded Carhart work shirt and OshKosh B'gosh suspenders. An oval name tag on his shirt says "Vern." There's a hint of mischief in his eyes, and someone behind him chuckles. I wipe my mouth and glance at my roommates. "I've got class tomorrow," I reply between bites, "but thanks anyway." It's true – we

all have one class tomorrow, at 8:00 AM. But it's already 1:00, and I know they'll sleep in, and I have to do what they do. The man looks at Mark and Lou, but they shake their heads.

We finish our burgers and order more beers. "Yahtzee to see who pays?" I ask with a smile, even though I can pay my own tab for once. My roommates look at me like I belong with the people here instead of with them in the dorm. "Rock, paper, scissors, like always," Mark says, and I know I'm home free because I never lose with these guys. Sure enough, my paper beats their rocks two times out of three, and Mark pays our tabs.

"What was Vern about?" Mark asks as we slip and slide back to our high-rise dorm, satiated with burgers, grease, and too many beers. The gleaming tower splits the black sky. The bright white lights call to me, promising tickets to escape and success, if I can fit in. If I can scrounge and schmooze enough money to finish. "Probably a bet the pansy-ass students wouldn't do real man's work," Lou replies. I agree, and almost add, "Guys like Vern can't comprehend that studying and attending class are more important than a day's pay for back-breaking work." But I don't, because I know both sides. I like the "me" I've become, the easygoing college kid who, unknown to my roommates, traded Carhart and work boots for Ralph Lauren and penny loafers. I can't admit to them or my college friends that I don't belong here, that getting good grades and graduating are my tickets out of Culla's world. Paper covers brick for me, every time.

We reach the dorm's glass lobby doors and I fumble for my key, standing in a square of white light on the cold sidewalk. I stop short, an unwelcome image materializing in my fuzzy mind. My old man is standing on a scaffold inside. He's landed a job hanging drywall in the unfinished lobby. He looks down at me, disappointment on his tired face. He shakes his head and says, "Well, son, I woulda 'ppreciated ya helpin' me pay for y'er education, even if it's only one day's wage."