

## PAPER COVERS BRICK

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Culla's is a neighborhood bar in a dying neighborhood, a workingman's bar with ever fewer workingmen. Other than the new natural food store, it's the only business on a city block of boarded up 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 tattered "Nixon for President in '72" poster suggests the preferred clientele.

The remaining regulars still gather at Culla's every evening after dinner. They used to work 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 downtown unloading river barges. Most have moved away to find other work, or to escape the University of Minnesota's relentless expansion that is devouring their neighborhood. So have their sons, who would have followed in their footsteps, and their daughters, who would have raised their grandchildren.

Culla's has been a local institution as long as any old timer can remember. I cruise by it every day as I drive back to my dormitory from my college classes. As I wait for the traffic to clear so I can turn into the neighborhood, I see a stooped old man limp to Culla's door, while a hippy family loads a child's wagon with shopping bags of 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 20 houses to be razed and finally broke the spirit of the neighborhood. In my mind's eye, I see children playing in the hard-scrabble front 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 used to glow, and see Culla's lonely Budweiser sign flashing red and blue.

Once a week or so, usually on Thursday after studying, my two roommates and I brave the sub-zero darkness and trek to Culla's for midnight beers and burgers. We trudge along icy streets, past abandoned houses, drawn by the flashing neon and anticipation of sizzling, greasy gut bombs.

Two sensations always strike me when we burst through Culla's door from the cold night. The room is claustrophobic – it's much smaller than it appears from outside. There are a dozen bar stools and maybe ten tables, all in dull red naugahyde and formica that would be more at home in 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 the three of us fill quite a bit of it as we stand inside the door, stamping our feet, taking off our gloves, and unbuttoning our coats. It's so dim that our eyes don't have to

adjust after walking in from the dark. Everyone turns and stares, and for a moment, the bar is silent except for the wrestling or boxing match 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. My roommate Mark says it's because the regulars don't want anything to do with us and take a table. My roommate Lou says it's because Culla wants students' business, and has told them to make way for us for a little while. Whatever the reason, we take our seats and Culla greets us pleasantly enough. Actually, I've never known for certain 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 who sits at the far end of the bar and 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. For the hundredth time, Culla explains patiently that the broiler can only cook two burgers at a time, and we assure her that it's OK. I've never seen another broiler like the one at Culla's. It's the size of a toaster oven, but has a gas burner. The tiny cavity is made even smaller by caked layers of black grease, and will barely hold two burgers and the buns.

Culla takes two raw patties from a plateful on the rear 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, Chesterfields, 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, as well as the transom window over the door, which would be the room's only natural light by day.

Culla serves us flat beers. With trembling hands, she cuts quarter-inch thick slices of Velveeta and slaps them on top of the sizzling meat. She warms two Wonder buns in the oven, then assembles the burgers and serves them to Mark and me on paper plates. The buns are soaked with grease, and the Velveeta has dripped onto the plates. "Wannanegg?" she asks, pointing to a bowl of hard boiled eggs. We say, "No thanks," and begin to eat. Culla sticks the third burger in the oven and we watch a new veil of grease smoke lift 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. It's like Ronald McDonald and the Big Boy got stoned and created the perfect, succulent greaseburger. Mark grunts as he devours his, unaware of the 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 50 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 Osh-Kosh-by-Gosh suspenders. An oval name tag stitched to his shirt says "Vern." There's a hint of mischief in his eyes, and someone at the table behind us chuckles. I wipe my mouth and glance at Mark and Lou. "I've got class tomorrow," I reply with my mouth half full, "but thanks anyway." It's true – we all have one class on Friday, at 8:00 AM, but we'll probably sleep in since it's already close to 1:00. The man looks at Mark and Lou, but they both shake their heads.

We finish our burgers and order more beers. "Yahtzee to see who pays?" I ask with a smile, even though I have enough to 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 a ticket to success and escape, if I can pay the price. "Probably a bet that the pansy-ass students wouldn't do real man's work," Lou replies. I agree, and almost add, "Guys like that don't understand that studying and writing papers and going to class are more important than a load of bricks and a day's pay." But I don't, because I've seen both sides, and I like the "me" that I've become, the college kid who's traded Carhart and work boots for Ralph Lauren and Bass Weejens. I can't admit to my roommates or any of my college friends that getting good grades and graduating is my ticket out of Culla's world. Paper covers brick for me, every time.

We reach the 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. The image is of my old man standing on a scaffold inside. He's landed a job hanging sheets of drywall in the unfinished lobby. He looks down at me, disappointment on his face. He shakes his head and says, "Well, son, I woulda 'ppreciated you helping me pay for y'er education, even if it's only a day's wages."