

Travis Ladonuel

The Displaced

I sat hunched at the bar, staring at the occupied booth where I sat every day. I glared at the intruders, waiting for them to notice. I willed them to move, using every sober iota of my being.

It looked like a family celebrating some sort of event. They were way overdressed for a bar like this in their button-ups and summer dresses. This was an establishment where you looked conspicuous if you wore a t-shirt without a mustard stain, tear, or football team emblem. They were far out of our league and far from their home.

Tourists. They think it's "darling" to drink in local spots. They sit in corners dwelling on their superiority, entertain themselves by discussing the local fools and their antics. That was my job. That was my booth.

Only one who lives in the muck and surpasses it may sit in judgment.

I glared at the patriarch, who was seated with his back to me.

A balding man with an expensive shirt, good stitching. A golden-rod-yellow paisley tie peeked out beneath the back of his collar. A bead of sweat pooled beneath his hairline, hung for a moment like it was deciding its next move, then began to trickle down the spine of his neck. I watched it closely.

He began to move slightly, wiped the sweat away. He could feel me staring blood-guts into the rear of his head. He wiped again at nothing, at the spot I was mugging. He sensed it. My eye-points were gunning for him and he could feel them—twin lasers burning through his first layer of skin with surgical precision. I turned up the intensity, my attention on nothing else but one square inch on the bald man's hairless neck. *Get the fuck on, old man. That is my spot. I claimed it.*

He began to squirm a bit. He knew somehow. Memes, if you listen to Carl Jung. That or he could see my reflection in the Yuengling mirror in the corner of the booth. I had to assume I looked demented. I hadn't bathed in two days and I was still wearing the same clothes from the night before. Same shirt, same underwear, same socks. Goddamn those socks. That's the only thing that I could not stand. My Achilles heel that covers my Achilles Heel. I could be a vagrant, or better yet a wanderer, could wear the same clothes day after day were it not for the socks. I cannot bring myself to roll that browned, crusted cloth over my feet. Fucking kills me.

I decided to walk up and claim what was naturally mine. God hates a coward. As I sauntered over I reminded myself of the threat that had been issued to me the day before.

"One more pinched ass, you son of a bitch... one more fight, one more skipped tab, not only will you be banned for life but you'll be on the wall in the shitter."

The issuer was referring to the bathroom, obviously. The spot where a shrine to violence had been made above the middle urinal. A corkboard collection of photographs of the macabre. Ten years of brutal teeth-punching-in, pool-cue-beatings, and all around general-shit-stomping. That's what happened when you fucked with the house.

Willard (Willie to his friends and fellow drunks), the ex Navy SEAL bartender, thought this an excellent deterrent to patrons acting foolish. It served as a reminder not to let a drunken argument turn into a situation where someone may or may not have to bite a curb. A method he claimed to have learned in the brothels of Cambodia or Vietnam. Some war torn, humid crap hole. It worked surprisingly well. Also, after the posting of the vulgar collage, fewer people used the middle pissier, which saved on cleaning supplies.

No, this could not be blatant or obtuse. This must be done with delicacy, a soft touch.

"Excuse me sir, as I can see you're not familiar with the rules of our little public domicile, I will momentarily forgive your transgression. I'm afraid you and your lovely family are occupying my booth. Now, I know it seems like a little thing but, well, without these little rules of the house the entire system could collapse. The rest of the bar knows this is my spot and they have become confused and frightened by this infraction of etiquette. We stand at the verge of societal collapse. I'm afraid your little nuclear family will have to get the fuck up for all to be right in this mini-ecosystem."

People do not expect to be spoken to in this manner at a hole-in-the-wall dive.

A look of shocked indignation registered on the area of the man's head below his lax hairline and above his well-tailored tie.

He feigned confusion. "I'm sorry?"

"I believe you heard me, sir. You must know the cardinal rule for travel of any sort: You never burn the locals. We have the connections here, not you. We have the power and the influence. You are out of your element. Don't fuck with us. Now, there is a perfectly good table by the bathrooms. Who's your waitress? Kim? I'll tell her to bring your food there. What did you get? They make a black-and-blue burger that's the best in the southeast. Delicious."

The wife and children began gathering their purses and cameras, rich and full of recent memories.

"This is outrageous. You bullying bastard, this is not how you treat people." He spoke softly and knew he had been shamed. Still he moved to the table I had nodded towards.

I pulled a book of matches and my pack of Parliament Lights out of my breast pocket and lit one.

I sat down in my booth and enjoyed the taste of the malted barley and hops the bald man had neglected to take to his new location.

I peeled my dingy socks off under the table and propped them up on the seat of the booth.

It felt good to be home.

The Displaced is Travis Ladonuel's first published story.