

## FAMILY

By Andrew Botolino

His gaze hiked the shelf, the price tag scaling in parallel. The man, in a creaseless blue dress shirt, poked his nose slightly above the meniscus of the glass in his left hand.

Barrell Gray Label Dovetail, \$84.

One branded, cubical iceberg careened around the cylinder. He pressed his lips and subtly nodded his head. He purchased the bourbon for its “festive notes.”

“Ripken had a pretty bad World Series, actually,” blue shirt said. “I remember going to game two.”

A man in a creaseless white dress shirt sat on an emerald, plush leather chair at the bar, adjacent to blue shirt. One empty chair divided the space between them, as was ritual at closing time, when spatial buffers transition from luxury to expectation. “I got Palmer’s autograph that season,” white shirt said.

“Hmph,” blue shirt said, and craned his neck in approval.

The bar and cocktail lounge were perched atop a hill. Guests at window seats could peer down below and trace their footsteps all the way up to where they sat; the path snaked, from the Hallmarkian village below, through manicured grass and enchanting lights, up to the Victorian building that received them.

“You know,” blue shirt said, I just took my boy to see *The Birds* for the first time.”

White shirt scanned the shelf’s second level. He squinted, settled on a bottle with a label that reminded him of a political satire cartoon and asked how much, which he said he usually didn’t do, but was “just curious.”

A Midwinternight’s Dram Act 8, \$125.

“You want festive,” white shirt said to blue, “here you go.”

“We sat right behind home, incredible seats,” blue shirt said. “My boy loved it. He’s got a pretty good arm, too.”

White shirt chucked. “How old is he?”

“12,” blue shirt said.

“How fast’s he throw?”

“I told him, throw as fast as you want, just no curveballs,” blue shirt said, and smiled, and looked up, and looked down, and looked at white shirt, and said, “I bet in a few years he’ll be throwing 70.”

“Pretty good,” white shirt said. “My son, he’s in high school, shortstop.”

Blue shirt asked for water. He looked at the shelf. Squinted. ‘TAYLOR,’ the bottle read.

Colonel E.H. Taylor was a cocktail lounge gateway drug. Sell the colonel to a guest early on in the night, and there were bigger things ahead in the Buffalo Trace catalogue.

Colonel E.H. Taylor, Jr. Barrel Proof, \$130.

Blue shirt launched into a confidently confused anthology of the Frankfort, Kentucky distillery. White shirt corrected him from time to time, sometimes correctly. It was well past close.

The front desk staff settled in for the graveyard shift. A Christmas tree towered over the occasional guest who passed through the lobby, which connected to the cocktail lounge. Most guests in the hotel had retired, full from the Thanksgiving dinner buffet, then a wine tasting and tour of the mansion in the mountains George Washington Vanderbilt constructed in 1895 for his sick mother as a respite from the guts of New York City. When the candlelight tour ended, the shuttle buses picked the guests up, wound through the estate, and dropped them off at the hotel.

White shirt took his first trip to the bar as dinner began. Blue shirt took his shortly after. The two men slipped in and out of the bar until dinner ended, and as their wives and children stepped onto the shuttle bus to make the journey from the hotel to the Biltmore mansion for the grand finale — the tour of gilded fantasy, through opulent bedrooms and bathrooms and a swimming pool and a bowling alley and up the stairs, down the stairs, gently around the servants' quarters, and back out into the sharp, cool, illuminated night — both men found themselves returning to the bar.

White shirt: W.L. Weller C.Y.P.B., \$175.

Blue shirt: W.L. Weller Single Barrel, \$200.

White shirt: Old Rip Van Winkle 10 Year, \$315.

Blue shirt: Van Winkle Special Reserve, \$350.

The men depleted small trays of candied pecans and pretzel twists. They rambled in platitudes of love for their children, mostly their boys, mostly their boys' sports teams, before deciding to switch the medium to tequila.

“We went to Mexico, the wife and I, years ago...” white shirt began.

It was midnight. As the man in the creaseless and now slightly-untucked blue shirt placed his glass of Don Julio Ultima Reserva Extra Añejo, \$160, on the bar, he realized his boys were probably in bed.